

The Tunisian Exception

*Profile of a unique
political laboratory*

**The Monographs
of ResetDOC**

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with European administrations to legalise their rights to residence, and in general the difficult situations experienced by migrants and their children, ISIS presents a mythologized counter-image of easy migration to the Land of Islam. It presents this as a regeneration of life but also as the product of collective and civilising history. In one of its videos, the organisation calls for a reversal of the migratory flow, addressing those who embark on the paths of illegal immigration, the refugees suffering from border wars and children of former migrants relegated to stigmatized neighborhoods.¹² The “false” immigration movement to Europe is contrasted with the “real” movement of the West towards “Sham”. This ascension from one material experience to another is presented as a way to repair the material psychological suffering of migrants to Europe. Welcoming the returning orphans of the Islamic State at the Palace in Carthage tends to present them as suffering people, the victims of multiple discriminations and with the right to be cared for by the state. It means making them people with whom we wish to identify more. This act of humanisation towards suffering people could be a moment for new policy directions that take into account the deeply-rooted reasons – poverty, education, immobility – that lead young people to a path of extremism instead of seeking their rightful place in society.

¹² A number of Jihad migrants that used clandestine immigration methods to reach Europe have become famous, in particular Anis Amri, the author of a jihadist attack in Berlin and who was killed in Milan on December 23rd 2016. His decision to take action was a sort of defensive reaction to an experienced exclusion and humiliation after crossing the Mediterranean. (Wael Garnaoui, “On the Way to the Christmas Market: The Case of Anis Amri”, Workshop Is Terrorist Learning Different? Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle, 21-22 November 2019).

Chapter VI

Women’s political participation in Tunisia

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Conventional wisdom suggests that the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) suffers from profound gender inequality. In some respects, this view is not unfounded. The Global Gender Gap Index, an indicator of gender equality in access to the economy, education, health, and politics, shows that women are less equal in the MENA than in any other region (World Economic Forum, 2017). Yet a simplistic view of gender relations misses the significant variation in women’s status, both across, as well as within countries. Tunisia is one of the most gender-equal societies in the MENA. From its founding, Tunisia’s leaders promoted gender equality in the form of state feminism. This resulted over time in profound social and political changes that bolstered Tunisia’s transition to democracy.

Today, the Tunisian constitution is unique worldwide in that it commits the government to ensure gender parity in all elected assemblies. As of 2020, women hold 25 percent of seats in the country’s unicameral parliament (IPU, 2020) and nearly half of the seats in municipal councils. At the same time, significant gender inequities exist. Women in rural and less privileged areas of the country and those who are less affluent have fewer opportunities than those in coastal areas. Women with more economic resources are also rewarded with expanded opportunities compared to women from less privileged backgrounds. Moreover, women continue to be marginalized from the

executive and party leadership relative to the legislative branch, which is covered by parity provisions in the constitution. This essay summarizes several challenges that women face to achieve equality in political life in Tunisia today and places them against the backdrop of the many successes since independence.

Bourguiba and Ben Ali

Tunisia is known as the birthplace of the Arab uprisings, but it is unique for its history of promoting gender equality as well. In 1956, Prime Minister and later President Habib Bourguiba (p. 1956-1987) decreed a Personal Status Code (PSC) that extended many rights to women, outlawed polygamy and the guardian system, and gave women an equal right to divorce. Bourguiba regarded advancing gender equality as a power consolidation strategy; he sought to reduce the power of already-weak tribes and reinforce his support among urban elites. He also believed that economic and social reforms would legitimize his regime (Charrad, 2001). This made Tunisia the most liberally-progressive state in the Arab world.

Ben Ali (p. 1987-2011) continued a program of state feminism, instituting affirmative action in the bureaucracy and state-run enterprises and supporting government-controlled women's rights organizations. In 1999, the dominant Constitutional Rally for Democracy (RCD) instituted a voluntary party quota. In the decades that followed, women's descriptive representation grew slowly. In 2007, to mark his 20th year in power, Ben Ali used his State of the Nation address to call on political parties to announce an increase in the RCD quota to 30 percent in the 2009 elections (Goulding, 2009). Later, on the eve of the Arab uprisings in 2011, 28 percent of the Chamber of Deputies members and 27 percent of local councilors were women. This proportion was the highest in

the Arab region at the time and exceeds women's descriptive representation in the US Congress, which currently stands at 23 percent.

The Arab Uprisings

The Arab uprisings initially raised fears that women's rights would be eroded in Tunisia, particularly if the Islamist Ennahda party came to power. Ennahda won a plurality of votes in the Constituent Assembly elections in 2011 but moved to assure the public and civil society that it would not seek to reverse the PSC. Ennahda also promoted women's rights in some important and often overlooked ways. In 2011, 41 percent of the deputies elected from Ennahda to the Constituent Assembly were women, a higher proportion than any other party. In the 2014 parliamentary elections, this figure remained about the same at 39 percent.

Ennahda also utilized large numbers of women in party offices to mobilize voters. The party had 240 Women's Committees to campaign in all of Tunisia's 24 wilayat, with 320 women acting as heads of these committees (Khalil, 2014). It also expanded women's role in its internal leadership, appointing two women to Ennahda's 15-member political Bureau within a few years of the uprisings (Ben Amar, 2016). Thus, rather than bringing a rollback in women's status, the revolution allowed activists to deepen the principle of parity which had been initiated during the authoritarian era. In 2014, parliament passed one of the world's most gender progressive constitutions. The constitution called for an end to gender-based violence, which remains a substantial problem in the country, despite laws criminalizing gender-based violence, including rape and harassment. It further guarantees gender parity in all elected legislatures (Article 46, Tunisian Constitution,

2014), based on the “law of parity” in the 2011 electoral law. Initial attempts to achieve gender parity in the national legislature in 2011 failed because, while the quota’s horizontal zipper system required all party lists to alternate male and female candidates, it did not require women to head half of all lists. As a result, women won 27 percent of seats in 2011. These gains were reinforced further. Activists worked to strengthen Tunisia’s quota by negotiating a vertical zipper system that requires lists to alternate male and female candidates as well as requiring that half of all lists be headed by women. As of 2020, women hold 25 percent of seats in the country’s unicameral parliament (IPU, 2020) and nearly half of the seats in municipal councils are held by women.

Challenges Remain

While Tunisia’s progress toward gender equality sets it apart in the Arab world and is progressive even by global standards, there is still a pressing need for continued reform. Tunisia ranks 123 of 142 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum, 2017), where a higher number is less equal. Concerns are pronounced in rural areas; in these parts of the country, women are more likely to drop out of high school, be burdened with farm and domestic work, and remain financially dependent on men. Despite being illegal, discrimination in the private employment sector still exists, as does harassment and domestic violence. Moreover, not all women benefit equally from the advances that have tended to accrue to the middle and upper class (and, in some cases, more secular) women. According to the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD), women, in general, are not well-represented in the media, and veiled women are virtually absent (Mfarej, 2011, 7; as cited in Khalil, 2014). The

presence of more educated, urban women in leadership also belies a much greater exclusion of poorer, rural women, who often have few opportunities in the public or private sectors. Women face other challenges in reducing gender gaps in political life. Women’s descriptive representation in legislative assemblies, whether at the national, regional, or local levels, while impressive, is the high watermark of their political representation. Women are much more marginalized from the executive and political party leadership than from the legislative branch. Of the 107 parties legalized in 2011, only three were led by women: Salma Ammar headed the party of Social Center; Emna Menif co-directed Afek Tounes; and Emna Mansour Karoui ran the Movement of Democratic Edification and Reform (Mfarej 2011, 14, as cited by Khalil, 2014).

Gender gaps in political participation also exist. Tunisian women participate politically less than men, but the size of this gap is smaller than in Egypt and Libya. For instance, 34 percent of Tunisian men and women reported having voted in at least one legislative election before the revolution. Following the revolution, 75 percent of men but only 65 percent of women reported having voted in the 2011 Constituent Assembly elections. Moreover, when surveyed during the 2011 Constituent Assembly elections, women reported deciding which party to vote for later in the campaign than men did. Half of the Tunisian male voters decided at the beginning of the election campaigns while 38 percent of women did so, and 27 percent of women decided on Election Day compared to 17 percent of men (Benstead and Lust, 2015).

Engagement in political parties is low for both genders in Tunisia, but fewer women belong to parties than men. In Tunisia, 4 percent of men are members of political parties, compared to 2 percent of women. Sixteen percent of Tunisian men describe themselves as uninterested in parties, compared to 23 percent of women (Benstead and Lust, 2015). Women’s

lower political engagement means that they have less influence on party policies, while parties have fewer incentives to serve women through legislation, club goods and services.

Finally, bias against women as leaders also exists. According to the sixth wave (2010-2014) of the World Values Survey, 24 percent of Tunisians disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that “Men make better political leaders”. At the same time, bias levels were slightly lower in Algeria (25%), Libya (25%), Morocco (30%) and Lebanon (41%). While stereotypes create hurdles at the polls for female candidates and women are less likely to be engaged in formal political life, the opening brought by the Arab uprisings empower women to make further reforms to these and other challenges facing the nation. But, this will only happen if women continue to expand their presence and power through all structures of decision-making and if the government and civil society take measures to reduce economic and religious inequality among women and men from different backgrounds.

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