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In the name of democracy - What secularists and women have to lose in the Tunisian elections

Saturday 22 October 2011, by [HELIE LUCAS Marieme](#) (Date first published: 22 October 2011).

On the eve of the elections in Tunisia that will shape the future of the country and even that of the Arab world as well, Western do-gooders and Islamic fundamentalists hand in hand rejoice in 'Tunisia's first free elections' and its access to 'democracy'. The recent history of Iran and Algeria have taught us better... And women in Tunisia watch in horror the rise of Muslim fundamentalists, as a possible replication of the Algerian scenario of 1989.

'Until the Ayatollahs came to power in 1979, Tehran, Istanbul, Beirut, Cairo, Amman, Damascus, Baghdad, Algiers, Tunis and any city in Morocco and even Tripoli, had among their populations the most secular elites.... How was the secular stamp rubbed out in most of these societies in the space of three decades?', asks Saeed Naqvi in an article ('Turmoil in the Arab World: Attack on Secularism') published on October 20 in the *Deccan Herald*.

The answer is simple: 'By terror', by terrorizing dissenters,- as we have seen in Algeria, with 200 000 victims in ten years time in the 90s. As was the case in Iran. As is now going on in Tunisia.

Since the self immolation of young Mohamed Bouzidi on December 18, 2010, in protest against the situation of jobless Tunisian youth - moreover harassed by the police -, what are the facts that the international community and the Left at large chose to ignore or underplay ? The euphoria of 'the people's revolution' systematically eludes the main question: who are 'the people'? What are the political forces at work within it. Who were they, who are they in Tunisia today? Let us judge by their actions.

It took them less than a month after the first anti Ben Ali demonstrations to appear in the open:

Saturday, Jan 29: While thousands of citizens march peacefully 'for equality and citizenship' and to demand secularism, here is a first hand testimony published on face book by a woman demonstrator; she describes how a group of youth 'headed by a bearded man', started chasing peaceful demonstrators, especially women; she herself is sexually assaulted and 'beaten up with the wooden stick of a flag', her colleagues are 'beaten on their back while they try and flee, their banners are torn and some are slapped in the face'. She states: 'These thugs demonstrated that these extremists are in no way the 'democrats or moderates' their leaders pretend they are, as is said in all the media'.

On March 21, Ms Belhadj Hamida, a jurist at the Cassation Tribunal in Tunis, and co-founder of the AI Tunisian section, participating in a conference in Algiers on women in the Tunisian revolution, declares that 'What An Nahda says in public is a far cry from what it says in small meetings'. She denounces the 'double speak' of its representative. She adds that fundamentalists 'put in question the personal status code which was adopted in 1956'. She warns that 'the An Nahda movement is growing bigger everyday and it already controls all the mosques in the country'. She also stresses

that it 'has financial means that no other party enjoys'.

Saturday April 9, ten thousands activists and supporters greet and acclaim Ghannouchi at the airport when he comes back from exile in London. He immediately starts touring Tunisia, holding public meetings in mosques. Let us note in passing that London housed numerous Algerian fundamentalists, and even refused for years to extradite to France one of the accused in the Paris metro bombing. Numerous fundamentalist publications were issued from the UK and spread all over Europe and the Arab world.

April 20, A large group of women's organisations publishes a *Women's Manifesto for Equality and Citizenship*, in which they state their position 'against the reactionary voices which get at the rights that women already acquired, under the pretext of religious and cultural specificities, and which lock up identity in a fixed prescribed form'.

In May, the popular café Le Paon (The Peacock) is attacked and devastated. Similar attacks take place on brothels in Tunis, Sousse, Kairouan, 'in order to purify our cities'. (As a reference point, let us be reminded that attacks on women workers, branded prostitutes because they live alone without a guardian (*wali*) and earn their living away from their families, to 'purify the city' and 'chase the devil out of the city' were conducted since 2001 in southern cities of Algeria and continue to this day).

In Ariana, salafists raid the beach in Raouad, forbidding women to wear swimming suits.

In Ibn Sina (ourskirts of Tunis), while families are celebrating the successes of their children in the baccalaureat exam (end of secondary school), groups of men armed with machettes forcibly enter houses in order to check whether alccool is served on the table.

After Yousra Fraws, lawyer and founding member of the AI Tunisian section, speaks on Al Jazeera, she receives more than 1200 hate messages on face book.

June 20: tourists are forbidden to access the Okba Ibn Nafaa mosque in Kairouan.

June 28, attacks on unveiled women, artists, bars, brothels, and hospital Charles Nicolle.

The group Echami, that brings together 80 organizations supporting freedom of expression, organizes a series of events titled ' Hands Off Creative People' to support artists targeted by fundamentalists.

On July 1st in Kairouan, the Tunisian flag is lowered and salafists mount their black flag

In Menzel Bourguiba (north of Tunis) several hundred fundamentalists attack a police station, beat up policemen, five of them seriously, and leave with looted arms and weapons. (A strategy that Algerian fundamentalists used since the 70s in order to prepare their armed uprising)

On July 2, An Nahda calls for demonstrations after the Great Friday Prayer in Sfax and Sidi Bouzid.

A sit in is organized on the steps of the City theater in Tunis to warn against 'fundamentalism, extremism and violence'. Banners say: 'No to Algeria of the 90s', ' against any religious extremism', 'no to violence, yes to tolerance'.

On July 3, activists from the communist party (POCT) are physically assaulted by Islamists to prevent them from holding a meeting in a sports hall in the poor suburb At'tadhamoun. Communists are called ' miscreants' and aggressors chant that ' secularism is kofr'.

July 4: Lawyers are badly beaten up by Islamists that came to the Tribunal to demand the liberation of their fellow 'brothers' accused in the attack of Afric'Art cinema. The redactor in chief of the daily paper *Ach Chaab* (Left) declares : 'As such things are repeated so much and grow each time, one is scared to witness, plain and simple, the rise of fundamentalism'

July 7, In the Zitouna mosque in Tunis, in front of hundreds of believers, the ulemas launch the attack on Nadia El Fani and call on the government to prevent 'attacks against the sacredness of God, and the dignity of the Tunisian people and its arabo-Muslim identity'.

On the same day, about a thousand people take to the streets in protest against fundamentalists' violence against artists and intellectuals.

July 12: In poor suburbs of cities, En Nahda activists openly claim that a war is needed between believers and 'impious' people. Islamists take all possible advantages from the new freedom that was allowed after the fall of the Ben Ali regime. Everyday in the At'thamoun mosque, a self proclaimed veteran of the Afghan and Soudan wars, delivers its teaching to children. These self proclaimed imams are not even known to the Ministry of religious Affairs of which they depend in theory. In this area, veiled women are a majority. An Nahda controls the 380 000 inhabitants area, as well as the local Council of Salvation of the Revolution. They are extremely popular as people in this area are very poor and An Nahda activists go settle the unpaid bills of poorest families at the local groceries.

July 25: Attack on Afric'Art, a cinema hall that shows the documentary film by Nadia El Fani, initially entitled 'Neither Allah nor Master', renamed under fundamentalists' pressure as 'Secularity, Inch'Allah' (i.e. : if Allah wishes), where she declares herself an atheist and apostate. In protest against 'attacks against Islam', Habib Beheldi, the owner of Compagnie Familiale Production who owns the cinema hall is punched on the eye. Film maker Nouri Bouzid, honored at the last Cannes Film Festival, is injured on the head after being beaten by an Islamist. 'Infidels' gathered to watch the film are sprayed with tear gas, demonstrators shout: 'Tunisia is an Islamic state'.

Fundamentalists' protests take place not just in Tunis, but also in Sfax (south), Sidi Bouzid (center); in Bizerte (north of Tunis) leaflets denounce 'attacks on Islam and conspiracy with foreign political parties'.

Threatened from May onwards, Nadia El Fani declares in an interview on September 21 that she still puts hopes in the important urban middle class in Tunisia to prevent fundamentalists to come to power. She admits that non fasting people (de-jeûneurs) now have to hide in Tunisia, which is new!, and dates this fundamentalist trend to the initial Ben Ali period when he allowed prayers to be called on national TV as soon as he got in power; while Bourguiba had opposed such concessions as well as special working hours during Ramadan, etc... Nadia El Fani now faces a court case in Tunisia: she is accused by fundamentalist lawyers, who nevertheless declare that they have not seen her documentary film, of 'attacking the sacred, attacking good morae, attacking a religious principle'.

July 31, Giuliana Sgrena, a well known Italian journalist who befriended women in all the Arab world for decades, testifies to the fact that Islamists are 'bolstered with money from rich oil countries', that they 'increase their influence among the poor by offering financial support to women willing to leave their jobs and stay at home, and to men who grow their beards to show religiosity'. 'The Islamists also organize collective weddings, picking up the costs'. She acknowledges the fact that they are 'becoming visibly aggressive, resorting to violence during demonstrations and threatening women'. Buying up the poor is a main strategy fundamentalists employed from Algeria to Turkey, to Bosnia...

On August 10, Giuliana Sgrena also notes that the number of veiled women is totally unusual in the streets of urban Tunisia. Women observers of the Tunisian elections process testify to the fact that,

this week of late October, numerous women in niqabs stroll the streets, something never to be seen before in Tunisia. A Premiere!

October 7, University of Sousse , 150 km south of Tunis: After the university refused to register a totally veiled student, very violent demonstration of fundamentalists; they physically attack the General Secretary of the University, provoking panic and terror among teaching staff and students. In response, 200 women march to 'denounce the retrograde forces and fanatics, to put an end to intimidation campaigns and to struggle against religious fanaticism'.

October 9 and 10, numerous acts of violence and intolerance take place: for instance customers in bars are beaten up in the suburbs of Tunis; a journalist from an Arabic speaking Daily records testimonies of victims and take photos; he concludes: ' their intention is to mark the new Tunisia with their seal, even if by force'.

October 14: Unprecedented threats on Nessma TV. 300 men attempt to set Nessma TV offices on fire in protest against its showing the French-Iranian cartoon film 'Persepolis' that describes the life in Tehran seen by a little girl. A huge demonstration gathering thousands of people starts from the Great Mosque El Fateh which is the rendez vous departure point of the March; they march towards Nessma TV. Police intervenes only when the march approaches the Prime Minister Office. The march lasts for two hours. People march Qur'an in hand, chanting 'Allah Akbar' and ' La Illah ila Allah Mohamed Rassoul Allah'. Shop keepers get scared and pull down the shutters over their windows. All along the march, more people join the demonstrators. Posters were pasted on the walls of the city before hand, calling for 'a popular demonstration after the Friday prayer, starting from mosques, and from universities, protesting attacks on God'.

Interestingly, Ghannouchi condemns the 'attack' in order to develop the image of An Nahda as a 'soft' Islamist party, Turkish AKP style (acceptable to the European Union?), but he also immediately issues a statement expressing astonishment at the timing of the film, stating that it was 'inciting hatred' and that Nessma TV should be condemned for that. The statement also urges the media to avoid ' provocation and sensationalism'. The President of the Channel apologizes for having shown the film...

October 16, the Aatakani march gathers 5000 people on avenue Mohamed V against 'the wave of salafist violence'. It is the first time since the revolution that a demonstration gathers so many participants.

Zouari, the representative of An Nahda, declares that 'secularists want to force others to be secular'.

Can anyone now doubt what they are up to?

En Nahda has a huge network of influence developped during its 20 years underground and it can mobilize instantly through mosques. The party is extremely structured and well financed. The En Nahda weekly *El Fajr* (The Dawn) sells 70.000 copies per week. Not one party on the progressive and secular side can compete. It is chaos, with 10. 000 candidates, 1600 lists, 105 parties represented, most of them brand new to the 'democratic' game. As in Algeria in 1989, it is fundamentalists who are likely to be the only beneficiaries of the legitimate popular revolt against undemocratic governments.

Like other fundamentalist movements in other Muslim countries, En Nahda surfs on the wave of the legitimate discontent of the people, and recruits among them. Unemployment which was already 14% under Ben Ali, is said to have risen to 20%. Most unemployed youth only dream of leaving Tunisia, as was clearly shown by the number of boat people trying to reach Italy, in the days after

the fall of Ben Ali.

Armed with the concepts of human rights, free speech, freedom of expression and democratic liberties, En Nahda aims at appearing perfectly innocuous and democratic. In front of the media, they are soft spoken and praise moderation, but they also have to satisfy their extremely conservative basis. Hence the discrepancies between the official discourse, the party meetings discourse, and the actions of their troops. 'They are doing double speak and everyone knows it', says Ibrahim Lataief from the very popular Radio Mosaïque FM.

It is certainly time to reflect on democracy, its aims and means. And to see its limits. Courageous Tunisians dare spell it out: 'July 24 (initial date planned for the elections) is a favor to En Nahda.../... It is suicide', says a member of the Republican Alliance, "With En Nahda in power, it will be Iran'. He is echoed by Ibrahim Letaief from Radio Mosaïque: 'A democratic Tunisia depends on the banning of En Nahda'.

It is the democratic opening in Algeria that brought to power the FIS party at local level for one year before legislative elections were cancelled under pressure and street demonstrations from unions, women's organisations and left parties - a fact generally hidden in the media reporting. In one year under the fundamentalist boots, people were scarred and wanted to step back. Easier said than done. Fascists usually don't leave power easily. Classical fascisms such as Salazar's in Portugal or Franco's in Spain, but new forms of fascism too, such as Iran's....

If democracy, defined as the power of the people expressed through its vote, i.e. parliamentary democracy, it is certainly far more just than monarchy or oligarchy. However let us not forget that Hitler was elected by the people, in a free democratic election. I have little doubt that the six million victims of its reign cared little about the democratic process that led to their elimination, and that they certainly deplored the failure of the undemocratic 'coup d'état' that planned to assassinate Hitler. Democratic means and processes can engender very undemocratic and unjust regimes.

Fundamentalists claim that 'if (they) have the law of God, why would one want the law of the people? One must kill all these unbelievers', as Algerian FIS n°2 Ali Belhadj said in 1989. Coming to power through democratic means and immediately ending any democratic process and representation, this is one of the strategies of fundamentalists.

Can 'democrats' the world over watch this in silence and clap their hands when anti-democrats win elections? I know there is no easy answer to the question I am raising here. But how long can one go on refusing to even address the issue? It is without any surprise, as we are by now used to these unholy alliances, that we saw the *Guardian* UK open its columns, on October 17, to En Nahda's Ghannouchi who went on and on praising the democratic process in Tunisia. He concluded that in any case 'democracy' will be the big winner of these elections: 'a day to inspire all Tunisians, whether Islamic or secular: what is important is that democracy triumphs'. Let us doubt it.

Tunisians in general but women in particular have everything to loose in the upcoming elections, whether En Nahda comes out with 'only' 20 or 25 % votes and heavily weight on the drafting of the Constitution, or whether they score more and become the absolute rulers of the new Tunisia.

Tunisia was - I think it is only fair to use the past tense now... - the first country in the Arab world to withdraw reservations to CEDAW that it already signed in 1980 ! They are more than 20% of the MPs. Tunisian women have the right to vote since 1957.

Starting with independence (1956) and the coming to power of Bourguiba, women have been granted many rights, and personal status laws have continued to be improved till recently. Women

have equal rights to pass on their nationality to their children, equal rights and responsibility in marriage and divorce, equal rights in guardianship of children and adoption, equal personal rights as husband and wife, including that to choose family name, profession, occupation, etc..., and near equal property rights. It is indeed the best situation for women in any given Muslim context today.

Nevertheless, women kept fighting for additional rights such as a status for unwed mothers, total equity in property rights, the repeal of the impossibility for Muslim women to marry non Muslim men and the repeal of the impossibility for non Muslim women to inherit from Muslim husbands (as a consequence, non Muslim women citizens in Tunisia do not have equal rights with Muslim women citizens). This inequality stems from article 2 of the Constitution which makes Islam the religion of the state. Women were and are till today calling for a change in the Constitution to make it entirely secular.

This is all what women have to lose, should fundamentalists come to power in Tunisia.

In the upcoming elections, women initially felt on the safe side as they thought they would have had 50% of candidates, however only 5% of them are heads of lists: there is now little chance that they will participate in and influence in any significant way the elaboration of the new constitution.

What is to be feared is, as Pervez Hoodbhoy recently said of the situation in Pakistan, that 'Europe's Dark Ages have descended upon us'. In the name of democracy.

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P.S.

* Paru sur SIAWI:

<http://www.siawi.org/article2624.html>