

# GENDER EQUALITY AND POLITICAL TURMOIL IN TUNISIA

MAHAA AYUB

Ten years ago, thousands of young Tunisians flooded the streets to demand the end of the dictatorial regime and the creation of new democratic institutions. Many of these protests were led by women, who hoped to achieve gender equality. Ten years after the success of the revolution that dubbed Tunisia the “only Arab democracy,” the country has found itself in dire economic and political straits.

Since the revolution, Tunisia has asserted itself in the Maghreb as a pioneer in women’s liberation, and the countless women who protested in January 2011 were able to propel monumental change. Central in the dialogue surrounding the sociopolitical future of the nation is the question of what place women occupy in Tunisian society. When a new constitution was drafted in October 2011, the National Constituent Assembly instituted reforms ensuring that women would be included in every party list.<sup>1</sup> Many speculate that the rise of Tunisian women as an important group in the political process may serve as precedent for other Arab countries, particularly Najla Bouden Romdhan’s recent appointment as Tunisia’s first female prime minister in October 2021.<sup>2</sup>

But are women truly seeing progress in Tunisian social and political life, or is Bouden’s appointment nothing more than a cover up for rising political tensions in Tunisia? It is worth consider-

ing that Tunisian President Kais Saied, who dissolved Parliament and seized executive power two months prior to her appointment, may be attempting to obfuscate the lack of fundamental democratic successes since the 2011 revolution.<sup>3</sup> Although her powers as Prime Minister were heavily diluted, President Saied emphasized Romdhan’s appointment on the basis of gender equality, calling it “an honour for Tunisia and a homage to Tunisian women.”<sup>3</sup> Romdhan will not face the Tunisian Parliament—which Saied suspended—and has instead been thrust into the national spotlight to manage various Tunisian crises: mass youth unemployment, cataclysmic brain-drain, and a failed response to the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

Her unique position as a symbol of female liberation and political power in the Middle East and North Africa must be juxtaposed against the rising political tensions in Tunisia. Political insecurity and a looming economic crisis have put Bouden in a position where she is responsible for managing nightmarish situations, such as the healthcare system collapsing under the pressure of the pandemic. Although her appointment is certainly a major stride towards female equality, the surrounding tensions raise important questions regarding her ability to effect change.

Even as women make political strides in Tunisia, however, they continue to be held back

by a lack of economic rights. Tunisia’s social and geographic disparities result in a system where metropolitan women have greater access to education and rural women are often targets of violence and intimidation. Other barriers to women’s success in the workforce include balancing family and work, inconsistent labor laws, and antagonistic cultural attitudes toward women in the workplace.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, women often do not have economic rights, as their property and finances are controlled by their fathers, or following marriage, their husbands.<sup>1</sup> Despite post-revolutionary laws that codified a woman’s right to own a bank account, women are far less likely to receive loans from the bank or be able to start their own business.<sup>1</sup>

Violence against Tunisian women has also persisted, with 47% experiencing either psychological, physical, or sexual violence at least once in their lifetimes.<sup>4</sup> In 2017, the government passed the Law of Eliminating Violence Against Women, created by Tunisia’s internal security services to process domestic violence accusations and offer protection orders, which would remove the perpe-

trator from the household and enforce a restraining order.<sup>5</sup> There is a gap between its formulation and implementation, however, and many women who are unable to receive protection orders, instead face their husband’s wrath for reporting crimes.<sup>5</sup> Some women have even been murdered for voicing their abuse, which was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is clear that the safety of women must be enforced through sociopolitical reform, but is the appointment of a female prime minister really enough to spur this change?

Tunisia has created the foundation needed to fight for gender equality; however, the reality of women’s rights in the nation is far more complicated. Without the necessary accountability to ensure laws are properly implemented, and with the rise in power and popularity of conservative parties such as Ennahda, a long battle remains. As the fight for equality continues, women’s political appointments cannot be the only accomplishment; meaningful change needs to be created regarding the manifestations of gender equality in everyday life.

