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Strategic Choices: How Conservative Women Activists Remained Active throughout Tunisia's Democratic Transition

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Gender politics scholars conclude that conservatives and religious actors curtail women's rights and political participation during a democratic transition, except in post-conflict contexts. Yet, this was not the case in Tunisia. This article documents how Islamist women activists remained active throughout the democratic transition in Tunisia. I argue that Islamist women within Tounissiet remained politically active by making two strategic choices: (1) not challenging conservatives and (2) aligning with liberal feminists when it was in their interest. This article builds on the emerging scholarship on women's roles in a democratic transition, especially conservative women, by providing original empirical work on an Islamist women's rights organization in a democratizing Tunisia. I suggest that more needs to be understood about conservative women and new actors that democratic transitions empower and embolden.

KEYWORDS: conservative women; women's movements; democratization; Islam; Arab Spring; Tunisia.

INTRODUCTION

Recent turmoil in the United States (U.S.), and the rise of the “political right,” conservatism, and religious actors worldwide, have prompted concerns about potential backsliding on women's rights and conservative women's influence. Concerns about curtailing rights are especially salient during a democratic transition when a state introduces gender reforms as it attempts to democratize. Democratization creates openings for women to participate in state-building projects and political debates compared to previously closed regimes (Badri and Tripp 2017, Viterna and Fallon 2008). Women's rights also become up for discussion and are often threatened during democratic transitions. Gender politics scholars, including political sociologists, have paid attention to these critical times in Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) (Alvarez 2010, Basu 2016, Ferree 2012, Jad 2018, Moghadam 2016, Stephan and Charrad 2020, Charrad and Reith 2019; Tripp 2015, Viterna and Fallon 2008, Waylen 2007a, Waylen 2007b). Women often fight to oust autocrats and participate in the transition to democracy; they do so by mobilizing other women and risking their lives to fight for political change and human rights (Moghadam 2020, Stephan and Charrad 2020,

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Waylen 1994, Wofford 2002). Despite being visible during the early years of a democratic transition, women typically do not sustain their collective action. They gradually disappear from the streets and decision-making table (Molyneux 1985, Viterna and Fallon 2008), and their issues eventually get placed on the backburner (Horton 2007).

Furthermore, new power players, often liberals/nationalists and conservatives/traditionalists, tend to sideline and silence women after the initial years of a democratic transition (Alvi 2015, Sadiqi 2016, Tadros 2020). Despite relying on women's efforts and support during the revolution and early years of a transition, they do so. Are there instances where women successfully sustained their political participation beyond the early years of a democratic transition? The gender politics literature on women's political participation in post-conflict states suggests that women benefit from political opportunities that arise when men are exiled, killed, or disappeared during conflicts (Feijoo and Nari 1994, Hughes and Tripp 2015, Viterna and Fallon 2008, Youssef 2020). Are there cases where women remain active throughout democratization, despite the absence of conflict? The Tunisian case is one example.

The rise of the political right also promoted increased research interest in religious and conservative women, especially those empowered by democratization processes. The women, Islam, and democratization literature suggests that Islamist actors often decrease women's rights when they seize power (Hafez 2019, Jad 2010, Jad 2011, Tadros 2016). Scholars also posit that women who join Islamist political parties sometimes try to curtail existing women's rights (Aksoy 2015, Aldikacti 2001, Charrad and Zarrugh 2014, Diner and Toktaş 2010, Rinaldo 2019, Topol 2012). What about women activists? Do they promote gender equality? Are they "wolves in sheep's clothing," prioritizing their political and religious interests over their gendered interests? (Celis and Childs 2012, Celis and Childs 2018) Do they ever change their position on gender issues? Cooperate with liberal feminists on issues of mutual interest? Challenge conservatives? A close examination of an Islamist women's rights organization, *Tounissiet*, or "Tunisian Women," that emerged in 2011 during the Arab Spring uprisings and remained active throughout the democratic transition in Tunisia furthers this discussion. *Tounissiet* formed the same year that Islamists became the leading majority in Tunisian politics for the first time in the country's history.

How did some Islamist women's rights organizations remain politically active throughout the democratic transition in Tunisia? Islamists adapted and made strategic choices during different phases of the transition. Those choices helped them to survive. To understand organizational survival, I focus on *Tounissiet's* choices. When *Tounissiet* was first founded at the beginning of the democratic transition, its leaders advocated for rights exclusively enshrined in religion and opposed gender equality. During the second phase of the transition, secular feminists pushed back and mobilized against Islamist views on women's rights. Once Islamist actors realized that failure to compromise threatened their authority, they changed their perspective on certain issues. During the third phase of the transition, *Tounissiet* partnered with secular feminists on combatting violence against women, a move that Islamist

leadership sanctioned.² Nevertheless, Islamists never conceded on inheritance and rejected reform—an issue at the core of Islamist identity in Tunisia.

This article contributes to political sociology and gender politics by analyzing religious women's collective behavior during democratization. As the transition progressed, conservative women in *Tounissiet* fought for gender reform that mostly aligned with universal human rights standards and the democratic transition, including eliminating gender-based violence and achieving electoral gender parity. Yet, they did not challenge rights based on Islamic jurisprudence, especially inheritance inequality. Given the organization's political nature, I classify *Tounissiet* as "Islamist" and not "Islamic feminist." Islamic feminism is often understood as feminism based on charitable work to achieve social transformation and a pious population over time (Badran 2008). Neither *Tounissiet* members nor external actors referred to *Tounissiet* as Islamic feminist.

I proceed with the literature review, provide a brief overview of Islamists in Tunisia, and discuss my methods. The findings section examines *Tounissiet*'s activities and evolving agenda to demonstrate that they remained active because they made strategic choices throughout the transition. I show (1) conservative women made two strategic choices that helped them remain active during the transition and (2) conservative women, like any social group, have various interests. The last section addresses reservations scholars and liberal feminists have about conservative women, study limitations, and future avenues for research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

My analysis of *Tounissiet* engages two bodies of literature: the gender politics literature on women's political participation during transitions on a global scale and the literature on women, Islam, and democratization. Building on both bodies of literature, I show how an Islamist women's rights organization remained active throughout a democratic transition in a non-post conflict setting.

Women's Political Participation during Democratic Transitions

Typically, in a transition from authoritarian to democratic regimes, political forces use gender. Gender politics scholars wrote women into democratization studies. Their findings fall under two categories. In most cases, women participate in the revolution and early years of the transition, but nationalists and conservatives sideline them and prevent their sustained political participation (Viterna and Fallon 2008). Most countries that experienced the third wave of democratization and the Arab Spring uprisings fall under this category because they experienced revolutions and relatively peaceful transitions. In some cases, which I label as "post-conflict states," women participate in the early years of the transition and sustain their political participation long term (Hughes and Tripp 2015). Countries that

² Secular feminist notions of feminism in Tunisia mirror the demands of liberal feminists around the globe. Secular feminists base women's rights on the declaration for universal human rights and seek total equality for women.

experience civil war and mass atrocities, including forced disappearances, fall under this category.

Gender politics scholars who argue that women's participation does not usually last much longer beyond a revolution claim that nationalists and religious institutions become emboldened during a democratic transition. These actors promote traditional family structures and oppose women's rights in the family. They ultimately prevent women's long-term political participation and prevent women from achieving their political goals (Ferree 2012, Khalil 2014a, Khalil 2014b, Sadiqi 2016, Touaf, Boutkhil and Nasri 2017). In Eastern Europe, which experienced the third wave of democratization, the state eliminated legislative quota, decreased funding for childcare centers, threatened abortion rights, and curtailed maternal leave rights (Einhorn 1993, Matland and Montgomery 2003, Plavkova 1994). In Chile, another place that experienced the third wave of democratization, women mobilized for political change (Adams 2002). Still, conservatives and the Catholic church remained influential and limited reproductive rights, despite feminist mobilization (Waylen 2007a, Waylen 2007b). In South Africa, conservative community leaders opposed women's rights within the family, especially regarding land ownership and inheritance equality (Basu 2016). In Portugal, women participated in the revolution and played a central role in Popular Power and organizing around social and political issues during the early years of the democratic transition (Simoes 2006). However, their participation declined as the transition progressed, and they made up only 8% of deputies in the first elected Constituent Assembly (Simoes 2006). Their labor force participation increased and there were several female cabinet ministers (Tavora and Rubery 2013).

Other gender politics scholars highlight post-conflict states as fertile grounds for women's sustained (long term) political participation. While civil strife and mass atrocities, including civil wars and widespread forced disappearances, often affect all citizens, more men are killed, disappeared, or exiled than women (Hughes and Tripp 2015, Tripp 2015). Men's absence often creates a power vacuum and political opportunities for women to lead. In the Congo, Sudan, and Rwanda, women helped restructure the state and became heavily involved in politics and the constitution-writing process after civil wars (Badri and Tripp 2017, Basu 2016, Fox 2021). In Argentina, another country plagued by conflict and forced disappearances, women led constitutional reform, enforced gender quotas, and strengthened civil society (Ackelsberg 2001, Borland 2008, Feijoo and Nari 1994, Lavrin 1998, Viterna and Fallon 2008, Waylen 2000).

Women, Islam, and Democratization

Many nationalist leaders expanded women's rights under state feminism in MENA during the 20th century. Secular rulers in Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Turkey, and Tunisia granted women new legal, political, economic, and reproductive rights (Al-Ali 2000, Ali 2018, Bier 2011, Cesari and Casanova 2017, Charrad 2001, Charrad 2011, Charrad and Youssef 2017, Kallander 2021, Moghadam 2013, White 2004). This strategy helped rulers consolidate power by placing women's

rights in the hands of the state and securing women's political support (Charad 2001). The strategy also helped them appeal to the international community, advance projects linked to modernity, and disarm Islamists and other challengers. First ladies, including Leila Trabelsi (Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's wife), helped execute this agenda through their embodiment of it (Jinkinson 2020). They became the official symbol of the contemporary Arab woman: a modern, professional, and highly educated woman who exercised her new rights (Debuyssere 2016a). Despite authoritarian leaders' public commitment to women's equality, nationalist leaders refrained from making reforms that directly challenged Islam, especially family law, including inheritance (Charrad 2009). Women's experiences significantly differed under Islamist rulers in many cases.

Many Islamist political actors who came to power at the turn of the 21st century significantly decreased women's rights in MENA. Islamist leaders reasserted traditional gender roles and expectations. In Palestine, the Islamist political party *Hamās* came to power after the 2006 elections. Once *Hamās* seized power, its leaders weakened the secular wing of the women's movement and its attempts to separate politics from religion and strengthen civil law (Jad 2010). Many Islamist women sided with *Hamās* and prioritized the nationalist struggle over progressive women's rights (Jad 2011). This finding tracks with the gender politics literature since nationalist causes often take priority over women's issues during democratic transitions. In Arab Spring countries like Egypt, the democratically elected Islamist Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) (Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood) curtailed women's legal rights after Islamists seized power in 2012. The FJP also did not condemn high sexual harassment and assault levels in public following the 2011 revolution and urged women to take on traditional roles (Hafez 2019, Tadros 2016). These cases are particularly salient since Tunisia is a Muslim-majority country located in the MENA region and is experimenting with democracy. Still, these studies focus on the state, not women's activism through civil society or formal politics during democratization.

Islamist women became empowered during democratization in Muslim-majority countries, but not all favored expanding women's rights. They sometimes joined Islamist political parties that undermined secular women's movements in MENA and existing women's rights. In Turkey, Islamist women helped the Islamist Justice and Development (AKP) party govern and often challenged existing women's rights and the women's movement's secular wing (Aksoy 2015, Aldikakti 2001, Diner and Toktaş 2010). In Egypt, women like Azza al-Garf, who ran for office under the FJP, supported women's political empowerment through voting and running for office but dismissed concerns over female cutting (FGM) and family law (Topol 2012). In Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population, some Indonesian women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that emerged during the democratic transition challenged women's rights based on liberal values (Rinaldo 2019). Some women from the conservative Indonesian Muslim Students Action Union and the *Tarbiyah* movement helped create conservative Islamist parties that sought to establish an Islamic caliphate (Rinaldo 2019). Some Islamist women join counter-movements that undermine women's rights and secular women's mobilization during democratization, while others promote some women's

rights. This finding confirms that women's groups are not monolithic, their identities are fluid, and their interests and priorities vary, even during democratic openings (Molyneux 1985).

This article contributes to the scholarship by (1) showing that Islamist women remained politically active throughout the democratic transition and (2) revealing that conservative women make strategic choices during democratic openings when Islamists must share power with secularists.

TUNISIA'S ISLAMISTS: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Islamists have a long and complicated history in Tunisian politics that predates the Arab Spring uprisings. On the one hand, they threatened women's rights by opposing women's emancipation, state feminism, and family law reform (Yasun 2020). Some Islamists became a serious threat when they exercised violence during the 1980s and 1990s (Wolf 2017). On the other hand, the secular regimes systematically targeted, imprisoned, and pushed their political opponents (including Islamists) into exile or underground in Tunisia until the Arab Spring uprisings (Fox 2019). According to Islamist respondents, the state punished some Islamist women for their affiliation with Islamist political parties or their proximity to Islamist political figures. Their punishment included harassment, expulsion from school, rape, the threat of rape, etc. (Gray and Coonan 2013, Mhajne and Brandt 2020, Wolf 2017, Zaki 2018). Islamists' mobilization skills and narrative as a marginalized majority helped them re-emerge on the political scene after the fall of the secular regime in January of 2011.

The Arab Spring uprisings, which began in Tunisia, created a political opening for Islamists to return from exile, re-enter politics, and debate women's rights. In October 2011, the moderate Islamist *Ennahda* (or *Al Nahda*) won 89 seats out of 217 in the National Constituent Assembly seats (NCA or ANC), following the first free and fair election by international standards (Vericat 2017).³ *Ennahda* also had the highest number of women elected to the NCA, where *Ennahda* women secured 43 of 59 seats that women won during the election (Vericat 2017). Thus, Islamists (not only secularists) became politically empowered after the revolution (Boubekeur 2016). Secularists and Islamists shared power through coalitions during different phases of the transition. The coalitions were volatile and required Islamists to make several concessions throughout the transition.

Islamists sought influence in civil society and formed new women's rights organizations after the revolution. In 2011, Tunisian secular and Islamist women created up to 300 new women's rights organizations (compared to two autonomous organizations before the revolution) (Ben Amara 2012). New organizations allowed Islamist women to carve out space for themselves in the women's movement (which remains divided) and the democratic transition (Charrad and Youssef 2018, Debuyser 2016b, Gray 2012). Some organizations formed a close but informal relationship with *Ennahda*, including *Tounissiet*, as many had pre-existing social ties under

³ While *Ennahda* shed its Islamist label in 2016, its members still refer to it as the Muslim Democratic Party.

dictatorship. A *Tounissiet* founder was appointed as Deputy Minister of Finance under *Ennahda* and was later elected as an *Ennahda* parliamentarian. *Tounissiet* also trained *Ennahda* female political candidates ahead of elections and trained them as elected officials. *Ennahda* respondents expressed support for *Tounissiet* during interviews, confirming my suspicion that *Tounissiet* and *Ennahda* worked together, and their politics overlapped. It is no surprise then that *Tounissiet*'s views on gender mirrored *Ennahda*'s throughout the transition.

Despite their electoral triumph and participation in civil society, Islamists remained controversial and a threat to secularists. In 2013, secularists accused Islamists and Salafists (who are less moderate than *Ennahda*) of assassinating outspoken secular politicians Chokri Belaid and Mohammed Brahmi. Salafists attacked secular feminists and women's existing rights. They physically attacked and assaulted outspoken female students (UN Women 2013). Islamists also threatened women's rights and initially rejected women's equality from legal texts. There were calls for women to return to the home. There were also calls to practice polygamy and female gentile cutting (FGM) (both banned in Tunisia) (UN Women 2013). They promoted the language of women's "complementarity" to men—a religious concept that conservatives often draw on to differentiate between men's and women's social roles and responsibilities. During the early phase of the transition, Islamists (including *Tounissiet*) opposed ratifying the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and lifting all reservations (Ketiti 2014). In 2012, *Ennahda* and other Islamists supported language on women's complementarity instead of equality in a constitutional draft (Charrad and Zarrugh 2014). This rigid position on gender equality led to mass secular feminist mobilization. Secular feminists pressured *Ennahda* and its secular coalition partners to protect women's rights in the constitution (Charrad and Zarrugh 2014, Charrad and Youssef 2018). While secular feminists successfully removed the complementarity language, conservatives and extremists continued to threaten women's rights. Islamists targeted secular feminists, including Amel Grami, Khedija Arfaoui, and politicians Bouchra Belhaj Hmida and Saida Garrache, to name a few, in vicious smear campaigns (Youssef, Aissa and Abdou 2021).

The findings section traces *Tounissiet*'s strategic choices throughout the transition. Like *Ennahda*, *Tounissiet* initially favored a version of women's rights enshrined in Islam, such as complementarity. Like *Ennahda*, *Tounissiet* was forced to change its views as it navigated a new political environment where both Islamists and secularists ruled. Finally, Like *Ennahda*, *Tounissiet* refused to compromise on inheritance, signaling that it was a red line.

METHODS AND CASE SELECTION

To analyze conservative women's mobilization in post-revolution Tunisia, I collected ethnographic data on women's activism over 6 months in Tunisia and 1 month in Washington D.C. in 2018 and 2019. I used purposive sampling to identify prominent Islamist women's rights organizations focused on women's political empowerment between 2011 and 2019. I conducted interviews with the leadership of

four prominent Islamist women's organizations, *Tounissiet*, Jasmine Foundation, *Afkar Nissa*, and *Nissa Tounissiet*. *Tounissiet* was the only one that fits the study's parameters of focusing on organizations that (1) were active in 2019 and (2) advocated for increased women's political empowerment. The other organizations did not fit the parameters because Jasmine Foundation is a youth organization that has some programming related to women's issues, and *Afkar Nissa* remains active, but the organization is more of a cultural club. *Nissa Tounissiet* is no longer operational.

I gained access to *Tounissiet* after women activists and donors in my network introduced me to them. I also gained access to their space as a woman. We commiserated over our experiences as outsiders where we lived: they as oppressed women living under repression before the revolution in Tunisia and me as an Arab feminist living in the U.S. during Trump's presidency.

My analysis is informed by a decade of knowledge as a researcher and former U.S. diplomat stationed in Tunisia. I draw on dozens of participant observations of conferences, state-sponsored events—such as parliamentary sessions and a Women's Day celebration held by the prime minister—and organizational meetings in Tunisia. These observations helped me assess *Tounissiet's* headquarters' conditions. They also allowed me to observe interactions and relationships in real time. I observed activist interactions with constituents and other organizations during training and conferences. I also observed their relationship with state officials when officials invited *Tounissiet* leaders to state-sponsored events. I also draw on 73 semi-structured interviews with women activists, state officials, and foreign donors and implementers. I asked the women about *Tounissiet's* activities and their views on issues since 2011. The interviews took place in offices, cafés, cars, and state institutions, including the Tunisian Presidential Palace and Parliament and the U.S. Department of State and Congress.

I analyzed Arabic and French *Tounissiet* publications, CREDIF publications, and legal state documents, including the 2017 GBV law and the gender parity clauses in the 2011 and 218 election laws, to triangulate the data. The data supplemented and supported my findings based on ethnographic methods.

FINDINGS: STRATEGIC CHOICES

The democratic transition was Islamists' chance to ensure Islamist women's participation in public life during and beyond the democratic transition. *Tounissiet* leaders made strategic choices during different phases of the democratic transition. During the early years of the transition, *Ennahda's* popularity emboldened Islamists. They resisted lifting CEDAW reservations and lobbied for complementarity, not equality, in the constitution. Secular feminists responded by mobilizing and pressuring *Ennahda's* secular partners to protect women's existing rights. This pressure forced *Ennahda* and *Tounissiet* to soften their position on complementarity, embrace electoral gender parity, and work with secularists on different issues, including violence against women. Inheritance reform was a red line for both *Ennahda* and *Tounissiet*. Islamists' rigid position on inheritance halted their cooperation with secularists and led to coalition breakdown.

First Phase of the Democratic Transition (2011–2013)

During the first phase of the transition, *Tounissiet* claimed to support women's rights that reaffirmed "Tunisians' Arab and Islamic identity" (BusinessNews 2011, Ketiti 2014). Like *Ennahda*, *Tounissiet* initially opposed gender equality and supported women's complementarity to men (Ketiti 2014). In 2011, *Tounissiet* joined an Islamist coalition, *Union des Femmes Libres* (Free Women's Union) with three other women's organizations: *Nissa Tounissiet*, *Hawa'*, and *Femmes et Complémentarité*; coalition members opposed lifting all CEDAW reservations and gender parity (BusinessNews 2011, Ketiti 2014). They opposed lifting CEDAW reservations and undertaking reforms that "could harm the Arab-Muslim identity" (BusinessNews 2011). Based on their position on CEDAW, they likely also opposed gender equality during the constitutional drafting process. In response, secular feminists mobilized domestically and internationally and lobbied to achieve gender equality in all legal texts. *Ennahda* conceded, and its civil society partners did as well. Decades of secular feminist mobilization prevented Islamists from backsliding on women's rights. Islamists knew that they had to concede in a political environment that they could not monopolize. An Islamist compromise on complementarity is uncommon across the Muslim world. Still, to achieve democracy and not alienate their secular coalition partners, Islamists knew that they had to accept gender equality. Once *Ennahda* compromised with its political partners, *Tounissiet* followed. Their shift on complementarity symbolizes a strategic choice. They adapted to signal their commitment to a democratic system based on universal human rights. As a result, the state lifted all CEDAW reservations, implemented electoral gender parity, and removed the complementarity language from the constitutional drafts.

Second Phase of the Democratic Transition (2014–2018)

Tounissiet's views shifted and fully supported gender equality and parity after the promulgation of the 2014 constitution. The first sign was when the organization advocated for electoral parity for the 2014 elections. *Tounissiet* cooperated with the Independent Commission on Elections (ISIE) on gender parity and election monitoring. During participant observations of *Tounissiet's* headquarters, I saw three certificates of appreciation from the ISIE, confirming *Tounissiet's* cooperation with the institution. Meriem*, an ISIE respondent, also corroborated this claim during our interview in Ben Arous, a working-class neighborhood in Tunis.⁴

We cooperated with *Tounissiet*. . . During the 2014 elections, the first legislative elections, we invited all women's rights organizations. The first large-scale cooperation with civil society was in 2012. *Tounissiet* representatives came from the interior.

Meriem* said that *Tounissiet* lobbied the ISIE and sent them many invitations to attend events that the organization sponsored.

⁴ Asterisks indicate pseudonyms for the women interviewed to protect them. All quotations are from these interviews, unless otherwise noted.

Tounissiet sends us invitations. They invited us whenever they planned a demonstration [around gender parity]. We formed a relationship or an exchange with them.

Tounissiet's former president Yasmine* pointed out that foreign donors recognized the organization's specialization and expertise in gender parity. The National Democratic Institute (NDI) invited *Tounissiet* to join a coalition on gender parity. NDI is known for its efforts to increase women's political representation and participation during democratization.

We [*Tounissiet*] joined a coalition with NDI [the National Democratic Institute] on horizontal and vertical parity. It was a civil society coalition, and we [*Tounissiet*] were the only women's rights organization.

Tounissiet also prepared women to run for office in local and legislative elections through the Women's Leadership Academy, according to *Tounissiet*'s Website and project reporting (Tounissiet 2020). *Ennahda* women, whom *Tounissiet* almost always trained, secured more parliamentary seats than secular feminists in every election between 2011 and 2019. Tunis's first female mayor was from *Ennahda*. She was sworn into office after the 2018 municipal elections. *Tounissiet* president Hanen* explained why she admired *Ennahda* women and enjoyed training them. Her admiration for them and aligned view of politics and society likely motivated her to ensure their election.

In my opinion of the political parties and women in political parties, why are *Ennahda* women more prepared and trained than other women? Because *Ennahda* women experienced suffering before. They were already political... They were present on the political scene before. They have 20 and 30 years of experience following political developments, and they have political opinions and political vision.

As part of its strategic approach, *Tounissiet* branched out beyond its cooperation with *Ennahda*. It worked closely with secular feminists during the following phase of the transition.

Third Phase of the Democratic Transition (2018)

Throughout the transition, foreign donors attempted to connect Islamist and secular women's rights organizations. Donors invited Islamist and secular women's rights organizations to events and programs. Search for Common Ground and U.N. Women brought together Islamist and secular women's rights organizations around gender reform and women's political participation during democratization. These opportunities opened the door for coalition building across ideological differences.

Gender-based violence brought Islamists and secular feminists together. Islamists and secular feminists first worked separately on the issue then formed a coalition since Tunisian feminists regarded violence against women as a problem dating back to the early 1980s. ATFD and AFTURD feminist pioneers conducted studies, signed petitions, formed coalitions, and set up hotlines and listening centers in the 1990s (Arfaoui 2007, Arfaoui and Moghadam 2016). After the revolution, feminists worked independently, in coalitions, and with the state on violence. Secular feminists led GBV efforts through new legislation. *Tounissiet* also contributed to the cam-

paign. Women's rights organizations succeeded in 2017 when the state passed a comprehensive law that included protecting women from all types of violence (including political violence) and recognizing marital rape (MOW 2017). Thanks to effective civil society organizing across ideological lines, the law had bipartisan support from secular and Islamist political parties (Youssef 2021, Youssef and Yerkes 2021).

Starting in 2014, *Tounissiet* and other women's rights organizations organized an annual 16-day campaign to protest GBV. They used the slogan, "Behind every abused woman, there is a law" (Arfaoui and Moghadam 2016: 644). *Tounissiet* partnered with state institutions, including CREDIF, a state-sponsored feminist research center, to provide social services and contribute to a GBV awareness campaign. In 2013, the Tunisian government adopted the National Action Plan for the Elimination of Violence against Women (NAPEVW). The NAPEVW requires the state to disseminate information, set up free hotlines, and increase access to comprehensive care for domestic violence survivors (Gender Concerns International 2014). Starting in 2016, *Tounissiet* partnered with CREDIF to raise awareness about GBV under the NAPEVW. Two *Tounissiet* staff members, Khedija* and Hafidha*, explained that *Tounissiet* partnered with the Tunisian state to develop studies on violence and launch awareness campaigns. I could not locate these studies.

We worked with CREDIF several times, particularly on eliminating violence. Most of the time, it was awareness campaigns. This included handing out brochures in the streets. We talked about how it relates to the youth [young men], cultural influences. . . You stop people in the street, separate them from others, and talk to them. You listen to victims, and you advise them. These are the things we participated in. As for big events, we sometimes held conferences or workshops.

Tounissiet founder and Ennahda Member of Parliament (MP). Ben Yaghlán was proud of *Tounissiet's* advocacy efforts around GBV.

It's been eight years since the organization was founded, and I think that *Tounissiet* has a brand image, meaning when you say "Tounissiet," you say it's a group of active and respected women. They're also effective. This is based on the issues they worked on, such as violence against women. *Tounissiet* produced a documentary on the type of violence women experienced under the former regimes. They also published sociological and psychological studies on violence and statistical analysis on violence.

Tounissiet also worked with the Ministry of Women, Family, Children, and Seniors on the 2017 Gender-Based Violence law. According to respondents at the Ministry of Women and in parliament, *Tounissiet* provided input on several draft law versions the Ministry of Women drafted. In 2017, *Tounissiet* produced a GBV policy report that broke down the draft legislation article by article. *Tounissiet* recommended clarifying and simplifying some of the language in the draft, including replacing ambiguous terms such as "taking advantage of" with "violence." *Tounissiet* also recommended adding protection from "institutional violence," referring to violence at the hands of the state (Tounissiet 2017). *Tounissiet's* lobbying efforts on this issue partially led to the inclusion of "political violence" in the legislation. *Tounissiet* focused on political violence based on its leaders' and members' experience under the Ben Ali regime. Tunisia is only one of 10 countries to formally recognize political violence against women. Perhaps if the law had existed before, Islamist women could have been protected.

Tounissiet lobbied elected officials, including *Ennahda*, on GBV before the law passed. According to respondents in parliament and a *Tounissiet* publication, organizational leaders served as expert witnesses on political violence against women before several parliamentary committees tasked with evaluating the draft law lobbied individual parliamentarians and parties to pass the law (Tounissiet 2016). *Ennahda* MP Mehrezia Labidi explained that women's rights organizations, including *Tounissiet*, effectively lobbied for gender reforms through various avenues during one of our interviews. She highlighted their efforts on GBV.

Yes, of course, of course. They [women's rights organizations] contact us as deputies in parliament and invite us to their events. This includes conferences that research institutes and think tanks host or awareness campaigns that the organizations carry out. There, they lobby us. They also send us written briefs. I remember that we received the best information from women's rights organizations on the issue of gender-based violence. ATFD, *Tounissiet*, *Aswat Nissa*, among others.

Tounissiet also briefed foreign allies who had the political capital to pressure the state to recognize political violence as a form of GBV, according to foreign donor respondents. The examples above demonstrate that *Tounissiet* proactively lobbied various political actors on GBV issues.

Building on its GBV efforts and as part of its strategic choice, *Tounissiet* cooperated with secular feminists on violence. *Tounissiet* joined a coalition with secular women's rights organization *la Ligue des Électriciennes Tunisiennes* (LET) when it was in their best interest. *Tounissiet* entered a European donor-sponsored coalition with secular LET in early 2018. To my knowledge, the coalition was the first (if not only) Islamist-secular feminist coalition among civil society actors (Youssef 2021). The coalition partners focused on implementing the GBV law, especially on political violence. Both organizations lobbied to include political violence in the 2017 GBV law, and they remained committed to it. Despite their shared interest in eradicating GBV, their coalition collapsed within the year, according to LET and *Tounissiet* leadership. *Tounissiet* leadership proudly discussed the coalition during fieldwork in early 2018, but neither organization was eager to discuss their partnership when I returned for additional fieldwork in late 2018. *Tounissiet's* vice president Saida* denied the coalition ever existed, even though *Tounissiet's* former president and current vice president Yasmine* was the first to tell me about the coalition months earlier. Later, I understood their reluctance to discuss the coalition when a feminist from an international organization explained that the coalition had collapsed between my two visits to Tunisia. One limitation of a divided women's movement is volatile coalitions. Feminists can have issues of mutual concern, but their differences can prevent them from forming lasting coalitions. Their coalition collapsed when *Ennahda* and its secular coalition partner *Nidaa Tounes* dissolved their coalition. Islamist-secular coalitions collapsed in part because inheritance debates intensified again.

Inheritance Reform: A Red Line throughout the Democratic Transition (2011–2019)

Tounissiet remained active throughout the transition because of its strategic choices, including not challenging conservatives on inheritance. Its leaders' rejection of women's equal access to inheritance reaffirmed the organization's commitment to an Islamist agenda. Women's inheritance is the most divisive issue in the women's

movement today, but the debates predate the Arab Spring (Charrad and Youssef 2021). In 1956, secular president Habib Bourguiba drastically increased women's rights through state feminism and reforming family law under *le Code du Statut Personnel* (CPS). Before the CPS' promulgation, family law was based on a conservative interpretation of Islam (Charrad 2001). The old family law restricted women's rights in all spheres of life, especially regarding inheritance, divorce, and marriage (Charrad 2001). The CPS eliminated polygamy, created the institution of legal divorce where women could initiate divorce for the first time, introduced a legal age of marriage for girls (17), and granted women guardianship rights in the event of the father's death (Charrad 2001, El-Masri 2015). The CPS was progressive in many ways, but it did not reform the inheritance law. *Ennahda's* leader Rached Ghannouchi criticized the CPS in the 1980s. This open criticism intensified secular feminist fears and inspired a campaign to reform inheritance.

Inheritance reform became a feminist issue that secular feminists fought for before, during, and after the Arab Spring. Starting in the 1990s, ATFD and AFTURD advocated for inheritance reform. They sought to divorce it from Islam (Arfaoui 2007). In response, the Islamist coalition *Union des Femmes Libres*, of which *Tounissiet* was a member, issued a statement in 2011 condemning inheritance reform, calling reform a "distraction" that undermined Tunisians' Arab and Muslim identity (BusinessNews 2011). *Tounissiet's* president used similar language almost a decade later during our interview.

After the 2014 elections, *Ennahda* formed a new coalition with the secular political party *Nidaa Tounes*. Secular feminists helped elect *Nidaa Tounes* because *Nidaa Tounes* ran in opposition to *Ennahda*. To secular feminists' surprise, the party that they elected chose to work with the Islamists. Secular feminists continued to pressure secular politicians to reform inheritance. *Nidaa Tounes* responded to their demands. In 2017, secular President Beiji Caid Essebsi established the Rights and Individual Freedoms Commission (COLIBE) on Tunisian Women's Day. The President tasked religious and secular legal scholars on the COLIBE to investigate the compatibility of Tunisian laws with international conventions. In 2018, ATFD held the first inheritance equality rally in the Arab world in front of parliament. ATFD, its allies, and ordinary Tunisian women flooded the streets, chanting and marching downtown for several hours. I observed Islamist opponents on the other side of the street during the rally staging a small protest. Later in 2018, the COLIBE concluded that inheritance inequality did not comply with international conventions or universal human rights. Following the COLIBE's findings, Essebsi presented a draft law to parliament that promoted inheritance reform. Some parliamentary sub-committees debated the draft law, but parliament never discussed the draft law in a general session. *Ennahda* was the primary vocal opponent of the draft law inside the state. *Tounissiet* also opposed it. They believe that most Tunisians favor the existing law as observant Muslims and do not wish to divorce it from Islam, which polling data supports (Gorman 2019, Quillen 2018).

Like *Ennahda*, *Tounissiet's* leadership believes that the state should not reform the inheritance law. *Tounissiet* respondents in this study were all personally against inheritance reform during our interviews and rejected divorcing inheritance law from *Shari'a* (Islamic law). They discussed the inheritance reform debates as marginal, a

political distraction by Essebsi and other secularists. *Tounissiet's* founding member and former *Ennahda* MP Ben Yaghlán said that she was not personally against inheritance reform when I asked her about it. Still, she indicated that the issue was not a priority.

I do not have a personal problem with equality between men and women regarding this issue, but this reform would be in name only. It would be procedural. . . Inheritance is not a priority right now. This issue has economic implications. We should not do it [reform the law] because society's identity is rooted in Islam. Tunisia has an Islamic identity. If we approach this as a political issue, we will not find a pragmatic solution.

Tounissiet founders insisted that the organization did not hold an official position on inheritance reform during interviews. This claim was puzzling because their position became clear to me during fieldwork and analysis. They repeatedly engaged the state and their constituents on the issue. *Tounissiet* recommended that the state put up inheritance reform for a referendum and hold a national dialogue around the issue. National dialogues became popular tools for consensus-building after the Tunisian revolution. *Tounissiet* leaders were confident that "ordinary" Tunisians would reject inheritance reform, according to *Tounissiet's* president Hanen*. *Tounissiet* hosted an inheritance event with legal and religious scholars. The National Endowment for Democracy (NED), *Tounissiet's* largest donor, sponsored the event, according to *Tounissiet* staff. The organization also briefed parliamentary subcommittees on its position after parliament received the draft law in 2018. One of *Tounissiet's* vice presidents, Saida*, said that Tunisians heavily debated the inheritance issue since it was core to their Muslim identity. When I asked her what Tunisians could do to settle the debates, she deferred to experts during our January 2019 interview.

Bring experts who can play a role in facilitating this issue.

Ben Yaghlán agreed with Saida* and went on to say that inheritance could not be debated on its own. Instead, all issues tied to family law should be discussed together.

Experts and Tunisians must discuss inheritance as part of a system of laws [family law] like child support. It is a whole system, not just inheritance.

Who were these experts that Saida* and Ben Yaghlán referred to? The COLIBE issued its final report and recommended reforming the law before the interviews took place. *Tounissiet's* president Hanen* explained that *Tounissiet* did not accept the COLIBE or its report because of the COLIBE's findings on homosexuality and queer individual rights (in addition to the findings on inheritance). Recognizing homosexuality would be a slippery slope that would threaten traditional families, according to Hanen*. This point further cemented my views that *Tounissiet* strategically chose not to alienate its conservative allies. This choice partially allowed its leaders to remain active throughout the transition.

COLIBE was a top-down process that shocked society. The COLIBE recommended that Tunisia must recognize and legalize homosexuality. If you do that, then the next thing they would say is to approve gay marriage. You acknowledge that, and then they will say that we must recognize gay families and allow them to adopt children. All this created a shock.

Inheritance was the most contentious issue that came up during interviews. On the one hand, *Tounissiet* claimed that the organization did not hold an official position. On the other hand, almost every respondent recommended having a national dialogue as the right approach to the issue, which aligned with *Ennahda's* official position that *Ennahda* MPs confirmed during interviews. Therefore, *Tounissiet* held a position that did not challenge conservatives. Their views aligned with the leading Islamist party.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

When discussing women's political participation during a democratic transition, gender politics scholars have mainly focused on how religious and conservative actors marginalize women after the initial years of a democratic transition, despite women's noticeable participation in the revolution and early years of the democratic transition. Yet, Islamist women who belonged to *Tounissiet* in Tunisia had a different experience during democratization. They remained active throughout the democratic transition and provided input on several pieces of draft legislation that increased women's rights.

Scholars have also focused their attention on the relationship between women, Islam, and democratization. They examined how states and Islamist political parties curtailed women's rights during democratization across different contexts. They also focused on Islamist women's participation in politics during democratization. Yet, Islamist women's activism during democratization remains underdeveloped in the literature.

Building on the two bodies of literature, I asked: *how did Tounissiet remain politically active throughout the democratic transition in Tunisia?* Throughout the article, I showed how *Tounissiet* leaders advocated for women's political empowerment without challenging family and sexuality issues within Islam. I argued that Islamist women within *Tounissiet* remained politically active throughout the democratic transition in Tunisia by making strategic choices during different phases of the transition. Their position on gender issues mirrored *Ennahda's*, highlighting the choice not to challenge conservatives, religious clerics, or Islamists. *Tounissiet* allied with secular feminists on violence when the political climate was conducive to secular-Islamist coalitions.

This article contributes to the gender politics literature on women's political participation during democratic transitions and literature on women's rights, democracy, and Islam. First, I have shown how Islamist women remained politically active throughout the democratic transition. Second, I revealed that conservative women promoted women's rights that did not challenge religion during democratization.

Scholars and practitioners who read my work inevitably comment that I must address that conservative women prioritize their political and religious interests over their gendered interests. I concede that *Tounissiet's* agenda did not challenge religious institutions or conservatives. However, it is noteworthy that its leaders set an agenda that was primarily compatible with the democratic transition and universal

human rights standards and adapted throughout the transition. Their efforts helped increase women's rights during democratization. The organization supported increased women's political participation through gender parity (after some resistance) and eliminating violence against women. However, the organization did not support inheritance reform. These choices were strategic and ensured *Tounissiet* survival.

Scholars will likely point to *Tounissiet's* support for women's inheritance inequality to indicate its true nature as "wolves in sheep's clothing." From a liberal feminist perspective based on universal notions of human rights, I concede that *Tounissiet* does not support women's absolute equality and may indeed be seen as a wolf in sheep's clothing. However, identities are fluid and complex. *Tounissiet* is composed of Islamists who promote a particular agenda that empowers Islamists. At the same time, *Tounissiet* is composed of women whose mobilization around women's political empowerment has likely improved Tunisian women's lives, regardless of their political affiliation. In other words, GBV prevention and electoral quotas can empower all Tunisian women, regardless of political or ideological affiliation.

My emphasis on the strategies and choices that a conservative women's rights organization adopted to stay alive during democratization does not suggest a static Tunisian scene either or a representation of all conservative women in Tunisia. Tunisia's political landscape is evolving with fragmented and sometimes colliding voices at the heart of the issue of women's rights and activism, even among conservative women. Some seek to adopt traditional gender roles and limit women's participation in the public sphere, although they are a minority. Others support women's political empowerment but not reforms that challenge traditional interpretations of Islam. Others reject the political process and join Jihadi efforts, often as wives in Iraq and Syria. Some radicals and conservatives view *Tounissiet* and *Ennahda's* agenda as too moderate and co-opted by Western and liberal forces.

Tounissiet's true intentions as an Islamist organization and its leaders' commitment to women's rights and democratization also come into question. While these are important concerns, we are tasked with making claims supported by evidence as sociologists. Based on interviews and observations, I suggest that *Tounissiet* is committed to improving women's lives and empowering Islamists in Tunisia.

While this is one of the few comprehensive studies on conservative women activists operating under the conditions of democratization in the Muslim world, it has limitations. *Tounissiet* is only one organization, and thus it cannot represent all Islamist women's organizations in Tunisia or elsewhere in the Muslim world. Therefore, my aim is not to offer a total model that explains all conservative women's rights organizations' agendas in Tunisia or in general since there is heterogeneity between groups and contexts. Instead, I offer insight into how one Islamist women's rights organization set its agenda during democratization. While the study draws on one case, it provides critical insight into conservative and religious women's mobilization across different contexts, including mature democratic states.

It is important to note that Tunisia is not a consolidated democracy yet, and conservatives and nationalists can still sideline women during the transition. This article focused on Islamist women's mobilization between 2011 and 2019. Since then, reporting on domestic and political violence against women has drastically increased (UN Women 2012, UN Women 2020a, UN Women 2020b). COVID-19, or the

Coronavirus pandemic, has restricted women to the home and made them more vulnerable to domestic violence (Youssef and Yerkes 2021). Similarly, outspoken secular women politicians and intellectuals have faced a conservative backlash, increased threats, and personal attacks (Yerkes and Youssef 2020, Youssef, Aissa and Abdou 2021). The increase in violence in public and private spheres is concerning for feminists and scholars rooting for women's participation in the transition and gender equality in Tunisia. Future studies should continue to track the democratic transition and women's political participation in Tunisia. This will follow whether Tunisia remains conducive to women's substantive political participation and influence.

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