

2011 Uprising and Tunisian Women's Socio-Political Status

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Abstract

A street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in protest after a police officer seized his cart and products. This embarked a set of social Unrest and demonstrations across Tunisia and the events rapidly exceeded Tunisia to many other Arab Countries. Now, more than six years after the start of uprisings in Arab States, Tunisia is almost the only country that emerged as a democratic state. The country witnessed a more or less gradual democratic process of transitional and legally elected governments after 2011 developments. Yet, debates remain about Women's role and status in the Tunisian society. The article thus, tries to examine the possible relationship between two socio-political factors; 2011 uprising in Tunisia and its consequent developments as an independent factor and Tunisian women's socio-political status as the dependent factor. In this regard, Michel Foucault's approach to power was chosen as a theoretical framework of the survey. The research results reject radical changes in women's social status after 2011 developments in Tunisia.

Keywords: Arab Spring, Feminism, Islamism, Power, Secularism, Social Participation.

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1. Introduction

A review of women's movements in the world suggests that debates on women's socio-political status and related researches are formed at the intersection of several intellectual and social movements. In Tunisia too, the women's movement has a history of quite a few decades. The movement witnessed vicissitudes, however, survived and developed alongside other social movements. It was affected by both internal/ indigenous elements and also external factors of modernity and women's movements in the West. Especially for some eastern countries among them Tunisia, the state as an important institution, alone or in association with other institutions, has played a decisive role in developments relating women's demands and their status.

2. Conceptual Framework

In this regard, and as a theoretical framework, the research found it helpful to apply Michel Foucault's overview regarding the Power. Foucault's approach to power was influenced by the political unrest he witnessed in the 1960s, a period which generated new challenges and struggles previously unarticulated in the political arena, and which raised new questions and problems about social and political relations. The new struggles required a new analysis of power: From all these different experiences ...there emerged only one word, like a message written in invisible ink, ready to appear on the page when the right chemical is added; and the word is power. (McLaughlin, 2003:116)

Michel Foucault holds that Power is productive. If power only ever denied us possibilities and opportunities, it would not be successful. Power relations open up as well as close off opportunities for particular forms of social relations, position and experience. (McLaughlin, 2003:118)

He continues that "Resistance exists within power. Power relations produce the spaces and opportunities within which resistance appears. The use of legal statutes and psychiatric discourses to construct particular identities as incorrect (homosexuality, for example) produce the language in which to challenge that construction. (McLaughlin, 2003:118)

Based on the fact that the state in Tunisia had a distinguishable hegemony, developments related to women have been heavily influenced by developments in the field of power. Accordingly, Governments have always tried to keep women in a state of passivity or use their power as a potential align force. Tunisian women on the other hand, experienced resistance against state power in the last decades. The research, tries to portray Tunisian women's movement and its related discourses in a challenge to the power body in Tunisia.

3. Historical Background

It is generally believed that Tunisian women are the "Arab exception" in terms of rights and gains. They enjoy a distinct human rights status from other Arab and Islamic countries. This situation is not the result of the Tunisian 2011 developments, but it backs to the dawn of Tunisia's independence from the

French colonization. (Haya, 2014) Accordingly, Abtahal Abdel Latif, Human rights activist and a member of the Truth and Dignity Commission* believes that Tunisian women contributed significantly to the national movement against colonialism and were in the front lines alongside men. (Al Naseri, 2015)

3-1. Tunisian Women Before 2011 developments

Tunisia gained its independence from France in 1956 and Habib Bourguiba became the first president of the Tunisian Republic. The new president was deeply influenced by 19th century scholars and thinkers and imbued by Hadda's ideas. So much so, those women were at the center of his agenda when he started reshaping the country. (Zlitni, 2012: 47)

A steady stream of reforms has followed the first and ground breaking phase, which occurred in the mid-1950s, at the time of the formation of a national state in the aftermath of independence from French colonial rule. It also implemented gender legislation expanding women's rights in several areas, especially in family law. The promulgation of the Tunisian Code of Personal Status' (PSC) in 1956 constituted a radical shift in the interpretation of Islamic laws with regard to the family and set a stage for further developments. (Charrad, 2007: 1514)

The same day August 13th 1956, Women's day was proclaimed, twenty years before the UN proclaimed March 8th the UN day for women's rights and international peace. The outstanding measures included in the PSC made it really outstanding in an Arab Muslim country. Indeed, polygamy is banned (Art.18), unilateral repudiation by the husband is abolished and is replaced by a divorce procedure (Art. 30); the divorce procedure can be requested by man and wife alike (Art. 31). A marriage can only be concluded with the consent of both spouses, in other words the status of matrimonial guardian who could speak in the name of the bride was abolished (Art. 3), and so was abolished the father's or guardian's constraining power over a woman's marriage (the jabr/jerb). Women were allowed to work, to teach, to vote and the civil rights they were granted were really impressive compared to other Arab countries (Zlitni, 2012: 48).

Tunisian women's trailblazing and advantageous legal status is considered an exception in Muslim countries. For decades the status has been a showcase for successive Tunisian governments, a forceful argument at election time for President Ben Ali, and an often-used alibi by the authorities when European countries and NGOs challenge the regime about human rights and freedom of the press. (Zlitni, 2012: 46)

Zine Al Abidine Ben Ali took power on November 7th 1987, after he had deposed President Bourguiba. He was in power until January 14th, 2011. In the national covenant of 1988, a founding document of the new regime that came after a period of uncertainty, the PCS was presented as a national asset and thus could not be negotiated. The national covenant stipulates that "the PCS reforms

aim at liberating and emancipating women; they are in accordance with a very old aspiration that existed in our country. The reforms are based on Ijtihad (exegesis) and on the goals of the sharia'a. They show the validity of Islam and of its opening to the demands and the evolution of the modern world". Ben Ali revived Bourguiba's policy for women. In 1956, the latter needed women to establish his authority and to affirm his modernist stand; in 1988 Ben Ali needed women to fight Islamism. "Women are thus the counterparts of Islamists who fight them. Once again, they are at the center of a societal struggle. They are the only ones that can't be suspected by those in power, either of supporting or of allying with Ennahda" (Daoud, 1990: 101). Ben Ali then took several measures to consolidate women's rights.

As mentioned, during both Bourguiba's and Ben Ali's rise to power, the rights of women formed the center of the debate between the secularist and Islamist movements. As a result, women have in the past received their rights through top-down, state enforced legal reforms—beginning with Bourguiba's revolutionary Code of Personal Status (CPS) and continuing with Ben Ali's progressive updates to the law. Such reforms have provided a mechanism for these leaders to consolidate power and suppress the desires of the opposition. (O'Rourke, 2012: 64)

Based on the same approach, in her 1998 book *Women, the State and Political Liberalization: Middle Eastern and North African Experience*, Laurie Brand closes her analysis of Tunisia with these words: Many women are unwilling to criticize the regime's approach. They have been profoundly affected by developments in Algeria and believe that their choice is between the current Tunisian government and the Islamists...Yet as long as the economy appears to perform well and the country is stable, many Tunisians, women and men, will be unwilling to risk the rise of Islamist influence and the losses they believe it would bring, by pushing for a greater opening of the system (Brand, 1998: 246 in Hopmann, 2012).

In analyzing the gender policy of the Bourgeois period, it should be noted that the policy was not a product of pressure from the bottom and a Women's / Feminist independent movement, but a result of the will in the government and within the framework of its political program. In fact, the nature of the growing feminism of the 1950s and 1960s was not mass but state and thus, is heavily politicized and, in essence, vulnerable and shaken. The relative reversal of gender policy during the 1970s and the resumption of the 1980s confirm this fact. In the 1970s, the danger of Marxism strengthened conservative tendencies in gender politics, and in the 1980s, the threat of Islamic fundamentalism led to a reversal process. With the rise of Islamists in the 1990s, this tendency intensified. (Pakniyat, 2016: 7)

However the most significant Turning point took place in the 1980s, which had a profound impact on the government's politics regarding women rights,

*- National Covenant, signed at the Presidential Palace in Carthage on November 7th, 1988. It was signed by the representatives of six political parties officially agreed and by a lawyer representing Le Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique that was not officially agreed.

especially in the 1990s and the era of Ben Ali's rule, was the emergence of women's organizations from within society, which until then, was the subject of a government monopoly on women's activities in the National Women's Union of Tunisia.

Basma Soudani holds that after the formation of the state and especially during the rule of Ben Ali, its role was marginalized by the restrictions on women's rights and trade unions, who opposed his regime, just like men. Ben Ali's prisons witnessed more than 400 women prisoners, indicating that they fought the time of repression in defense of freedom of speech and opinion, and received, like men, a great share of suffering and torture. (Al Naseri, 2015)

At the beginning of 2002, following the "Multi Fiber Agreement"* that affected the textile industry, these were women who began struggling, strikes. This wave of demonstrations by women led to the creation of the Tunisian Social Court. Another example is the movement of miners in 2008, which was a major advance for the Tunisian revolution, and was led by women. Mothers of young workers who were not accepted for internships sat in the streets of Kfsa, which eventually ended to a vast rally by the miners. (Mohammadpour, 2012)

3-2. Tunisian Women and 2011 Developments

Seven years ago, on December 17, 2010, a street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in protest after a police officer seized his cart and produce. It was an act that encapsulated the resentment of Tunisians suffocating after years of official corruption, economic stagnation, and police abuse. Bouazizi's self-immolation in the city of Sidi Bouzid sparked protests that spread across the country, gathering in size and momentum. The autocratic Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, who had been president of Tunisia, was forced to flee to Saudi Arabia on January 14, 2011. The Arab Spring had begun.

Tunisian women played an active role in the 2011 developments because they also suffered from marginalization, injustice and unemployment. So they rushed to the streets demanding the overthrow of the regime and received the same crackdown and suppression and many lost their lives for the sake of freedom and social rights. No one can deny woman's participation and their role in the 2011 events.

As soon as the regime fell, the presence of women in the movement, especially among protestors of Kasbah 1 and Kasbah 2, in the Government Square[†] continued to complete the objectives of the demonstrators, which succeeded in toppling the government of Mohamed Ghannouchi. They also persuaded the path advocated by the protestors to establish new Parliament. (Al Naseri, 2015)

*- 'Multi-Fiber Arrangement - MFA' an international trade agreement on textile and clothing that was active from 1974 till 2004. The agreement imposed quotas on the amount that developing countries could export in the form of yarn, fabric and clothing to developed countries. Multi-Fiber Arrangement (MFA) - Investopedia

Indeed, Tunisian feminists and women's rights activists succeeded not only in joining the protests that forced President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali to flee the country, but also in remaining an active part of civil society and the National Dialogue. (Hursh, 2017: 281)

4. Participation of Tunisian Women in Elections

The post-Tunisian 2011 developments were marked by the debates on the women's rights and freedoms and it was after the rise of religious parties to govern in the aftermath of the elections of 2011. During the period of the Troika Government, Tunisian Women continued to fight in the political platforms to maintain their personal status and rights both in legislative and pragmatic era, especially they insisted on political participation, by demanding that women be leaders in political parties and at the top of electoral lists, and assuming high positions and responsibilities in the state.

As a result of these moves, the National Constituent Assembly adopted in May 2011 the rule of equalization and rotation in the electoral lists and the inclusion of a chapter in the section on the rights and freedoms that recognizes: "Citizens are equal in rights and duties and are equal before the law without discrimination. The state guarantees citizens and their individual and collective rights and freedoms, and provides them with a decent livelihood."

In the first elections after 2011 developments, Tunisian women participated in political life and in the electoral phase. The percentage of registered female voters was 46%. The percentage of women candidates on the lists was 48 percent. However, despite the fact that the number of female candidates was almost identical, women only occupied 27% of the parliamentary seats, i.e. within the quarter. (Al Naseri, 2015)

Although this success forced the presence of women in political life, they had a modest presence during the formation of successive governments in Tunisia after the elections. The 48-member Troika government had only three ministerial posts for women, the same for Mehdi Gomaa's government, which in turn held only three posts for women.

Comparing to the neighbors, Algeria, for example, was ranked 28th in the world in the representation of women in parliament in 2012 (May) to reach 31.6%, the first in the Arab states is in this regard, and its neighbor Tunisia, the spring of the events of the Arab Spring, was second in this field in the Arab world, which is ranked 39th in the world after the elections in October 2011 with a representation rate of about 26.7% (IPU, 2013; Sinha, 2011) in (Kehad & Rema, 2016).

Table 1. Women in Tunisian parliamentary elections

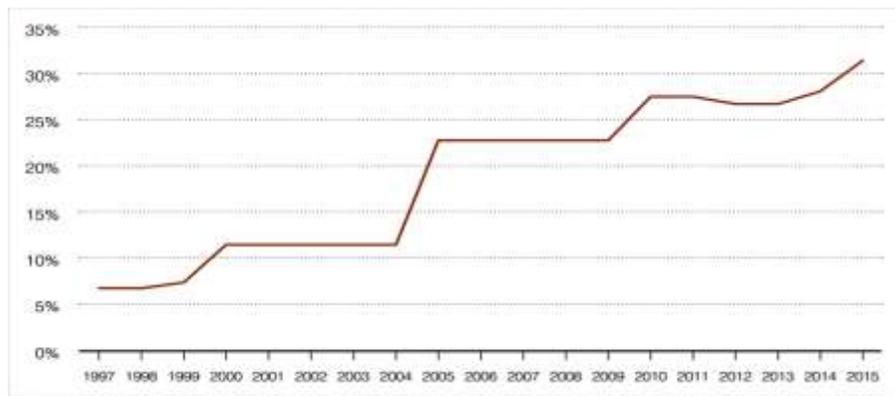
Election	Comment	Women in parliament	
		Number	Share
1994	Government party wins 88% of seats in parliament	11	7%
1999	Government party wins 81% of seats in parliament	21	12%
2004	Government party wins 80% of seats in parliament	43	23%
2009	Government party wins 75% of seats in parliament	59	28%
2011	National Constituent Assembly elections after the Arab Uprisings	58	27%
2014	Largest party wins 40% of seats in parliament	68	31%

Source; (Ohman, 2016: 16)

Tunisian Women contributed significantly to the drafting of Tunisia's new constitution and the principle of gender equality in the Constitution, which confirms that "the State is committed to protecting women's acquired rights, supporting their gains and works for their development." The State is also bound to guarantee equal opportunities for men and women to assume various responsibilities and in all spheres". Nevertheless, the presence of Tunisian women in the political arena remained below the required level and specifically in the lists of candidates for the upcoming parliamentary elections.

In the 2014 elections, more than 50 per cent of women registered in the elections, with only 47 per cent of them running, only 12 of them running on electoral lists, and only one Tunisian woman involved competition with 26 men candidates in the race to the Carthage Palace. (Al Naseri, 2015)

Figure 1. Percentage of seats in the Tunisian Parliament held by women



Source: Developed by author based on data from Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Women in parliaments", 1 February 2015. <<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/arc/world010215.htm>>.

The parties, especially the modernists, have been demanding more support for women's gains and their presence in the political arena. They were called on to implement all the promises they had made, including the adoption of the principle of fairness and equal sharing in composition of the electoral lists, taking into consideration that it can pave the way for enhancing women's chances and reaching decision-making positions.

However, observing the electoral process and the analysis of electoral lists announced during the 2014 elections (as obvious in Table 1 and Figure 1) highlights the exclusion of Tunisian women from the political competition, whether in parties that have long advocated the principle of equality or rejecting the presence of women.

Woman Rights activist Maryam Bel Amin holds that the political participation of women in Tunisia is still contrary to expectations. Despite important legislative improvements such as the January 2014 Constitution and the Electoral Code, which strengthen the place of women in official posts, the number of women in Parliament is not representative of the people and the new government. (Al Naseri, 2015)

5. Islamists and Women's Social Participation in Tunisia

On the Islamist side, Al-Nahdha Party, in its founding years, criticized the status of women, especially in the West. At its early inception times, the Party saw it necessary for women to adhere to the boundaries of their home as a wife and refused their presence alongside men in the society. In this way Al-Nahdha was very strict in rejecting Habib Bourguiba's policies, regarding the issues like imposition coeducational schools, Polygamy and Adultery. Al-Nahdha Party saw the education of women is not desirable, limiting its necessity to raising illiteracy. The party in its early approaches was influenced by the Egyptian and Pakistani literature in the 1970s, but it later was more influenced by Sudanese experience in social Islam Making it more flexible and tolerant in the issues regarding Women and their rights. (Salamah, 2016: 147)

Nevertheless in recent years the party has made significant changes in its positions. according to Alqannuchi, Al_Nahdha Party believes that the participation of Muslim women in health, educational and social institutions has a profound impact on the spread of the Islamic call, which is more important than the economic necessity and its advantages in favor of the call to Islam exceeds the possible risks, of course taking into account the general moralities. (Alqannuchi pp. 76-77, in Salamah, 2016: 148)

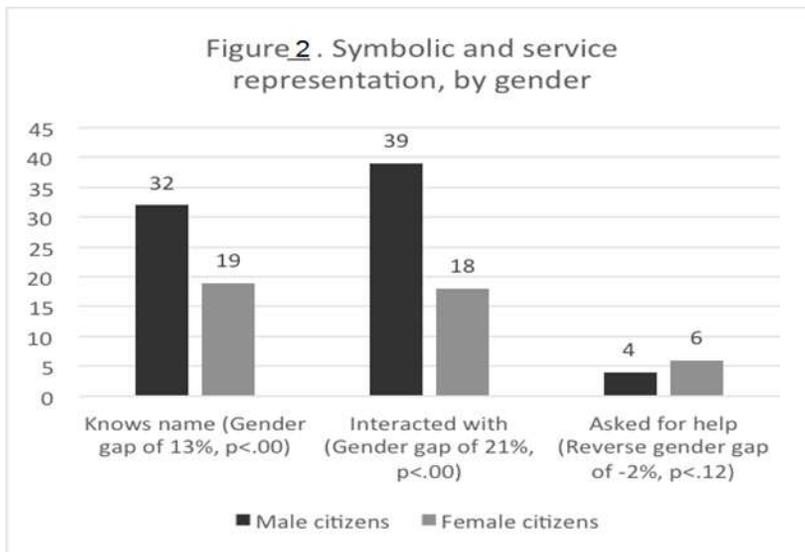
Alqannuchi rejecting criticisms explains that: "Competitors tried to consider Ennahdha as an enemy of women's rights, but the election proved that Tunisian women do not accept this condemnation. We convinced women that we are the main guarantor of Tunisian women's rights and this is clear in the Constituent Assembly because 42 of the 49 women are from Ennahdha. Some do not wear the hijab, and none wear the niqab...We challenged the secular parties to present a woman with a hijab and they could not, so we convinced people that our party is more tolerant than other parties because we represent all kinds of choices." (SAIS Group Meeting, 24 January 2012, in O'roke, 2012)

Conventional wisdom assumes that Islamist successes negatively affect women, whether in terms of family laws, service provision, or other governance outcomes. Yet literature on Islamist parties and governance suggests the picture is more nuanced; some studies suggest that Islamist parties benefit women by improving governance outcomes like healthcare (Blaydes 2014). Others suggest that the chief obstacle to gender inequality in government services may not be

Islamism, but clientelism, which is deeply embedded in the Arab world's authoritarian and transitional political contexts and advantages men due to their structural and numerical dominance in positions of power. (Sung 2003; Bjarnegard 2013) Because Islamist parties are more internally democratic than some non-Islamist parties, serve marginalized communities, and institutionalize constituency service to avoid corruption and patronage, electing Islamists may diminish males' advantages accessing clientelistic networks and improve women's access to services. This would be particularly true if Islamist parties use women to mobilize female supporters in sex segregated, female environments such as homes, mosques, and social events, which increases women's access to clientelistic networks, while diminishing access for men, thus, creating greater gender equality. In (Benstead -2017-When Islamist Parties (and Women) Govern)

Scholars such as Leila Ahmed, Fatima Mernissi, Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, among many others, have long rejected that Islam is incompatible with women's rights. Rather, they find that deep-seated patriarchal traditions have usurped the ethos of gender equality present within Islamic thought. (Hursh, 2017: 281)

Figure 2 shows that, especially when it comes to symbolic representation, female citizens in Tunisia are significantly less likely to enjoy interactions and connections with parliamentarians than are men. In (Benstead -2017-When Islamist Parties (and Women) Govern)



Source: 2012 Tunisian Post-Election Survey (TPES). In: (Benstead, 2017)

Yet, consistent with other research, our analysis shows that electing women has a positive impact on women's symbolic and service representation. Controlling for relevant factors, women are more likely to know a deputy's name and have asked for a service in districts where a higher proportion of female parliamentarians are elected. The results for Islamist parties are more striking. Islamist parties in general and Islamist female deputies in particular

increase the probability women know a deputy's name and have asked for services (that is, symbolic and service representation). Islamist female deputies also increase the likelihood that women will interact with parliamentarians, while decreasing men's ability to do so. (Benstead, 2017)

A crucial aspect of Tunisia's transition from revolution to an emergent, if fragile, democracy was the success of women's rights activists in shaping this process. These activists worked tirelessly to ensure that women's rights remained strong both through their participation in civil society and by safeguarding these rights in Tunisia's legal system. (Hursh, 2017: 281)

6. Conclusion

The history of Tunisia over the past half century has witnessed a special experience in the Arab world regarding women's participation in Social and political affairs and developments. Gender equality policy became among the bases of the legitimacy of Tunisia Since its independence in 1956. Yet, over the next years gradually, the issue emerged as the symbol of the secular government's opposition to the leftist and Islamist currents. During these developments, Tunisian women's movement proved to be one of the major socio-political trends in the Tunisian public arena. In addition to social and political role during the dictatorship period, since the 2011 uprising, they have also been active in the competitions of the secular and Islamists' rivalry in establishing the new system.

However, findings of the article based on the relevant statistics indicate that the 2011 developments in Tunisia did not have a significant impact on women's influence and participation in the social and political arena in Tunisia. It seems, there is a real problem in women's access to leadership positions, resulting from a variety of historical political, economic, and social, problems and deficiencies among them and one of the most important factors, is the state power and its decisive role in Tunisian socio-political decision making process.

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