



The Long March Forward

The Islamic trend movement in Tunisia under Sheikh Rashid al-Ghanoushi has emerged as the foremost and best articulated opposition to the despotic rule of Habib Bourghiba. Specifically the Islamic Trend has stolen the banner of the 'Championship of the Oppressed' from the left. **Abdelwahab El-Effendi** traces the life of al-Ghanoushi and examines the various phases through which the organisation has passed.

ALL the well-known figures in the modern Islamic movement, have one thing in common: a religious upbringing and an early inclination to religiosity. Most of them were actually sufis. Jamal ad-Din Afghani, Muhammad Abdu, Rashid Rida, Hassan al-Banna and Ayatollah Khomeini were deeply absorbed in mystical training from their teens, and were set apart from their surroundings by this deep involvement which imbued them with a sense of a mission from very early on. Maulana Maududi of Pakistan and Dr Hassan Turabi of Sudan were not exactly mystics, although Turabi comes from a family with deep roots in the sufi tradition and must have been influenced by this fact. But even these two embarked very early on a path characterised by deep commitment to Islam and intensive study in traditional religious sciences. Not so Rashid al-Ghanoushi, leader of the *Islamic Trend Movement* (MTI) in Tunisia.

Ghanoushi, who comes from a peasant family from Hammah in the province of Qabis in southern Tunisia, was not particularly faithful to his religion in his early years, in spite of

the fact that he had completed his studies in a traditional Islamic *Mad-rassa*. He was violently traumatised by the conflict between his religious education and the thoroughly secularist society brought about by the French rule and its continuation under Bourguiba. As he put it once: "I remember we used to feel like strangers in our own country. We had been educated as Muslims and Arabs, while we could see the country totally moulded by the French culture." Probably as a result of this conflict he ceased to be religious, and up to the end of his first year in college he did not even observe the daily prayers (although he fasted during the month of Ramadan).

His Arabic education naturally barred him from entering the French-speaking university at home, so he went east to Damascus where he enrolled at the Faculty of Letters studying philosophy. His philosophical studies influenced his thought deeply, and its traces could be strongly felt in his writings and his style of thought. He was also politically active in the ranks of Arab nationalists, joining the Syrian Nationalist Social Party (SNSP) a pan-Syrian party influenced by the

ideas of Nasser. His arrival in Syria in 1964 coincided with the heyday of Nasserite socialism and the cult of Nasser, which was at its strongest in Syria and Lebanon. But he soon began to have doubts about his new beliefs. The reason for his disenchantment with Arab nationalism went back to his Maghrebi culture in which the terms 'Arab' and 'Muslim' were interchangeable. "In the Middle East, however, there are Christian Arabs... There the concept of Arabism is often opposed to Islam." He wrote.

His contacts with the Syrian *Ikhwan* and his polemics with them further exacerbated the tension between his native conception of Arabism and the one hoisted on him by his adopted party (which was, by the way, founded and led by a Christian Arab). By the end of his first year in college he abandoned his Arab nationalist convictions and decided to move to the Islamist camp. This was the first instance when nascent logical training scored a triumph. He had to spot the contradictions in his concepts and beliefs and resolve them.

Ghanoushi graduated in 1968 and

left for France for further studies, but was forced to cut short these studies and return home, after only one year, because of family difficulties. In Tunisia he took up a job as a philosophy teacher in a secondary school. There he came across a nascent Islamist movement, the most prominent figures in which were Abdul-Fattah Moro, Ahmaida al-Naifar and Shaikh bin Milad who, Ghanoushi says, "has become my teacher."

According to Moro, their movement was inspired by the Indian-based *Tabligh-i Jamaat*, a group of itinerant preachers who roam the world urging Muslims to observe their religious duties (but which avoided any involvement in politics). The *Tabligh* people visited Tunisia in the years 1966 and '67, and some young people were apparently impressed by their techniques. So in 1968 these groups went around cafes and streets asking customers and passers-by to come to mosques and listen to preaching, and attend lessons in Qur'an and be taught how to perform prayers, etc. (A similar technique was applied by Hassan al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. Although Banna does not speak of *Tabligh* influence, nor does he appear to have been the immediate example for the young Tunisian Islamists.) In time this movement grew and became successful, drawing large numbers of people to listen to popular preachers. Ghanoushi joined this movement, and after a period as a "disciple" under Shaikh bin Milad, he became a prominent figure in his own right.

Rahid Ghanoushi also used his position as a teacher in secondary schools to educate his pupils in an Islamic way. First he reopened an old mosque in the school and started to organise prayers in it. In his philosophy lessons he was also busy: "I used to dedicate most of my efforts to demonstrate to my students the contradictions and errors of every materialistic ideology, using logical reasoning. Then I would present the point of view of Islam and prove its superiority over all other western doctrines."

The whole thing was an uphill task. "In those years it was difficult to find a young man praying, especially if he was from the so-called educated classes. As for girls, to see any dressed as a Muslim was almost impossible." But in time the movement grew steadily if slowly. Mosques

sprang up in secondary schools everywhere, while the classes organised in mosques grew so popular that at one time up to ten thousand people were attending the lessons given by some leading figures in the movement, like the one given by Ghanoushi himself at the Subhan Allah mosque in the traditional quarter of Bani Swiqa, or by Moro at the Sidi Yousuf mosque. But they had started to attract government attention long before that. In 1971 leading members joined a society recognised by the government called "The Society for the Preservation of the Holy Quran", and some were elected to its offices. But as soon as the government found out it expelled them. This was the beginning of a long relation of hostility with the Bourguiba regime, with which Ghanoushi and his colleagues were not enamoured anyway.

As the pressures mounted, the movement shifted most of its activities underground. Says Ghanoushi: "We formed groups with the purpose of educating ourselves in Islam... The education consisted of memorising the Qur'an, as well as studying Sunna and other sciences of Islam." The groups were of seven to eight each, and this represents what could be called the "Ikhwan phase" of the movement. Like most of his colleagues, Ghanoushi was at that time under the influence of two trends of Islamic thought: the traditional current of Zaytouna college graduates and the thought of the Ikhwan. He personally studied in Zaytouna, but at that time he represented the Ikhwan-influenced trend, together with other colleagues like Ahmaida Naifar, while the traditionalists were represented by such venerable Shaikhs as Ahmad Saleh al-Naifar and Abdel-Qadir Salama. Like most Ikhwan in that period they had read a lot of Maududi's works and were influenced by some of his ideas.

But then the movement's growth brought it into conflict with all sorts of groups. As Ghanoushi's young students went to university, the movement struck root there. In December 1977 the student members felt strong enough to call a public meeting on the campus. However, the various leftist factions which were dominant in the university at the time would not stomach such insolence on the part of these upstarts and decided to break up the meeting, and the Islamists took a sound beating that evening. Some

weeks later another meeting by the Islamists in a lecture room was broken up even more violently, and although no one was killed, some of the students were disabled for life. But the result of this was to turn public opinion on the campus against the leftists, who were in any case involved in endless factional bickering. From then on support for the Islamists grew in leaps and bounds.

The decisive moment in the history of the movement came in January 1978, very shortly after the showdown with the left. In that month the powerful trade union movement the *General Union of Tunisian Workers'* (UGTT), clashed violently with the regime over pay claims. Strikes and protests were put down severely by the regime, resulting in many casualties. The Marxists in the university were not at all sympathetic with Habib Achour, the powerful UGTT boss, who they branded as "bourgeois". So when the Islamists called for a strike in the Faculty of Sciences in solidarity with the trade unionists, the communists opposed it strongly. But the motion recommending the strike was carried overwhelmingly when presented to the students for a vote, and this was the start of Islamist hegemony in the university, where the Faculty of Sciences remains one of their major strongholds.

January 1978 was also a watershed for the movement in other ways. Following the labour unrest the movement was "forced" (Moro's expression) to perform its first public act, issuing a communique supporting the workers' demand but deploring the rioting and resort to violence. This contrasted sharply with the statement issued by the student supporters of the movement, which roundly condemned the regime and called the events of January '78 a popular uprising against "the injustices, repression and exploitation" of the ruling Destour Party which "divided the country into classes." This discrepancy between the rather moderate stance of the leadership and the militancy of its student followers represents the moment of transition in the movement and also a tension that will persist inside it for sometime. Rashid Ghanoushi says that they had not participated in the events of 1978 in anyway because: "because we were prejudiced in such a manner that unionism was alien to us. The social confrontation between the rich

and the poor is a Marxist formula which did not correspond to our understanding of life. Later on, we realised that Islam also has a say in that confrontation and that as Muslims we could not be indifferent to it. In our country we found that the group allied with international capitalism exploits the common people and by that the harmony and balance of social existence is broken... Our position was very clear. We were on the side of the oppressed. From that point on we began to develop a consciousness and a sensibility towards social realities."

This retracing of the steps of Marx and the rediscovery of classes represents a momentous step not yet taken by any other Islamic movement, and sets the MTI in a class of its own. The movement was never the same again after that. 1978 was also the year when the MTI acquired its name. In 1971 when the Islamists were expelled from the Quran Society the government called them the "Islamic Group". When they handed their statement on the events of January 1978 to a newspaper to publish (it was signed by Ghanoushi and Moro) the editor presented it as the view of "the religious trend". This later was modified to the *Islamic Trend*, and the students in the university started to call themselves the *Islamic Trend Movement* (this was also partly due to the influence of the Sudanese Ikhwan who have been calling themselves the Islamic Trend in the university since the early seventies).

In the writings of Ghanoushi one can watch the development of the movement's ideology, as it moved from its more traditional stance to its more original position. The MTI was first set up in May 1972, and in 1973 it acquired the magazine *al-Maarifa*. Ghanoushi used to write regular editorials and essays for the magazine. His early essays reflected his philosophical training and concerns. Two articles written in 1973 and '74 discuss the curriculum of philosophy in schools (he said it was just a collection of unrelated opinions not viewed from any particular stance) and the concept of "progress" respectively. In the second article he argues that progress has no meaning unless it occurs to a recognised entity which progresses through transcending its present state while preserving what is best in it. His target are those who claim that pro-

gress means shedding the past completely, charging that these people call for amnesia and mental regression into a state of dependence and childhood. In 1974 he chastised a fellow teacher who wrote arguing that literature and morality are two separate things that should not be mixed. Ghanoushi finds this position false and inconsistent. He argues that there is no such thing as pure appreciation of beauty. "Every artistic form carries a philosophical or moral content and is therefore a call to something." So we have to have a moral position from which to appreciate art. "The real problem of education in our country is the absence of an educational philosophy among the men responsible for planning and executing educational programmes."

But the first sign of really original thinking appears in a series of articles published in late 1978 under the title "Once Again: The West and Us". The allusion here is to Maulana Maududi's work of a similar title, which he implicitly criticises. In this article he warns against the oft-repeated allegations about the decline of the West which serve only as a sedative for Muslims. Although he believes that the decline in the West is a fact, at least on the moral level, he sees little consolation in this for those who have declined even more. His thesis runs as follows: The problem of our relation with the West is the central issue around which all the differences in modern Islamic thought revolve. But this issue has to be put in a new form, because it has been put in the past from the wrong perspective, in conditions where the presence of the West was overpowering and the Muslims were firmly under its spell and physical control. Now a lot has changed and we have to put the right questions from the right perspective. The achievements of every civilisation are the reflection and the embodiment of the conceptions and values dominant in it. The essence of every civilisation is the "effective ideas" which move it, and most centrally man's conception of himself and his role in this world. On this conception the central idea in the western civilisation is the belief in man: that man exists in himself and for himself and is the measure of all things. Man can control his world and his destiny and understand his world and master it completely. The positive fruits of such a belief is the liberation



Ghanoushi (second from right) takes the platform: when it comes to orthodoxy, he is the Shaikh.

of man from the feeling of impotence and the direction of his thought towards practical channels, belief in progress and fearlessness in tackling the unknown, the acute sense of the value of time and the appreciation of man's dignity and freedom which reflects itself on the political level in democracy and the respect for human rights. But it also has its negative aspects, as seen in the lack of interest of anything that lies beyond material life, with the consequence that the West's intellectual and spiritual life lagged considerably behind its material progress, causing its life to lapse into decadent hedonism, with no convincing vision about the real meaning of life. Ghanoushi then goes to examine the Islamic values and conception of man's role and find that they contain all the positive aspects of the western conception, and concludes the decline of the Muslims was caused by the deviation from these conceptions and the lapse into fatalism and mysticism. This reality of decadence is now being transformed by the emerging Islamic movement which wants to establish the true values of Islam. In place of the idea of the "man-god"

which informed the western civilisation and the concept of "man-the-oppressed" presented by the decadent Muslim civilisation, the new revived Islam presents the concept of "man-the-successor-of-God", who is neither consumed by destructive overwhelming arrogance nor crushed under self-imposed burdens of imagined impotence. There is a touch of the old apologetic streak in these arguments, but one cannot fail to discern a positive and novel approach peeping from behind the old formula, of which we will see more later.

In general we find three central positions separating Ghanoushi's thinking from other modern Islamists. First there is his unwavering commitment to pluralism and representative government. He once rebuked a questioner who asked him during a lecture whether he would permit a Communist Party to operate once he came to power, telling the questioner that the very question smacked of a patronising mentality. We do not want to assume any guardianship over the people, and Islamists should free themselves from this patronising stance, and believe in the people's

ability to make the right choices. In an interview with a Kuwaiti magazine he said: "We have entered the political arena in Tunisia to fight for freedoms and not to set up an Islamic state." He added to the shock of his traditional Islamist interviewer: "We must respect the wish of the masses if they decided to choose a way other than ours. We are not guardians over the people. So if our society decided one day to be an atheistic or communist one, what can we do?" This stance has been enshrined in the communique that launched the movement in June '81. It was there declared that the MTI "does not present itself as a spokesman for Islam in Tunisia, nor does it aspire ever to be given this title." The movement also declared its rejection of one-party systems. This novel outlook which was substantiated by the MTI's practice, and which appears to be emanating from Ghanoushi himself, is behind the solid support all opposition groups gave to the MTI in spite of government inducements and threats. In 1981 Bourguiba legalised the Tunisian Communist Party (TCP) and received its leader Mohamed Hermel on the same

foreign capital", but has actively penetrated the trade unions and made the struggle of the underprivileged in Tunisia its own. This was helped by the fact that the overwhelming majority of its membership comes from peasant, working class or lower middle class backgrounds. In an interview in 1981 Ghanoushi spelled out the dominant view in the movement when he stated that: "As Islamic work becomes the fight for political freedoms and for social justice and the struggle for independence from international camps, we come closer to our goals."

This is a very dangerous road, which has been travelled by organisations like "The People's Mujahidin" of Iran (known as "Mujahidin-e Khalq"), which ended by subordinating Islam to its Marxist conception of social justice, and then quitting Islam altogether. The MTI came dangerously close to this road, especially during the ideological disarray that followed the arrest of Ghanoushi in 1981. In the absence of the chief theoretician of the movement all sorts of contradictory and over-liberal interpretations gained currency, and debates flared up concerning the most basic points of Islamic doctrine. The movement fell under the influence of the so-called Islamic Left and the writings of such modernists as Abid al-Jabiri and Hassan Hanafi. This had again brought out the contradictions and potential rifts like the one which led to a split in 1977. In that year a tiny group led by Ahmaida al-Naifar and Salah al-Jorshi split up and now publishes a magazine called *21/15* (in reference to the Christian and Islamic centuries). This group claimed that the MTI was still too traditionalist. But the turmoil of the 80's stopped short of splits as Ghanoushi came out in 1984 and reasserted the "orthodox" line.

This reflects the other side of Ghanoushi's personality. He may be a rebel by all traditional Islamist standards, but he is no heretic. In the ranks of the MTI he is referred to reverentially as "al-Shaikh," (the teacher or master), and he positively radiates saintliness and sincerity. Although he lays no claim to unusual piety, his commitment to the essentials of Islamic teachings is unquestionable. His ideas have made his movement into one of the most iconoclastic trends in modern history (and not that

of Islam alone), but he remains the champion of orthodoxy inside the MTI and the ultimate arbiter of Islamic authenticity. During his years in prison he apparently deepened his studies of the Quran, and his ideas in this period are reflected in a selection of essays he extracted from Sayed Qutb's commentary of the Quran. Qutb is one of the most ardent advocates of Islamic authenticity. Ghanoushi's selections from Qutb's magnum opus reflect his own inclinations. He mainly dwells on Qutb's philosophical reflections on man's role, the nature of his relation to God, and the nature of God's knowledge, mercy and attributes. But he also dwells on the spiritual meaning of Islamic rituals, social duties and norms and the meaning of martyrdom and struggle in the cause of God. It was clearly meant as an education to the young activists, guiding them through such matters as the relations with men and women and how to visit each other, etc. as well as equipping them with answers on such questions as the issue of free will and the meaning of life for the Muslim. This means that Ghanoushi was not oblivious of this side of Islamic commitment, and in fact played a major role in the spiritual preparation and moral education of his followers.

His main assertion, however, is that authenticity does not mean traditionalism. In an article entitled "*Islamic Thought between Idealism and Realism*" (published in 1982 and written from prison) he criticises the imprisonment of Islamic thought in what he termed "the idealism of the age of decadence." According to him, the reason why the modern Islamic movement failed to achieve its objectives may be partly due to the war waged against it by the west and its agents in the region and by traditional religious institutions, but the main reason remains internal. This is because the dominant thought patterns inside the movement have been conditioned by an idealism developed in the age of decadence, which trains its eyes only towards ossified texts divorced from reality. As a result the Islamic movement itself appears to be totally divorced from reality, to the extent that many of the publications presented by Islamists give little indications of the time or place in which they originated.

This mentality, he goes on to say,

displays itself in three vital areas of modern life neglected by the Islamists. The first of these is the working class which the Islamists do not address except through moral and ideological exhortations, neglecting completely the social dimension of its problems. Second are women whom Islamists view mainly from the point of the prevalent flouting of Islamic teachings in their treatment, forgetting the root of this phenomenon which lies in the oppression of women in Muslim societies, often in the name of Islam. Third is the neglect of the arts, which Islamists shun in spite of the vital role they play in the lives of people, and their efficacy in carrying any message, including the Islamic message, to the people.

The MTI matched word with deed on all these levels, and in addition to spearheading trade union activity gave women a very prominent role in the movement and pioneered many "Islamic" ventures into the world of art.

This very open outlook has certainly been conditioned by the MTI's emergence in Bourguiba's Tunisia which Ghanoushi says is probably the most secularised Muslim country, more so even than Turkey. But Bourguiba was not interested in this tribute to his life effort! The movement was harassed from its inception. (Contrary to claims that it has been encouraged by the regime to counter the leftists. In fact Mzali's overtures towards the movement -which are now counted by the regime as some of his main crimes- came after the MTI vanquished the left in the university and turned into a threat in its own right.) When the MTI applied for legal recognition in June 1981 (following Bourguiba's welcome to pluralism in April) its leaders were promptly bundled into jail and given sentences of up to 11 years (for Ghanoushi).

The decision to go public came after an intense internal debate. In December 1980 the government seized documents revealing a wealth of information about the movement's internal organisation. That was partly the reason for deciding to go public. But more than that the openness was a logical corollary of Ghanoushi's stance on democracy, pluralism and peaceful transition to the Islamic society. It was resisted fiercely by the radical students who saw no point in seeking legal recognition from a decadent and

corrupt regime thus making the MTI just another adjunct of the system. The announcement scheduled for the 18th of January 1981 was delayed and almost sabotaged in February when the student wing organised a huge demonstration against the regime. Ghanoushi was shocked when he emerged on the street that morning to find 15,000 students clogging the streets and shouting slogans against the regime. But the students were eventually made to tow the line.

The arrest and long imprisonment helped only to confirm Ghanoushi in his views regarding freedoms and human rights. He was shocked by the inhuman treatments of fellow prisoners (ordinary criminals) who were being beaten "from morning to evening... without attention to quantity or method. The prisoner is beaten until he falls unconscious, and then revived by pouring cold water over him, only to be beaten again." He appealed to the conscience of the intellectuals who expressed revulsion against what they termed harsh Islamic punishments although this was regulated by law, to stand up against this brutality which is not defined by any law. He even called for the review of the whole institution of imprisonment, which he called "the ugliest institution ever invented by civilisation." (It is to be mentioned here that the MTI was one of the founders of the Tunisian League for Human Rights and remains one of its strongest supporters. The leader of the League was imprisoned for speaking up for the Islamists, but released after strong international pressure.)

Ghanoushi and his colleagues were freed in August 1984 by a presidential amnesty (Ghanoushi insists that there was no deal, and that the "Bread Riots" of January 1984 jolted the regime into making concessions.) But the official harrassment never let up. There was a slight lull during the infighting within the regime which characterised the last days of Mzali's premiership. But Interior Minister Zain al-Abidin bin Ali, a pro-American ex-army officer, who has become the new strongman of the regime, is determined to uproot "fundamentalism", which means getting rid of Rashid Ghanoushi, especially. Ghanoushi is aware of the danger, but laughs it off.

Ghanoushi was very serious in his determination not to let this lure the

MTI into violence. He came on with all his ideological weight against any uncalculated reaction to any provocation, citing the case of the Prophet and his early followers who endured all kinds of persecution, including torture and murder, without lifting a finger against their persecutors. An internal document circulated among members at the time urged them to continue their struggle peacefully and under no circumstances deviate from their chartered course of peaceful struggle for Islamic values.

But even this was not peaceful enough for Bourguiba, for whom, apparently, only a dead Islamist is a peaceful one. In March this year he called a meeting for his top aides and told them he wanted the MTI leaders dead. Some of the shocked officials relayed the information to some MTI leaders. At first it was thought that this was just a plant from these officials to scare the Islamists. For although executions of political opponents (and even their murder in exile) was not an uncommon thing in Bourguiba's Tunisia, such a step was considered outrageous even by Tunisian standards. But the threat appears real enough as Ghanoushi and 90 other colleagues stand trial for all kinds of ridiculous charges in a court presided over by the General Prosecutor, and face the death penalty if convicted. Their conviction is more than certain, since the judge-prosecutor presiding over the trial made no secret of his conviction of their guilt even before the trial started. But it is not yet certain whether they will face death, since nobody even in the Tunisian regime, with the possible exception of Bourguiba and bin Ali, seems to feel that way.

But whatever the Tunisian regime does Ghanoushi has made his indelible mark on the development of modern Islamic social and political thought. He is probably one of the foremost modern Islamic thinkers to bring Islamic thought fully in touch with the realities of modern life. Ghanoushi (46), who has been for most of this decade living as a guest of Bourguiba in state prisons than at home, is married and has six children. His wife, a teacher, is an Islamic activist in her own right, and is as determined as he is to press on with the path they have both chosen, whatever the consequences.