

Tunisia Experiences Secular-Religious Rifts

Author: [Ramy Jarboui](#)

Young activists say tensions are growing with Islamists as they flex their political muscle.

On the stairs of a colonial-era theatre, covered with graffiti, I sit with a group of young Tunisians discussing the aftermath of our uprising.

More than six months has passed since the revolution began. In that time, over 90 political parties have been licensed to operate, and many figures from the old regime have been removed.

But there remain innumerable issues which have not been resolved, and new problems have arisen, beyond the unemployment, corruption and financial crisis which already occupy our attention here.

The debate now is about religion versus secularism. Whether surfing the pages of social networking sites and blogs, or walking through the streets of Tunis, you can't escape people arguing over differences in their religious point of view – and how this affects their political standpoint.

“A young man set himself on fire and that sparked the revolution,” Amen Moulehi, an architecture student, said. “The youth were the ones who spent endless nights in the streets protesting, and they were the ones who took the bullets and died for the sake of this country, and in the end what do we get? A grandfather with a long beard who want us to go back to the dark ages or a grey-haired communist who is still weeping over on Stalin's grave.”

Drinking alcohol or praying at the mosque should be a personal choice, Moulehi added.

No-one should be able to dictate to others. But many young people have been manipulated by religious extremists, their lack of political commonsense one of the legacies of the old regime.

And parties across Tunisia are scrambling to attract the youth vote in this country where the median age is only 30.

The Islamic party Al-Nahdha has taken to standing outside schools as exams approach and greeting the students with cold drinks and cake.

Their attempt to spread their ideology by turning the mosque into a platform for their political ideas is criticised by some who believe that the mosque is a sacred place which should not be used for such purposes.

My friend Adel told me that the “khwanjiya” or radical Muslims at this university had taken over a classroom to turn into a prayer room. When one student protested that there were already too few classrooms to study in, the Islamists accused him of being a troublemaker and said he should shut up.

Haythem Mekki, a young journalist who blogs under the name “ByLasKo” - and who has received death threats from some extremist groups - made the point in a YouTube video that the Islamists are hiding their political intentions behind the facade of religion which allows them to call anyone who objects to them a traitor and part of a conspiracy.

This position has led to violence - on June 26, there was an attack by an angry crowd on a Tunis cinema showing a film advocating secularism.

And, in turn, a cyber-war is being waged by the secularists on the intolerant religious.

There have been satirical pages created on Facebook making fun of “the Pokemons of Al-Nadha”, and the website of the party's leader Rached Ghanouchi was recently hacked for the third consecutive time by a group of young Tunisian cyberactivists.

This situation is getting worse - and rather ridiculous - because there is no intelligent analysis or discussion of the real problem, only the creation of antagonism and contempt between groups of people with different opinions.

“For 23 years we didn't know about politics; we used to talk only about football,” Hassen Aldawess, an activist in his twenties, said. “Now everyone thinks he is some kind of genius, and what was a solid stand by a united nation [during the revolution] has become a weak population divided by religious and cultural differences. The only side who will profit from this is the current government who gain more time to continue with its failures.”

Many young people are trying to raise awareness of religious extremism, while emphasising the importance of holding the current government to account, through youth groups, the internet, art and music.

The graffiti collective Ahl il kahf, which has been described as the Tunisian Banksy, has been very active during the post-revolution period and their works, criticising the current government and the police, can be seen all over Tunis.

There is still much to criticise. A 24-year-old journalist was brutally beaten by police and many others injured in the July 15 protest known as “Kasbah Three”. Ironically, this took place one day after the United Nations opened its first human rights office in Tunisia.

Elsewhere, rap and rock concerts have been organised with a message promoting peace and tolerance.

This is important. If the Tunisian youth allows extremist groups to win power, and don't fight against the sham of the transitional government – then we won't win the rewards of our revolution.

Ramy Jarboui is a Tunisian writer, activist and film-maker.

Location: Tunisia

Topic: Protests

Focus: The Arab
Spring

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/tunisia-experiences-secular-religious-rifts>