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Gender Justice in Post-Ben Ali Tunisia: Women and Political Participation

By: Wafa Ben Hassine

While the status of women in Tunisia has long been touted as a point of pride for the country, the success story is not nearly as rosy as some would like it to be. The actual degree of opportunity provided for women and their subsequent level of political agency is low, from the municipal level all the way up to the ministerial. The same reality is seen in the partisan sphere. Surveying Tunisia's political landscape today can be somewhat of a challenge due to the increasingly complex security and economic challenges that have come with Tunisia's regime change. However, it does not take much to notice the absence of women in agency-wielding positions. This article will argue that Tunisia's current institutional arrangement, which is in a state of transition, is not conducive to the inclusiveness of women as instrumental political actors. An overview of women's participation on the municipal and ministerial levels, as well as through the dynamics of national political parties, will be presented to demonstrate the low levels of female political participation.

Noura* is a 29 year-old woman who works in a small, rural municipality located along Tunisia's coastline. She has started working for the mayor's office ever since early March 2011 - a mere two months following former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali's ouster. She was the only woman employed as a full-time public servant in the municipality. At the time of speaking to her, she was considering leaving her job and finding another elsewhere. "There are many projects that we need to focus on, even in our small village, and the municipality's leadership is not even giving me the chance to express my opinions. I am dismissed most of the time, at the expense of our town's children that really need help." She told me how the local stadium desperately needs flooring and fencing, and how 760 members of the town's unemployed population hold a college degree. She also informed me that she was working on a survey that assessed the elementary and middle school's dire situation. "Our children are suffering in school - they do not have a proper learning environment nor do they have the adequate tools necessary to understand their classes. Most of the time, their parents are illiterate too, so they cannot help them with their homework at night either."

Noura's survey has been ignored on several occasions, and she feels her role is largely expected to be one of blind servility to the mayor and the rest of his administrative team. She felt like she was being treated with contempt, and was being actively denied the opportunity to serve her community. Further, as the only woman on the team, Noura faced many culturally-rooted pressures from local residents. Noura said that she faced opposition from her community whenever she would advocate for an issue or project that the mayor himself did not advocate for. She had difficulty finding her voice in an environment that frowned on her participation and perpetuated her exclusion.

Noura has since left the municipality and has instead begun working with a regional non-profit organization. Unfortunately, she is one of the countless of women who work in the public sector and whose voice is given very little attention or importance. The issues that she continuously brought to the table while she was employed at the municipality are issues that many men have historically ignored: children's rights, education, and women's health. Thus, excluding women from the public political sphere contributes to the very same problems that women, in whatever official capacity they hold, may attempt to mitigate. Gender stratification in politics continues to cyclically sustain and provoke the issues that women have long attempted to resolve.

Men constitute a privileged group in the Tunisian political class, and this cannot be better observed than in the working dynamics of today's political parties. While, a sizable number of Tunisian political parties have women serving on their executive boards or political bureau, their true role is limited. Those few women who wield some political influence are subsequently exposed to greater media scrutiny than their male counterparts. Maya Jribi, a female politician who was appointed as the secretary general of the Progressive Democratic Party in 2006, is now the secretary general of the Republican Party following the PDP's merger with other centrist-left leaning parties. She is the first woman to hold such a position in Tunisia's recent history. Jribi has been assaulted on several occasions. Most recently, on April 15th, 2012, she was [chased down](#) by a mob as she attempted to enter her vehicle and drive off. Jribi has also been subject to frequent harassment, both in her personal life and while on air (TV, radio).

The Congress for the Republic's (CPR) Samia Abbou, a member of the Constituent Assembly and well-respected human rights defender, has enjoyed popularity among the public for quite some time. However, when praise is attributed to her, she is labeled as a "woman that is just like a man." The cultural gender

bias in this seemingly benign statement are important to make note of: to qualify as a respected figure, one must act, or appear to act, as a man. Abbou is also constantly linked to her husband, a former minister and current secretary general of the CPR, Mohamed Abbou. Association with her husband greatly aids in legitimizing her image with the Tunisian public - and this holds especially true in the more rural areas, where she is simply known as "Mohamed Abbou's wife."

Jribi and Abbou are both very opinionated, outspoken feminists, who could potentially encourage, empower, and even directly recruit other women to be politically active. Yet, due to the sociocultural constraints mentioned above their efforts are not being institutionally supported by their respective parties. Jribi and Abbou's efforts to develop their constituencies are undermined, and even hindered, by their parties' lack of female empowerment strategies. Sadly, most Tunisian parties overlook the importance of women's participation within their very own internal workings. To date, no explicit mechanisms to increase women's participation within decision-making spaces has been instituted by either party.

In Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali's cabinet, there is a total of two women (out of 25) serving as ministers: Sihem Badi serving as the Minister of Women and Family Affairs and Memia Benna serving as the Minister of the Environment. These two positions have been historically held by women. Male dominance persists in all higher ranking ministerial posts, such as the Ministry of Defense, Interior, or Foreign Affairs. Because politically active women have historically been confined to focus only women's issues, when women are promoted to a higher governmental position, it is usually one of the two ministries mentioned above. Women are not trusted to lead in a top ministerial post.

Some efforts have been made to close the gender stratified opportunity gap. On September 24th, 2012, Tunisia joined 12 other countries in launching the Equal Futures Partnership. The [stated goal](#) of the partnership is "for women to participate fully in public life and to lead and benefit from inclusive economic growth." As a founding member, the government of Tunisia promises to reaffirm the principles of equality between the sexes, including in the political sphere, and to "to promote and protect women's human rights and fundamental freedoms." Yet, the government has made many similar promises in the past - and the words remain, for the most part, empty.

Women in Tunisia are leading a battle against many factors, the most prominent of which is the established male-dominant cultural apparatus. Today, efforts to challenge the political establishment's status quo are met with resistance, arrogance, and sometimes violence. Such reactions cast a grim shadow on, if not eclipse altogether, Tunisian women's acquired gains in the political sphere. Given the decisiveness of the moment, it is no overstatement to suggest that women and men alike must take particular, directed, and affirmative measures to properly re-structure society in a way that explicitly facilitates the inclusiveness of women. Such directed measures include: women-focused Ministry of Employment projects (micro-loans, training workshops, etc), the development of an explicit policy agenda that facilitates the inclusion of women in everyday political life, and political parties redistributing and balancing power in the heart of their organizations - both in the urban and rural regions.

Without the genuine inclusion of women into the political fabric of the country, Tunisia's entire reform process is seriously compromised. The equitable participation of women in politics and government must be one of the highest priorities for the Tunisian government, and a thorough *de novo* assessment is in order.

*Name changed to protect individual's privacy.