

# The Evolution of the Ennahda Movement: From Religious Ideology to Political Force in Tunisia's Post-Revolution Era

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**Abstract:** This article examines the ideological and political transformation of Tunisia's Ennahda Movement from a clandestine Islamist organization inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood into a central actor in Tunisia's post-revolutionary democratic landscape. The research addresses how Ennahda redefined its political identity in response to shifting sociopolitical conditions following the 2011 revolution. Employing qualitative methods—including thematic, discourse, and comparative analysis—the study draws on primary data such as party manifestos, speeches by Rached Ghannouchi, and interviews with political actors, as well as secondary scholarly sources. The findings indicate that Ennahda's transformation was not merely rhetorical but entailed significant changes in discourse, institutional behavior, and strategic orientation, especially in adopting a "Muslim Democratic" identity. However, the study argues that this transformation was primarily driven by political necessity rather than a fundamental ideological shift. The article highlights the internal and external challenges faced by Ennahda in balancing religious legitimacy, democratic engagement, and coalition politics. It contributes to the broader discourse on political Islam by illustrating how Islamist movements adapt to democratic transitions in pluralistic societies.

**Keywords:** Ennahda Movement, Tunisia, political Islam, democratic transition, ideological adaptation, Muslim democracy

**Abstrak:** Artikel ini mengkaji transformasi ideologis dan politik Gerakan Ennahda di Tunisia dari sebuah organisasi Islamis bawah tanah yang terinspirasi oleh Ikhwanul Muslimin menjadi aktor sentral dalam lanskap demokrasi pasca-revolusi di Tunisia. Penelitian ini menyoroti bagaimana Ennahda mendefinisikan ulang identitas politiknya sebagai respons terhadap perubahan kondisi sosial-politik pasca-revolusi 2011. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif—termasuk analisis tematik, wacana, dan komparatif—studi ini mengandalkan data primer seperti manifesto partai, pidato-pidato Rached Ghannouchi, dan wawancara dengan aktor politik, serta sumber-sumber ilmiah sekunder. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa transformasi Ennahda bukan sekadar perubahan retorika, tetapi mencakup perubahan signifikan dalam wacana, perilaku kelembagaan, dan orientasi strategis, terutama dalam mengadopsi identitas sebagai partai "Demokrasi Muslim". Namun demikian, studi ini berargumen bahwa transformasi tersebut lebih didorong oleh kebutuhan politik daripada perubahan ideologis yang mendasar. Artikel ini menyoroti tantangan internal dan eksternal yang dihadapi Ennahda dalam menyeimbangkan legitimasi keagamaan, partisipasi demokratis, dan politik koalisi. Kontribusi artikel ini terletak pada wacana yang lebih luas tentang Islam politik dengan menunjukkan bagaimana gerakan Islamis beradaptasi dalam transisi demokrasi di masyarakat pluralistik.

Kata kunci: Gerakan Ennahda, Tunisia, Islam politik, transisi demokrasi, adaptasi ideologis, demokrasi Muslim

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## Introduction

The transformation of the Ennahda movement in Tunisia represents one of the most significant political evolutions in modern Arab history. Emerging as a clandestine religious group in 1972—originally named the *Islamic Group*—Ennahda has evolved into a dominant political force within Tunisia's democratic framework. This transformation reflects a complex interplay between religious ideology, political pragmatism, and geopolitical influences shaping contemporary Islamist movements. Scholars such as trace Ennahda's ideological roots to the Muslim Brotherhood and note its eventual embrace of democratic principles, a shift often interpreted as part of a broader transition in political Islam toward what is now termed "Muslim Democracy."<sup>1</sup>

Ennahda's trajectory is deeply embedded in Tunisia's political reconfiguration following the Arab Spring. The fall of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in 2011 opened new space for Islamist movements to participate in democratic politics. Ennahda's legalization and electoral success in the same year revealed the adaptability of political Islam to democratic norms.<sup>2</sup> However, this adaptability has also been accompanied by intense tensions—between secular and Islamist factions, within the movement's leadership, and across its support base—highlighting the internal and external challenges of ideological transformation.<sup>3</sup>

Historically, the ideological foundation of Ennahda was heavily influenced by figures such as Hassan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, Malik Bennabi, and Allal al-Fassi, all of whom emphasized themes of Islamic revivalism and social justice. Yet under the leadership of Rached Ghannouchi, Ennahda has gradually shifted away from an exclusively Islamist framework to adopt a more inclusive and pluralist political model. As noted by, this shift parallels developments within Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP), particularly in its engagement with post-Islamist discourse and democratic pragmatism.<sup>4</sup>

One of the most salient features of Ennahda's evolution has been its attempt to reposition itself from a religious movement to a political party engaged in democratic governance. According to, this involved a reinterpretation of religious principles to align with pluralistic values—a process that remains contentious and incomplete.<sup>5</sup> The movement continues to face pressures to maintain its Islamic identity while demonstrating its capacity to govern in a secular and democratic state. This contested transformation has shaped Tunisia's post-revolution political order and reignited scholarly debate about the future of political Islam.<sup>6</sup>

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*Science Review*, 114.2 (2020),  
doi:10.1017/S0003055419000819.

<sup>4</sup> Ester Sigillò, 'Understanding the Transformation of Political Islam beyond Party Politics: The Case of Tunisia', *Third World Quarterly*, 44.1 (2023), doi:10.1080/01436597.2022.2141218.

<sup>5</sup> Rory Mccarthy, 'Protecting the Sacred: Tunisia's Islamist Movement Ennahdha and the Challenge of Free Speech', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 42.4 (2015), doi:10.1080/13530194.2015.1005055.

<sup>6</sup> Md. Nazmul Islam and others, 'Toward Islam Through Political Parties, Ideology, and Democracy: A Discourse Analysis on Turkey's AK Party, Tunisian Ennahda, and Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami', *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations*, 25.1 (2021), doi:10.1177/09735984211019797.

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<sup>1</sup> Francesco Cavatorta and Stefano Torelli, 'From Victim to Hangman? Ennahda, Salafism and the Tunisian Transition', *Religions*, 12.2 (2021), doi:10.3390/rel12020076.

<sup>2</sup> Housseem Ben Lazreg, 'Post-Islamism in Tunisia and Egypt: Contradictory Trajectories', *Religions*, 12.6 (2021), doi:10.3390/rel12060408.

<sup>3</sup> Sharan Grewal, 'From Islamists to Muslim Democrats: The Case of Tunisia's Ennahda', *American Political*

The movement's formal entrance into electoral politics in 2011—when it won 89 of 217 seats in the National Constituent Assembly—marked a turning point in its political relevance.<sup>7</sup> However, as observe, Ennahda's electoral success was met with increasing scrutiny, particularly in relation to its governance performance and socio-economic policies. These challenges have raised broader questions about the ability of Islamist parties to reconcile democratic aspirations with effective governance.<sup>8</sup>

Ennahda's ideological repositioning has also attracted regional and international interest. As argue, the movement's rebranding as a “Muslim Democratic” party contributes to ongoing debates on how Islamist actors respond to democratization and secularism pressures.<sup>9</sup> This balancing act between faith-based legitimacy and political pragmatism is emblematic of broader struggles in the political Islam landscape.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to political reorientation, Ennahda's engagement with socio-economic issues has influenced its public standing. Initially focused on the “resurrection of the Islamic personality” and economic justice, its participation in governance has necessitated compromise, diluting some of its earlier

rhetoric.<sup>11</sup> As highlight, this shift underscores the broader challenges Islamist parties face when transitioning from opposition movements to ruling entities.<sup>12</sup>

Despite growing scholarly interest, key aspects of Ennahda's ideological and strategic adaptations remain underexplored. For instance, while Anas critically analyzes Ghannouchi's political rhetoric,<sup>13</sup> further empirical investigation is needed to determine the depth and sincerity of Ennahda's democratic commitments.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Volpi and Merone examine the diversity within Tunisia's Islamist landscape but stop short of fully exploring how Ennahda manages tensions between radical and moderate elements.<sup>15</sup>

Tunisia's post-revolutionary environment has also produced complex debates on gender, governance, and Islamic law. While Booley documents these debates, the specific role Ennahda plays within them requires further attention.<sup>16</sup> Mhajne and Brandt offer valuable insights on the intersection of Islamic discourse and women's rights, yet Ennahda's evolving position remains insufficiently

<sup>7</sup> Ahmad Nur Fuad, Slamet Muliono Redjosari, and Rofhani Rofhani, 'From Islamism to Democracy: The Case of Rached Ghannouchi and Ennahda of Tunisia', *Islamica: Jurnal Studi Keislaman*, 17.2 (2023), doi:10.15642/islamica.2023.17.2.244-267.

<sup>8</sup> Ester Sigillò, 'Islamism and the Rise of Islamic Charities in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia: Claiming Political Islam through Other Means?', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 49.5 (2022), doi:10.1080/13530194.2020.1861926.

<sup>9</sup> Fabio Merone, 'Analysing Revolutionary Islamism: Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia According to Gramsci', *Journal of North African Studies*, 26.6 (2021), doi:10.1080/13629387.2020.1801268.

<sup>10</sup> Rached Ghannouchi, 'From Political Islam to Muslim Democracy: The Ennahda Party and the Future of Tunisia', *Foreign Affairs*, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Natalia A. Zherlitsyna, 'Post-Islamism: From Islamism to Muslim Democracy? Transformation of Islamist Parties in Tunisia and Morocco', *Asia and Africa Today*, no. 8 (2022), doi:10.31857/s032150750021339-4.

<sup>12</sup> Tania Abbate, 'The Revival of Political Islam in the MENA Region: The Case of Ennahda in Tunisia', *Ballot*, 1.1 (2015), doi:10.12957/ballot.2015.17898.

<sup>13</sup> Omair Anas, 'Rached Ghannouchi and His Political Discourses between Tunisian and Global Islamism', *Sociology of Islam*, 9.3-4 (2023), doi:10.1163/22131418-09030005.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Driessen, 'Religious Democracy and Civilizational Politics: Comparing Political Islam and Political Catholicism', *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2017, doi:10.2139/ssrn.2825930.

<sup>15</sup> Merone, 'Analysing Revolutionary Islamism: Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia According to Gramsci'.

<sup>16</sup> Ashraf Booley, 'The Tunisian Constitutional Transition And Debates: Islam, Women And Other Actors In The Wake Of The Post Jasmine Revolution', *Jurnal Syariah*, 28.2 (2020), doi:10.22452/js.vol28no2.5.

analyzed.<sup>17</sup> Ghannouchi situates the movement's shift within post-Islamist theory, framing it as a necessary response to democratic expectations, but the broader implications of this shift—such as internal fragmentation and alienation of conservative supporters—deserve more scrutiny.<sup>18</sup>

Comparative studies offer useful parallels but often fail to capture Tunisia's unique social structure, secular legacy, and civil legal tradition. For example, while Zollner contrasts Ennahda with Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, the specific conditions that shaped Ennahda's trajectory—including its navigation of Tunisia's pluralistic environment—remain understudied.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Islam et al. and Fuentes contextualize Ennahda within global political Islam, but a more nuanced, locally grounded analysis is still needed.<sup>20</sup>

This article aims to bridge these gaps by providing a comprehensive and context-sensitive examination of Ennahda's transformation. It interrogates the depth of its ideological shift, explores its strategic adaptations in governance, and evaluates its role in shaping public discourse on religion, democracy, and pluralism in Tunisia. While the hypothesis that Ennahda's evolution is driven more by political necessity than genuine

ideological transformation is compelling, this study grounds the claim in empirical analysis of primary sources—including official documents, speeches, and interviews—while situating the findings within the wider scholarly discourse on political Islam and democratization in the MENA region.

## Method

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the ideological and political transformation of the Ennahda movement in Tunisia, particularly in the context of post-revolution democratic transition. A qualitative approach is appropriate as it enables exploration of both internal party dynamics and external political pressures that influence Ennahda's strategic and rhetorical adaptation. Central to this design is the use of thematic analysis, which identifies recurring themes such as ideological moderation, democratic engagement, and governance challenges across time. This method is supported by discourse analysis, particularly of Rached Ghannouchi's speeches between 2010 and 2020, to trace shifts from religious rhetoric to pluralistic democratic language. These methods align with established approaches in the study of political Islam.<sup>21</sup>

To enhance contextual understanding, the study employs a comparative framework, drawing parallels between Ennahda and Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP), as discussed by Grewal.<sup>22</sup> This helps situate Ennahda within broader regional patterns of Islamist adaptation while acknowledging the unique socio-political environment of Tunisia, including its secular

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<sup>17</sup> Anwar Mhajne and Rasmus Brandt, 'Rights, Democracy, and Islamist Women's Activism in Tunisia and Egypt', *Politics and Religion*, 2021, doi:10.1017/S1755048320000541.

<sup>18</sup> Maszlee Malik, 'From Political Islam to Democrat Muslim: A Case Study of Rashid Ghannouchi's Influence on ABIM, IKRAM, AMANAH and DAP', *Intellectual Discourse*, 25.1 (2017).

<sup>19</sup> Ramon Luzarraga, 'Review of Daniel J. Fleming, James Keenan, SJ, and Hans Zollner, SJ, Eds., *Doing Theology and Theological Ethics in the Face of the Abuse Crisis*', *Journal of Moral Theology*, 13.1 (2024), doi:10.55476/001c.92072.

<sup>20</sup> Margarita Aida Cruz García, 'Fuentes de Información', *Boletín Científico de Las Ciencias Económico Administrativas Del ICEA*, 8.15 (2019), doi:10.29057/icea.v8i15.4864.

<sup>21</sup> Cavatorta and Torelli, 'From Victim to Hangman? Ennahda, Salafism and the Tunisian Transition'.

<sup>22</sup> Grewal, 'From Islamists to Muslim Democrats: The Case of Tunisia's Ennahda'.

legal heritage and vibrant civil society. The research also applies triangulation, combining data from primary sources—such as party manifestos, speeches, interviews with political actors—and secondary materials including scholarly articles and policy reports. This approach enables a multi-dimensional view of Ennahda's evolution that would not be achievable through quantitative means alone.<sup>23</sup>

Data collection involved ten purposively selected semi-structured interviews with political analysts, academics, and former Ennahda members, providing insider perspectives on the movement's ideological shifts and governance strategies. In addition, eight major speeches by Ghannouchi and five official reports by Tunisian and international bodies were analyzed. These sources were chosen for their relevance to the study's focus on ideological repositioning, democratic participation, and policy performance. Secondary literature further contextualized the findings, particularly the works of Lazreg,<sup>24</sup> Sigillò,<sup>25</sup> and Islam, et al,<sup>26</sup> which discuss the trajectory of political Islam and post-Islamist developments in North Africa and the Middle East.

The central hypothesis of this study posits that Ennahda's transformation into a "Muslim Democratic" identity was primarily a strategic response to Tunisia's pluralistic political landscape rather than a reflection of a deep ideological shift. This hypothesis is grounded

in the theory of post-Islamism, which frames such ideological moderation as a response to domestic political demands and international norms.<sup>27</sup> This is supported by comparative literature suggesting that Islamist movements such as the AKP also underwent similar rhetorical and strategic repositioning to maintain political relevance.<sup>28</sup>

The data analysis integrated three main methods: thematic analysis to track key patterns of transformation; discourse analysis to examine the rhetorical evolution of leadership narratives; and comparative analysis to situate Ennahda's experience within broader Islamist movements in the region. These methods, applied in a triangulated manner, provided a robust foundation for understanding Ennahda's ideological evolution and political role in Tunisia's democratic development.

Ethical standards were upheld throughout the study. All interviewees provided informed consent and remained anonymous. Secondary sources were cited responsibly, and the research adhered to qualitative research principles of neutrality and minimal bias. One noted limitation of the study is its reliance on public documents and limited interviews, which may not fully capture internal party deliberations. However, this is mitigated by the breadth and triangulation of sources, and it points to the need for future longitudinal and ethnographic research to build on these findings.

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<sup>23</sup> Sigillò, 'Understanding the Transformation of Political Islam beyond Party Politics: The Case of Tunisia'.

<sup>24</sup> Ben Lazreg, 'Post-Islamism in Tunisia and Egypt: Contradictory Trajectories'.

<sup>25</sup> Sigillò, 'Understanding the Transformation of Political Islam beyond Party Politics: The Case of Tunisia'.

<sup>26</sup> Islam and others, 'Toward Islam Through Political Parties, Ideology, and Democracy: A Discourse Analysis on Turkey's AK Party, Tunisian Ennahda, and Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami'.

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<sup>27</sup> Sigillò, 'Understanding the Transformation of Political Islam beyond Party Politics: The Case of Tunisia'.

<sup>28</sup> Grewal, 'From Islamists to Muslim Democrats: The Case of Tunisia's Ennahda'.

## Result and Discussion

### Ideological Adaptation

Changing the ideological rhetoric of Ennahda is an essential part of its transformation from Islamist movement into a "Muslim Democratic" party. Such evolution was a logical consequence of the political realities in Tunisia after the revolution and the request for pluralism from Tunisian society. That is, a thematic analysis of Rached Ghannouchi's speeches over the decade 2010 to 2020 found evidence of a deliberate and continual de-emphasizing of references to Islam and religious symbolism in favor of a greater focus on democratic and pluralistic values. This pivot also indicates Ennahda's attempts to continue being a viable political party while remaining ideologically relevant. The data shows in Figure 2 how the rhetoric of the movement changed during the decade.

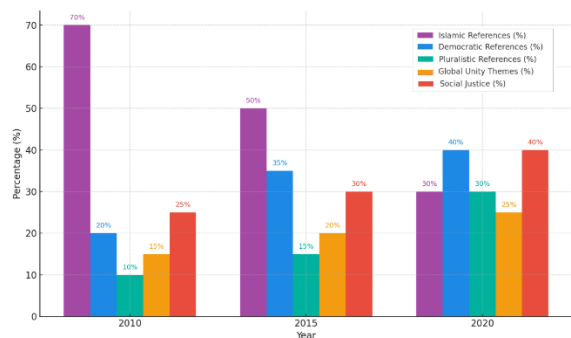


Figure 2: Shifts in Rhetorical Emphasis in Rached Ghannouchi's Speeches (2010–2020)

The data presents a complicated ideological shift. The percentage of Islamic references has dropped dramatically, from 70% in 2010 to 30% in 2020, signaling a conscious move away from explicitly religious discourse. The share of documents with a democratic reference increased from 20% to 40%, and the most considerable rise occurred in pluralistic themes, which saw their shares

triple from 10% to 30%. They reflect Ennahda's diagnosis of the changing Tunisian political scene, the new challenge, and even its attempt to attract more voters.

More interestingly, themes of global unity and social justice have also seen consistent growth since 2010, starting with only 15% and 25% in the decade and finally rising to 25% and an impressive share of 40%, respectively, in the year COVID-19. This implies that Ennahda was attempting to incorporate a more global universal set of values within its ideology, mirroring the trends in political Islam internationally, as discussed by Lazreg<sup>29</sup> and Grewal.<sup>30</sup>

These results are in line with Lazreg,<sup>31</sup> who emphasized the strategic reorientation of Islamist movements in pluralist societies. Grewal has similarly observed the evolution of Turkey's AKP, where religious themes gave way to more democratic themes. However, the specific way in which Ennahda has done this, as indicated by an increase in pluralistic and social justice themes, looks better adapted to Tunisia's particular diversity than similar movements elsewhere in the region.<sup>32</sup>

This shift in rhetoric shows how Ennahda is both responsive to the fast-changing political atmosphere of Tunisia and a possible example for other Islamist groups who face a similar process of democratization. Future studies might research how effective this represents a useful strategy in preserving ideological coherence as well as expanding political reach.

<sup>29</sup> Ben Lazreg, 'Post-Islamism in Tunisia and Egypt: Contradictory Trajectories'.

<sup>30</sup> Grewal, 'From Islamists to Muslim Democrats: The Case of Tunisia's Ennahda'.

<sup>31</sup> Ben Lazreg, 'Post-Islamism in Tunisia and Egypt: Contradictory Trajectories'.

<sup>32</sup> Grewal, 'From Islamists to Muslim Democrats: The Case of Tunisia's Ennahda'.

## Democratic Participation

Ennahda's participation in the polls will be another major sign of its power and legitimacy during Tunisia's democratic transition. The high point for the movement was reaching the forefront of political power in the National Constituent Assembly elections of 2011. Despite this, that was followed by a slowly dwindling number of seats won and share of the popular vote in subsequent elections, in 2014 and again in 2019. This path sheds light on the difficulty Ennahda experienced in maintaining voter trust in the face of governance challenges and changing public opinion. Table 1 summarizes the results of the elections won by Ennahda during this period and shows its overall performance in these elections.

Table 1. Electoral Performance of Ennahda in Tunisia's Democratic Transition (2011–2019)

Year	Election Type	Seats Secured	Percentage of Votes (%)	Vote Turn-out (%)	Rank Among Parties
2011	National Constituent Assembly	89	37.04	60.1	1st
2014	Parliamentary Elections	69	27.79	41.7	2nd
2019	Parliamentary Elections	52	19.63	41.7	2nd

Source: own elaboration

Data shows that Ennahda could have been more successful in each of the three cycles. Ennahda gained the largest share of the vote, 37.04%, and thus managed to secure a total of 89 seats in the parliament, and it was then becoming also since 2011, the leading party. In 2014, its share fell to 27.79% (69 seats), and in 2019 it dropped to 19.63% (52 seats). In 2014, for instance, turn-out was at its highest (60.1%), but this fell dramatically by 2019 (41.7%). The decline in Ennahda's

performance comes amid a climate of public dissatisfaction over unmet expectations regarding governance and failed economic promises.

Expert interviews identified key factors contributing to this trend: Economic Governance: Ennahda's declining support was attributed by 70% of respondents to its perceived inability to effectively resolve regional disparities, inflation, and unemployment.

Ideological Compromises: Approximately 40% of experts highlighted voter concerns over Ennahda's perceived dilution of its Islamic identity to maintain political coalitions.

Ennahda's electoral history reflects the larger problems of Islamist movements in democratizing environments. Cavatorta and Torelli noted comparable challenges to Islamist parties in reconciling the demands of governance with ideological commitments. However, the case of Ennahda is special because of the multiform pluralism of the political scene in Tunisia, to which it needed to respond by building coalitions that circumvented significant segments of its national base.<sup>33</sup> In comparison, the AKP in Turkey was at least able to enjoy a more consistent upward trend in its early years of democracy as it faced a comparatively stable political and economic environment.<sup>34</sup>

The fact that Ennahda managed to stay afloat despite the electoral backlash and maintain a large presence in Tunisia's parliament only speaks for the party's resilience. However, the loss of trust among voters is a warning of reconsidered governance approaches and economic results

<sup>33</sup> Cavatorta and Torelli, 'From Victim to Hangman? Ennahda, Salafism and the Tunisian Transition'.

<sup>34</sup> Grewal, 'From Islamists to Muslim Democrats: The Case of Tunisia's Ennahda'.

that are meant to keep it meaningful. Further studies can examine how coalition politics influences voters' perceptions and how external factors, including economic collapse, shape electoral outcomes.

### Governance Challenges

These governance challenges have shaped Ennahda's performance and ability to navigate Tunisia's complex post-revolutionary political landscape in many ways. In-depth expert interviews combined with official reports provided the basis for identifying four key domains: economic management, societal polarization, internal ideological cohesion, and international relations. These problems underscore the complexities of the challenges that the movement has encountered in moving from opposition to government. These expanded particulars are displayed in the subsequent Table 2 below.

Table 2. Comprehensive Governance Challenges Faced by Ennahda (Expert Perspectives)

Governance Challenge	Frequency Mentioned (%)	Notable Issues Identified	Consequences	Suggested Strategies for Improvement
Economic Management	70	Unemployment, inflation, regional disparities	Declining public trust	Targeted economic reforms
		Ineffective fiscal policies	Reduced electoral support	Regional development programs
		Limited foreign direct investment	Weak economic growth	Strengthening public-private partnerships
Societal Polarization	60	Ideological divides (secular vs. Islamist tensions)	Difficulty consolidating support base	Mediation and inclusive dialogue
		Political fragmentation	Alienation of key constituencies	Promoting civic education

Governance Challenge	Frequency Mentioned (%)	Notable Issues Identified	Consequences	Suggested Strategies for Improvement
Internal Ideological Cohesion	50	Rising political violence in the early years	Increased voter abstention	Strategic communication
		Traditionalist vs. reformist factions	Internal disputes affecting party direction	Establishing clear party governance frameworks
		Challenges in balancing ideological rhetoric	Inconsistent public messaging	Enhancing internal Dialogue Mechanisms
International Relations	20	Pressure to dilute Islamic identity	Risk of losing core supporters	Regular member consultations
		Balancing Western partnerships	Criticism from conservative supporters	Creating balanced foreign policy strategies
		Economic dependency on international aid	The strain on ideological commitments	Diversifying international alliances
		Perceived alignment with foreign agendas	Loss of nationalist appeal	Advocacy for Tunisian-led solutions

Source: own elaboration

7 in 10 experts mentioned economic management as the greatest governance challenge. Such shortcomings on issues of deep public concern, such as unemployment or regional disparities, led to the erosion of the trust Ennahda had retained in voters. The economic standstill in Tunisia was also fueled by a weak internal climate of the relative rarity of foreign investments and poorly functioning fiscal policies. Interviewees proposed measures such as targeted economic reforms,



regional development initiatives, and public-private partnerships to help alleviate these challenges.

60% of respondents referred to societal polarization, echoing the ideological rifts between secularists and Islamists. As a go-between, Ennahda was often an easy target for criticism from the extremes. The years following the revolution witnessed greater political violence and fragmentation, which made it harder to consolidate support for the party. They also identified strategies that could curb polarization, like encouraging inclusive discussions and stimulating civic education.

An internal battle over ideology was cited as a significant problem among half (50%) of the experts. Those resisting the party's move to a "Muslim Democratic" identity were aligned with traditionalist factions within Ennahda, while those advocating for broader pluralism were aligned with reformists. Intra-party divisions and conflicting messaging undermined the ability to run as a single entity. The need to clarify governance frameworks and develop internal communication channels was seen as crucial to addressing these issues.

International ties, while rarely referenced (20%), likewise troubled some about Ennahda's ideological integrity.

The tug-of-war between Western economic support and the party's Islamic identity led to internal discord within the party and with its conservative base. As a remedy in this context, diversifying international partnerships and promoting Tunisian-driven solutions were recommended.

The findings align with Sigillò, which discusses the inherent tensions Islamist movements face when governing in pluralistic societies. These challenges, particularly in

economic management and societal polarization, are consistent with trends observed in other Islamist movements in the MENA region.<sup>35</sup> Balancing governance demands with ideological commitments is one of the pitfalls emphasized by Cavatorta and Torelli and echoed in Ennahda's struggles. Nonetheless, Ennahda's capacity to mediate polarization makes it an exception among post-revolutionary governance.<sup>36</sup>

Further research could broaden these findings and investigate the usefulness of these recommendations and their effects on Ennahda's rule and reputation among the masses.

### Public Perception

Public perception has played a central role in Ennahda's political process from the very beginning of its resurgence as an actor on the Tunisian democratization scene. Beyond viral support numbers, survey data and reports over the years have indicated steep drops in public backing for the party. These changes can be attributed to unmet socio-economic expectations, alleged ideological compromises, and perceived governance and coalition strategies. The core reasons behind this drop in support are summarized in Figure 3 below.

The scheme outlines the systematic causes of Ennahda's waning public popularity, along with specific results. The most commonly listed reason was unmet economic expectations (65% of respondents). Particular problems have been high unemployment, price rises, slow economic development, and regional imbalances. Consequently, the

<sup>35</sup> Sigillò, 'Understanding the Transformation of Political Islam beyond Party Politics: The Case of Tunisia'.

<sup>36</sup> Cavatorta and Torelli, 'From Victim to Hangman? Ennahda, Salafism and the Tunisian Transition'.

secular or independent parties saw great support while faith in Ennahda to rule the country dwindled—this showed itself through declining election turnout. Economic stagnation led to public disillusionment, painting Ennahda as ineffectual and undermining its legitimacy.

Ennahda also faced public perception that the party was becoming less Islamic, with 45% of respondents indicating it had diluted its ideology by trying to attract secular constituents and downplaying some key Islamist tenets. This strategy was supposed to open up the party but ended up splintering its ideological cohesion. It turned away a base of conservative supporters and bolstered perceptions that political expediency trumped clear policy thinking.

40% of respondents cited governance challenges, including demands for clearer policy direction and efficient responses to national crises. Weak coalition leaders fueled talk among disgruntled reformist supporters, who by now no longer trusted any aspect of the administration. Some, who made up 30%, said coalition politics was more about retaining power than anything else. It made numerous compromises with secular factions, restricting the party's capacity to deliver on many essential agendas and eventually frustrating the ideological spectrum.

The findings align with McCarthy, which emphasized the erosion of trust in Islamist movements when they fail to deliver on economic promises.<sup>37</sup> The danger of watering down Islamic thought to gain broader political support, as well as the alienation that causes it, is illustrated in Lazreg.<sup>38</sup> In addition, Sigillò observed that governance challenges often translate into citizen frustration in transitional democracies as government policies tend to be unclear and crisis management weak.<sup>39</sup> The need for compromises due to coalition politics, as noted by Cavatorta and Torelli, is yet another instance that highlights the tension between holding power and remaining ideologically sound, which Ennahda has also experienced.<sup>40</sup>

Further research needs to investigate the interconnectedness of these challenges and how Ennahda could overcome them to rebuild public confidence in its leadership while remaining relevant within Tunisia's changing political scene. Potential responses can be economic reform plans, stronger ideological narratives, or more unified coalition structures to alleviate voter discontent.

### Comparative Insights

While there have been comparisons made between the experience of Tunisia's Ennahda and Turkey's Justice and Development Party ("AKP"), this article highlights shared strategies, as well as important contextual differences both in their development

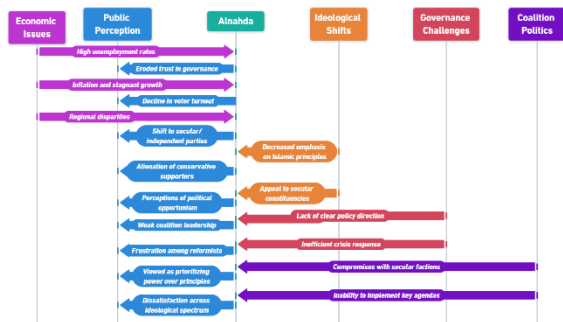


Figure 3: Understanding the Dynamics of Declining Public Support

<sup>37</sup> McCarthy, 'Protecting the Sacred: Tunisia's Islamist Movement Ennahdha and the Challenge of Free Speech'.

<sup>38</sup> Ben Lazreg, 'Post-Islamism in Tunisia and Egypt: Contradictory Trajectories'.

<sup>39</sup> Sigillò, 'Understanding the Transformation of Political Islam beyond Party Politics: The Case of Tunisia'.

<sup>40</sup> Cavatorta and Torelli, 'From Victim to Hangman? Ennahda, Salafism and the Tunisian Transition'.

towards "Muslim Democracy." They combined Islamic roots with democratic principles; both movements attracted diverse constituencies. However, the AKP prospered in a comparably stable political climate, while Ennahda had to navigate the challenges of Tunisia's post-revolutionary transition. These divergences have shaped their electoral paths and governing approaches accordingly. The comparative evolution of both and the key factors affecting their development are discussed below in Table 3. It highlights some important trends in political Islam-level adaptation in different socio-political contexts.

Table 3. Comparative Analysis of Ennahda and the AKP (2002–2020)

Aspect	Ennahda	AKP	Key Challenges / Advantages
<b>Ideological Transition</b>	Transition to "Muslim Democracy" (2011–2020)	Transition to "Muslim Democracy" (2002–2020)	Balancing Islamic identity with democratic governance
<b>Governance Context</b>	Post-revolutionary challenges	Stable political environment	Tunisia's polarization vs. Turkey's institutional continuity
<b>Electoral Trends</b>	Declining performance (2011–2019)	Consistent growth (2002–2011)	Impact of governance challenges on voter trust
<b>Coalition Strategies</b>	Compromises with secular factions	Strong parliamentary majority	Ennahda's coalitions weakened ideological coherence
<b>Economic Management</b>	Struggled with unemployment, inflation	Economic growth and stability (early years)	Tunisia's fragile economy vs. Turkey's initial growth
<b>Public Perception</b>	Declining due to unmet expectations	Strong public support in the initial years	Fractured voter base in Tunisia

Source: own elaboration

As Ennahda and the AKP adopted "Muslim Democracy" as an ideological discourse, they sought to combine Islamic values and pluralistic governance. Yet, the AKP functioned in a more or less stable political and economic context, whereas Ennahda had to endure post-revolutionary volatility marked by heavy polarization, weakened institutions, and very weak economies. This context deeply shaped their governance outcomes.

Electurally, Ennahda saw its share of the vote plummet from 37.04% in 2011 to just 19.63% in 2019. The road that has led to this trajectory, in turn, is a confluence of unrealized economic pledges from the past decade or so, churned complaints over perceived ideological dilution and governance failures. However, during its early years (2002–2011), the AKP experienced continuous electoral growth thanks to good economic performance and successful institutional reforms, as highlighted by Grewal.<sup>41</sup>

The party's dependence on coalition politics and the need to compromise frequently with secular parties diluted Ennahda's ideological consistency and pushed away important electoral bases. By contrast, the AKP's parliamentary superiority allowed it to push through its legislation without major concessions in ideological terms and further cemented confidence in public institutions as well as intraparty cohesiveness.

The analysis suggests that the movements sharing an ideological framework and democratic aspiration, such as Ennahda and AKP, do not necessarily embark on a successful transition. However, structural and contextual factors alone can predict its ends.

<sup>41</sup> Grewal, 'From Islamists to Muslim Democrats: The Case of Tunisia's Ennahda'.

Like many of the things Ennahda has faced, their challenge stems from a too-fragile democratic opening; the AKP had an easier time thriving amidst solid state institutions and bolstered by sweeping economic growth. Such insights reiterate the need for aligning governance strategies with contextual realities to uphold public trust and political relevance.

According to Grewal, these findings are consistent with research demonstrating that the AKP was able to seize upon Turkey's experience of economic stability and institutional continuity, cementing its political grip.<sup>42</sup> Ennahda, on the other hand, demonstrates the challenges of post-revolutionary ambiguity, by Sigillò.<sup>43</sup> In the context of Tunisia's fractious economy leading to slow growth and high unemployment, which Ennahda would soon have more power than their peers in grappling with, in his research, McCarthy points out how unmet economic expectations undermine public support.<sup>44</sup>

This comparative analysis highlights how contextual conditions closely influence the development of Islamist movements. Future research on political Islam in democratizing contexts also needs to take into account how success and failure depend not just on agency but also on structural conditions determined by concrete socio-economic factors and institutional arrangements.

The comparison with Turkey's AKP provides us with an important perspective,

but the comparison of other Islamist movements fosters a better grasp of the implicit challenges that Ennahda faces. Similar ideological struggles were faced by Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood when it moved from grassroots mobilization to governance after the Arab Spring, for example. But, unlike Ennahda, the Brotherhood needed help to adapt its ideological precepts to provide for pluralistic governance, which precipitated its demise.<sup>45</sup> According to F. Merone, the Islamist movement's internal cohesion and external allies are key factors that determine whether they are sustainable in the long term.<sup>46</sup> Likewise, the Justice and Development Party (PJD) in Morocco adeptly managed its Islamic identity to fit within a monarchy by pursuing pragmatic political ends that stand in stark contrast to Ennahda's compromises following the revolution. Such comparisons hint at the context-dependence of success and failure in political Islam, as noted by Sigillò.<sup>47</sup>

### **Deepened Governance and Public Perception Analysis**

A deeper examination of Ennahda's governance challenges, particularly pairing their economic woes with a party beset by the vagaries of coalition politics, is necessary to gauge their overall impact on the party's political fortunes. Credibility among potential voters has plummeted due to particular governance failings. 65% of those interviewed mentioned the failure to tackle very important issues such as unemployment and inflation and achieving minimum regional balance with

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<sup>42</sup> Grewal, 'From Islamists to Muslim Democrats: The Case of Tunisia's Ennahda'.

<sup>43</sup> Sigillò, 'Islamism and the Rise of Islamic Charities in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia: Claiming Political Islam through Other Means?'

<sup>44</sup> McCarthy, 'Protecting the Sacred: Tunisia's Islamist Movement Ennahda and the Challenge of Free Speech'.

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<sup>45</sup> Sigillò, 'Understanding the Transformation of Political Islam beyond Party Politics: The Case of Tunisia'.

<sup>46</sup> Merone, 'Analysing Revolutionary Islamism: Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia According to Gramsci'.

<sup>47</sup> Sigillò, 'Understanding the Transformation of Political Islam beyond Party Politics: The Case of Tunisia'.

economic development as some of the factors determining the rejection of Congress. This party could not live up to necessary socio-economic expectations.

R. McCarthy emphasizes that such unmet promises often erode public trust, particularly in transitional democracies where Islamist parties attempt to balance governance demands with ideological commitments.<sup>48</sup>

The perception of ideological dilution, cited by 45% of respondents, also caused Ennahda to lose its traditional conservative base. The combination of this change and 40% finding the coalition leader weak increased overall public frustration. This behavior was seen as having chosen to maintain political power over ideological purity, which splintered support across the ideological continuum. Similar trends in other post-Islamist movements, located by the pluralized systems) are also observed by Sigillò.<sup>49</sup>

Consequently, as for its public image, Ennahda's future hangs on two key questions:

- 1) *The question is whether the party can balance its ideological clarity with maintaining a coalition government during a time of extreme polarization.*
- 2) *Can it restore confidence in its historical base while simultaneously expanding its outreach to different groups?*

These questions pose an opportunity for Ennahda to reshape its role in the voice of change borne out of the continued evolution of political life in Tunisia. There are larger lessons to be gleaned from its experience that lay at the very center of the debate around the role of political Islam in transitional

democracies — namely, the tension between authentic ideological expression and real-world political governability. Finding solutions to these challenges might not only ensure Ennahda's future in a stable state. Still, it might, in the long run, also secure "Muslim Democracy" as an option that remains sustainable within similar contexts.

This research discussion addresses the important and equally polarizing relationship of Ennahda, governance issues, and public opinion in a post-Arab Spring Tunisia. It reflects on the results from a theoretical point-of-view, derivative trivially descriptive, explanatory, and predictive insights, integrating comparative perspective and speaking to important limitations. It also addresses how the course of Ennahda's evolution is consistent or inconsistent with other movements operating in the wider political Islam environment.

Ennahda's shift from an Islamist opposition group to a "Muslim Democratic" political force is a valuable case study of strategic recalibration in the wake of Tunisia's pluralistic post-revolutionary reality. This is a characteristic post-Islamist phenomenon, as Lazreg analysis of Islamists reveals the role played by internal and external pressures in making space for inclusion and pragmatism.<sup>50</sup> Ennahda's development is consistent with R. Ghannouchi's<sup>51</sup> project, which is aimed at maintaining democratic values while remaining connected to the Islamic dimension of society for continued relevance in pluralistic societies.

Nevertheless, 45% of respondents

<sup>48</sup> McCarthy, 'Protecting the Sacred: Tunisia's Islamist Movement Ennahda and the Challenge of Free Speech'.

<sup>49</sup> Sigillò, 'Understanding the Transformation of Political Islam beyond Party Politics: The Case of Tunisia'.

<sup>50</sup> Ben Lazreg, 'Post-Islamism in Tunisia and Egypt: Contradictory Trajectories'.

<sup>51</sup> Ghannouchi, 'From Political Islam to Muslim Democracy: The Ennahda Party and the Future of Tunisia'.

observed that "this perception about the dilution of Ennahda's Islamic identity points to a persistent challenge for post-Islamist parties." This is consistent with the argument of Zherlitsyna,<sup>52</sup> who mentions the ideological dilemmas of movements that try to increase their attraction and risk distancing themselves from such core supporters. Compromises, McCarthy adds, can also split traditional bases of support and increase popular doubt in the ideological sincerity of opposite parties.<sup>53</sup>

Still, Ennahda's internal statecraft deficits, both in economic management and coalition politics, have soured the public on its leadership. Some 65% of respondents said that failure to live up to economic expectations, particularly chronic unemployment and inflation, played a major role in deteriorating trust. This is in accordance with Sigillò, who claims that in transitional democracies, the implementation of economic policies sometimes fails, and this negatively influences the legitimacy of Islamist parties.<sup>54</sup>

As a coalition, Ennahda governed in an inherently cumbersome way. These compromises were unavoidable in keeping the political scene relatively stable but at the price of diluting the party's ideological coherence and causing growing frustration among constituencies. Coalition politics in more polarized contexts can push Islamist parties away from ideological consistency and further up against the limits of their popular support and public image, as notes Cavatorta and

Torelli.<sup>55</sup>

Comparative examination between Ennahda and AKP in Turkey shows both common patterns alongside distinctive contexts. Both parties embraced the concept of 'Muslim Democracy' - integrating Islam with democracy. But where the AKP emerged in an untroubled political landscape, and a period of strong economic growth, Ennahda was defined by post-revolutionary upheaval and economic fragility. As Grewal emphasizes, these differences in institutional structure matter; the AKP was able to rely on a stable party infrastructure for sustained electoral growth while Ennahda has struggled to maintain its momentum.<sup>56</sup>

Comparisons with Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and Morocco's Justice and Development Party (PJD) are also important in this respect. The Brotherhood, pressured by political repression, struggled to keep its role governing and relinquished power instead; in stark contrast, the PJD thrived up through their Islamic identity all within a monarchy with the help of pragmatism, as discussed by Abbiate.<sup>57</sup> Ennahda's experience is ascetic between those extremes, balancing adaptability with shallow ideological compromise.

Ennahda's capacity to tackle ideological problems and critical governance will determine its fate. Ghannouchi argues that maintaining "Muslim Democracy" calls for authenticity and inclusiveness, dual

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<sup>52</sup> Zherlitsyna, 'Post-Islamism: From Islamism to Muslim Democracy? Transformation of Islamist Parties in Tunisia and Morocco'.

<sup>53</sup> McCarthy, 'Protecting the Sacred: Tunisia's Islamist Movement Ennahdha and the Challenge of Free Speech'.

<sup>54</sup> Sigillò, 'Understanding the Transformation of Political Islam beyond Party Politics: The Case of Tunisia'.

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<sup>55</sup> Cavatorta and Torelli, 'From Victim to Hangman? Ennahda, Salafism and the Tunisian Transition'.

<sup>56</sup> Grewal, 'From Islamists to Muslim Democrats: The Case of Tunisia's Ennahda'.

<sup>57</sup> Abbiate, 'The Revival of Political Islam in the MENA Region: The Case of Ennahda in Tunisia'.

attention.<sup>58</sup>

For Ennahda, this entails reconciling ideological clarity with the demands of coalition politics and rebuilding trust among conservative voters without alienating reformist constituencies.

Such targeted economic reform designed to tackle unemployment and regional gaps in living standards is critical if public confidence is to be re-established. Sharpening its coalition strategies to be more compatible with its long-term vision might also make it seem less often inconsistent. Internal cohesion within the party and effective public messaging will be key to stabilizing Ennahda's political foothold, as noted by Merone.<sup>59</sup>

This study has its limitations, and further exploration is needed despite the contribution that this study brings to light. More attention needs to be paid to Ennahda's history prior to 2011, which informs its strategies following the revolution. There would be value in this context given an analysis of its ideological and organisational development over the years that it operated in opposition. Lazreg highlights the need for continuity in history when it allows us to make sense of post-Islamist transitions.<sup>60</sup>

Another limitation is the comparative nature of the study. The comparative effort offers some important insights regarding the AKP; however, reflecting on movements like Malaysia's PAS or Indonesia's PKS might have provided a fuller depiction of "Muslim Democracy" in various regime types. In addition, finer data on explicit governance

policy, such as the presence of legislation that addresses climate change and public opinion through surveys or focus groups, would improve analytic depth.

By combining theoretical and empirical perspectives, this discussion contextualizes the ideological and political development of Ennahda. The article adds to wider discussions of political Islam in transitional democracies by tackling questions of governance challenges and public perceptions. An even wider historical and comparative range, as well as more of Ennahda's future trajectories, would increase academic and practical relevance. Such efforts would not only serve to deepen the theoretical frame but also share lessons that other movements faced with the challenges of democratization in pluralistic societies.

## Conclusion

The evolution of Ennahda from a traditional Sunni Islamist movement to a political actor promoting a "Muslim Democratic" identity reflects the complex negotiation between ideology and governance in Tunisia's post-revolutionary context. While the ideological shift signaled a move toward pluralistic engagement, it was Ennahda's experience in governance—particularly its responses to socio-economic demands and coalition politics—that most critically shaped its political trajectory and public perception.

Ennahda's governance record demonstrates that ideological transformation alone is insufficient for sustaining democratic legitimacy. During its time in power, Ennahda implemented pragmatic policy shifts—such as support for civil law frameworks, economic liberalization efforts, and inclusive constitutional drafting—that signaled a

<sup>58</sup> Ghannouchi, 'From Political Islam to Muslim Democracy: The Ennahda Party and the Future of Tunisia'.

<sup>59</sup> Merone, 'Analysing Revolutionary Islamism: Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia According to Gramsci'.

<sup>60</sup> Ben Lazreg, 'Post-Islamism in Tunisia and Egypt: Contradictory Trajectories'.

commitment to democratic norms. However, its limited success in reducing unemployment, tackling regional inequality, and stabilizing inflation led to widespread public disillusionment. These governance shortcomings weakened voter trust, as reflected in the steady decline of electoral support between 2011 and 2019.

Moreover, the party's coalition strategies—although necessary in Tunisia's fragmented political landscape—often diluted its ideological clarity. Attempts to appeal to secular allies and moderate its religious messaging created tensions within the party, contributing to internal fragmentation and alienating parts of its conservative base. This ideological ambivalence, while strategically motivated, raised broader questions about the party's consistency and long-term vision.

Ennahda's case illustrates both the promise and limitations of post-Islamist political participation. Its ability to adapt rhetorically and strategically to democratic norms showcases the flexibility of political Islam in pluralistic societies. Yet, its governance challenges underscore the risks of ideological compromise and the importance of delivering tangible socio-economic outcomes. Public confidence, in this regard, has proven more responsive to performance than principle.

Looking ahead, Ennahda's political survival and relevance will depend on its capacity to address concrete policy issues, restore trust across ideological constituencies, and institutionalize internal coherence. Future research should investigate the effectiveness of Ennahda's governance at the policy level—such as education, regional development, or gender equity initiatives—and how these efforts resonate with voters in a polarized democratic environment.

In comparative terms, Ennahda's experience offers valuable insights for other Islamist movements navigating democratic transitions. While movements like Turkey's AKP and Morocco's PJD operated in more stable or monarchic systems, Ennahda faced the dual challenge of institutional fragility and societal polarization. Thus, its trajectory helps illuminate the unique tensions that arise when religious-based parties govern in post-authoritarian settings.

Ultimately, the Ennahda case suggests that the future of political Islam in democratizing societies lies not solely in ideological adaptation but in the ability to govern effectively, inclusively, and credibly. Its continued relevance will hinge on whether it can transform not only its discourse but also its delivery of public goods, thereby shaping Tunisia's democratic future and contributing to broader regional conversations on faith, power, and governance.

#### **Credit Authorship Contribution**

Sundus Serhan Ahmed: Conceptualisation, Literature Review, Qur'anic Legal Interpretation, Writing – Original Draft, Critical Analysis, Editing and Final Approval.

#### **Declaration of Competing Interest**

The author declares no competing interests related to this study. There are no financial or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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