

Nov 04, 2016 by **Philip Seib**

Islamists and the Tests They Face ^[1]

DOHA --- When the Islamist Ennahda Party won 40 percent of the vote in Tunisia's first free election since the overthrow of Zine Abidine Ben Ali, the party's leader, Rachid Ghannouchi said, "We will continue this revolution to realize its aims of a free Tunisia, independent, developing, and prosperous in which the rights of God, the Prophet, women, men, the religious, and the non-religious are assured because Tunisia is for everyone."

Although most political observers in this region take Ghannouchi at his word, any political party or individual with the label "Islamist" attached is viewed with great suspicion in the West. Part of this stems from the lack of knowledge about Muslims' faith and culture, and from the assumption that "Islamism" is synonymous with "extremism." Overcoming ignorance and prejudice will take time, but parties such as Ennahda and its counterparts elsewhere in the region could do much to advance their cause by forthrightly addressing the issues that create suspicion about how they will use power. Among the most important of these is the role of women in Muslim societies.

Ennahda has promised that women will play a prominent role in Tunisia's government. Elsewhere in the region, Yemen's Tawakkol Karman, a winner of this year's Nobel Peace Prize, is among that country's energized women who are leading the struggle for democracy, and women have played prominent roles in bringing about change in other Arab nations. They don't want tokenism, such as a quota of seats in legislatures, but rather seek to freely make decisions about how to lead their lives and to participate in the lives of their countries.

But there are plenty of conservative interpreters of Islam who insist that women should wear the veil, should be excluded from public life, and should generally be subservient to men. If this outlook takes hold as Arab countries reshape their politics, the term "Islamist" will deserve its pejorative meaning.

Muslims must decide if faith and freedom are to coexist. As they decide, a primary task for the states emerging from the "Arab spring" is to make democracy more than a matter of electoral politics, and instead embrace the notion of a democratic culture. The openness endorsed by Ghannouchi is at the heart of such culture. The people – all of them – must have the opportunity to shape their countries' futures.
