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Post-revolution, women are Tunisia's biggest losers



This is not the Tunisia I know and love. That was my first impression when I recently visited the North African nation I have grown fond of over two decades of extensive visits and following meetings with many of the strong, smart Tunisian women I always admired and respected. Signs of extremism are everywhere from the main streets to the alleys of the capital Tunis which swelled after the revolution by some two million newcomers.

Violence against women

The news stories indicate a deterioration of the Tunisian woman's status, her role and her political, as well as social, involvement. Violence against women is augmenting; from the rape of a three-year-old in her own backyard to the rape of a pregnant woman in front of her husband, stories that break the heart and depress anyone who cares about the future of this nation that always valued women and gave them equal rights with their male counterparts even under a dictatorship that lasted decades. The public outcry against these crimes is louder than thunder in the face of a deafening silence from the current government that does not condemn or offer any solutions or timetable to redress the desperate situation.

What makes things worse is that the minister of women and children's affairs is a woman who continues to justify the Islamist government's stance instead of standing up for women's basic rights of protection and equality. I happened to be in Tunisia during a small but vocal demonstration demanding her resignation in the aftermath of the rising rate of crimes against women committed by former convicts who were released from jail as part of the political manoeuvres between the Islamists and the reformers. During the hours of the peaceful demonstration there were no signs of the minister or her aides. Instead, there was an obviously staged counter demonstration in her support with clear Islamist slogans and personal attacks on the original demonstrators through the banners and the insults shouted. Despite all their efforts, organization and determination, they could not drown out the shouts demanding the minister's resignation.

Intimidation by the Islamist police, an apparatus operating independently from the local police, is visible throughout the city and is a cause for concern for all Tunisians I spoke with. Fundamentalism seems to be spreading at an alarming pace through the daily rhetoric as well as in symbolic signs such as the garb worn by many newcomers mingling with the local population. These individuals stand out like an eyesore not because of their extreme religious beliefs but because of their pompous attitude and outright provocation of locals and visitors alike.

“No, this is definitely not the Tunisia we aspired for,” a young female activist told me, echoing the multitude of Tunisians from all walks of life I got the chance to interact with.

The ousted president had imposed his dictatorial rule over Tunisia for decades but he had given women many rights that Arab women could only dream of. His government had used that successfully in its propaganda to give the impression, to the outside world, that Tunisia was a modern and open-minded society. Today, as Tunisia's revolutionaries struggle to keep the uprising alive, there is a genuine effort by the Islamist government to stifle the voices of dissent and take away women's rights, reduce their positive role and erase their exposure. All this while upholding their false claim that everything is perfectly fine in their country.

The good news is that the Islamists are failing in all aspects of their governance. Thus forcing Tunisia's civil society and peaceful activists to insist on sparing no effort to move their country towards a separation of religion and state. They know very well that if women lose this battle, Tunisia will lose the war against extremism and the fundamentalist government will only bestow on them a modern version of the darkest of dark ages!

This article was first published in Lebanon-based daily Annahar on April 9, 2013.

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