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Social networks and women's mobilization in Tunisia

By Sami Zlitni¹, Zeineb Touati²

Abstract

After the fall of Ben Ali's regime, fears were growing as various religious parties have decided to run in the elections to the Constituent Assembly of October 23th, 2011. The Code of Personal Status, the very symbol of Bourguibian modernity, might well be challenged. Beyond their presence on traditional media, feminist movements have organised themselves online so as to make themselves heard and to be able to mobilize public opinion. Facebook has become a place that maximizes visibility, thus allowing Tunisian feminists to make their ideas and their actions widely known. By favouring distanced commitment, Facebook is a tool that has brought about an upheaval in the various forms of militancy and the militant's relationships to organizational structures.

Keywords: Revolution, feminist mobilization, ICT, electronic medias, social networks, Facebook, Tunisia.

Introduction

Tunisian women's trailblazing and advantageous legal status is considered an exception in Muslim countries. For decades the status has been a showcase for successive Tunisian governments, a forceful argument at election time for President Ben Ali, and an often-used alibi by the authorities when European countries and NGOs challenge the regime about human rights and freedom of the press. We will first show the specificity of the status, then we will have a close look at the role played by social media in the defense of the status as Tunisia is going through a period of political turmoil. In this part we will also show that the defense of women's freedom has brought about new ways of using social networks and that those new forms of mobilization online have now appeared.

Legal Specificities for an Outstanding Status

The much-vaunted Tunisian Personal Status Code (PSC) is the result of a long process that spread over a century. First reformers' reflections, the national debate of the 1930s over women's liberation and finally Habib Bourguiba's highly symbolic strategic choices all combined to make the Code possible. In the following part, we will present the contribution of Tunisian first reformers and thinkers before explaining the context in which a national debate was made possible after Tahar Haddad's *Our Women in the Sharia'a and Society* was published in 1929. We will conclude this part with the political decisions and strategic choices made by both Tunisian presidents between 1956 and 2011.

The Historical and Intellectual Foundations of the Tunisian Specificity

The women's issue arose in Tunisia and was the result of Turkish and Egyptian experiences that had been taking previous Tunisian experiences into account. They were all based, on the one hand, on the ideas of an elite whose members, for most of them, had studied at al-Zitouna University and raised on the concepts elaborated by Middle-Eastern reformers (Rifât Tahtawi, Mohammed Abduh, Rachid Ridha). On the other hand, they were

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also based on the ideas of intellectuals who had been educated at Sadiki College and then in French universities. Middle-Eastern reformers and Tunisian thinkers have indeed compared French women life to those of their citizens during their stay in France. Thus they have noted the importance of women's education and social integration. This comparison allowed them to propose solutions to what was called the decadence of Arab societies in political, social and economic sectors.

There was also the considerable contribution of 19th century Tunisian thinkers who all helped to lay the bases of modernism. Among the first reformers was Private secretary Ahmed Bin Dhiyf who was the first person to talk about women's emancipation and to stress the need to give both professional and religious education. Kheireddine Pacha, for instance forcefully asked in 1877 for a new status for women while emphasizing the need for girls to go to school and get educated. He relentlessly argued against the fears raised by ulemas about women's emancipation. That question became extremely controversial after Tahar Haddad's book *Our Women in the Charia'a and Society* was published in 1929. Indeed it generated unanimous reprobation that escalated into unprecedented violence.

In that reference book, Haddad denounced the enslavement of women, dealt with social and legal aspects of the Women's issue, compared the lot of Arab women to that of European women and severely criticized the lack of education for girls. More clairvoyant than his predecessors, he regretted that nothing was done to educate women and girls about conjugal relationships and to tell how to deal with their emotions. He compared the veil to a muzzle and listed its negative consequences on girls'/women's lives (submission, confinement) and on their married lives (separation of the sexes, dependence on a husband and inability to educate her children). He also denounced parents' interventions in the choice of a husband, enforced marriages and weddings of under-age girls to much older men. Polygamy and repudiation were also condemned. Besides Haddad demanded special law courts for divorces.

Even though he underlined that his work was based on a reinterpretation of the Quran and the founding texts, he was quickly accused of atheism and of being submissive to Western values (thinking, clothing style, emancipation). Charged with atheism and blasphemy, he lost his jobs as a professor and a notary and his book was banned. An unprecedented smear campaign was launched in the columns of *Azzohra*, *An-nadim* and *An-anhdha*.

The controversy that followed the publication of the book was the first real violent form of expression against any movement of women's liberation in Tunisia. It was also the first debate of that magnitude, hence its importance in the construction of public space in Tunisia.

While intellectuals were debating some Muslim Tunisian women, belonging for most of them to the Tunis bourgeoisie, started to claim the right to be emancipated, not to wear the veil, the right to be educated and the right to work. Manoubia Ouertani is a case in point: on January 24th 1924, she took off her veil during a lecture on feminism (*"For or against feminism"*). Despite reprobation and violent reactions Habiba Menchari too took off her veil before a conference she was giving on January 8, 1929 and which was entitled *"Tomorrow's Arab women, for or against the veil"*. It drew strong condemnation from the National Movement, theologians as well from colonial authorities. Thus a long and meaningful debate started that mainly appeared in newspapers and periodicals. It paved the way to reforms that take place after the independence of the country and that will be presented in the next part.

Promulgation of the Personal Status Code and the societal revolution

Habib Bourguiba became the first president of the Tunisian Republic after Tunisia became independent. The new president was deeply influenced by 19th century scholars and

thinkers and imbued by Hadda's ideas. So much so, those women were at the centre of his agenda when he started reshaping the country. On August 13th, 1956 he promulgated the Personal Status Code (PSC) before monarchy was abolished and the Republic proclaimed and three years before the constitution was adopted on June 1st 1959. That shows how important women's emancipation was to him. The same day (August 13th 1956), Women's day was proclaimed, twenty years before the UN proclaimed March 8th the UN day for women's rights and international peace. The outstanding measures included in the PSC made it really outstanding in an Arab Muslim country. Indeed, polygamy was banned (Art.18), unilateral repudiation by the husband is abolished and is replaced by a divorce procedure (Art. 30); the divorce procedure can be requested by man and wife alike (Art. 31). A marriage can only be concluded with the consent of both spouses, in other words the status of matrimonial guardian who could speak in the name of the bride was abolished (Art. 3), and so was abolished the father's or guardian's constraining power over a woman's marriage (the *jabr/jerb*). Women were allowed to work, to teach, to vote and the civil rights they were granted were really impressive compared to other Arab countries.

The promulgation of the Code was a watershed in the history of the country. It was also a big step towards the reinterpretation of the Quran. The stand taken by Tunisian women is both original and exceptional because it did overstep Islam rules set up by retrograde religious authorities. There was no violent rejection of the code by the people in Tunisia; on the other hand, ulemas and conservatives were quick to react as can be seen in the national newspapers of the time. Abroad, Arab chiefs of state and Muslims expressed their indignation and populations their refusal of such measures that they considered as "illegal". Knowing full well that he had provoked traditionalists and theologians alike, Bourguiba justified the PSC by referring to religion. He declared in 1956 "We have achieved a rational enterprise founded on the very principles of Islam". He did hesitate to show himself with theologians he said he had consulted prior to and during the drafting of the Code. There was no breaking away from religion but with Arab and Muslim traditions. Just like Haddad did in his time, Bourguiba based his action on a reinterpretation of sacred texts. It was a way for him to justify himself, to confer legitimacy on his choices, and, above all, to gain religious legitimacy so that the population could agree to his project. For Bourguiba, this was a major political coup. It was also highly symbolic. He also put his communication skills to full use. He made countless public speeches, launched a frontal against the veil and he even tried to take an Haik (image 1 - 1957) and a veil (image 2 - 1960) off the heads of two women. The gradual acceptance of women's rights is mainly due to Bourguiba's charisma. In other words, people accepted women's rights because the reforms were introduced by Bourguiba himself.



Image 1



Image 2

Bourguiba's reforms shook the very foundations of religion and traditions. With his attack on the veil, he was taking on Tunisian Imams and theologians, as the veil was one of the pillars of institutional Islam in the country. Despite the risks he was running, he deemed it necessary to achieve women's emancipation and to shake off and loose the yoke of *sharia'a*

law and traditions that were plaguing society.

Besides the unveiling and a better social and legal status for women, Bourguiba initiated the family planning revolution in 1964.

Import and sales of contraceptives were allowed (law of January 9th, 1961). In 1965 a bill was passed allowing “social abortion” in the first three months of pregnancy for the fifth child. A decisive step was taken on September 26th, 1973 when abortion was made legal whereas it was not allowed in Islam, whatever the number of children. Bourguiba used the same tactics as with PSC: he associated much respected religious leaders so as to lend undisputed legitimacy to his project. Bourguiba’s revolutionary reforms enabled women to have a special place in civil space and on the labour market.

The Ben Ali period: Respect for Bourguiba’s Legacy and Consolidation

Zine Al Abidine Ben Ali took power on November 7th 1987, after he had deposed President Bourguiba. He was in power until January 14th, 2011. In the national covenant of 1988, a founding document of the new regime that came after a period of uncertainty, the PCS was presented as a national asset and thus could not be negotiated. The national covenant stipulates that “the PCS reforms aim at liberating and emancipating women; they are in accordance with a very old aspiration that existed in our country. The reforms are based on Ijtihad (exegesis) and on the goals of the *sharia*’a. They show the validity of Islam and of its opening to the demands and the evolution of the modern world”.³

Ben Ali revived Bourguiba’s policy for women. In 1956, the latter needed women to establish his authority and to affirm his modernist stand; in 1988 Ben Ali needed women to fight Islamism. “Women are thus the counterparts of Islamists who fight them. Once again, they are at the centre of a societal struggle. They are the only ones that can’t be suspected by those in power either of supporting or of allying with Ennahda” (Daoud 1990, 101).

Ben Ali then took several measures to consolidate women’s rights. The 8/13/1992 amendments comforted and reassured women. They mainly consisted in:

- The creation of a fund guaranteeing alimony payments for divorced wives and her children in case the divorced husband sought to shirked his responsibility (absence, escape);
- New provisions concerning alimony payments, so that payments could be guaranteed for the couple’s children until they reach the age of majority or till they stop going to school. For girls the pension will be paid after her age of majority or if they don’t have any revenues, until they get married;
- The mother’s obligatory consent of the mother for the minor child;
- The right for the married daughter who is not a major to manage her life (private live and business);
- The right for minor daughters to manage their private as well as their public lives.

Besides, the amendments also dealt with the Code of citizenship, the Penal code and the Code of Labour. Now, Tunisian mothers were given the right to transfer nationality to their children to the same extent as their husbands, even if they were married to a foreigner, on the sole condition that the father has given his approval. The Tunisian woman was the only one in the Arab world to be entitled to such a right. It was not until July 2005 that the Moroccan woman was granted the same right. The murder of his adulterous wife no longer

³ National Covenant, signed at the Presidential Palace in Carthage on November 7th, 1988. it was signed by the representatives of six political parties officially agreed and by a lawyer representing *Le Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique* that was not officially agreed.

gave the husband extenuating circumstances. Provisions also reinforced the protection of women in regard to men in repressing spousal violence.

Yet, despite the various measures announced by Ben Ali, nothing was said about some fundamental issues such as the marriage of a Tunisian woman to a non-Tunisian man or inheritance equality between the sexes, which been raised by women's organizations.

A Precarious Status

Though the status is now over 50-years old and deeply rooted in the Tunisian society and in Tunisian women's every day lives, it is threatened from every single political change. Feminists as well as quite a few non-feminist women were afraid of losing their status and expressed themselves both in the streets and in national media. Bourguiba's destitution and Ben Ali's coming to power was a period of uncertainty. When Ben Ali took over, the country was going through a social and economic crisis that was compounded by the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. Islamists threatened both State stability as well as the safety of its citizens. Women's acquired rights were clearly in jeopardy. Fundamentalists whose rise had started in the 70s launched a blunt attack on the PSC. The MTI⁴ (Islamic tendency movement), born in mosques and Islamic circles, fostered cells of militant women. Those veiled women were asked to islamize their fellow sisters. They built aid networks and manage to enter all social spheres. Most of these women were activists but non-leaders of the movement. They, in fact, represented the basis. They were not against the whole rights accorded to women but they advocated a return to the religion. Furthermore, they demanded laws that respect the role and position of women in Islam.

Indeed, the number of veiled women and the number of Khouangia⁵ did not stop rising. They were organized into small groups so as to better help people but also to teach religious education to other women.

As protest movements were growing together with cultural identity claims, exacerbated by the Gulf war, Bourguiba's deposition revived the debate on Arab Muslim authenticity. It focused on the PSC and it was seen as direct threats to the legal gains granted by Bourguiba, the "Father of the nation" and "Liberator of Tunisian women". "The Personal Status Code is not part of the sacred texts", said a Member of Parliament. "It infringes on Islamic texts" added the Mufti of the Republic. Petitions and counter petitions followed one another: for the reinforcement of Islam, for the separation of religion and state ... Women closed ranks. Eventually, the State decided the PCS was outside the field of negotiations and the Government struck Islamism harshly (...). Women were summoned to the rescue of the government's policy and its achievements "al-injazat" (Ben Achour, 2001).

Women's associations played an important part when they tried to mobilize associations, unions and political parties. The 1988 national covenant and the 1989 elections indirectly put an end to that controversy. According to the writings of several journalists of newspapers politically committed as *Achaab* or *Attariq Al Jadid*, and association leaders (Tunisian Association of Democratic Women⁶), for the people in power, any kind of dialogue with fundamentalists was out of the question as they were seen as threat to the stability of the country.

⁴ *Le Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique* appeared in 1970 with the creation of the association for the safeguard of Quran and its congress in 1971. Its goals: "Restore religious practice and propagate the genuine values of Islam". During the 70s, the movement gained strength but it was still illegal. In 1981, the movement changed into a political party with a constitutive chart, yet its existence and its activities remained illegal. In 1989, the party changed its name to *Ennahdha* (Re-birth) to negate any religious connotations.

⁵ Khouangia is the name used by Tunisians when they refer to Islamic Fundamentalists (spoken language).

⁶ Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates (ATFD) : <http://femmesdemocrates.org/>

The same fears are cropping up today in Tunisia after the 2011 January revolution which led to the fall of Ben Ali's regime and the constitution of a transitional government before and after the election to the Constituent Assembly in October 2011. The political change at the head of the State has also led to the recognition of several new political parties, but also to the recognition of parties that were banned when Ben Ali was in power. Among those parties, was Ennahdha, which was considered dangerous during the 1990s. The rise in the number of veiled women (burqa-wearing women were actually seen in the street, unlike other Arab countries, a first in Tunisia) and Rached Ghannouchi's propaganda has aroused considerable fears among liberal women. Indeed they believe that their rights granted by the PCS could well be in jeopardy either by reaction against the association of women's rights to the old regime or by rooting Ennahdha dogmas in the population. Whatever the reasons of those fears, they have been expressed on traditional media that have become free than they used to be. They also invaded the Internet which has become an alternative space built by and for citizens. The Internet has supported women's mobilization and the defense of women's rights. This new kind of mobilization as well as the use of social networks will be analyzed in the forthcoming part.

Women in The Streets, Women On Social Networks

A lot of publications have underlined the important role played by traditional media in the shaping of public opinion and in the support of collective actions (Habermas, 1978; Tarrow, 1998). With the development of Information technology (ICT), Tunisian people have understood how important these new tools are for the constitution of a platform for political expression and for "the construction of identities and for the mobilizing necessary for collective actions geared to public opinion" (Chambat, 2000). On the one hand, activists or associations find it very hard to have access to the professional press or audiovisual media; on the other hand, activists have become aware that the internet can bring them visibility and easy access at a very low price while being autonomous vis-à-vis traditional media. In that respect, Facebook, the social network, became a very visible space for women's movements. They could thus to share their reflections and make their actions known after Ben Ali's fall.

The recent political upheaval in Tunisia has indeed allowed ICT to appear in the limelight. In a country where heavy internet filtering was the rule and press censorship rampant, the convergence of traditional ICT and mobile IT, together with the development of Facebook and Twitter, the importance of blogging, played an important part in the mobilisation that caused the fall of Ben Ali's regime. It obviously does not mean that the Tunisian revolution can be reduced to a digital revolution. The revolution is not just virtual. The battle was won on the streets. But ICT played a major part in Tunisia as well as abroad. Wikileaks, Youtube and Twitter have allowed the world to know about the situation, blogs have helped to support the insurrection whereas the revolution itself was made possible thanks to word of mouth –the buzz-, text messaging or Facebook (Liénard & Zlitni, 2012).

During the whole process that led to President Ben Ali's fall on January 14th 2011, women participated in all the stages of the Tunisian revolution. They were very active in the unions, they were there during marches and demonstrations, and their activism was relentless on the Internet. Several Tunisian women ran blogs. *A Tunisian girl*⁷ run by Linda Ben Mhenni is a case in point. She braved the dangers to cover the bloody conflict in Western Tunisia. She has actually been awarded the Deutsche Welle International Blog Award and El Mundo's International Journalism Prize in 2011.

We are going to try and study the various types of collective actions led by Tunisian feminists on Facebook, the social network. We opted for that particular tool as it is the most

⁷ <http://atunisiangirl.blogspot.com/>

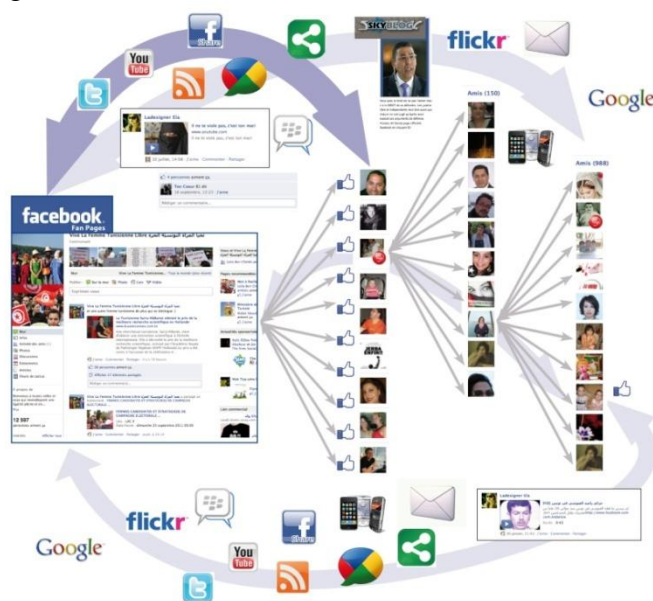
commonly used one in Tunisia with more than 2.5 million accounts in September 2011⁸, well ahead of blogs or Twitter. Most facebookers are young, between 18 and 34. They account for 77% of all accounts. Women represent 41.5% of all accounts⁹.

In order to constitute the documentary corpus, we monitored the accounts of five informers. For this presentation we monitored the data which was then archived between January 20th, 2011 (about twelve days before Rached Ghannouchi's return to Tunisia) and September 25th, 2011.

ICT and New Forms of Activism

Compared with traditional activism (commitment to a structured permanent organization whose opinions are expressed by spokesmen), social networks, and generally speaking the Internet, reinforce the idea of a "fragmentation of the we", raised by Jacques Ion (1997), in favor of a form of individualized activism. The Internet user can now participate in a "militant" action without having to lastingly adhere to the movement. This can be seen as "post-it" activism that can be dropped and terminated at any time (Ion 1997, p.81) since the Internet user can leave scotch free. The same way he got in, actually.

Besides, this on-line activism shows some features that are characteristic of the tool used. Activism on Facebook is different from that on other websites or blogs. Indeed, looking for a militant website or blog remains a voluntary action (Ollitrat, 1999). Prerequisites are necessary for such research: in the case of women's activism, she/he must have ideological predispositions (punctual however they may be); he/she must be, if not savvy, at least sufficiently informed about women's issues and women's organizations to be able to access the right websites. There's virtually no constraint with Facebook. Thanks to the hyperlinks posted by "amateur activists", the other facebookers issues. As only have to click to access the sites, blogs and other Facebook pages devoted to women's a net surfer wrote on *Nawaat*¹⁰ (a blog): "First, I am Tunisian and I have decided to break the silence and write on this blog which I have discovered through Facebook". Thus the research and source selection phases are done by a link (a person) of the network, who can then broadcast the sources to the other members of the network. They, in turn, can access them and relay them to their contacts/friends (figure 1).



⁸ Source: Check Facebook, <http://www.checkfacebook.com> (on September 24th, 2011)

⁹ Source: Check Facebook, <http://www.checkfacebook.com> (on September 24th, 2011)

¹⁰ <http://nawaat.org/portail/>

Figure 1 : Organization of activism according to a reticular networking model

Post-it activism, however amateurish as it may be, is not deprived of any commitment. In fact, it generates various levels of commitment. It can go beyond the mere reading of the summary/comment that goes with the link. It may indeed lead the recipient to read the document starting at the source; he/she can even fill out a questionnaire or sign a petition. At each step, the Internet user has gone another step further in his/her commitment to the cause.

Besides, Facebook has not only revolutionized activists' different forms of commitment, it has also revolutionized the relationship to organizational structures. Indeed, it has allowed structured groups as well as unorganized groups to become visible. Several Tunisian women's movements got started on Facebook the day Islamist parties running for the Constituent Assembly started challenging their legal rights and the PSC. When preparing this communication, we listed over one hundred pages or groups¹¹ devoted to that issue, twenty or so of which with over 1,000 members or fans. Save two institutional sites that were clearly identified as feminist groups, the other groups were without any affiliation at all; they did not belong to any political party or any association. They just felt concerned by the defense of the Tunisian woman's status like *Vive la Femme Tunisienne*, which states on its front page that: "it belongs to no political group, no religious organization, [...]" and it has only one claim: full equality"¹² or *Tunisian Women's league to defend Woman's freedom* (translated from Arabic), which, in its front page, notifies the reader "that their page has nothing to do with any organization or association. The space is only a Facebook page devoted to discussions about women's freedom in Tunisia"¹³ (translated from Arabic).

Some pages have a clearly feminist editorial line like *OUI à la protection des droits de la femme Tunisienne*¹⁴ or *Pour plus de liberté en faveur de la femme tunisienne*, which claims that "the aim of the page is to preserve what had been gained through the PSC and other decisions in terms of women's rights against obscurantist movements and reactionary discourse that threaten our rights"¹⁵. Others are devoted to more general topics with various types of posts like *Femme Actuelle & tunisienne* which defines itself as a "page totally devoted to the modern Tunisian wife, to her pleasures and her wishes..."¹⁶ or *Tous contre les intégristes en Tunisie!!!*¹⁷ which urges the State to protest against fundamentalists.

Others still define themselves as community and activist groups like *Forum Des Femmes Tunisiennes*¹⁸ which claims to be "an association that gathers independent women, regardless of their political credos, and which works for the defense of the gains achieved by Tunisian women", or *Le Mouvement Féministe Tunisien*¹⁹. These activist pages do not exist outside their presence on Facebook. Facebook is a tool that allows them to avoid the constraints of a time-consuming and costly organization, but helps them to get high visibility thanks to this kind of social network.

Institutional women's associations have also their Facebook pages but their pages only supplement other communication tools. A case in point is the *Association Tunisienne des*

¹¹ From now on, the term "Facebook page" will refer to "Facebook fan page" or "Facebook group".

¹² <https://www.facebook.com/libertunisie>

¹³ <https://www.facebook.com/femmes.libres>

¹⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/pages/OUI-%C3%A0-la-protection-des-droits-de-la-femme-Tunisienne/133709203369615>

¹⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Pour-plus-de-libert%C3%A9s-en-faveur-de-la-femme-tunisienne/119003111477018>

¹⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/femme.actuelle.tunis>

¹⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/119483328123208/>

¹⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/Forum.des.femmes.tn/>

¹⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Le-Mouvement-F%C3%A9ministe-Tunisien/191160340927528>

*Femmes Démocrates*²⁰ (AFTD) or the *Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche et le Développement*²¹ (AFTURD): they have their own web sites as well as printed publications and they are part of the professional press (press releases, meetings, conferences, seminars...). However our study shows that these two institutional pages have a small fan base (1,094 for AFTD and 3 for AFTURD) compared with 12,589 fans for *Vive la Femme Tunisienne* or 2,456 for *Tounsia Horra*²². This definitely shows that fans do not have a long-lasting action in mind when they register. In that particular case, it was very punctual and linked to the fact that Islamists were running for election. These amateur activists, independent from institutions, rely on networks they have built themselves and they espouse a particular cause for a limited period (Flichy, 2010).

Thus, the public space of institutional activists is being challenged by that of amateur activists who then appear as an alternative space, as Internet users say, free from “the usual cant” where discourse is both reactive and proactive.

Facebook: a media for women’s mobilization and action

Facebook has allowed the creation of a network of individuals who mobilized to take part in various demonstrations. The network helped for specific actions linked to particular events. Indeed, a call to demonstrate coming from a group of activists, or even from one activist, can strike a chord with other individuals or other groups. Engaging in protest actions is clearly stated on several Facebook pages. For instance the one posted on the page *Preserver les acquis de la femme tunisienne dans la nouvelle démocratie* (“*Preserve Tunisian women’s legal gains in the new democracy*”) says: “the goal is to fight for the preservation of our status in civil society, to exchange ideas and information that can help understand how the new democracy works, and to stay united to defend our interests against some movements that can be harmful to our rights. Actions may follow.”²³

Given that the success of a call to demonstrate depends, among other things, on the number of demonstrators, Facebook seems to be a very effective means to mobilize since it allows the quick spread of information. As an example, in a reaction to a rally organized by Islamists, feminists called for a demonstration on Facebook on Saturday February 19th, 2011 in front of the Tunis municipal theatre. That call had circulated on Facebook alone and gathered over 2,000 people who marched down Habib Bourguiba Avenue. Similar demonstrations were organized via that social network in Tunisia. For Woman’s Day, a special page was created on Facebook (*Large gathering for Woman’s Day*) inviting Tunisians to join the gathering on March 8th, 2011 “to pay homage to Tunisian women who fight to preserve their legal rights!” Thus Facebook is an answer to the expectations of people who share the same interest without belonging to an institutional organization. That kind of page is not only a catalyst for the mobilization of individuals; it is also a way to broadcast the demonstration and to comment on it as it happens thanks to photos, videos and publications. Now, supporting a cause does not mean a long-lasting commitment within stable institutions –that are seen by Facebookers are remote from action- but rather taking in part in demonstrations. Thus, with the Tunisian example, the contention that recruiting organized groups of activists is a necessity is not supported by today’s evidence. Indeed, it is through Facebook that more or less isolated individuals were urged to join action (Oberschall, 1973). It is easy to remark that the production of online information is richer, more documented, more illustrated and more polemical than that produced by the professional press (Cardon & Granjon, 2003).

²⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/femmesdemocrates>

²¹ <https://www.facebook.com/AFTURD>

²² All the figures for the number of fans or group members are for September 24th, 2011.

²³ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/acquis.des.femmes/?ref=ts>

As a pluralistic tool, Facebook has allowed feminist activists to create an educative space. Beyond ideological discourses made to mobilize, several photos and documentary films with educative aims were broadcast with the idea of raising awareness. A three-part audiovisual document entitled *Bourguiba and Women in Tunisia* (image 3) shows women's emancipation at the end of the 50s and President Bourguiba taking the veil off women who were walking up to him. Another example is a video film *La femme tunisienne, un patrimoine national* (*The Tunisian woman, a national heritage*) that retraces Tawhida Ben Cheik's school years (image 4). She was the first Muslim girl to pass the baccalauréat in Tunisia (1928) and the first woman in the Muslim Arab world to be a doctor, a pediatrician, then a gynecologist. In the same way, photos showing Tunisian women of today and yesterday are also used to defend the woman's cause, such as the photos of Miss Tunisia's elections of 1956 with contenders wearing bathing suits (image 5), or that of Ons Jabeur, winner of the Roland-Garros tennis junior tournament in 2011 (image 6) or the silver medalist of Track and Field World championship (2011 in Daegu).



Image 3 : *Bourguiba and Women in Tunisia*



Image 4 : *The Tunisian woman, a national heritage*



Image 5 : *Miss Tunisia's election, 1956*



Image 6 : *Habiba Ghribi in Daegu, 2011.*

Those photos and videos are meant to be the media supporting the women's cause so as to draw public attention and to keep people on their toes, thus making sure that support is there as can be witnessed by the various comments: “very instructive”, “when we consider that heritage, we can't go backward ...”, “Thank you for making me feel Tunisian again”, or “Thank you for posting this testimony that set into relief the gap between the Tunisian society and the societies of other Arab countries. Let's be faithful to Tunisia!”. The media target autonomous Tunisian citizens so they can form their own opinion and become the grassroots support of the movement.

The work done on the social networks by Tunisian people, either as groups made of individuals or as structured groups of individuals, have allowed the creation of a space that reaches far beyond the national borders. Transnational pages, such as the page “*Pour les droits de la femme nord-africaine*”, joined the national Facebook pages devoted to women. More, documents about women fighting for their rights are used to make public opinion aware. A case in point is the *Iran 8 mars 1979 – Femmes contre hejab* report relating Iranian women's protests when wearing the veil was made compulsory or the *Women2drive* operation when Saudi women decided to get behind the wheel in response to calls for nationwide action to break a traditional ban. Another good example is the showing of extracts of *Persepolis* on Facebook to make public opinion aware of what could happen in Tunisia if Fundamentalists were in power, just like what happened in Iran after the Islamic revolution.

Beyond photos, videos and consciousness-raising texts, various testimonies are posted on Facebook walls to be used as evidence against Islamic parties. These testimonies from people who don't belong to any political parties or movements reveal subjective and

expressive experiences that are in sharp contrast with organizations' instrumental logic (Dubet, 1993).

So as to thwart the Islamic discourse, cyber activists resort to playful and funny ways of communicating. Thus when Rachel Ghannoudi came back to Tunisia, Tunisian feminists produced some tongue-in-cheek pages like *Toutes les Tunisiennes en bikini pour accueillir Ghannouchi à l'aéroport*²⁴ (*All Tunisian women in bikini to welcome home Ghannouchi at the airport*) to tell him firmly that they will not back down when it comes to fighting for their liberties. . No women went to meet the Ennahdha leader in bikini, but that allowed women's activists to have international visibility since the event created a buzz and the information appeared on several sites and blogs as well as in the professional press. The name of another page is also humorous: *Sauvez notre pays des Ninja warriors* (Save our country from Ninja warriors) and declares in the description of the site: "AGAINST THE BURKA! P.s. Our group is not islamophobic, fascist, not even anti-Semitic! Useless to say that we are interested in ideology or doctrine and not in the people who have been more often than not misled by extremist ideas!"²⁵. The offbeat title and the use of caricatures as means of mobilization have helped the page to gather 9,488 fans.

In order to mobilize public opinion about a possible challenge to the PCS by Islamic parties, women activists have produced numerous artistic creations. Several caricatures denouncing the wearing of the niqab or the burqa, can be found. For instance, the "surprise burqa" (image 7) with a reference to Kinder surprise, the ID card with the photo of a woman wearing a niqab with the following information: first name and name "So and so, daughter of ..., third wife of, born in Tunistan (image 8) or the cover of a women's magazine with the photo of a woman wearing a niqab and the various topics that are dealt with, such as "Tested for you. Lapidation: 5 stones put to the test", "14 years-old ... and not married yet! A worrying phenomenon" or "19 tips to become his favorite wife" (image 9). These caricatures, which we can describe as lampoons can be shocking for some ("they are aggressive and violent" said an Internet user), but, at least, they arouse debate and stimulate discussion. A facebooker commenting the reactions after watching a caricature wrote: "walah bravoo, nikach ta7foun ekhtilef raey ma3koul w klem mo7tarem rabbi yberek fikom walah bravoooooooo" (Bravo, good discussion, good contradictory debate and respectful discussion; God bless you, bravo).



Image 7



Image 8



Image 9



Image 10

Other productions use comparisons or similitudes between two situations. For example, an image is composed of two images: one showing former president Bourguiba

²⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/182964375060185/>

²⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/ninjaswarriors>

taking the veil off a woman's face in 1956, another one showing Ennahdha leader talking with women wearing a niqba in 2011 (image 10). Another image shows the similitude between some Ku Klux Klan people and a group of women wearing a burqa.

Another type of poster shows parodies of a national campaign done by ISIE (Instance Supérieure Indépendante pour les Elections) with the slogan "I am registering. What about you?" (image 11). The posters have been parodied to raise awareness with, for instance, the photo of a woman wearing a niqab with the slogan "She registered. It's high time for you to register" (image 12). The aim of this parody, according to some Internet users is to urge people to think and then register on electoral roles so as to be heard.



Image 11 : poster of the national campaign done by ISIE



Image 12 : parodie of the campaign

Facebook has become the space that gives the possibility for everyone to express themselves. It allows all kinds of contributions since it tolerates different formats and different writings. Photos without captions but with comments can be found together with mini clips that just last a few seconds, video that can be a few minutes long, short and long texts where the author is really committed but capable of being critical, institutional texts and personal testimonies. Besides, the language used is familiar or colloquial, yet it can also be formal. Texts can also be in Tunisian, Arabic, French or English. As to the contents, variety of enunciation is the rule: annotated articles, insults, rants, a space for a debate, opinions that generate tons of reactions ... when users fall into the "trap of a forum leading to an overflow of comments, from factual information to texts where opinions are firmly stated, from pamphlets to analytical texts" (Masse & Papathéodorou, 202).

Conclusion

On August 13th 2011, the PSC 55th anniversary was celebrated in Tunisia. The comeback of the religious parties in the Tunisian public space and the success of Ennahdha at the recent Constituent Assembly elections has put it in jeopardy. Under pressure from many quarters and from the media, Ennahdha has reassured the Tunisian population and said it would not tinker with the PSC and has even suggested that they could include it in the Constitution.

Facebook, the most widely used virtual platform in Tunisia, has thus become an independent alternative space, replacing face-to-face discussions with e-mails, networks of "friends" built by the users themselves. Women activists, supporters or members of institutional organizations take advantage of the opportunities offered by social networks to enhance public awareness and carry out specific actions, as can be seen with the recent demonstration for freedom, on Saturday the 28th of January 2012.

Since Facebook is a tool that makes the voices of all users heard, it is also used by several Islamist movements to thwart feminist movements. Indeed, they either respond to feminist posts, invite themselves to forums, or mobilize individuals for the occasional

demonstration (demonstration against secularism, April 1st, 2011) or even create their own Facebook pages and groups (see for instance: “*Pour que la femme tunisienne porte le HIJAB*”).

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