

Women, Feminism and Politics in Post-Revolution Tunisia: Framings, Accountability and Agency on Shifting Grounds

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Abstract

During periods of flux generated by Tunisia's transition to democracy, all classes of women found the 'political opportunities' to push for change even if they did not necessarily share the same ambition or dream. The mobilisation, contestations, confrontations and struggle of Tunisian women in the post-revolution period alert us to the need to examine the factors behind this activism and the extent of its visibility. It is important to revisit the Tunisian women's movement in order to understand its interaction with other forms of power such as politics, religion, and class; as well as the extent to which such activism is a renegotiation of women's identities and status in post-revolution Tunisia. Indeed, the extent to which the rise of Islamism and its conservative gender ideology can affect feminist movement activities has been one of the main issues of debate. The divide between Tunisian women - secularist and feminist versus Islamist women (Nahdhawiyat) begs to be explored. This divide can be understood as the expected materialisation of binaries that manifestly reveal the hard task of pursuing accountability of feminist movements regarding broader and universal feminist issues of epistemology, agenda, and ethics within the new local context.

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emerging religious/indigenous/ethical and conservative discourse. It aims to shed light on the influence of such opposed frames and their impact on women's struggles for empowerment, and the accountability of both state and non-state actors.

Keywords: *feminism, Islamism, liberalism, elitism, conservatism, Tunisian women activism*

Introduction

During periods of flux generated by Tunisia's transition to democracy, all classes of women found the 'political opportunities' to push for change even if they did not necessarily share the same ambition or dream. The mobilisation, contestations, confrontations and struggles of Tunisian women during the post-revolution period alert us to the need to examine the factors behind their activism and the extent of its visibility. It is important to revisit the Tunisian women's movement in order to understand its interaction with other forms of power such as politics, religion, and class; as well as the extent to which such activism is a renegotiation of women's identities and status in post-revolution Tunisia. Indeed, the extent to which the rise of Islamism and its conservative gender ideology can affect feminist movement activities has been one of the main issues of debate. The divide between Tunisian women - secularist and feminist versus Islamist women (Nahdhawiyat) begs to be explored. This divide can be understood as the expected materialisation of binaries that manifestly reveal the hard task of pursuing accountability of feminist movements regarding broader and universal feminist issues of epistemology, agenda, and ethics within the new local context.

This article is an attempt to address the binary framings of secular/liberal/elitist/Westernised feminist movements against the re-emerging religious/indigenous/ethical and conservative discourse. It aims to shed light on the influence of such opposing frames and their impact on women's struggles for empowerment, and the accountability of both state and non-state actors.

A Historical Background to Emerging Binary Frames

The first Tunisian president Habib Bourguiba led the country after its independence from France in 1956 until his removal from office in 1987 by Zine El Abedine Ben Ali¹. Bourguiba chose to establish a modern educational and welfare system and promote women's rights rather than build a strong military and involve it in politics. Since 1956, the Personal Status Code² banned polygamy, granted equality in divorce proceedings and established a minimum age for and mutual consent in marriage. It granted women's rights to work, move, open bank accounts, and start businesses. Bourguiba insisted on the maintenance of women's rights through social institutions (see Charrad, 1997; 2007). Still, Bourguiba's regime continued to rely on basic Islamic tenets. While promulgating the CPS, his administration maintained the new was not a break with Islamic heritage, but 'a new phase in Islamic innovation, similar to earlier phases in the history of Islamic thought' (Charrad 2007, pp. 15-19).

It was the second president, Ben Ali, who promoted women's rights and continued to implement reforms favourable towards women. In 2007, the minimum age of marriage was raised from 15 to 18 for both men and women. In the 2000s Tunisia expanded women's rights with regard to marriage contracts, alimony, and custodial rights over children. These top down policies for women's rights were intended to portray Tunisia internationally as embracing modernity.

The polarisation between the secularists/liberalists/leftists and the Islamists became visible during the 1980s, and characterised the broader debate on political, economic, legal and social choices and policies. The debate included women's rights and other issues, framed within opposing visions that pitted the Western model of liberation against a conservative one rooted in the Islamic perspective. This divide involved supporters of 'modernity and contemporality' (*al-hadathawa-l-mu'asara*) on the one hand, and supporters of 'tradition and authenticity' (*al-turathwal-asala*) on the other. The debate over the role of language in society continues to elucidate this divide, even today. While leftists, modernists, and secularists believe French is more appropriate for the new context of nation state modernisation, Islamists and nationalists link Arabic language to religion, the 'sacred book', and collective identity. Hence, modernity and tradition compete for ideological influence and, at times, hegemonic political expression.³

Although the first generation of educated women were part of Muslim organisations during French 'rule', many of the post-independence figures were Western-educated and became involved in political life and social activism. Political leadership, and its only dominant party, championed women's involvement in the public and political spheres. State-sponsored women's organising contributed to this activity in the fields of education, health and other key sectors. A large number of women leaders travelled to Europe for education and training before returning to Tunisia and participating in this state agenda. However, in 1975 a 'reactionary' discourse emerged when President Bourguiba and his guests gathered during Ramadan for a scholarly lecture given by a female scholar. Instead of praising Bourguiba and the progressive Personal Status Code, renowned philosophy professor Hind Shalabi criticised key provisions of the Code and

called for a return 'to the fundamental foundations of [Islam]' (Toraifi, 2012). From the mid-seventies to the early eighties a divide between the state's project and the emerging Islamist movement became apparent. It initially involved universities whose students fascinated by communism and nationalism and those who were divided between those who supported the 1979 Iranian Revolution and Muslim Brotherhood activism in the region.

The divide impacted perceptions of accountability related to political order and social justice. The state accused Islamists of seeking to return to the dark ages, while Islamists attacked the government for uprooting Muslim women from their Islamic identity. The period was marked by repression and trials of several Islamist activists, and a widening social divide between supporters of a modernist view and those calling for the return to the rule of Islam. There was no emergence of an autonomous feminist movement, women's activism remained circumscribed within a national political conflict between the state and the dissident Islamist voices. Leftists were part of this debate; although they were also feared by the ruling party, they had no specific women's or feminist agenda.



(Demonstration organised by the Tunisian Association of Women Democrats (ATFD) for a secular Tunisia. Author Amel Grami (wearing blue). Photo: Lina ben Mheni).

In the 1990s, a new class of female scholars emerged the majority of whom were bilingual or trilingual and either were the product of the new educational system or educated in Europe. Many worked in the State's education and judicial institutions before engaging in political life. Although some were initially used by the dominant state-led feminism to fight radical Islamic movements, many became active on more than one level. They became increasingly visible in the public sphere through the media and political participation through the ruling party. However, some pointed out the low level of women's representation in the government, the parliament and civil society organisations and unions. Radhia Hadded, President of UNFT (National Union of Tunisian Women-the major State-sponsored female organisation), criticised the lack of freedom of expression and association. Amel ben Aba and Zeineb Cherni were among other feminist members of the communist organisation 'Perspectives' to denounce the state feminism.⁴ Despite his revolutionary ideas, Bourguiba chose to reinforce the more traditional Tunisian women's roles, often represented in his speeches as mothers, wives, and guardians of Islamic tradition.

Due to Tunisian system of education and educational policy in general, the field of religious studies mainly remained male-dominated. Feminists used the West as their frame of reference and held that it would be counter-productive to employ a local religious framework. Most of these women were more aligned with the left and not knowledgeable about religious issues,⁵ having a feminist liberal socialist view. However today, educated women are increasingly embracing an Islamic vision as a pathway to liberation and empowerment. Accordingly, their vision of Islam is often described as a way of life, a cultural force and consists in wearing the veil, trying to exemplify Islamic values, helping the marginalised and vulnerable people and promoting 'moderate Islam'. Along with this trend, a number of feminists have emerged who, because of their knowledge of Islam's

founding texts and heritage have chosen to work within the field of religion and cultural identity while simultaneously defending their feminist and women's rights agendas.

Thanks to an increasing reception of new approaches to humanities, and a rich and complex debate on religion, women and culture since the late 1990s, a new group of feminist scholars have focused on a reinterpretation of religious texts. This opening has created new venues for Tunisian feminist scholars who initially did not see themselves as 'Islamic feminists'.⁶ The deconstruction of religious discourses has been one of several strategies for addressing patriarchy and state feminism as well as contesting men's monopoly of religious discourse and knowledge.

The fact that the Islamic movement politicised religion and appropriated its norms and values influenced feminist scholars of the 1980s to act and react. They endeavoured to counter this discourse and defend themselves against charges of being Western pawns, implementing an imperialist agenda, lacking religious knowledge and legitimacy/authenticity. Some feminists, including myself, started to deconstruct religious discourses, explaining that women's status in Tunisia is related to not only the history of the reformist movement but also the history of Islamic thought in the country, which includes the Tunisian 'brand' of Maliki *fiqh*.

Being a Member of 'The Tunisian School of Islamic Thought'

As a university student, I was particularly influenced by the work of Nawal el-Saadawi and Fatima Mernissi. Both women illuminated for me the differential treatment of men and *women* in a *patriarchal society*, helping me to reflect on processes by which *women* are constructed as 'other'. Some of my male professors, too, encouraged students to learn more

about feminist theories and approaches, believing feminism was a tool for female advancement. At that time, I witnessed the rise of the Islamist movement and its confrontation with leftists/secularists at the university. Some young scholars chose to align themselves with either the Western feminist tradition (often influenced by second wave French feminism) or Islamist ideology. I preferred to focus on historical critical approaches to tradition influenced by the work of pioneers such as Nasr Hamed Abu Zayd and Mohamed Arkoun, among others.

Believing that women can participate in the effort to develop 'fresh' interpretations of religious texts (both Sunni and Shi'i), I decided to study 'feminist interpreters of the scripture' in different religions. As a member of an international interfaith research and dialogue group, 'GRIC' (Groupe Islamo -Chretien) I value openness towards, and cooperation between and among, women activists of various ideological inclinations. Since I was aware that the strategy of locating gender equality within religion has its limitations and may not result in equality for all women in the world, I decided to analyse women's history and experiences from different perspectives and through new lenses. Moreover, as a scholar and activist, I needed to reflect on the question of whether or not taking human rights conventions as a point of departure would be strategically more effective in advancing women's rights than the reinterpretation of religious texts. I finally chose to combine both strategies, combining different perspectives and working on the potential intersectionalities rather than established theoretical categories. As a result, today I situate my analysis of the legal relationship between the state and women within a framework of 'equality', and citizenship.⁷ Employing a multidisciplinary approach and taking gender as a category of analysis, I question religious texts and challenge religious scholars who defend a literal reading of the Quran and consider themselves authentic representatives of Islamic heritage. In fact, I was among the few women scholars who agreed to debate with men

representing official religious institutions in various Arab countries, which brought me recognition and a certain authority.

Today I identify myself as a feminist, but I am not among the secular feminists who view religion as fundamentally incompatible with feminism. Rather, I think that it is time Tunisian feminists take religion into account, recognise social change and different women's needs. Neila Sillini, Olfa Youssef, Zahia Jouiro, myself and other scholars as women who have

... reshaped the debate on the role of Islam in society and on Qur'anic hermeneutics. They play the role of public intellectuals detached from the Islamic feminism movement as conceived in other Muslim countries.' These scholars are known as 'the new reformists', and are now part of The Tunisian School of Islamic studies (*L'école Tunisienne d'islamologie*) founded by Abdel Majid Charfi,⁸ who holds there are different Islams and we should be aware of the diversity of Muslims' environments, ways of life and understanding of religious texts at different historical moments. The Moroccan, Abdu Fillali Ansary agrees, adding, 'Terms such as 'democracy,' 'human rights,' or 'civil society' do not exist in a vacuum, but travel, are translated to Arabic and become part of the political discourse (Ansary 2012, p. 10).

The establishment of modern university departments, following the Western model, has influenced this wave of scholars. They have focused on fields as diverse as sociology, political science, philosophy, philology, history and anthropology, leading them to use modern critical disciplinary tools to analyse their own societies and adopt a historical perspective towards contemporary issues. Feminist scholars trained in this vein seek the empowerment of women through knowledge and critical engagement rather than a repudiation of their cultures. Using modern disciplinary

methodologies, they deconstruct the classical discourse on interpretation elaborated mainly by men. This new Islamic reading of religious texts emphasises the role of context and history in interpretation, without questioning the texts' ontologically divine nature. These scholars also rigorously examine the Hadith tradition (sayings of the prophet Muhammed) and are unanimous in their demand for gender justice as integral to a just society.

Women's Activism and Binaries in the Aftermath of the Tunisian Revolution

Tunisian women have been transformed into symbols of the tensions between tradition and modernity, East and West, feminism and Islamism. The 'woman question' has become a symbolic terrain for political and ideological struggles in periods of instability – post-independence as well as post-revolution. During the years preceding the Tunisian revolution, growing anti-Bourguiba sentiment emerged among certain segments of the population despite a long standing reverence for the Personal Status Code.⁹ These dissenters felt his numerous achievements came at the expense of estrangement from Islamic identity, norms and authentic social values; a view shared by some women who defended the return to an authentic patriarchal order. In this sense, the divide among women reveals an important disparity regarding their status and the impossibility of reaching a unified voice or vision for the future of women in Tunisia.

Scholars like Sillini, Youssef and myself became more visible after the 2011 revolution and we participated in many talk shows, debates, and conferences. After being used by the authoritarian regime as a political tool, the media industry has transformed following the revolution. Tunisians began to discuss openly and freely: the role of religion (Shari'a law)¹⁰, the Personal Status Code, secularism, and other theoretical

subjects considered fundamental in the process of writing the new constitution as well as building a new civil and democratic state. Female scholars have used all the tools available: mainstream media (press, radio and television), social media (Facebook pages, YouTube, blogs) and publishing to play an important role in clarifying many religious concepts, including some used by Nahdha Party¹¹ deputies in the Constituent Assembly.¹² By using oral narratives, popular proverbs, life stories, and testimonies we have drawn attention to the forgotten or marginalised female voices that have shaped the history and culture of our society. In short, feminist scholars have helped to refashion the consciousness of the new generation from a gender perspective.

Scholars like Youssef, Sillini and myself are also committed to action in the public sphere and have targeted policy makers, as well as civil society to sensitise them to the high cost of excluding women from social reform and democratisation. As scholar-activists we demonstrate our commitment to accountability in the sense that, 'If being accountable involves being answerable for one's actions, the principle of accountability can be extended from formal to informal institutions and from collective to individual actors' (Cornwall 2017, p. 11).

Scholars have become increasingly involved in 'action research', merging intellectual and academic activities with militant action where appropriate. Action research is:

a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes... It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more

generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities (Reason and Bradbury 2001, p. 1).

When women engage in the interpretation of religious text and enter the public arena for debate or action, they create a different form of knowledge, using different tools for both its production and dissemination. The post-revolution Tunisian experience led to public acknowledgment of some secular feminist scholars as specialists on religious knowledge. Nonetheless, secularists are not yet ready to concede to the idea of a fully privatised religion, or the total separation between religion and politics.¹³

In Egypt, religious scholars at Al-Azhar University have been actively involved in the political restructuring currently ongoing in their country, calling incessantly for the reform of religious discourse. In Tunisia, however, scholars at the theological school Zeitouna University¹⁴ have remained outside the transformation process, despite a long reformist tradition, since most are supporters of the collapsed regime. After the revolution, some joined the Nahdha Party and a few became close to Salafist groups. The majority of women scholars from Zeitouna have shown no interest in playing a role during the transitional period. Many either express conservative views or reject the secular perspective in the belief that the gender perspective is a threat to Islam, and a Western heretical approach. Fatma Shakout, for instance, who has campaigned for a radical and conservative interpretation of Islam, dismissed the Personal Status Code as dissident from Shari'a. On many occasions, conservative voices have risen against progressive projects involving women such as the Parity Law, the suspension of reservation on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and other reforms. By looking at the Islamic past for a model, Zeitouna scholars

have sought to reproduce sexual difference as both a cultural and theological necessity.

After the revolution, the Personal Status Code was at the heart of the ideological conflict between feminists, secularists and extremist views (some members of En Nahdha and Salafists). Bourguibawas dismissed by Nahdha, CPR (Congress for the Republic, a centre-left secular political party) and the Salafists for imposing on Tunisian women a Western perspective that undermined their role in the construction of an authentic Islamic order. Secularists defended Bourguiba as ‘the liberator of women’, insisting on the need to advance women’s rights. The conflict highlighted a serious cleavage among scholars leading to a visible divide between those seeking an authentic lost Islamic order and those seeking to advance women’s universal human rights. The latter were criticised for being defenders of immoral and dissident practices, and in favour of LGBTQ rights.

The Impact of the Divide on the Political Process

After the revolution, some women activists decided to run for election in 2011. While women from Nahdhawere supported by their party, leading female figures from the democratic block¹⁵ and human rights activists (Saida Garrash and Boshra Bel Haj-Hamida among others) dealt with Islamists' manipulation of their image, stories and agendas. Although they had opposed the Ben Ali regime, these activists were dubbed traitors because they had built coalitions with other feminist groups around the world. They faced harassment and intimidation from Islamists and were subjected to police surveillance. Social networks dismissed them as liberal women of bad reputation and a disgrace to the ideal of a pure Islamic order.

In their electoral campaign, Islamist groups represented feminist activism as a threat to men's natural privileges and status in society, often portraying women activists as deviant and morally transgressive of a divine and ideal social order. Being secular, activists were portrayed as 'non-believers', Westernised women trying to impose Western values on Tunisian women, and thus to undermine their religious and cultural traditions. Attacks on rights activists were designed to undermine their legitimacy, an echo of previous regimes. Caricatures and cruel videos¹⁶ were widely shared by Nahdha supporters, portraying women activists as enemies of the *ummah* (Muslim society). As Manel Zouabi writes,

Soumaya [Ghannoushi, Nahdha leader] polarizes feminist activists from the start. She constructs them as the evil side and herself as the righteous one. ... Soumaya restricts secular feminist women's agency to inappropriate dress code, dictatorial elitism, and un-Islamic consumption of cigarettes and alcohol. These feminists, therefore, are transformed into a social repulsive threat (Zouabi, 2016).¹⁷

While feminists received regime support from the ruling government before the revolution, following the revolution Islamists saw them as supporters of the state. They treated them as if they are against Islam as a whole. Their objection to wearing the veil in public was considered not only as hostility against Islamic principles but also against democratic ones.¹⁸ Yet for many activists, the fight against fundamentalism was and continues to be a profoundly democratic struggle and inevitably associates them with a regime that has held a similar discourse on women's rights.

As a result of the Islamist campaign, women's rights in general have become closely associated with Bourguiba and Ben Ali, both of whom are seen as dictators and enemies of religion. Islamists often fail to grasp what

activists understand - not all acts against the state are acts of resistance, and not all acts supporting the state signal acquiescence. Because of the campaign, most feminist candidates experienced harassment and violence in public. Men from various political parties (Islamists as well as leftist and secular) used different methods to silence women's voices, devalue them and perpetuate stereotypes, confirming political parties to be 'private clubs for men' (UNDP 2012, p. 14).

Islamist parties (Nahdha, Ansar Asharia and Hizb Attahrir) have a negative perception of women's rights; they reject family laws as a secular action against Shari'a and believe the idea of women's empowerment has already gone too far and has disempowered men. Some political leaders from En Nahdha close to the Salafists believe the moral and even economic ills of society are the result of estrangement from Islamic cultural heritage and laws.

To get voters' support, Islamists used the narrative of oppressed veiled women as victims of the former authoritarian regime. They published documentaries and interviews with some mothers and wives of prisoners to evoke people's empathy and support for Islamist women as bearers of an authentic moral and political order that had been repressed. Although the veil was no longer considered a problematic issue in the new political context in the sense that women were free to wear it, Islamists provoked a debate about its earlier ban under Ben Ali. They accused feminists of being accomplices to the repression Islamists had faced. Thus, the veil itself has become an iconic sign of difference (both political and ideological). This in itself was a strategic move altering the visual, and therefore the ideological landscape. The first legislative elections after the revolution gave Nahdha Party a majority of 89 seats. There were 49 women elected to the Constituent Assembly out of 217 representatives

(equating to 26.3 per cent). Nahdhawi women MPs were a majority among women in the parliament, clearly identifiable by their dress code, unified discourse and attitudes.

Rather than normalising religion as one identity point among many, or as a complex category that often defies easy characterisation, the identification of religion has become a fetish and the starting point from which social relations are enacted and from which institutional policy is developed (Beaman 2013, p. 147). Nahdhawi women defended their party as a civil, 'moderate political party'; however, they made use of their emotional experiences as veiled women. This positioning was constituted by dissociating themselves from 'feminists', their discourses and their way of doing activism. Not all women MPs supported the feminist agenda; feminists were dismissed as representative of only a small class of liberal Tunisian women, acting against the authentic values of Islam and indigenous culture. Nahdhawi women never denounced the campaign against feminist activists nor the death threats from some preachers.¹⁹ During the process of drafting the new Constitution 2011-2014, En Nahdha supporters verbally and physically attacked many activists for so-called violations of Islamic morality. In this sense, Islamism in contemporary, post-revolutionary Tunisia is much more complex than just piety and virtuous bodily practices.

The presence of women on Nahdha's electoral list helped convince people that, against all established perceptions and its proven track record, the Islamist party was 'women-friendly' and believed in women's ability and eligibility to lead and act in all fields. On many occasions, Ghannouchi assured women that his party would neither alter nor want to cancel any of the legal or social achievements of women. He also gave assurances that his party would not challenge the law on polygamy or impose the veil on

women. The supposed political enfranchisement of women was used as a progressive front, and once again a political leader tried to reserve the right to decide on women's rights. Hence the demand for women's rights was instrumentalised in political Islam as well as anti- Islamist discourses.

The years 2011 to 2013 witnessed a shift under the new Islamist government towards a more explicit state-led anti-women's rights agenda. Some Nahdhawi political leaders expressed their will to Islamise the country and society.²⁰ Rached Ghannouchi suggested holding a referendum about the Personal Status Code to reconsider the clauses that he believed contradicted Islam, such as the prohibition of polygamy and the right to adoption, while some of his deputies proposed imposing Shari'a law. To convince people of the necessity of Shari'a law, an unveiled woman deputy from Nahdha, Souad Abderrahim, spoke out against Ben Ali's policies and gave an impassioned tirade against liberal secular feminists for calling for measures to protect and support single mothers (Kouichi, 2011). Moreover, she defended the need for their children to receive social and legal protection but pointed out that they should not be treated legally on equal terms with married women. 'We do not want to normalize children outside marriage' (El Ouazghari, 2014). It is important to note that the En Nahdha party decided to recruit some unveiled women and give them importance. In this sense Nahdha women are not seen as associated with spiritual but with political Islam. Religion is a political agency rather than a religious one.

The long history of the instrumentalisation of women for political reasons has made many Tunisians aware of the real incentive behind the Islamist party's promotion of women. In fact, the party's real attitude towards women was made clear when it suggested reforming of Article 28 of the draft constitution, defining women as 'complementary' to men.

Thousands of people protested against this move on 13 August 2012, Women's Day in Tunisia.

Many actions such as violence against women activists (Arfaoui and Moghadam 2016, p. 643), the call for segregation, and attempts by men to control women's behaviour in public, were sufficient evidence that an established lifestyle was being challenged (Sgrena, 2011; Wolf and Lefevre, 2012). There were nationwide protests against any plan to revoke constitutional rights. As John L. Esposito and François Burgat (2003) pointed out, 'Islamists do not intend to dismantle modernity but to Islamize it, to create an alternative modernity' (Esposito and Burgat 2003, p. 65).

Women's Resistance



(Author Amel Grami (left) and a university colleague Mounira Remadi (right) demonstrate with thousands of Tunisians for equality, not 'complementarity' between men and women on National Women's Day in Tunis. 13 August 2012. Photo: Amel Grami.)

It is evident that there is a polarisation of issues related to women in post-revolution Tunisia. This is visible in the binarism and dichotomies that emerge from the debates and perception of women in the public and

political spheres. Many Tunisians have adopted the idea that revolution is not a one-off moment, but requires momentum and continuous resistance. The gap between women's agendas being debated within the Constituent Assembly and civil society organisations has led to head-on-collisions. The result is an increasing polarisation between the 'Islamists' and 'secularists'. Civil society and other women's rights actors hold hostile political actors accountable for any regression or cancellation of rights that women have hitherto enjoyed. This accountability has become a weapon for a trading off between political parties at the Constituent Assembly. Statements about female excision made by a deputy from Nahdha, Habib Ellouz, angered a few Constituent Assembly women who demanded an apology. Nadia Chaâbane, elected member from Al Massar reacted by stating, 'I am surprised that the ANC [National Constituent Assembly] and, by that, I mean the presidency of the ANC, has not yet ruled on this issue. It is responsible for enforcing the law and ensuring its compliance, and so far, it has rather kept silent'²¹.

The old divide between urban and rural women and educated and non-educated women has gradually been replaced by another divide between Islamist and secular women. There was a clear divide between the large number of Nahdhawi women and those from other political parties. However, women from left and progressive parties constituted a progressive block and had a unified voice thanks to their outstanding knowledge of and background in women's and human rights activism at both the local and international levels. Some established women's organisations such as AFTURD and the Association of Tunisian Women Democrats (ATFD) have long lobbied for legal reform, such as the parity law, and a law to end violence against women. Learning from the experiences of women's movements in the region, Tunisian activists have acquired tools of resistance. Many became famous for their outspoken

views on the media; other politically active women have also stepped forth to defend the cause.

The debate over the issue of ‘complementarity’ in the new constitution dramatically highlighted such divergence on women’s issues. Nahdha proposed,

The State guarantees the protection of women rights and the promotion of their gains, as a real partner of men in the mission of the homeland building, and the roles of both should complement each other within the household ... The State guarantees the extermination of all kinds of violence against women. (Draft Tunisian Constitution, see McNeil, 2012)

Many Nahdha members were convinced that men and women are equal before God but that they should indeed have different roles within society, especially with regard to family obligations. Others stressed the privileged status given to women in the Shari’a namely through instructions on how mothers, wives and daughters should be by men. Beyond being a linguistic battle, the conflict revealed sharp differences and a tendency to pave the way for the adoption of Shari’a principles that see women as supplementary to men, rather than as full and equal partners.

This binary revealed two frames of reference for women in Tunisia. One a push toward full and legal equality between men and women, and another that sought to establish a softened moral agenda of instituting difference. Some Constituent Assembly members launched a broad protest movement²² along with civil society organisations (Democratic Women’s Association, Tunisian Women’s Association for Research and Development, Tunisian General Labour Union, Human Rights League and others). It culminated in a large march on August 13 2012, which rallied

7,000 women and men through downtown Tunis to protest against women's perceived complementarity to men in Article 28 (Charrad and Zarrugh 2014, p. 236). By pushing politicised women to demand their rights from within a religious framework, En Nahdha leaders were obviously trying to alter the discourse on gender equality and give it a meaning compliant with the religious principles of natural inequality.

Luckily, after this huge demonstration on the street and popular pressure, the first women's battle was won and the term 'complementarity' was removed from the constitution, but statements by some women Constituent Assembly members revealed the protest did not end the divide. Accountability was a weapon used by activists who accused those in power of betraying the trust given to them. Any lost right meant further polarisation. Although Ghannoushi declared his party would not change the status of women in Tunisia or the Personal Status Code, some party members opposed parity law, and argued for gender segregation at school. Moreover, some Islamists spoke of overturning the ban on polygamy or tolerating 'religious marriages' that would enable a man to have more than one wife simultaneously or to 'marry' one 'temporarily' (Moghadam, 2016).

The consequence of this battle and the impact of the fall of Morsi regime in Egypt on Nahdha strategies was important. By placing demands on women deputies to function as public representatives of the 'moderate Islam' they represent, Nahdha tried to show that Tunisian Islamists were different. They claimed to be preaching a moderate political Islam, neither incompatible with democracy, nor hostile to the modern status of women in society. Nahdhawi women MPs maintained that they enjoy freedom of action, but they did not show any independence from party policies, decided mostly by a male-dominated central committee. They did not adopt, individually or as a group, any position championing women's roles

and rights in political or social spheres. This shows the extent to which the political discourse and agendas remained divorced from visible action. The contrast between Nahdha's advocacy of women's equal participation as citizens in the political arena and its efforts to limit women's rights as individuals (as reflected in Abderrahim's comments, and in Nahdha's proposal to define women as complementary to men) partly reflects divisions within the party. It also suggests that the party's male cohort make all the decisions on the matter of women's rights.

The rise of Islamist power revitalised the women's movement in post-revolution Tunisia. Fear, anger, uncertainty and doubt pushed many women to join demonstrations and to raise their voices. More importantly, those feelings were fertile ground for productive and deep dialogues about the future of Tunisian women, feminist activism and feminist accountability. This, however, shifted the focus on accountability from State responsibility and duty to that of civil society and its activist leaders. Yet this situation has helped women voters to emerge as a political force to reckon with. The 2014 elections marked the advance of the newly constituted liberal Nidaa Tounis at the expense of Nahdha, a victory decided primarily by women's votes.

Just as there is a politics behind the vocabulary of activism, there are also multiple strategies, forms and techniques of resistance. Many feminist activists have patched together events, convinced others of common objectives, and circulated knowledge about opportunities and tactics. They have also used Facebook, Twitter and other social media to promote societal change and gender equality. Associations like 'Chaml' have become prominent, with an aim to renew feminist discourse based on contemporary realities, mounting conservatism, yet aware of the pitfalls of the inherited past. 'Chaml' seeks to create a space where the intersections of various perspectives of women's identities are expressed.

From these intersectional identities, they can create a diverse, plural form of feminism that is not shaped by Ben Ali or the media, but by women themselves, through their words, stories, expressions, and interactions with different feminist ideas in online spaces. 'They do not want feminism to be defined at the top, because it does not represent the diversity of women in Tunisia, so they use online spaces to define and conceptualise a new form of grassroots Tunisian feminism' (Mulcahey 2016, p. 63).

Activists are aware that new media is creating a new sense of accountability toward a public increasingly challenging in its demands for greater transparency in state decisions and policies. Feminists have used these media outlets to make the state more accountable, as well as for outreach in an attempt to adjust negative perceptions of feminism. They have expressed their concerns and voiced their responsibility for the advancement of women's causes and rights, giving their sense of accountability a social dimension shaped by and reflecting alternating alignments of politics, cultures, social norms and institutional expectations.

Many feminist practitioners and scholars have questioned whether their work is feminist enough. Others have started to draw attention to feminist accountability and expressed their discomfort and hesitation. As the feminist Allen (2001) asked: 'What is my responsibility to the people whose lives I am studying? What do I owe them for giving me the opportunity to get inside their lives? What do I want to give back?'²³ If we agree that reflexivity demands continuous self-criticism, we can understand why some associations have adjusted their feminist agendas in the aftermath of the revolution. They have focused on the issue of social justice and have done a lot of work on rural areas. It is obvious that the uncomfortable feelings from feminist exchanges have furthered their

thinking and encouraged them to work toward more accountable practices.

Aware that the digital world is increasingly a space of political and social struggle, where individuals and institutions use social media to project their voices and expand their sphere of influence, women from En Nahdha party have used this platform to convince women to integrate the political vision of the party and to work for its agenda. Some of them try to focus on issues related to the construction of religious identity and to help young women to be 'good Muslims'. What is missing in Islamist online activism is the debate on women's associations' accountability and a serious debate on the future of the Tunisian women's movement.

Despite increased women's activism on both sides, challenges to the state's corruption, arbitrary arrests, and systematic injustices remains limited. There have been few attempts to build coalitions in the parliament around women's rights and advancement. Some Tunisian women feel the need to bridge divergent discourses and share the idea of Margot Badran that '[t]oday, in the final push to achieve equality in the family in Muslim societies, Muslim reformers as secular feminists and Islamic feminists need to work cooperatively more than ever before. Non-Muslims with knowledge, insights, and experience who share concerns about living together with Muslims in the same families and societies need to be an integral part of the debates and activist initiatives' (Badran 2009, p. 7). But to date the Tunisian experience has not yet meaningfully disrupted the classic yet artificial secular/religious binary.

Conclusion

The experiences of women in post-revolution Tunisia show the extent to which binaries and frames may shift. But what such binaries confirm is essential to any feminist action, rooted in the past, responding to emerging complex realities, and eager to think of the future as mutually constructed. They also confirm that women remain agents and a force to be reckoned with, yet they still have much to do to liberate their action from tutelage and dependence. Achieving autonomy and acquiring free will have to start with dismantling residual forms of accountability, instrumentalised and invested with inherited crippling ideologies. State feminism of the pre-revolution period used accountability to ensure the loyalty of women by appropriating their cause whilst ensuring that the state remained the real actor. Any form of progress or achievement that women enjoy is developed using the existing male structures of decision-making. Although Tunisian women have enjoyed political and civil rights that women in other countries of the region envy, such rights have always been used to disarm feminists and cripple their agency.

Post-revolution Tunisia has shifted the responsibility and accountability from the hands of the state to that of the lawmakers and civil actors. The polarisation that emerged involved a resurfacing of the conservative Islamist agenda that obliged the progressive, modernist block to unite around the issue of women's rights. The battle around concepts was but the visible tip of the iceberg. The divide involved a clear collision between two ideologies and worldviews. The battle that women won marked their entry on the stage not as civil activists but as a political force that ended with changing the balance of power through a massive vote by women who chose to support a liberal candidate. This shows the extent to which women's activism is essentially political. There is no alternative to political involvement.

The post-revolution events helped shape a new female agency rooted in a history of state feminism and shaped by the divide between progressive and conservative societal projects. Throughout this process, the history of feminist action and activism in Tunisia reveals the extent to which the process is dynamic and volatile requiring a continuous rallying of forces, education, and appropriation of language and spaces of decision-making. Accountability is not necessarily in the hands of the same power structure but is changing location and meaning. Throughout this process, female agency is struggling under the weight of changing structures of power and authority. To emerge fully, it needs an 'enabling environment' and the construction of a collective agency aware of its weight and determinant role in challenging authority. Its liberation is in educating women, in making them aware of the need to change location in terms of framing issues, to transgress the rule of male domination and all its residual forms. This is happening at various levels. For the first time, two elected presidents of Tunisian universities are women and in some university councils, women now hold the majority. There is no doubt that the future of Tunisia is in women's hands. They are aware of the impact of accountability on social relations and on the configurations of power.

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Women and Terrorism', Tunis, Meskiani, 2017 (with the collaboration of the journalist Monia Arfaoui).

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Notes

¹ Ben Ali was President of Tunisia 1987-2011.

² 'On 13 August 1956, less than five months after the proclamation of independence from French colonial rule, the Republic of Tunisia promulgated the Code of Personal Status (CPS). A set of laws regulating marriage, divorce, custody, and inheritance, the code profoundly changed family law and the legal status of women. Together with the Turkish civil code of 1926, the Tunisian CPS of 1956 represented a pioneering body of legislation that reduced gender inequality before the law in an Islamic country', <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/tunisia-personal-status-code>

³ In 2012 a controversy sparked by a member of Tunisia's Constituent Assembly having difficulty communicating in standard Arabic reopened the debate about the role of language in national identity and the meaning of 'Tunisianity', see Guellouz (2016). Feminism and religion started clashing after the nationalist movement moved towards a more patriarchal and culturally traditional model that included religious language and symbolism.

⁴ The term 'state feminism' or alternatively 'institutional feminism', was employed under Bourguiba and Ben Ali's regimes as a tool to promote gender equality and women's rights to exclude the alternative politics of independent feminist activists.

⁵ Scholar activist Khadija Ben Hasine scholar argues, 'Why should we return to the religious text, spend our lives reading and re-reading this text, stretching it like an elastic to see what it will allow us?' To use the Koran as a reference is to 'give up on the universal, on our constitution, on international treaties' and to engage with fundamentalists who reduce religion to talk of 'nothing else but women's bodies' (Lindsey, 2017).

⁶ Some scholars define themselves as feminists, some call themselves human rights activists while others see themselves as scholars/activists. Some shun labels altogether. After the revolution, Olfa Youssef and Zahia Jouiro declared themselves part of the 'Islamic feminism movement', while Neila Sillini and I define ourselves as 'Muslim feminists'.

⁷ Unlike Charrad, who often draws her discussions into the theoretical, both Chekir and I analyse 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, we both pair discussions of progress with diagnoses of remaining inequalities, citing the distance between the three points of law, implementation, enforcement, and practice (Petkanas 2013).

⁸ For more on Charfi see Charfi (2004), Benzine (2004), Ansary (2003), and Zeghal (2008).

⁹ The Personal Status Code was passed by the first President of the Tunisian Republic, Habib Bourguiba, on 13 August 1956. It was sympathetic to the spirit of feminist egalitarianism and gave women some essential rights.

¹⁰ For more see Colombo (2015), Debuysere (2015), Grami (2015), Johansson-Nogués (2013), Labidi (1998), Tais (2015), Tchaïcha and Arfaoui (2012) and Zamiti-Horchani (1983).

¹¹ Formed in the early 1980s as an Islamic opposition movement, EnNahdhais is one of Tunisia's oldest and most well-organised political parties. Persecuted by the former regime, many leaders lived in exile or were imprisoned until the 2011 Revolution.

¹² For example, Olfa Youssef is very active on Facebook and YouTube, raising awareness about liberties, commenting on Al-Nahdha, the hegemony of the Ulama, and discussing violence against women and homosexuality.

¹³ Petkanas (2013) argues the dominant narrative of the autonomous women's movement in Tunisia is secular feminism. 'It focuses exclusively on a secular, humanist, and internationalist discourse of feminism enshrined in organisations 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' (2013, p. 6).

¹⁴ Zeitouna University has trained theologians since the eighth century. In the late 1950s, Bourguiba, dismantled and replaced it with a simple faculty of Shari'a and Theology. Under both Bourguiba and Ben Ali some forms of religiosity were excluded from public space, and Zeitouna was only able to continue Islamic instruction under close state observation. Recently, most of its scholars opposed the presidential initiative to reform inheritance law. Nouredine al-Khadmi, a former Minister of Religious Affairs and a professor at Zeitouna, said any other interpretation of the Quranic law was impossible (The Guardian, 2017).

¹⁵ Such as Ettakattol Party, The Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties (one of the secular coalition partners within the Islamist-led government), [Ettajdid \(or Renewal\) Movement](#), and The Movement of Socialist Democrats.

¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3yfP2JC4WoY> (Accessed 12 February 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FJBKqeGpao> (Accessed 12 February 2018).

¹⁷ On many occasions Soumaya Ghannoushi insulted feminist activists (Ghannoushi 2011). For more on the use of Facebook to insult activists see Zouabi (2016).

¹⁸ In 2006, Saida Akremi, a well-known Tunisian human rights lawyer, filed a lawsuit on behalf of a teacher contesting the scarf's ban in state buildings and schools. She won, but the government would not enforce the ruling throughout the country on the grounds that it would 'divide rather than unite' (Tchaïcha and Arfaoui 2012).

¹⁹ Two days after I gave a lecture on gender equality and inheritance law in 2016, some preachers declared in their Friday sermon that I was an apostate.

²⁰ Tunisians, like Egyptians, Moroccans and others have been exposed over the last decade to radical religious discourse and misogynic attitudes. In fact, one consequence of globalisation and the rapid growth of satellite TV channels in the new millennium is giving conservative radical preachers a powerful pulpit from which they can reach Muslims all over the world and sensitise them to a more conservative interpretation of Islam.

²¹ Interview with Nadia Chaaban, by *African Manager* (https://africanmanager.com/site_eng/author/african-manager/?v=79cba1185463, 29 March 2013).

²² Selma Baccar, a theatre director, and member of the Constituent Assembly.

²³ We adopt K. R. Allen's definition: '[F]eminist accountability is expansive, non-quantifiable, collective, and engenders deep reflexivity, critical thought, and fundamentally troubles the status quo' (2001, p. 806).

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