

## Transcript: interview with Rached Ghannouchi

*Rached Ghannouchi, leader of Tunisia's Islamist movement, Nahda, spoke to the Financial Times in London. Here are excerpts from the interview.*



### **FT: What do you think about the Future of Arab Revolutions?**

RG: I'm optimistic. These people who made these revolutions I have confidence that they have the ability to translate these revolutions into a system that achieves the aims of these revolutions. These came after a struggle for long decades where all methods were tried for reforming these regimes from within. And all had failed, in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere and reform from without has also been tried, through the use of violence, and that has also failed.

The people have discovered that these regimes are not able to be reformed. And that attempts to reform them through violence have only strengthened these regimes. And they discovered the method of peaceful resistance, peaceful revolutions. Hence the fate of these revolutions is not linked to any particular party or ideology or leader. It depends on the millions who have achieved them, these revolutions.

Today, the revolution continues; and the youth of the revolutions are still striving to put pressure on the old elites, which are trying to return on the scene to rule again. And are ruthlessly defending their interests. Hence we see new sit-ins and protests in Tunisia and Egypt to put an end to the past, break with the past, and start a new page.

To break with the past and build a political system that achieves the aim of the revolution in building a fair, democratic system. The youth are very vigilant and conscious of what they need

to do, and they're not ready to leave their fate in the hands of the elites. And there is still turmoil in the country, in both Tunisia and Egypt.

**FT: What balance sheet would you draw up on what has been achieved so far in the transformation of power?**

RG: The main achievements are – and the first one is toppling the dictator and putting a number of his accomplices on trial. Apart from that the main achievements are psychological and people have liberated themselves from fear. People are exercising their sovereignty on the ground; so the ruler or the minister or the director of a company who is appointed, people research their background and they evaluate them. If they discover that they come from the old archives then they use the famous “Degage” and they are dismissed. However, the problem is the new appointees are from the same archives too.

So now fear has moved from the people to the opposite camp of the state, so the state is trying to please and appease the people. . . The police were a source of great terror. Now Ben Ali has fled and his nearest allies are living in fear, police stations have been burnt. They are coming back onto the scene but in small, reserved steps.

The Interior Ministry has even changed the colour of police uniforms to end the image of the hated policeman; they've changed the colours of police cars. So people will forget the image of the terrorising and corrupt policeman.

But we have said what is under the uniform must change, too. There's a great internal conflict within the Interior Ministry between different trends: those who say that the police must be neutral in the political sphere, must not side with any political party. And just apply the law. Another trend believes that the police itself is in danger because they will bear the responsibility for all the crimes of the old regime. So they must continue with the same mentality, the same ideology of combating fanaticism and terrorism and Islamists.

Because that was the ideology of the state, combating Islam is combating Nahda. So in brief there is a movement pushing forward and another trying to pull back.

**FT: Why did you agree to the postponement of the elections for a constituent assembly (from July to October). Nahda had been against that?**

RG: We had no other choice; we were forced to accept.

**FT: Forced by whom?**

RG: Because the electoral commission, they were the ones who, without consulting anyone, decided to postpone the elections.

**FT: It was on technical grounds though?**

RG: That's what they said - they said it was for technical reasons. But we were against the way this was done, without consulting anyone. And we're not confident this will be the last time they will be postponed. We have a feeling that there is an attempt to find other ways, other than elections, to prepare the public opinion, for other methods, about those who are talking about presidential elections.

**FT: So to hold presidential elections before the elections for a constituent assembly?**

RG: The higher council is now proposing projects for different codes, laws. So within this council they are doing the work of the Constituent Assembly before it is elected.

We think that they believe that this Constituent Assembly would not be dominated by them; they will not be able to control it. So they wish to set everything, decide everything, before these elections even though this is not an elected Committee.

**FT: But you are represented on this council or have you suspended your participation?**

RG: We are still reviewing seriously and we might leave this. We now believe that this higher council is no longer committed to the principle on which it was founded; that is consensus. It's now built on the majority as if it's an elected body.

There is a new sit-in that started on Friday in Tunis, calling for reforming this council because it's not balanced.

**FT: The biggest fear of many people, and generally the elite, is that you are ahead of them, and, therefore, will do better in elections and you will be able to control the shape of the next Constitution. Why did you refuse to sign on a republican charter that they had proposed? Wouldn't that have been a better way of reassuring the liberals?**

RG: No, did not refuse to sign this Republican Charter as a principle. But we believe this is trying to impose something on the Constituent Assembly, prior decisions. As a principle we are not against the content of this Charter, but the methods it's being imposed or they wish to impose it. We believe that is something for the Constituent Assembly to do.

The Council has achieved its mission; its mission has ended, to look into the electoral codes, which will not be used to organise elections. Now we should go forwards to the elections and the charter will be part of the tasks of the Constituent Assembly.

**FT: When the FT interviewed you two months ago you sounded a lot more positive about the transition. But now you feel that there is a strong pushback?**

RG: Yes, indeed there is, there are some actions by sectors of the elites in which we see an attempt to circumvent the revolution. That there's a lack of confidence and trust in the people and to restrict the people's choice by prior decisions, by unelected bodies. It is a kind of guardianship of the people.

The same methods used by the toppled President. So the revolution was achieved to lift this guardianship over the people, imposed on the people. They are trying to practise the same guardianship. There were 29 members first of this Council; then they added 42 others. They were called national figures; they're not from any party. They're supposed to be independent. When the head of this Council was asked where are they coming from, he said this list comes from the Prime Minister's office. When the Prime Minister was asked he said it came and I signed the list without specifying where from. So the former Interior Minister, who has been dismissed, this has led them to say that there is a shadow government ruling the country.

**FT: So how are your relations now with the prime minister?**

RG: We have met him more than once, on many occasions. We have a fear really that there is a shadow government controlling some of whose figures have been announced, such as the famous businessman Kamel Eltaif who was a very close accomplice of Ben Ali but Leila, Ben Ali's wife, pushed him aside. Now he's returned with the same power. (Editor note: Mr Eltaif has denied the charges made by the former interior minister).

**FT: So what are you saying? That you need a new revolution already?**

RG: It is continuing, the revolution. There's a new sit-in now, the youth of the revolution, from the various regions, have been supported by some parties, such as Dr Marzouki's party. He visited them; I believe other parties will also support them. Because people don't believe that the revolution is going the right way, there's an attempt to circumvent the revolution.

So those who have made the revolution are now back on the streets. The revolution toppled fear and guardianship of the people, and the dictatorship. Now politicians are a bit in the spotlight and the youth are supervising their actions. These . . . see that they are not represented in the government and that this government is from the old regime. So things will only be stable when these youths see that their will is represented in this Council and in the government.

What has been done is against the revolution; it's an attempt of the old regime to come back. There is a new party called the Free Constitutional Party, with Mohamed Ghannouchi, the former Prime Minister and other historical figures from the (Habib) Bourguiba era. Around 20 parties have been formed on the basis of the old, dissolved RCD. This new Free Constitutional Party aims at gathering all those new small parties to regain power.

**FT: New parties from the old RCD are running in the elections. Isn't your problem that they're trying to pre-empt, to predetermine, the outcome of the process?**

RG: Yes. That is not – it is not the only the answer to parties who are trying to predetermine. . . under this, it's not that these new parties. They have the right to form parties. We are against the return of certain figures who are implicated in the crimes of the old regime; we are against their return on the political scene. Corruption or killings and human rights violations – we are against the use of these, of the state's resources, for their own interests.

**FT: But the parties you are referring to are made up of people from the Bourguiba era more than Ben Ali's and many officials from the RCD are banned from participating in the elections.**

RG: These are the ones who controlled the state for 50 years. The revolution is still outside the state, it's still on the streets. One sees the old figures coming back.

**FT: Where do you position al-Nahda between, say, the AKP in Turkey and say the Muslim Brotherhood?**

RG: We are close to the AKP, my books are more available in Turkey than they are in Tunisia. I considered the primary point of reference the literature of the AKP. Every time I visit Turkey I find that a new book of mine has been translated into Turkish. The historical development in Turkey is similar to Tunisia.

In the 19th century there was a reform movement in Turkey and we had the same in Tunisia, which aimed to bring Islam and modernity in harmony with each other. French colonisation combated this reform movement and ended it. This is a reform movement aimed at incorporating democratic principles within an Islamic context. We consider ourselves to be an extension of that reform movement.

**FT: Do you think that ordinary Tunisians believe your guarantees on basic freedom, on personal status law and the rights of women? That this is now a key, as it were, among not everyone but the mass of Tunisian people, that your message is believed?**

RG: I just want to add to the previous answer. I also wish to add that there are similarities between the Tunisian people and the Egyptian people. And the closest society to the Tunisian society is the Egyptian society. Because they both went through reformist movements. In Egypt as well in the nineteenth century there was a reform movement. There were three centres: Istanbul, Tunis and Cairo.

Both Tunisian and Egyptian societies have an urban nature rather than a rural, predominantly. The concept of the state is a deeply established one in both societies, which was the cause of dictatorship but also a cause for the fall of dictatorship.

Now we go back to your question regarding human rights. Since 1981 – this is the 30th anniversary of the emergence of political Islam in Tunisia – since 6th June 1981 we announced the foundation of an Islamic movement, of a political movement, which was very early compared to other Islamic movements.

We announced our commitment to democratic principles and we saw that legitimacy of the state comes from pluralistic elections. The state should be founded on the principle of citizenship where citizens enjoy equal rights, regardless of their faith or their gender. When we look at our

declaration from that time, it needs no change. But time has only given us further commitment to those principles. And we believe we have made a considerable and significant contribution to the development of the principles of human rights and democracy within an Islamic context.

**FT: But as far as I understand the latest polls that I saw, you're running at about 17 per cent, is that correct?**

RG: Until now we have no confidence to any of these opinion polls. This could be accurate or somewhere near there, or it could be not so accurate. We don't really have a tradition of fair opinion polls either.

**FT: Do you have internal polls, your own party?**

RG: Not until now. We are rebuilding our organisational structure; we were absent for over 20 years from the political scene. We were only present in the hearts of the people.

**FT: Looking forward to the October elections, have you been able to agree on a coalition with other parties as you had been trying to do?**

RG: This was a strategic choice for us. But the electoral law that's been approved does not encourage alliances. The aim of this law is to prevent large parties or major parties from achieving large representation. And when we talk about major parties in Tunisia, there aren't many such parties. Usually people mean al-Nahda. But we have repeatedly affirmed that Tunisia today and other Arab countries, where revolutions are taking place or will be taking place, they cannot be ruled without an effective participation of Islamists. As the movement that has given the highest sacrifices during the last few decades.

But that's not the complete truth. We need to also add that the Islamic movement alone cannot rule. Because the challenges we are facing, no single party, however great, large, it is, cannot meet these challenges alone, particularly the economic challenge.

We are in a transition period in the next five years in which the country needs a national unity government, in which we have the widest representation of the political elites. In order to unite and mobilise the largest number of – the population – for development, and the elites, for economic development and the building of a democratic system.

**FT: What do you think of the Ben Ali trial?**

RG: We don't see sufficient seriousness in trying the figures of the old regime. There is no seriousness also in recuperating the funds even though the latest report on Ben Ali's . . . estimated his wealth to be around \$5bn and that of his family to be \$12bn, which is the same as the Tunisian state budget. This is from the Tunisian branch of Transparency International report.

Had the government been serious about recuperating these funds they would have been sufficient, instead of chasing loans and grants. At the beginning of the revolution there was talk of the presence of \$680m at Swiss banks and belonging to Ben Ali. After one month, and now they say there are only \$68m. So the government has given sufficient time for these criminals to recuperate their funds.

**FT: Has Abdelfatah Mourou (a founder of Nahda) made up with the party or is he forming his own movement?**

RG: He was asked recently – he was asked in a recent meeting when will you return to Nahda and his response was when did I leave it. He has no intention to establish a party. The only question he's considering is whether to stand as part of the Nahda list in the elections or to have his own independent list. And whether he stands as an independent candidate or as part of Nahda, Nahda will support him. We will not compete with him; he's one of our major figures, one of the principal founders of the movement.