

Tunisia: the long march of the feminists for full equality in the law

Sunday 23 September 2018, by [BELHADJ Ahlem](#), [DAHHER Joseph](#) (Date first published: 23 August 2018).

In Tunisia, major mobilizations led by feminist organizations have taken place in recent weeks to demand full equality in the law, particularly with regard to the Tunisian Personal Status Code (CSP). The CSP consists of a series of legal provisions governing marital relations between men and women and inheritance issues. The Swiss journal *SolidaritéS* [1] spoke to Ahlem Belhadj, feminist activist and member of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women).



Demonstration for equality, Tunis, August 2018

Joseph Daher - Can you tell us about the latest feminist mobilizations and their dynamics?

Ahlem Belhadj - Since 1956, the date of the promulgation of the Personal Status Code, 13 August has been Tunisia's national women's day. This year, several thousand women and men, young and old, invaded Habib Bourguiba Avenue to defend equality and individual freedoms. The call came from feminist associations, including the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women, human rights organizations and several newer LGBTIQ associations.

The demonstration is part of the Tunisian feminist movement's long journey to achieve gender equality. It follows the battle for the constitutional recognition of women's rights from 2011 to 2014. The feminist movements demanded the recognition of equality between citizens in a civil status based on non-Sharian laws. But there is still a lot of resistance to harmonizing laws with the constitution.

The personal status code, which has become obsolete over time, is the subject of a heated national debate following the report of the Committee on Individual Liberties and Equality (Colibe) set up by the Presidency and led by feminist MEP Bochra Belhadj Hmida. This code includes frankly discriminatory measures inspired by Sharia law: the husband as head of the family; paternal guardianship of children except in special situations; the obligation of dowry for marriages (even if it is symbolic), and especially discrimination in inheritance.

In addition to equality between men and women, the demands also concerned respect for individual freedoms and in particular the decriminalisation of homosexuality and the free disposal of your body. The alliance between the feminist movement and the LGBTIQ movement is recent. It has resulted in several joint actions and the establishment of a Tunisian collective for individual freedoms.

What obstacles do these mobilizations face?

On 11 August, the hard-line Islamists organized a march against these reforms. They claim that they are in contradiction with religion and consider that equality and individual freedoms threaten Tunisian Muslim society and that the Colibe report is a call to Fitna (civil war on religious grounds). They called for all measures in favour of equality in inheritance, dowry to be abandoned and were particularly opposed to everything related to free sexual orientation.

The ruling Islamist Ennahdha party did not officially call for this demonstration, but one of its leaders was Ennahdha's former minister of religious affairs.

The two ruling parties, Nidaa Tounes and Ennahdha, are trying to create a climate of political polarisation in preparation for the 2019 elections. And the instrumentalization of women's rights is the subject that works best for that. President Caïd Essebsi, who is very disappointed by the coalition with the Islamists, needs the entire female electorate who voted massively for him to be able to counter Ennahdha and to follow in Bourguiba's footsteps and make history by establishing equal inheritance, . For its part, Ennahdha plays on religion and identity in the hope that its base will forget its failures.

The demonstration on 13 August broke the state of lethargy and demobilization of recent months following many disappointments and the economic and political crises. The government is disowned by its own people, and Essebsi's Nidaa Tounes party has splintered into several pieces with a succession war over his son. The ruling national coalition has several internal conflicts. The UGTT trade union centre is calling for the government to resign in the face of neoliberal measures dictated by the IMF and the World Bank, in a climate of unprecedented economic crisis: inflation at 7.2%, debt ratio at 72% of GDP, devaluation of the dinar.

Few political parties supported the feminist call. The Popular Front [2] joined the march the day before and eventually took a clear position on the side of the demonstrators, the Massar (former Tunisian Communist Party) also called for joining the march, while political activists from other parties demonstrated independently of their parties' positions.

The demonstrators chanted slogans for equality, for individual freedoms but also against the cost of living, corruption and all forms of conservatism. Will the Tunisian feminist movement once again be a driving force for mobilization?

Ahlem Belhadji, 23 August 2018

P.S.

• Translation IVP, 19 September 2018:
<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article5710>

Footnotes

[1] French version also available on ESSF.

[2] The Popular Front for the Realization of the Objectives of the Revolution, is a leftist political and electoral alliance in Tunisia, made up of nine political parties and numerous independents.