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Women's Organizations in Tunisia:
Transforming Feminist Discourse in a Transitioning State

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Introduction

On October 23rd, Tunisians voted in their first democratic election in the state's history with much at stake after overthrowing the 23 year reigning dictator. As the era of Ben-Ali politics and social policy unraveled, Tunisians began to develop their own sophisticated political discourse as they collaborated to decide the direction of their state. Within this discourse, there emerged a sharp divide within the population, masked by Ben-Ali's suppressive politics, over the issue of religion. Islamists, organized under Al-Nahda and other independent parties, stood in opposition to secularists who aimed to maintain a separation between religion and state.

Tunisians speculated over the impact that an Islamist party could make upon their country, particularly in drafting a constitution. The discourse always turned to the first amendment of the former constitution, which states, "Tunisia is free, independent and sovereign state. Its religion is Islam..."¹ Tunisians, even before casting their votes, made it clear that Islam is an intrinsic part of their self-identity and removing it from the constitution would not be negotiable. As Asma Noura pointed out, even the secularists within the country are not yet ready to concede on the idea of a fully privatized religion.² With this point firmly made, political scientists and citizens alike soon ascertained that the area over which Al-Nahda would try to assert its power is women's rights.

Habib Bourgiba, the first president of Tunisia, became the so-called champion of women's rights shortly after independence with his progressive personal status code. The 1956

¹ Tunisian Constitution 1956

² Noura, Asma. Lecture. 4 Oct 2011.

code eliminated polygamy and gave Tunisian women access to the public sphere. However, this essentially was a temporary solution that failed to address the more socially and culturally engrained issue of gender inequality. Bourgiba's code established "state feminism" as a function of the state to promote a positive image of the regime domestically and abroad. At the time and continuing under the Ben-Ali dictatorship, opportunities for an autonomous feminist movement and women's organizations were restricted.

Following the revolution of January 2011, Tunisia began to experience the benefits and initial aftermath of the falling out of the longstanding phenomenon of state feminism. Women were finally able to organize themselves in the public sphere to defend rights collectively and grassroots movements formed. The timing was appropriate given the discourse going on within the country surrounding Al-Nahda, Islamists, and women's rights. We now know that Al-Nahda has attained power by winning 89 seats in the constituent assembly. Many women who I've met have expressed their fear that in this position, Al-Nahda will begin to slowly alter the 1956 personal status code in a negative way. Al-Nahda, especially during their campaign and immediately following the election, insisted that they would not touch the personal status code, however in their words, they would improve upon it. What Al-Nahda specifically means by "improvement" has yet to be seen.

In the face of this perceived threat, matched with the birth of autonomous women's organizations, one begins to question what the current status of Tunisian women is after the dissolution of Bourgiba's state feminism. Over the past three weeks, a significant debate over women's rights has emerged. Suad Abderahhim, a leader within the Nahda party, made

comments to Monte Carlo Radio stating that single mothers were a disgrace to Tunisia. She also stated, in Tunisia “there is no room for full and absolute freedom.”³ Her inflammatory comments and Islamist view on women’s status in Tunisian society shocked and outraged many. Secularist women organized on social networking sites like Facebook and arranged to protest outside of the pharmacy where Abderahhim works in Tunis. This event indicates, first, that women are capable and eager to mobilize on behalf of their rights and status. It also illustrates clearly the dichotomy between women in the Tunisian state. The views they hold are not universal and are not defined by a unified sense of Tunisian identity.

Women in the role of activists and organizations’ members and leaders have been playing a dynamic role in the post-revolutionary state. Following the revolution, women began to take advantage of their democratic freedoms to assemble and freely express their ideas and interests by founding grassroots women’s associations that operated in the economic, political, and social fields. As the state itself is transitioning, women’s associations are learning new approaches to relate to the state as well as to serve the needs of their peers.

“Masculine” and State Feminism: Haddad and Bourguiba

The analysis of the current status of women in Tunisia is rooted in a contextualized view of the historical processes that shaped the current policies and culture. An examination of the historical processes that led to the legal advancement of Tunisian women necessarily begins with the recognition of the contribution to political and social thought made by Tahar Haddad. As

³ <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2011/11/09/ennahda-spokeswoman-souad-abderrahim-single-mothers-are-a-disgrace-to-tunisia/>

Boutheina Gribaa points out, “we cannot speak of Bourguiba and the Personal Status Code without first speaking about Tahar Haddad.”⁴ Haddad was a scholar educated at Zitouna University in Tunis, one of the most prestigious theological universities in the Maghreb. In 1930, he authored a controversial text, *Our Women in Shari’a and in Society*, which advocated for the expansion of women’s rights. According to Mounira Charrad in her study of the post-colonial effect on women’s rights, Haddad:

Called for changes in women’s status and improvements in women’s education as a way of making women better citizens, better wives, and better mothers. The point was not primarily to emancipate women for their own sake, but to make them better able to contribute to the stability of families and better able to educate future generations of Tunisians.⁵

Saloua Cherif, professor of women’s studies at Carthage University, points out that Haddad drew upon Islamic principles to develop an argument for the emancipation of women.⁶ At the time, in the midst of the colonial period, Haddad’s work and perspective on the issue of gender equality produced considerable debate and opened the discourse of women’s roles within Tunisian society.⁷ The work, however, was deemed by the faculty of Zitouna to be incongruent with Islamic principles. Charrad comments that “Al-Haddad’s book met with a storm of indignation. The Zaytuna...condemned it immediately as an outrageous attack against Islam.”⁸

⁴ Interview. 1 Dec 2011.

⁵ 216

⁶ Lecture. 10 Oct 2011.

⁷ Labadi, Lila. 9.

⁸ 217

Consequently, the book was banned and its author, Haddad, was labeled a heretic and marginalized within society.⁹

The reaction to Haddad's work represents the social and political context of the time in which it was published. Charrad notes that such a reaction was indicative of the "bitter and effective opposition to change."¹⁰ The impact of Haddad's work would be realized in future work on the advancement of women within Tunisian society and in the position it occupies in Tunisia's historical narrative. Haddad's generation of a feminist discourse was incredibly significant, especially given the context as well as the influence it would later have on granting women's rights in the post-colonial era. As Lila Labadi notes in "The Nature of Transnational Alliances in Women's Associations in the Maghreb: The Case of AFTURD and AFTD in Tunisia," Haddad "became a symbol for those who questioned the paternalistic political discourse and took it upon themselves to construct a new discourse."¹¹

Following the suppression of feminist discourse, embodied in the official denouncement of Haddad, formal discussions of women's rights would not be revisited until the post-colonial period. Even during the early 1950s, in which Tunisia was struggling for independence from the French, the status of women was a low priority on the national agenda. Charrad notes in *States and Women's Rights*, "as long as the country was under colonial domination, the nationalist leadership defined the safeguard of cultural distinctiveness as a top priority."¹² In reality, this rhetoric meant that women were held within traditional gender roles as constructed by a

⁹ Labadi. 9

¹⁰ Charrad. 217

¹¹ 10

¹² 218

patriarchal society. Habib Bourguiba, who would become the first president of the Tunisian Republic, maintained prior to independence a firmly conservative position on women's issues.

Charrad cites statements made by Bourguiba, in which he argued during colonial times:

Is it in our interest to hasten the disappearance of our ways of life and customs...that constitute our identity? Given the special circumstances in which we live, my answer is a categorical: No...Tunisians must safeguard their traditions, which are the sign of their distinctiveness, and therefore the last defense of a national identity in danger.¹³

This attitude, upheld by Bourguiba, is representative of an anti-colonial rhetoric in which Tunisian nationals felt the need to safeguard their traditions and distinctive identity against the threat of foreign influence.

By contrast, the post-colonial state was opened up to alternative discourses about the woman and the family. Bourguiba, most ironically, would lead the initiative to change women's status drastically and set an example of progressive women's rights for the Arab world. As Bourguiba assumed power as independent Tunisia's first president he began the task of nation-building which gave precedence to family law in the national agenda. The rhetoric shifted from a preservation of tradition to a nationalistic approach of creating a politically and economically strong state. Bourguiba viewed women as the center of the family and as able contributors to state-building efforts. In August of 1956, five months after independence and months before the

¹³ Charrad 218.

Tunisian Constitution was written, Bourguiba promulgated a Personal Status Code that remains one of the most progressive in the Arab world. The family law adopted instituted a minimum age for marriage, made divorce a legal procedure, and abolished polygamy. According to Charrad, the Personal Status Code left “few, if any, aspects of family life untouched” and consequently made a great impact on the advancement of women within society.¹⁴

The adoption of the code was directly followed by a communiqué from the religious community affirming the Islamic nature of the family law.¹⁵ In “Feminist Organizing in Tunisia,” Sarah Gilman confirms that “Tunisia’s Personal Status Code, [is] a document that broke with Islamic law without completely abandoning it, thereby radically reforming Muslim family law while stopping short of completely secularizing it.”¹⁶ Tunisian identity is intrinsically tied to its Islamic character and references religion as a point of legitimating policies as in the case of the Personal Status Code.

Bourguiba is personally credited with the advanced status of women and the successful implementation of the family code. Gilman points out that Bourguiba “declared himself ‘father’ of independent Tunisia as well as the ‘father’ of Tunisian women’s liberation.”¹⁷ It is important to note that he was responsible not only for granting women legal rights but also for enforcing policies that attempted to promote gender equality within society. The notable examples of these efforts to alter society’s view on women’s issues were education and family planning. In the mid-1960s, Bourguiba instated family planning programs that provide contraceptives, abortions,

¹⁴ 219

¹⁵ Charrad. 221

¹⁶ 97

¹⁷ Gilman. 97

and counseling services at no cost to the woman.¹⁸ These programs were used as a means to reinforce the woman's ability to manage the family in a way that permitted her to be active outside of the home. According to Boutheina Gribaa of CAWTAR, Bourguiba's intention was to "make the personal status code concrete in society" and adds that educational curriculum and family planning were "two ways to make women able to participate fully at the social and family level."¹⁹ These programs enabled women to fully benefit from the changes within the family law and to be more effectively engaged in the public sphere.

Bourguiba's promulgation of the Personal Status Code set the precedent for addressing issues of women's rights. For decades, the family law has become a standard by which society has measured its advancement. This is largely due to the significant role that the code played in developing and modernizing the Tunisian state after independence. However, despite the advances that resulted from the code, one must further assess and deconstruct the political intentions and impact on society.

It is first important to consider the reality that the reforms made to family law in the 1950s were unprompted by any form of contestation or feminist movement within society. Associations and individual women participated in the nationalist movement during the 1950s; however their agenda was not in pursuit of increased gender equality.²⁰ Gilman concurs that "although women's organizations may have existed prior to independence, Tunisian women played no role in the promulgation of the family law legislation that ultimately propelled them,

¹⁸ Cherif, Saloua. Lecture. 10 Oct 2011.

¹⁹ Interview

²⁰ Interview.6 Dec 2011.

rather ironically, into the spotlight as symbols of the ‘emancipated’ Arab woman.”²¹ The lack of demand for the observance of women’s role in the Tunisian state calls into questions the motivations and political interests of the nation’s leadership. Under Bourguiba’s regime, the only women’s association to exist was the state-sponsored Union Nationale de la Femme Tunisienne, or the National Union of Tunisian Women (UNFT). UNFT appealed to female activists who were involved with the independence struggle and were already invested in the cause of developing a modern Tunisian state.²² The organization, Raja Bousseadra clarifies, did not defend any rights or promote gender equality, but merely represented a state that was benevolent towards women’s rights.²³ While women had rights to be engaged in the public sphere, Bourguiba’s promotion of gender equality fell short of the right to assemble, with the exception of UNFT. Therefore, not only did women not participate in the creation of the family law, but their role was conversely suppressed after 1956 by their inability to freely and publicly express their interests and to form autonomous associations.

Bourguiba’s shifting discourse on the role of women during the struggle for independence and in the post-colonial period reflects the political interests inherent in the reformation of family law. Women were central to Bourguiba’s agendas pre- and post-independence. Under French domination, women were essential to maintaining traditional gender roles as a means of preserving Tunisian and Islamic identity. Following the acquisition of state sovereignty in March of 1956, the state’s leader viewed women as playing an intrinsic

²¹ Gilman 97

²² Gilman 98

²³ Lecture. 4 Nov 2011

role to the development of the independent state. The granting of additional women's rights in what Gilman refers to as Bourguiba's "paternal mission," is a top-down approach to reform in which the state is responsible for instituting policy changes that impact civil society.²⁴ Such an approach did not take into consideration the social, cultural, and religious context of the newly independent state. Consequently, the application of the Personal Status code established a disparity in which the law observed the value of women, while society itself had yet to challenge deeply embedded issues of gender inequality. In "The Women's Movement in the Maghreb: With Emphasis on Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria," Rabea Niciri argues that in the Tunisian post-colonial case, "state intervention in the process of modernizing family and social structures placed women's status in the context of 'contradictory relations between a developmental, modernist ideology and a sexist identity ideology.'²⁵ The resultant ideology falls under the category of state feminism. Niciri expands upon the definition of state feminism as it existed in the 1950s, stating, "This 'state feminism' was above all a 'masculine feminism,' rooted in a reformist political movement that raised the issue of women's liberation as a necessary condition to an Arab renaissance. It is a 'masculine feminism' because it does not aim at transforming women's traditional roles, but at making them more efficient within a patriarchal family structure."²⁶

The impact of Bourguiba's legislation simultaneously set a standard for women's rights and propelled women into the role of key players in the nation-building project while also leaving in place socially engrained concepts that prohibit the full inclusion of women as equal

²⁴ 97

²⁵ 23

²⁶ Niciri. 23.

contributors to civil society. UNFT embodies Bourguiba's stance on women in Tunisian civil society and the impact of his state feminist policies. Sarah Gilman emphasizes that the creation of UNFT was effective in "securing centralized state control of formal women's organizing in independent Tunisia. Bourguiba's monolithic state feminism reigned supreme until the 1970s, when he briefly loosened his hold on civic activity." Autonomous women's associations would not be founded, however, until state reforms were implemented by Bourguiba's predecessor in the late 1980s.

The Ben-Ali State: Institutionalization and Repression

Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia's "president for life," was removed from power by his then-prime minister and successor, Zine El Abidine Ben-Ali, in a "medical coup d'état" on November 7, 1987. Ben-Ali instated an authoritarian regime based largely upon corporatist-bureaucratic agreements. Ben-Ali maintained and built upon his predecessor's commitment to women's rights set in the Personal Status Code. Niciri points out that as a result of Ben-Ali's respect for Bourguiba's reformist policies and modernization project established "the state's commitment to the liberation of women became a permanent characteristic of Tunisia."²⁷ Ben-Ali's primary contribution to the status of women was his institutionalizing efforts.

Ben-Ali's administration was responsible for the establishment of a government ministry that specifically addressed issues related to the Tunisian woman and the family. The Ministry of Women and Family Affairs was founded in 1993. The function of the state cabinet was to develop state policy on women's issues and family matters and to coordinate efforts being

²⁷ Niciri 23

undertaken by women's organizations that were emerging in the state after Ben-Ali's assumption of power.²⁸ The ministry itself, both in name and function, points to the patriarchal nature of the state, which holds women as synonymous with the family. The Tunisian woman ultimately cannot be fully separated from her role as wife and mother.

Furthermore, in keeping with Bourguiba's precedent of state feminism, nearly all of these organizations were affiliated in some way with Ben-Ali's party, the Constitutional Democratic Rally, known by its French acronym as RCD.²⁹ These associations lacked autonomy and operated within the party and corporatist-bureaucratic system. Consequently, their relevancy in terms of ability to affect change on the status of women was minimal. The primary function of the organizations, therefore, was to be a tool of public relations to portray an image of the Tunisian state and civil society as being amiable towards women's interests. One Tunisian woman confided to NPR news that Ben-Ali only "pretended to support women's rights to please the West."³⁰ In reality, the RCD affiliation of these organizations paired with their inaction indicates that Ben-Ali's regime had no interest in expanding the rights of women. Women's rights were protected through the maintenance of the Personal Status Code largely due to the standard and expectation set by Bourguiba for the observance of women as valued members of society.

Two autonomous associations were founded under Ben-Ali. First, the Association des Femmes pour la Recherche sur le Développement (AFTURD) was founded in 1989 as a research

²⁸ <http://www.tunisiancenterusa.com/institutions.html>

²⁹ Interview Boutheina Gribaa

³⁰ <http://www.npr.org/2011/01/27/133248219/in-tunisia-women-play-equal-role-in-revolution>

institute. AFTURD aims to investigate ways in which the Tunisian woman can be integrated into the development process and can participate to their full potential as activists and citizens.³¹ According to their mission statement, AFTURD “members are animated by a desire to promote critical and constructive thinking on the status of women in Tunisia for an effective participation in the development in all its dimensions: cultural, social, economic and political.”³² The organization’s membership attracted elite professional from various fields, including journalists, teachers, engineers, medical doctors, and lawyers.³³

In addition to AFTURD, the Association de la Femmes Democratres (AFTD) was also formalized as an official organization in 1989. The organization, typically referred to as Femmes Democratres, was originally a network of women who informally organized under Bourguiba as Club d’Etudes de la Condition des Femmes, or Club Tahar Haddad. The network, according to Gilman, originated primarily to question the status of women and acted by openly “challenging the refusal of men from the Tunisian left ranks to recognize the validity of women’s oppression.”³⁴ AFTD established itself as the sole Tunisian organization to self-identify as a feminist organization. The organization operated across a spectrum of women’s issues from empowerment to upholding a respect for human rights and dignity.³⁵ The organization’s most effective program was the creation of the Centre de Ecoute which assists victims of violence. Gilman emphasizes that “it is difficult to deny that Femmes Democratres was the first woman’s group in Tunisia to assist victims of violence and difficult to discount the importance of the role

³¹ <http://www.afturd.org/a-propos-de-afturd/>

³² Ibid.

³³ Labadi P 16

³⁴ Gilman 28

³⁵ P 115

the autonomous feminist movement played in initially spreading awareness of the issue and in inspiring... other organizations to do the same.”³⁶

Though Ben-Ali did allow for the expansion of the autonomous women’s movement, it did not come without limitations or restrictions. Only two significant women’s associations were formed during the 23 years of the authoritarian’s regime. The ability of AFTD and AFTURD to carry out their programs and to effectively work towards their objectives of women’s empowerment and strengthening their roles as viable political activists was repressed. First, the Ben-Ali regime was characterized by its strict censorship that counteracted and suppressed any voices that contradicted the regime or party. Women had to operate within this system of limited freedom of expression for fear of losing their right to assemble. Additionally, the autonomous organization had to work within a political sphere that was heavily occupied by state-sponsored women’s associations and party-affiliated associations. Gilman argues that “reflecting the nature of the larger political system, women’s organizing in Tunisia also happens in an atmosphere of concentrated power, with a small group of women’s organizations, those groups with close state ties, controlling available resources and political influence.”³⁷ Consequently, organizations like AFTD become reliant upon foreign investors to enable their existence which conversely undermines their autonomous status.³⁸ This dependence on foreign funding ultimately has consequences for the organization’s ability to operate. Boutheina Gribaa

³⁶ 115

³⁷ 102-103

³⁸ Gilman P 100

argues that AFTD and AFTURD had “no raw materials to work efficiently” towards their objectives.³⁹

Ben-Ali upheld the groundwork for women’s rights found within Bourguiba’s Personal Status Code throughout his reign as president. Over the course of 23 years, however, Ben-Ali made little contribution to further advancing the political, social, and economic status of women. NPR reports that on the matter of women’s rights “no one gives an ounce of credit to Ben Ali.”⁴⁰ Women in Ben-Ali’s Tunisia enjoyed their rights that were observed in family law, but their freedom was far from full or equal.

Women Revolutionaries: Demanding “Freedom, Dignity, Equality”

Tunisia experienced a revolution in January 2011 that would initiate a wave of uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa, in which citizens long oppressed by authoritarian regimes claimed their political rights and dignity. For Tunisia, the narrative of how the revolutionary events proceeded is traced back to the tragic death of Mohamed Bouazizi.⁴¹ Bouazizi, a young, poor fruit vendor in the southern town of Sidi Bouzzid, was accosted by a police officer on December 17, 2010 and had his goods confiscated, his only means of financial support.⁴² Bouazizi subsequently committed suicide by setting himself on fire in front of the municipal government building in the city center. Though Bouazizi is credited with starting the January revolution, his story merely reflects the underlying root cause of the social unrest:

³⁹ Interview

⁴⁰ <http://www.npr.org/2011/01/27/133248219/in-tunisia-women-play-equal-role-in-revolution>

⁴¹ http://articles.cnn.com/2011-01-16/world/tunisia.fruit.seller.bouazizi_1_tunisian-history-street-vendor-police-officer?s=PM:WORLD

⁴² <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/01/201111684242518839.html>

desperation and frustration with the poor socio-economic situation affecting citizens across the country, especially the youth.

The story of Bouazizi's self-immolation was propelled by social media and mobilized people into organized protest. The ideological message of the Tunisian people was simple: "we want dignity, freedom, and equality." The protests and uprising themselves were successful because of their unpredictability and their numbers. Unrest was not uncommon under Tunisian authoritarianism; however Ben-Ali's regime was effectively a police state that successfully quelled any insurrection against the regime. In the case of the January revolution, however, the vast mobilization of citizens across the nation made it impossible for Ben-Ali to assert his control over the populace any longer.

Women were equal and active participants within the revolution. Nadya Khalife, a Human Rights Watch researcher on the Middle East and North Africa, states "It was understood that women and men both felt ownership of these political transitions."⁴³ Though the media devoted little attention to the role of women in the revolution, they were present in equal numbers as their male counterparts in demonstrations.⁴⁴ Additionally, Raja Boussedra stresses the significant impact of women's contributions at the grass roots level in assisting neighbors through food shortage conditions, preparing food for demonstrators, and organizing neighborhood watches.⁴⁵ Women, particularly young women, were also key players in the use of social media as a tool to strengthen the revolution. Social networking sites like Facebook and

⁴³ <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/11/30/arab-spring-women-some-achievements-many-disappointments>

⁴⁴ Lecture. Raja Boussedra 4 Nov 2011

⁴⁵ Boussedra, Raja. Lecture. 4 Nov 2011.

Twitter were means of spreading information and mobilizing support. Women were active as bloggers as well, including the highly influential “A Tunisian Girl” site authored by Lina Ben Mhenni’s. Ben Mhenni used her blog to expose the corruption of the Ben-Ali regime and to demonstrate the repression that was ongoing throughout the month of protests.⁴⁶

The revolutionary actions demonstrated a variety of indicators on the state of Tunisian civil society. First, the demonstrations and mobilization via social media represented the breakdown of fear and censorship that characterized the Ben-Ali regime. Fear was eliminated from the attitudes of the Tunisian people and replaced by determination to carry out their demands for economic opportunity and respect for human dignity. Additionally, in terms of gender relations, the January revolution illustrated that men and women had equal stakes in the transformation of their political and social reality and were equally committed to bringing about that change. The revolution, above all, was the first instance in which the citizens of the Tunisian state reversed the precedence of “top-down” approaches to reform by standing up and taking ownership of their political realities and taking on the role as actors in a democratic “bottom-up” power structure.

Under pressure from mounting unrest and unable to control the mass of people contesting state authority, Ben-Ali fled the country on January 14, 2011. Ben-Ali’s departure both marked the end of the era of authoritarianism and the start of the construction of a democratic system of governance. The transitional government established itself on January 17 to oversee the

⁴⁶ <http://www.tap.info.tn/en/en/culture/5907-tunisian-blogger-lina-ben-mhenni-2011-nobel-peace-prize-nominee.html>

transitional phase. The revolution's character was purely ideological with abstract demands for the universal values of freedom and dignity of the Tunisian person. The most tangible demand offered was a call for employment for the youth. After the ousting of Ben-Ali, Tunisia was tasked with translating the revolutionary ideology into a democratic political system that serves the needs of civil society. What the revolutionaries, however, could not account for at the time were the debates and discourses that would be brought forth in the state-building process over identity and religion. Women's personal status lies directly at the center of these discourses and the development of a strategically placed feminist discourse would be critical to maintaining the gains made under Bourguiba.

Transition to Democracy and the Grassroots Feminist Movement

The transitional government formed on January 17 imparted measures to accompany the Tunisian people through the post-revolutionary creation of a democratic system. The government created three consultative bodies: a reform commission, a committee to investigate police violence during revolutionary demonstrations, and a fact-finding mission on corruption in the Ben-Ali regime.⁴⁷ The reform commission, which began as an association of eighteen experts, played a significant role in aiding the transition. Tunisians in the Kasbah movement, however, demanded representation within the reform commission and consequently added 170 members and renamed the commission the "Higher Authority for the Implementation of the Objectives of the Revolution."⁴⁸ This body would form a sub-committee, the Higher

⁴⁷ Redissi, Hamadi. Lecture. 19 Sept 2011.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Commission on the Electoral Process, known by its French acronym, ISIE. ISIE effectively organized and administrated the electoral law, the organization and registration of parties, and successful democratic elections both inside and outside of Tunisia within ten months.

The issue of women's status was once again introduced into the rhetoric of state-building. Women after the revolution began to fear that much was at stake for their status given the change of power. Indeed, women had long enjoyed the paternal protection of state feminism and the revolution introduced the idea that the underlying status of women within civil society was fragile.⁴⁹ The transitional government took measures to reassure women that their status as citizens of the state was valued. The transitional government did make a historic move by becoming the first Arab state to remove their reservations against the Convention to Eliminate Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). As Brian Whitaker notes in a publication in *The Guardian*, "This may sound a rather obscure and technical matter but it's actually a very important step. It reverses a long-standing abuse of human rights treaties – especially in the Middle East – where repressive regimes sign up to these treaties for purposes of international respectability but then excuse themselves from some or all of their obligations."⁵⁰ This removal of reservations against CEDAW, however, can only be seen as a positive indicator.

Taking place alongside the governmental functions of the democratic transition was the growth of the non-governmental sector, specifically women's associations. The post-revolutionary state witnessed an influx of grassroots women's organizations that reintroduced a

⁴⁹ Boussedra, Raja. Lecture. 4 Nov 2011.

⁵⁰ Whitaker, Bryan. "Tunisia is Leading the Way on Women's Rights in the Middle East." *The Guardian*. 10 Sept 2011. Web <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/sep/10/tunisia-un-human-rights-women>>

feminist discourse to assert the place of women as important contributors to the revolution and in response to rising concerns over women's status in the post-revolutionary society. The primary function of a majority of these organizations was, in the words of Boutheina Gribaa of the Center of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR), "to accompany women in this process" and to enable women to be present in the new political and social context.⁵¹ The agendas of the newly formed women's associations focused primarily over the eleven months on issues of women's roles as citizens in a democratic society and participating to their fullest potential.

One organization that has had a significant impact on women's ability to impact the transitional and electoral process in post-revolutionary Tunisia is Association Egalite et Parité (The Association of Equality and Parity). The organization under the leadership of long-time activist on women's rights, Faiza Skandrani, was mobilized two months after the revolution. The organization grew out of a Facebook page, which gathered supporters of the values that are now the namesake of the association.⁵² Members of the Facebook group engaged in discussions about equal opportunities for men and women in the government and on February 21 called for a meeting. On March 18 the members who responded to the call for a meeting agreed to found an association to lobby for equality and parity in the Tunisian democracy. The association does not strictly classify themselves as a feminist or women's association as their membership is composed of both men and women alike.⁵³ According to the Egalite et Parité's president, their

⁵¹ Interview. 1 Dec 2011.

⁵² Interview. 1 Dec 2011.

⁵³ Ibid.

objective first and foremost was to “begin with the battle of parity.” The association was instrumental in lobbying ISIE to enact a gender parity law in the electoral code.

ISIE did observe a gender parity law in the electoral code. The law is a formal recognition of women’s rights to participate fully and equally in the democratic transition. The law required that party lists alternate between male and female candidates and was designed to ensure that women are represented in the constituent assembly. However, the problem with the law was that in actuality, given the proportional representation by remainder electoral system, this would not guarantee equal representation of women in the assembly. Parties overwhelmingly placed men at the top of their party lists, making it difficult for women to be elected. In fact, only Pole Democratic Moderniste had a woman as the first candidate on 50% of their district party lists.⁵⁴ Al-Nahda and Ettakatol, two majority winning parties, only had four and three women as the head of a district list, respectively.⁵⁵

Another function of the grassroots women’s associations that grew out of the revolution was to encourage women’s participation in the election as voters, candidates, and election observers. The Ligue de Electrices Tunisiennes (The League of Tunisian Women Voters) was one such association that assembled and established a mission that addresses each of these areas of women’s political participation. The organization began as a gathering of women professionals in the Tunis area to assess their ability to make a contribution to the democratic

⁵⁴ Ligue de Electrices Tunisiennes PowerPoint. Najla Abbas

⁵⁵ Ibid.

transition.⁵⁶ In May of 2011, the organization formally established itself with the objective of raising awareness among young people and women of the importance of democratic process and their role within it.⁵⁷ In the words of vice president Houda Zaibi, one of the primary messages of the organization was to “push women to get out of their houses and vote.”⁵⁸ The organization undertook outreach programs to first help register women to vote, to access information about parties, and finally to vote.⁵⁹

Conclusion

Both during and after the revolution, Tunisian women joined together whether through social networks, individual action, and formal associations to address the question “what can we do for Tunisia?”⁶⁰ Post-revolutionary organizations have been engaged in their political context and in asserting their presence as significant political voices. Boutheina Gribaa argues that these newly founded women’s organizations are acting more efficiently than their predecessors in AFTD and AFTURD because of their enthusiasm, use of social media and ability to work in all fields of women’s interests – economic, political, social, and religious.⁶¹ Giorgia DePaolo of CAWTAR concurs because these associations are operating in a new political context and lack a history and background they are able to “just act.”⁶² She adds that AFTD and AFTURD, who

⁵⁶ Zaibi, Houda. Interview. 6 Dec 2011.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Interview. 1 Dec 2011.

⁶² Interview. 1 Dec 2011.

continue to operate post-revolution, have thus far not been successful in transforming to their new context.⁶³

Feminism and feminist associations, like the Tunisian state, are in a transitional period. Women as leaders and activists are learning to adapt their strategies to the developing democracy and its political climate. In the immediate context gains like the removal of reservations from CEDAW and the electoral parity law are achievements for the status of women. The parity law in this case was the result of demands from the feminist movement. However, it is yet again reflective of “top-down” approaches of the state “handing down” women’s rights that consistently fail to achieve full gender equality. Proof of this is found in the election results. The constituent assembly consequently consists of 27% women, totaling 49 of 217 seats.⁶⁴ Interestingly, 42 of these female representatives are members of Al-Nahda.⁶⁵ Tunisians are watching closely and with concern at the way that Al-Nahda, the majority party who are self-ascribed moderate Islamists, will act. Interestingly, the position over which they stand to exert the most authority in terms of reforms is women’s issues. With women already in a tenuous position within the assembly and within society, a regression from the 1956 Code of Personal Status would be detrimental. Al-Nahda has been exercising a double-talk within their public discourses, stating at once that the CSP will be maintained and also that they intend to “improve” upon it. What is meant exactly by “improvement” has yet to be seen, but will be a measure by which Al-Nahda will be tested in their leadership position. Women are taking this time to

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ <http://www.tunisia-live.net/tunisi-as-election-results-in-infographic/>

⁶⁵ Gribaa, Boutheina. Interview. 1 Dec 2011.

restrategize their feminist approaches, to take advantage of their democratic atmosphere of post-revolutionary Tunisia, and to alter the way that they relate to the state.

There is much at stake in the transition and at the moment it is still too soon to accurately evaluate the full impact that these associations will make in Tunisia. In terms of this particular project, it would have been valuable to have further interviews or to additionally attend events hosted by the organizations I investigated. Because of the extent of the work being carried out at the moment, however, women activists had limited availability. On a personal level, however, it was a wonderful opportunity to observe the actions of women activists and their associations at protests in Manouba and Constituent Assembly Sit-ins that have been taking place. The most important thing is that women are present and fully invested in participating equally in the democratic process and are committed to defending their status. The true yardstick by which the revolution will historically be measured is in its impact on women's rights and gender equality.

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