

In Tunisia, popular Ennahda party tests 'moderate' Islam

by [Elizabeth Bryant](#) in the [December 27, 2011](#) issue

Nearly a year after Tunisia set off the Arab Spring of popular revolt, the face of political Islam in this fledgling Muslim democracy is a 47-year-old pharmaceutical executive who favors tailored suits and stiletto heels.

Souad Abderrahim's main political experience was as a student union leader more than two decades ago, but the political neophyte is now cheered at rallies and trailed by the media as a leader of Ennahda, the Islamist party that has become the main political force in this North African country.

Abderrahim holds a seat in the country's new Constituent Assembly, charged with creating a democratic political structure following the downfall of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who ruled Tunisia for nearly a quarter century.

The mother of two said she felt compelled to emerge as a spokeswoman to curtail fears that Ennahda would curb women's rights or mix conservative religion and politics. "When I saw the phobia on the streets about Ennahda as a hard, backwards party, I felt it was important to be with them and shed light on this false image," she said.

The Tunisian uprising triggered the Arab Spring protests that upended politics from Libya to Yemen, and Tunisia's subsequent steps toward democracy are being closely watched as a model for other countries.

"Tunisia today is the major test of the Arab Spring," says Mansouria Mokhefi, head of Middle East and North

Africa programs at the French Institute of International Affairs. "The direction it goes depends on the success or failure of Tunisia."

That's

why the spotlight is on Ennahda, which styles itself after Turkey's ruling center-right Justice and Development Party. Its inclusive message and corruption-free image have attracted a wide following across all levels of society.

Will it make good on its promises to uphold

Tunisia's pro-Western, secular foundations and women's considerable rights? Or, as some critics maintain, is Ennahda hiding a more radical agenda? The answer, analysts say, may shape the future of political Islam that is gaining ground in countries such as Egypt, Morocco and Libya.

"Whether it will be moderate Islam as appears the case in Tunisia and Turkey or another form is unclear," Mokhefi said. "But it's an inevitable, unstoppable march by Muslims, young and old, toward what they feel is a reappropriation of their identity."

Abderrahim is

not a typical face of political Islam, or even Islam itself. Declining to wear a headscarf, she has emerged as a passionate and articulate defender of women's rights. Driving in from her upscale villa in the Tunis suburb of Manouba, Abderrahim expertly juggles cell phones and the steering wheel in her commute to Ennahda's headquarters downtown. She keeps in touch with supporters through Facebook.

"Women can have

every degree of liberty, while respecting our religion and traditions," she said. "Equality at work, equality in all the Tunisian projects."

That inclusive message is echoed by other Ennahda officials who have forged a governing coalition with two secular, leftist parties.

"We

take inspiration from the ethical values of Islam which we believe are universal values—freedom, dignity, equality," said Yousra Ghannouchi, the London-raised daughter of Ennahda's founder Rachid Ghannouchi.

"Religion is not something we believe the state will interfere in or impose. It's a matter of personal choice."

Others are not so sure.

Women's rights activists demonstrated in front of the assembly building as the new government began work on November 22.

"The big question is are we going to deal with women's rights through positive laws and codes—which Ennahda vows not to touch—or are we going to return to the Shari'a [Islamic law], even if it's a soft interpretation?" asks prominent rights campaigner Khadija Cherif.

Opposition parties in the new government sound similar warnings. "There are lots of things in Ennahda's program that represent a danger, notably the relationship between politics and religion," said Samir Tayeb of the small, staunchly secular Democratic Modernist Pole coalition.

Probed about her beliefs, Abderrahim appears to stray off Ennahda's tolerant message. She disapproves of homosexuality, children born outside of wedlock, and marriages between Tunisian women and non-Muslim foreigners. "Tunisia is a Muslim country, and we have our own customs, traditions and Islamic requirements," she said. "So we can't have these kinds of freedoms that other parties want."

Western governments have signaled their readiness to work with Ennahda. But Tunisia observer Steven Ekvich at the American University of Paris is not surprised at the lingering wariness. "There probably should be some worry about what Ennahda may try to do," he said. "But on the other hand, Tunisians are going to be very vigilant. They're not going to let Ennahda go too far in the direction of an Islamic fundamentalism that doesn't suit the Tunisian temperament—or Tunisian history, for that matter." —RNS