



THE JASMINE REVOLUTION AND ITS IMPACT ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN TUNISIA

Saifuzzamanⁱ

Research scholar, Department of West Asian Studies and
North African Studies, AMU, Aligarh, India

Abstract:

On Saturday December 17, 2016, Tunisia celebrated the six year anniversary of the Jasmine Revolution which was sparked off by the self-immolation of Bouazizi that started in Sidi Bouzid, a small town in the center of the country. The revolution in Tunisia led to a regional wave of uprisings spreading rapidly to Egypt, Algeria, Libya, Yemen, Jordan and Syria. For over half a century, Tunisia lived under a dictatorial regime with a single powerful political party. The other parties, allowed in-between, had no power, being restricted in their movements and actions and only served to make the world believe that Tunisia was indeed democratic, as daily reported by Ben Ali's media. Since the independence of their country from colonial rule in 1956 Tunisia sustained major progress in relation to women's access to health and education services and the labor market; maternal mortality and fertility rates were halved, girls' enrolment in secondary school more than doubled and women were increasingly in paid employment. Moreover, despite the limited democratic space, the number of women in government grew significantly and women's organizations began to play a role in shaping social and political transformation. This paper argues that women's empowerment in Tunisia is largely rooted in the particular features of the elite post-independence bargain, early political choices regarding state-society relations and the associated policies in the areas of education, health and labor, which increased women's access to resources. It also highlights the interaction between changes in law, policies promoting gender equality and women's capacity to mobilize. Women's increasing individual and collective agency in both the public and private spheres explains the existence of opportunities to consolidate women's empowerment in contemporary Tunisia. Cumulative change in different spheres has been mutually

ⁱ Correspondence: email saifuzzaman.amu@gmail.com

reinforcing, and may also have created resilience regarding potential reversals associated with the political changes brought about by the 'Arab Spring'. Tunisia's progress in women's empowerment provides valuable lessons on how women can obtain access to new resources and the way in which politics and power, and the struggles, dynamics and contestation that these generate can be used to challenge gender and social power relations. It demonstrates the importance of locating political paths of change – such as processes of women's empowerment – in the context of wider political settlements.

Keywords: Jasmine Revolution, dictatorial regime, democracy, education, women empowerment

Introduction

The Republic of Tunisia (in Arabic *al jumhuriyyah at-Tunisiyyah*) is the smallest country in the Maghreb region of North Africa, with more than 3,000 years of history and rich cultural heritage, a country with deep rooted traditions of openness, peace and progress. It today covers a territory of 163,610 square kilometers. Its population in 2014 was estimated to be 11 million; most of them are Muslim (98 per cent), with small Christian and Jewish minorities.ⁱ (Azouz, 2016) In 2011 Tunisian National Institute of Statistics Report, the male to female ratio Tunisia is almost 50/50. Tunisia gained independence from French rule in 20 March, 1956. Since that time of Republic (25 July 1957) Tunisia has actively promoted equality for their citizens, regardless of gender faith. (Lack, 2011)ⁱⁱ From independent to 2011, Tunisia was governed by a secular party, "Constitutional Democratic Rally" (RCD) under Habib Bourguiba and Zine-el-Abidine ben Ali. Habib Bourguiba established a strict one-party state, dominated the country for 31 years, repressing Islamic fundamentalism and establishing rights for women unmatched by any other Arab nation. Ben Ali took over as president after a bloodless coup on November 7, 1987, against the country's founder president, Habib Bourguiba after having he had Bourguiba declared senile by his own doctors. Since then, Ben Ali ruled one of the best organized and surprising prosperous police states in the world. Having once headed the country's intelligence, he presided over one of the most efficient intelligence systems, where citizens were closely watched and any criticism of the regime suppressed. (Farasat, 2013)ⁱⁱⁱ Ben Ali was forced out of power, on January 14, 2011, the day he had fled to the Saudi Arabia, his 23 year rule toppled by 29 days of a popular uprising, a real revolution for a change. (Eltahawy, 2012)^{iv}

The popular unrest that started in Tunisia on December 18, 2010, as a popular uprising triggered by the self-immolation of street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, a protesting against the Country's corrupt and autocratic regime. What is eventually led

to be a chain of revolutionary uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), toppling dictatorial governments in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Yemen. Monarchies in Morocco, Jordan and Bahrain enacted reforms to varying degrees in attempts to stave off wider scale protests. Tragically, Syria descended into a vicious civil war. Popularly known as the "Arab spring" and sometimes as the "Arab spring and winter", "Arab Awakening or Arab Uprisings" and quite a few Arabs also calling it the "Tunisian intifada" and we also call this the revolution of Mohamed Bouazizi. (Achcar, 2014)^v Like their counterparts in Libya, Egypt, Yemen and elsewhere, Tunisian women were present everywhere in that which was later known as the Jasmine Revolution. The term originated from American journalist Andy Carvin and by the western media it called the jasmine Revolution or jasmine spring, after Tunisia's national flower and in keeping with the geopolitical terminology of "color revolution". (Fishman, 2015)^{vi}

In the Arab world, women have a long antiquity of fighting along with their male counterparts against colonial and autocrat rulers. Hence, since the beginning of Arabo spring, they are playing a significant role in bringing down the entrenched tyrants of the region. The Arab women were an integral part of the protest movements in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and others countries. They participated in the demonstrations demanding social and political change, calling for justice and fighting for human and social rights.

Status of Women in Tunisia before the Jasmine Revolution

The origins of Tunisia's innovative role in women's issues reach back to the beginning of the twentieth century. Tahar Haddad (1899-1936), a liberal scholar of the Zitouna Great Mosque, wrote his book entitled "*Our Women in the Shari'a and Society*" (1930), dealing with the importance of women in a modern society and advocated for freeing women from their traditional bonds. According to him, Islam is a great source of development. In the name of Islam, he accused all forms of abuses against women and also promoted formal education for women. He also support for social change and respect of religious identity. Despite the ban of Haddad's book, he holds a significant position in Tunisian history as the inspiration for a new religious, social and political discourse that would influence development in those early decades. (Grami, 2008)^{vii}

Tunisian women are pioneers in terms of women's rights, which led in the year of 1936 the first women organization was form. After the post-war agitation for independent in 1950, the New-Destour party created its first official women's section. After country's independent from colonial legacy, the women benefited almost immediately. When Habib Bourguiba (1956-87) assumes office of country's first president, he tries to first time to advancement and modernization of the country. He believed that for the great nation building processes both men and women would be required to play an

important role in its construction. Article 6 of the Constitution, which was promulgated on June 1, 1959, provides that *"all citizens have equal rights and duties and are equal before the law"*, thereby paving the way for subsequent laws that progressively established the fundamental rights of women in all fields: the right to vote (on March 14, 1957) and stand for office, the right to work, the right to free and compulsory education, the right to social protection, the right to make their own choices in life, the right to enter into contracts and so forth. (Charrad, 2001)^{viii}

On August 13, 1956 the Code of Personal Status (CPS) was adopted in Tunisia, which had given women significant rights through the abolition of repudiation and polygamy, the right to judicial divorce, equality in terms of education and work outside the home. Women had also been encouraged to get rid of the veil, which they did. As a result, sefsaris gradually disappeared from the Tunisian landscape when women of all age groups adopted the Western way of dressing and chose to go unveiled. Remarkably, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, women of all age groups got rid of their veils, as seen in a New York Herald Tribune article in 1965 titled, *"From Veil to Bikini in Tunisia."* (Durkop, 2012)^{ix}

Former American President Obama stated in his speech of May 19, 2011 said, *"History shows that countries are more prosperous and more peaceful when women are empowered"*, he also adding that the Arab world must *"insist that universal rights apply to women as well as men . . . by standing up for the right of women to have their voices heard, and to run for office."* That had been Habib Bourguiba's philosophy too, for he believed there could be no development without the emancipation of women. He established laws and asked official *muftis* (religious men who often interpreted the Qur'an) to justify them according to tradition and Islamic Law. To institute the changes he had in mind, Bourguiba used the Qur'an and promote such view. For example, to justify the end of polygamy, Bourguiba said the Qur'an stated a man could have up to four wives provided he treated them equally. As it is impossible to treat all four wives equally, a man should therefore only have one wife. (Charfi, 2012)^x

Bourguiba concluded: *"In fact, the Qur'an wished to guarantee monogamy. But keeping in mind the weakness of Arabs, their state of mind and the customs of the time, it temporarily authorized polygamy, subordinating it to a practically unattainable condition"*. (Bourguiba, 1978)^{xi}

Tunisia was considered as a role model for other Arab countries, because of its social revolution. The state formation was accompanied by the rise of a feminist consciousness and the majority of women implemented the new vision of society. The Tunisian government has sought to develop a new phase of Islamic interpretation (Ijtihad) distinct from the Islamic law in other Muslim countries. This new thinking has included reforms to create gender equality in the areas of marriage, divorce, child

custody, and women's social autonomy. Despite the anger of religious leaders, religious courts had been abolished. The government unified the judicial system by integrating all courts into a single national system. In 1956 CPS abolished, the right of a father to force his daughter to marry against her will and marriage only can take place with the consent of both parties. In the case of divorce proceedings, can be only granted by a judge who has exhausted all efforts to reconcile the two parties. In 1958, the statute on adoption was granted. The adopted child would become a full member of the family and benefit from all the rights as the right to take the name of the adopting parent. In 1962, women were allowed to access for birth control and in 1965 Tunisia became the first largely Muslim country abortion was legalized (Tunisian women gained this right 8 years before the American women). By 1973, Tunisian women were granted the right to abort in the first three months of pregnancy. In this way, Tunisia has succeeded in stabilizing its population growth, another pioneering development in the Arab world. (Mark A. Tessler, Janet Rogers and Daniel Schneider, 1976)^{xii}

In the 1970s had emerged the autonomous feminist movement that consolidated into two organizations, the Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development (AFTURD) and the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD). Penalties for rape also have become increasingly severe. A March 1985 law allows the death penalty in cases of rape. In 1989, the Tunisian feminist movement increasingly dissociated itself from the State endorsed feminism of the National Union of Tunisian Women (UNFT) and later, the Ministry of Women, children and Family Affairs. Two major laws, adopted in 1997 and 1998, substantially strengthened the rights of women as persons, namely the law concerning the patronymic name of natural or abandoned children and the law organizing the regime of the joint estate of husband and wife. The Code of private international law November 27, 1998, provides that when one of the spouses is a native of a country where polygamy is permitted, officers in charge of civil status and notaries will conclude marriage only on presentation of an official document certifying that the spouse is not bound by any other marital bond. A Tunisian woman married to a non-Tunisian may legally transmit her nationality to her child, provided the father consent. Working in tough conditions under Ben Ali's dictatorial regime, being constantly spied upon, and having no access to the media, prevented feminists from organizing meetings in public places and from creating branches in other regions. Although they were sometimes physically harassed and victims of slander by state media, they continued to work towards raising women's awareness of their rights, be they in the home or in the workplace. Prior to the Arab Spring that suddenly changed the landscape of the country; the autonomous feminist movement had been working on several issues. (Perkins, 1986)^{xiii}

Tunisian Uprising and Women's Roles

The events in Tunisia are of far greater significance for west Asia, and the Arab world in particular, than the immediate fact of a people's revolt forcing a head of the state out of power. For one, it is a rare example of people trying to force out a regime, rather than yet another coup effecting regime change. Second, this is, patently, a secular uprising, not something instigated by Islamism. Third, not without reason, the events in Tunisia a cause for worry for many of the authoritarian regimes in west Asia. (The Tunisia intifada, 2011) Tunisia's revolution was fueled by tens thousands of young people, most in their teens and early 20s, who ultimately overthrew their leader. In the information age, shaped by Facebook, twitter, you tube, mobile phones, Tunisia's youth were exposed to the openness of the west, Bouazizi death was the turning point of them. Asma Nairi a 22 year law student said about Ben Ali ruled *"we were not living. We were like his puppets."* And she also said *"if we spoke the truth, we would be punished."* Another student of computer engineer Karim Ali said *"our government made us into a lost generation."* A poor 26 year neighborhood in Tunis named Mehaned view *"For us, we call this the revolution of Mohamed Bouazizi, not the Jasmine Revolution."* (Raghvan, 2011)^{xiv}

In Tunisia, large number of women injured and killed shows their active involvement in the revolutions. They were the protesters who defied tear gas, volunteered as nurses, and wrote blogs. They have been part of every opposition movement that has shaken the Arab world, even on the front lines. The women stood for solidarity with Mannoubia, mother of Bouazizi and his sister Samia. Old women including young girls came out to the streets in headscarves wearing black judge's robes, marched along with men down the streets demanding that the former president Ben Ali would leave and in this way the demonstrations were badly intensified. They also joined men at night when the secret police violence acts started taking place and sometimes even, they performed the night duties. (www.fpif.org)^{xv} However, during the first protests that Ben Ali and until the fall of their regimes, political and social claims of male and female protesters alike have failed to include women and equal rights. Even in Tunisia, calls and needs of women have not been considered a priority. Slogans and catchwords were more unifying and uniting: *"all unified against the regime..."* It is only after reaching these goals that women engaged in campaigns calling for an end to their exclusion and demanding an equal role for them in these transitory periods. This was especially true in Tunisia where women's movements are stronger and are part of a longer running tradition. Women's campaigns were also present in Yemen and Bahrain on a smaller scale. In Tunisia, women were very active and present in demonstrations, unions, associations and political parties. Sihem bin Sedrine and Naziha Rejiba, both journalist and human rights activist and also co-founder of international online magazine Kalima, also prepared the ground for the revolution by

teaching Tunisians to fight for democracy, independence, self-confidence and tolerance. (Mursaleen, 2011-12)^{xvi}

Status of Tunisian Women after the Revolution

The Jasmine Revolution put end the dictatorship regime in January 2011, but women were very much afraid of their rights and position that could be undermined and the Arab spring could mark the end of an era for women's freedom which they were enjoying for last decade. After the end of events, all exiled political dissidents of the former regime as well as Islamists could return to Tunisia, and those in jail were freed. Meanwhile, dozens of political parties and organizations formed. In the National Constituent Assembly(NCA) election in Tunisia, held in October 2011,more than 14,000 local and international observers are monitoring the polls which elected a 217 member Assembly and the elected representative choose an interim government, write a new constitution and prepare for fresh parliamentary and presidential polls. In the election, about five thousand women contested and the Islamist party Ennahda acquired the largest number of seats, bragged 42 female candidates of a total of 49 women elected, 23 per cent of the total seats (a higher share of women than the USA Congress). Suad Abdel-Rahim, an Ennahda candidate, who said during her election campaigned *"I am not a feminist in the traditional western sense but I believe in equal right for women grounded in an Arab and Muslim identity and discourse"*.(Aneja, 2011).^{xvii}

Ennahda Executive Council member Mounia Brahim emphasizes the mixed courses of Islamist women in politics by saying, *"Look at us. We're doctors, teachers, wives, and mothers – sometimes our husbands agree with our politics, sometimes they don't. But we're here and we're active"* (Marks 2011).^{xviii}

Saida Rached member of the Association Tunisienne des Femmes Democrates (ATFD) also said the results had been anticipated: *"It is a great achievement but it is not enough... If it were not for the Principle of Equal Share, women would not have gained this percentage. Not all parties obeyed the principle"* (Ajmi, 2011)^{xix} It is hoped though that these women will defend women's rights. The provisional transitional government forms which led by Beji Caid Essebsi, out of 23 members only two ministers were women.Eventually, only one remained, Dr. Lilia Labidi, at the head of the Ministry of Women's Affairs. Women also played a minimal role in party leadership. Among the 51 party leaders, there is only one woman, Maya Jribi, a biologist and leader of the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP). At a press conference given on April 26, 2011, Prime Minister Beji Caid Essebsi made the reassuring statement that there would be parity in the elections lists:

"... equality between man and woman, and woman and man (in alternation), is a key gain and banishes the so far patent discriminations in a fallacious official discourse on equality between the sexes."

(Raouf, 2011)^{xx}

Tunisia now has a new government, one that has been elected democratically even though many are not pleased with the results. Despite its promises of respecting women's rights and the CPS, the strong religious impact of the new government is a source of serious concern among the secular population. Violence committed by students and members of the public unto female and male professors has also been a source of concern. As a matter of fact, Manouba University of Arts and Letters has been closed for almost one month now because of Salafists bearded men and women in burkas occupying the grounds, vowing not to leave until burkas, separate classes for boys and girls and so on are imposed in the university.

On August 13, 2012, the constitutional assembly released the first draft of the constitution, several articles of which came under public scrutiny. Article 28, proposed by the Commission of Rights and Freedoms, was particularly contentious:

"The state shall guarantee the protection of the rights of women and shall support the gains thereof as true partners to men in the building of the nation and as having a role complementary thereto within the family. The state shall guarantee the provision of equal opportunities between men and women in the bearing of various responsibilities."

(Draft Constitution of the Republic of Tunisia, 2012)^{xxi}

In January 2014, Tunisian national assembly voted to enshrine gender equality *"without discrimination"* in draft constitution, a key step towards safeguarding the most liberal laws in the Arab world on women's rights. *"All male and female citizens have the same rights and duties. They are equal before the law without discrimination,"* states article 20 of the text, which was approved out of the 159 lawmakers out of the 169 who voted. Ennahda, the ruling Islamist party, sparked a storm of controversy in 2012 when it tried to introduce the concept of gender *"complementary"* rather than equality into the post-uprising constitution. In the new formula was agreed upon during recent negotiations between Ennahda and the secular opposition aimed at thrashing out a series of compromises and ending the political crisis triggered by the assassination of an opposition politician named Chokri Belaid by suspected Islamist militants on February 6, 2013. (The Hindu 2014)^{xxii}

Conclusion

Tunisia has led the way in the Arab Spring. It is hoped that it will continue to do so by inspiring the other Arab countries in issues of gender equality and democracy. Should Tunisia manage to inspire other Arab countries to relook their gender issues and their approach to the democratization process, the term "Arab Spring" will maintain its positive connotation.

In the socio-political turmoil in Tunisia where hardline Islamists threaten the secular population, moderate Muslims, women and artists on grounds that women should be veiled and stay at home, and art is haram and against the precepts of Islam, many observers have suggested Tunisia follow the example of Turkey. This is because Turkey, though officially secular with a clear separation between religion and politics, still has an Islamist government. Tunisian historian and Islamic scholar Mohamed Talbi stated that Muslims lived without Shari'a for two centuries. The Medina Constitution, he explains, had been negotiated by the Prophet in the first year of Hejira "*between all the social components of the State-City, polytheists, Jews and Muslims. Nowhere, in its 47 articles, does the question of a state religion arise. It was a secular Constitution*".

Though Tunisian women have enjoyed the most enlightened CPS in the Arab World for over 50 years, it is feared their rights might be curtailed by the religious groups currently dominating the country's political landscape. Tunisia's achievement is historic. Indeed, few Tunisian watchers could have imagined the change wrought in the country. Just as Tunisians led the way forward in the Arab Spring, they hope to do the same for women's rights and female political participation in the region. True and sustainable democracy cannot be built on a foundation of stark inequality between men and women.

Regardless as to whether Tunisia has any form government; it should only govern for the people and has to be controlled by the people. When the Tunisian people started the movement, they did not know they "could" topple the dictator. Their journey for freedom and dignity is also a quest for equality and justice. In the months to come, they will have to be vigilant so as to ensure that the values of the revolution are respected. By working towards the protection and enhancement of individual liberties, Tunisians are able to safeguard the country from the emergence of another dictatorship.

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