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Gender Standards v. Democratic Standards: Revisiting the Paradox

By Amel Mili¹

Abstract

In our past work, we had analyzed the correlation between gender standards and democratic standards in post-colonial North Africa, and found it to be essentially non-existent, despite the fact that these two standards are highly correlated worldwide, and despite the analytical evidence to the effect that they go hand in hand. We revisit our previous analysis, in light of recent developments in North Africa and the Middle East.

Keywords: Gender Standards, Democratic Standards, North Africa, Middle East, Arab Spring, Arab Gender Policies.

Introduction: Revisiting the Paradox

In [Mili, 2009], I discuss an empirical study I had conducted in 2005-2007, in which I analyzed the statistical correlation between gender standards and democratic standards in post colonial North Africa. Even though these two standards are highly correlated worldwide, they have virtually no statistical correlation in the case of North African Countries. To justify this paradox, I had presented a number of different explanations, including:

- *Top Down Gender Policies.* The reason why gender standards and democratic standards are usually correlated is that the same pressures from the base that force the adoption of progressive gender policies also force the adoption of democratic systems of governance. But what happened in post colonial North Africa was that progressive gender policies were decided by the political class, which did not feel obligated to make any political concessions to match its progressive gender policies.
- *Alien Metrics.* We argue that international metrics of gender standards reflect Western understanding of gender equality, and may be inadequate to measure North African or Middle Eastern perceptions gender equality. For example, while a Western woman may feel that wearing clothes that expose her physical features is a sign of freedom, a Middle Eastern woman may find that she prefers wearing modest clothes that protect her from prying looks.

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- *Turning Maslow's Hierarchy on its Head.* Whereas Abraham Maslow's theory [Maslow, 1943; Maslow, 1954] holds that human beings have a hierarchy of needs, that they fulfill in decreasing order of urgency and criticality, I had argued that when it comes to democratic standards, peoples of the Maghreb seem to have conceded them, because they perceived them as the price they have to pay for political stability and economic prosperity. I had argued that such a bargain was necessarily unstable, and that sooner or later people would realize that they are getting a bad deal.



I, like most people, did not expect them to make this realization so soon. Barely a year after my earlier analysis was published, a policewoman got into an argument with an unlicensed fruit vendor in the town of Sidi Bouzid in central Tunisia, upon which she slapped him, triggering a sequence of events that is still playing out across the Arab world, with worldwide global repercussions that have yet to be understood.

Background: Initial Results

In [Mili, 2009], we had conducted an empirical study intended to analyze the statistical correlation between gender standards and democratic standards in post-colonial North Africa. To this effect, I quantified gender standards by the UNDP's Gender Development Index and democratic standards by the Freedom House's CL (Civil Liberties) and PR (Political Rights) indices, which we added to produce a compound index that we call DI (for Democracy Index). We collected data on DI and GDI for the three countries of North Africa, namely Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, for four time periods in their post colonial history, namely 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000. We employed statistical correlation analysis and linear regression analysis between these factors, and found that they are decidedly unrelated: their correlation for the three countries and four time periods is very near zero, sometimes even negative. Because this is highly counterintuitive, we analyzed the correlation between GDI and DI for all the countries for which the UNDP has recent information (involving 162 countries), and found a correlation coefficient of 0.645, which satisfies us that our expectation (and intuition) was not unreasonable. Focusing back on North Africa, I evaluate the statistical correlation between DI and GDI for all the communities of countries of which North Africa is a part, and find the following results:

- A correlation of 0.02 for 46 African countries.
- A correlation of -0.30 for 16 Arab countries.

- A correlation of 0.03 for 43 Islamic countries.
- A correlation of 0.71 for 18 Mediterranean countries.

It appears that it is the African/ Arab/ Islamic identity of North African countries that accounts for the absence of statistical correlation between gender standards and democratic standards. In the presence of this paradoxical situation, we had put forth a number of explanations, including those that are discussed in section 1, namely: The top down nature of gender policies in North Africa; the use of what may be an alien measure of gender standards (the United Nations' GDI); and the absurd bargain that peoples of North Africa seemed to have struck with their respective political leaderships... at least until December 2010.

The Arab Spring: A Slap Heard Around the World

Cracks in the Fortress of Arab Autocracy

During the course of the twentieth century, the world witnessed several waves of democratization that swept through Latin America, much of Asia, and (after the fall of the Berlin wall) Eastern Europe and Russia. So that at the dawn of the twenty first century, the only countries that remained firmly in the grip of autocratic regimes were Arab countries; but a number of circumstances, brought on by globalization and the information technology revolution, started to chip away at the fortress of Arab autocratic regimes. Some of these circumstances are:

- ***Al Jazeera.*** This Qatar-based television network grew from modest beginnings to become one of the most reliable/ credible sources of information for Arab masses, and later one of the top media organizations in the world. Unlike most Arab media, Al Jazeera is relatively independent, and is free to expose the incompetence and corruption of Arab regimes.
- ***Wikileaks.*** Wikileaks went further than Al Jazeera in exposing the incompetence and duplicity of Arab regimes, by showing clearly how their covert actions were totally at odds with their public positions.
- ***Facebook.*** Facebook and other social media enabled Arab masses to organize a challenge to Arab regimes virtually anonymously, leaving authorities powerless to interfere with their activities, to identify them, or to arrest them.
- ***Youtube.*** The availability of youtube meant that political activists could record events and post them for the world to see, thereby exposing the abuses of the regimes or their inability to control the situation.

As a result of these circumstances, Arab regimes have lost credibility with their populations (thanks to Al Jazeera, and Wikileaks, etc), at the same time as they have lost the political initiative (thanks to Facebook, Twitter, etc), and the ability to control the message (thanks to Youtube, etc). All that is needed to trigger a revolution is a spark.

Tunisia: The Jasmin Revolution

The spark that triggered a wave of revolutions across the Arab world started modestly as a minor incident in a small town in central Tunisia, on December 17, 2010. A policewoman named Fadia Hamdi harassed an unlicensed fruit vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, confiscated his

wares and ordered him to close shop; when he resisted, she slapped him in public. When local authorities refused to meet with him and hear his grievances, he set himself on fire. This triggered a wave of protests, that were fueled by pent up discontent and resentment against the regime; these protests spread across the country, all the way to the capital, where they culminated on January 14, with the fall of the Ben Ali regime, and the exile of President Ben Ali to Saudi Arabia. Tunisia was subsequently governed by successive governments, until October 23, 2011, when elections were held for a new constitutional assembly.

Fadia Hamdi was put on trial for her role in the December 17 incident, and was acquitted. Mohamed Bouazizi survived his injuries but was badly burned; he passed away on January 4th after two weeks of intensive care, without witnessing the momentous events of January 14, 2011.

The events of Tunisia helped other Arab peoples to conquer their fears and rise against their autocratic regimes; in the remainder of this section, we discuss how events unfolded for other Arab countries.

Alternating Between Concessions and Oppression: Egypt

Protest movements started in Egypt on January 25, shortly after Ben Ali was sent into exile. Like Ben Ali, President Mubarak of Egypt alternated between two approaches to put down the protest movement: making concessions to appease the protesters; and using violence to suppress their movement. When neither policy seemed to work, President Mubarak stepped down on February 11 and relinquished power to a temporary military authority.

Revolution by Civil War

When Moammar Gaddafi in Lybia, Bashar Al Assad in Syria and Ali Abdallah Saleh in Yemen saw (in Tunisia and Egypt) the result of hesitating between concessions and oppression, they were unimpressed. So when their respective populations rose up, they showed little hesitance in using oppression all the way, with varying results: Gaddafi used all his weapons (air force, tanks, heavy artillery) against civilian populations, until a UN resolution opened the way to a NATO intervention against him, culminating in an inglorious end to his 42-year regime; Saleh did not show much restraint either but unlike Gaddafi, he has little means, and his opposition is relatively well armed, hence the Yemeni situation remains in a limbo; As for Assad, he keeps shooting at Syrian protesters with everything he has, undeterred by pressure from the UN, the international community, and the Arab League. In Lybia, all-out repression has clearly failed, due in large part to NATO intervention; whether it succeeds elsewhere remains to be seen, but is doubtful in the medium term.

Preempting Revolution with Carrots: Morocco, Jordan

Fearing that the successive examples of Tunisia then Egypt started to define a pattern, some Arab governments took the initiative, in a bid to prevent political unrest, and launched democratic reforms ranging from decreased executive power, to increased freedom of expression and political opposition, to constitutional reforms, to promises of power sharing, transparency and term limits. Such was the case in Morocco and Jordan.

Preempting Revolution with Sticks: Bahrain and Saudi Arabia

At the first sign of trouble, the monarchy of Bahrain cracked down on street protesters, using violence, intimidation, arrests, and prison terms to crush their movement before it started. Other Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, provided the weaponry and the political support.

Also, following the events in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia reinforced its security measures, issued stern warnings that it will not tolerate any public disturbances, and had religious leaders issue edicts making loyalty to the authorities a religious duty.

Post Arab Spring Politics: Tunisian Elections

First Free Elections

Tunisia holds two enviable titles with respect to Arab revolutions: it is home to the first Arab revolution; and it has (so far) the smoothest revolution (as revolutions go, it has been exceptionally orderly and free of violence). Hence we focus our discussion of gender and revolution on Tunisia.

Upon the overthrow of the Ben Ali regime, Tunisia had a succession of temporary governments, which, under pressure from street protests, had fewer and fewer members of the old regime. The last, and longest serving, of these held office from March 2011 to November 2011, when it cedes power to the new government, that was formed from the constitutional assembly. The constitutional assembly is itself a temporary structure, whose responsibility is limited to write a new constitution and organize elections according to the terms of this constitution.

The election campaign for the constitutional assembly was very short by US standards, since it ran from October 1st to October 21st, 2011, though the country had been preparing for it through the spring and summer 2011. The election was organized and monitored by an independent election commission (*L'Instance Supreme Independante des Elections*: The Supreme Independent Council for Elections, <http://www.isie.tn/>). The constitutional assembly has 219 seats, to be taken from predefined electoral districts. Within each district, voters choose between candidate lists, which are either submitted by parties or by independent individuals. Each district is assigned a number of seats, depending on its population; all candidate lists in that district have to have a number of candidates equal to that number. Also, each list is ranked in a specific order, that determines who gets elected depending on how many votes the list secures. If a list wins one seat, then the head of the list gains that seat; if the list wins two seats, then the first and second person on the list gain seats, etc.. To ensure adequate gender representation, lists had to alternate between female and male candidates; so in a district with nine seats, for example, a list whose head is a man would have five men and four women, and a list whose head is a woman would have five women and four men. Despite this commendable effort of the election commission, there was no assurance that women would be adequately represented in the constitutional assembly: Because most lists were headed by men, membership in the constitutional assembly would be gender-balanced only if every list wins an even number of seats. But if every list wins only one seat, and all winning lists are headed by men, then no women would gain a seat at all.

The period leading up to the elections was a period of great excitement in Tunisia, as Tunisians learned first-hand the benefits of democratic governance, and the chaos and uncertainty that inevitably accompany it. Several parties that had been in a state of hibernation under the 23 year regime of Ben Ali sprung back to life, and many new parties arose with little more than a political slogan and a vague political program. As a consequence, Tunisian voters were overwhelmed by the dizzying array of choices before them, most of which they had barely heard about. The only two parties that enjoyed any name recognition at all were EnNahdha (the

renaissance, an Islamist party) and the PDP (Popular Democratic Party); both were long term opponents to the Ben Ali regime and both were ruthlessly silenced during his rule.

Election Results

The elections were held on Sunday October 23, 2011 under the auspices of the Tunisian Election Commission, and were monitored by Tunisian and International bodies; they were universally hailed as a great success, in terms of voter participation, poll organization, and transparency. According to the independent electoral council [ISIE, 2011], the rate of participation among registered voters was 86.1 %, a very honorable figure by any standard, reflecting the faith that Tunisians have in the benefits of democracy. The results of the election, distributed by party and by gender, were as follows (in terms of number of seats in the constitutional assembly):

Party	Number of Seats				
	Men	Women	Total	Percent	Percent Women
EnNahdha (Islamist)	50	39	89	41.01 %	43.82 %
CPR (Center Left)	25	4	29	13.36 %	13.80 %
Aridha (Petition)	22	4	26	11.98 %	15.38 %
Takattol (Social Democrat)	16	4	20	9.22 %	20.00 %
PDP (Social Democrat)	14	2	16	7.37 %	12.50 %
PDM (Democracy, modernity)	3	2	5	2.30 %	40.00 %
Moubadara (Initiative)	3	2	5	2.30 %	40.00 %
Afek (Horizons, liberal)	2	2	4	1.84 %	50.00 %
POCT (Communist)	3	0	3	1.38 %	0.00 %
MDS (Socialist)	2	0	2	0.92 %	0.00 %
MP (Popular movement)	2	0	2	0.92 %	0.00 %
Independents	16	0	16	7.37 %	0.00 %
Total	158	59	217	100.00 %	27.19 %

Commentary and Analysis

Looking at these results from a gender standpoint, one is struck by three observations:

- First, despite the best efforts of the elections authorities, women participation in the constitutional assembly is limited to 27.19 %.
- The second observation is that paradoxically, the party that has the most women representatives, and (nearly) the highest female representation in its caucus, is the EnNahdha party, which is feared by many Tunisians to roll back some of the gains that women secured prior to the revolution. To be sure, this has to do with electoral rules more, perhaps, than the party's interest in women representation. In most electoral districts, EnNahdha is the only party that gains more than one seat, thereby getting women elected, even on a list led by a man. Because other parties are highly divided, they usually gain only one seat at a time, ensuring that only the head of their lists (usually a man) get a seat. There was one EnNahdha list that was chaired by a woman, who

wasted no time showing her colors by declaring shortly after the elections that unwed mothers do not deserve legal protection.

- On the face of it, these results appear to be alarming from a gender viewpoint, because the party that garnered most votes, and 41.01 % of the seats, is not known to be a champion of women's rights. Some members of this party would be quite happy to see polygamy reinstated; some believe that the solution to high unemployment is to send women home; and some are obsessed beyond reason by what a woman should wear and not wear.

Yet there are a number of reasons why we believe that we should not be alarmed by these results; we discuss these in turn, below.

- As any political consultant will confirm, winning elections has less to do with having good ideas, having a sound political program, and fielding good people than it has to do with being organized. Due to its history, and to its grassroots organization, EnNahdha was able to get organized much faster than any other party, hence was much better positioned to win votes. Hence we submit that the score of 40% of the vote does not reflect the political opinions of the Tunisian people as much as it reflects the special circumstances of this particular election.
- Even assuming that the current poll reflects the political tendencies of the Tunisian electorate, EnNahdha cannot govern by itself, and has to form a coalition with other parties; no other party will ever bargain away Tunisia's cherished gains in terms of gender legislation.
- As can be seen from the table above, 39 out of the 89 members of the constitutional assembly are women; this constitutes 43.82 percent of the EnNahdha caucus. It is fair to assume that on critical gender matters, these members will not caucus with EnNahdha against their own interest, leaving only 50 members out of 217 who could vote on gender-hostile measures.
- Unlike subsequent governments, the constitutional assembly has a short-term mandate, which is limited to writing the constitution, while a temporary government drawn from a coalition of winning parties runs the day to day operations of the country. This short term mandate has two beneficial effects: First, it will give Tunisians an opportunity to watch EnNahdha in power, and to see for themselves that religious doctrine alone is not sufficient to govern; second, it will give time to the other parties to consolidate, in light of their performance at these elections, and to offer fewer and better alternatives to Tunisian voters than the overcrowded field they currently have.
- In addition to its distinguished role with respect to Arab revolutions, Tunisia holds a distinguished title with respect to gender relations: On August 13, 1956, under the leadership of then-President Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia enacted a comprehensive body of legislation that defied centuries-old traditions and customs, and replaced with modern legislation that protected the right of women in terms of inheritance, marriage, divorce, child custody, property ownership, etc. With the possible exception of marginal extremists, all Tunisians cherish these laws, credit them for turning Tunisia into a modern progressive society, consider them as an important part of the country's social fabric, and will never tolerate that any government rolls these back.

- Of course, EnNahdha leadership has been repeating that it has no intention to roll back any legislation pertaining to women's rights, and that it will not interfere with dress code at the beach, nor advocate female unemployment as a solution to economic problems. While one can take them at their word, many Tunisians feel that this moderate posturing is merely an electoral ploy; if it is an electoral ploy, it will not be uncovered during the tenure of the current temporary government.
- Some observers see women wearing headscarves as a sign that they are embracing an earlier era, prior to Bourguiba's revolutionary gender legislation. But we argue that the headscarves that women wear nowadays reflect a totally different gender symbol from those that were used prior to Tunisia's gender revolution. Whereas in the past those veils reflected a woman's submission to the whim of the men in their lives (fathers or brothers when they are young, husbands when they grow up), today's headscarves are a much more assertive individual decision that is neither initiated by men nor even approved by them. It is driven by issues of faith, identity, and freedom of expression. Policymakers would do well not to confuse these different interpretations.

Ultimately, the most secure warranty of women's right in Tunisia is the Tunisian people: having conquered their fears, they have put their leaders on notice that they will not tolerate any violation of their cherished values.

Revisiting the Paradox: On Gender and Democracy

In [Mili, 2009], we had identified three premises that may explain the paradox of the discrepancy between gender standards and political standards in the Maghreb (the same observation was made about Arab countries in general): The fact that gender policies were enacted top down; the fact that we used the UN's GDI metrics to reflect gender standards; and the fact that Arab populations appear to have inverted Maslow's hierarchy. We review these three premises in light of the discussions of this paper:

- *Gender policies enacted top down.* In the new political landscape, we anticipate that political decisions are no longer going to be done top down, as this is incompatible with democratic principles and modus operandi.
- *GDI as an alien metric.* While the GDI metric was not specifically tailored to Arab women, we feel that it is by and large an adequate reflection of gender development; also, we suspect that even if we had used an Arab-specific metric of gender development in our earlier study [Mili, 2009], we would still have found the same result.
- *Inverting Maslow's hierarchy.* With the events of the Arab Spring, Arab populations have shown that their Maslow hierarchy is properly oriented: they have recognized that conceding political freedoms for economic security, even if it were more than a perception, is a bad bargain. They now believe they can have economic security through political freedoms, a positive development by any measure.

Conclusions

The first free election in Tunisia has yielded the victory of an Islamist party. The fall of the Mubarak regime in Egypt has enabled long-oppressed Islamist forces to operate more assertively

and more freely. On the day when Gadafi is defeated and his 42-year regime ends, the National Transitional Council of Lybia announces that it wants to enact Islamic legislation in Lybia. It would be a cruel irony if by overthrowing their autocratic regimes, the peoples of Tunisia, Egypt and Lybia are substituting them for regimes that, under the cover of enacting religious law, may be causing great harm to gender development in their countries. For the reasons I discussed in section 4.3, I don't believe this fear is justified. First, because I do not believe that in the case of Tunisia, and perhaps of Egypt and Lybia, the rule of an Islamist party is inevitable. Second, if it were, I do not think that it leads necessarily to a degradation in gender development. In the days leading up to the October elections, Tunisia hosted Prime Minister Recep Taieb Erdogan, who reminded us that it is possible for an Islamic inspired party, such as his, to govern a country that has a long tradition of separation of state from religion, and to do so in a way that is moderate and modern.

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