

How has the role of women changed in Tunisian society before, during and after the recent uprisings?



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Executive Summary

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the evolution of the status of women in Tunisian society from the time Tunisia gained independence in 1956 up to, during and after the uprisings that began in 2010. The aim of this thesis is to provide an overview of the development of the Tunisian woman. Furthermore, this thesis attempts to gain a greater understanding of the current status women enjoy in Tunisia today and presents a combined conclusion and outlook for the future with regard to the possibility of change in the status of women in the country after Ben Ali was forced into exile. The content of this thesis has evolved around the following central question:

How has the role of women changed in Tunisian society before, during and after the recent uprisings?

In order to answer the central question, extensive desk research has been conducted followed by an extensive 3-day field research on the post revolutionary situation in Tunisia, during which a variety of women were interviewed in Tunis, the capital city. To conclude, Tunisian women have considerably enjoyed more rights than their Arab counterparts. Unlike the majority of women in the Middle East and North Africa region, Tunisian women can vote, have access to education equal to men, have access to abortion and have the Personal Status Code protecting their rights as women. However, uncertainty and fear has risen amongst women in Tunisia as the country is currently going through democratic transitions after the recent uprisings. The newly gained freedom is being interpreted differently by the different levels of society and with growing Islamism the previously gained women's rights in Tunisia might be at stake.

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Preface

This dissertation is submitted as part of the final fulfilment of the requirements to obtain a Bachelor's Degree in European Studies at The Hague University of Applied Sciences in The Netherlands. The primary research has been conducted between March and May 2012. My supervisor during this period has been Ms M. van den Haspel, senior lecturer in European Law at The Hague University of Applied Sciences.

In December 2010 a young man named Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire in reaction to unfair treatment by the Tunisian authorities. People in the Middle-East and North Africa have been living under extreme dictatorships for decades and do overall, not enjoy the basic legal rights that are outlined in the international conventions established by the United Nations. What started as an act in protest of a violation of an individual's dignity and basic human rights sparked a flame that spread throughout the whole region. Protests emerged in other cities and eventually other countries and the whole world was watching the on-going events happening in far away countries. It has greatly impressed me how one single man can mobilise a whole people to say 'no' to inequality and rise against authoritarian regimes on a joint mission to oust the unpopular dictators.

Inspired by lectures on Human Rights and Humanitarian Law by Mr M. van Munster at the Hague University in the final year of my studies in 2011, I decided to become part of a global movement for change and to direct my future career towards the field of human rights. I have befriended immigrants and travelled a fair bit in the past, which have made me eager to discover and learn more about other cultures. Coming from a very open-minded and liberal family, I have often taken the rights I enjoy today for granted. After reading several books such as 'Desert Flower' by Waris Dirie and 'Infidel' by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, I came to realise that not every girl grows up in a stable and safe environment. Women today still face discrimination, (sexual) harassment, humiliation and all other kinds of misery inflicted upon them solely because of their gender. I pursue to learn more about these women and to eventually help them one day fight the battle towards equality in a world that is still dominated by men. In the West our mothers and perhaps even grandmothers started feminist movements, freeing the way for young women like myself today. It is time to erase the taboo around gender stereotypes and raise awareness and clear the way for future generations of girls and women to enjoy the same rights boys and men have enjoyed for centuries.

During the period I wrote the dissertation I experienced a great lack of understanding concerning the current situation in Tunisia. It frustrated me how people generalise and draw conclusions on things, topics and issues they are not fully informed about. I decided to go and see the current situation for myself, to see, breathe and experience post-revolution Tunisia. I spent three days in Tunis where I spoke to students, women, mothers, Salafists and also to members of organisations such as the Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates and even members of the largest political party Al-Nahda. During my short stay I learned a lot and gained more understanding of who the real Tunisian woman is.

Desirée Bernhardt
Lausanne, May 2012

Introduction

Women in Tunisia have enjoyed considerably unique rights compared to their Arab counterparts in the North African and Middle Eastern region. Tunisia has only seen two rulers since its independence in 1956: Habib Bourguiba and Zine Al Abdine Ben Ali who have both pushed the country towards modernisation, secularism and the emancipation of women. Women's rights are entrenched within domestic legislation under the Personal Status Code and Tunisia has signed and ratified a large number of the international Conventions established by the United Nations, including the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), calling for signatories to apply international standards within its national law systems.

The recent uprisings and the rise of Islamisation have raised a sense of instability and insecurity concerning women's rights. This dissertation will examine the past and current events and how they have influenced and complemented each other on this particular issue. Furthermore, it will examine whether they will continue to do so. The conducted research has evolved around the following central question:

“How has the role of women changed in Tunisian society before, during and after the recent uprisings?”

The content of this paper leading up to the answer of the central question is divided into different chapters. To begin with, the paper will examine the change of governance after Tunisia gained independence in 1956. It will explain the development the country underwent under its two leaders Bourguiba and Ben Ali. Furthermore, it will continue outlining the different roles women have played in Tunisian society prior to the recent uprisings and the factors leading up to the growing discontent. Finally, the events of the revolutions are presented followed up by the current situation, the issues women are facing in a post-revolution environment and an outlook for the future combined with the conclusions.

Primary research was conducted between March and May 2012. First, extensive desk research was executed processing information found in online magazines, periodicals and scholarly research papers. Secondly, interviews were conducted combined with a questionnaire from my workstation in Switzerland. This in particular has led to greater curiosity and eagerness to learn more about the topic resulting into an intensive three-day field research in Tunisia's capital city Tunis from May 14 to May 17 2012.

Chapter 1 – Historical Background Tunisia

Tunisia is a Maghreb country¹ and lies in the Middle Eastern and North African region (hereafter MENA region). It borders the Mediterranean Sea with Libya on the southeast and Algeria on the west. With a population of 10.7 million, it is one of the smaller countries in the region. Tunisia has seen many changes over the centuries. In order to comprehend the influence of the variety of events from the past, the following chapter will consist of a brief historical background in order to gain a better understanding of the current situation and the emancipation of- and the current status of women in Tunisia.

Tunisia under the French protectorate

The Arabs arrived in Tunisia from the east in the 7th Century AC bringing with them their religion: Islam. They ruled until the 16th Century and have left a vivid and vibrant cultural impact. Arab occupation went alongside Berber belligerence and later the Spanish Reconquista, the Ottoman Empire and around 1869 the greater colonial powers; Italy, France and Great Britain that all became involved in the Tunisian region. But it was not until 1881 when the French gained control over the, then bankrupt, Tunisian economy and acquisitioned Tunisian territory.

On 12 May 1881 the Treaty of Bardo (also known as Al Qasr as Sa'id) was signed in which the French were to protect the Bey's² area. The transition of power through this Treaty resulted into more autonomy for the French with regards to internal affairs and policymaking within Tunisia.

The French brought with them not only their language but also Roman Catholic influence in Tunisia. The French authorities introduced a secular school system that was to be operated in both French and Arabic. This in turn replaced the decentralised education system that was based on religion with a strong focus on the Qur'an that was usually carried out by local mosques and imams.

Female participation in the public sphere was limited during the time of colonialism. Traditionalism was more visible as women were wearing veils and the

¹ Maghreb is the region of North-West Africa consisting of the coastlands and the Atlas Mountains of Morocco, Algeria, Libya and Tunisia.

² A Bey commonly refers to a country's sovereign and originates from the Ottoman Empire.

traditional safsari³ that reflected the Tunisian identity within public spheres. During this time women were far more marginalised and were mainly excluded from economic activities alongside their limited access to education. Women were merely circumscribed to household- and family duties, as all of these constraints were associated with the true Islamic identity present within the country (Ben Salem 2010, in Sinha 2011).

In the years that followed, anti-colonial movements came into existence. In 1907 the Young Tunisian Party was formed with a vision to establish Tunisian autonomy. However, greatly displeased by movements such as these, the French assured that not much progress was made with regards towards an independent Tunisia. The more belligerent Destour Party was the first to introduce the idea of the full independence of Tunisia in the early 1920's. In 1934 young and impatient thinkers calling themselves the Neo-Destour Party pushed for further advancement regarding independence. Their secretary-general was Habib Bourguiba.

The earliest call for female emancipation

It was the Tunisian scholar and firm supporter of feminism, Tahar Haddad in the early years of the 20th century, who in the name of the Islam was one of the first to introduce the idea of female participation in society and education. He was a firm believer that the Islam with regards to women was misinterpreted and that women were no longer "aware of their duties in life and the legitimate advantages they could expect" (Colombo, 2010). His book 'Our Women in the Shari'a and Society' (*La femme dans la société et dans la Chariâa*), that was published in 1930 triggered women in advancing their own cause and taking their roles in the movement against the colonial powers along the journey towards independence. It was also one of the first pieces of literature on feminism within the Islamic culture.

Independence and Tunisia's first President: Habib Bourguiba

Habib Bourguiba was one of the most prominent members of the young nationalist movement in the 1930's and was on the forefront of the Neo Destour Party. Bourguiba had been imprisoned by the French for several years for sedition including time during the Second World War under German occupation before he returned to Tunisia in 1955. After the realisation of political independence in 1956, Bourguiba became the first President of

³ The safsari is a white cloth worn by women that fully covers the body and is part of Tunisia's cultural heritage.

the Republic of Tunisia. As an Arab leader, he was seen as one of the most consistent pro-Western of his kind and one who had directed the country towards modernisation. Some Tunisians also refer to him as 'the father'.

As a visionary leader, Bourguiba came to realise that in order to create a successful and well-functioning state, it was highly important and of great necessity to ensure the separation of religion and state and to fully integrate and include women in society. He visibly emancipated women who no longer played solely the traditional role as the carer within the domestic life and the bearer of children, but also as an individual capable of contributing towards social and economic development (Siala A., personal communication, May 15, 2012). Bourguiba expressed his view on female participation in society during a speech in Tunis in 1972 as the following: "A society cannot be healthy and balanced if half of the social body, the female element, continues to be enslaved, exploited and humiliated" (Gazbar, 1978, p. 30).

Bourguiba instigated the foremost piece of legislation that ensured salient women's rights, unique at the time, under the so-called Personal Status Code (*Code du Statut Personnel*) in August of 1956. The Personal Status Code established a strategy for the empowerment of social and moral equality of women profoundly changing the point of view on women in society and other areas of life. This legislation particularly outlawed "repudiation and polygamy, it established a minimum age for the marriage of girls, and ensured the right to equal wages for both men and women" (Watts, 2007). During a speech in Carthage in 1973 Bourguiba outlined that: "The Personal Status Code liberated women, made her restore her dignity, made her a human being, made her recognise the right to marry the man of her choice and, in cases provided by the law, to obtain a divorce" (Gazbar, 1978, p. 31).

Women gained the right to vote in 1957 together with the right to stand as candidates in elections. A law that was adopted in 1958 legalised adoption and required marriages to be registered.

In 1965, Tunisia was the first Muslim country to liberalise its national law on abortion. This particular policy was predominantly directed at reducing the population growth aiming at the improvement of the socio-economic development. As is the case in most countries, abortion is only allowed during the first trimester of pregnancy. Contraception methods were also highly promoted to achieve the previously mentioned aims. With this law, Tunisia bypassed the United States where abortion was built into the Constitution in 1973 and other Western societies such as The Netherlands where an

abortion law was only adopted in 1981 or the United Kingdom where an abortion policy was adopted in 1967.

The era of Zine El Abdine Ben Ali

Bourguiba had been ruling the country since independence with no democratic elections as the state consisted of only one party: the Neo-Destour Party. This party was called the Destourian Socialist Party from 1964 to 1988 and was later called the Democratic Constitutional Rally in 1988. A deteriorating economy and a growing support for Rachid Ghannouchi's *Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique* (MTI) had led to riots in the 1980's. The government had suppressed these riots with the aid of the army led by Zine El Abdine Ben Ali and put a considerable number of Islamists into prison.

Zine El Abdine Ben Ali ('Ben Ali') who was appointed prime minister in 1987, was a general in the military and succeeded Bourguiba in the same year after Bourguiba had been declared 'unfit' by doctors due to his aging and decreasing health to keep fulfilling his obligations as President. A bloodless coup d'état followed resulting into Ben Ali becoming President of the New Republic. National elections came in 1989 where Ben Ali and his party won a vast majority of the votes. The results of the elections were however fabricated reflecting the low level of legitimacy and transparency.

In the years that followed, democratic reforms together with human rights and political pluralism were kept a promise and Ben Ali and his political party were re-elected with an astounding majority of votes each time in the elections of 1990, 1994, 1999, 2004 and 2009 again, all with a lack of transparency and legitimacy. In 2002 a reform in the Constitution was made allowing Ben Ali to run for a fifth term as President. Ben Ali's, as well as Bourguiba's leadership were characterised by one of secular governance, in which (religious) political parties were as good as non-existent or either highly suppressed. Namely the Islamic Al-Nahda party was prohibited in 1991 as it was suspected of being closely affiliated with terrorists. Ben Ali's administration, like that of his predecessor Bourguiba, put a strong focus on education, socioeconomic development and modernisation. This has led to a higher educated population, higher literacy rates and a by comparison to other countries in the MENA region a low poverty rate.

During Ben Ali's ruling, the regime had used the progression of women's rights as a cover to portray a satisfying image for the west to show their 'successful' secular and modern governing of the country. "Progress on women's rights issues were thus deployed as a democratic façade of a non-democratic regime" (Goulding, 2011). The West took for

granted what was offered in return and therefore let Ben Ali in particular get away with human rights violations such as torture, oppression and corruption. The government promoting women's rights was also used as a means to fight off the influence of (extreme) Islamists as they perceived the role of women in society differently and contrary to the one Bourguiba and Ben Ali envisioned.

Chapter conclusion

With Bourguiba leading the way towards female emancipation and modernising the country and later under Ben Ali growing socioeconomic development, Tunisia had become a relatively stable society with solid relations with the western world. However, Ben Ali's autocratic ruling could not hold up any longer and in reaction to the widespread unrest of his people in late 2010, that demanded him to step down shouting the to the world famous battle cry "degage!" in the streets of Tunisia, Ben Ali was forced into exile on January 14, 2011 in Saudi Arabia. The ousting of Ben Ali by its own people had brought an end to an era of 23 years of strong autocratic dictatorship. He was trialled in his absentia to 35 years in prison alongside \$65 million worth of fines with more trials to come for more severe crimes as the 35 years in prison related to 'minor' crimes in comparison. His wife, Leila Trabelsi faces the same charges for the same major felonies.

Chapter 2 – Women pre uprisings

Women's rights in Tunisia have bypassed other countries in the MENA region after the country gained independence in 1956. International conventions ensuring the rights of women were signed and laws and legislations were passed to include women in society. Women as well as men were active participants in society and were overall treated as first class citizens. They were economically as well as politically active. The following sections will analyse how women have been involved in society prior to the uprisings that commenced in 2010. First, it will briefly present the socio- economic development the country underwent during the Ben Ali era and will then continue with the various ways women have been involved within Tunisian society by presenting examples and outlining differences existing within the country. Furthermore, the chapter will outline the factors leading up to the revolution.

Tunisia before the revolution

During the 23 years of autocratic ruling of Ben Ali, the country has distinguished itself in comparison to the other neighbouring Arab nations. Tunisia under Bourguiba and Ben Ali has seen some significant development in its social and economic areas as both leaders adopted a strong pro-Western focus. The country has enjoyed an average capita income growth rate of 5 per cent since the 1980s (Henry, 2011). Alongside foreign aid and its secular sense of governing, Tunisia has made prompt development in the more coastal- and big city areas such as Tunis and Hammamet. With economic agreements with both The European Union (EU) and The United States of America (USA), Tunisia has been able to develop its industries namely the manufacturing- and tourist industry, boosting its economic growth. For example there has been close collaboration with the EU at the Euro-Mediterranean Conference that led to the signing of the Barcelona Declaration in 1995 that later developed into the EU Neighbourhood Policy calling for the promotion of democracy, human rights and establishing various partnerships ensuring future development of the participating countries (Paciello, 2011).

The considerable existing social policies helped in the development of a sizable middle-class. This in turn resulted in reasonable access to social services and benefits. It is arguable that this aimed at the compensation of the deprivation of political and civil freedoms. Beatrice Hibou (2006, in Paciello 2011) argues that these social policies were merely used as a method for the authorities to get away with the continuous violations of human rights in the country. Ben Romdhane (2007, in Paciello 2011) argues that the

social policy within Tunisia discouraged democratic order, as most of the population was willing to accept the fact that sacrificing the lack of political liberties would in return make place for better socio-economic development and welfare.

Earlier protests of the people as a result of the growing discontent have occurred in Tunisia. A particular event took place in 2008 where a social movement against corruption had started in a mining basin in the South of the country. The protests lasted for days but the government managed to control the turmoil by reacting with violence and controlling the media coverage of the events (Ben Mhenni, 2011). Similar small disruptions that followed were also answered with police interference and violence. The government also imposed a blackout of the media making sure unrest would not spread out to other parts of the country by ensuring the flow of information was very limited.

Tunisia and CEDAW

Tunisia has ratified the six essential UN human rights conventions and their optional protocols. With the exception of the two optional protocols to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the optional protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the optional protocol to the Convention against Torture. Tunisia has also ratified the core International Labour Organisation conventions on forced labour, freedom of association, collective bargaining, child labour and discrimination. Reality has shown however, that the Tunisian governments have frequently not complied with their obligations towards these international conventions ensuring the (basic) rights of its citizens.

Tunisia was one of the first countries in the world to sign the International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1980 with ratification in 1985. This particular convention that came on the international agenda for the first time in 1979 is part of the United Nations body. The convention specifically guarantees the rights of women and girls by bringing women's rights on the global political agenda. The convention describes discrimination against women as the following:

Any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and

women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field (CEDAW 1979: Art. 1).

Out of 193 countries, 186 countries have ratified the CEDAW treaty, including all countries in the MENA region. However, as is the case with international conventions a country is given the possibility to hold reservations on certain articles that do not comply with their religious and/or cultural beliefs. This means that a country does not have to implement that particular part of the convention where it chooses to opt out of certain provisions. This in turn results in no adoption of provisions with regards to gender equality into its domestic legislation. Even today numerous countries have not fully implemented the convention and have made reservations to a number of articles of the convention. CEDAW is seen as one of the key human rights instruments and even the United States have not ratified the convention. During the Bourguiba and Ben Ali presidencies, reservations in Tunisia had been made on the following sections of CEDAW namely the following articles:

- Art. 9(2) Nationality (CEDAW, 1979)
(2) States Parties shall grant women equal rights with men with respect to the nationality of their children.
- Art. 15(4) Law (CEDAW, 1979)
(4) States Parties shall accord to men and women the same rights with regard to the law relating to the movement of persons and the freedom to choose their residence and domicile.
- Art. 16 Marriage and Family Life (CEDAW, 1979)
- Art. 29(1) Administration of the Convention (CEDAW, 1979)
(1) Any dispute between two or more States Parties concerning the interpretation or application of the present Convention which is not settled by negotiation shall, at the request of one of them, be submitted to arbitration. If within six months from the date of the request for arbitration the parties are unable to agree on the organisation of the arbitration, any one of those parties may refer the dispute to the International Court of Justice by request in conformity with the Statute of the Court.

The reasons why Tunisia had previously objected to these particular articles and opted out on them were arguments based on the grounds that they did not comply with The Personal Status Code and could not be interpreted in terms of article 1 of the Constitution, which outlines that the state's religion is Islam.

In September 2008, Tunisia ratified the Optional Protocol to CEDAW and by doing so recognised the ability of (groups of) individuals to file complaints to the CEDAW Committee in the assumption of violations of their rights under the convention (Ben Salem, 2010, p. 5). With the historical occurrence that took place in September 2011, when the interim government in the name of the proclamation to women's rights withdrew from Tunisia's existing specific reservations on CEDAW (Human Rights Watch, 2011), Tunisia is the first country in the MENA region to lift all reservations on the convention and to fully ratify it.

What role have women played prior to the uprisings?

Although Tunisia has only seen two leaders since its independence, the attention towards women's rights has been visible from the start. Bourguiba had emancipated women by freeing them from their traditional bonds and duties balancing these with the Islamic faith. Despite his secular approach of governing, Bourguiba greatly valued religion and accepted the importance of Islam in Tunisian society. During a speech in 1973 he notified that: "Today, like yesterday, we are in need of religion but from a different angle focused on creative effort and progress" (Lablibli, 2006).

Bourguiba strongly focused on modernisation and envisioned a developed society that could only function effectively if men and women were to work side by side. The rights concerning women that Bourguiba had installed in the Personal Status Code were therefore left untouched and further developed with the switch of regimes over time. Various amendments were made in the law in 1993 concerning the rights of women, for example women were granted the right to pass on their name and nationality to their children, guardianship rights were increased and domestic violence was criminalised (Ben Salem 2010).

After independence in 1956 women have been more absorbed in the workforce than under the French protectorate thanks to the Personal Status Code. Together with the international frameworks and through the different collaborations on gender equity, women were introduced to a broader spectrum concerning their rights within their societies. The Beijing Conferences for example and the Convention on the Elimination of

All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) introduced the world to international standards concerning women's empowerment and participation in the public as well as private spheres. Women became more and more visible in all kinds of different fields of expertise. In Tunisia women became less marginalised within the domestic spheres and took on the role of parent, carer and provider. Bourguiba made education more accessible, free and even obligatory for all children between 6 – 14 years of age, which was reformed in 1991 pushing the age up to 16 years (Ben Salem, 2010). This in turn led to a higher number of educated women and higher literacy rates. The 1956 census showed that 84.7% of the total population over 10 years old was illiterate of which 96% was female (Idem.). At the moment, 96% of the female population between 15 and 24 is literate whereas 82% of the female adult population between 2005 and 2010 was literate (UNICEF, 2012). Women made up 27,9% of the workforce before the revolution in contrast to 18,9% in 1979 and 23,7% in 1999. In 2010 women made up 72% of pharmacists, 42% of medical personnel, 45% researchers of which 15% were at the head of laboratories and research units, 47,6% in the domain of justice with 42,5% lawyers and 29,8% judges, 44,6% in the communication sector of which 34% female journalists and 44,3% of employees were female with 25% in managerial positions and 17,4% in director positions (Zouari, Dahmani, Barrouhi, & Slimani, 2010). Wahida (2011, in Ajmi 2011) stated: "Bourguiba made Tunisia an exceptional country. The Tunisian revolution is Bourguiba's heritage. He was the one who made our mothers educated and in possession of the level of knowledge they now have." In its report, the Economist Intelligence Unit (2010, in Zouari, Dahmani, Barrouhi, & Slimani, 2010) classified Tunisia as first in the Arab world in terms of economic opportunities for women. However, the workforce remains highly segmented as strong male-biases remain eminent in the private sector in areas such as business and economics.

Ben Ali had made it quite clear that female participation in politics would be a crucial denominator towards an effective democracy. He established for example the so-called 'gender quotas' calling for his own party, the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD), to embrace female participation by allocating 30% of the available slots for election to women (Lancaster, 2010). Tunisia in comparison to the other Arab states has been one in which female participation in politics have been seemingly higher. For example in 2010 Tunisia ranked 31 in the world with 27,6 % female presence in parliament (Zouari, Dahmani, Barrouhi, & Slimani, 2010). The reason for the high number of women in politics in Tunisia is because of the set gender quotas under Ben Ali.

Women's organisations

A variety of organisations were existent under the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regime. Under Bourguiba and later under Ben Ali, freedom of assembly and association seemingly had its limitations and all groups wishing to pursue their objectives had to be in some way affiliated to the government (Goulding, 2011). Government control was therefore a main factor of the on-going politics within various organisations and influenced the outcomes of the goals most groups envisioned. The main reason of heavy interference was Ben Ali's fright to be removed from parliament and therefore anyone who could only have the slightest connection to the opposition had to be repressed and penalties were to be imposed to those not obeying the law. Laws became more strict in the early 1990's where it became more complex for an association to receive a license or to have their applications processed and registered in the first place (Ibid.).

The National Union of Tunisian Women (L'Union National de la femme Tunisienne or UNFT) was the first organisation created under Bourguiba in 1956 with regard to women's interests and was the first of its kind within the Maghreb countries. However, Bourguiba imposed a firm grip over the organisation's agenda and permissibility, always keeping his own regime in the back of his mind. As Goulding (2011) states: "The UNFT became a catch-all for women's interests and the nation's sole women's group".

Tunisia's civil society before the uprisings did consist of some thousands of voluntary associations and national (civil) organisations. In the year Ben Ali seized power in 1987 there were 1,776 legally existing organisations and the number rose to some 9,350 of such legally existing entities in 2009 (Henry, 2011). Civil society in the more sensitive areas such as human rights and civil liberties were especially of small size before Ben Ali fled the country mid-January 2011. Approximately 20 women's organisations and committees were legally existent in the previous government who worked closely together with political parties, the National Board for Family and Population Affairs and the Ministry of Women, Family, Childhood, and the Elderly (MAFFEPA) (Ben Salem, 2010, p. 3). Several bodies were established under Ben Ali for the protection of women's rights. The National Women and Development Commission is one example of an organisation established under Ben Ali in 1991 as part of the Economic Development Plan "in order to compensate for the insufficient representation of female experts on the various sectorial commissions" (CEDAW, 2000). This committee brings together different stakeholders concerned with women affairs and is led by the Minister for Women and Family Affairs.

The Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates – ATFD) established in 1989 is an example of one of the bigger women's organisations based on plurality and solidarity alongside gender equality, democracy, secularism and social justice. During an interview with the author with the ATFD, a representative explained how difficult their work was prior to the revolution with the government closely watching their moves and activities and even their leadership coming from the RCD. They faced a lot of restraints and could not fully operate in certain areas such as domestic violence. She said that: "it is not easy to defend women's rights" (S. Fraouis, personal communication, May 17, 2012).

The few autonomous organisations such as The Tunisian League of Human Rights and even Amnesty International had strict limitations regarding their work and had to carefully watch their steps. All these entities were closely monitored by the government and struggled to get by due to limited or no funding possibilities made available to them. They enjoyed limited freedoms and even their private movements were closely monitored to assure they were not in any way trying to oppose the government by putting them in a bad light. Media outings of such organisations on problems in Tunisian society such as domestic violence, sexual harassment and poverty were suppressed.

Leila Trabelsi, the former First Lady, had been highly involved in politics. Since 2009 she was very active as the President of the Organisation of Arab Women (l'Organisation des femmes Arabe – l'OFA) consisting of 16 countries in the Arab League: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania, Oman, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Palestine and Yemen. She called for awareness and a communal strategy to combat violence against women in the region. The Constitution of UNFT stated that the First Lady would be at the head of the organisation. The UNFT, especially with Trabelsi at the top functioned as a mouthpiece of Ben Ali's political party the RCD. Trabelsi had called for larger female active participation in Tunisia in the months prior to the ousting of her spouse naming women's rights one of the top priorities of the ruling officials on the political agenda at that point. After Trabelsi fled the country the UNFT was left with no sufficient leadership and struggled for some time to get back on track again.

Regional differences between women

Notably, it has to be taken into consideration that prominent differences between women in the more rural and inland parts of Tunisia on the one hand and the more

cosmopolitan and touristic parts of Tunisia on the other are well existent. Women in the more rural and inland part of Tunisia seldom own land and are often deluged by the difficulty of combining domestic tasks with the rough farm work (Ben Salem, 2010, p. 2). As mentioned in an interview with the author, Saoussen Mahjoub a young Tunisian entrepreneur and co-founder of the Tunisian American Association of Young Professionals (TAYP) in Washington D.C, explained how the different lifestyles influence the way women perceive certain aspects of life and determine the extent of active participation of women in society. Ben Ali had always put a stronger focus on the metropolitan and tourist areas in terms of socioeconomic development. This created a better standard of living in these areas than in the poorer inland regions. Socioeconomic differences in turn result into different mentalities. City and tourist areas are usually more modernised and the people have an overall different perspective on society. E.g. a girl from the more rural areas could be sent by her father to work as a maid for a far more emancipated woman belonging to the elite which would in turn exercise a culture shock for the young employee seeing the large differences between the city and the country. The interior areas of Tunisia are more traditional and patriarchal and women are more involved in the domestic life whereas the overall more open-minded women in the more densely populated areas live with more liberal perceptions towards life and the role they should play in society. Mahjoub presented the example of herself growing up in the more cosmopolitan city of Tunis where she had been able to enjoy more freedom in comparison to her counterparts in the inland. E.g. she could smoke, go out and had the ability to colour her life the way she wanted it to be. However, she clearly outlined the present differences with the countryside, as she would not even dare to enter a café in smaller towns that are usually solely visited by men of the closely-knit communities, simply to avoid friction.

Factors leading up to the revolution

In the years leading up to the revolution, people across the MENA regions were living under oppressive dictatorships. High rising youth unemployment rates, no freedom of press, no freedom of expression and highly corrupted governmental institutions, such as the police and military, had sparked the flame of a heavy dynamic movement of uprisings in this region against its unpopular dictators.

Merely a small privileged minority of the Tunisian population benefited from the regime's restrictions on most of its functioning entities that brought growth and prosperity

(Henry, 2011). This indicates to the widespread corruption eminent within the economic spheres. The relatives of Ben Ali and his wife Leila Trabelsi together with other influential families namely the Trabelsis, Materis and the Mabrouks (altogether also known as 'The Family') possessed the majority of existing businesses in the country making it extremely difficult for individual entrepreneurs to open up new businesses as their status was heavily disfavoured. Nepotism was very common within The Family. You had to know someone in order to get something you wanted done. Often the unprivileged individuals who were not affiliated to The Family could not get loans from the banks and could not pursue their businesses. Besides the monopolistic emporium that this elite had built for themselves they were also not subjected to corrupt charges as 'The Family' enjoyed an extremely favourable position within the jurisprudence. High loans were, at times forcibly, granted and were often not paid back. Essentially The Family managed to take over control of a number of banks alongside other important and costly assets (Ibid.).

Elsewhere in the country for the less privileged part of society, where regional economic differences were cultivating and the high rate of unemployment especially amongst young graduates (in Tunisia) became problematic, heavy protests started in December 2010. Out of the total Tunisian workforce, 13% (around 500.000 people) was unemployed of which 30% of the young population between 15 and 24 did not have a job (World Bank, 2012). A tremendous majority of the working youth was working below its own intellectual capabilities and working in the more modest jobs. The job market could simply not absorb the growing number of skilled workers. The government failed to react with effective and adequate economic policies to meet the high demands for job creation, which in turn called for a lot of frustration especially amongst the younger generations.

A second factor leading up to the revolutions were the increasing regional disparities. Especially the north, the northwest and the centre west harvested the fruits of the tourist sector and the offshore activities that brought more wealth and prosperity to these areas. Most of Tunisia's economic activity is centralised in the governorate of Tunis and Sfax. The regional and inland areas on the other hand were suffering greatly where (youth) unemployment rates exceeded 22.6% since 2004 in regions like Gafsa and Kasserine. On top of the growing differences the government had showed a lack of attention to these problems ignoring the situation. The government had been investing 65% of its public spending in the more coastal areas, neglecting the need for financial aid in other areas (Verdier-Chouchane, Obayashi, & Castel, 2011, p. 4).

The global economic crisis of 2007-2008 had also played a role in the growing discontent. Worldwide people started to suffer financially and countries in the MENA region, dependent too on trade and partnerships with the west, strongly felt the crisis. The Tunisian economy is highly dependent on entities such as the EU in terms of tourism, export and foreign direct investment. Real economic growth started to decrease as in 2007 economic growth was at 6.3%, 2008 brought only 4.5% and eventually merely 3.3% in 2009 as a result in the drop of FDI (World Bank, 2010)

The sizeable middle class that came about due to the previous socioeconomic development, started to erode when salaries were considerably low in comparison to the increasing cost of living and the world rising food prices affecting purchasing power in Tunisia (Paciello, 2011). The government showed a lack of attention towards the growing problems facing the country that ultimately resulted in the erosion of the little trust the people had left in the regime (S. Fraouis, personal communication, May 17, 2012). The aggravating situation called for frustration and dissatisfaction amongst the Tunisian people.

Chapter conclusion

Women have been visible more and more in society since Tunisia's independence in 1965. They have been absorbed in the workforce and have taken up the task as provider beside their traditional roles as mother and carer. Women became more visible through female organisation, although highly monitored by the government taking care of such organisation's agenda's. Differences in class and lifestyles were eminent when comparing touristic and city areas with the more inland and rural areas. Despite Ben Ali's relative success towards socioeconomic development, his lack of attention to the deteriorating situation became suffocating and unacceptable with growing unemployment rates, lack of opportunities, a shrinking middle class, high corruption and economic downturns that eventually escalated.

Chapter 3 – Women during the uprisings

Tunisian women have played active roles in the popular protests all over the country. Women as well as men have stepped out of their day-to-day lives to let their voices be heard in a journey towards the reformation of authority and ousting of its dictator. Women have manifested shoulder-to-shoulder with men claiming their rights and pleading for democratic reform. Women have been on the forefront of the revolution, have equally been harassed, tortured, injured as men and have sacrificed their lives for the cause of living. This section will briefly outline the so-called 'Jasmine Revolution' and will continue with female involvement during the uprisings. Social networks, media and cyber activism have played a significant role in the uprising in organising protests, spreading the word of the revolution together with sharing and exchanging information about the events.

Brief introduction to the Arab Spring

In December 2010 a young man by the name of Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire after the police had reportedly abused him in public and intervened with his illegal fruit selling business in front of a government building in the city of Sidi Bouzid in the centre of Tunisia. He died of his injuries in early January 2011. Following this event, hundreds of young people gathered in protest against the ruling government, calling for change and measures against the high unemployment rate, the regional disparities, lack of freedom of expression and the high level of corruption in the country. The dissatisfaction of the Tunisian people that led to the 'Arab Spring' (also known as the 'Jasmine Revolution') rapidly spread out over the MENA region inspiring hundreds of thousands of protesters both men and women to stand up for their rights and turn their backs on the corrupt dictatorship from the past decades.

The world quickly turned to Egypt where, not long after Ben Ali's departure, Egyptians inspired by the Jasmine Revolution ousted President Hosni Mubarak. Protests spread to Bahrain soon to be followed by Libya where protests led to a brutal civil war against Muahmar Ghaddafi who was eventually killed in October 2011. Yemen's protest might lead to more liberalisation and in Syria little progress is slowly being made in a struggle to oust President Bashar Assad, a struggle which has already cost more than 5000 lives.

Protests, however, in Tunisia have seemed to be a rare phenomenon seeing the country used to be one of the most stable countries in the MENA region (Borger, 2010). What started in the smaller town of Sidi Bouzid had rapidly spread out over neighbouring

towns and eventually to the whole country. It led to national protests that commenced on the 27th of December 2011 when large numbers of people from all backgrounds went out on the streets to express the heavy discontent towards the government. In reaction to these events, Ben Ali made an attempt to hush the masses by making the following clear during an interview on national television on 28 December 2010:

“A minority of extremists and agitators in the pay of others, and against the country’s interests, resort to violence and street disturbances.... This is negative and anti- civil behaviour... and impedes the flow of investors and tourists which impacts negatively on job creation.... The law will be enforced rigorously against these people” (Honwana, 2011).

The reaction thereafter of the authorities had been one of violence. The President reacted with a firm hand on the events threatening with heavy punishments for the protestors. Police and military have used severe violence and force against the protestors during the turmoil, which to this day has cost more than 200 human lives. But the people simply just had enough and could no longer accept the social contract they had signed with Ben Ali in the past. The previous socioeconomic development could no longer go alongside the deteriorating situation in the country. Escalation was inevitable. The protest went on for weeks with January the 14th marking as a special day in history when Ben Ali left the country. Teyssir Azizi described her experiences on that particular day during an interview with the author:

“Everyone participated. It didn’t matter who they were, what they did or where they came from. On January 14 we all came together and shared solidarity. We were all Tunisians that day and you could really feel that. Men, women, boys, girls and even small children, everyone was there. It was insane.”

Female involvement was astounding and a lot of media outings and images show women waving the Tunisian flag, shouting for equality, being on the forefront. The news bulletin of the National Public Radio reported the following on female involvement during the revolutions on January 27:

“Female voices rang out loud and clear during massive protests that brought down the authoritarian rule of Tunisian President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali. Women in Tunisia are unique in the Arab world for enjoying near equality with men. And they are anxious to maintain their status. In Tunis, old ladies, young girls and women in black judges robes marched down the streets demanding that the dictator leave. Hardly anyone wears the Muslim headscarf in the capital, and women seem to be everywhere, taking part in everything, alongside men” (Beardsley, 2011).

Media, social networks and cyber activism

The former Tunisian Constitution guaranteed the freedom of press and publication. Notwithstanding, the government exercised control over the actual dispersion of the freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution under the Press Code. By restricting the distribution of the available materials such as (international) periodicals, putting strict limitations on ownership of different entities affiliated with the media, and applying an overall wide censorship over mediums, the government pulled the strings in accordance to the control over the media (European Commission, 2004, p. 8). Even private means of communication such as the Internet, telephone lines and individually owned Internet cafés were frequently controlled. Heavy rules existed on the use of Internet and individuals were restricted in their access to foreign websites. If foreign connection were to be made, it had to be approved by the Tunisian Internet Agency (ATI) first, in order to be able to access it (Ibid.). The government imposed more restrictions by routinely blocking websites such as Youtube, Dailymotion and Facebook to limit access.

Despite the governments’ heavy interference over the years with regard to the distribution of news, a hacking group calling themselves ‘Anonymous’ together with hacking collective ‘LulzSec’ have hacked numerous governmental websites and other institutions and companies including the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (Amara 2012).

Social media and social networks have played a significant role prior and during the uprisings in Tunisia. The power of social media has proved to be one of the non-violent means in which people could express themselves, share and exchange information each other and reach out to a far larger audience than solely word-to-mouth communication, (news) papers or other news media. The extensive use of camera phones and other devices have particularly shaped the media outcomes for the Tunisian uprisings as a lot of the taped footage appeared on online pages such as Facebook and

other network sharing webpages. The bigger news organisations such as BCC, CNN and Al-Jazeera have in return used a number of these primary sources to cover the news stories worldwide.

Tunisia is rich in active (female) journalists, bloggers, Tweeters, Facebookers and other digital activists that helped spreading the word of the revolution through cyber activism. The amount of Internet users in Tunisia has risen from 100.000 in December 2000 to close to 400.000 in December 2011. The number of people on Facebook was close to 3 million at the end of March 2012 (Internet World Stats: Africa Stats, 2011).

One of the most well-known bloggers and also a 2011 Nobel Peace Prize nominee, Lina Ben Mhenni is a woman of great distinction. Lina Ben Mhenni aged 27 is a young Tunisian cyber activist and a teaching assistant of linguistics at the University of Tunis. Ben Mhenni blogged about the happenings in Tunisia not only reaching her own people but she also brought to light what was going in Tunisia to the world through her connections with foreign media. She posted her stories alongside shocking photos of corpses on her blog 'A Tunisian Girl'. Ben Mehnni strongly disagrees with the outside world for labelling the Tunisian revolution as one led by Facebook, Wikileaks and Twitter. She clearly states:

"I'm against the term 'Facebook Revolution.' We shouldn't forget the martyrs and people who were injured, the mothers who lost their children and took to the streets again and again until Ben Ali fled. If the revolution had only been on the Internet, it would never have had the same result. It was a combination of the fight on the ground and the fight on the Internet" (L. Ben Mhenni & M. Salem, 2011).

It was the bravery of the people who took out to the streets to let their voices be heard. Most of the people in Sidi Bouzid for example were not even aware of the existence of the Wikileaks cables that some argue was a crucial part of the start of the revolution. Ben Mhenni has been named as 'one of the most fearless bloggers in the world' by the Daily Beast, an online periodical. On her blog 'A Tunisian Girl' she blogged on 26 January 2012

that she had received death threats from the Salafists⁴. She posted the following on her Facebook page:

“The Salafists/Islamists announced that I am on a death list when I answered them by sharing Quraniq verses and the prophet's sayings to show them how stupid and how far from religion they are, they said that I did this because I am afraid. No I am not. I was under the live bullets when you did not dare to reveal your ideologies and beliefs and when you did not dare to have your beards and total veils so I won't be afraid of you cowards” (Mhenni, 2012).

Her determination and belief that change will happen has inspired a lot of people. As a Muslim woman she is determined that one can practise religion without letting it interfere with politics.

Fatma Riahi is another renowned young female blogger under the name of ‘Fatma Arabicca’. She was arrested in 2009 for presumably causing unrest with her online activities and her possible connections with the controversial cartoonist Blog de Z (Gharbia, 2009). Facebook pages were started in order to plead for her release. After she was released, she has been blogging actively and has joined the opposition (of Ben Ali) towards the creation of open governance and e-democracy. She believes in giving the young generation the opportunity to understand the political landscape in a post-revolution environment (Dahmani, 2011).

Another female journalist and prominent human rights activist is Sihem Bensedrine. She lived in exile for several years after she had been harassed and arrested under Ben Ali's regime. She returned to Tunisia after the uprisings. She is a co-founder of the National Council for Liberties in Tunisia (CNLT). CNLT is a human rights organisation that actively monitors and publishes information on human rights conditions in Tunisia. Bensedrine is at the forefront of the radio station Kalime that was previously broadcasted through Satellite 1 and the Internet. As it was part of the opposition, it was against the authorities and therefore declared illegal. Today she is very active in Tunis with the start-

⁴ A Salafist is a person who believes only in God's law and believes he is the only correct interpreter of the Qur'an. They overall see moderate Muslims as infidels and envision a world where their fundamentalist interpretation of Islam will dominate.

up for new broadcastings on both radio and television to accommodate the public with greater access to information (Dennison, Dworkin, Popescu, & Witney, 2011).

What all these women have in common is their fearless approach towards equality and democracy concerning their rights. These three women are only a few of the women that have put their own safety at risk to protect the rights and dignities of others.

How have these women influenced the current situation?

On the 23rd of October 2011, Tunisia was the first country in the MENA region to hold democratic elections after the heavy turmoil in the region. With more than a 100 parties participating in the election process to win seats for the Constituent Assembly, it is seen as a firm step towards democracy where Tunisians would be able to have their voices heard and counted in a meaningful way (Goulding, 2011). The Constituent Assembly is tasked with the drafting of a new Constitution and with directing the country towards the next elections to be held in 2013.

The moderate Islamist Al-Nahda party, also known as the Renaissance party, came out as the big winner in the Tunisian Constituent Assembly election. Moncef Marzouki's party Congress of the Public (Congrès pour la République) came second in the elections. Marzouki is a well-known human rights activist and doctor and is internationally praised for becoming influential in the democratic transition. Al-Nahda, as previously mentioned in chapter 1, was banned under Ben Ali's presidencies due to its religious nature, which consequently had forced a lot of its members, including its leaders either into prison or into exile. Al-Nahda won with a vast majority of 41 per cent which ensured their party with 89 seats out of the 217 available seats in parliament, allocating more than half of its available seats to women. Al-Nahda's ideology is based on the Islamic principle of equality, equity and social values (Moschella, 2012). Their program constitutes of a focus on economic and social development, national security and combating corruption. They also envision the perpetuation and advancement concerning women's rights (Ibid.).

Today, fear has risen in the country with a religious-oriented party as the main party. On the grounds of the promotion of extremism and intolerance, religious parties were forbidden and highly suppressed under the Bourguiba and Ben Ali presidencies. Individuals and groups who dared to express their political preferences in accordance to religion, especially Islam, were sent to prison (where rumours of torture and execution were rampant) or forced into exile. Al-Nahda in particular was banned from the political

décor from the early nineties until their legalisation after the revolution in 2011. Its leader Rachid Ghannouchi aged 70 has been in exile and has only returned to Tunisia after the uprisings.

Article 1 of the 1959 Tunisian Constitution lays out that "Tunisia is a free, independent and sovereign state. Its religion is Islam, its language is Arabic and its type of government is a republic" (Mandraud, 2012). Al-Nahda supports this and has previously stated that Sharia shall not be implemented nor will Sharia become part of the new Tunisian Constitution and that they value the separation of religion and state (Ibid.).

Months after the elections, people remain sceptical about the "double discourse" Al-Nahda seems to spread (M. Lynch, 2011). According to Goulding (2011): "Al-Nahda's leaders are saying one thing while the secularists and the West are listening, while imams in the mosques and local-level activists say and do very different things". Speculations go around that they will accordingly change their points of view over time as various delegates, including female members, of the Al-Nahda party have made startling remarks about several of the existing women's rights and human rights in general that do not comply with the international conventions assuring these rights. Rachid Ghannouchi, the President of Al-Nahda stated in October 2011 that: "The law allowing adoption of children could not remain in place and proposed a return to the system of kafala⁵, or tutorship." In early October 2011 Souad Abderrahim, a female member of parliament for the Al-Nahda party, said that: "Single mothers are a disgrace in an Arab Muslim society and should not have the right to exist" (Shirayanagi, 2011). Sihem Badi, Minister for Women and Family Affairs, said in February 2012 that customary marriage or urfi⁶ was a "personal freedom". During an interview, however, with France24 held in December 2011, Hemadi Jebali, the Prime Minister-designate of Al-Nahda, was confronted with the question about the procurement of women's rights to which he responded that:

"There is no reason to worry. I can guarantee that Al-Nahda will be at the forefront of the fight to guarantee women's rights in all fields – politically, socially and professionally. The members of the coalition government and primarily Al-Nahda will

⁵ Kafala is a state of guardianship under immediate family.

⁶ An urfi marriage is a customary or traditional marriage in the presence of two witnesses. Urfi marriages are not registered and not officially recognised by law.

affirm the rights of women through the Constitution, through legislation and above all through our actions.” (France 24, 2011)

The current transitional period with regard to the role of women has called for controversial issues. As previously mentioned, women are anxious about losing the rights gained in the past whilst others urge for bringing back traditional values to the Tunisian society. During various interviews conducted by the author, women expressed their concerns to be possibly forced to wear the veil in the near future. Some do not exclude the thought of what happened to the revolution in Iran in 1979, where women who have fought side-by-side men, have been strongly deprived of their rights after the Muslim extremists came to power. Others put faith in Al-Nahda whilst others remain sceptic about the party's possible discourse and wait what the future will bring.

Current situation and women in society

The interim government that was created after the fall of Ben Ali consisted largely of members of the previous parliament who were primarily members of the ousted RCD party which caused new protests. A second interim government was formed which, again, could not meet the demands of the people and ultimately a third interim government was created until the elections of October 2011 (Freedom House, 2012). People generally did not trust members of the old parliament including the women previously sitting in parliament representing the RCD and were therefore excluded from the transition period. This in turn resulted in a low representation of women in the interim government. Goulding (2011) argues that the low representation of women during this period can also be explained by the fact that most female organisations and namely the UNFT led by the former First Lady, lacked the leadership to assure prominent representation within the interim government.

During the 10 months of the interim government, civil society rapidly expanded to some 20.000 organisations by the summer of 2011 (CEMAT, 2011). Laws were put into effect lifting previous constraints on basic human rights such as freedom of expression. Freedom of assembly and association was made more accessible resulting in the formation of over 100 political parties.

A gender parity law was adopted prior to the elections requiring parties to run equal male/female candidates on their list ensuring consequent female representation for the Constitutional Assembly. Despite wide acceptance by all participating parties

(including Al-Nahda), in practice women were not prioritized: more than 95% of party lists were headed by men resulting in low female representation in the government. After the elections in October 2011, three women made it to the 41-member cabinet of the government holding the following functions: Minister of Environment, Minister of Women's Affairs and the Family and Secretary of State for Housing (FIDH, n.d.). Regarding female representation in parliament, Tunisia now ranks 34 in the world. Since the previous parliamentary elections held in October of 2011, 58 seats out of 217 seats (26,7%) are held by women (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2012). An interesting remark is that out of those 58 seats taken up by women; women representing the biggest party Al-Nahda vest over 45 of these seats.

Chapter conclusion

Women stood side-by-side men during the popular uprisings. Media and social networks were active contributors in spreading the word of the revolution, together with constant updates and footage made available to the world overpowering barriers such as censorship. After Ben Ali went into exile, women were however less included in the transition period than anticipated. Measures such as the gender parity law have not resulted into prominent female representation in the current government. Whilst support for Islamic movements is increasing women have growing fears for their rights.

Chapter 4 – What issues are women facing in the post revolution environment?

First of all, one of the main reasons that caused the revolution is far from being solved. The high employment rate especially under (recent) young graduates persists and has even risen since the ousting of Ben Ali. The last reported unemployment rate was 18.9% in 2011 against 13% prior to the revolution (World Bank, 2012). Out of that 18.9%, 72.1% of all the jobless people are young people under 30. Unemployment rates under women in 2011 were almost double that of men with 28.2% of unemployed women against 15.4% of unemployed men (Chomiak, 2011). Tunisia enjoyed an annual average economic growth of 5% between 1997 and 2007 which has reportedly been negative 1.8% in 2011 (World Bank, 2012).

Secondly, after the revolution people have expressed their fears for the current safety situation in the country. Traffic rules seem to have disappeared resulting into chaos. People are afraid to go out because of persistent protests, roving gangs and a generalised weakness in rule of law. While Ben Ali invested hugely in the police force, reaching 250.000 at some stage who have closely collaborated with his regime over the past decade, many of those have now fled or quit. Tunisia's condition is still one of a state of emergency and temporary movement restrictions and curfews can still be imposed at any time on short notice or no notice at all.

Finally, there remains a growing fear of change in the position of women in Tunisian society with the rise of Islamic extremism in the country. There is a growing tendency towards extremism that led to a large protest in February 2012 organised by The Tunisian Front of Islamic Associations, who took to the streets to advocate the implementation of Sharia Law into Tunisia's domestic legislation. Sharia Law restricts women's rights such as inheritance rights and family rights. Bourguiba and Ben Ali have fought extremely hard towards a secular state where religion and politics were to be separated. Besides seeing them as the enemy and therefore highly oppressing them Ben Ali in particular has succeeded in keeping the two separated. Aiming to ban religious clothing, a law was adopted in 1981 that banned the hijab (traditional veil worn by Muslim women) from public spaces such as hospitals and public offices followed by a law adopted in 1985 that banned them from educational institutions (Ben Salem, 2010, p. 7).

The rise of the Salafists has caused some distress amongst women. During interviews conducted by the author in Tunis in May 2012, girls and women shared their experiences being approached by Salafists on the streets urging them to cover

themselves up. For example, Nada Fersi, a young medical student in Tunis who plays the cello, one night after music class, overheard two Salafists talking about how music is forbidden in their beliefs and how people like her should be annihilated. And tellingly, according to Nada there is more traditional clothing visible in public as some Muslim women experience the new reforms as freedom as wearing the hijab or niqab is liberating for them.

As reforms are made and a new Constitution is drafted, women look with fear at their possible future position in society. In the conducted combined questionnaire and survey along with interviews by the author, a majority of the women expressed their fears of what is yet to come. Most of the Tunisian women that were questioned, believe that the worst thing that could happen now is the diminution of the rights they currently enjoy as women and a possible change in the current Personal Status Code.

Outlook for the future & conclusion

Tunisia has long been seen as a beacon in the MENA region when it comes to women's rights. Women in Tunisia have historically enjoyed considerably more rights than their counterparts in other countries in the MENA region. Since independence and under Tunisia's 'founding father' Habib Bourguiba, women's rights were established and instigated under the Personal Status Code in 1956. Herein laid the fundamental principle of women and men as equal citizens in Tunisian society. Bourguiba emancipated women by freeing them from their traditional bonds and duties. Vast progress was made during the years of Bourguiba and later Ben Ali, where some women's issues even surpassed some western civilizations on matters such as the right to vote, contraception and abortion.

Nearly a year and a half have passed since the young Mohammed Bouizizi died of his self-immolation act in protest against the Ben Ali autocratic regime in late December 2010. It was the straw that broke the camel's back of the obeisance towards a corrupt and dysfunctional system. The transition from an autocratic regime in a country that has only seen two rulers since its independence from France, into a democracy is evidently a challenging and complex process. It will take time to accustom to the transformations that are being made and close attention must be paid towards the deflections of past events. As Saoussen Mahjoub said during an interview with the author: "Tunisia needs time, but we have no time. It is now or never." Without a shadow of doubt, the revolution has not only placed the outcry for democratic change on the national agenda but also attracted the attention of the international community in that the previous dictatorships that have been ousted must become and stay a phenomenon of the past and that together we should strive towards human equality and human dignity.

Tunisian women have come a long way and have previously been absorbed in the workforce, in politics and in civil society. Most of these entities, however, were highly monitored and reflected the ruling authorities' preference towards the functioning of the country. Women as well as men have been able to enjoy education for free which has resulted into a larger high-educated population. The direction of women's rights is a highly debated topic in post-revolution Tunisia and Amira Lassoued expressed her views in the combined questionnaire and survey from the author as the following:

"Women's rights are undoubtedly one of the most debated issues in the post revolution environment. Our challenge today is to affirm our existence without the

support of any political party. Unfortunately, many politicians took women as a bridge to reach their goals. For the future, I hope to see the Tunisian woman as powerful, self-determining and free. Far from politics, we must fight every kind of abuse, be it social or political.”

With growing Islamisation, women in Tunisia are sceptic and somewhat scared of what is held for them in the future. The current leading moderate Islamist Al-Nahda party is eminently moving towards a stronger Islamic influence in the country. Despite their promises to not touch women's rights by expressing their pride and respect to Tunisia's achievements of the past concerning these rights, various members of this political party have made startling comments about women's rights that point in the opposite direction of the gains made in the past. Women fear that their rights might deteriorate with the upcoming Islamic influences within the public-, private- and the political spheres. They fear that they will be forced back into domestic life in compliance with (traditional) Islamic values. What a lot of women have expressed in interviews with the author is that they experience fear of being forced to wear the veil one day and will be banned from society. Al-Nahda, however, has articulated their willingness to work together with other political parties but time will tell whether their intentions are truly genuine.

The upswing of extreme Muslims such as the Salafists has also caused growing fear. Previously, traditional religious clothing was prohibited and banned from the public view. After the fall of the regime, more and more people seem to find their freedom and relief in religion. The Salafists are more prominent in the streets and urge women to cover up and become what they call 'good' Muslims. It seems that the uprisings have resulted into a division of the people where everyone perceives freedom of expression in a different way. Where one sees it as comparable to Western countries where one is free to speak one's mind and live one's life the way one wants it to be, there are some Muslims and in the more extreme cases extremists who see the obtained freedom as a way to go back to traditional values and lean to the more extreme interpretations of the Qur'an. Both extremes will effect and influence the status of women as different interpretations on society bring with them different views on what role women should play in society.

At this stage, one which is still developing, it must be closely monitored what is going to happen next. It is certain that the ousting of Ben Ali has led to more freedom in some areas. People are more free to speak their minds and do not have to look over their shoulder when openly talking about and criticising the government. Democracy, however,

is a whole new phenomenon in Tunisia and there is a lack of political experience. Bourguiba had a one-party sense of governing followed by Ben Ali's autocratic ruling highly oppressing the opposition. International observers have been invited by the ruling authorities to monitor the process of the next elections that will be held in early 2013. The outcome of which will highly depend on the new Constitution that is currently being drafted.

Nonetheless, with growing differences amongst the people, it will be very important that the ruling authorities will be able to act as a bridge between the existing dissimilarities in mentality amongst its population in order to satisfy everyone to a realistic extent. Effective communication including both men and women from all levels of society and a strong determination are the necessary ingredients for a well-functioning democracy and will push Tunisia forward again. Tunisia needs the economy to step up again and the country needs to become attractive again for foreign investors and tourists. A stable and transparent government is necessary in order to accommodate this need. During times of distress, women are often more likely to become victims of the deteriorating situation.

Tunisia is a member of CEDAW and was the first in the region to lift all its previous reservations in September 2011 on the treaty. This, already, is a step in the right direction. Tunisian women should become more aware of their rights and demonstrate their willingness to fight for their rights. As long as women do not let their gained rights slip through their fingers, but take a firm grip on the transformation and stay part of the public life by becoming more involved in all areas of society, they can only gain more rights, dignity, recognition and equality. As the young Nada Fersi put it during an interview with the author concerning the possibility of diminishing women's rights as: "We must all have faith in women and just not let it happen."

Recommendations

The government should put equality between men and women on the top of the political agenda. Furthermore, the government should be as transparent as possible working closely together with civil society to accommodate the needs of the people. At the moment there is a lack of political experience as Ben Ali's RCD was the only ruling component of the former government. Workshops and (in-depth advocacy) trainings are urgently needed for women as well as for men in order to assure fair and skilled governing in the future. The international community should contribute to the training of Tunisian politicians in order to establish a well functioning democracy. Furthermore, the government should acknowledge the fact that women are a crucial part of society and should therefore further integrate women in society by including them more in policy-making and decision-making bodies.

Women should become more active within society. Women need to get involved and participate as much as they can in politics and not become passive bystanders. Organisations such as the AFTD should expand their efforts explicitly on the rights of girls and women to launch more awareness campaigns to assure consciousness on the rights of women and address the missing links towards full equality. Development programs should be initiated to decrease the gap between women in the urban areas and women in the inland and rural areas.

It is important that *the cause of the revolution* will not get lost in the debate on religion in public life. There is high unemployment at the moment, especially amongst women and young graduates. Therefore it is important that the new government despite its religious preferences addresses these problems and presents realistic solutions for the short-term as well as the long-term. Job creation is crucial to accommodate the current unemployed population and to avoid future uprisings.

Economic growth has been declining since the uprisings and needs to go upwards again. Tunisia is not rich in natural resources and the economy was focused and highly dependent on tourism, foreign direct investment (FDI) and other offshore activities. It is crucial that the authorities acknowledge and address these stagnating processes and ameliorate political stability in order to create a higher level of trust for foreigners to attract them to invest, trade and spend their holidays again in Tunisia. Women could play a

crucial part in this as their knowledge and competency is eminently present. Additional trainings and workshops should be provided to train women on leadership in these areas.

The government should take measures to guard women's rights with regard to the rising Islamism and growing extremist Muslim movements.

The government should facilitate public debate on political and social issues so that people can discuss and form opinion and that information on all kinds of subjects and ideas is available.

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Appendices

Appendix I – Combined Questionnaire and Survey

Introduction to the questionnaire and survey

For my primary research, I decided to create a combined questionnaire and survey in order to gain a better understanding of the situation with regard to women in Tunisia, to get in touch with Tunisian women and to possibly make an analysis of the matter. I have sent out approximately 40 pieces to a variety of (young) women I found on Facebook, (organisational) websites and I had placed an announcement on the Tunisia group page on www.couchsurfing.com. On couchsurfing, a young Tunisian woman named Emna Bel Hadj had read my message and offered her help. She has distributed the combined questionnaire and survey to her friends, family and colleagues from all different levels of society in Tunisia. Unfortunately, the response rate was low and I only received a total of 10 documents back. I understood that this would not be sufficient enough to make a decent analysis based on statistics and other outcomes and decided to merely use the responses as a source of information and not to substantiate my arguments.

Introduction

My name is Desirée Bernhardt and I am a student at The Hague University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands. I am currently writing my final Bachelor's dissertation on the role of women in Tunisia. My research question is the following:

“How has the role of women changed in Tunisian society before, during and after the recent uprisings?”

I have formulated 12 questions on the next few pages and would greatly appreciate your help in answering them. It will be no problem if you would rather answer the questions in French. If you have more friends and/or family who would be interested in contributing to this research paper, please feel free to forward this document to them to be send back to me on:

bernhardt.da@gmail.com

Please, let me know if you would rather stay *anonymous*, in that case I will not quote you by name in my paper. If you would also like to talk over Skype this is, of course, possible. My Skype name is:

desiree.alicia.bernhardt

Thank you in advance for your time and help, I truly appreciate it.

Warmest regards,
Desirée Bernhardt

Questions

Name	
Date	
Age	
Occupation	
Organisation	
Location	

Open questions

1. *Where were you when the Revolution started? How do you perceive them?*
2. *What were your first thoughts when the revolution (uprisings) in Tunisia commenced?*
3. *Can you describe yourself as a woman and your freedoms, roles and beliefs in your day-to-day life living in Tunisia before and after the revolution?*
4. *What roles have women played prior-, during- and post the uprisings?*

→ What have you done to have your voice heard?
5. *What issues are women facing in the post revolution environment?*
6. *What is your ideal for women in a post-revolution environment?*

Questionnaire

Please, highlight your answer. Feel free to leave comments if you would like to express your opinion or elaborate on the question.

1. Do you have concerns about women's rights under the current government?
Yes
Maybe
No
Other: ...

Comment(s):

2. Do you believe there should be a separation between religion and state? In other words; should Sharia be enshrined into domestic legislation?
Yes
Neutral
No

Comment(s):

3. At this moment, do you see your quality of life better or worse than before the uprisings?
Better
Slightly better
Neutral
Worse
Much worse

Comment(s):

4. On a scale of 1 to 10*, how effective do you believe the revolution was in bringing about *democratic* reform?

...

Comment(s):

5. On a scale of 1 to 10*, how pro-active were women in the Jasmine Revolution?

...

Comment(s):

6. On a scale of 1 to 10*, how would you rate your future prospects as a woman?

...

Please, explain:

** 10 is highest, 0 is lowest.*

Partial response reference

The following partial response came from Amira Lassoued, a 24-year old student from Tunis. I found what she had written extremely powerful and have therefore quoted her in my conclusion on page 34-35. She responded the following to question 5 and 6 of the combined questionnaire and survey:

5. What issues are women facing in the post revolution environment?

Women's rights are undoubtedly one of the most debated issues in the post revolution environment. Our challenge today is to affirm our existence without the support of any political party.

6. What is your ideal for women in a post-revolution environment?

Unfortunately, many politicians took women as a bridge to reach their goals. For the future, I hope to see the Tunisian woman as powerful, self-determining and free. Far from politics, we must fight every kind of abuse, be it social or political.

Appendix II – General Interview Questions

The following questions have functioned as guidelines for the conducted interviews. They have been subjected to change wherever necessary or appropriate depending on the questioned party.

Introduction

- What exactly do you do?
- What is your connection with Tunisia? Why Tunisia?
- Where were you during the uprisings? How do you perceive them?

Tunisia

- If you look at the historical background of Tunisia, what was the role of women during colonialism?
- Is colonialism the main attribute to the special difference concerning women's rights in the Middle East? How come Tunisia is so different?
- And under Habib Bourguiba after they gained their independence, how would one perceive the role of women in those days?
- What role did women have under Zine El Abidine Ben Ali?

Women pre uprisings

- Why now?
- What role have women played prior to the uprisings? Where were they?
- How have they been involved?

Women during the uprisings

- What role have women played during the revolution?
- Do you think Social Media was one their largest ways of involvement?
- How has their influence effected the current situation?

What is the current situation like?

- What issues are women facing in the post revolution environment?
- Has their situation drastically changed?
- Were they better off before or after the revolution?

The future

- What do you think will happen now?
- With the new government, do you think the role of women will drastically change?
- What is their biggest fear?
- What is the worst thing that could happen?
- What can be done from this end? Geneva, EU, UN etc.? What can we do? Can we do something? Should we do something?

*Appendix III – Interviews**Interview 1 – Saoussen Mahjoub*

Interviewee: *Saoussen Mahjoub*, is a marketing executive in charge of North Africa for a Market Research, Polling, and Data Analysis firm based in Tunis, CVV international. She lives in Washington D.C. at the moment.

Date: 22 April 2012

Place: Skype, Lausanne, Switzerland

Saoussen is an acquaintance from a colleague, Caitlin at my former internship. Caitlin connected us and we had a long talk over Skype. We talked about her life growing up in Tunisia and her ideas on the current situation. Saoussen is the co-founder of the Tunisian American Association of Young Professionals (TAYP). They are a network of Tunisian Americans who promote entrepreneurship in Tunisia as well as Foreign Direct Investment to their home land that they believe is an investment hub and a platform to access the rest of the world.

Saoussen had been very active during her student time in law school in Tunis but felt limited in her ways and decided to pursue her studies in the United States, starting from scratch again. In Tunis she had her own student group, Skape Team, but they were very limited by the government, as the government would influence their agendas. The group was eventually shut down. She explained how the government would interfere with everything that could harm their ruling and order. All kinds of groups, associations, and organisations were very limited and enjoyed no freedom to work their own agendas. Whilst in America, she has organised panels and discussions about the revolutions, putting Tunisia on the map for a lot of people.

The biggest problem in Tunisia is and has been the lack of communication. People got used to no effective communication. She is sceptic about Al-Nahda and does not believe an Islamist government is the right way for Tunisia. They are not clear about their intentions and overlook the real problems. She said: *“Change will come though, but only little by little... very gradual. People will wake up from their coma and realise they need to do something.”*

Tunisian women vary greatly depending on where in the country they have grown up. She explains how the women in the more metropolitan and tourist areas like Tunis and Hammamet are more developed and open-minded. There are a lot of rural girls that do not enjoy the same opportunities as city girls and that there is a more eminent patriarchal tradition in these inland and rural areas. They are not exposed to a more modern society. The interior part of the country is more conservative. It's also a 'family thing' how families see their daughters. You're only successful if you achieve something 'real' like becoming an engineer, a doctor or a lawyer. Professions such as teachers are looked down on.

Overall, Tunisian women are free to do whatever they want. Women are well educated thanks to Bourguiba. Bourguiba understood that you could not move forward as a country by excluding women, he was a visionary. Now, women need to be provided with a better status, they need social recognition. Ben Ali used women as talking heads, as a 'picture perfect' for the West. That needs to change. Women are a big part of the current development. She tells me that they need to become leaders, not followers. They have to be creative and innovative. It's highly important that they do not take a passive stance and become part of the movement. Women should be what people think they can't be. They should prove them wrong by showing the world what we're worth! Tunisia needs women empowerment and it needs to invest in leadership and entrepreneurship. They need more women in politics. The economy needs to get going again. But it will take time she said: *"Tunisia needs time, but we have no time. It is now or never."*

Interview 2 – Kristine Goulding

Interviewee: *Kristine Goulding*, is a research analyst on gender and development at the United Nations in Geneva. She holds a Master's Degree in Development Studies and has lived in Tunisia to do research. Several articles that she has written on Tunisian women are published online.

Date: 24 April 2012

Place: Geneva, Switzerland

I met Kristine at the United Nations in Geneva. We met for an hour where she explained the evolvement of women in Tunisia since independence. Prior to our meeting I had sent her my dissertation outline to give her an idea of what kind of information I was looking for on my research on Tunisian women.

Kristine started explaining the historical processes and how Bourguiba had brought a profound change in Tunisian society by implementing the Personal Status Code that laid down the principles of equality between men and women. Women were needed according to Bourguiba to establish a stable society. He was very focused on modernisation. Secularisation and education became a high priority as he tried not to be like countries such as Algeria and Liberia where women were more marginalised. However, his sense of ruling could not continue as his policies became somewhat problematic. His one-party system and his oppression of Islamist movements also led to protests in the 80's resulting in a lot of the political activists fleeing to France and Italy.

She moved on to the Ben Ali era where things started to change slightly. He was this new face to step into Tunisian politics. He was going to 'fix' things. He welcomed feminists but there were strict boundaries set by the government. We talked about female representation that became more eminent over the years but was often used by Ben Ali to merely present a good picture to the West. Women were everywhere, they were working, they enjoyed freedoms other Arab women did not have and remain not to have. Feminism became part of the political agenda with the state sponsoring organisations following their agenda's; there was no support for other organisations that did not comply with Ben Ali's regime. Ben Ali understood that it was better to include them than to exclude them, which worked fairly well. He got support from the US, the EU and had the military behind him.

She explained how the US took advantage of Tunisia's secular position and economic growth to closely collaborate with them after the attacks of 9/11. A consolidation of state power brought socioeconomic development. He diversified the economy and ensured economic growth. He made the country more attractive for foreign investors by pointing out to the world that Tunisia was different than other Arab nations. The people, however, had to put up with this 'economic pact' and economic growth went alongside oppression and violations of human rights. There were a lot of human rights abuses, people disappearing, a great invasion of privacy. People were not free. News agencies such as the BBC were blocked and organisations like Amnesty International could not fully do their work due to Ben Ali's restrictions. People had to be very cautious with their actions. The government highly monitored everything; individuals, companies, civil society, all different kinds of organisations.

Kristine explained the growing discontent in the country that eventually led to the revolution. The large nepotism under Ben Ali, the growing unemployment rates, the high level of corruption and the erosion of the middle-class could no longer: people could no longer remain silent. There was a great sense of inequality. The protests in the mining basin in 2008 were fiercely oppressed and Ben Ali tried his best not to have too many people, especially not foreign media, know about it. Then came the WikiLeaks cables about American officials criticizing Ben Ali's government and Mohammed Bouazizi's self-immolation act led to the uprisings.

Women have been very present in Tunisian society. They contributed greatly to the economic growth and have been part of the workforce. There are a lot of high-educated women in Tunisia. The number of women in politics has not been as high as Ben Ali envisioned and women were often used merely as 'talking heads'. There were initiatives to include them more like gender quotas but in reality they never came into practice. There is a growing fear of the right-winged parties now. With Al-Nahda people are uncertain of what is going to happen. Al-Nahda is so big because they are better funded, better known than the other parties and people often see them as the real opposition of Ben Ali. Now there is the big debate between feminism vs. Islamism. Women are encouraged, also by Al-Nahda to become more politically involved. You see a lot of young females going back to traditionalism with very modern young Tunisian women at the opposite end. Tunisia is a signatory of CEDAW, has the PSC, which ensure the rights of

women. They have always taken a pro-active stance towards women's rights but for now it will be a waiting game of what is going to happen. Some people envision the model Turkey has at the moment where religion and politics function alongside each other. Some people want the implementation of Sharia Law that will most likely endanger women rights.

Kristine gave me a very vivid and realistic outlook on Tunisia and we met again on the 10th of May where she greatly helped me out planning my trip to Tunisia. She presented cultural differences and gave me tips on how to get by in Tunis. She gave me some contacts of people in Tunis who could possibly help me. We discussed interview questions and we talked about what could happen now in Tunisia.

Interview 3 – Emna Bel Hadj

Interviewee: *Emna Bel Hadj* is a young 27-year old Tunisian woman working in Tunis. She is born in Bizerte and her father comes from the Island of Djerba and her mother from Tozeur in the South West of the country.

Date: 14 May 2012

Place: Tunis, Tunisia

Emna has been my guide, my translator and my friend during my stay in Tunis. We met on couchsurfing, an online community connecting people all over the world. However very helpful, Emna at first did not want to answer my questionnaire and survey and she gave modest views during our conversations. She is very pessimistic about the current events in Tunisia and she tries to be far from politics. At first she was excited about everything that was happening and believed change was coming. Tunisia is an exceptional country with a lot of potential she told me but the thought of real change, remains a dream she said.

Desirée: **Where were you when the revolution started? How do you perceive them? How have you been involved?**

Emna: The revolution started a month before 14 January when Bouazizi set himself on fire on the 17th December 2010. After his act, protests intensified day by day. I followed everything via Facebook because the local channel didn't show anything. Most of the protests were inside the country,

Fist, protests were just about social equality so I was happy to see people were speaking and fighting for their rights, as it was not usual to ask for anything during Ben Ali. I was amazed how brave people were to rise against Ben Ali. When he delivered his speech on national television, I thought people were going to stop their protests, because he promised a lot of change like creating 300 000 job in less than 2 years, I was like "wow" he listened to us...

The protests didn't stop and international Arab television channels like al Jazeera or el Arabia (they have more than 40 millions viewers in the Arab world) started to cover what was happening in our country, and the protests changed from being social to political.

I was really feeling that change was coming Ben Ali's 3 speeches in less than a month on national television, which is "une première", because he speaks to us officially only twice, or 3 times per year.

I was connected to Facebook all the time, sharing videos, showing the cruelty of the police against the peaceful protestors. I was well aware that I was risking my social life like my job and perhaps my future, because I was thinking Ben Ali knew anything about us. In a way this was true because it was a police government. I had a lot of arguments with my father who was trying to stop me sharing videos and saying that I'm going to lose all my potential for my future if I would keep doing that. I just had a strange feeling that things were going to change, I thought sharing these videos was patriotic and it could help what was happening...

I couldn't be there on the 14th of January because I was ill. I followed everything closely on the television and the computer that whole day long. When I heard that Ben Ali escaped, oh my! It was one of the happiest moments in my entire life! I was thinking: "We beat him, we beat darkness we are finally going to see lights, all is going to change!" But at the same time, I had my doubts because I knew that he was very strong and perhaps he was going to come back and rot our lives again...

Desirée: How do you feel as a Tunisian woman?

Emna: I'm proud to be a Tunisian woman; women were very active in the revolutions and the struggles experienced by the country during the era of Bourguiba and Ben Ali. Now, I think we are forgotten and discarded after the revolutions because we live in a society dominated by men. It's true that we have more rights than all other Arabic countries. For example we can vote since 1957 (even before Switzerland or Monaco), the right of abortion since the early 1960s and the prohibition of polygamy after 1957. Women are very active in all areas of life. The number of women that enter high education is for example higher than those of men. Even in sports, Tunisian women are always on the top, but sadly as I said we live in a society dominated by men, who always try to minimise the role of women and will always try to be in control. After the revolutions, the only thing that really has changed is freedom of speech. I can say and think out loud and share my opinions without fearing to face the government.

Desirée: **What are the major challenges for you and other women now?**

Emna: My biggest fears are the diminution of women's rights. We have come a long way with for example the Personal Status Code and laws aiming at gender equity. Women were largely represented in the public sphere but after the revolution they are much less represented; only two out of the 31 ministries of the provisional government were allocated to women. I think that is abnormal! Even under Ben Ali, there were always more than 10 ministries allocated to women. I think new decisions have to be taken to protect women's rights. Maybe, the main problem is that Tunisia is balanced between its Arab-Muslim origin and being open to the rest of the world. We have always been like that and that is what always made us different to the other Arab countries.

However though, with Islamist parties like al-Nahda or Hizb Al-Tahrir (the party of the Salafists) in power we are not going to be as open as we were. They think that we have to maintain our Arab-Muslim identity and break with the rest, especially the West. They think that the role of women is should be only her role within the family and what they are doing is trying to slow down the movement towards women's rights and entire equality.

Personally, I don't trust them. Take Al-Nahda for example. Most of their leadership spent their 20 last years in prison or in exile so they have no idea what our society needs in order to make progress again. They don't have enough experience and have a contradictory discourse. The problem is though that this party is strongly supported by the GCC (Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf), especially by Qatar and Saudi Arabia, who give them enough financial support to maintain power.

Desirée: **How do you feel about the Salafists?**

Emna: Salafist favour the study of Qur'an and sciences of hadith to the rest of sciences (I'm not against that, and I think the spiritual side is very important) I think if we need to go forward and be like Malaysia, that is a good example of an open Islamist society. We need to establish others systems of education, not going back to traditional ways of learning and just focusing on the spiritual side like the Salafists want.

The problem with them too, and it's one of my fears, is that they try to impose to others what they think is right. Their poor children for example, now you see 5-year-old girls wearing the veil! I have never seen that before. Instead of teaching their daughters how to love themselves, they teach them how to hide themselves. The Qur'an does not impose girls to wear the veil, especially not children. I think if they force them to wear it

because these kids could be attractive. I'm sorry, but for me that just means they are paedophile.

Desirée: **What is the worst thing that could happen now?**

Emna: We have to separate politics from religion, because the religious party represents a threat to women's rights. I'm afraid someone will take the rights we already gained away from us, that is the worst thing that could happen now. With the Islamist party I'm afraid that we will return to a dictatorship. We are not focusing on development and we are wasting our time on ideological discussions.

Interview 4 – Al-Nahda Representative

Interviewee: *Al-Nahda representative.* This man had been in prison under Ben Ali and had been tortured. He had one drifting eye which was a result of maltreatment during his 17 years in prison.

Date: 14 May 2012

Place: Al-Nahda Headquarters, Tunis, Tunisia

I went to Al-Nahda headquarters on the day of my arrival. My friend Emna accompanied me and functioned as a translator from Arabic to French/English. I did not have an appointment and after some negotiation and talking, a man agreed to meet with Emna and me. Conversation, however, was difficult because of the language barrier.

The man explained met first about Al-Nahda. Compared to the other Arab countries, the Tunisian revolution had well developed after Ben Ali left. Concerning women's rights, Al-Nahda believes in preserving the rights women have gained in the past. He told me that Islam is the main resource for the party and that they act from that particular point of view. I asked him how in which he answers explaining about a chapter in the Qur'an. There is this one particular chapter in the Qur'an where Allah and the prophet Mohammed give rights to a woman and how she becomes equal to a man. Every woman has rights that are preserved by Allah after a set of rules.

Desirée: What is the position of women in your political party?

There are a lot of women representing Al-Nahda in the Constituent Assembly he says, it is close to 50/50. In Tunisia everyone can enjoy the same education so they can have the same positions he explains. During their campaign they have fully included them as well. The list was made up out of man-woman (the gender parity law). The new Constitution is going to preserve the rights they already enjoy and on top of that they want to improve the status of women. They don't think men and women have to fight. They should not be against each other but should complement each other. What makes them different is that yes, they do take the Qur'an as a basis but only the real Qur'an where there is no problem in equality he says because they are equal. The advisor of the Prophet Mohammed was a woman and they had high positions in society. The 'real' Islam does not oppress women. Take it as a resource and preserve women's rights. He presents the example of 1981

where there was a leading woman in parliament. The change of female involvement came under Ben Ali where they were merely used as a 'beautiful image' but in practise women did not really enjoy those rights. Many women were oppressed. Although laid down in the law, pay was unequal between men and women. They want to make that different, make it go away. They want real equality. Tunisian women need to have their rights but he says they need to respect their 'personality'. With this he means that should not only have a career and don't let down the family. She is free to have her own choice.

Desirée: Why are people scared of Al-Nahda taking away women's rights?

In the past 20 years and also under Bourguiba the West has blown up the image of Islam. Europeans have a bad image of Islam. He invites me to host me to meet his family to see with my won eyes that they are nice and genuine people. They have changed too. Women will be more conscious and have a good position. Women were oppressed under Ben Ali, exploited he says. He gave a fake image.

He believes in a new model for Tunisia where there is room for change. The future will change. She will have a better position in society, more freedom. I asked about the real situation and he says there is a lack of all this now but it will change. The party has changed; it's not the image Ben Ali portrayed. The main thing they are working on is new freedoms in many areas. I asked him about his points of view on democracy. He strongly believes it's possible if people work together. Even if they won the vast majority, they don't want to be 'just the leader', they want to talk to the rest and want to compromise in giving everyone a say. They are willing to cooperate with everyone and share responsibility even when they are not on the same level. You have to think about the country he says, the country is for the people and you have to live together. They have the majority, they can decide on the course in which the country is going but they are open-minded and open for dialogue. They welcome other parties and want to work together.

Desirée: What are the main complications at the moment concerning the new government?

There is a lack of political experience and they try to learn as much as possible to move the revolution forward. They want freedom for everyone. But, it will take time.

Interview 5 – Teyssir Azizi

Interviewee: *Teyssir Azizi* (31) is a payroll manager in Tunis.

Date: 14 May 2012

Place: Tunis, Tunisia

I met Teyssir in Tunis. She is a good friend of my guide and good friend Emna. She hosted me for a night where we have talked a lot about her life in Tunisia and what it was like for her growing up. She told me her father was in the military and that she grew up learning to love her country, which has made her very patriotic.

Desirée: Where were you when the revolution started? How do you perceive them? How have you been involved?

Teyssir: I was at work when the revolution started. When it became really serious we were obliged to quit work for security reasons. We were kept informed by the media about everything that was happening, especially Facebook. Riots began in December 2010 but there were many events that happened like minor riots before the 'big' revolution. On the 14th of January I was among the people who were in streets and I lived a nightmare, the violence of the government was beyond belief and it was clear that they were ready for anything to hush people and to establish order again. I lost my sister in the crowd and got teargas in my eyes. I made videos and posted these on Facebook. Everyone participated. It didn't matter who they were, what they did or where they came from. On January 14 we all came together and shared solidarity. We were all Tunisians that day and you could really feel that. Men, women, boys, girls and even small children, everyone was there. It was insane! I was devastated though, of seeing everything collapsing in the country of quietness and peace, the country I love. As days passed, I felt much more afraid of snipers and the growing disorder. I was terrified for the revenge of the government because the riots became bigger and voices were louder...

Desirée: How do you feel as a Tunisian woman?

Teyssir: As a Tunisian woman I feel emancipated not since 2011 but since my birth. Growing up I was aware of the role women played in our society as our leader Habib Bourguiba made women equal to men. We have laws that protect us and we feel proud about our status. We are not deprived of any of our roles, in all the fields we can be

shoulder to shoulder with men. I'm a Muslim and I will be for my life. I am not wearing the hijab but I do practise daily. One day I will wear the hijab but not because someone tells me to like a Salafist or a political party, purely for myself as it is something between God and me.

Desirée: **What are the major challenges for you and other women now?**

Teyssir: A lot of security has left together with Ben Ali. I'm afraid to go out at night when it's dark because no one trusts the police anymore. At least during Ben Ali we felt safe. Also, the growing extremism like the Salafists are a threat. They want women to wear the hijab and diminish their rights. The Tunisian woman is strong though so I will hope we will keep up the fights. Women's rights are untouchable. We have the right to freedom, peace, stability, dignity and respect. The revolution brought us freedom of speech, it's a beginning but I don't know what is going to happen now...

Interview 6 – University students Tunis

Interviewees: Nada, Hager, Wael and Mehdi are all 3rd and 4th medical students in Tunis.

Date: 15 May 2012

Place: Medicine Faculty of the University of Tunis, Tunis, Tunisia

I got in touch with a girl from couch surfing called Nada. She agreed to meet me this day so I set met her at the Faculty of Medicine of the University in Tunis. We talked for a while with three of her friends Hager, Mehdi and Wael. They were very different than the young women I had met so far. They are very open-minded although they are Muslims, they don't practise. In the university, students smoke in the hallways, laughing and joking around with each other. It is like in Europe, very liberal girl-boy relationships.

I asked them about the revolution and how they experienced it. They told me that everyone stood side-by-side. They told me that on this day everyone was together rich, poor, men, women, children, students, lawyers, vendors, everyone. Everyone was Tunisian this day. It was a great share of solidarity towards each other demanding Ben Ali and his posse to step down, "*degage!*".

They are very sceptic about the current government and they do not trust al-Nahda, at all. They are very sceptical about this party and do not believe in them, their intentions are not at all genuine. All have them have been overseas a lot and has opened their minds. We talked about how Tunisia is changing and what needs to be done.

We talked about democracy and religion. Democracy is very new phenomenon in this country and they still greatly have to learn how it works and what 'the rules' are. The current mentality at the moment is not correct. People perceive freedom a little different here they told me. They have become more selfish, ignore cues in the hospital and drive like madmen. The country is in a bit of chaos. They really liked Marzouki (a human rights activist and the man who lead his party to the second place after the last elections in October 2011) at first but now they are really disappointed in him. He leans very close to al-Nahda and Wael said he is like a puppet now. Nada thinks they are very clever at al-Nahda and intelligent. Wael and Hager seemed to disagree greatly. "Yes" Hager said "but it's not true they are good politicians, they just know what to say with the right words".

They all agreed. Wael stressed the point that religion is a weakness in Tunisia. Al-Nahda has eminently used it as a tool to be elected. The country was left weak after Ben Ali fled and people turn to religion, it is a sensitive topic for a lot of Tunisians.

I asked the girls if they were scared that their roles and rights as young women would change now with the new transition. Nada told me that they would not touch their rights and it would not happen. She said: “not with me here, as long as I am here no way”. She said that: “we must all have faith in women and not let it happen.” Mehdi said how women’s rights are enshrined in the Personal Status Code and it would just not happen. Nada did express her fears a little comparing the situation with Iran. She does not exclude the thought of the possibility of something similar to happen in Tunisia. Wael killed the thought with: “no way!!!” It’s funny because I asked them about the film ‘Persepolis’ as well and they thought it was a good film, not at all offensive. Allah is just the imagination of this little girl and not at all a portrait of what he does or doesn’t look like. They told me it was stupid how they used it around election time. This brought “religion in danger” and the people needed to “protect” it now. They told me that politics now have started the whole debate on religion whereas it was not, at all, the aim of the revolution. The economy needs to start going again and the tourists need to come back. They told me mentality has to change and religion should not be a worry, at least not for now.

Before the revolutions, all of them had the ambition to leave the country. Their future prospects were limited. There were no politics before the revolution and everyone was forced to keep quiet and everything would be fine. People were very passive and despite their frustrations were used to the way it was. They were all shocked about the outcome of the last election as it was, for them, very unexpected that Al-Nahda won the vast majority. They come from very different environments, much more liberal. There were a lot of political parties, over a hundred, at the last elections. A lot of those parties, mostly all Wael said, lack political experience. They are starting to merge and hopefully people will get more acquainted with them and make wise decisions at the next election in 2013. The main task for the government now, they said, is to guide the people in the right direction. The mentality has to change. They feel more Tunisian now and don’t want to particularly leave anymore.

Interview 7 – Safa Meftah

Interviewee: *Safa Meftah* is a 21-year old student in Tunis. She studies to become a primary school teacher. She is currently part of the youth movement of Al-Nahda. Al-Nahda is the long forbidden Islamist political party.

Date: 15 May 2012

Place: Tunis, Tunisia

I met Safa, a conservative girl wearing the veil, on a terrace in Tunis. Although a supporter of Al-Nahda, she claims that a lot of her points of view are personal and therefore do not reflect the perspective of Al-Nahda.

Desirée: How did you hear about the revolution?

Safa: Through Facebook and then I went out on the streets to protest against Ben Ali. I was very scared as the police reacted with violence against the protesters. My brother almost died after he was shot by the police. After the revolution, I joined Al-Nahda's youth movement and campaigned for them.

Desirée: What are the differences for her before and after the revolution?

Safa: Before the revolution I felt greatly oppressed by president Ben Ali's restrictions on traditional Muslim clothing. I felt uneasy and scared wearing the veil in public. The police could stop me anytime and take away my veil, as the veil was prohibited in public space. Now I feel happy and comfortable. I feel free to wear the veil and I am no longer scared of being looked at or of my veil being taken away.

Desirée: What were the main constraints for women before the revolution?

Safa: There was no equality. Women wearing the veil did not have the same rights at work or in life in general. There was discrimination against women who wore a veil.

Desirée: In what way were you involved in the Al-Nahda youth movement?

Safa: My family was in exile under Ben Ali's regime. The Al-Nahda party was forbidden since the 1990's and meetings were held in secret. After the revolution I campaigned for Al-Nahda, talking to people and informing them about the political program of Al-Nahda. We support the idea of an Islamic banking system that will greatly benefit the economy.

As for women's rights, Al-Nahda will maintain the personal freedom of women. We will not touch the Personal Status Code. It is important to protect Islam as the State religion. I personally am in favour of polygamy, it is the word of the Prophet, he had 4 wives too.

Desire: You sometimes mention 'real Islam'. What do you mean by that?

Safa: The 'real Islam' is something different than 'real tradition'. Religion and living by the words of the prophet Mohammed is important to me.

Desirée: Do you believe that religion and politics should be separated?

Safa: I personally believe in the application of Sharia Law and the entrenchment of this within domestic legislation. Islam is the way and the only truth there is. It is my personal view and it does not reflect what Al-Nahda stands for. Al-Nahda is pro-democracy and open to dialogue. I believe democracy is a fake and comes from The United States where it does not work.

Desirée: How is Al-Nahda going to make the current situation better?

Safa: Al-Nahda base their principles on the Islam and they are good Muslims. We help people, especially poor people and Islam is our base. Education is important. They are honest people at Al-Nahda, and there is a lot more freedom now. They want what is best for the people.

Desirée: The differences between women in the Arab world fascinate me. How do you look at Tunisian women?

Safa: I personally think that women should change back to the teachings and words of the Islam. Not by oppression but in a more modest way. Pretty things are hidden, women should not expose themselves as much as they do now.

Desirée: What is your opinion about the Salafists?

Safa: There are different types of Salafists who all have different values and intentions. They don't hurt anyone as the media try to make you believe. They are no threat to women, they only want to preserve women. Women should stay at home as the men will work. I want you to learn more about the Islam and be a good Muslim one day. Islam is the way. I do not fully trust people who don't believe in Allah.

*Interview 8 – Salafists***Interviewee:** *Salafists***Date:** 15 May 2012**Place:** Tunis, Tunisia

“A Salafist is a person who believes only in God’s law and believes he is the only correct interpreter of the Qur’an. They overall see moderate Muslims as infidels and envision a world where their fundamentalist interpretation of Islam will dominate.” (p. 28)

I was very eager to meet these Salafists I had read about and everyone had been talking about. Emna came with me and we started talking to one in front of the Mosque in downtown Tunis. It was a little nervous because you hear a lot of bad things about Muslim extremists. The man we talked to had a beard and was wearing traditional clothing. Emna translated everything from Arabic to English. The interview was more reversed as the man asked me all sorts of questions concerning religion. He tried to convert me to Islam and he told me that Islam is ‘the way’. More men joined the conversation, interested in what was going on. A second man in the same traditional clothing could speak English and he talked about Allah for a while. I could not really ask my questions but I got the chance to ask him about women in Tunisian society. He told me that there is no such thing and believes in the Arab world as a whole. “Women” he told me, “are like diamonds. The Earth hides precious things underneath the soil, away from the public eye. The Arab man is jealous and he does not want to see other men gazing at his women.” I eagerly listened to his story and looked him straight in the eye. He told Emna I should stop looking at him and the reason he did not look at me was because: *I was not his*. He continued that in their belief a woman is like a princess and should be treated as a princess. The man will work and the woman will stay at home. She will cover up in public, because people should not see her. He went on for a while and I got to ask a second question: “Do you believe in true love?” I asked him. He could not give me a solid answer. The other men all wanted to teach me about Islam and told me to come back the next day when they would have their visions translated for me in English. I never went back.

Interview 9 – Fatma Sraira

Interviewee: *Fatma Sraira*, is a 53-year old woman who works as a Bio-Medical Technical researcher in a laboratory in Tunis.

Date: 15 May 2012

Place: Tunis, Tunisia

I met Fatma in a park where she was talking to her mother in the grass. The women looked very interesting and made me eager to talk to them. Her mother (who must have been in her late 70's) had a very interesting traditional tattoo on her chin. We started talking and they agreed to come for a cup of tea in a café with me. They were both wearing a colourful veil and they told me they came from the South of Tunisia.

Desirée: Tell me about your life growing up in Tunisia, what is it like to be a woman in Tunisia?

Fatma: I have always been able to do everything thanks to the well being of my family. Bourguiba emancipated women and gradually welcomed them into society. Thanks to him we were all able to go to school for example and get into higher education. Look at my mother for example she is from 1937 and she was the second wife her husband as polygamy was still widely accepted. Furthermore, we had no freedom of speech under Ben Ali and we did not dare to protest. One could not talk about politics.

Desirée: What is different for you now after the revolution?

Fatma: Before the revolution we did not have manifestation. People dare to go on strike now for example. I do not feel scared to speak my mind or even have this conversation! Things have changed and will change. I voted for Al-Nahda but what I think is most important is that the new people in the government address the problems the country is facing. There are so many well-educated young people unemployed! We need more economic opportunities. The society needs to be well organised. The first and most important thing is that democracy will be established: everyone needs to have a voice. They need to come up with a good solution and a good strategy that the economy starts going again to make the current situation better. I believe in secularism. Some people are afraid of God. It is important that no one will force religion on one another and not oblige people to wear the veil. Religion is something between me and God. And concerning

women, Tunisian women are different. They are well spirited and they are open. They are not *against* modernisation they are for modernisation.

Interview 10 – Alyssa Siala

Interviewee: *Alyssa Siala*, is a doctor and a non-practising Muslim.

Date: 15 May 2012

Place: Tunis, Tunisia

Alyssa is the mother of Hager, a medical student I met at the university. They hosted me for one night where I got the chance to interview her.

Desirée: Tell me what it was like for you to grow up in Tunisia as a woman.

Alyssa: I was privileged and went to a French school to study. I moved on to become a doctor and studied in Paris for a couple of years. I didn't feel much as my family was part of the middle-class and I was born after Tunisia independence so I have been able to enjoy so-to-say 'normal' rights like any other boy my age. I could study and I could later work. Bourguiba created a larger middle-class, whereas when Ben Ali came to power, he created a very small rich elite. With Ben Ali started the real problems. A big unemployment rate started to grow over the years. And now we are scared of Al-Nahda and women's rights. We are not sure what is going to happen because they seem to send out double message. They have a double discourse. We are scared be forced back into the home, take care of the house etc. Tunisian women are strong though and are needed in our society. Women are everywhere! For example they dominate in the medical world, there are more female doctors in hospitals nowadays. Also, in med school there are more females enrolled than men. The big difference with me growing up and my daughter Hager growing up is that fathers now are more ok with what their daughters do, where they go and what they're up to. Back in the days they were a little stricter I think.

Desirée: How do you feel about religion and state?

Alyssa: The two should be separated. That would mean back to the time before Bourguiba compared to rights for women if we go live by tradition and Islam again. He ensured secularism, separated the two. Before the revolution, women did not wear veils. They were prohibited in public. People are scared though. It is like an identity crisis! After the war in Iraq for example, the West looks down on Islam and only sees the bad of it. I'm a Muslim for example but I don't practise. It does not mean you are a good or better person if you were the veil. I think people now are using it as a defence, to be different

and to differentiate from the 'evil' West. But the modern Tunisian woman is a Muslim, it does not per se mean she has to practise but she is a Muslim. She is free, she goes out, she drinks... The Islam does not say women are less than men, the opposite! It was a woman who led the caravan, who consulted the Prophet, who held high positions. People misinterpret the Qur'an like those Salafists. It is not realistic in our lifetime.

Desirée: How do see the future now?

Alyssa: There is anarchy now. People interpret freedom different. Look at the traffic for example, it's madness! Chaos! We need new laws to regulate the country again. Under Ben Ali it is true we did not have freedom of expression but at least we were so-to-say safe. Now, we are a little scared to go out on the streets at night. I don't do that anymore. We will just have to see what is going to happen, I believe that democracy is possible but it will take time and the right people to make it happen. Men and women, together, are very important in this process.

Interview 11 – Monia Brahim

Interviewee: *Monia Brahim*, is a veiled women and a member of Al-Nahda. She is currently part of the Constituent Assembly and contributes to the writing of the new Tunisian Constitution. She is also a member of the party's executive committee responsible for women and family affairs.

Date: 16 May 2012

Place: Tunis, Tunisia

After my interview at the Al-Nahda headquarters, they referred me to the Al-Nahda centre for women where they arranged an appointment for me with Mrs. Brahim.

Mrs Brahim told me her husband had been in prison for 17 years under Ben Ali for being part of Al-Nahda. She raised her children alone. She just underwent an operation in late December 2010 but wanted to be part of the revolution and stand side-by-side with the people, so her daughter went with her to Tunis (they come from Sousse). It was a once in a lifetime experience, writing history she told me. Everyone had been waiting for change.

Al-Nahda is a party that does not want to exclude women, on the contrary. She is member of the Constituent Assembly and contributes in rewriting the Constitution. At the moment, 25 - 26% are women in the current government. There are 43 women and 46 men in the government representing Al-Nahda, almost half-half. Democracy is possible. In terms of religion, Al-Nahda is modern in its thinking. They are very willing to work together with other parties and listen to the different opinions. Never will they force anyone to wear the hijab, as it is a personal choice. Women were oppressed to do so under Ben Ali and had difficulties expressing their religious beliefs openly, now they are free to do so and they encourage that not force anyone.

With regards to the Salafists, Brahim explained to me that they too were oppressed under Ben Ali. They were in prison and they are now looking for their identity, like a lot of Tunisians. People are free to choose to what 'group' they want to belong to. It's a difficult and developing stage, but the day will come. Communication is always a problem she explains. Ben Ali did not communicate with the people and nor do the Salafists. Al-Nahda

wants to function as an intermediary and open up dialogue. It is important to understand one another. The Salafists will have to accept that there are differences between people. The image of Tunisia does not exist without women. Men and women are partners; neither is superior to the other. They need each other within all different aspects of life, within the family, work, society, politics. In the 69's and 70's the Tunisian women gained a lot of rights. The only problem has always been with Bourguiba and Ben Ali that women were given a role without *really* having a role. Now it's different, they have become more conscious about their role. They are capable of making decisions; they have an opinion and will have real roles now. Tunisian women are different compared to other Arab women. She gave me the example of prominent women in the Qur'an and in Tunisian history like Alyssa who was the founder of Carthage. Women are not just for the pleasure of men; they are part of the society. Compromise is needed in order to satisfy everyone accordingly. The women at Al-Nahda are not willing to except denomination of their rights. Men and women will compliment each other, not work against each other.

Interview 12 – Rachida Bel Hadj

Interviewee: *Rachida Bel Hadj*, is the mother of Emna who has been my guide during my stay in Tunis. She works for a bank and only started wearing the headscarf after she visited Mecca. She believes that religion is something between her and God.

Date: 16 May 2012

Place: Tunis, Tunisia

Desirée: How did you feel when the revolutions started?

Rachida: I felt amazed, as protests were very rare in Tunisia. I followed every moment on the television, as there were news updates constantly. Every day protests started in different cities from Sfax, to Bizerte to Tunis from the 27th of December until the 14th of January. In the evenings you were not allowed to go out, there were curfews.

Desirée: What was your life like as a woman in Tunisia?

Rachida: I always worked, absolutely did not stay at home. My family is very intellectual. Bourguiba opened up our society by making education accessible, which worked as a great advantage for the people. He established women's rights. Here at home we are a little conservative but not very much. My husband for examples does not practise. Every region is different too in the sense of dedication to religion. Inlands they are more conservative then here in the big city.

Desirée: What are the current issues women are facing and what is the worst thing that could happen now?

Rachida: The worst thing for now is women being forced to wear the veil. Religion is something between the individual and God and no one should interfere with that. People wear them now to get a better place in the hospital and wear the veil without conviction. Many women wear it 'just to be a good woman'. There is still corruption and nepotism highly existent in our society, you have to know people to get things. Al-Nahda is not good. They have all these beautiful promises but nothing is changing, it is only getting worse and worse. The government is not doing anything against the unemployment. The biggest freedom is to have freedom, that's it. We can openly talk about the issues now, but the issues are still there. The lack of political experience is also a problem at the moment. We're also scared of Salafist. They are against women and want them to go

back into their traditional roles, hidden away from society. Salafists are hypocrites, they are not real Muslims. I don't have a lot of confidence for the future as it is now, but we will have to see what happens when we will see the real face of Al-Nahda.

Desirée: **What is your ideal for women in a post-revolution environment?**

Rachida: I want them to remain modern and further develop. We have a beautiful religion but one has to understand the Qur'an and understand that men and women are equal.

Interview 13 – Sanja Somia

Interviewee: *Sanja Somia*, is the financial director at the Association Tunisienne de la Femme Démocratique in Tunis.

Date: 17 May 2012

Place: Tunis, Tunisia

Desirée: **What is it exactly that your organisation does?**

Sanja: We have a variety of running projects at the moment, directed at different groups of women. We open up discussions, we talk together about women's rights and we lobby a lot. For example we lobby at the moment to ensure that women's rights are not touched in the current Constituent Assembly and that they will further develop. We discuss the representation of women in the next elections.

Desirée: **What are the differences with now and before the revolution?**

Sanja: Before the revolution it was difficult to operate in a closely monitored environment. It was, and stays, a very sensitive area: women's rights. It's not easy to defend women's rights. What has really changed is the freedom of expression. We can easily talk more open about the current issues although it remains difficult to address them. We have more confidence now too that we can make a broader change. There are more civil society organisations and more political parties that are established after Ben Ali's fall. It is important that the reasons that started the revolution will not be lost and indeed the situations concerning unemployment, health, education, dignity, rising food prices will be addressed and hopefully ameliorate soon.

Desirée: **What were the main constraints for women before the revolution and are you scared of what will happen now?**

Sanja: There are threats now indeed concerning women's rights. It will be a battle to maintain our rights we enjoy now and fight to obtain more rights. We have to closely monitor and protect single mothers as they are looked down on in society. Domestic violence is very eminent in Tunisian society too which is also a big problem. I am a little scared of what is going to happen now. I have had encounters with Salafists as I dress the way I want to. Nothing has changed so far. There is growing insecurity; the situation is somewhat instable. There has been reported violence too, also against tourists which is

bad as we strongly need tourism for the economy. We feel caught in the middle between the two extremes: Salafists and the government. There is still no real transparency. The problems from before the revolutions are still there. Food prices have risen, unemployment is still high and the economy is not great either.

Desirée: **What do you do as an organisation to be involved?**

Sanja: We have a variety of projects to include women and youth. From artistic programs to education, to awareness campaigns we try to make people more conscious about their rights. We study the reality, what is going on at the moment and try to address these problems. We have been one of the few autonomous operating NGO's from the Ben Ali area and it remains difficult to pursue our goals also due to the lack of funding. We try to lobby to as much as we can to push the Constituent Assembly towards more inclusion of women, not touching the rights we have now and we call to obtain more rights. It's hard to find funding though as we are an NGO and funding is very, very limited at the moment.