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The Position of Women in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia and Their Role in Political Decision-Making Processes

Between Social Movements, Frustrations
and Administrative Routine?

ABSTRACT

The Arab Spring, including the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, displayed a strong female presence and the active involvement of women voicing their dissatisfaction with authoritarian regimes. Even though the contribution of women during the Jasmine Revolution is beyond dispute, the question regarding the role of women in post-authoritarian Tunisia has remained unanswered. It further remains debatable if the active involvement of women in the revolution has been transformed into a stronger societal position and greater influence in political decision-making processes for women in post-revolutionary Tunisia. The article analyses the repercussions of the Jasmine Revolution, and its context, on subsequent discourses regarding the position of women in post-authoritarian Tunisian society and on their involvement in political decision-making processes after Ben Ali's departure. Through the course of the article the outlined theoretical approaches discussing the role of women in post-conflict society and in political decision-making processes are contrasted with the interviews conducted with high-ranking women in Tunisian administration mapping the first year of the transition process after the Jasmine Revolution with a particular focus on the role of women in post-revolutionary Tunisia.

Keywords: *social movements, gender, decision-making, Tunisia, Jasmine Revolution*

Introduction¹

The recent social movements in the Arab countries displayed a strong female presence and an active contribution by women, voicing their dissatisfaction with authoritarian regimes. From the beginning of the protests in Tunisia in December 2010, women were on the front lines of change and played active and visible roles as both organisers and demonstrators.² The spontaneous and leaderless protests across Tunisia involved the broadest possible spectrum of social classes despite their diverse political experiences, expectations and expressions.³ In the streets veiled women mixed with unveiled, old with young, educated with illiterate and peasants with intellectuals.⁴ However, it was not just individual women⁵ who were present, but rather women participated, side by side with men, in the protests across the country⁶ and together they confronted armed police and the secret police.⁷ Women, as well as men, were attacked by the police, were arrested and risked their lives in the streets. Further, women were victims of sexual assault and harassment, which was used as a tool of repression against female protestors by Ben Ali's secret police.⁸ Women also contributed to the revolution "behind the scenes" by blogging, posting videos, sharing information and organising themselves within civil rights movements and women's organisations.⁹ The mass social movement,

- 1 I would like to acknowledge my peer reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions.
- 2 Mounira Charrad/Amina Zarrugh: Equal or Complementary? Women in the new Tunisian Constitution after the Arab Spring, in: *The Journal of North African Studies* 19:2 (2014), pp. 230–243, p. 233; Fatma Osman Ibnouf: To Arab Women: Golden Opportunity to Stand-up for Your Rights, in: *Global Advanced Research Journal of History, Political Science and International Relations* 1:5 (2012), pp. 113–117, p. 114. On the slogans of the revolution: Nabih Jerad: *La Révolution Tunisienne: Des Mots qui ont Fait l'Histoire aux Enjeux de Langues*, in: Ahmed Jdey (ed.): *La Tunisie du XXIe Siècle: Quels Pouvoirs pour quels Modèles de Société?*, Paris 2012.
- 3 Mehdi Mabrouk: A Revolution for Dignity and Freedom: Preliminary Observations on the Social and Cultural Background to the Tunisian Revolution, in: *The Journal of North African Studies* 16:4 (2011), pp. 625–635, p. 627.
- 4 Cornelia Vutz: Women in Recent Middle East Uprisings, Library Briefing, European Parliament 2011.
- 5 It must be further acknowledged that not all women supported the Jasmine Revolution as a considerable share was associated with Ben Ali's regime, among them also members of women's organisations that were closely connected to the state party such as the National Union of Tunisian Women (UNFT) and the Tunisian Mothers' Organisation (OTM).
- 6 Nadjé Al-Ali: Gendering the Arab Spring, in: *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 5 (2012), pp. 26–31, p. 27.
- 7 Stuart Schaar: Revolutionary Challenges in Tunisia and Egypt: Generations in Conflict, in: *New Politics* 13:3 (2011), pp. 19–26, p. 23.
- 8 Cornelia Vutz: Women in Recent Middle East Uprisings.
- 9 Fatma Osman Ibnouf: To Arab Women: Golden Opportunity to Stand-up for Your Rights, p. 114.

which was named the Jasmine Revolution after Tunisia's national flower, led to Ben Ali's overthrow on 14 January 2011 and his subsequent flight from Tunisia together with his family.¹⁰

Tunisia was the first country in the Arab world to begin the revolutionary process, ousting its longtime dictator Ben Ali from power, holding the first free elections since the country's independence, commencing the path towards democracy and, at the same time, inspiring popular demonstrations for democracy across the region. Even though women's active contribution during the Jasmine Revolution is beyond dispute, the question regarding their role in post-authoritarian Tunisia has remained unanswered. Further, it remains debatable if the active involvement of women in the revolution has been transformed into a stronger societal position and greater influence in political decision-making processes for women generally in post-revolutionary Tunisia.

This article¹¹ analyses the repercussions the Jasmine Revolution had on the position of women in post-authoritarian Tunisian society, with a particular focus on women's involvement in political decision-making processes during the first two years (2011–2012) following Ben Ali's departure. Through the course of the article the outlined theoretical approaches discussing the role of women in post-conflict society and in political decision-making processes are contrasted with interviews conducted with high-ranking women in Tunisian administration, mapping the first year of the transition process after the Jasmine Revolution, particularly the role of women in post-revolutionary Tunisia.

Theoretical approaches underlining the situation of women in post-conflict society and their role in political decision-making processes are used as a theoretical framework in order to analyse their relevance in the Tunisian case. The article further integrates the analysis of six qualitative interviews, conducted in Berlin in spring 2012, with Tunisian women who hold senior positions in the Tunisian administration. The views presented in the interviews are views of educated and privileged, if not elite, women and constitute a distinct set of ideas that cannot represent Tunisian society at large. The age of the women interviewed ranged from 30 to 41 years and all of them, except for Noura,¹² lived and worked in the capital Tunis. All women interviewed had completed a university education, and all of them, except for Karima, pursued their studies at the National School of Administration (ENA) in Tunis. The occupation of Zeineb, Saida and Karima is linked to the control of public institutions, services or contracts. Latifa and Noura are employed in the judiciary and Naima's profession is connected

10 Stuart Schaar: *Revolutionary Challenges in Tunisia and Egypt*, p. 23.

11 This article is based on my master thesis submitted to Humboldt University of Berlin and Middle East Technical University, Ankara in March 2013 within the framework of the German-Turkish Masters Program in Social Sciences.

12 The names of the interviewed women have been changed to protect their privacy.

to the field of good governance. All interviewed women strongly identified themselves with their currently held positions. They all commenced their careers within the administration during Ben Ali's regime and were well-established in the old system. With the outburst of the revolution they faced a loyalty conflict and therefore the majority of them constituted observers rather than direct participants in the Jasmine Revolution. However, they were all aware of shortcomings of Ben Ali's regime and favoured a regime change, therefore their opinions and experiences act to broaden the understanding of the implications of the revolution on the position of women and their involvement in political decision-making processes in post-authoritarian Tunisian society.

Societal and Historical Specificities of Tunisia

It is necessary to acknowledge a number of specific circumstances that single Tunisia out as a particular case among the countries that experienced recent social movements in the region. First of all, Tunisia demographically constitutes a highly homogenous country with a majority of Muslims and a broad middle class, which is viewed as comprising half of the population, even though social disparities between rural areas and cities still prevail.¹³

Secondly, in order to study women in Tunisia it is necessary to overcome the term "Arab women", as such terminology neglects their diversity and overshadows it by means of gross generalisation.¹⁴ Furthermore, women in Tunisia (like women worldwide) constitute a heterogeneous group and their differing situations, needs, and the difficulties they encounter are related to class, ethnicity, religious affiliation, regionalism (urban vs. rural), local culture and other variables.¹⁵

- 13 Khair El-Din Haseeb: *The Arab Spring Revisited*, in: *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 5:2 (2012), pp. 185–197, p. 186. On rural women in Tunisia: Laroussi Amri: *La Femme Rurale Dans l'Exploitation Familiale Nord-Ouest de la Tunisie*, Paris 2002; Moktar Lamari/Hildegard Schürings: *Force Féminines et Dynamiques Rurales en Tunisie*, Paris 1999.
- 14 Laura Lengel: *Resisting the Historical Locations of Tunisian Women Musicians*, in: *Gender & History* 12:2 (2000), pp. 336–365, p. 336.
- 15 Nader Said-Foqahaa: *Arab Women: Duality of Deprivation in Decision-Making under Patriarchal Authority*, in: *Hawwa* 9:1 (2011), pp. 234–272, p. 242.

Thirdly, Tunisia is considered a leader in the Arab world in promoting the legal and social status of women¹⁶ having established the Arab world's most progressive family code, the Code of Personal Status.¹⁷ These state policies were implemented by the first president of Tunisia, Habib Bourguiba, and continued by his successor, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali. However, it must be acknowledged that the changes leading to the empowerment of women were not a response to pressure from below but were rather initiated by the unchallenged elite, in the absence of a women's movement,¹⁸ and were treated as a part of the general construction of the modern Tunisian state.¹⁹ Women's social and cultural emancipation was of secondary importance,²⁰ and measures to increase gender equality were implemented as long as they remained harmless to the regime and the status quo.²¹ Furthermore, women's rights, and their status, were instrumentalised by Ben Ali as a part of his public image on the world stage and a defense against Islamist political opposition.²²

- 16 Tahar Haddad (1899–1936), a Tunisian modernist and reformist, played a crucial role in initiating a discussion on the advanced legal status of women in Tunisia in accordance with the Islamic doctrine (Souad Bakalti: *Femme Tunisienne au Temps de la Colonisation: 1881–1956*, Paris 2002, pp. 48–49).
- 17 The Code of Personal Status introduced by Habib Bourguiba in 1956 changed family law significantly as well as the legal status of women and amended regulations on marriage, divorce, alimony, custody, adoption and to a lesser extent inheritance, leaving few facets of family life unaffected. At the same time, however, these reforms openly maintained gender inequality in some spheres by for example retaining the rule by which a woman inherits only half as much as a man (Mounira Charrad: *The State and Women's Rights: The Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco*, University of California Press 2001, pp. 218–219).
- 18 Whereas women's agency was absent in the 1950s, it emerged in the 1990s when the second major expansion of women's rights took place (Mounira Charrad: *Policy Shifts: State, Islam, and Gender in Tunisia, 1930s-1990s*, in: *Social Politics* 4:2 (1997), pp. 284–319, p. 309).
- 19 Emma Murphy: *Women in Tunisia: Between State Feminism and Economic Reform*, in: Eleanor Abdella Doumato/Marsha Pripstein Posusney (eds.): *Women and Globalization in the Arab Middle East: Gender, Economy and Society*, London 2003, pp. 169–194, p. 175; Mounira Charrad: *The State and Women's Rights: The Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco*, pp. 219–220.
- 20 Bochra Kammarti: *Veiling in Tunisia: A Marker of the Religious Fact's Territorial Implications*, in: *International Social Science Journal* 61:202 (2010), pp. 457–466, p. 458.
- 21 Nadje Al-Ali: *Gendering the Arab Spring*, p. 30.
- 22 Andrea Khalil: *Tunisia's Women: Partners in Revolution*, in: *Journal of North Africa Studies* 19:2 (2014), pp. 186–199, p. 193; Kristine Goulding: *Fear the Islamists, and the Secularists too? Tunisian Women in Post-Arab Spring Electoral Politics*, Geneva 2011. On Tunisia under the rule of Ben Ali: Olfa Lamoum/Bernard Ravenel (eds.): *La Tunisie de Ben Ali: La Société Contre le Régime*, Paris 2002.

Fourthly, even though gender equality was officially promoted through governmental channels, other societal forces, such as traditional patriarchal structures, continuously discouraged women from obtaining the articulated equality, and there continued to be a striking discrepancy between the legal framework and the de facto situation.²³ The implemented state policies improved women's education and enhanced their political, economic and social participation, however, women remained under-represented in public life and constituted the minority in decision-making positions during Bourguiba's and Ben Ali's rule.²⁴ The vast majority of women in the government belonged to the official state party, possessing only restricted roles and with limited impact on decision-making. A sharp difference between qualitative and quantitative presence of women persisted in the administration with women predominantly working in lower positions and their presence within senior levels serving only symbolic purposes.²⁵ In fact the only women who exercised considerable political influence by the end of both presidents' rules belonged to the respective presidential families.²⁶

Fifthly, throughout its modern history Tunisia has witnessed an active role of women in social movements. Women participated in the anti-colonial struggle against French colonialists²⁷ and several other uprisings prior to the Jasmine Revolution, such as the protests of the General Union of Tunisian Workers in 1978, the bread riots of 1984 and the revolt of the Gafsa mining basin in 2008.²⁸ Thus, women did not just suddenly emerge on the scene during the Jasmine Revolution but had actively contributed to previous social movements. However, due to the mostly local scale of these protests the state succeeded in isolating and suppressing these events without attracting much foreign attention.

- 23 Laura Lengel: *Resisting the Historical Locations of Tunisian Women Musicians*, p. 337.
- 24 Rosa Ana Alija Fernandez/Olga Martin Ortega: *Women's Rights in the Arab Spring: A Chance to Flourish, A Risk of Hibernation*, in: *Revista de Estudios Juridicos* 11 (2011), pp. 1–12, p. 6; Amel Grami: *Gender Equality in Tunisia*, in: *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 35:3 (2008), pp. 349–361, pp. 358–359.
- 25 Anne Françoise Weber: *Staatsfeminismus und autonome Frauenbewegung in Tunesien*, Hamburg 2001, p. 41.
- 26 Michael Willis: *Politics and Power in the Maghreb: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from the Independence to the Arab Spring*, London 2012, p. 4.
- 27 On a historical perspective of women in Tunisia: Dalenda Larguèche (ed.): *Histoire des Femmes au Maghreb: Culture Matérielle et vie Quotidienne*, Tunis 2000. See also: Souad Bakalti: *Femme Tunisienne au Temps de la Colonisation*.
- 28 For further analysis of these events: Mehdi Mabrouk: *A Revolution for Dignity and Freedom: Preliminary Observations on the Social and Cultural Background to the Tunisian Revolution*, pp. 625–635; Larbi Chouikha/Éric Gobe: *La Tunisie Entre la Révolte du Bassin Minier de Gafsa et l'Échéance Électorale de 2009*, in: *L'Année du Maghreb* 5 (2009), pp. 387–420; Anne Françoise Weber: *Staatsfeminismus und autonome Frauenbewegung in Tunesien*.

Furthermore, women's activism in trade unions, women's organisations,²⁹ political opposition parties and informal organisations during Bourguiba's and Ben Ali's rules must be acknowledged when analysing their post-revolutionary situation.³⁰ Social changes, including changes in literacy, the education of women and labour force participation, contributed to women's awareness and increased the proportion of politically active women.³¹ However, autonomous civil society organisations, as well as the opposition, were suppressed by both Bourguiba's and Ben Ali's regimes, and the only women's organisations permitted were generally docile auxiliaries of the state, such as the National Union of Tunisian Women (UNFT).³² Even though women's rights activists sought an autonomous role for women independent from the intrusive control of the government, they suffered censure, lacked freedom of expression and faced persecution and imprisonment if they openly denounced human rights abuses in Tunisia. During Ben Ali's rule feminist discourse was further absorbed into the dominant state discourse and women's rights associations were unable to perform their activities without the interference of the first lady Leila Ben Ali.³³

Additionally, the activism of Islamist women in Tunisia prior to the Jasmine Revolution must be taken into consideration because Islamism remained a powerful social force despite the forceful secularisation and repression of Islamism by the state regime.³⁴ From the end of the 1970s, the veil regained some visibility as it was worn by women close to the Tunisian Islamist movement and became the signifier of political dissent and the symbol of politico-religious involvement. As a reaction to this manifestation, political authorities denoted the veil as a sign of an Islamist infiltration and religious conservatism, and banned it in public spaces.³⁵ Islamist women were persecuted and imprisoned for wearing a veil and for supporting Islamist movements. Furthermore,

29 At the end of the 1970s autonomous women's and feminist movements emerged which positioned themselves against state feminism (Anne Françoise Weber: *Staatsfeminismus und autonome Frauenbewegung in Tunesien*, p. 63).

30 Nadjé Al-Ali: *Gendering the Arab Spring*, p. 27.

31 Mounira Charrad: *Policy Shifts: State, Islam, and Gender in Tunisia*, p. 301.

32 Deniz Kandiyoti: *Promise and Peril: Women and the "Arab Spring"*, in: *openDemocracy* 2011; Kristine Goulding: *Fear the Islamists, and the Secularists too? Tunisian women in Post-Arab Spring Electoral Politics*.

33 Doris Gray: *Tunisia After the Uprising: Islamist and Secular Quest for Women's Rights*, in: *Mediterranean Politics* 17:3 (2012), pp. 285–302, p. 288; Lilia Labidi: *The Nature of Transnational Alliances in Women's Associations in the Maghreb: The Case of AFTURD and ATFD*, in: *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 3:1 (2007), pp. 6–34, p. 19.

34 Francesco Cavatorta/Rikke Hostrup Haugbolle: *The End of Authoritarian Rule and the Mythology of Tunisia under Ben Ali*, in: *Mediterranean Politics* 17:2 (2012), pp. 179–195, p. 191.

35 Jane Tchaicha/Khedija Arfaoui: *Tunisian Women in the Twenty-first Century: Past Achievements and Present Uncertainties in the Wake of the Jasmine Revolution*, in: *The Journal of North African Studies* 17:2 (2012), pp. 215–238, p. 221.

Islamist women were held responsible, not only for their own beliefs, but also for ideas and beliefs of the male members of their families who had connections to Islamist movements.³⁶ In summary, it is necessary to acknowledge that activists on either end of the political spectrum faced oppression if they did not support the official party line.³⁷

Theoretical Considerations: Women in the Public Sphere and in Post-Conflict Society

Women's inclusion in political decision-making has been continuously undermined by the ideology of "separate spheres", which reflects the identification of public space as a "proper" domain for men and the private domestic sphere as a "proper" domain for women. This social construction of separate spheres has constituted a major constraint for women's involvement in political decision-making.³⁸ Politics has always been male dominated, with women generally portrayed as external to politics and considered as subordinate or illegitimate political actors. Therefore, women must constantly construct, reconstruct or reconstitute their political standing before engaging in political action.³⁹ Furthermore, the entry of women into the public sphere has rarely been followed by a redistribution of gender roles in the private sphere, thus doubling their burdens and further undermining their ability to participate fully in public life, as well as limiting their capacity to influence political decision-making processes.⁴⁰

However, during times of crisis, such as revolutionary challenges to a ruling regime, the traditional gender dichotomy is challenged as the involvement of women is required in the public sphere in order to secure the movement's success. Once the critical period is over, women are again excluded from the public sphere and asked to reclaim their natural or "proper" role in the private sphere.⁴¹ Social movements, in this way, have a twofold effect: they reproduce gender inequality within themselves

36 Monica Marks: *Islamism and Uncertainty: Charting the Future of Women's Rights in Tunisia*, in: *St. Antony's International Review* 7:2 (2012), pp. 120–138, p. 131.

37 Doris Gray: *Tunisia after the Uprising: Islamist and Secular Quest for Women's Rights*, p. 288.

38 Benita Roth/Marian Horan: *What Are Social Movements and What Is Gendered About Women's Participation in Social Movements? A Sociological Perspective*, Binghamton 2001.

39 Karen Beckwith: *Lancashire Women Against Pit Closures: Women's Standing in a Men's Movement*, in: *Signs* 21:4 (1996), pp. 1034–1068, p. 1062.

40 Nader Said-Foqahaa: *Arab Women: Duality of Deprivation in Decision-making under Patriarchal Authority*, p. 249.

41 Patricia Campbell: *Gender and Post-Conflict Civil Society: Eritrea*, in: *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 7:3 (2005), pp. 377–399, pp. 377–378.

and within society⁴² but also create spaces in which normative gendered divisions of labour and social roles are contested.⁴³ Women's participation in social movements has frequently contributed to the evolution of their political consciousness,⁴⁴ however, despite women's increased activism during revolutionary struggles, these changes are often not sustainable in the process of political consolidation and women's revolutionary activism is not easily convertible to women's participation in state institutions and political decision-making processes.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the analysis of the impact of democratisation on gender relations shows that "there is no necessary connection between playing an important part in any stage of the process of democratisation and having any particular role during the period of consolidation."⁴⁶ However, there are several factors that might have an influence on women's political inclusion in post-conflict society, such as:

[...] previous inclusion or exclusion of women; state attention to women as a social category; pace of the transition process and organized women's involvement in it; the extent to which economic and social transformations, concurrent with political change, positively affect women; and the political opportunity structure.⁴⁷

It has been repeatedly observed that women's participation is welcomed during the revolutionary struggle but discouraged in post-revolutionary society.⁴⁸ It is striking that periods of greater democratisation have often resulted in the codification and reinforcement of gender hierarchies⁴⁹ and the re-marginalisation of women.⁵⁰ The article will explore to what extent these theoretical approaches can be applied in the case of the post-revolutionary developments in Tunisia.

42 Aldon Morris: Reflections on Social Movement Theory: Criticism and Proposals, in: *Contemporary Sociology* 29:3 (2000), pp. 445–454, p. 451.

43 Bahati Kuumba: *Gender and Social Movements*, Oxford 2001, p. 18.

44 Guida West/Rhoda Lois Blumberg: *Women and Social Protest*, Oxford 1990, p. 20.

45 Karen Beckwith: Beyond Compare? Women's Movements in Comparative Perspective, in: *European Journal of Political Research* 37 (2000), pp. 431–468, p. 450.

46 Georgina Waylen: Women and Democratization: Conceptualizing Gender Relations in Transition Politics, in: *World Politics* 46:3 (1994), pp. 327–354, p. 329.

47 Karen Beckwith: The Comparative Politics of Women's Movements, in: *Perspectives on Politics* 3:3 (2005), pp. 583–596, p. 588.

48 Patricia Campbell: *Gender and Post-Conflict Civil Society*, p. 379.

49 Rita Noonan: Women Against the State: Political Opportunities and Collective Action Frames in Chile's Transition to Democracy, in: *Sociological Forum* 10:1 (1995), pp. 81–111, p. 107.

50 Patricia Campbell: *Gender and Post-Conflict Civil Society*, p. 379.

The Issue of Women's Rights and Women's Involvement in Political Decision-Making Processes in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia

The Jasmine Revolution and the overthrow of Ben Ali have brought about new challenges for Tunisian people and particularly for women.⁵¹ Without the protection of the authoritarian regime, a potential threat to women's gains in terms of political and social rights has been articulated, mostly by secular women, especially in the wake of an Islamist resurgence. As previously outlined, reality often shows that even though women actively participate in the revolution, their activism is not easily convertible to participation in state institutions and political processes⁵² and the reinforcement of gender hierarchies often takes place in post-revolutionary society.⁵³ However, factors like women's previous inclusion, state attention to women and women's activism have an impact on the political participation of women.⁵⁴ Despite the instrumentalised promotion of women's rights by Ben Ali's Regime and the dominant role played by Leila Ben Ali, the previous enhancement of women's rights, representation and participation will undoubtedly have a crucial influence on the position of women in post-authoritarian Tunisia.

The post-revolution debates concerning a possible backlash undermining women's rights and status in Tunisian society underlines the troublesome character of the reliance of women on the state to implement and protect gender equality.⁵⁵ Progressive policies introduced by Bourguiba, and continued by Ben Ali strengthened women's rights and led to an enhancement of women's education, employment and political participation. However, the sustainability of these policies would remain problematic as decrees which established women's rights were neither codified in the constitution nor implemented into Tunisian law. Additionally, the system of parliamentary gender quotas, which was installed by Ben Ali in 2007 to ensure 30 per cent female participation within the ranks of the official state party, was never codified, and when Ben Ali's official party was dissolved in March 2011, the same fate befell the gender quota

51 For the reflections on Tunisian transition: Bendana Kmar: *Chronique d'une Transition*, Tunis 2011.

52 Karen Beckwith: *Beyond Compare? Women's Movements in Comparative Perspective*, p. 450.

53 Rita Noonan: *Women Against the State: Political Opportunities and Collective Action Frames in Chile's Transition to Democracy*, p. 107.

54 Karen Beckwith: *The Comparative Politics of Women's Movements*, p. 588.

55 Nadjé Al-Ali: *Gendering the Arab Spring*, p. 30.

policy.⁵⁶ While this does not entail that the new political entity will not continue the previous regime's policies, it does highlight the need for a women's rights agenda to be negotiated and accepted by a larger proportion of the Tunisian population rather than merely implementing top-down preferential policies.⁵⁷

The Islamists did not play a primary role in the Jasmine Revolution, but Islamists, especially Ennahda, gained prominence in the national discourse after Ben Ali's departure. The Ennahda (Renaissance) Party emerged from the Islamist Tendency Movement at the end of the 1980s, representing the first faith-based organisation with a full-fledged political agenda and a nation-wide social base. Ennahda turned out to be the only force in Tunisian politics able to challenge the ruling party in terms of mobilisational capacity and organisational sophistication. Ben Ali responded to this challenge with heavy repressions, destroying Ennahda's infrastructure and banning the party in 1991. Most of its Islamist leaders ended up either imprisoned or in exile, emphasising there was no place for competition, let alone transition, of power at that time.⁵⁸

However, the situation changed with Ben Ali's overthrow, and in October 2011 Ennahda Party won the National Constituent Assembly⁵⁹ elections, and was assigned the double role of running the country and drafting a new constitution. The victory of Ennahda Party was considered a protest vote in favour of the only political force not associated with the previous regime rather than a genuine Islamist vote.⁶⁰ Even though a gender parity policy alternating between male and female candidates on the electoral lists was introduced for the Constituent Assembly elections,⁶¹ the actual outcome of the elections did not result in the hoped-for gender parity. Although all parties ran slates that were 50 per cent female, most parties failed to place any woman as their first candidate. Due to the great diversity of parties running for election, in many constituencies only a single – that is the first – candidate per party was elected

56 Kristine Goulding: *Fear the Islamists, and the Secularists too? Tunisian Women in Post-Arab Spring Electoral Politics*.

57 Doris Gray: *Tunisia After the Uprising: Islamist and Secular Quest for Women's Rights*, p. 286.

58 Steffen Erdle: *Ben Ali's New Tunisia (1987–2009): A Case Study of Authoritarian Modernization in the Arab World*, Berlin 2010, p. 231.

59 Ennahda gained 41 per cent of the seats and formed a coalition with two secular parties, Congress for the Republic and Ettakatol (Duncan Pickard: *Challenges to legitimate governance in post-revolution Tunisia*, in: *The Journal of North African Studies* 16:4 (2011), pp. 637–652, p. 639).

60 Laura Guazzone: *Ennahda Islamists and the Test of Government in Tunisia*, in: *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs* 48:4 (2013), pp. 30–50, p. 31.

61 A gender parity policy was introduced in April 2011 by the High Commission for the Realisation of Revolutionary Goals, Political Reforms and Democratic Transition which consisted of representatives from all political parties and civil society.

to the assembly. Before the 2011 elections the selection of the first candidate within the parties had usually been in favour of men so that many more men than women gained seats. The only exception was Ennahda which won enough seats to appoint 42 women to the Constituent Assembly (with 49 female representatives in total).⁶²

The underrepresentation of women in the Constituent Assembly and a lack of heterogeneity among female representatives were reflected in the conducted interviews, for example by Latifa:

At the parliament level, even the principle of parity has not allowed a high representation of women and even women who are present do not belong to a variety of political parties since the majority represents the Islamic Ennahda party. We have few women of opposition.

Women's marginalisation in politics was further mirrored in the transitional government as there were only three female appointments at the ministerial level all of whom were appointed to the weakest governmental ministries.⁶³ The gender disparity reflected in the outcome of the 2011 elections further highlights a conflict between a "thin" notion of gender equality, concentrated merely on the numerical representation of women in politics, and a "thicker" notion, which among other aspects encompasses participation and influence in political decision-making.⁶⁴ The appointment of women to lower posts is also a common practice in post-authoritarian Tunisia, as expressed by Latifa: "We have a high representation of women at the base, but at the level of high positions we do not have enough women."

Two interviewed women, Latifa and Noura, who actively participated in the subsequent protests after Ben Ali's departure, criticised the political marginalisation of women in post-revolutionary Tunisia and voiced their demands for the extension of women's rights as formulated by Noura: "There is no discussion of acquired rights, we want more! Acquired rights are acquired rights [...] they are rights granted! So as a woman you must claim and not stop claiming." Apart from Latifa and Noura, the other four interviewed women were more concerned with civic rights than women's rights and were convinced that the new regime should concentrate on granting equal rights to all citizens instead of privileged rights to women. This was expressed by Karima:

62 Khalil Al-Anani: *Islamist Parties Post-Arab Spring*, in: *Mediterranean Politics* 17:3 (2012), pp. 466–472, p. 470.

63 Andrea Khalil: *Tunisia's Women: Partners in Revolution*, p. 193.

64 Kristine Goulding: *Fear the Islamists, and the Secularists too? Tunisian Women in Post-Arab Spring Electoral Politics*.

It is true that we had a lot of women's rights in Tunisia before but we do not feel that these rights were acquired by what we wanted and according to our expectations. What I want is to have any rights as a citizen [...] I do not really look if there are female ministers but I would be satisfied if I am in the street and the police respect me and I can speak freely.

According to these interviewees it was not important if women were adequately represented in the government or in the Constituent Assembly. Instead the goals of the revolution should be reached, and therefore the most qualified and experienced people regardless of gender should be granted political representation. The choice of members of the Constituent Assembly should be based on knowledge and skills rather than gender equality. This was further presented by Karima:

The presence of women does not mean that we secured human rights [...] For me personally I see that there are some people who have enough intellectual thoughts at political level, political knowledge, they know democracies around the world. Their skills are much more important than that of a woman who before taking office was perhaps a housewife, who was satisfied with her life and did not really have any problems.

Such statements emphasised that these women did not particularly support gender quotas, instead reflecting opinions of women who had to prove their knowledge, skills and wait to climb the promotion ladder on the basis of seniority principle. Therefore, they did not agree that women should be equally represented based on gender parity principle if they are not sufficiently qualified, as stated by Naima: "If a woman deserves a post, it must be assigned to this woman. If the person is not competent – man or woman – the position should be assigned to the most appropriate person regardless of gender."

Based on the views of Saida and Zeineb, the underrepresentation of women in political decision-making has also been caused by women themselves since women did not readily accept important political positions due to their children and domestic responsibilities. This statement could be further linked to the male-dominated construction of politics and the definition of the public space as men's and the private sphere as women's domain.⁶⁵ The underrepresentation of women in the public sphere was also reflected in the interviewees' respective work environments. The interviewees differentiated themselves as women working in high and demanding positions from "other" women who preferred less demanding jobs because of family responsibilities. As

65 Benita Roth/Marian Horan: What are Social Movements and What is Gendered About Women's Participation in Social Movements?

mentioned above, this also supports the argument that women's entry into the public sphere has not led to the redistribution of gender roles within the private sphere and that women have faced a double burden which impacts their ability to enter into public life.⁶⁶

Nevertheless it is claimed that women's participation in social movements has often contributed to the evolvement of their political consciousness.⁶⁷ This is confirmed by the interviewees who affirmed that after the revolution women's voices became louder, and women, predominantly in opposition parties as well as civil society, have started demanding greater political representation in present-day Tunisia, as expressed by Karima: "Women are demanding more participation in political life [...] they are stronger, they talk more about their rights as well as about having political offices [...] They want to be heard and they are more aggressive."

However, Karima further claimed that women prefer to participate in associations rather than in political life, since they have more power at the level of associations and are more respected in society than women in politics. As stressed by the interviewees, there has been a strong presence of women in Tunisian civil society organisations. However, in politics women occupied rather "symbolic" posts without effective decision-making power, with the exception of the President's wife, during the previous regime. Additionally, the interviewed women did not appear to be fully convinced that this has changed following the revolution, as voiced by Latifa: "In terms of political freedom we have the freedom, but in terms of representation we have a problem." She further asserted that women need greater encouragement to pursue careers in post-authoritarian politics.

Despite the implementation of the gender parity principle in the National Constituent Assembly elections in order to ensure strong participation of women in the process of drafting the constitution, women faced severe obstacles to be involved in constitutional reforms.⁶⁸ The first draft of the constitution released in August 2012 described women as "complementary" instead of "equal" to men and came under intense public scrutiny. Secular women's rights activists took to the streets, protesting against the wording of the draft constitution and demanding gender equality.⁶⁹ On the other hand, the majority of female Ennahda members supported the term "complementary" as they understood it as a term of an exchange and of a partnership. They further asserted that it was a terminological misunderstanding fueling the controversy, and argued that the

66 Nader Said-Foqahaa: Arab Women: Duality of Deprivation in Decision-making under Patriarchal Authority, p. 249.

67 Guida West/Rhoda Lois Blumberg: Women and Social Protest, p. 20.

68 Rosa Ana Alija Fernandez/Olga Martin Ortega: Women's Rights in the Arab Spring: A Chance to Flourish, A Risk of Hibernation, p. 11.

69 Valentine Moghadam: Modernising Women and Democratization after the Arab Spring, in: *The Journal of North Africa Studies* 19:2 (2014), pp. 137–142, p. 140.

term “complementary” needs to be differentiated from the notion of inequality.⁷⁰ Due to this controversy the “complementary” clause was omitted from the final draft of the constitution. This episode demonstrates the newly acquired strength of politics from below which emerged after the revolution. It further highlights that secular women of political opposition and civil society were unwilling to accept male-dominated politics and would not be satisfied unless full and equal citizenship rights were guaranteed for both men and women.⁷¹

After the Jasmine Revolution the priorities of Tunisians included employment, public security, economic development and a new constitution.⁷² As socio-economic issues were more pressing in post-revolutionary Tunisia, the women’s issues were threatened to be sidelined.⁷³ This was confirmed by Karima who acknowledged that women’s issues “are not a current concern because there are so many problems that it is not the problem now.” On the other hand it is suggested by the theory, as suggested for example by Valentine Moghadam, that the countries that enhanced women’s rights and participation of women are most likely to experience a successful democratic transition and consolidation.⁷⁴ Therefore, women’s issues should not be sidelined but rather the unique Tunisian way of women’s inclusion should be further pursued, and higher participation of women in the public life and in political decision-making should be demanded and applied. Furthermore, with regard to women’s rights, a number of challenging questions still require addressing, including unequal inheritance rights. These issues will inevitably lead to further heated public debates in the future.⁷⁵

Islamist vs. Secular Women and Underlying Ambiguity

Post-revolutionary public discourse in Tunisia has been framed by the issue of Islam versus secularism and within this context the question of national identity and the status of women have become fully politicised.⁷⁶ Furthermore, two opposing contin-

70 Mounira Charrad/Amina Zarrugh: *Equal or Complementary? Women in the New Tunisian Constitution after the Arab Spring*, p. 239.

71 Valentine Moghadam: *Modernising Women and Democratization after the Arab Spring*, p. 140.

72 Duncan Pickard: *Challenges to Legitimate Governance in Post-Revolution Tunisia*, p. 638.

73 Jane Tchaicha/Khedija Arfaoui: *Tunisian Women in the Twenty-First Century: Past Achievements and Present Uncertainties in the Wake of the Jasmine Revolution*, p. 234.

74 Valentine Moghadam: *Modernising Women and Democratization after the Arab Spring*, p. 139.

75 Interview with Dr. Lilia Labidi: Minister of Women’s Affairs Government of Tunisia, in: *Middle East Law and Governance* 3 (2011), pp. 230–237, p. 233.

76 Doris Gray: *Tunisia After the Uprising: Islamist and Secular Quest for Women’s Rights*, p. 285.

gents of female activists – secular and Islamist – have been formed and rather than being allied for a common women’s cause, they became adversaries and competitors in the political field. These opposing poles of women activists reflect a polarised society divided between secularists and Islamists, which emerged after the revolution.⁷⁷ However, within the whole Islamist/secular debate it is necessary to recognise the spectrum of Islamist groups in Tunisia and their divergent gender ideologies.⁷⁸ The same is valid for secularists and secular political parties.

On the one hand, following Ennahda’s electoral victory, and the rise of Islamism in Tunisia, Islamist women feel represented for the first time and consider their rights to be respected to a greater extent than before. For example, they are now allowed to wear a veil in the public to freely express their religiosity.⁷⁹ Additionally, Islamist gender activism, which developed in the 1980s, reemerged after the Jasmine Revolution, shifting from an oppositional position to the political centre.⁸⁰ Members of Ennahda repeatedly and publicly underlined the party’s respect and commitment to women’s rights, acknowledged the importance of the promotion of gender equality in education, jobs and public office and emphasised that wearing a veil is a woman’s personal choice. Ennahda members further condemned the Salafists for their attempt to impose the veil in Tunisian universities.⁸¹ Furthermore, women have been visible within the Ennahda and can be found at all levels of leadership inside the movement differentiating Ennahda from other Islamist movements. The female Ennahda members have repeatedly asserted their party’s political agenda of maintaining the Code of Personal Status and of strengthening the role of women in public life. They further emphasised that their goals are in favour of women’s economic, political and social rights.⁸² Ennahda women played a crucial role in mobilising female voters for the Constituent Assembly elections, and the Ennahda Party often constituted the only party reaching rural women prior to the elections. Ennahda further appointed more women to the Constituent Assembly than any other party, and these women are well-educated and have broad activist experience due to their resistance against repressions of Ben Ali’s regime.⁸³ Therefore, Islamist women undoubtedly have the potential to play an important role in determining the future of the women’s rights agenda in Tunisia.

77 Andrea Khalil: *Tunisia’s Women: Partners in Revolution*, p. 187.

78 Nadjé Al-Ali: *Gendering the Arab Spring*, p. 31.

79 Anne Wolf: *An Islamist ‘Renaissance’? Religion and Politics in Post-revolutionary Tunisia*, in: *The Journal of North African Studies* 18:4 (2014), pp. 560–573, p. 568.

80 Andrea Khalil: *Tunisia’s Women: Partners in Revolution*, p. 187.

81 Khalil Al-Anani: *Islamist Parties Post-Arab Spring*, pp. 470–471.

82 Andrea Khalil: *Tunisia’s Women: Partners in Revolution*, p. 189.

83 Monica Marks: *Islamism and Uncertainty: Charting the Future of Women’s Rights in Tunisia*, p. 133.

On the other hand, the revival of Islamists, and the reappearance of the veil in public space in Tunisia, prompted secular women to express concerns about the potential loss of women's status and reconfiguration of their presence in the public and private spheres.⁸⁴ Whereas women's rights were of secondary importance during the initial protests leading to Ben Ali's departure, hundreds of secular women and feminists gathered in Tunis to defend women's rights and refuse a potential Islamic resurgence once it became obvious that Islamists would become the main beneficiaries of the revolution.⁸⁵ Despite the rather moderate position of Ennahda and the strong role of its female members, fears persisted among secular women and feminists, who claimed that Ennahda is engaged in a "double discourse", and despite its public and repeated statements not to hinder women's progress in Tunisia, it will eventually amend the Code of Personal Status and impose laws that are more compatible with a conservative Islamic interpretation.⁸⁶ According to secular women Islamists aim to return women to the domestic sphere, excluding them from the workforce and enforcing Islamic dress code. The statements of Islamists in favour of women were further perceived as a strategy to gain support in the elections.⁸⁷ These arguments by secular women are based on the often contradictory declarations by Ennahda leaders, who have stated Ennahda's acceptance of the Code of Personal Status but at the same time called for "traditional values".⁸⁸ Secular women have pointed out that beyond repeating its support for the Code of Personal Status, Ennahda has not formulated a coherent policy on women's issues.⁸⁹ They have further criticised Ennahda for allowing the violence employed by radical Salafists, such as threatening the female director of a radio station, intimidating a group of artists, storming the US Embassy in Tunis, clashing with university students while attempting to get approval of a full-face veil during the classes and committing assassinations of two leftist oppositional leaders. Further criticism was

84 Jane Tchaicha/Khedija Arfaoui: *Tunisian Women in the Twenty-First Century: Past Achievements and Present Uncertainties in the Wake of the Jasmine Revolution*, p. 216.

85 *Ibid.*, p. 232.

86 Doris Gray: *Tunisia After the Uprising: Islamist and Secular Quest for Women's Rights*, p. 287.

87 Andrea Khalil: *Tunisia's Women: Partners in Revolution*, p. 189.

88 Peter Schraeder/Hamadi Redissi: *Ben Ali's Fall*, in: *Journal of Democracy* 22:3 (2011), pp. 5–19, p. 18.

89 This could be also caused by the fact that the party operated in the underground and its leaders were either imprisoned or scattered across Europe, therefore there could not have been an internal debate regarding their policies and positions on specific issues (Doris Gray: *Tunisia After the Uprising: Islamist and Secular Quest for Women's Rights*, p. 291).

aimed at salafists' promotion of gender segregation and their call for a reference to sharia in the Constitution. Ennahda was criticised for seeking a dialogue with Salafists instead of making them responsible for their actions.⁹⁰

The conducted interviews also reflected the contrasting views held in Tunisian society regarding the Ennahda Party. The majority of the interviewed women asserted that Ennahda did not pose a threat to the Code of Personal Status and will not undermine women's rights. According to Naima: "There are people who feared that with the rise of the Ennahda party the position of women would deteriorate [...] I do not want to advertise for Ennahda's regime but where I live, the person on the election list was a woman; a woman who does not wear a veil." On the other hand Noura expressed her fears that the Ennahda Party would apply a double discourse in order to accommodate its opponents, and that once it will have consolidated its power it would roll back women's rights:

The current regime has ensured that it will not affect the achievements of women [...] Frankly, as a woman I do not trust fully [...] When it comes to women and the problem of women, they will promise something, I think, after all, they have a double, a triple, a quadruple language. They may have a quadruple language regarding this project and now, to ease tensions, it is guaranteed that women will not be affected.

Even though secular women articulate their fears for the position of women under the Islamist government, women's rights are no less vulnerable under the rule of secularists. A democratically elected, secular government is just as capable of undermining women's rights as an Islamist-led government. Secularism does not automatically mean gender equality. Experienced throughout Tunisia's history, state-sponsored secularism was applied as a strategic political tool to codify and regulate women's activities and eventually hindered their socio-political role in society.⁹¹ Therefore, the role of women should not be reduced to protecting women's rights and insisting on a secular government or on a numerical representation of women in decision-making bodies. Rather it is necessary that equal participation and influence in decision-making processes by women are guaranteed and women are involved in shaping a new discourse of inclusive politics.⁹²

90 Anne Wolf/Raphaël Lefèvre: Revolution under Threat: The Challenges of the 'Tunisian Model', in: *The Journal of North African Studies* 17:3 (2012), pp. 559–563, p. 562.

91 Kristine Goulding: Fear the Islamists, and the Secularists too? Tunisian Women in Post-Arab Spring Electoral Politics.

92 Zahra Langhi: Gender and State-Building in Libya: Towards a Politics of Inclusion, in: *The Journal of North African Studies* 19:2 (2014), pp. 200–210, p. 209.

In fact Tunisian women on both sides – secular and Islamist – repeatedly expressed the same objectives such as the preservation of the Code of Personal Status, freedom in dress and religious worship and increased participation of women in political and public life. However, due to ideological differences, many women have not acknowledged this overlap in their goals. The dispute between these two sides does not focus on the presence of women in politics, but rather on a different point of reference – Islamist versus universalist human rights reference. In the absence of any progress towards a mutual understanding of shared objectives or compromise between Islamist and human rights discourse, this polarisation represents only a burden in advancement of the position of women in Tunisian society.⁹³ Therefore, it is necessary that secular feminist and Islamist women find a common ground for negotiating the position of women in contemporary Tunisia and arrive at a consensus about the role women should play in post-authoritarian Tunisian society. If secular and Islamist women continue to reject dialogue, it will only perpetuate the divisions constructed by the previous regime.⁹⁴

Conclusion

The overwhelming presence and participation of women during the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia was a high point of women's agency which developed in Tunisian society due to women's education and encouragement to participate in political, social and economic life during Bourguiba's and Ben Ali's regime. During the Jasmine Revolution women of different generations, social classes and ideological backgrounds took positions in the public space and put forward their demands. Women actively participated in the demonstrations across the country but once Ben Ali was ousted and the demonstrations were over, the question of women's rights and roles in Tunisian society dominated the public discourse.

The hypothesis suggesting that women's participation is welcomed during revolutionary struggle but discouraged in post-conflict society needs adjusting in the case of Tunisia. Women's active participation during the revolution was appreciated by all parties involved and this was reflected in the attempts to introduce gender parity in the Constituent Assembly even though it was eventually undermined in the elections. However, men took most of the leading roles in the post-authoritarian regime and women remained underrepresented in decision-making processes. This supports the argument that the public sphere is perceived as the proper realm of men and that politics are male-constructed. Even though it seems like women's representation in

93 Andrea Khalil: *Tunisia's Women: Partners in Revolution*, p. 198.

94 Doris Gray: *Tunisia After the Uprising: Islamist and Secular Quest for Women's Rights*, p. 301.

decision-making processes has been discouraged by predominantly male-dominated societal forces, women in Tunisia are more strongly than ever voicing their needs and concerns. They are moreover ready to be more involved at different levels of decision-making, and represented in leading positions due to the enhancement of their political consciousness during the Jasmine Revolution among other factors. Tunisian women seem hence unlikely to accept their exclusion from public life.

A dispute between secular and Islamist women over the understanding of the role women should play in post-revolutionary Tunisia has been reflected in wider society between Islamists, including the Ennahda, and the secular opposition in the questions of post-authoritarian development. The advancement of the constitutional process was slowed down by the deepening polarisation between secularists and Islamists and Ennahda's difficulties in both satisfying its more radical wing and appealing to the wider public. The process was further hindered by the disruptive actions of radical Salafists and led to Ennahda's resignation from the government in autumn 2013.⁹⁵ Tunisia's new Constitution was finally adopted in January 2014. This has been considered a victory for women as it enshrines equality between men and women as well as gender parity in elected assemblies. However, critics point out that the Constitution does not fully embrace the principle of equality. Its articles regarding gender equality have been criticised as too vague leaving too much scope for a different interpretation.⁹⁶

Countries that have enhanced women's rights and participation are likely to experience a successful democratic transition and consolidation.⁹⁷ Even though other problems such as high unemployment, security concerns and an ideologically and politically divided society seem more pressing to Tunisians at the moment, women's issues should not be ignored. Women in Tunisia will have to prove that their active participation in the revolution is convertible into political participation. Both fractions – secular and Islamist women – will have to become aware of their shared goals and find a common ground for discussion in order to assure a substantive place for women in Tunisian society. Furthermore, the role of women should not be limited to protecting women's rights and insisting on women's numerical representation, but should seek a stronger influence on decision-making processes. Future developments in Tunisia will reveal if the post-revolutionary Tunisian trajectory of women's involvement can, in the long term, represent a model for other Arab countries undergoing similar political transformations.

95 Valentine Moghadam: *Modernising Women and Democratization after the Arab Spring*, p. 138.

96 Synda Tajine: *Small Constitutional Victory for Tunisian Women*, in: *Al-Monitor*, 19 January 2014, available online at: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ar/politics/2014/01/tunisia-women-small-victory-constitution.html> (accessed on 19 June 2014).

97 Cf. Valentine Moghadam: *Modernising Women and Democratization after the Arab Spring*, p. 139.

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