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Abstract

Rashid al-Ghannoushi, a thinker, reformer, leader and founder of the al-Nahdah political party in Tunisia, is undoubtedly one of the forerunners of the contemporary Islamic resurgence. His brave and pioneering contribution in arousing Islamic consciousness and political awareness concerning the dangerous and evil repercussions of the authoritarian regime of Zainal Abidin Bin Ali in Tunisia. This article explores his life and thought with a special focus on his approach to democracy and its compatibility with Islam, public and civil liberties, political rights of non-Muslim citizens in an Islamic state and the concept of political legitimacy in Islamic political thought.

Key Words: Public liberties in Islam, democracy and Islamic democracy, political rights and political legitimacy.

His Early Life

Rashid al-Ghannoushi was born on 22 June 1941 in a small village of Hamma in the province of Gabes near the southeastern coast of Tunisia during the turbulence of World War II. Al-Ghannoushi grew-up under these conditions. His father was treated by the villagers as a teacher and Miftah. His maternal uncle, al-Bashir, had a great influence over his young nephew. Al-Bashir was an enthusiast of Pan-Arabism and its leader, Jamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt. Al-Ghannoushi would listen attentively to his uncle’s analysis of political developments during that tumultuous period. In addition to this early “political education”, as a child, al-Ghannoushi witnessed the emergence of the armed struggle against the French colonizers. The heavy-handed policy and ruthlessnes of the colonizers imbued him with a deep aversion towards colonialism. In addition, his early readings about the atrocities committed by Zionist terrorist gangs against Palestinians in the late 1940s deeply affected him (A.S. Tamimi. 2001: 3-6).

At the age of eighteen, al-Ghannoushi left the village for the capital, Tunis, to pursue his secondary school education at the prestigious madrasah al-Zaytunah, where he obtained a degree in theology. Upon graduation al-Ghannoushijoined the KhalduniaSecondary School. The years al-Ghannoushi spent in al-Zaytunah exposed him, and made him more sensitive, to the identity crisis which the French, and after independence, the Bourguiba Government, had created through the extensive secularization of Tunisia. In the name of modernization, Bourguiba sidelined Tunisia’s Arab-Islamic heritage replacing it with the official and elite Francophile culture. For Bourguiba, Islam represented the past, and the West was Tunisia’s only hope for a modern future (Esposito.1992:153).

Al-Ghannoushi summed this identity crisis as follows: “I remember we used to feel like strangers in our own country. We had been educated as Muslim and Arabs, while we could see the country totally moulded by the French culture” (El-Affendi. 1987: 124).

His Arabic education at al-Zaytuna naturally barred him from entering the French-speaking University at home, so in 1964 he went to Damascus where he enrolled in the Faculty of Letters wherein he studied philosophy. His philosophical studies deeply influenced his thought, and its impact was discernible in his writings and mode of thinking. As a student he briefly joined a secular Pan-Arab Party, the Syrian Nationalist Social Party, which was influenced by Jamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt. While in Syria, he also established close contact with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (Syrian Islamiyyah/Muslimin), which resulted in his strong attachment to the ideology of the Muslim