



# The Counterrevolution Gains Momentum in Tunisia: The Rise of Abir Moussi

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## SNAPSHOT

### SUMMARY

- Abir Moussi, a ruling party official in the Ben Ali dictatorship and now an opposition leader in parliament, is making headlines in Tunisia on almost a daily basis with her anti-revolution stance and uncompromising positions.
- Though elected only in October 2019, Moussi has since emerged as one of Tunisia’s most controversial, and influential, politicians. Her Free Destourian Party (PDL) is leading in public opinion polls, even though it currently holds just 17 out of 217 parliamentary seats.
- Moussi not only openly defends many aspects of the dictatorship, she denies that a revolution even took place in 2011. She advocates banning the Ennahda Party and backs other illiberal policies. Moussi’s speeches are provocative, if not outright defamatory, and her sit-ins regularly paralyze parliament.
- At a time when broad sections of Tunisian society feel disenchanted by persistent unemployment, governance gridlock, and insecurity, Moussi’s populist anti-revolution rhetoric is gaining ground.

### INTRODUCTION

Her speeches are provocative, slanderous, if not outright defamatory. Abir Moussi, a former official in the Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali dictatorship and now an opposition leader in parliament, is making headlines in Tunisia on almost a daily basis. Though elected to the Assembly of the Representatives of the

People (ARP) only in October 2019, Moussi has since emerged as one of Tunisia’s most influential and widely followed politicians. Her Free Destourian Party (PDL) is now leading in public opinion polls, even though it currently holds just 17 out of 217 parliamentary seats. One recent poll placed the PDL’s support base among likely voters as high as 36 percent, 13 points ahead of the moderate Islamist

Ennahda party, which came first in last year's parliamentary elections.<sup>1</sup>

Moussi not only condones but openly lauds many aspects of the Ben Ali regime, for which she served as a senior official of the ruling party, the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD). She praises what she claims were decades of “stability” in Tunisia, even though this stability was maintained through harsh repression and masked wider social discontent that ultimately exploded in the December 2010–January 2011 revolution. But while Moussi has acknowledged that “there were some transgressions” during the dictatorship,<sup>2</sup> she has skillfully crafted her own version of Tunisia's recent history. Moussi denies the very fact that a revolution took place and instead claims that officials from the Ben Ali regime were the main victims of a “plot.” She vows to restore security and stability through measures reminiscent of the dictatorship.

#### THE RCD'S LAST ADVOCATE

Moussi first rose to prominence immediately after the fall of the Ben Ali regime, when she was the only lawyer who agreed to take on the task of defending the RCD in court. (Moussi lost: the judiciary ruled on March 9, 2011, to dissolve the party.) At that time, her pro-regime activism was still a societal taboo, and resulted in Moussi being insulted and harassed in public.<sup>3</sup> But these assaults did not prompt her to take a backseat in politics. In 2013, Moussi joined the Destourian Movement party, founded by Ben Ali-era Prime Minister Hamed Karoui. When the party failed to win a single seat in the 2014 legislative elections, many members left—but not Moussi. Indeed, despite having little financial support and a very limited support base, Moussi pursued her party activism, and in 2016 she took over the leadership of the then-renamed PDL.

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**MOUSSI DENIES THE VERY FACT THAT A REVOLUTION TOOK PLACE AND INSTEAD CLAIMS THAT OFFICIALS FROM THE BEN ALI REGIME WERE THE MAIN VICTIMS OF A “PLOT.”**

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Moussi ran for president in the September 2019 election, but fared quite poorly, finishing in ninth place with just 4 percent of the vote. At the time, Moussi was simply not as well known as she is now, and her divisive style did not appear as a good fit with the presidency, which is supposed to be a unifying position. In addition, some Tunisians are not ready for a female president. Moussi arguably is better at parliamentary politics. In the October 2019 ARP elections, some supported her PDL to get back at parties with which they were dissatisfied, or out of nostalgia for the past, rather than because of her vision and program. Since being elected to the ARP, Moussi has shrewdly used this platform to attract more attention to herself.

Indeed, today Moussi draws a wide range of supporters, not only Ben Ali-era officials and other ex-regime nostalgics, but even previous revolutionaries whose hopes for a better life under democracy remain unfulfilled. Many Tunisians lament that other parties, whether religiously tinged or secular-leaning, have failed to deliver on their promises and have engaged in so much political compromise that it is no longer clear what their leaders stand for. Moussi, by contrast,

1. B.L., “Le PDL passe de 28% à 36% dans les intentions de vote aux législatives” [PDL rises from 28% to 36% in voting intentions in the legislative elections], *Realities*, September 7, 2020, <https://www.realites.com.tn/2020/09/le-pdl-passe-de-28-a-36-dans-les-intentions-de-vote-aux-legislatives/>

2. Author's interview with Abir Moussi, Tunis, May 31, 2016.

3. Videos taken inside the courtroom show people shouting ‘dégagé’ [‘get lost’] and pulling Moussi's hair. See for example, “Faouzi Ben Mrad et avocats font leurs cirques lors du proces rcd” [Faouzi Ben Mrad and lawyers make a fuss during the RCD trial], YouTube, March 30, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fchBLkqnDEI>





Abir Moussi speaks at a Free Destourian Party (PDL) event, June 2, 2019. Credit: Abir Moussi Official Facebook page

is perceived as totally unyielding in her politics. And an increasing number of Tunisians, even some who reject her anti-revolution stance, respect that she never hesitated to stand up for her convictions, no matter how controversial.

### DENYING THE REVOLUTION

Following Ben Ali's ouster, many members of his regime quickly sided with the revolutionaries to protect themselves, but far from pursuing this self-serving strategy, Moussi openly refuted the very notion that a revolution had taken place.<sup>4</sup> She came to lead a pro-dictatorship camp that

continues to claim that in December 2010 and January 2011 "foreign elements," together with "Islamists" and "so-called human rights activists," toppled Ben Ali.<sup>5</sup> Moussi portrays officials of the former regime as the main victims of this supposed "plot." She asserts that they were violently targeted and that some even died as a result of the assaults or psychological stress that they supposedly endured.<sup>6</sup> In reality, of course, the overwhelming majority of those killed during the revolution were pro-democracy activists.<sup>7</sup> The unjust and derogatory treatment of Ben Ali regime members, Moussi claims, continued even after his ouster, when the new electoral law prohibited them from running in the October

4. Anouar Chennoufi, "Abir Moussi 'Parti Destourien Libre' à Béja: Nous ne reconnaissons ni la révolution du 14 Janvier et ni la Constitution élaborée par l'ANC" [Abir Moussi 'Free Destourian Party' in Béja: We do not recognize the January 14 revolution or the Constitution drawn up by the ANC], *Tunivisions*, January 14, 2018, <https://tunivisions.net/1756/abir-moussi-parti-destourien-libre-a-beja-ne-reconnaissons-revolution-14-janvier-constitution-elaboree-lanc/>

5. Author's interview with Abir Moussi, Tunis, May 31, 2016. See also Benoît Delmas, "Tunisie: ces favoris de la présidentielle" [Tunisia: these presidential favorites], *LePoint*, August 10, 2019, [https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/tunisie-avec-98-candidats-un-regain-democratique-autour-de-la-presidentielle-10-08-2019-2329220\\_3826.php](https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/tunisie-avec-98-candidats-un-regain-democratique-autour-de-la-presidentielle-10-08-2019-2329220_3826.php)

6. Author's interview with Abir Moussi, Tunis, May 31, 2016.

7. According to official Tunisian government figures, 338 people were killed during the revolution. See Alexis Arief, "Tunisia: In Brief" Congressional Research Service, November 1, 2019, <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/1217536/download>

2011 National Constituent Assembly election. (In subsequent elections, both national and municipal, ex-regime and RCD officials have been allowed to participate.)

To lend more weight to her victimhood narrative, Moussi insists that the Ben Ali regime figures targeted during the 2010-2011 turmoil were the heirs to Tunisia's nationalist Destour (Constitution) movement, which, under the leadership of Habib Bourguiba, paved the way for independence from France and from which Ben Ali's RCD later evolved. Today, Moussi claims to champion these supposedly nationalist 'heroes' through her Free Destourian Party,<sup>8</sup> though most of Tunisia's independence fighters have, in fact, passed away. In a narrative resembling that of the dictatorship, she insinuates that political actors who do not conform to her definition of 'Destourian' are not truly Tunisian or nationalist. For example, Moussi regularly seeks to discredit leftist parties by linking them to Western ideology, sometimes even going so far as to claim that they are simply offshoots of the French Communist Party.<sup>9</sup>

### THE ISLAMIST 'THREAT'

Moussi's main political target, however, is the moderate Islamist Ennahda party, which has emerged as a leading actor since the revolution. Moussi refuses to call the party by its name, instead referring to it as the Muslim Brotherhood, which she seeks to classify as a

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terrorist organization.<sup>10</sup> Yet, despite Ennahda's Islamist roots, throughout its history it entertained only loose, sporadic relations with the Muslim Brotherhood organization founded in Egypt. In 2016, Ennahda leaders even distanced themselves from political Islam and announced that henceforth they constituted 'Muslim Democrats.'<sup>11</sup> By calling Ennahda the Muslim Brotherhood, Moussi denies the party's Tunisian origins and social base. In her speeches, she regularly suggests that, as a branch of the Brotherhood, Ennahda is led by foreign actors.<sup>12</sup> And, in a strategy already pursued by Bourguiba and Ben Ali, she links Ennahda to terrorism: Moussi has repeatedly claimed that

8. Brahim Oueslati and Fawzia Zouari, "Tunisie: Abir Moussi, portrait d'une Benaliste convaincue" [Tunisia: Abir Moussi, portrait of a passionate Benaliste], *Jeune Afrique*, March 19, 2019, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/749576/politique/tunisie-abir-moussi-portrait-dune-benaliste-convaincue/>

9. Author's interview with Abir Moussi, Tunis, May 31, 2016.

10. Mohamed Gontara, "Abir Moussi: quand la présidente du PDL fourbit ses armes" [Abir Moussi: When the president of the PDL prepares for war], *L'Économiste*, July 6, 2020, <https://www.leconomistemaghrebin.com/2020/07/06/abir-moussi-quand-la-presidente-du-pdl-fourbit-ses-armes/>; Frida Dahmani, "Tunisie - Abir Moussi: 'Ennahdha n'est pas un parti de souche tunisienne'" [Tunisia - Abir Moussi: 'Ennahdha is not a party of Tunisian origin'], *Jeune Afrique*, September 23, 2020, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1048486/politique/tunisie-abir-moussi-ennahdha-nest-pas-un-parti-de-souche-tunisienne/>

11. See, for details, Anne Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia: The History of Ennahda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

12. "Tunisie: Ennahda fait allégeance à la Turquie et le Qatar et ne pas à la Tunisie, Selon Abir Moussi" [Tunisia: Ennahda pledges allegiance to Turkey and Qatar and not to Tunisia, says Abir Moussi], Al-Ain, September 24, 2020, <https://fr.al-ain.com/article/ennahda-pledges-allegiance-to-turkey-and-qatar-and-not-to-tunisia-says-abir-moussi>



Abir Moussi speaks at a protest against Tunisia's Truth and Dignity Commission, created to reveal human rights abuses committed by the Bourguiba and Ben Ali dictatorships, December 16, 2018. Credit: Abir Moussi Facebook page

she possesses secret information “proving” that Ennahda leaders have ties to violent jihadists.<sup>13</sup> For some of Moussi’s followers, the fact that her late father worked in, and her husband is still employed by, the security sector lends credibility to her allegations. In reality, however, Ennahda leaders have adopted a harsh policy towards jihadists,<sup>14</sup> and Moussi has never presented any of her supposed evidence.

In addition to accusing Ennahda of ties to terrorism, Moussi holds the party responsible for Tunisia’s mounting economic problems.<sup>15</sup> She asserts—again without proof—that Ennahda members run networks of corruption and foster a parallel economy that excludes all those who are not part of their organization. Therefore, Moussi’s reasoning goes, to tackle

terrorism, revive the economy, and foster political stability, Ennahda must be excluded from politics.<sup>16</sup>

### AN ILLIBERAL AGENDA

Moussi frames her Free Destourian Party as the modern, liberal opposite of Ennahda, and she claims that only the PDL can improve security and stability; she blames all the other major secular-leaning parties, including those that ostensibly pursue an anti-Islamist agenda, for cooperating with Ennahda once in power. In reality, Moussi’s own politics are highly destabilizing: PDL-led sit-ins and protests are regularly paralyzing the work of the parliament, including by disrupting voting

13. Nadia Dejoui, “Abir Moussi remet la correspondance sur la visite d’élus d’Ennahdha aux terroristes à la justice” [Abir Moussi releases the letters on Ennahdha elected officials’ visit with terrorists to the Ministry of Justice], *L’Economiste*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.leconomistemaghreb.com/2020/06/18/abir-moussi-justice-correspondance-visite-elus-ennahdha-terroristes/>

14. See, for example, “Tunisia declares Ansar al-Sharia a terrorist group,” BBC, August 27, 2013, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-23853241>

15. “Abir Moussi: Ennahdha se sert de l’ARP pour attaquer ses adversaires” [Abir Moussi: Ennahdha uses ARP to attack opponents], Directinfo, July 4, 2020, <https://directinfo.webmanagercenter.com/2020/07/04/abir-moussi-ennahdha-se-sert-de-larp-pour-attaquer-ses-adversaires/>

16. Directinfo, “Abir Moussi: Ennahdha se sert de l’ARP pour attaquer ses adversaires.”



on key legislation.<sup>17</sup> At the moment, the PDL is still a relatively minor player in parliament, but the latest opinion polls suggest that this could change in the future. Were Moussi's anti-Islamist platform to gain wider backing, any attempts at outlawing Ennahda would trigger a massive political backlash from Ennahda supporters and a range of pro-democracy activists who fear that the country could slide back into dictatorship. Attempts to outlaw Ennahda could even lead Tunisia to become more directly drawn into the regional struggle that pits PDL supporters Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates against Qatar and Turkey, which are close to Ennahda.<sup>18</sup>

Beyond her anti-Islamist agenda, Moussi supports a range of policies that could threaten Tunisia's fragile political balance. For example, she seeks to change the constitution to increase the powers of the president, returning Tunisia closer to the authoritarian system that existed under Ben Ali and Bourguiba.<sup>19</sup> Moussi also seeks to weaken the role of political parties in government by promoting the rise of ostensible 'technocrats,' rather than members of parliament, as ministers. This is a common strategy used by authoritarian regimes to weaken potential challengers; the vast majority of 'technocrat' ministers under Ben Ali were cronies of the president. And even on issues of women's rights and minority rights, she is far from the modern, avant-garde actor she claims to be. Moussi opposes equal inheritance for women and increased rights for members of Tunisia's LGBTQ community.

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## BEYOND HER ANTI-ISLAMIST AGENDA, MOUSSI SUPPORTS A RANGE OF POLICIES THAT COULD THREATEN TUNISIA'S FRAGILE POLITICAL BALANCE.

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At a time when broad sections of Tunisian society feel disenchanted by persistent unemployment, governance gridlock, and insecurity, Moussi's populist anti-revolution rhetoric is gaining ground. Though scheduled for 2024, parliamentary elections may take place early given Tunisia's political challenges. Until then, there is a real possibility that the coronavirus pandemic will likely deepen Tunisia's political and economic woes and bolster Moussi's support base. Nearly ten years after the fall of the Ben Ali regime, this poses a real threat to Tunisia's democracy: Moussi is the most unyielding Ben Ali-era official who has succeeded in gaining a wide following. This means that, unlike many other Ben Ali regime figures, she would not suddenly become more moderate and reconciliatory if her party does well in the next elections and she were to assume a leadership role in parliament or even a position in government. Instead, Moussi likely would continue to pursue her anti-democratic, illiberal agenda without compromise.

17. See, for example, Belhassen Lassoued, "Abir Moussi: 'Le sit-in du PDL se tiendra désormais devant le bureau du président du parlement'" [Abir Moussi: "The PDL's sit-in will now be held in front of the office of the president of parliament"], *La Presse*, July 22, 2020, <https://lapresse.tn/68855/abir-moussi-sit-in-du-pdl-se-tiendra-desormais-devant-le-bureau-du-president-du-parlement/>

18. Saudi and UAE-backed media outlets regularly cover the PDL and Moussi in a favourable light. In an overt display of support, in 2019 the Emirati ambassador to Tunisia attended a PDL press conference.

19. "Présidentielle 201 : Abir Moussi veut un régime politique présidentiel" [Presidential 2019: Abir Moussi wants a political presidential government], *Le Diplomate Tunisien*, September 10, 2019, <https://www.lediplomate.tn/abir-moussi-veut-changer-le-regime-politique-de-la-tunisie/>



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Cover photo: Tunisian leader of the Free Destourian Party (PDL) Abir Moussi speaks at a sit-in in downtown Tunis, July 5, 2020. Credit: Abir Moussi Official Facebook page