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From Visible to Invisible: Tunisia's Gendered Democracy Paradox

Zoe Petkanas

PhD Candidate, University of Cambridge

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Publisher: Centre of Governance and Human Rights, University of Cambridge

Contact: cghr@polis.cam.ac.uk, (+44) (0)1223 767 257

Abstract: *This paper will argue that secular Tunisian women have faced a unique set of challenges to accessing formal political power since 2011, indicating a disconnect between the dominant image of Tunisia and the reality of the post-revolutionary state and society. It will examine secular women's invisibility in formal politics, in sharp contrast to their visibility both historically and during the uprisings, by deconstructing the nuanced ways in which access to full citizenship rights is differentiated by gender and other identity markers. In doing so, this paper will situate Tunisian secular women in the contemporary political scene, revealing the ways in which power has reconsolidated in the vanguard state of the Arab Spring.**

Tunisian women were a powerful presence during the uprisings of 2010 and 2011, setting a precedent for the rest of the region during the Arab Spring. With no gender segregation amongst the protesters, women marched side by side with men, chanting and singing pro-democracy slogans. Images of women wrapped in Tunisian flags, shouting in the faces of security forces, and occupying the streets streamed out of Tunisia, capturing the eyes of the international community. Lina Ben Mhenni, a young Tunisian woman who wrote the blog "A Tunisian Girl", even garnered a Nobel Peace Prize nomination for her fearless coverage of the protests throughout the country.¹

The images of women, many of whom were seemingly secular, participating in the uprisings alongside their male counterparts fit the expectations set by the regimes of Ben Ali and Bourguiba of women as viable and autonomous political actors in Tunisia given their historically high status in comparison to the rest of the region. Tunisia, existing in relative global obscurity before 2011, was known essentially for its commitment to a secular political system and society, along with its long history of support for women's rights. Tunisia's relaxed attitude towards dress and alcohol, along with the visible role of secular women in society, due in large part to the 1956 promulgation of the most secular Code of Personal Status, (known by its French acronym, CSP), that the Arab world had ever seen, helped solidify the perception that Tunisia was a bastion of secularism and the standard bearer for women's rights in the region. The reality, however, was the continual utilization of women's rights as a mechanism of state power and consolidation, under the guise of modernism.² Nonetheless, the political, social, and economic nature of the protests and the interim government's passage of a gender parity law before the elections only served to underscore the prevailing and popular image of a progressive Tunisia.

This image had been reinforced by the almost exclusive focus on secular women and their position vis-à-vis the state in the existing literature on women in Tunisia, especially in relation to Islamist women, who are essentially invisible. This emphasis portrayed them as the only female actors within the incredibly narrow political space afforded Tunisians in an authoritarian state, and thus the women most advantageously positioned to access political power following Ben Ali's fall. However, defying expectations set and reinforced by secular women's roles in history and the uprisings, they were largely invisible in the subsequent interim governments and were similarly underrepresented in the constitutional body elected in the 2011 elections, particularly vis-à-vis Islamist women. This paper seeks to explore this disconnect as it relates to secular women in contemporary Tunisian politics, filling a necessary gap to enhance understanding of the political dynamics of the new Tunisian state.

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¹ Y. Ryan 'Tunisian blogger becomes Nobel Prize nominee', *Al Jazeera*, 21 October 2011.

² See Charrad, Brand, Chekir, Grami, Anderson, Arfaoui, and Labidi.

1. Tunisian Women in the Literature

Given the activist nature of the state under Bourguiba and Ben Ali, the primary discursive frame through which scholars analyze the development of women's rights is a legal one, essentially focusing on the changing relationship between the state and Tunisian women. Throughout these texts, the nature of that relationship is in opposition to Islamism, whereas progress is conflated with the secularization of the legal system, either implicitly or explicitly, as the arguments are located outside of religion.

Mounira Charrad, a prolific Tunisian legal scholar, employs several lenses through which to analyze the relationship between women and the state, one of which is defined by discussion of the state's legal relationship to women within the context of gendered citizenship. Studies in gendered citizenship are concerned with the ways in which women are incorporated into modern politics and the state by virtue of gender.³ In much of her work, Charrad deconstructs the supposedly gender-neutral view of liberal citizenship by articulating how multiple layers of identity differentiate access to rights within the nation-state.⁴ Charrad situates her analysis in the process of state formation, emphasizing how the "relationship between the national state and kin-based tribal groups as it evolved historically chapters the structure of the state and its policies", in this instance, its policies on women's rights.⁵ A comparativist, Charrad uses a transnational analysis of the Maghreb countries to illustrate the degrees to which state formation impacts the development of women's rights in the context of constituting a citizen.⁶

Hafidha Chekir and Amel Grami employ a different approach. They situate their discussions of the legal relationship between the state and women in a framework of 'equality', rather than citizenship. Grami, for example, uses changes in family law as a barometer, as they are "considered as a significant indicator of social change in the Middle East".⁷ Chekir, by contrast, uses family law as a stepping-stone into a conversation about replacing the patriarchal system with an egalitarian one.⁸ Unlike Charrad, who often draws her discussions into the theoretical, both Chekir and Grami analyze the impact of Tunisia's laws on women to explore the practical implications of the legal status of women in Tunisia as compared to men. To that end, they both pair discussions of progress with diagnoses of remaining inequalities, citing the distance between the three points of law, implementation or enforcement, and practice.

In contrast, Laurie Brand's discussion of the law is incidental to her larger point, which is the overall relationship of the state to women in Tunisia, in which there is a legal component. She does include a section where she outlines the legal status of women, describing both gains and remaining inequalities. Instead of emphasizing the law, however, Brand situates a discussion of the legal relationship of women to the state within a larger conversation on state manipulation and utilization of women and women's rights within Tunisia. She focuses on the corporatist relationship of the state to women in Tunisia, including an extensive discussion of the ways in which Tunisia's two presidents, Bourguiba and Ben Ali, had co-opted the supposedly non-state civil society actors for their own political ends. In contrast to Charrad, Grami, and Chekir, Brand focuses

³ D. Kandiyoti, 'Foreword' in S. Joseph (ed.) *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, 2000, p.xiii.

⁴ See Charrad (1998, 2000, 2001, and 2007).

⁵ M. Charrad, 'State and Gender in the Maghrib' in S. Joseph and S. Slymovics (eds.) *Women and power in the Middle East*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2001, p.61.

⁶ See Charrad 2000, 2001, 2001a.

⁷ A. Grami, 'Gender Equality in Tunisia', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 35(3), December 2008, p.360.

⁸ H. Chekir, 'Women, the Law, and the Family in Tunisia', *Gender and Development*, vol. 4(2), Jun. 1996, pp.43-46.

more on the ways that the state's relationship to women fit into the broader political narrative of Tunisian modern political history.⁹ Like Charrad, Brand is also a comparativist and she embeds her discussion of Tunisia in a broader context by including Jordan and Morocco.

Brand is accompanied in this approach by Lisa Anderson and, sometimes, by Charrad, who has already been mentioned above. Another comparativist, Anderson also emphasizes the larger machinations of the Tunisian state as it relates to women and women's rights. In her book, *The State and Social Transformation in Tunisia and Libya 1830-1980*, she delves farther into history than any of her counterparts, comparing the ways in which the Tunisian and Libyan states utilized their institutional resources to engineer social change and facilitate state consolidation. As her frame, Anderson employs the divergent paths of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial state formation to highlight parallels and differences between the two states. Anderson primarily draws on the highly centralized bureaucratization of the Tunisian state from the late-19th century onwards as the primary factor driving state policy post-independence, including the Tunisian state's relationship to women.¹⁰ Like Brand, she situates these issues within a larger political discourse.

Similar to Brand and Anderson, Charrad, when employing this modality, uses a more focused gendered approach to make a broader political point about the Tunisian state. In her work, 'Policy Shifts: State, Islam, and Gender in Tunisia 1930s-1990s', she emphasizes the ways that larger political goals of the Tunisian state were articulated through its fluid and flexible policies directed towards women. For example, she traces Bourguiba's retreats and advances on women's rights back to his changing relationship with Islamists and leftists, tying his policies on women to his various political needs at the time. Focused and incisive, Charrad charts the evolving relationship of women to the state over the broader political context, belying any feminist intent on the part of the Tunisian state.¹¹

There also exists a body of literature on women in Tunisia in which non-state actors are the primary focus. Despite the attempts by both Bourguiba and Ben Ali to monopolize the women's movement, an autonomous feminist discourse began to develop outside the state for the first time in the late-1970s. Discussion of this phenomenon can be broken into two parts: the development of the discourse and the translation of the discourse into political platforms. The two are not always discussed in tandem.

Ilhem Marzouki, Khadija Arfaoui, Lilia Labidi, Sarah Gilman, and Laurie Brand all produce essentially the same narrative about the development of the autonomous women's movement in Tunisia.¹² Starting with the *Club d'Études de la Condition des Femmes* (CECF), the authors detail the beginnings of a discourse on women's rights and feminism in Tunisia outside of the state. Labidi is the only of these authors to describe and analyze the new discourse rather than just acknowledging its existence. She articulates the process through which Tunisian feminists engaged in anthropological methods to explore the socio-specification of an internationalist discourse on human rights to create a new Tunisian feminism.¹³

⁹ L. Brand, *Women, the State, and Political Liberalization: Middle East and North African Experiences*, Columbia University Press, New York City, 1998.

¹⁰ L. Anderson, *The State and Social Transformation in Tunisia and Libya, 1830-1980*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1986.

¹¹ M. Charrad, 'Policy Shifts: State, Islam, and Gender in Tunisia, 1930s-1990s', *Social Politics*, Summer, 1997, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp.284-319.

¹² See Marzouki, Arfaoui, Labidi, Gilman, and Brand.

¹³ L. Labidi, 'The Nature of Transnational Alliances in Women's Associations in the Maghreb: The Case of AFTURD and ATFD', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, vol. 3(1), winter 2007, pp.6-34.

The next phase of this narrative is the institutionalization of the discourse. Each of the authors cite the founding of *Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates* (ATFD) and *Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche et le Développement* (AFTURD), both of which were legalized during the relative openness of Ben Ali's first few years as president. Each author goes on to create a narrative dichotomy of the women's movement between the state, whose interests are articulated directly through the *L'Union Nationale de la Femme Tunisienne* (UNFT) and the non-state actor, represented by ATFD.¹⁴ In other words, ATFD, and by extension secular feminism rooted in internationalism, dominates the narrative on the autonomous women's movement in Tunisia.

The unity of the narrative is interesting and raises some questions. It focuses exclusively on a secular, humanist, and internationalist discourse of feminism enshrined in organizations that acted as a kind of counterweight to the government. This dichotomy, which may well have been reflective of the public conversation, renders impossible the existence of any other feminisms. The prominence of female *Nahdawi* deputies in the post-revolutionary political scene prompts questions concerning the development of Islamic feminism in Tunisia, for which the dominant framework does not allow. This emphasis on secular feminism in Tunisia, and particularly on the institutionalization of that feminism in the form of ATFD, produces a simplified image.

These texts are united in their positioning of, mostly secular, women in contention with the state, by emphasizing either the continuing misogyny of the Tunisian government in a legal framework or the oppositional politics of the autonomous, and secular, women's movement. This lens positions secular women largely in opposition to a dictatorial state, setting them up as potentially viable political actors, should the confines of a repressive regime fall away. The dominant narrative on feminism in Tunisia and the primary discursive frames of the existing literature helped to build the expectation that secular women in Tunisia, of all places, would be uniquely and advantageously positioned to access political power in the new state given a history of relatively open organizing.

2. The Democracy Paradox

The expectations resulting from the historic visibility of secular Tunisian women, the focus of the existing literature, and the presence of secular women during the uprisings contrasted sharply with their exclusion from the interim governments formed in the wake of Ben Ali's exit. Only two of nineteen, and then two of twenty-three, members of the initial interim governments were women, in contrast to the relatively high numbers of women in the government of Ben Ali. Similarly, the Independent Electoral Commission (ISIE), tasked with organizing the election in October, had only two women out of twelve members.¹⁵ Valerie Moghadam, an expert in social change and movements in the Arab world, explained this phenomenon as part of the "democracy paradox" or "the gender-based democracy deficit", in which women are marginalized from the political process in a democratic polity in a post-protest space.¹⁶

Despite this exclusion, however, there were some seemingly positive developments for women. In April 2011, the High Commission for the Realization of Revolutionary Goals, Political Reforms and

¹⁴ ATFD is classified as non-state insofar as it is not affiliated with the state party, but the term "non-state" is used while recognizing that within a political system in which civil society is highly regulated and managed by the state, "non-state" remains a diluted concept.

¹⁵ K. Goulding, 'Tunisia: Arab Spring, Islamist Summer', *openDemocracy*, 25 October 2011, p. 2.

¹⁶ V. Moghadam, 'Engendering Democracy: Women and the Mass Social Protests in the Middle East and North Africa', Nonviolent Initiative for Democracy, 24 March 2011.

Democratic Transition, a coalition of 150 politicians and civil society actors tasked with examining new laws and ensuring that they were in keeping with the demands of the revolution, passed a gender parity law for the elections in October.¹⁷ Electoral law determined that the election followed a closed list proportional system. This meant that parties submitted lists of ranked candidates prior to the election. The proportion of votes that a list received in a district determined how many candidates from the list would sit at the Assembly.¹⁸ The gender parity law required candidate lists to be evenly split between men and women and for them to be listed in a “zippered” fashion, alternating between genders.¹⁹

In addition to the gender parity law, prominent female appointee Lilia Labidi, the interim Minister of Women’s Affairs, was dispatched across the globe to bring attention to the situation of women’s rights in Tunisia. The government launched a huge radio and TV campaign to encourage Tunisian women to vote called “I Must Go There”.²⁰ And in September, Tunisia removed its reservations on the Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), about which many had complained prevented implementation of the international convention.²¹

As the country readied for elections in October, political parties began forming, benefitting from a newly opened arena and wildly diversifying the formerly controlled political sphere in which only nine political parties operated. By October, over 100 official parties had formed, of which only six had been legal under Ben Ali and with six that identified as Islamist.²² Most major parties were secular, with the exception of *Ennahda*, who re-emerged for the first time since Ben Ali’s fierce crackdown in the 1990s.²³ *Ennahda* was the most organized and best financed of all the parties, capitalizing on its name recognition and ability to connect on a grassroots level outside the capital, which proved a perennial problem for secular parties. By October, *Ennahda*’s impending success was almost a foregone conclusion.

Internationally hailed as free and fair, the Tunisian elections were described by a US Embassy official as “outstanding”.²⁴ While only 55% of the total voting population registered to vote, and only 45% of those registered were women, 90% of registered voters turned up at the polls. The extraordinarily high voter turnout spoke to the elections’ ultimate credibility, despite following a summer that had been fraught with conflict over its legitimacy.²⁵ Largely peaceful, with only a few exceptions, it seemed as if Tunisia was to become a model of democratic transition for the rest of the region.

As had been expected, *Ennahda* won eighty-nine of the 217 seats in the Constituent Assembly, far outpacing the next runners-up, left-wing parties *Congrès pour la République* (CPR), which won twenty-nine seats, and *Ettakatol*, which won twenty. *Ennahda*, CPR, and *Ettakatol* went on to form a governing coalition, popularly known as the Troika. *Al-Aarridha al-Chaabia* (Popular Petition) won twenty-six seats. This was surprising as its founder lived in London, and it had formed mere

¹⁷ Goulding (2011a), p.2.

¹⁸ D. Pickard, ‘Challenges to legitimate governance in post-revolution Tunisia’, *The Journal of North African Studies*, vol. 26(4), p.641.

¹⁹ From the ISIE website: www.isie.tn.

²⁰ S. Zouari, ‘Ad Campaign Urges Tunisian Women to Vote’, *Tunisia Live*, 27 September 2011.

²¹ B. Whitaker, ‘Tunisia is leading the way on women’s rights in the Middle East’, *The Guardian*, 10 September 2011.

²² Pickard (2011) p.645.

²³ Popular spelling conventions have changed since the 1990s, *al-Nahdah* is now typically written as *Ennahda*, or *Ennahdha*.

²⁴ Interview, 20 April 2012.

²⁵ Pickard (2011), p.641.

months before the election, remaining relatively unknown,²⁶ but was suspected to be affiliated to the RCD.²⁷ The socialist *Parti Démocrate Progressiste* (PDP) won seventeen seats; the secular, anti-Islamist coalition group *Pole Démocratique Modernist* (PDM) took five; and *Afek Tounes*, a new secular, business-oriented party took four. The remaining seats went to some other small parties.²⁸ These results highlighted the fractured nature of the secular political movements in contrast to *Ennahda's* power as a united bloc.

As for the gender breakdown, there seems to be some confusion over exactly how many women were elected and are currently serving in the Constituent Assembly. By and large, the most common number for both is forty-nine, however, some cite fifty-nine, while others cite sixty. ISIE, for its part, does not list deputies by gender, merely by party. According to the personal research of a Tunisian United Nations Development Programme gender specialist, who both implemented the gender training for UNDP and monitored the election, it appears as if fifty-one women were elected in districts in Tunisia while eight were elected from overseas. Before subsequent reshuffling following appointments to the government, forty women from *Ennahda* were elected, thirty-six from districts inside Tunisia. By contrast, eleven to fifteen secular women were elected in-country, while four were elected abroad, depending on how one defines secular.²⁹ Why were the numbers of secular women so low, both in general and in comparison to *Nahdawi* women? Certainly more than 5-6% of women in Tunisia identify as secular.

3. Gender Parity Law: Origins and Implementation

When the High Commission was considering instituting the gender parity law in the spring of 2011, some thought that it would hamstring *Ennahda*, given the prevailing perception of Islamist attitudes towards women's role in society. However, according to one of the experts consulted on electoral law by the High Commission, it was secular parties that were the most opposed to the gender parity law. *Ennahda*, confident in the depth of its support in general, favoured gender parity from the beginning, along with UGTT, ATFD, and AFTURD. However, CPR and some of the other newer and smaller secular parties were initially against it. They, unlike *Ennahda*, did not feel that they had a base level of female membership from which to draw 50% of their candidates. In the end, however, all entities voted favourably.³⁰

Following the passage of the law, parties went about filling half of the positions on their candidate lists with women. ISIE was tasked with scrutinizing each list and disqualifying those that did not meet the standards of the law, namely that the list was split evenly between genders and that the candidates were alternated by gender. Overall, women did fare moderately well, taking at least forty-nine of the 217 seats, about a quarter in total. While an impressive percentage given the global lack of female political representation, there was substantial disparity between the number of female candidates and the resulting number of female deputies.

The reason for this disparity lies not so much in the implementation of the law as it was written, but rather in the space left for interpretation. The law specifies two conditions for compliance with the gender parity law: the number of women running relative to men and their alternation on the list. While women did indeed comprise 50% of the candidates, they only headed 8% of the lists.

²⁶ Parker, E., 'Aridha Chaabia, 'Popular Petition,' Shocks Tunisian Politics (UPDATED)', *Tunisia Live*, 27 October 2011.

²⁷ Ghribi, A., 'Hechmi Hamdi Elected as Head of Party of Progressive Conservatives', *Tunisia Live*, 6 February 2012.

²⁸ 'Reflections on Women in the Arab Spring: Women's Voices from Around the World', K. Headman and M. Youssef (eds.), Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2012.

²⁹ Personal Interview, 19 April 2012.

³⁰ Personal Interview, 23 April 2012.

Within the legal framework set out by the High Commission, the law does not define parity as requiring half of the lists to be headed by women. Only one party, PDM, interpreted parity as to include the gender of the candidate heading the list, while *Afek Tounes* came close. The structure of voting amplified the systematic male preference. Using a proportional list-based voting system places great emphasis on the order of the candidates on the list. The proportion of votes received per party determines how many candidates, starting from the top of the list, will become deputies. Due to the paucity of female-headed lists, the proportion of men elected far outpaced that of women.

Although all female candidates were affected, secular women were decidedly more so, evidenced by the fact that *Nahdawi* women held almost all of the seats won by female candidates. The origins of this disparity lie in the success of *Ennahda* compared to any individual secular party. Although roughly 60% of the voting population did not vote for *Ennahda*, there was no comparable concentration of support for any one secular party. Most secular parties won no more than one seat per district, meaning that only the head of the list, comprised of mostly men, were actually elected, regardless of the total percentage of female candidates. The heads of *Ennahda*'s lists were similarly male dominated. However, the relative popularity of *Ennahda* in comparison to individual secular parties ensured that more than just the candidate at the head of the list was elected. This resulted in the election of a higher number of female *Nahdawi* deputies in comparison to secular ones, despite similarly narrow definitions of parity.

4. Women and Political Parties

The order of the candidates on the list and the voting structure explain the disparity between female candidates and female deputies, but not the reasons behind the systematic preference for male candidates over female candidates for the lead positions on the lists.

Immediately after Ben Ali fell, the issue of women's rights came to the fore of public discourse. With the surprisingly meteoric rise of *Ennahda*, secular women became immediately fearful of losing the rights that they had already gained. As the election approached, women's rights came to be situated in a confrontational narrative between Islamists and secularists. *Ennahda* was accused of engaging in "double discourse", essentially paying lip-service to progressivism publically while saving conservative rhetoric for more radical elements. Their emphasis on differentiation between secularists and Islamists overshadowed how the secular parties were incorporating women into the newly opened political arena. The fact that almost no secular party promoted parity between heads of lists had been surprising, especially given the supportive rhetoric of secular party leaders in addition to the historic appearance of secular women's visible role in society. The president of a new election monitoring organization, described how, "All the Tunisian people expected a lot of women to be on the top of the lists, but they weren't. We expected that but then we saw the opposite".³¹

In exploring the reasons behind the dearth of female headed lists, four reasons arose: (i) *mentalité*; (ii) marginalization from central party structures; (iii) lack of female party members or lack of interest in candidacy; (iv) lack of qualified women.

³¹ Personal Interview, 18 April 2012.

(i) *Mentalité*

Mentalité, essentially constructed patriarchal attitudes that situate women as inferior to men, mediated the full and equal incorporation into secular political parties. A publicly unreleased seminar debriefing by the UNDP, reveals evidence of misogyny within the ranks of the political parties which impacted how women were seen and utilized within them. From a series of focus groups with nineteen female candidates, representing fifteen political parties, it describes how even the parties that purported to be the most progressive and modernist:

...still believe that women are incapable of providing political leadership. The parties, through their management, continue to devalue women and perpetuate stereotypes. There is not, fundamentally, a real conviction of the need to involve women and the role that they could provide. Political parties remain 'private clubs for men'.³²

The report went on to demonstrate how this attitude made the political party leadership unwilling to "bet on women candidates" i.e. by putting them first on the list of candidates.³³

(ii) *Marginalization from central party structure*

This *mentalité* of male superiority manifested tangibly within party leadership. Referring to the male dominance of internal party structures, one candidate from PDP described how women were kept out of the inner decision-making circles. She considered that "They were very happy to have me and gave me lots of things to do. But I found that women, they don't have any power to decide anything in the political party. Men have all the power".³⁴ This account is supported by the UNDP debriefing. It described how the process of constructing the list put women at a disadvantage because of the insularity of the decision-making bodies. Although newer parties tended to have a more open and inclusive process for creating the lists, older political parties' processes were less so. They tended to use their male-dominated political bureaus for this purpose, using unspecific and unclear selection criteria. The women in the focus group also cited the fact that there were no provisions in the party by-laws that obligated representation of women in political decision-making positions.³⁵

(iii) *Lack of female party members or interest in candidacy*

Many cited the lack of female party members in general and, linked to this, a lack of interest by women in becoming candidates. The reasons behind this reveal a range of gendered social pressures including the social inappropriateness of women in politics and the inhospitality of the political arena to women, along with the relative difficulty women have balancing politics with their other responsibilities. A candidate from PDM, the coalition that did achieve parity between heads of lists, describes the unique difficulties facing women who want to go into politics,

Women have much more responsibilities [sic]. They have families and take care of their kids. If they work, they still have to take care of their families. I see many women activists in political parties right now...It is a challenge that women have to face. Women have to make the choice to give much more time to political activity. But it is easier for them [men]. Women can't get

³² UNDP, 'Le parcours des candidates aux élections de l'Assemblée Nationale Constituante: Compte, rendu, Leçons apprises, Stratégies pour de meilleurs résultats', Projet d'appui au processus électoral: Renforcement des femmes en politique, 2012, p.14.

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ Personal Interview, 25 April 2012.

³⁵ UNDP (2012), p.6.

rid of their family responsibilities. Men can lean on their wives much more than a wife can lean on her husband for taking care of the kids and taking care of meals.³⁶

Women who do make the choice to go into politics have to then deal with societal judgments or her own guilt at choosing politics over her family. A *Nahdawi* deputy who holds a prominent position on the Commission for Human Rights in the Assembly, describes these feelings:

During the campaign, there are some men that get back to their house at 2, 3, or 4 in the morning. They don't feel guilty about not taking care of their kids. But if I get home late, and I did when I was doing a lot of work doing door-to-doors, I felt guilty for not taking care of my kids. Even if my husband is taking care of my kids for me and doing a good job, I feel guilty.³⁷

These issues originate in patriarchal social structures that gender domestic and political responsibilities, placing obstacles unique to women that block pathways to accessing their full citizenship rights. Her experience highlights the fact that these gendered pressures face both secular and Islamist women.

(iv) *Lack of qualified female candidates*

Both men and women attributed the lack of female-headed lists to the fact that there were not enough qualified women to run for office. Many described how after the gender parity law was passed, all parties were scrambling to fill their gender quotas so as not to have their lists disqualified. A female member of the *Ettajdid* political bureau and law professor describes, "A lot of parties, even *Ennahda*, were obliged to take women to put on the lists without looking for qualifications or even confidence".³⁸ This was levied as a criticism of all parties, because in choosing unqualified women, "it shows the population that women were not able to speak, govern, and participate well".³⁹ The perception that the recruited female candidates were underqualified creates a strong disincentive for the party leadership to put women at the head of the list.

These criticisms were often invoked as a way to malign the credentials of the current *Nahdawi* female deputies by secularists, suggesting political, as well as gendered, motivations. These findings were reinforced by focus group research published by the National Democratic Institute (NDI). Its report details how the general perception was that women were included on the lists purely to satisfy gender quotas, and no way because of their qualifications.⁴⁰ These comments were also made disparagingly, suggesting an attitude of derision towards women who engage politically.

However, competence only came up in relation to female deputies. With the exception of the handful of political parties that had been allowed to operate under the Ben Ali regime, the vast majority of political parties and their members were new to politics. Citing only the scarcity of competent women as a way to explain the lack of comprehensive parity seemed to gender the competence issue. The expert consulted by the Revolutionary Council on parity summed up her thoughts on this:

³⁶ Personal Interview, 17 April 2012.

³⁷ Personal Interview, 25 April 2012.

³⁸ Personal Interview, 24 April 2012.

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ A.B. Yahia and G. Borovsky, "Women's Political Participation in Tunisia After the Revolution: Findings from Focus Groups in Tunisia", National Democratic Institute, May 2012, p.9.

In our country, we have had many, many deputies, men, who are not competent. So now why are we talking about competence now that we are dealing with women? We have never had competent deputies! They did not have great capacities! So now that we are talking about women, we are talking about competence!⁴¹

When asked her thoughts on this, a young female blogger who was active in the uprisings exclaimed indignantly, “There aren’t enough competent men for the Constituent Assembly! Politics is new for all of us”.⁴² Rather than indicating an actual disparity in competence, this attitude could be reflective of deeper perceptions about the political value of women in general, in other words, the *mentalité* that determines the incorporation of women into secular politics.

5. The Electorate: Perceptions of Women

Female candidates were not only battling misogyny from within their own party ranks. The *mentalité* evident in the structural exclusion of women and in the parties’ attitudes towards its female members is reflective of wider societal views on the appropriate role for women in society. By a wide margin, the most frequently cited reason for the existence of barriers to equal female political participation in general, was “culture” or “*mentalité*” related to the appropriateness of women in politics.

The communications director for ATFD and an active participant in the uprisings, pointed out that, “There are a lot of voices that...say the natural place is in the house for women”.⁴³ The campaign director for *Afek Tounes*, described it in cultural terms, “It is a cultural problem in Tunisia. I deal with people who see women at a different level than men, who don’t see women as smart as men. Even some women feel that too!”⁴⁴ The law professor from *Ettajdid*, also framed this issue culturally:

The image of women that we have in our society is that women are unable to govern. There is the famous phrase in the Muslim world that says, ‘There is no goodness in the nation governed by women’. This phrase is still around. So it is really difficult to show that a woman is able to enter into the political sphere to have opinions and not to be still at home taking care of children and so on”.⁴⁵

An official at the US Embassy summed it up, “Tunisia is an inherently conservative society. It isn’t America with an Arab veneer”.⁴⁶ These descriptions are supported through observations derived from NDI’s research. It found that:

[G]ender norms are deeply embedded in participants’ environments, illustrated by respondents’ comfort placing women and men in traditional gender roles in both private spheres (family, household) and public (political institutions, workplace). Participants expressed a widespread and traditional mentality that women should play a mostly private role in Tunisian society.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Personal Interview, 23 April 2012.

⁴² Personal Interview, 24 April 2012.

⁴³ Personal Interview, 16 April 2012.

⁴⁴ Personal Interview, 17 April 2012.

⁴⁵ Personal Interview, 24 April 2012.

⁴⁶ Personal Interview, 20 April 2012.

⁴⁷ Yahia and Borovsky, p.6.

6. Secular Women and Campaigns

This *mentalité* regarding the suitable role for Tunisian women in society underpins the patriarchal structures that shape the political field unevenly between male and female candidates. The prevailing attitudes about women's suitability in public and political life create a vast series of challenges for women seeking to transcend that social barrier.

Battling stereotypes of female inferiority, women must work harder to prove their worth as political candidates. My informants reiterated this point repeatedly across party lines. The *Nahdawi* deputy saw this in her campaign and, subsequently, in the Assembly, "The challenge for women is always having to prove herself more to get to higher levels of government".⁴⁸ The communications director for ATFD stated that it was the biggest challenge facing a woman in politics: proving herself deserving of candidacy.⁴⁹ From the outset, women faced a gendered challenge in the pathway to legitimacy. This challenge was compounded by the media's failure to cover women's campaigns to the same degree as those of men.⁵⁰ This underrepresentation of women in the media created yet another barrier to overcoming damaging stereotypes and was reflective of the societal devaluation of female political potential.

This entrenchment of social mores that locate women in the private sphere makes it harder for female candidates to access some public spaces to campaign. For instance, Tunisia, like many states in the region, has a thriving male-dominated café culture. In Tunisia, male-only spaces in the capital decreased under Ben Ali, as a reinforcement of Tunisia's modernity. Outside the capital, men have continuously dominated café culture, insofar that it is inappropriate for women to venture inside. Even in Tunis, since the fall of Ben Ali, public spaces have become more gender segregated, including the re-segregation of cafés. But cafés serve a larger role in Tunisian culture and in the region. More than just places to buy and consume coffee, cafés are hubs of political and social activity, and thus vital spaces to access for candidates during campaign season. Given the gendered nature of these spaces, however, some female candidates had a hard time transcending the social rules that exclude them. Not all female candidates reported difficulty accessing male-only spaces like cafés,⁵¹ but many informants spoke of instances in the rural areas in which women were not allowed to participate in a political debate because of its location in a traditionally male space. Transcending these engrained social rules can be very difficult for female candidates especially when there is no guarantee that their presence will be received positively.

Verbal, online, and even physical harassment was a huge problem for many female candidates during the campaign, even in places that are not designated male spaces, real or virtual. Although both men and women faced difficulties during the campaign, women faced some uniquely gendered ones. Whereas men often received questions about their platforms and ideas, women were judged, challenged, and often harassed about their personal appearance, their morality, their marital status, and personal life.

The experiences of Bochra Belhaj Hamida, the former president of ATFD and current lawyer-cum-activist, are often cited as a prime example of the type of harassment that specifically secular women face, much of which is sexualized. Bochra lives in Tunis, but ran in Zaghuan, a conservative city outside the capital. She does not use her husband's last name and was aggressed on her Facebook page and at campaign events for supposedly being unmarried. There were rumours about her morality, and by extension her sexuality. There were also rumours about

⁴⁸ Personal Interview, 25 April 2012.

⁴⁹ Personal Interview, 16 April 2012.

⁵⁰ Personal Interview, 19 April 2012.

⁵¹ UNDP (2012) p. 4.

pictures existing on her Facebook of her consuming alcohol.⁵² Although Bochra was at the head of the list, she was not elected. The vitriol directed at Bochra about her personal life is credited with *Ettakatol's* loss in that district, in that their proportion was not even high enough to send their top candidate from the list to the Assembly.

Bochra is a well-known public figure who takes vocal stands on controversial issues, such as equal inheritance, which could account for some of the ire directed at her. However, her campaign was not an isolated incident. One candidate from PDP describes the defamation of a poster put up by the campaign for a colleague. The eyes of the woman's face had been scratched out and someone had scrawled across the bottom, "Do not vote for this slut and lesbian". She also reports that she was often aggressed by men with beards, usually associated with salafism in Tunisia, for not being religious or moral enough. She says her colleagues faced similar challenges, especially in the rural areas.⁵³ Even Maya Jribi, the Secretary-General of the Constituent Assembly and arguably the best-known female politician in Tunisia, faced verbal, sexualized harassment. Khedija Arfaoui, prominent feminist and human rights activist, suggested that it was intended to discourage women from entering the public sphere.⁵⁴

Secular women are the most vulnerable to these types of attacks on morality. Particularly in rural areas, secular women running for office represent a direct challenge to patriarchal social structures that locate women in the private sphere. They thus stand in direct contrast to the model of a "good woman". *Nahdawi* women, all of whom wear the *hijab* except for one high-profile case, are typically protected from these assertions by virtue of their visual commitment to their faith. Also compounding the vulnerability of secular women is their association with the former regime. The fact that Ben Ali championed secular women's rights, often at the expense of Islamist women, does secular female candidates no favours in conservative areas. Some report being taunted with shouts along the lines of, "Ben Ali was your father! What will you do without your father to protect you?"⁵⁵ In their research, NDI also notes a negative association between the *ancien regime* and the "modern" woman.⁵⁶ This confluence of social forces creates a unique set of challenges for secular female candidates in the field.

7. The Gendered Impact of Campaign Finance

The structure of campaign finance was the final factor contributing to the unique challenges facing secular female candidates. *Ennahda* was the financial front-runner throughout the entire campaign season. *Ennahda's* wealth, in conjunction with its leadership's political acuity, was apparent in the sophistication and organization of their operation. By contrast, the secular parties, with the exception of CPR, were vastly underfunded. Their relative poverty, along with the nascence of many of the secular parties, was also evident in their lack of organization or sophistication. This lack of resources meant that, in secular parties, support was spread thinly amongst the different candidates. Although all candidates within a party suffered from lack of resources, this situation resulted, nonetheless, in gendered outcomes when interacting with the patriarchal social structures already in place within Tunisia.

Lack of party resources meant that secular parties were often unable to embed their candidates within a party structure when they were campaigning in more remote areas. While men could

⁵² Personal Interviews, April 2012

⁵³ Personal Interview, 25 April 2012.

⁵⁴ Personal Interview, Khedija Arfaoui, 18 April 2012.

⁵⁵ Personal Interview, 16 April 2012.

⁵⁶ Yahia and Borovsky.

benefit from party support during campaign events, women were, in many instances, hampered by its lack. Most prevalent in remote areas, the gendered division of space and the prevailing attitudes about women in politics presented challenges in and of themselves. Being embedded within the (mostly male) party structure in remote areas could have given female candidates the tools to overcome structural, patriarchal challenges.

However, due to the state of secular parties' finances, in the areas where the need was more acute, women were less equipped to deal with the challenges that arose from patriarchal social structures, such as lack of access to all public spaces. Every secular female candidate that I interviewed highlighted the vulnerability of women campaigning alone in rural areas. As a current deputy from *Afek Tounes* described it,

As a woman, the terrain was very difficult. You have to know that you are a woman and that you will face difficulties. Sometimes you really need a man with you. I felt like I needed a man with me when I was in the rural parts".⁵⁷

By contrast, a UNDP representative testified to the fact that *Nahdawi* female candidates were accompanied by high-level party representation at every campaign stop. She says, "They really gave the impression that they were a team with these women. This never happened with the other parties. Never".⁵⁸ Despite the fact that being embedded in the male party apparatus proved a political advantage, it also underscored the patriarchal norms that inform the roles that are deemed appropriate for women.

The difficulties of secular female candidates were compounded by the party's internal structuring of campaign finance. The way some of the secular parties distributed their limited resources also had an unintended gendered impact. By nature of the proportional list voting, the candidate in the top position on the list received the most party support during the campaign. As male candidates occupied most of these positions, women systematically had less access to party resources before the elections. Compounding this, the candidate at the top of the list was often tasked with allocating party finances to the other candidates. With male candidates both heading up almost every list and dominating internal party power structures, campaign finances were controlled almost exclusively by men. Even women who occupied the second slot on party lists reported having more difficulty accessing adequate funds for their campaigns than their male compatriots, indicating that the *mentalité* of male superiority underpinned distribution of funds.⁵⁹ This meant that secular female candidates were disadvantaged relative to their fellow male candidates as well as in comparison to *Nahdawi* female candidates. Here, the implications of patriarchal attitudes informing the construction of male-dominated lists played out through a structurally gender-neutral policy of internal financial allocation.

8. Consequences of Exclusion

With the constitutional process ongoing, the impact on policy by the underrepresentation of secular women in the Constituent Assembly remains to be seen. Although the future effects of secular women's exclusion remain unclear, the political implications of their current invisibility in formal politics are already playing out.

⁵⁷ Personal Interview, 23 April 2012.

⁵⁸ Personal Interview, 19 April 2012.

⁵⁹ UNDP (2012), p.6.

“Women in Tunisia are afraid,” declared the vice president of a new organization focused on encouraging female political participation.⁶⁰ Among women in the established women’s movement,⁶¹ the discourse on the challenges facing secular women is united to the point of being hegemonic. The dominant themes centre on fear of *Ennahda* eroding rights that women have already acquired, given the high degree of formal rights that they have historically enjoyed. Due to this fear, *Ennahda*, its influence in the Constituent Assembly, and Islamism more broadly is invariably positioned as the greatest challenge currently facing secular Tunisian women. This threat requires “vigilance”, another hegemonic concept in secular feminist discourse. This dynamic places secular women in total opposition to *Ennahda*, viewed, as it were, as an essentially existential threat to women’s rights. The vigilance that characterizes this fear creates a frame through which secular women view *Ennahda*’s moves. Every action that seems to confirm secular women’s fears is woven into a narrative that strengthens the already existing aura of distrust, in a mutually reinforcing cycle.

Since its re-emergence last year, *Ennahda*’s official rhetoric has been progressive and moderate. Despite these and other assurances, rumours of “double” discourse, wherein the public image of *Ennahda* is progressive while privately, and in front of more conservative elements, is radical. Instances of high-profile *Nahdawi* politicians making comments that seem to indicate an underlying conservatism have only served to reinforce that perception.⁶² When the first draft of the constitution was published in August of 2012, the use of “complementary”, rather than “equal” in the first draft of the constitution released in August when describing the nature of the relationship between men and women, further strengthened these perceptions.⁶³

The antagonism felt between secular women and *Ennahda* is situated within a larger context of antipathy between secularists in Tunisia and the Islamist movement. The discourse of secularists in the political arena in general has some similarities with the secular women’s discourse, in that there is palpable fear and uncertainty surrounding the intensions of *Ennahda*. This fear is focused on the general direction that *Ennahda* is taking the country, rather than specific regression on women’s rights. This fear, however, must be appraised from within a political context in which the opposition’s power is severely limited. For the secularists in opposition, the political arena is meaningfully divided between Islamists and secularists than in any other way. The murky relationship between *Ennahda* and more radical salafist groups has only served to fuel this divide. *Ennahda* was accused of inadequately providing safety and security when salafist elements attacked the American Embassy and an American school.⁶⁴ The result has been an inflammation of political tensions and clashes between pro- and anti-government forces.

The result of this complex web of relations between *Ennahda*, secular women, and secularists in general is a mutually reinforcing cycle of distrust, fracture, and paralysis, negatively impacting the process of democratic transition. The fear that secular women feel concerning *Ennahda*’s true political orientation is very real indeed, both reinforced by and informing the construction of a

⁶⁰ Personal Interview, 16 April 2012.

⁶¹ This refers to organization such as ATFD and AFTURD, along with women who participate in the discourse of secular feminism that developed in the 1980s. For more information, see Labidi (2007).

⁶² See: ‘Tunisie: l’élection du président d’Ennahdha pourrait se faire en deux tours’, *GlobalNet*, 16 July 2012; R. al-Ghannouchi and E. Abrams, ‘Tunisia’s Challenge: A Conversation with Rachid al-Ghannouchi’, Council on Foreign Relations, 30 November 2011; K. Shirayanga, ‘*Ennahda* Spokeswoman Souad Abderrahim: Single Mothers are a Disgrace to Tunisia’, *Tunisia Live*, 9 November 2011; S. Ajmi, ‘Ennahdha Discourse: The Sixth Caliphate or a Misunderstanding?’, *Tunisia Live*, 16 November 2011; ‘Tunisia women accuse Islamist party of false pre-election promises, to allow polygamy’, *Muslim Debates: Muslim Women News*, 2011.

⁶³ B. Daragahi, ‘Term used for women in Tunisia’s draft constitution ignites debate, protest’, *Washington Post*, 16 August 2012.

⁶⁴ ‘Embassies under attack over anti-Islam video’, *Al-Jazeera*, 15 September 2012.

unified narrative of *Ennahda's* hidden extremism. This tension is exacerbated by *Ennahda's* failure to act, either affirming or contradicting secular women's worst fears in a tangible way. This further heightens the aura of distrust that already exists between them. This, in turn, further positions secular women in oppositional roles to the government, intensifying the fractured nature of the political arena.

This dynamic is grounded within and mirrors a confrontationalist relationship between the Islamist and secular movements more broadly, albeit for different reasons. *Ennahda's* lack of movement on women's rights, while potentially ideologically driven, is more likely reflective of the political paralysis that characterizes the entire political system. The Troika, with *Ennahda* as its indisputable leader, has been trying to prove its competence as the governing body, rather than as an oppositional force. This is a task made more difficult by the fear felt by secularists in general, due in no small part to their inability to sufficiently mobilize. This taints the relationship with yet more distrust, causing further polarization and entrenchment. Similar to the dynamic between women and *Ennahda*, this contributes further to the political fracturing and subsequent paralysis on important issues.

The nature of this unfortunate cycle is mutually reinforcing, becoming ever more intractable and entrenched. Meanwhile, the catalysts of the uprisings and the future of Tunisia, the youth, are increasingly alienated from the political arena, whilst the dire economic problems facing the majority of Tunisians go unaddressed. As the debate over the constitutional draft continues the consequences of this dynamic will become ever more clear.

9. Conclusions

The High Commission, in passing the gender parity law, recognized the potential for differentiated access to formal political power along gendered lines, essentially acknowledging the patriarchal nature of Tunisian state and society that mediates women's full access to their citizenship rights. But in the aftermath of the elections, it was clear that access to political power was not solely differentiated by gender, as secular women faced unique challenges by virtue of their identity. Some of these challenges were gendered outcomes of nominally gender-neutral political processes as a result of the natures of the secular political movements as contrasted with the Islamist movement, *Ennahda*. Many, however, were anchored in deeply engrained social and cultural mores regarding the value of women and the nature of their role in Tunisian society, revealing a different set of popularly held values than the ones supposedly mirrored in the former hegemonic image of the Tunisian woman. Clearly the former image of the Tunisian woman clashed with the product of a cultural, rather than a political, process of subjectification. This dynamic highlights the artificialness of that former image of secular women as autonomous political agents, as perceived advantages accrued under the former regime evaporated once the protection of the state bounds fell away.

Access to political power, was indeed thereby differentiated. Still unclear, however, is the true nature of that differentiation. Is it a cross-section of both gender and secularism? Or is it merely gendered? The differentiation of access existed at the intersection of gender and secularism in 2011. However, it is yet uncertain whether the challenges facing secular women would have been universal without the political advantages that *Nahdawi* women had access to, mitigating the effects of gendered challenges.

Regardless of the true nature of the differentiation, the contemporary discourse positions secular women in opposition to Islamist women, exacerbated by the respective (in)visibility in formal

politics. This antagonism has larger political implications for the nature of the Tunisian polity, embedded as it is within a larger narrative of confrontation between secularism and Islamism. Fostering mutual distrust between Islamists and secularists, this narrative is both informed by and perpetuates a general political paralysis. This cyclically reinforcing antagonism is reflected in the situation now faced by Tunisian feminists. This process serves merely to deepen the divisions between the two entities of Islamism and secularism, the gendered manifestations of which have come to represent divergent, and apparently dichotomous, visions for the new Tunisian polity. While the ultimate political implications of this process have yet to play out, the wider political elite fights for the ideological soul of the state, as the rest of the Tunisian people must wait for the benefits of their revolution to emerge.



UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Centre of Governance and Human Rights

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Centre of Governance and Human Rights

POLIS · 7 West Road · Cambridge · CB3 9DT · United Kingdom

www.polis.cam.ac.uk/cghr
