

Session I - Challenges to Peace & Security in the Middle East and Ways to Intervene:

“Tunisia in Transition & its Women: a Model to Follow?”

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Tunisia, which is at the origin of the so-called Arab Spring, has been praised so far for being a model that could or should be followed by the other Arab countries in a democratic transition phase. Therefore, it could be interesting to present the Tunisian experience in light with the role its (young) women have played in it, so as to be able to identify the good practices to be reproduced somewhere else if possible and the possible ways to go forward.

A Revolution Sparked by a Woman?

It is not a so well-known anecdote but the Tunisian revolution actually started with a woman: the female police officer who arrested Mohamed Bouazizi and confiscated the few goods he was illegally selling on the street. It is said that she even slapped him in the face which highly humiliated him and led him, together with other things, to his self-immolation despairing act and sparked the revolution.

So, if the Tunisian revolution may have started with a woman, it has continued on its bumpy road, for sure with and thanks to a huge women’s participation in it. And everybody has in mind, pictures of these Tunisian ‘walkyries’ who made the magazines covers in many countries abroad.

Young Women as Guardians of the 2011 Revolution

In addition to the demonstrations, strikes, and seat-ins, social media also played a critical role. Here too, and once again, women were very active with some key figures, the first one being Lihna Ben Mehri who was nominated as one of the possible laureates for the Nobel Peace Prize for her blog: ‘a Tunisian girl’. In December 2010 and January 2011, she went to Sidi Bouzid, the site of the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, then to Kasserine and was among the first to report the events that took place there. Her blog broadcast photos and videos of police operations, of the wounded and the dead, the lists of victims, of her visits to hospitals and interviews with families who lost one of their own because of police repression. She also maintained contacts with foreign journalists. Thus, ‘A Tunisian Girl’ quickly became a focal point of the opposition.

With the revolution over and the democratic transition taking place, another young woman played a key role in ensuring accountability of the new decision-makers and sustainability of the process: her name is Amira Yahyaoui. She got famous by setting-up a civil society organization named Al Bawsala ("The Compass" in Arabic). During the entire mandate of the National Constituent Assembly, this organization followed up all parliamentary debates, including commissions, to ensure the transparency of the revolution and shared the information on its website so that every citizen could follow it on a day-to-day basis. It is now continuing its watchdog role by ensuring national budget transparency and local governance accountability. In line with this accountability ideal, Olfa Rihahi, another female blogger, became famous for denouncing some personal use of public funds by then Minister of Foreign Affairs, creating a scandal known in Tunisia under the name of the "Sheratongate".

Women's involvement for Peace and Democracy: A Tradition in Tunisia?

This involvement and activism of (young) Tunisian women is actually a tradition in the country and can be traced back up to the fight for independence. Already in the '20s, women came together to support the independence fight and later on the World Wars efforts with charity and social projects for war soldiers and prisoners. They became active not only inside the country but they also networked and committed themselves to the independence fight for other women overseas (e.g. Algeria, Vietnam, Korea)

"Supported" by the progressive ideas of religious thinkers and intellectuals, like Tahar Haddad (1899-1935), these women organized themselves and this slowly led to the apparition of 2 poles of women's activism : one rather close to the religious and conservative, the other one rather progressive and close to the left-wing. But the two poles managed to forget about their ideological differences to come together so as to obtain the right to vote for Tunisian women (on 11 June 56).

During the presidencies of Bourguiba and Ben Ali, the women's activism and feminism got institutionalized into one association: the UNFT (Union Nationale des Femmes Tunisiennes). However, with continuous women's involvement in labor strikes and calls for economic and social rights, new autonomous associations emerged in the '70s-'80s and played a key role in the women's rights agenda and criticism of the Ben Ali regime. The 2011 post-revolution is now structured in three main types of associations: still the left and right wings, but confronted now with a soft center made up mostly of young women, committed not solely to women's rights but to larger agendas, like Peace, Democracy, and the well-being of the citizens of the country.

These women managed both to create and to benefit from a strong institutional and legislative basis with, firstly, a very advanced Personal Status Code which entered into force prior to the new Republic's Constitution in 1956. This Code abolished polygamy, repudiation and gave more obligations to the male spouse and more protection & rights to the female spouse. This keystone was followed – among other legal developments- by the ratification of the CEDAW in 1985 but with some major reservations (similar to most of these made by the Arabo-Muslim countries of the region) based on the religion. An intense women's campaign

for the lifting of these reservations finally lead to the notification of their lifting to the United Nations Secretary-General in April 2014 as well as to the adoption of a progressive new Constitution, also in 2014, which now protects the existing rights and promotes gender equality in all areas, especially in public life.

However, the recent history has demonstrated that if the legislative/institutional basis is strong, its content and most of all its enforcement/application is often threatened by a society and a culture which may sometimes go against entrenched social norms. Therefore, the post-revolution context has seen a constant involvement and commitment of young women in Tunisia, fighting to safeguard the women's gains and to call for more progress, for the women in particular, and for the society as whole, as well.

Tunisian women played a key role against the religion-based threats expressed during the transition....

During the post-revolution period, Tunisia was shaken by many serious crisis and political assassinations. Like often during crisis, women's rights were at stake and women had to commit to defend their gains.

The main involvement of women (accompanied by men) which happened was during the writing of the new Constitution during which Tunisian women proposed several drafts based on non-discrimination and gender equality and fought for the integration of these key principles in the new Constitution. The Ennhada (the Islamist party in power at that time)'s attempt to replace the principle of gender equality by that of 'complementarity' (in article 28) led to a wave of protest all over the country, led by women's associations, young and older female individuals, largely accompanied by men. The article 28 was finally withdrawn in the subsequent draft which was a first victory for the young women in Tunisia.

The second victory and fight which saw the involvement of women as 'watchdog force' concerns the international Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women, (CEDAW). On 8 March 2013, an anti-CEDAW campaign on several social media was unofficially initiated by women's associations close to the Ennhada party. Among other things, this campaign aimed to construct an analogy in people's minds between CEDAW and HIV (CEDAW and Sida (HIV/Aids), in French, sound very similar), and an incitement to prostitution and homosexuality. The campaign also invoked cultural relativism as a justification for unequal treatment of women and misinformed people by printing fake copies of the Convention (especially of its articles 15 and 16) in the newspaper Fajr, the official journal of the ruling party. Anti-CEDAW demonstrations also got organized by women's local associations in the interior regions asking the ANC to cancel the decree-law No. 103. This issue of the CEDAW reservations symbolized the polarization of the Tunisian society, at that time, and was worrying many observers who feared that neither compromise nor reconciliation would be found.

... as well as in finding a compromise/consensus

But this is where Tunisia is presented as a potential model to follow: a culture of consensus and negotiation enabled the country to overcome the major obstacles that emerged on the

road out of the transition: CEDAW reservations finally got lifted, following the adoption of a very progressive and women's rights friendly Constitution.

Women from opposite sides also managed to overcome their dissensions and to come together over the key issue of Transitional Justice and the pressing need to mainstream Gender within its entire process and structures. Joint advocacy efforts managed indeed to reveal how women were being forgotten and invisible as victims of the previous regimes: people tended to focus solely on men as victims of arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and exile whereas if women being direct victims were few in number (it is true) they were massively concerned as indirect/collateral victims of humiliations and violations of socio-economic human rights. As a result of these advocacy efforts, these violations were included in the Transitional Justice Law and a sub-commission on women and victims with particular needs was created within the Truth & Dignity Commission (which is led by a woman).

Women's political participation was another topic on which all women's sides agreed: advocacy was made for the adoption of horizontal gender parity of the political parties' lists. That led to 27% female MPs at the Constituent National Assembly in 2011. Further demands were made to add – in line with the articles 46.3 and 34.2 of the new Constitution- the vertical parity, but with no success. However, still 30% of the current MPs are female, although this is far from the 50% of the parity. Also, for the first time in the history of the country, one woman, a magistrate, Khaltoum Kennou, presented herself at the presidential election of 2014 and gathered around 0.56% of the expressed votes, which put her at the 11th rank among the 27 candidates. The current President, Mr. Beji Caid Essebsi is also said to have won over Mr. Moncef Marzouki thanks to an overwhelming female vote in his favor.

Which future and How to Support these Women?

Despite the existing progressive framework and a strong tradition of activism and involvement in public life issues, women in Tunisia still have a long way to go: if women represent 63.6% of the successful graduates, they also represent 43% of the graduated who are unemployed; only 7.85% of the positions in the government are held by some women and women do not represent more than 6% of in the general decision-making bodies of the country.

So, what should be or could be done to support and get these women keeping advocating and finding solutions for the peace and development of their country?

A first issue to solve would be the dispersion and fierce competition between the 'old' civil society organizations and the new ones created after the revolution : donors should be careful to not restrict their funds to the old women's organizations who have experience in dealing with budget and activities but they should also make an effort to build up the capacity of the new organizations, to associate them to any new initiatives and projects, maybe by encouraging a system of coaching of the younger by the older/more experienced persons/associations.

In order to smoothen the polarization of the Tunisian society and of its women's organizations, common areas of concern should be exploited to build up bridges, make the left and right wing sides talk to each other and, most of all, listen to each other.

Finally, some recent studies conducted after the revolution showed that women – and especially young, rural women- still suffer in Tunisia from a disinterest in the traditional forms of politics. A lot has to do with a lack of self-confidence in themselves as well as with a lack of knowledge of a political system seen as too centralized and far from their interests. With the new decentralized model of governance set up by the new Constitution, new opportunities and key chances to have women involved in local political life should not be lost. All should be made to support and to build the capacities of the women, young and older, to present themselves and integrate the decision-making new structures of the country. It is an opportunity they should not miss or it will take decades to catch up on it.

