State Feminism and the Islamist-Secularist Binary: Women's Rights in Tunisia

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Although ruled by an authoritarian regime from 1956-2011, Tunisia was described as a 'beacon' for the Middle East and North Africa region.[1] The status of women was a major aspect of this. A family code passed in 1956 – on independence from France – significantly improved marriage, inheritance and custody rights for Tunisian women.[2] It was not until 2003 that nearby Morocco implemented a similar code.[3] Tunisia was also the first Muslim country to legalise abortion and the second, after Turkey, to ban polygamy.[4] A 2012 Freedom House Report summarised this, reporting that 'Tunisia's post-independence policy has long been hailed as the most progressive in the region'.[5]

The progressive image enjoyed by the regime proved somewhat illusory when thousands of Tunisian men and women took to the streets in the winter of 2010-11. Their unified demands for democracy, freedom and economic justice surprised many in the West, such as French political elites who denied the extent of the authoritarian regime. [6] Global and local actors were then concerned about the rising popularity of Islamism in politics and the consequences of this for women.[7] However, years on from the revolution, it seems that the threat of Islam to women's rights has been overemphasised. This analysis seeks to uncover why the secularist/Islamist binary was employed by the authoritarian regime, and how these divisions continue to prevent cooperation today.

This essay is organised into three chapters. The first will emphasise the state's historical use of women's issues to suppress political opposition in the 1956-2011 era. This will reveal the political benefits that championing feminist issues brought to Tunisia's leaders. Chapter Two will focus on the 2010-11 Revolution, and Tunisia's transition to democracy. It will find that despite the fears over an Islamist party taking power, the rights of women have been preserved and expanded on. The third chapter will look at the barriers that continue to prevent further progress towards equality. Importantly, these are largely institutional and societal problems distinct from religion. However, the historical rift between religious and secular groups continues to prevent dialogue and cooperation on these matters.

This essay will incorporate historical studies with contemporary statistics and perspectives. Mounira Charrad's book compares Tunisia's post-independence trajectory to that of Morocco and Algeria.[8] She emphasises the role of Tunisia's process of state formation as the determining factor in post-independence reforms on women. Nouri Gana's edited book *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution* gives useful insights into the causes and consequences of the Jasmine Revolution, and Tunisia's relationship with the West. Chapters by Monica Marks and Kennith Perkins especially illuminate the manipulation of women's and religious rhetoric by Ben Ali's regime.[9] In her recent publication, Laura Guercioanalyses the text of Tunisia's 2014 constitution, shedding light on the factors that enabled the successful transition into a democracy.[10] Recent theoretical insights offer valuable contributions, such Imen Yacoubi's analysis of state-feminism, Clara Della Valle's application of universalism to EU funding decisions and Loes Debuysere's recommendations for dialogue between women's groups.[11] BBC News, World Bank and Amnesty reports have provided contemporary statistics and accounts.

This investigation fits into wider debates regarding whether gender equality and human rights can be reconciled with Islam. The Tunisian specificity could be dismissed as being unique for its historically progressive stance on women and the success of its democratic transition following 2011. However, in tracking the state's relationship with women's rights over very different regimes, this analysis hopes to improve upon simplistic narratives about Islam that

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have been perpetuated by the West. By acknowledging that women's rights and democracy can flourish under a democratically elected, Islamist government, 'zero-sum' assumptions that Islamist regimes are oppressive to women are called into question.[12]

Chapter One

An extreme form of state feminism – the use of state bodies and policy agencies to promote gender equality – was exhibited in Tunisia between 1956 and 2011.[13] President Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia's leader from 1956-87, used his power to pass through reforms that vastly improved women's legal rights. He drew from previous debates but imposed the reforms from above rather than in response to grassroots activism.[14] President Ben Ali, in office from 1987-2011, similarly preserved and expanded on women's rights within an authoritarian framework. This chapter will explore the political motivations that drove state feminism, and the long-lasting consequences of this model.

Women's Rights Before 1956

A more equal status for women was being imagined by both Islamist and Western-influenced thinkers long before Tunisian independence. In 1930, the book *Our Women in the Shari'a and Society,* by religious intellectual Tahar Haddad, called for girls' education and an end to polygamy and forced marriages.[15] At the time, Haddad's book was banned and received heavy criticism from the press and religious circles.[16] Nonetheless, his work stimulated debate over women's rights and conceptualised gender equality in the context of the Quran.[17] Additionally, many Tunisian elites, including Bourguiba, attended French universities and drew comparisons between the lives of French and Tunisian women.[18] By the 1950s, reformists in Neo-Destour – the party set to take power upon independence – were publicising their progressive stance on women's issues.[19]

President Bourguiba and the Personal Status Code

Religious and feminist rhetoric was used selectively by Bourguiba in his modernising mission. The Personal Status Code (PSC) was passed within months of independence.[20] This was a ground-breaking family code that legalised civil divorce, permitted abortions for women who had more than four children, banned polygamy, boosted the custody rights of mothers and increased inheritance rights for daughters and granddaughters.[21] Although establishing a state separate from religion, Bourguiba presented the PSC as justified by Islamic teachings. He claimed to use 'ijtihad' – his critical thinking skills – to re-read the Quran as previous reformers had.[22] Photos of the president with leading Muslim theologians were published to present the code as being compatible with Islam and Tunisian tradition.[23] It is worth noting that before independence, Bourguiba had supported traditional family law and the veil. He described the veil as 'the last defence of a national identity in danger' and stayed quiet during Haddad's persecution.[24] However, once president, Bourguiba proceeded to ban the veil in classrooms, repeatedly describing it as 'an odious rag' and referring to Haddad as a pioneer for women's rights.[25] Furthermore, when Bourguiba became less popular in the 1970s due to economic dissatisfaction, he emphasised his religious beliefs and encouraged women to remember their domestic and family roles.[26] This is indicative of his flexible application of religious and egalitarian rhetoric depending on the national context, and hints at the exclusion experienced by veiled women in Tunisia's early post-colonial years.

The PSC served to reduce the power of traditional and religious authority.[27] In the lead up to independence, a power struggle was taking place in Neo-Destour between conservative religious figure Ben Youssef and secularist moderniser Bourguiba.[28] Youssef drew support from kinship groupings and the religious establishment, whereas Bourguiba had an urban, affluent base.[29] The two also diverged in their preferred strategies for independence. Bourguiba sought dialogue with the French, but Youssef called for Tunisia to join a larger Arab-Islamic Supranation.[30] Although the reformist faction was triumphant and Youssef ousted from the party in 1955, the PSC was passed as part of a wider programme of state power consolidation. At this time, Islamic courts lost their independence, the monarchy was abolished and a bloody purge of Youssef's supporters began. [31] The PSC undermined Islamic family law which supported patriarchal family relationships and formed the basis of kinship practices.[32] Bourguiba could thus propel Tunisia into a society more centred on individual rights and the nuclear family model.[33] This would serve to create national unity, end feudalism and strengthen Bourguiba's power.

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Although it is hard to distinguish between ends and means, the PSC was a component of a larger modernising programme that subordinated religion to the state.

State Feminism Under President Ben Ali

The use of women's issues to suppress Islamist men and women intensified under Ben Ali. He took office in 1987, in the midst of a tense political atmosphere and a growing Islamist movement.[34] Cells of militant Islamists were being organised, more women were wearing the veil and there were demands for a referendum on the PSC.[35] Initially, Bourguiba offered concessions to the Islamist movement (Ennahda), but would come to see them as a major threat to his regime.[36] He responded by cracking down on religious dress, coercing opposition and arresting thousands of Ennahda members for allegedly plotting terror attacks.[37]

This suppression juxtaposed Ben Ali's progressive laws on women. He amended the PSC in 1993 and 1998 to give women more autonomy over their public and private affairs, more workplace protections and increased divorce rights.[38] These reforms and the rhetoric that Islamism would be detrimental for women's rights provided Ben Ali with a loyal support base.[39] Secularist women's groups worked with the authoritarian regime as it was seen as the guarantor of women's rights. For example, Tunisia's largest women's union, the UNFT, was effectively used to distribute pro-Ben Ali propaganda.[40] Given that activists and journalists could be sent to prison for speaking out against the regime, it is unsurprising that many secularist groups saw that they would achieve more for women in cooperation with the state.[41] Although some autonomous feminist groups were allowed to operate from the late 1980s, notably AFTURD and ATFD, they continued to represent elite and secular women and have been accused of having questionable links to the regime.[42] In this regard, Ben Ali successfully exploited the fears of these groups and used the Islamist/secularist binary to ensure their continued compliance. State feminism, therefore, did not allow any women's groups the freedom to think critically about gender equality or meaningfully participate in politics. However, the human rights of Islamist women were directly under attack.[43]

The exclusion of Islamist women was a significant feature of state feminism.[44] For example, the official symbol for Tunisian women was Ben Ali's wife, Leila Trabelsi, and Women's Day celebrations focused on praising her personal achievements.[45] Many Muslim women found this offensive, and felt that their religious identities were marginalised given Trabelsi's liberal, elite image.[46] This suggests that Ben Ali was eager to carve out and impose his own personal, Westernised view of the modern woman, rather than championing women's rights through more inclusive symbols. Veiled women also suffered from physical harassment by the state.[47] The 2015 Truth and Dignity Commission hearings found that Islamist women were the victims of sexual violence and assault, perpetrated by the police, based on their association or relation with Ennahda members.[48] State feminism, thus, was an oppressive experience for those women who did not fit the modern, liberal archetype. This caused resentment among many religious women towards both Ben Ali and the feminist groups who stayed quiet during their persecution.[49] Notably, in 2003, ATFD stated their "profound concern about the spread of the head-scarf in the country".[50] Instances like these greatly contributed to the end of communication between secularist and Islamist feminist groups during the Ben Ali years. As will be discussed in the third chapter, these tensions did not dissipate following on from the Jasmine Revolution.

State feminism and Western Islamophobia also helped Ben Ali maintain positive relations with the West. In the early 1990s, Islamism was emerging as a powerful force in neighbouring Algeria's civil war.[51] Following the 9/11 attacks on the US in 2001, Ben Ali's regime was also identified as a strategic ally in 'America's War on Terror'.[52] This was exemplified by Ben Ali's crackdown on civil society after a 2008 rebellion, claiming that the dissidents were connected to terrorist organisation Al-Qaeda.[53] Because Ben Ali was seen to share the same enemies as the US, he avoided scrutiny in his persecution of Islamists.[54] French firms also enjoyed access to Tunisia's cheap labour market.[55] This partly reveals why French funding to Tunisia was bumped up in 1995 and President Jacques Chirac described the country as 'a pole of stability and peace'.[56] Furthermore, like secularist women's groups, NGOs cooperated with Ben Ali's regime, as operating outside of it would have been risky and far less effective.[57] Although there are many factors at play in understanding Tunisia's historical connections with the West, Tunisia's official record on women's rights certainly helped to justify these relationships. [58] Like in the domestic setting, Ben Ali used state feminism and the secularist/Islamist binary to further his own power internationally, as he came across as the

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lesser of two evils.[59] Thus, Ben Ali avoided external pressure to democratise and continued to receive support and funding from international bodies such as the EU, the IMF and the World Bank.[60]

State feminism was therefore a way for both dictators to strengthen their power. Although Bourguiba was less brutal, there were political benefits from passing the PSC. Ben Ali's regime used the fear of Islam to maintain the support of Western funders and secularist women's groups in his authoritarian regime. The illusion of Tunisia's progressivism was revealed in 2011, when women from all backgrounds demanded an end to the regime that claimed to champion women's rights.[61]

Chapter Two

This chapter will explore how, despite secularist concerns over a conservative Islamist party taking power, women's rights have improved since 2011. Tunisia's electoral law, the opening-up of civil society and the wording of the constitution have all signalled progress for women's groups.

Women in the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring, a wave of anti-government uprisings and protests across the Arab world, began in Tunisia. It was sparked on 17 December 2010 by the suicide of Mohamed Bouazizi, a young street vendor who had been the victim of ongoing harassment by Tunisian state security forces.[62] Widespread anger at poor economic policies which perpetuated inequality and unemployment motivated Tunisians to take to the streets.[63] Mass demonstrations took place, and protestors spanning generations, classes, sexes and religious beliefs filled Bourguiba Avenue and took hold of Parliament and the courts.[64] Women played a vital role – they were active in organising and partaking in protests during the Revolution and the following transition period, using new means of mobilisation through online social networks.[65] They suffered at the hands of the Tunisian police, and were the victims of sexual and physical violence.[66] Importantly, these women were from diverse backgrounds and did not operate within the confines of government-sanctioned organisations. Islamist women, victims of the old regime, were especially motivated by the demand for religious freedom and autonomy.[67] By 14 January 2011, Ben Ali had fled the country.[68]

National Assembly Elections of 2011

The lead up to and results of Tunisia's October 2011 elections evoked both domestic and international anxiety over the maintenance of democracy and preservation of Tunisia's progressive rights on women.[69] Ennahda, self-defined as a modern, Islamist party, surprised international observers in winning more seats than any other party in the October 2011 National Constituent Assembly.[70] For example, Fatima Sbaity Kassem, former director of the United Nations Centre for Women at the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, claimed "As religiosity in parties' platforms rises, women's chances in leadership and decision-making fall."[71] Western media contributed to a growing frenzy about what Ennahda's power would mean for women.[72] Commentators in the Tunisian media also worried about whether the PSC would be preserved. Domestic secular groups were also deeply concerned that Ennahda's genuine aims were being hidden behind modern rhetoric, fearing that it would impose an Islamic government.[73] Feminist groups sprang up as soon as Islamist groups started running for the constituent assembly, and secularist women's groups repeatedly told the media that Ennahda would reduce women's status once in power.[74] Social media was also utilised by women in the transitional period as a tool to raise public awareness of women's issues. For example, feminist group *Pour les Droits de la Femme Nord-Africaine* shared videos of women publicly protesting for their rights and conveying what life would be like for women if Islamic fundamentalists took power.[75] This emphasises the distrust of Islamist movements still tangible and prevalent across Tunisia following the ousting of Ben Ali.

One immediate gain for women was the electoral gender parity policy announced in April 2011. On party lists, male and female candidates would have to be alternated between, with the aim of equal representation in Tunisia's legislature.[76] This meant that in the October 2011 election, 24% of the National Assembly seats went to women, including 42 out of the winning party's 89 seats.[77] These measures to boost female political representation were maintained and expanded under successive Islamist-led governments, serving to undermine the idea that Islamist

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governments are necessarily oppressive for women.[78] Furthermore, the continued female underrepresentation also needs to be considered in a global, rather than Muslim context. Tunisia has consistently placed ahead of the global average of women in parliament. For example, in 2019 36% of legislative seats went to women – more than 10 percentage points higher than the global average and 11 points higher than the US.[79] Many Western democracies are yet to adopt a similar electoral parity.[80] This is worth considering, as it undermines Western perceptions about the treatment of women in the Arab-Muslim world and contrasts with the meta-narrative that previous Tunisian dictators were pushing.

Civil Society Following the Jasmine Revolution

The National Dialogue – tasked with writing Tunisia's constitution – was able to maintain open communication between political parties and civil society from 2011-2014.[81] Where protests in other Arab countries have not resulted in an end to authoritarianism, or worse have escalated into civil wars, Tunisia is seen to have been largely successful in transitioning to a democratic state.[82] Guercio compares Tunisia's constitution-drafting process to Egypt and Yemen. Whereas in the latter two countries, certain important groups were excluded from the drafting process, Tunisia was able to bring together secular and religious forces to compromise and reach agreements.[83] This meant that consensus was reached over citizens' rights and their relation to the state so the constitution was viewed as legitimate, providing a strong foundation for continued democratic stability and women's rights. The new constitution, adopted on 26 January 2014, guaranteed gender equality in rights and responsibilities, protection from violence, and the right to education and work.[84] This places Tunisia far ahead in comparison to other MENA countries. Being that healthy democracy and equal rights are an excellent basis for progress on women's issues, the implications of the drafting process have positive implications for women.

The loosening of civil society restrictions has been positive for women's groups.[85] Between 7,000 and 10,000 new civil society groups were reported to have registered during the 10 months following the Revolution.[86] Islamist feminist groups emerged such as the Tunisian Women's Association, Nisa Tounsiyat and Tounissiet, and secularist group AFTD forged new connections with different political parties and parliament.[87] Women's groups have been active in demanding an end to genital mutilation and calling out sexual harassment.[88] They were also active in campaigning for the preservation of the CPS and pushing for constitutional equality.[89] For example, intense debate took place over Article 21 of Tunisia's constitution. A controversial clause was proposed by the Ennahda party, describing women's roles in relation to men's as 'complementary'.[90] In response to this, women's groups organised a mass demonstration on International Women's Day 2012. This campaign was successful, and the wording was changed to describe men and women's roles as 'equal'.[91] This highlights both the democratic nature of the drafting process, and the effectiveness of autonomous women's groups in achieving more legal rights. Furthermore, although Ennahda initially supported this wording, their appreciation of wider pressures shows that any more sexist religious beliefs were secondary to the democratic process. Women's groups were also successful in lobbying the government to adopt a law to fight violence against women in July 2017, extending the definition of violence and giving additional help to the victims.[92] Therefore, the shift away from state feminism to a thriving civil society that holds the government to account has been a very positive outcome for women's groups.[93]

Religiosity has not led to diminishing women's rights in Tunisia, as was feared. That is not to say that the transition has been effortless – the months following the Revolution were characterised by worrying trends such as increased Salafist attacks and poor economic conditions.[94] However, progressive electoral reform, the opening up of civil society and the legitimacy of the new constitution are positive indicators for democracy and Tunisian women. Importantly, the PSC was preserved and the constitution enshrined gender equality within the context of a democratically elected, Islamist government.

CHAPTER THREE

Despite impressive legal and political improvements since 2011, institutional and societal barriers continue to block true equality. This chapter will explore the domestic violence, marginalisation, and police brutality characteristic of the post-Revolution years. These issues arguably necessitate cooperation between Islamist and secularist women's groups. However, this is partly being prevented by ongoing stereotyping and resentments, which have outlived the

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state-feminist era. Furthermore, the decisions made by EU funding for local women's groups continues to prefer those groups more friendly to Western values.

Continued Barriers Faced by Tunisian Women

Since 2011, domestic abuse has continued to be a daily reality for many Tunisian women. Although the 2014 constitution guarantees 'the elimination of all forms of violence against women', this has not translated into a corresponding fall in abuse.[95] In 2016, the BBC reported that violence against women has actually worsened since the Revolution, and the ATFD has claimed that nearly 70% of women suffer from abuse.[96] Many women fear coming forward due to the shame it would bring to their families.[97] Until 2017, taking a case to court could actually bring the victim more harm as the perpetrator of rape could avoid the criminal charges if he married his teenage victim.[98] International human rights charity, Amnesty International, blames 'flawed laws and entrenched discriminatory attitudes' as the barriers that prevent victims from realising justice.[99] Social norms and pressures appear to have blocked further progress on this issue. In 2017 a law titled Eliminating Violence Against Women was passed to tackle these issues. However, implementation has not gone as far as was hoped and has been criticised for not criminalising spousal rape or protecting victims from the pressure to drop charges.[100] Without targeted funding and the commitment of the political centre, the benefits to this law will not be fully realised.[101]

In the security sector, police brutality is yet to be addressed by meaningful reform. Without a proper code of ethics or personnel change in 2011, police officers continued to abuse their power.[102] In 2012, a case involving the rape of a woman by two policemen was brought to court. The victim, Meriem Ben Mohammed, faced charges of indecency, for putting herself in an 'immoral position' because she was with her fiancé late at night.[103] Although the charges were dropped after global outcry, the chain of events revealed deep-rooted patterns of sexism within Tunisia's security sector and judicial system. In 2012, another NDI report revealed that where veiled women were the victim of harassment before the Revolution, women thought to be wearing inappropriate clothing or being too close to young men in public were now being targeted by the police.[104] Given a continuation in much of the personnel of the security forces, this suggests that abuse and harassment stems more from social patterns of female oppression and a lack of police regulation rather than ideological or religious reasons.

Low visibility for women, especially those veiled, remains an issue. In the period preceding the 2011 elections, 90% of media coverage focused on men, with women receiving around 10%.[105] Those women who were interviewed by mainstream networks were unveiled.[106] Labidi notes that misogynistic comments about women by political parties and the media remain frequent.[107] This lack of visibility for women is negative as it reinforces norms that women should not be in the public eye, and sexist comments are a barrier to women's freedom. Women in Tunisia's South also have a very different experience. In traditional, rural areas, women continue to be restricted by traditional roles and the public life is seen to be male.[108] Working class women are often paid below minimum wage and are subject to sexual harassment at work.[109] A lack of economic opportunity and marginalisation by the Tunisian mainstream media means that rural women continue to distrust the centre of Tunisian politics and feel unrepresented.[110] This goes some way in explaining the support for Islamist groups in the South during the 2011 elections, given that poorer areas are more Islamist and feel disillusioned with elite politics.[111]

Continued Division Between Religious and Secularist Groups

Overcoming these issues is in part being hindered by animosity between secularist and Islamist women's groups. There are clear areas of disagreement between both sides. Islamist feminists see men and women as equal, but with different familial and societal roles.[112] This has led Islamist women's groups to support the maintenance of unequal aspects of the PSC on inheritance matters, and opposed the government's acceptance of all CEDAW clauses.[113] Contrastingly, secularist group see human rights as non-negotiable and endorse the Western model of women's rights.[114] Beyond these ideological differences, however, bitter stereotyping remains an issue. Islamist women have felt secularist groups to be superficial collaborators with Ben Ali's regime and continue to question the political neutrality of ATFD and AFTURD.[115] Secular groups often have lumped Islamist women with extremist Salafists and have withdrawn from dialogue on this basis.[116] In March 2013-14, the NGO *Search for Common Ground* organised a Dialogue to be held between women from different backgrounds.[117] Although different groups were

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able to identify problems that they all saw as important, such as helping rural women, ending violence and boosting female political participation, frictions came to a head.[118] ATFD and AFTURD refused to attend the closing ceremony, expressing that they did not want to collaborate with groups that did not believe in human rights.[119]

These resentments are a legacy of state feminism. Islamist women have not forgotten the persecution they suffered during Ben Ali's regime, and secularist groups remain caught up in the rhetoric that the Quran and women's rights cannot be reconciled. It seems that the distrust on both sides has been unproductive, especially given the list of shared aims. Debyusere highlights that dialogue and strategic coalitions between different women's groups can foster more progress.[120] In overcoming the 'us vs them' rhetoric of the old regime, feminist groups would be able to help and campaign on behalf of all women – regardless of location, class or religion.[121] Furthermore, given that Islamist feminist groups are more able to reach and appeal to rural, religious women, collaboration could help to educate and empower women from more backgrounds.

The Role of External Funders

Following the Revolution, Tunisian civil society has benefitted from millions of dollars of European and American funding.[122] Although this helped to sustain a pluralistic political environment, Clara Della Valle investigates the impact of universalism – in this context treating EU values as 'normal' and seeking to export them – on the ability of certain women's groups to access funding.[123] During Ben Ali's suppression of civil society, NGOs cooperated with the UNFT out of necessity.[124] However, Della Valle's 2018 research on EU-funded projects since the Revolution reveals that there has been little change in terms of which groups receive funding, with the same secular and Western-aligned women's groups continuing to be privileged.[125] This has the effect of skewing funding towards norms seen as acceptable to the EU, despite the fact that funding could be more targeted and policies more reflective of local Islamist women's preferences.[126] This can also be observed in the EU's 2016-2020 Framework for Gender Equality and Empowerment, as it does not allow for countries to reconceptualise norms based on their specific religion or culture.[127] By deeming Western norms as universally applicable rather than locally adaptable, the agency of local Islamist women and smaller grassroots groups has been denied. The historical suppression of Islamist groups in particular means that Islamist women's activists have little experience in organising and campaigning.[128] As highlighted by Della Vallle, these smaller groups find it harder to qualify for EU funding meaning that many projects to improve gender equality are carried out by international rather than local charities.[129] Furthermore, secularist women are more represented in leadership of feminist groups and are felt to be chosen over veiled women to attend international conferences.[130] This highlights that despite the Jasmine Revolution, Islamist women continue to be denied agency – a remainder of the Ben Ali regime and symptomatic of hegemonic Western tendencies.

This chapter has revealed some of the issues which have continued to be detrimental to Tunisian women. It has highlighted that these issues are less to do with religiosity and more rooted in oppressive social norms and unreformed institutions. It has suggested that the marginalisation of Islamist women has had tangible impacts in terms of access to external funding and the opportunity for dialogue between different groups. This can partly be linked to the divisive rhetoric and oppression of Islamist women that occurred under Ben Ali.

Conclusion

This essay has aimed to contribute to the growing literature reflecting on the Arab Spring. It has focused on the experience of women, tracking progress, and identifying continuities between Tunisia's authoritarian regime and post-Revolution democracy. In particular, the meta-narrative that Islam is oppressive to women has been undermined by this account.

The causes and legacies of state feminism have been explored. This essay has illuminated some of the political motivations that must be considered before uncritical praise is rewarded to the PSC and subsequent progressive reforms. Namely, both dictators secured a loyal base of support among secularist women and oppressed rival power bases whilst maintaining Western funding. The lack of democracy and constraints on civil society also had the effect of preventing genuine grassroots women's activism. Whilst this disadvantaged any women's groups that did not wish

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to operate within boundaries defined by the state, Islamist women were directly persecuted by Ben Ali's regime. Symbolically and politically, veiled women and those associated with Ennahda were excluded. This was possible in part due to Ben Ali's use of the rhetoric that an Islamist regime would be detrimental to women's rights. Not only did secularist women share this fear, but international political actors were receptive to these concerns, seeing the dictator as beacon in a sea of backwards regimes.

The Tunisian experience following the Jasmine Revolution, with politics largely dominated by a conservative, religious party, suggests that Islamism was not the greatest threat to women's rights. On balance, the new democratic environment has been a major step forward for women. The opening-up of civil society has given many women's groups a genuine voice that they were previously denied. These groups have been active and successful in ensuring the preservation of the PSC and enshrining gender equality into the constitution. Ennahda has been receptive to popular sentiment with regards to women's issues and has pushed for greater female representation in parliament. In respecting the democratic process, more conservative elements of the Islamist party have largely been ignored and women's rights have continued to improve. Tunisia's parliamentary gender ratio also continues to outperform many Western, 'advanced' democracies.

However, as highlighted in the third chapter, Tunisia remains a far from equal society. Police harassment of women, a lack of media coverage and domestic violence has continued to detriment women across different social and economic backgrounds. This implies that patriarchal norms and institutional problems are a larger threat to women's rights than Islamism. Now that Islamist groups can operate freely, cooperation between different feminist organisations is necessary to tackle these issues.

In historicising Tunisia's post-Revolution experience, the division between secularist and Islamist groups has been traced back to state-feminism. This legacy of polarisation is hindering further progress on women's issues today. As highlighted by Debuysere, these groups must embrace the pluralistic environment whilst forming strategic alliances. In being pragmatic and overcoming animosity, these groups will be better equipped to tackle ongoing problems and empower women from a wider range of socio-economic groups. Furthermore, EU funding continues to favour secularist feminist organisations.

This essay has thus drawn two key conclusions. Firstly, contrary to the narratives promoted by Ben Ali and the West, the coming to power of an Islamist party has not been detrimental to women's rights. Secondly, that the divisions between secularist and Islamist women, a legacy of the former regime, are preventing further progress on women's issues.

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