

# **Tunisia's New Islamic *Radio Zitouna*: Elite led Private Media, Politics, and Emerging Muslim Identity**

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Paper to be presented at the conference

## **Time for Medialisation: Integrating media and transcultural communication reseach within Islamic and Area Studies**

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08.-10.04.2010, Berlin

"I thank President Ben Ali for giving us this first private Islamic radio channel". The paradox of this remark given by a Tunisian woman – that the president *gives* a private media – nicely summarizes one of the essences of new private media in Tunisia: They are closely connected to the regime. The remark is also significant as it underlines the new appropriation of Islam and Muslim identity among the Tunisians which has taken place over the last 5-7 years.

This paper aims at analyzing the role of the new private Islamic Tunisian radio station – *Radio Zitouna*, which was launched in 2007. The puzzle of the paper is two sided. On one hand, Radio Zitouna is one of several new private media launched since 2003. As the paper aims at showing they can all be understood within an analytical framework and discussion of political public spheres, political elites, survival strategies of authoritarian regimes, and of democratization. On the other hand preliminary field work has revealed that Radio Zitouna could be seen as a piece in a greater puzzle where the new appropriation of Muslim identity in Tunisia is the overall theme. The paper argues that both aspects of Radio Zitouna have equal relevance and have to be taken into consideration. On the background of the case of Radio Zitouna the paper suggests that media can be used as an analytical tool for understanding further aspects and consequences of liberalizing economies and political changes.

The paper opens with an introduction to the current audiovisual media landscape in Tunisia. From there the paper moves on to an analysis of Radio Zitouna on equal foot with the rest of the new private media in a broader context of liberalization but with a focus on the role of business elites. In the second part the paper takes Radio Zitouna out of a context with the other new private media and puts it in a context of a broader development of the role of Islam within Tunisia. In order to give the background of the "new" in the current role of Islam the paper first describes the absence and "return" of Islam in the Tunisian public sphere. Then the paper analyses the role of Radio Zitouna in the new status of Islam. The analysis is based on preliminary field work. Therefore the paper finally points to aspects which could be further explored.

## **The Tunisian audiovisual media land scape anno 2010**

In his speech on the occasion of the national holiday of November 7 2003 president Ben Ali said: "*As part of the process of constant reform and promotion we have undertaken in the sector of information, we announce today our decision to open the audiovisual space to the radios and televisions of the private sector, so that they contribute to enriching the national media scene, beside the public media institutions. This should start as of now; for today starts the first private radio with independent broadcasting*"<sup>1</sup>. This became the starting signal for the launch of three new private radio stations and two private television channel. The private radio which was launched by the speech was *Radio Mosaïque FM*. A few years later, in 2005, another private radio, *Radio Jawhara*, was given licence to broadcast from Sousse, Tunisia's third largest city with a substantial number of young people. The same year the first private television station, *Hannibal TV*, began its broadcasting. A significant sign of change in Tunisia in general was the launching of the country's first Islamic media, *Radio Zitouna*, in 2007. The latest new private media is *Nessma TV* which made its first attempt to broadcasting in 2007 but did not broadcast regularly until March 2009

Before 2003 all national based radio and TV broadcasting was led and owned by the Tunisian state. The state-owned radio and TV is organized in the *Tunisian Radio and Television Establishmen (ERTT*<sup>2</sup>). Administratively and financially radio and TV is separated and have two independent budgets. The radio broadcasting is organised under the umbrella of *Radio Tunis* or *Tunisian National Radio* (Radio Nationale Tunisienne). Radio Tunis has four channels which can be received by the FM band throughout the whole country: The first, *Radio Nationale*, is broadcasting news and general programs of different kinds in Arabic and French, *Radio Tunisie Chaine Internationale* launched in 1960 is broadcasting in Franch, Italian, English, German and Spanish and aimed at ex-pads, tourists and the Tunisian French speaking elite<sup>3</sup>. A third channel *Radio Jeune* (Youth Radio) began broadcasting programs with a special focus towards the young audience. Finally, *Radio Tunisie Culture* was launched in 2006 as a response to the competition from the new private radios. As the name indicates Radio Tunisie Culture broadcast programs about

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<sup>1</sup> Address by President Zine El Abedine Ben Ali on the Occasion of the 16<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Change. See [www.changement.tn/english – speeches](http://www.changement.tn/english-speeches), last accessed on November 2, 2009. Author's highlighting.

<sup>2</sup> Etablissement de la Radiodiffusion et Télévision Tunisienne

<sup>3</sup> The Italien Embassy in Tunis estimates that 200.000 Italians are living in Tunisia. Around 5 million tourists are visiting Tunisia every year (Source: Office National de Tourisme, ONTT, Tunis)

Tunisian culture in historical as well as contemporary contexts. Added to the four national channels are five local radio stations which administratively also belong under the umbrella of the Tunisian National Radio<sup>4</sup>. The local radios cover local culture, events, business and agriculture.

On the TV side La Télévision Tunisienne is running two TV channels. The main channel is *Tunis 7* broadcasting a variety of programs of news, sport, culture and films. In November 1994, a second public television channel called *Canal 21* was launched. It only broadcasts in the evenings with the huge young Tunisian population as the target group<sup>5</sup>.

The first but rare satellite dishes were seen in Tunisia in 1988 but they could only receive programmes from France and Italy through the Astra satellite. The number of dishes increased steadily and in 1994 the official number reached 100.000 satellite receivers. Meanwhile, in 1994 the government put an end to this development. It was prohibited to sell satellite dishes from the middle of 1994 to the end of 1996. The reason given was that the state wanted to restructure and manage the development in new and better ways, ensure the quality of the satellite dishes and stop their illegal import. Despite the intervention of the state the sale and purchase of dishes continued on the black market and it was as a consequence of this that the state finally decided to legalize satellite dishes again in 1996.

### **Media as a political public sphere: Elites and the new private media**

Within political and economical theories there is a substantial scholarship arguing that profound changes in the economic set-up of the country have significant political effects. This line of thinking holds that the modernization of the economy, which usually coincides with a movement away from a state-controlled economy to a liberalized market one, provokes the formation of new social groups. In turn, these social groups, particularly the expanding middle-class, become the main drivers behind democratization. An important part of this story of economic and political development is the liberalization of the media. With the launch of Al-Jazeera in 1996 and its ideal of the use of critical journalism and critical debate programs led scholars to point to the possibility of the development of a new Arab public sphere where

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<sup>4</sup> The five local radio stations are placed in *Sfax*, an important business city on the eastern coast, *Monastir*, a touristic centre on the coast and the home area of a big part of the political elite, *Le Kef* on the mountain area to the west, *Gafsa*, a geographically isolated town of importance because of its phosphor mines, and finally *Tataouine* in the geographically isolated area to the south-east on the border to the desert and Libya.

<sup>5</sup> The use of 21 in the name of the channel refers to the national holiday of the youth celebrated each year on March 21.

media free of state censorship could contribute to the development of democracy (Alterman & Karawan, 1998). Liberal and independent media became a necessary ingredient of political pluralism and governmental accountability. In this optics an autonomous and privately owned media sector give civil society actors access to a wide audience, which is then informed about problems and issues in a non-propagandist and sloganeering manner thereby undermining the unitary 'voice' of the authoritarian regime.

Since the 1970s the Tunisian economy has undergone a profound restructuring, moving towards a market oriented set up. But it is only when Zine el-Abedine Ben Ali came to power in 1987 that such an embrace of economic liberalism occurred. Reforms in the industrial, agricultural and services sectors were carried through and possibilities for loans for new small entrepreneurs were established. Liberalization of the economy is a cornerstone and core demand in Tunisia's association agreement with the EU dating back to the Barcelona process in 1995. For the Mediterranean EU-countries Tunisia is an upcoming and growing market of importance and interest. Tunisia for its own part needs foreign investment in order to create jobs to the large young population. Later, after the attack of 9/11 2001, when the US launched its democracy projects in the Middle East and the rhetoric of "with us or against us" it became urgent for Tunisia and the regime to underline that Tunisia was with the US. Relations between the US and Tunisia have been close since Ben Ali came to power in 1987 for security and financial reasons (Cavatorta & Durac, 2009).

Meanwhile, by the end of the 1990s and beginning of 2000 studies of the economical reforms in Tunisia proved that politics and economy had not become more liberal as a result of the liberalization. Rather, from the analysis of the elites in Tunisia (Erdle 2004), it becomes clear that only five clans with close ties to the presidential family through marriage to the president's four daughters constitute what is called "the ruling or core elite". These five families are the main benefitters from the privatization as they have become the new owners of the former state owned companies and industries. In the following the paper will look closer at some of the most significant relations between the new private media and ruling elites and business elites.

To establish a new media in Tunisia a license is needed which is approved by the High Communication Council (*Conseil Supérieur de la Communication*). The council also has the task of advising the president and government on issues concerning media in Tunisia. As has already been mentioned, the first private radio, **Radio Mosaïque**, was not launched on the background of an license but by a presidential decree. As many Tunisians in the media sphere point to the director of Radio Mosaïque, Nouredine Boutar, is – and was in 2003 - one of the 15 members of the High Communicative Council. Therefore, some see it as a result of Boutar's position within the council that it was Radio Mosaïque and not one of the many others applications that obtained the license in 2003. Radio Mosaïque is part of the holding company *Khartago Group* which is owned and headed by Belhassen Trabelsi, brother in law of the President. Trabelsi also holds a leading position in the central committee the ruling party, RCD.

Within the Karthago Group one also finds **Cactus Prod**, an audio-visual production company. Even though Cactus Prod is not a broadcasting media it plays a significant role on the current media landscape. The productions of Cactus Prod are aimed at the public TV station TV7 and by 2010 Cactus Prod has managed to get the majority of the production of TV7. It should be mentioned briefly that as a consequence journalists, producers and technicians at TV7 did not receive any or only a small part of their salary in 2009-10 as their salaries were used to pay Cactus Prod. In this way state owned television is more or less directly financing private business of Belhassen Trabelsi and empowering the core elite. The role of Cactus Prod not only takes place in relation to the public television. A third and very important part in this drama is the first private television channel, Hannibal TV.

**Hannibal TV** was launched in 2005 by the well known business man, Larbi Nasra. With its focus on sport, especially football, and entertainment Hannibal TV has become increasingly popular. One of the most popular programs is *Belmakchouf* which means means "to discover everything. The program is technically a sports programme and is filed on the webpage of Hannibal TV as such. But it does not cover sporting events themselves. It goes behind and discusses all the problems that are related to sport such as problems of infrastructure, problems of the use of drugs within sport, and that spectators outside the stadiums might have been arrested during an event. Such issues have never been addressed by the national television. Further, *Belmakchouf* does not only tell these stories, but it does its utmost to get comments from the protagonists, it invites the directors or managers responsible of

the affairs being examined, politicians and other celebrities to hear their explanations, comments on and analysis of a certain event and problem.

*Belmakchouf* has become increasingly popular, which was in part due to the popular presenter Moez Ben Gharbia. But in June 2008 Ben Gharbia left Hannibal TV for Cactus Prod where he became the presenter of the Tunisian version of "*Sans Aucun doute*" originally a concept program from TF1. A few months later another popular presenter, Ala Chebbi, left Hannibal TV for Cactus Prod. He became presenter for another TF1 concept program, "*Y a que la vérité qui compte*". Both of these programs were produced for and showed at the public channel of TV7. "*Ya que al vérité qui compte*" is similar to "*Al Mousameh Karim*" at Hannibal Tv which Ala Chebbi used to present. Both programs invites average Tunisians into the studio where they face members of their family with family problems, declare a divorce or take up other taboos live on the screen. The case developed into a fight between Hannibal TV and Cactus Prod. As Hannibal is a private channel it is depending on advertisers which were easily attracted with the popularity of Belmakchouf and Al Mousameh Karim. Therefore, the move of Cactus Prod hit the channel hard. At the beginning of 2010 rumours will know that Hannibal TV is facing such an economical difficulty that a merge with "an un-named production company" – ei. Cactus Prod - is expected to be carried through.

On the occasion of the Ramadan in September 2008, Hannibal TV launched a new Islamic channel, *Hannibal Ferdaws* (Paradise). The channel was aimed at airing hadiths, religious lessons for children and explanations of the Quran, to present the values of tolerant Islam and to denounce violence. *Hannibal Ferdaws* was closed down short after the launch and it is possible to see the channel as an attempt to respond to the private ***Radio Zitouna***, which was launched in 2007.

Like Cactus Prod, Radio Zitouna has close connections with the presidential family. Radio Zitouna is owned by the son in law of the president, Mohamed Sakhr al-Materi. He is out of an important business family and heads the familie's companies of car import, food plants, cruise ships, and harbour management at the cargo port of La Goulette. In 2009 El Materi bought Ash-Shourouk, one of the biggest news paper publishers in Tunisia. The latest addition to his business empire is the launch of Tunisia's first Islamic Bank, called *Ezzaitouna*, in March 2010. In the parliamentary elections in 2009 El Materi obtained a seat in the parliament. In the context of an illumination of the politics of media and business elites it must also be mentioned that El Materi is married to the fourth and youngest daughter of the

president. Unlike her three elder sisters, she is the daughter of the second and current wife of the president, Leila Ben Ali. She was former Laila Trabelsi and out of the important business family, Trabelsi, who is running some of Tunisia's largest companies and as described above also is engaged in Cactus Prod. In the last presidential elections in 2009 it was remarkable how Leila Ben Ali created a profile of her own. Her act during the election campaign can be viewed as taking full advantage of the possibilities in these election to achieve fame and popularity and strengthen her own Trabelsi-family compared to the three other in-laws core elite families<sup>6</sup>.

Radio Zitouna is based in a villa in the upper class area of Carthage outside Tunis. It has two studios and three offices. From this villa the radio broadcasts every day from the first prayer early in the morning till the last prayer in the evening. Programs are broadcast by the FM band and live by the internet. *Radio Zitouna* broadcasts Islamic programs such as explanations of the Quran, presentation of the hadith, and advices as to how to live as a good Muslim. The presenters of the programs are both male and female. One particular sheikh and presenter, Mohamed Machfar, is very popular. He is relatively young with his age of 48, he speaks Tunisian dialect as it is spoken in the street even when he presents the Quran and hadith and he underlines that Islam is easy and should not be complicated. Programs in general are broadcast in either the Tunisian spoken dialect or in French. The presenters express themselves in simple language in order to reach out to average Tunisians. This seems to be a successful strategy. In the capital of Tunis Radio Zitouna has gained a broad audience of all ages and with many different educational and social backgrounds. In March 2008 Sigma Conseil, a Tunisian marketing and media research company, estimated that 13% of the population in Tunis and suburbs were listening to Radio Zitouna and 19% in Sfax, the second largest city in Tunisia.

The director of Radio Zitouna, Kamel Omrane, is a professor of Islam at the University of Tunis and former director of the national radio. He explains that the aim of *Radio Zitouna* is to counterbalance the overwhelming influence of especially Islamic satellite channels from the Gulf. He points to the name of the radio station which affiliates it with the grand mosque "Jama' Zitouna" in the heart of the medina in Tunis and which has a history and reputation as one of the most important centres

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<sup>6</sup> For an in depth analysis of the president and parliament elections in 2009 see Haugbølle, Rikke Hostrup (2009) "Presidential Elections in Tunisia: Repetitions, news and consumerism before political engagement", Cuminet blog, <http://cuminet.blogs.ku.dk/page/2/>



of religious learning after the Islamic Al-Azhar University in Cairo. According to Kamel Omrane the name is chosen to underline that there exists a certain Tunisian Islam which has always been moderate, tolerant, inclusive and accepting all types of science. He explains the launch of the radio as a respond to demands from the Tunisians from the beginning of the 2000 for an Islam which corresponded to their Tunisian culture and history. At the same time, again according to Kamel Omrane, *intégrisme* (Islamism) coming from the satellite channels was almost the only representative of Islam in Tunisia. Therefore, he explains, the young generation was expressing a need of guidance in other interpretations of Islam. *Radio Zitouna* was launched as a response to this need. Before the paper looks closer at this “need of guidance” in the Tunisian population an overview of the role and status and not least the absence of Islam in public spheres will be given. On this background the question of how to understand Radio Zitouna proves further relevant.

### **The absence of Islam in Tunisian public spheres**

In 1956 Tunisia gained independence from French Protectorate which had lasted from 1881. Just after his take over of power Tunisia’s first president Habib Bourguiba began building the new Tunisian nation state. His ideology was a mélange between the French Republican tradition and Turkish Kemalism, Egyptian Nasserism, Russian Communism. The new Tunisian citizens were to see themselves as members of the same family – the Tunisian nation (Bourguiba, 1962), and they were all to be equal with regard to liberty and civil rights (Moore, 1965). Emancipation of the woman became crucial in what Bourguiba called a modernization project. Therefore a number of changes concerning women’s status in the society were carried through. In the first year of independence The Code of Personal Status was radically changed so that it now guaranteed women equal rights with men in all aspects. Worth mentioning is the abolition of polygamy and a minimum age for marriage at 17. In 1957 women were given the right to vote in municipal elections and from then in all elections<sup>7</sup>.

The new francophone, Westernized ruling elite with Bourguiba in the front held the view that Islam was a core reason for the backwardness of Tunisia. If

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<sup>7</sup> For further reading on women’s rights in Tunisia see for instance

- Grami, Amel (2008) “Gender Equality in Tunisia”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Volume 35, Issue 3 December, p. 351-359.

- Charrad, Mounira (2001) *States and Women’s Rights: The making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco*, University of California Press

Tunisia was to become modern like Europe Tunisia should be secular. Religion should not play any role in politics, education and the public sphere<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, a number of reforms were carried through which all were aimed at undermining the role and status of Islam. Through a reform of the education system the highly reputed university at the Zitouna Mosque in Tunis was closed and moved to a new secular university as a department of theology. Sharia courts were abolished and the judicial system based on secular laws. By this move the ulama lost any importance they had had in society. Also Ramadan, a visible manifestation of social solidarity based on Islam, was attacked by Bourguiba. Ramadan lowered the productivity, he argued, and therefore working hours in the public administration remained unchanged through Ramadan. Later when television had been introduced in 1965 Bourguiba made the famous act of drinking a glass of juice during day time in Ramadan claiming that Tunisia was in a state of jihad in the fight against poverty and underdevelopment (Morre, 1965:57). From the introduction of television Islam was almost absent in the program grid. Hadith and Quran was read once a day and the break of the fast was announced but apart from that there were no Islamic or religious programs.

"The question of the woman" was also played as a card in the defeat of the backwards, Islamic society. Women's dressing and especially the use of the veil was used by Bourguiba as an icon of the struggle for modernization against Islamic backwardness. In his speeches Bourguiba called the veil an "odious rag"<sup>9</sup> which had nothing to do with *Tunisian* culture, tradition or history. The modern woman should not wear the Islamic veil or the traditional bedouin veil (melia). In some towns the veil was forbidden in the classrooms. Later, in 1981, Bourguiba announced a decree which prohibited the use of the veil in public buildings. This meant that the modern, educated women employed in the public administration and as teachers could no longer wear the veil at work, and girls in schools and at universities had to take off the veil before entering the school. As a consequence the veil as well as other public markers of Islam slowly disappeared from the public sphere from 1956 to the beginning of the new millennium.

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<sup>8</sup> It should be mentioned that another reason for Bourguiba to eliminate the role of Islam in Tunisia was to eliminate a faction within his own party led by Salah Ben Youssef. He was known as a defender of Islamic values and became the main challenge to Bourguiba after independence. Ben Youssef lost the fight between the two. He fled to Libya in 1956 before he moved to Frankfurt am Main where he was assassinated in 1961.

<sup>9</sup> Moore 1965, p. 55.

As the paper wants to move forward to the return of Islam in the public sphere in the beginning of the 2000s the rise of the Islamist movement An-Nahda from 1978 will not be described in details<sup>10</sup>. From 1984 to 1987 the Islamic movement grew in popularity and riots, strikes and uprising against the regime grew in number and strength. In 1987 Ben Ali who at that moment was premier minister declared the ageing Bourguiba senile and took over the position as president. He has remained as president since then. His first focus was to crush the militant Islamists and reestablish stability in the country. Thus, a complete fight of militant Islamists in the country became the legitimization of his being in power. Because of his hard crack-down on Islamists and control with practicing Muslims Islam became synonymous with Islamism well into the first years of the 2000s. With the entrance of Ben Ali in the presidential palace Tunisia returned to a state of almost complete absence of Islam in the public sphere.

### **New appropriation of Islam**

This status of Islam has profoundly changed since the beginning of the new millennium: Young girls and women are now wearing the headscarf, men leave their beard, prayers are performed in the mosque not only on Fridays, and Islam is now openly discussed in conversations even in public places. This change has been remarkable since 2003 and culminated in 2006 where it was clear that the increasing use of the veil became a challenge for the regime became clear during the Ramadan in 2006. The minister of Religious Affairs stated that the veil was not in keeping with Tunisian cultural heritage and national identity and he urged the president to enforce the decree from 1981 against the veil. A crack-down on girls and women wearing the veil was carried through. They were stopped in the street and told to take off the veil immediately, students were denied participation in university exams if they did not take off the veil, and women in the public administration were denied access to work with the veil on. A walk in the main street of Tunis today clearly demonstrates that the strategy against the veil did not succeed. Veils of all colors are still very visible every where.

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<sup>10</sup> For studies on An-Nahda see for instance:

- Boulby, Marion (1988) "The Islamic challenge:" Tunisia since independence", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 10, No. 2,
- Waltz, Susan (1986) "Islamist Appeal in Tunisia", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 40, 4 autumn

Through preliminary field studies of Radio Zitouna it became clear that the new appropriation of Islam in Tunisia is more profound and contains other aspects than the use of the veil. One noteworthy aspect is that several of the presenters and sheikhs at Radio Zitouna are affiliated with Quran Schools in Tunis as teachers. Although Quran schools have always existed to some degree in Tunis it is remarkable that the number of especially female students following classes in hadith, the reading of the Quran and how to live in accordance with Islam have increased remarkably. An interesting case is the new established Quran school in Cité An-Nasr in a new suburb north of Tunis. The Quran school has existed since 2007 and has increased the number of students every year so that it now has more than 700 adult students taking one or more classes a week. Cité An-Nasr is an upper class quarter as the plots and appartments are very expensive. The new quarter is mainly inhabited by people with close familiy ties to the town of Sfax. In this way Cité An-Nasr corresponds to earlier and current urban development in Tunis. Through an analysis of another new upper class area, Le Lac, Pierre-Arnaud Barthel proves that business families from Sfax also play a crucial role here, as many have chosen to leave the former upper class areas of Menzah V and VI and Al Manar II in order to move to Le Lac (Barthel, 2006). One of the six founders of the association in Cité An-Nasr explains that the men who frequented the new mosque discussed how they felt that there was a lack of values and warmth in the new area. But they also felt that the Tunisians in general lacked an identity of their own which could combine the best from the West, which they see as a crucial part of their identity, and from Islam. Slowly, they developed the idea of a Quran association could help to elevate the moral of the society and give "a stability for the soul"<sup>11</sup>. At this moment contact was established to Radio Zitouna – or rather to the icon of the radio, Sheikh Mohamed Machfar, as they knew him before his time of engagement with Radio Zitouna. As the popularity of the association grew other sheikhs and female Islamic theologians, whom are also presenting programs at Radio Zitouna, have been employed as teachers at the association.

The classes for women has experienced a remakable attendance. This is the case both in Cité An-Nasr and the older quarter of Ariana. The women explain how they feel that reading the Quran gives them satisfaction and a sence of piece. At the association in Cité An-Nasr a majority of the women are young to middle age women (30-45 years). Many of them are well educted and working as university

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<sup>11</sup> Interview in Cité An-Nasr, January 2010.

professors, lawyers and business managers. Retreated women who have been employed in the public administration or as school teachers as well as house wives also consists an important number of the students. Preliminary interviews with some of the female students between 30 and 45 points to the years of 2003 to 2005 as a turning point where they became significantly aware of Islam and chose to wear the veil for the first time in their life. Their explanations for this does not include political evidences such as an anti-western point of view, sympathy with the Iraq, or the ongoing fights between Israel and Palestine. Rather, they explain that they have been through a process where the choice of the veil is the last step. Or they explain that they have always wanted to do it but did not find the courage until 2003/2005. They all point to Radio Zitouna as an important institution in their new appropriation of Islam. "As a working woman and mother I do not have much time to study Islam. But I can turn on the radio while I am driving in my car and hear half an hour" or "I listen to Radio Zitouna every evening while I prepare the dinner in the kitchen" are just two examples of how the women feel that Radio Zitouna offers an opportunity which they could not find otherwise and which they have been longing for. It is also in this context that the woman cited in the introduction "thanks the president for giving us Tunisia's first Islamic Radio"<sup>12</sup>.

### **Tentative conclusion**

Radio Zitouna was launched in 2007. Since 2003 the Tunisian government and president Ben Ali have been behind the launch of new private radio and TV stations either by presidential decree or by giving the necessary license. This paper has been concerned with the question of how to understand the new Islamic Radio Zitouna given the absence of Islam from the public sphere and in the media from 1956. The first part of the paper analysed Radio Zitouna as a media in a general context of new private media in Tunisia. In the second part of the paper Radio Zitouna was seen in relation to "Islam" more than "media" and in connexion with the general development of Islam in the Tunisian society.

The discussion of the role of media as political public sphere is embedded in theoretical discussions of the role of media in democratization processes which again are related to theoretical discussions of liberalization and modernization. Many aspects are relevant in these discussions. In this paper a focus on political elites and business elites in relation to the new private media has been

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<sup>12</sup> Interviews carried through in Cité An-Nasr in January and February 2010.

chosen . The close ties not only between Radio Zitouna and the presidential family but all of the new private media in general has led some commentators - among these Tunisian journalists, opposition groups and university professors, to see these media as part of a broader strategy from the liberalizing authoritarian regime and the elites surrounding it to maintain their status not only as a political but also a religious authority. The role of liberalization and democratization for Tunisia's relations to The US and the EU further strengthen the assumption that the new private media were launched as an attempt to prove that Tunisia is moving in "the right " direction towards democracy. In the speech of 2003 and his highlighting of " *...the process of constant reform and promotion...*" Ben Ali himself makes it clear to the Tunisians and the outside world that he wants the opening of the audiovisual landscape to private media to be connected to the other privatization reforms which have been carried through.

The selected case stories of a number of the new private radio and television stations makes it clear that elites which are also core political elites and business elites are in key positions within the new private media. This leads to the possibility of analyzing the new private media in a theoretical framework of political elites and the theoretical critics that have been raised recently of their interest in liberalization and democratization (Hinnebusch, 2006; Schlumberger, 2007). State elites have their own autonomous preferences and interests which affect the process of liberalization, and in many ways, Tunisia falls into the category of Arab countries where 'private capitalists have little enthusiasm for democratization' (Dillman, 2002: 71) because their economic status depends on the patronage networks created in conjunction with the state. This line of critique obviously applies to the media sector as well. The cases implied here seems to support and even strengthen the argument that new private media does not *per se* mean independence from the ruling elite or the regime. Thus, it becomes evident that while the new Tunisian private media might be 'private' in terms of business set up and ownership, they are owned and run by companies or individuals that have very close relations with the president Ben Ali. It is in this context that it can be stated that there is a *political* aim of the new private media and further that it is this relation that one could talk about a *political public sphere* in Tunisia. Though, in the case of Tunisia it could be held that the public sphere is *politized* rather than *political* in the sense that the new media form an core and important part of the strategy of the regime and ruling elite with regard to liberalization as well as regime survival. On this background Radio Zitouna could

be seen as a politicised public sphere on equal foot with the other private media and as another branch of the business of the ruling regime and certain business elites, especially the Trabelsi and the El Materi families.

Meanwhile, empirical data point to the fact that while the new media may be politicized with regards to the elites and the regime they are neither political nor politicized by the public. On the contrary. At least with regards to Radio Zitouna. While Islam has been very politicised since 1956 a new appropriation of Muslim identity has taken place since 2003 to 2005 outside the political field. Through interviews it becomes clear that it is not a revival of Islamism but a search by the individual to live in accordance with Islam and Islamic values and hereby contributing to the values of society in general.

The use of the veil and the persistence to the use of it despite the crack downs of the regime is one strong example. As described the women played a crucial role in Bourguiba's nation building and modernization project and the unveiled woman became the icon of this modernization. The women that have insisted to wear the veil despite the conflict with the regime are outputs of Bourguiba's ambitions. They have equal rights with the men, they are well educated and many of them hold high or at least good positions.

The Quran association is another example. The founders are not interested in politics. They are concerned with the moral values of the society in general and their neighbourhood in particular. The neighbourhood of Cité An-Nasr and its inhabitants has emerged as a result of the liberalization and the privatizations carried through since the 1990s. They are entrepreneurs often with more than one company on the record and are well off with regards to income. To all of these people Radio Zitouna is an important piece in a greater puzzle where the concern is the strive for a life in accordance with Islamic values but which is also in accordance with the modern, comfortable life they are living. Held up against the pacification of the Islamic authorities in Tunisia for decades the explanation given by Kamel Omrane to the launch of Radio Zitouna as "a response to the need for guidance" is in accordance with what is pointed to in the preliminary interviews.

This does not mean that the paper concludes that the political aspects of Radio Zitouna in relations to elites and strategies of the regime should be neglected. These are still relevant. But the paper points to the limits of understanding Radio Zitouna if it is only seen in the context of politics, liberalization and elites. On the background of the field work the paper argues that Radio Zitouna

also plays an important part in a greater puzzle where a new appropriation of Muslim identity in Tunisia is the overall theme. As has been pointed to here the puzzle also contains the emerge of a new upper class and the choice of Islam among well educated women. In many ways the new status of Islam in Tunisia has similarities with development in Turkey since the 1980s: Introduction of reforms and neo-liberal economies, an upper class related to liberalization and with roots in one particular town, in Tunisia Sfax and in Turkey Anatolian towns (*the Anatolian Tigers*), and well educated women who have turned their attention to Islam in a personal strive and have chosen to wear the veil. Nilufer Göle's examination of the complex relationship between modernity, religion and gender relations seems to have much to offer for a more in depth analysis of the new appropriation of the Muslim identity in Tunisia (Göle, 1996). Patrick Haenni (2005) is using the term of "market Islam" in order to describe the Islam which has its base in a market oriented population while Asef Bayat (2007) is talking about "a soft Islam". Likewise,

Among aspects of the puzzle which have not been discussed here is the urbanisation as a result of more young people choosing studies at the universities. Some analysts point to the fact that Islam in Tunisia primarily became absent in the bigger cities such as Tunis with suburbs and Sousse while it remained the main frame of identity in the rural regions (Dakliya, 1993, Boukraa, 2005). With the urbanisation Islam therefore moved from the country side and into the cities. Other analysts points to the importance of the presence of satellite media in Tunisia and the globalization of both Islam and media. Former politicians have pointed to the fact that the audiovisual media have developped all along the way but mainly in the periode of Ben Ali's rule. Especially the launch of national local radios in the 1990s is put forward as examples of initiatives which have responded to a need of "having a voice" in local areas. The need of inclusion of other aspects and geographical areas than Tunis in the further analysis of the role of Radio Zitouna seems necessary in order to collect all pieces of the puzzle.



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