

## **Women and Leadership in the Post-Arab Spring: The Case of Tunisia**

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### ***Introduction***

This chapter aims at analyzing the expectations of Tunisian women with the outbreak of the so-called “Arab Spring” and the unexpected events that came not only to counter them but even worse to bring them back to a status of the Middle Ages. As a result, women’s struggle had to face two things: resist threats to the gains they had made since 1956 with the advent of the Code of Personal Status (CPS) and continue their march towards full equality with men. A beautiful name was given to the revolution that was ignited by the self-immolation of a young fruit and vegetable peddler on 17 December, 2010 in Sidi Bouzid, a small town south of Tunis: the Arab Spring. Why “Spring” when the time was plain inter? Others called it “the Jasmine Revolution,” because Tunisia is a country where Jasmine is the favorite flower of people? What do flowers have to do with revolution? Both names have positive connotations of joy and festivities. This revolution had had no leader and no political party had backed it. It had been a spontaneous movement of youth and women in particular with high expectations for a new democratic Tunisia.

It did not take long for everyone, in and out of the country, to realize that the revolution that freed the Tunisian people from a vile dictator had brought unprecedented violence and threats to gains and all forms of freedoms, in particular women’s rights. Tunisian women were an example for the entire Arab world because of the rights they had gained ever since independence in 1956; their focus had been on eradicating the last obstacles to full

equality with men through lobbying for the lifting of the reservations Tunisia had made on CEDAW (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women). They had to do more during the three ensuing years: they achieved a considerable gain when they obtained a parity law, the first ever that made it obligatory to have an equal number of men and women in electoral lists for the parliamentary elections that took place on 23 October 2011.

(The new constitution was written by a majority of Islamist constituents, whose program was part of a huge plot meant to create an Islamist state crossing frontiers and nations. Women were not part of this program. mirrored women's and democrats' expectations in spite of a few flaws is considered an achievement. It also helped Tunisia remain at the forefront of all the other Arab nations in terms of women's rights. However, the struggle is continuing there is a difference between theory and practice: women in leadership positions remain a minority at all levels in spite of all the achievements they made. Yet, the victory of modernist Nidaa Tounes against Islamist Al-Nahda at the legislative elections of 26 October 2014 will be a plus for the country and for women.

Tunisia had been known for ages for being the most developed and open-minded country in the Maghrib and in the Arab world. Its women were the most admired because they had been offered rights that are unique in the Arab world. Its recent achievements will maintain it as an example in democracy. It is hoped that it will be followed by similar successes in the neighboring countries.

### ***Women and Leadership in the Post-Arab Spring Era: The Case of Tunisia***

*“History shows that countries are more prosperous and more peaceful when women are empowered” (Barack Obama, 19 May 2011)*

And, Obama added that the Arab World “must insist that universal rights apply to women as well as men... by standing up for the rights of women to have their voices heard, and to run for office.” Habib Bourguiba (1903-2000), the first president of the Republic that Tunisia had become after the departure of the colonizers in 1956, had the same view and the emancipation of women was his revolutionary achievement through the promulgation of the Code of Personal Status (CPS). The CPS was his gift to women and to the nation as a whole. It was a gift because it came from him and not as an answer to any claims made by women. In fact, Bourguiba even said that by so doing, he had spared Tunisian women the efforts made by women elsewhere in the world to demand equal rights. Habib Bourguiba stated:

The emancipating laws promulgated in their favor have spared Tunisian women the task of exhausting themselves in claiming struggles in which women in most countries find themselves compelled and allowed them to buckle down straightaway to the apprenticeship of freedom and responsibility (Bourguiba, 15-8-76).

Thanks to the CPS, Tunisian women have gone a long way. In the pre-independence era, some had been able to leave the secluded world of the home sphere to join the world of politics by helping male relatives in their struggle to oust the French colonizers from their country. As they progressed and became bolder in their activism, some of these women started to attend political meetings without wearing a veil; they demanded that schools for girls be created and collected money to that end. To ensure that they get what they wanted, they stressed that good morals would be taught so that good Muslim girls would come out from those schools. Were they thinking about leadership positions then? Probably not. Indeed, it was not anything women sought then and even if some did, none would have dared to claim it because it would have put a halt to their march for involvement in the affairs of the country

and in their coming out from seclusion. The CPS promulgated in 1956 established a fundamental principle, namely that of equality between men and women. It abolished polygamy and repudiation, giving women rights that are still the envy of many of their Arab sisters in the Arab World. It established judicial divorce, allowing both spouses to file for divorce (Arfaoui 2007). Tunisian women were to make many more gains, in particular when Tunisia signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1980) and ratified it (1985) with some reservations which Tunisian feminists had been struggling to have their government.

This chapter is about the obstacles met by Tunisian women since 14 January 2011 in their march towards full equality with men and the role played by women parliamentarians, members of the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) and civil society in addressing these obstacles or countering them. In particular, radical Islamists tried on several occasions to deprive women from their rights, going as far as to encourage women---young girls in particular—to join Jihad niqah, to be used as mere sexual objects<sup>1</sup> in Syria and elsewhere. Since the revolution, Tunisia has become a laboratory for democracy. If democracy succeeds in Tunisia, then it is bound to have a positive impact on the rest of the Arab World. If it fails, it will succeed nowhere else.

Much has been going on since the 1930s when the quiet women's movement started. Illiteracy was high then, in particular among women. This is one of the major differences

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#### <sup>1</sup>ENDNOTES

Jihad Niqah is used for sexual jihad. As they encouraged young men to jihad in Syria, radical Islamists encouraged young women to join the Jihad by having sex with the jihadists. All these youth are made to believe that their action will allow them to go to Paradise.

between the Tunisia then and now. Indeed, the Tunisian girls attending educational institutions at the time of what Beji Caied Essebsi, the leader of Nidaa Tounes<sup>2</sup> called in a televised interview on Nessma TV on 24 October 2014, “the Tunisian Spring,” have nothing to do with their elders for the simple reason that, today, there is not a single family that does not include its children’s education in its priorities although girls remain the ones that are made to quit school and not the boys. Most girls go to school with one objective of securing a paid job and, whether they are aware of it or not, ensure what Simone de Beauvoir had claimed in “The Second Sex”: economic security.

The laws enacted in the Code of Personal Status (1956) benefitted women but also the entire family for, educating women means educating the entire society. Women have proved to be good scholars and they have achieved successes in science, medicine, law, politics; there is not a single sector where they have not proved their competence. And yet, concretely, very few have been able to get leadership positions.

We may wonder at the whys of this resistance, one that is unique neither to Tunisia nor to the rest of the Muslim world though. It is interesting to note that Habib Bourguiba, the man who freed Tunisian women, proved yet that the discrimination that impeded women’s progress was embedded in his mind too. Indeed, how else could we interpret the fact that while encouraging the insertion of women in the workforce, it had to be done according to women’s “natural predispositions,” i.e. women could only work as nurses, secretaries, seamstresses, kindergarten teachers, social assistants? (Marzouki: 160). The “leap backwards” that Bourguiba made in his speeches on two Women’s National Days (13 August 1966 and 1973)

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<sup>2</sup> Nidaa Tunes (The Call of Tunisia) is a secularist political party founded by Beji Caied Essebsi in April 2012.

shows that discrimination against women is cultural and so fixed in his mind in spite of his sincere sympathy for women's plight. In 1981, Bourguiba energetically declared that he had never meant to disrupt the harmony of the family; that he did not want to have women rise against their husbands, adding that women did not need to have a paid job and ending by advising women to take part-time jobs<sup>3</sup>. Campaigns followed, orchestrated by the National Union of Tunisian women (UNFT) to make women stay on the right path and live according to Muslim standards, mostly leaving leadership of the family to the husband. A few years later, although he continued his predecessor's feminist policy, Ben Ali, who took over in 1987, also recommended part-time jobs for women with the promise of full retirement benefits. For him and for a few narrow-minded people, that was the solution for reducing men's unemployment.

The question to ask at this juncture is: if these two heads of state, who promoted women's rights, recommended that women should be treated differently from men, that their roles as housewives and mothers gave them overwhelming responsibilities, ignoring the fact that such responsibilities should be shared by both the wife and the husband, what can one expect from other rulers —the Islamists that appeared after 14 January 2011— and who, from the beginning have not hidden what they think of the situation: that women are different from men, that they are “complementary” to men and consequently, that they must be submissive to them. For, in August 2012, the radical Islamist members of the NCA in charge of the drafting of the new constitution insisted on the inclusion of a clause stating that women were “complementary” to men, a proposition strongly supported by the female parliamentarians of Al-Nahda Party who even demanded that Tunisia withdraw its very ratification of the

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<sup>3</sup> Cited by Marzouki, pp. 160-161.

CEDAW<sup>4</sup>. The series of propositions made by radical Islamists were meant to curtail women's rights and thus, not only prevent any leadership role for women but also make sure that they be submissive to men who are still maintained as heads of the family.

Very recently, in October 2014, Beji Caid Essebsi, leader of Nidaa Tounes, the party that has become a competitor to Al Nahda, and that won the legislative elections of 26 October 2014, let a misogynous remark come out of his lips when he said about Al-Nahda's vice-President of the NCA, Maherzia Labidi: "She is but a woman." He explained later that he certainly did not mean that as a criticism but rather as a form of gallantry, adding that he considered Tunisian women "...to be the guarantors of the democratic process" and that he was "... one of those who participated in the liberation of women by Bourguiba" (Bel Aiba 2014). Indeed, Essebsi is for gender equality as he once said:

...equality between men and women, and women and men (in alternation), is a key gain and banishes the so far patent discrimination in a fallacious official discourse on equality between the sexes. (Khalsi: 2011)

Still, it is believed that Essebsi made such a remark because the idea is ingrained in Tunisian culture. A woman is weak, one has to bear with her, and therefore, he was not going to argue with the crimes the woman was accusing him of. Of course, it infuriated women who are among his strongest supporters. The persistence of such a view contributes to show the necessity to work on breaking this old-fashioned view of women's inferiority, a view that started to come back in force with the return to the veil that, after disappearing almost totally

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<sup>4</sup> Tunisia had signed the CEDAW in 1980 and ratified it in 1985. It is also one of the few countries to adopt the Optional Protocol that entitles women to address complaints to the UN if there are any infringements on the CEDAW.

from the landscape, had started to reappear in the 1980s (Belhassen 1989), probably following the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Where was that going to lead the women's movement for equality and leadership positions?

### **Tunisia Veiling Itself**

In parallel, as women's presence in educational institutions and in the workplace continued to increase, exceeding the 60 percent figure, a huge conservative movement materialized with the return of the veil. What is interesting is the fact that wearing an Islamic outfit no longer means staying at home. To the surprise and bewilderment of their modernist sisters, these new women generally choose to wear the headscarf on their own free will but they are also keen on having their place in every sector: in the streets, schools and universities, in politics, in the army, police, in the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) as well as in government... After being harassed under the dictatorship, they have been, since the so-called Jasmine Revolution that made Ben Ali flee into exile on 14 January 2011, given the freedom to wear their hijab (although the niqab remains abhorred and rejected by the majority of women).

### **Tunisia in Transition for Democracy**

Confronted to radical Islamists who used violence to impose their whims and their unsettling and threatening presence throughout the country, the Tunisian people stated that Tunisia deserves better than that: hadn't Tunisia been founded by a woman, Elyssa, queen of Carthage? Another powerful and strong woman is the pride of the Tunisians: Kahena. A country that boasts over 3,000 years of history counting such women cannot fall into the hands of the terrorists that have been trying to disrupt the social fabric of life in the country.



After almost four years of transitional government, after assassinations and violent acts of terror, in particular against members of the NCA, the police, and the army, Tunisia had its second historic democratic legislative elections on 26 October 2014 which will be followed by presidential elections on November 23, 2014. The parity law used in the legislative lists for the legislative elections has even been reinforced since it is now in the constitution of 24 January 2014. According to Article 16 of Decree 35, “Candidates shall file their candidacy applications on the basis of parity between men and women.” Lists that do not follow the principle of gender parity will only be admitted when the number of seats, in the relevant constituency, is odd (Article 16). “Lists shall be established in such a way as to alternate between men and women (Article 16). The 1,500 lists including 15,652 candidates were made accordingly with more women heads of lists than during the 2011 elections (representing 12 percent).

For the first time ever, the candidacy of a woman for the presidency has been accepted: Kalthoum Kennou is a 55-year-old, a well-known judge, and former president of the Association of Tunisian Magistrates through which she ceaselessly struggled for the independence of the Judiciary. She used to be harassed by Ben Ali’s police for her activism (Ghribi, 2014). There had been other women candidates, but she was the only one to meet the requirements set by the electoral commission. Mrs. Kennou said she had not intended to present her candidacy, but the threat facing the country, its people and particularly its women has led her to do so. She believes that although it is necessary to use military forces to combat terrorism, more is needed: “We should combat religious extremism intellectually and socially. When Tunisians elect a woman president, they will tell the world that they are attached to modernism, progress and gender equality,” she said (Ghribi 2014). Whether she is elected or not does not really matter. What does matter is that the Tunisian legislation allows a woman

to present her candidacy for such a high position. It shows that some people are open to have a woman assume the highest leadership position in the country. And that is extremely important.

In the midst of all of this, the feminist movement that had been struggling to eradicate the last hurdles to full equality with men has had to slow down its battle to face an unexpected obstacle presented by the rising Islamist movement that simply wanted a return to the Shari'a. That would have meant first the loss of all the gains women had made during more than half a century. They could not resume their activism which consisted mainly in having their government lift the reservations it had made to the CEDAW that Tunisia had ratified in 1985. Since the Arab Spring, Islamists have attempted to curtail women's legal rights; yet, women's organizations and civil society have successfully pushed back these forces and managed to achieve ground-breaking gender equality laws for women in several important areas. At a time when fighting was fierce between hard Salafis who wanted a radical societal change and women, feminist activism succeeded in having a parity law that made it necessary for all political parties to obligatorily respect gender parity in their election lists by presenting the same number of men and women. This law was a victory for women and for all democrats and certainly the first in the Arab world. It was accepted and implemented by all parties, even by Islamists. What made a difference was when women were heads of lists, the potential number of women members of Parliament increased. The number of Islamist women elected in the NCA was higher because they had more women heading lists than the other parties.

In the 26 October 2014 elections, there were more women heads of lists than in the 2011 elections, but the fact that the percentage is so low (12 percent) shows a clear weakness: in theory, Tunisian women have obtained equality but reality on the ground is different as it is conditioned by a mentality that has remained chauvinistic. In spite of its modernity, in spite of

its being open to the West, there is a clear reluctance on the part of Islamists when the way of life does not conform to the Shari'a. The confrontation has thus been clearly between two ways of life that are absolutely opposite: one aiming at continuing the march forward for a more advanced society where women have equal rights allowing them to obtain leadership positions according to their competences, and the second a completely opposite one that certainly does not want women to be equal to men and even less to have leadership positions. So, our question here is: how could Tunisia possibly emerge from this and move forward in its quest for democracy and equal rights for men and women?

### **Education is the Key to Change in the Mentalities**

It was through widespread education that Bourguiba was able to bring the social changes that made of Tunisia the most progressive country in the Arab world. Throughout this chapter, I have considered how the country developed in the midst of discriminatory concepts consciously or unconsciously ingrained in the population not only among men, but also among women as demonstrated by the female Al-Nahda members of the Constituent Assembly who supported polygamy and demanded that Tunisia lifts its ratification of CEDAW. These women do not seem to mind that this attitude would bar any social, economic and political promotion of women, therefore, to leadership positions, rooting them deeply and paralyzing them in the family. The same point of view had been made much earlier in time, in 1990, by a group of women lawyers, researchers, doctors, professors who declared: "Women are largely responsible for the sexist reproduction of discrimination from which they are still suffering in their daily life." To this point of view, Neziha Mezhoud, then UNFT's president added that this attitude was caused by women's inertia that unconsciously reproduces

schemas of thought and behavior (Ben Romdhane, 1990). Indeed, I have shown how biases leave scars/roots in men's and women's minds. If women involved in politics demand that women wear the niqab, if they support the marriage and excision of little girls, if they deny rights to children born out of wedlock as stated by Al-Nadha's parliamentarian Souad Abderrahim, if they condemn adoption as haram, it is not good for women's advances and progress. But such an attitude only shows that patriarchal values are deeply ingrained in men's and women's minds. And, the , Habib Bourguiba would retreat<sup>5</sup> As to , he as part-time work means no promotion, they claimed,

It is not enough to be the first country in the Arab World in terms of women's emancipation and family laws. Much more must be done so that the principles outlined in the new Constitution of January 2014 which grants gender parity and equality and in international treaties ratified by Tunisia do not remain mere theory as they still are today. It is for this main reason that women are needed in leadership positions. Bochra Bel Hadj H'mida, feminist activist lawyer is second on a list of Nidaa Tounes, the party that won the legislative elections. She has been elected. Women like her are needed. This is what she said: "... I feel I am bearing values of justice, equality, liberty and democracy that I am sharing with many men, women and youth and that I insist on defending in the context of an elected assembly, whereas so far I had been defending these values in associations..." (Dami, 2014). Another strong political activist and the only woman holding the position of Secretary General in Al

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<sup>5</sup> Cited by Marzouki (1993: 161). Habib Bourguiba's speech. Monastir, 10-13 August

1981 Report of the 7<sup>th</sup> Congress of the National Union of Tunisian Women.

Jomhuri political Party, Maya Jribi has unfortunately lost in the elections (Ben Said 2014). The victory of Nidaa Touness—85 seats over 69 seats for Al-Nahda-- is also a victory for women, although as expected with a lesser number than men: For 217 seats at the NCA, the milestone elections gave women 67 seats, representing 31.3%, against 28% in 2011:

Total number of women	Nidaa Tounes	Al-Nahda	Popular Front	Free Patriotic Union	Democrati c trend	The people want
67	33	27	3	2	1	1

(Table made from figures found in Baya. tn)

However, in spite of this overwhelming success, Nidaa Tounes will not have the absolute authority as they will share that authority with Al-Nahda and also with at least two other parties (the Popular Front and the Free Patriotic Union). Saida Wanissa, a candidate of Al-Nahda at the legislative elections said: "It is important to replace the traditional image of feminism with a true model for feminism – one that suits the reality of Tunisian society." Knowing all that the Islamists, men and women did to weaken the image and status of women, one certainly does not agree with what she called "a true model for feminism" (Anadolu Agency, 2014) for it cannot correspond to the one advocated by democratic feminists demanding nothing less than full equality.

Although the 2014 Constitution stipulates that:

All citizens, male and female alike, have equal rights and duties, and are equal before the law without any discrimination. The State guarantees to citizens individual and collective rights, and provides them with the conditions to lead a dignified life. (Article 21), these rights have yet to be implemented.

## **Conclusion**

Tunisia has been a frontrunner in women's rights since 1956 and has step by step, become a frontrunner in democracy in the aftermath of the Tunisian Spring. Indeed, it was a model before the revolution and has continued to be so by taking further steps: it adopted a parity law in electoral processes and in January 2014, a Constitution that protects human rights; it lifted all its reservations on the CEDAW in August 2014; it held successful democratic legislative elections on 26 October 2014 and is getting ready for electing a new president on 23 November 2014. All of these democratic events have been taking place under the most stressful situations but they have been able to overcome all the obstacles. Consequently, a better future is still to be hoped. Tunisian women have not given an inch of what they have achieved so far. Yet, their rights remain lower than those of men who have remained the heads of the family. This in itself is a major obstacle to women's equality with men. The parity decree they were able to introduce in the legislation could have given them a fifty-fifty participation in Parliament: it has not. It is for this reason that Myriam, a Tunisian journalist says that "settling gender injustices through legislation alone is not enough...true women's emancipation can be achieved only if awareness campaigns are intensified to include all women from all walks of life in both cities and rural areas" (El Amraoui & Kalboussi 2014). Indeed, nothing much has been done to improve the hard life of rural women, working long hours and being paid less than men for the same work. Even if these rural women know their rights, what could they do to bring a change in their life?

The newly elected democratic Parliament will achieve the goals of the "Tunisian Spring" when it includes the status of women in its vast program against poverty, against radical Islam, against unemployment, against terror. When all women know their rights, when the equality granted to them in the Constitution becomes a fact, they will become stronger and as a result, act differently, no longer allowing their rights to be trampled upon. They will assume more leadership

roles in the country. The fact that there is one woman candidate for the presidency is alone encouraging even if she is not likely to be elected. In 2014, Sophie Claudet reported: “Female political participation is best exemplified in [Tunisia](#), where women represent more than 31% of members of parliament, up from 28% in 2011. By way of comparison, a mere 18% of national legislature seats are held by women in the United States and 27% in France.” In spite of all the violence it has met on several fronts, in spite of serious fears for the future of the country in the midst of such turmoil, Tunisia has maintained its position of leader on women’s rights in the North-African region and in the Middle East. It can rightfully boast of having succeeded to eliminate most of the hurdles placed by political Islam. Tunisia can boast of having ignited the Arab Spring, of having drafted a Constitution that is the pride of all Tunisians, and thirdly of having democratically elected a new and more representative Parliament with democrats and Islamists. More needs to be done for Tunisia to have full leadership on gender equality. By way of conclusion I would include the following quote: “The status of Arab women is evolving but it will require the commitment of governments, rights organizations and women alongside men to speed up the pace and make sure that economic participation and higher school enrollment rates also translate into political empowerment” (Claudet 2014).

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