

Unlikely Feminist Coalitions: Islamist and Secularist Women's Organizing in Tunisia

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Abstract

Following the 2010-2011 revolution, Islamist and secularist political parties and women's rights organizations formed coalitions in Tunisia. Nothing of the sort had happened before in Tunisian history. This article considers the conditions that led feminists with different ideological beliefs to create what I call an "unlikely feminist coalition" in Tunisia. I argue that Islamists and secularists can form unlikely feminist coalitions when facing similar threats, working on similar tasks prior to formation of the coalition, the experience of common grievances, and a shared feminist identity. Drawing on the gender politics and social movement literature on coalitions, I suggest that more needs to be understood about unlikely feminist coalitions, especially in the Middle East.

Introduction

Over the past decade, Tunisia experimented with coalitions between Islamists and secularists after decades of profoundly rooted mistrust and suspicion. I identify Islamists as conservative political actors seeking to incorporate elements of Islam in political life and as secularists, liberal political actors who strongly believe in French-style secularism or *laïcité* and the separation of Islam and politics. Before the 2010-2011 revolution, Islamists and secularists were deeply suspicious of one another and rarely cooperated (Buehler 2018). Secularists occupied the presidency and opposition parties similarly formed secularist coalitions. The state marginalized or exiled Islamists, preventing them from forming political coalitions. Yet, secularist and Islamist political parties have formed several short-lived coalitions since the revolution. In 2011, Islamist *Ennahda* and secularist *Ettakatol* and Congress for the Republic

(CPR) formed the first coalition government. They had many disagreements, including on women's rights, that threatened the coalition (Charrad and Zarrugh 2014). Nevertheless, Islamist and secularist women politicians formed a coalition, which helped not only to end a political gridlock but also to pass one of the most gender-equitable constitutions in the world in 2014.

I examine an unlikely feminist coalition: In 2018, secularist women's organization *La Ligue des Électrices Tunisiennes*, or the League of Tunisian Women Voters (LET), and Islamist women's organization *Tounissiet*, or Tunisian Women, briefly worked together on women's political empowerment in a coalition. I call this type of cooperation “unlikely feminist coalitions” because, on the whole, secularists and Islamists have either been in conflict with each other or in a state of grudging mutual acceptance in Tunisia (Boubekeur 2016; Buehler 2018). Secularist feminists, who formed two small women's rights organizations, fought for twenty years to completely divorce women's rights from Islam (Charrad 1997; Charrad and Youssef 2017; Kammoun 2013; Moghadam 2018, 2020; Tchaïcha and Arfaoui 2012). They also formed feminist coalitions with other secularists (Labidi 2007; Moghadam 2005; Tchaïcha and Arfaoui 2017). In contrast, Islamist women were either underground or in exile and did not advocate openly for their agendas, except as student activists in many cases (Debuysere 2013; Gray 2012; Marks 2011; Mhajne and Brandt 2020; Zaki 2018). Following the revolution, for the first time in Tunisia's history some Islamist and secularist women's rights organizations cooperated.

This article investigates the circumstances that lead women's rights organizations with different ideological beliefs to form feminist coalitions. I ask *under what conditions do unlikely feminist coalitions form that transcend ideological differences*. More specifically, *what drove Islamist and secularist women's rights organizations to work together in Tunisia?* I draw on qualitative research methods and interviews, to examine the unlikely feminist coalition that

Islamists and secularists formed. I argue that they were able to form a (short-lived) coalition because they (1) shared a feminist identity; (2) experienced common grievances; (3) faced common threats; and (4) previously worked on similar topics to eradicate gender inequality.

The coalition was *unlikely* because of the deep ideological divisions between Islamists and secularists in Tunisia. Many social movement scholars argue that groups with radically different ideologies cannot form coalitions (Van Dyke and Amos 2017; Van Dyke and McCammon 2010a). Yet, the Tunisian case shows otherwise. Islamist and secularist feminists cooperated, in part, because of their common feminist identity. The coalition was *feminist* because both women's rights organizations (1) identified as feminist during interviews; (2) sought to politically empower women through comprehensive electoral quotas and an end to violence against women during and beyond the democratic transition; and (3) shared gendered grievances based around women's inequality ((LET) 2020; Tounissiet 2020). In this case, two ideologically distinct women's rights organizations decided to work together, defying widespread expectations that their ideological differences would prevent them from cooperating.

Following a discussion of my theoretical framework and methodology, I provide a brief overview of women's rights and activism in Tunisia. I then analyse the coalition, first, by combining the social movement and gender politics coalition literature to show how common grievances, a feminist identity, common threats, and common tasks were precisely the conditions that drove LET and *Tounissiet* to form an unlikely feminist coalition in Tunisia. I then discuss the circumstances that partially led to the coalition's collapse. I conclude by suggesting future directions for research.

Theoretical framework

My analysis draws on the concepts of threat and common tasks (Ayoub 2019; Meyer and Corrigan-Brown 2005; Staggenborg 1986; Van Dyke and McCammon 2010a; Van Dyke and McCammon 2010b) found in the social movement literature on coalitions. I examine how facing common threats and working on common tasks led Tunisian Islamist and secularist feminists to form a coalition. I also draw on the gender politics literature that has shown that shared feminist identity and common grievances as circumstances lead to feminist coalition formation (Arnold 1995; Ferree and Hess 2002; Gilman 2000). I draw on the work of scholars who have considered the following aspects of the Tunisian women's movement: the movement's origins (Kammoun 2013; Labidi 2007; Tchaïcha and Arfaoui 2017), its development (Arfaoui 2007; Charrad and Youssef 2018; Grami 2018; Khalil 2014; Youssef and Mighri 2019), its strategies and priorities (Charrad and Zarrugh 2014; Arfaoui and Moghadam 2016; Zaki 2018) to situate the coalition within the Tunisian women's movement.

Threat and Common Tasks in Social Movement Coalition Building

In asking how Tunisian Islamist and secularist feminists formed a coalition, I consider how Islamist and secularist women formed a coalition in response to common threats and worked on common tasks despite their differences. Some social movement scholars partially define coalitions as agreements between groups that work on a common task (Levi and Murphy 2006; Van Dyke and McCammon 2010b) and face a common threat (McKane and McCammon 2018; Meyer and Corrigan-Brown 2005; Youssef and Mighri 2019). According to social movement scholars, a coalition exists "when two or more social movement organizations work together on a common task" (Van Dyke and McCammon 2010a, xiv). Common tasks such as environmental justice (Shaffer 2001), labor rights (Fantasia 2004; Fantasia and Voss 2004), victims' rights (Rentschler 2011), nuclear disarmament (Barkan 1979; Benford 1993), women's

rights (Guenther 2010; Ferree and Hess 2002; McKane and McCammon 2018) and civil rights (McAdam 1982; Morris 1986) sometimes bring opposing groups together to achieve a shared objective. In Tunisia, Islamist and secularist women worked together to implement both the gender-based violence law and comprehensive gender quotas, two issues that address grievances in both their communities.

In line with theorizing in the political process school, a core claim in my analysis is that political environments and threats, more specifically, affect movement coalitions (Ayoub 2019; Meyer and Corrigan-Brown 2005; Staggenborg 1986). Political process theorists posit that social movement actors often cooperate when they face common threats (Meyer and Corrigan-Brown 2005; Staggenborg 2010; Van Dyke 2003). Common threats include threats to the political or social order, including civil liberties (Chung 2001; Van Dyke 2003). For example, in the United States (U.S.), several social movement actors formed a broad coalition in response to Donald Trump's election in 2016. Black Lives Matter activists, student activists, women's rights activists, and immigrant rights activists mobilized across college campuses immediately after Trump's election (Van Dyke and Amos 2017). Common threats often motivate unlikely partners to work together when they calculate that they cannot independently face a threat. Likewise, Islamist and secularist Tunisian women's rights activists faced two threats—extremism and a return to authoritarianism—that threatened backsliding on women's rights that they gained during the democratic transition. They believed that the spread of extremism or a return to authoritarianism threatened to undermine their agendas and to undo progress on gender reform.

Common Grievances and Shared Feminist Identity in Feminist Coalition Building

Gender politics scholars interested in understanding women's movements cannot merely rely on the social movement literature. An analysis of feminist coalitions is valuable for gender

politics scholars since feminist coalitions embody women's movements' complexities. The feminist literature makes two critical contributions to coalition studies: (1) identifying a broad grievance by all women (Ferree and Hess 2002; Ferree 1995); and (2) recognizing intersectionality as both a strength and challenge for feminist coalitions (Arnold 2011; Bernstein 2010; Coe and Schnabel 2011; Luders 2016; Roth 2010).

However, there remains a gap in the literature on feminist coalitions regarding conservative women's coalitions and conservative and liberal feminist coalitions. Feminist coalition research remains limited to primarily liberal and progressive coalitions. Scholars have examined liberal feminist coalitions mainly in the U.S., highlighting coalition dynamics in democracies (Ferree and Hess 2002; Gilmore 2008; McKane and McCammon 2018; Staggenborg 1986). Others have examined transnational coalitions, which brought feminists in non-democratic contexts into the literature (Basu 2016; Ferree 1995; Ferree and Tripp 2006; Moghadam 2005). Finally, some scholars have examined liberal feminist coalitions in the Tunisian context, which is the most relevant for this study (El-Masri 2015; Grami 2018; Tchaïcha and Arfaoui 2017).

Despite these contributions, conservative women are often absent, limiting researchers to formulating one particular group's worldview while ignoring the other. The studies that consider conservative actors include U.S. Christian movements (Perrin, Roos, and Gauchat 2014; Young 2006); Islamist actors in democratizing states (Marks 2017; Rinaldo 2013; Stepan 2018); conservative women politicians in liberal democracies (Arfini, Ghigi, and Magaraggia 2019); conservative women's movements (Al-Ali 2000; Hafez 2011; McLarney 2015; Roja 2016; Whittier 2018); conservative feminism (Dillard 2005; Manning 1999; Schreiber 2008, 2018; Stacey 1983; Swift 2019), among other groups. These studies broaden the social movement and

feminist literature to include conservatives, but they do not analyze unlikely feminist coalitions that encompass conservatives and liberals. When scholars examine conservative-liberal feminist coalitions, they often do not consider their cooperation as coalition work but rather see it as "collaborative adversarial" work (Whittier 2014, 2018). This study addresses this gap by examining conservative and secularist women's voices in a coalition that coalesced around a common feminist concern: women's political empowerment after the revolution.

Feminists form coalitions when they face common grievances, regardless of which cultural or social factors caused them. For example, feminists worldwide are fighting for gender equality irrespective of the political system in which they live. Women in democratic nations like the U.S. (McCammon and Brockman 2019) and women in monarchies like Morocco (Charrad and Stephan 2019) continue to fight for gender equality. At the same time, feminist coalitions embody the complexities of women's movements and highlight diverse views within the movement. Feminist coalitions underscore the impossibility of conceptualizing a singular feminism, highlighting the diversity of feminist voices within women's movements (Hess & Ferree 1985; Gilmore 2008). Feminists bring multiple consciousnesses into coalitions and broaden the scope of the movement (Gilmore 2008). Thus, feminist coalitions are often intersectional since they recognize multiple and overlapping inequalities (Basu 2016). The recognition of intersectionality as a strength departs from the social movement literature, which sees a lack of common ideology as a weakness and a threat to coalition formation and survival. This finding is critical for understanding how broad-based coalitions that lack a common ideology function.

Methods and Case Selection

Interviews with feminists and state officials and field observations of feminist activities in Tunisia drive this analysis. My analysis was informed by official state documents, including the 2014 constitution and gender legislation passed between 2011 and 2019, activists' documents, including many posted on their Web sites and social media, and by articles in Tunisian newspapers.

I focused my research on LET and *Tounissiet*. I label LET as a secularist organization and *Tounissiet* as an Islamist organization based on their views on inheritance reform—a highly contested issue in Tunisia. LET advocates for inheritance reform, which is currently rooted in Islam. They wish to divorce women's rights from religion and base rights on civil law and universal human rights. *Tounissiet*, on the other hand, rejects reform and supports the status quo because they believe that most Tunisians accept the law in its current form due to their religious beliefs. Their respective views align with many secularists and Islamists in Tunisia. I also base my definitions on how other Tunisian actors have described the two organizations.

Once I identified the feminist coalition between LET and *Tounissiet* as the unit of analysis, I relied on my network to recruit interviewees. I secured interviews with *Tounissiet* after their largest donor, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), referred me and with LET after a former colleague and LET founder introduced me to LET's leadership. I conducted in person interviews with LET and *Tounissiet* leadership and staff and foreign donors in March 2018 while the coalition was active and between December 2018 and April 2019 after the coalition ended. The interviews took place in offices, cafés, and cars in Tunisia and Washington D.C. I interviewed most LET and *Tounissiet* members at their headquarters. I attended separate LET and *Tounissiet* events, training, and workshops. However, I did not participate in any of their joint events since they did not hold any while the coalition was still active during my visits to Tunisia.

I used an interview protocol to conduct semi-structured interviews in Arabic, English, and French and developed a coding scheme after concluding the interviews. A semi-structured approach allowed me to follow up on themes emerging in the interviews while posing a set of questions to all of my informants based on the interview protocol. The interview protocol included questions about their experiences under dictatorship, how they got involved in the women's movement, the composition, membership, agendas of their respective organizations, and their organizations' coalitions. Their joint coalition organically came up during the interviews when I asked about coalitions. Next, I created a coding scheme based on my field notes and interview transcripts. Coalition codes included all coalitions, feminist coalitions, and their joint coalition. Subcodes included ones on the extent of unity and conflict, duplication of efforts, coalition process, working groups, individual and group agendas, the history of relations, resources, and views on coalitions.

Attendance at separate LET and *Tounissiet* workshops, conferences, and meetings and feminist demonstrations in 2018 and 2019 was beneficial not only for the data gathered through observation but also in interviewing activists I introduced myself as an Arab feminist and sociologist studying the women's movement in Tunisia to as many people as possible during workshops and conferences that organizational leadership invited me to. During interviews, activists frequently referred to statements made at meetings or events that I had observed. Since I could not attend joint LET- *Tounissiet* events, I relied more heavily on interviews with LET and *Tounissiet* leadership, other feminist activists, and state officials on the relationship between the two organizations and their participation in the debates on women's rights, which was helpful.

The Women's Movement in Tunisia Today

Women's activism has a long history in Tunisia. In 1989, secularist feminists established two small organizations that fought to separate women's rights and religion (Charrad 1997; Charrad and Youssef 2017; Kammoun 2013; Moghadam 2018, 2020; Tchaïcha and Arfaoui 2012). They formed feminist coalitions with other secularists in Tunisia (Labidi 2007; Moghadam 2005; Tchaïcha and Arfaoui 2017) and with other secularist feminists in the region (Gilman 2007; Labidi 2007; Moghadam 2005; Tchaïcha and Arfaoui 2017). Local and regional women's groups used coalitions, like the *Collectif 95* to share knowledge and exchange effective strategies on gender issues (Tchaïcha and Arfaoui 2017).

Following the revolution, women created over 300 new Islamist and secularist women's rights organizations (Ben Amara 2012). The revolution created a space for Islamist and secularist feminists to participate in the discussions on women's rights during nation-building. This was the first time women's rights were up for debate since the creation of the modern Tunisian state in 1956 (Zaki 2019). After the fall of the secularist Ben Ali regime, Secularist feminists feared the loss of rights they had secured and their fears intensified after Islamists won most seats following the first democratic elections for the Constituent Assembly in October 2011 (Dawisha 2013; Debuysere 2016). For the first time in Tunisia's history, Islamists (not secularists) were in charge. This political shift led most secularist feminists to fear that Islamists would abolish the progressive Personal Status Code (CPS) and amend the constitution to reflect Islamic values (Johansson-Nogués 2013; Tchaïcha and Arfaoui 2012). Their fears were not unfounded since some Islamists called for the practice of polygamy, which secularists banned and or women's return to the home (Charrad and Zarrugh 2014; Moghadam 2013). However, Islamist women sought to carve out space for non-secularist voices within the women's movement (Gray 2012; Mhajne and Brandt 2020; Zaki 2018).

Before the revolution, Islamist women were absent from the women's movement since they lived in exile or engaged in the Islamist political struggle (Buehler 2018; Gray 2013). Secularist political leaders systematically targeted their Islamist opposition, including women, in an attempt to crush them (Yerkes and Youssef 2020). After the revolution, Islamist women sought retribution for past abuses under the secularist Ben Ali regime, fought for political representation, and advocated for eliminating gender-based violence, an issue affecting all Tunisian women (Gray 2012; Yerkes and Youssef 2020). LET and *Tounissiet* were among those who set a precedent for Islamist-secularist cooperation in the women's movement.

While the coalition remained divided along ideological lines, some Islamists and secularists cooperated under the sponsorship of foreign donors. In 2013, Search for Common Ground, UN Women and European donors initiated a dialogue between Islamist and secularist women's rights organizations. According to study respondents from UN Women, donors wanted to address ideological divisions within the women's movement. Secularist and Islamist feminists began to attend meetings facilitated by foreign donors and through these came to recognize some of their common grievances. Fearing backsliding on women's rights, certain Islamists and secularists fought to implement a comprehensive electoral gender quota and eliminate violence against women.

Findings

What explains the capacity of secularist and Islamist women's groups to form at least a temporary coalition? I found that working on a common task, facing similar threats, sharing a feminist identity, and having similar grievances helped LET and *Tounissiet* to come together. The two organizations worked on common tasks, such as gender-based violence and electoral parity. They feared backsliding on women's rights, shared a collective feminist-activist identity

and had common grievances regarding gender-based violence. These allowed them to overcome their differences, if only for a year.

An Unlikely Feminist Coalition Emerges

Immediately following the revolution, LET and *Tounissiet* emerged as two distinct women's political rights organizations. Five to ten women from activist and non-activist backgrounds created their respective organizations to empower women. They separately engaged the state on women's political participation, gender-based violence, and inheritance equality. In early 2018, a European donor facilitated a coalition that LET and *Tounissiet* participated in. It is possible that LET and *Tounissiet* were attracted to the coalition because of the resources that they stood to gain by working with a foreign donor as both organizations drew on donor funds to sustain their organizations. However, it is unlikely that they risked working together only to attract additional donor resources.

The coalition focused on electoral gender parity and gender-based violence. *Tounissiet* and LET's official relationship began in early 2018 and ended when LET left the coalition later that same year. After LET's departure, *Tounissiet* served as an expert witness before parliament on gender parity in the 2018 municipal elections.

Working on Violence Against Women and Gender Quotas

During their short-lived coalition, LET and *Tounissiet* worked on two issues fueled by their common grievances as women: (1) implementing the law to eliminate violence against women and (2) implementing a comprehensive gender quota. Tunisian women's organizations regard violence against women as a social problem that impacts *all* women's lives. According to a 2010 survey conducted by the Tunisian National Office of Family and Population, at least 47% of women ages 18-64 experience one or more forms of violence in Tunisia (Arfaoui and

Moghadam 2016, 642). Following the revolution, feminists worked independently, in coalitions, and with the state on violence. LET and *Tounissiet* also lobbied for a strong law to eliminate violence against women, succeeding in 2017 when the state passed a comprehensive law that included protection against political violence, in addition to recognizing marital rape.

LET and *Tounissiet* also engaged the state on electoral gender parity and pushed to implement a comprehensive parity law. Under Ben Ali, women regime loyalists had benefited from a gender quota but after the revolution, the new government removed the quota. Women's organizations lobbied to restore electoral quotas and succeeded in securing a comprehensive quota system (horizontal and vertical parity) that ensured women got elected if their parties secured more than one seat during elections. In vertical quota systems, parties must win two or more seats for women to participate in politics since men are placed at the top of political lists. When a party won only one seat, it has gone to a man. According to activist respondents and their foreign partners, LET and *Tounissiet* served as election observers, trained women to run for office, and educated women on the importance of voting, especially during democratic transitions. They continued to do that work together in the coalition.

LET partnered with the Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE) to register Tunisians for the 2011, 2014, 2018, and 2019 elections, according to a senior policy adviser at UN Women. Created in 2011, the ISIE is tasked with implementing gender quotas, organizing elections, and monitoring elections in Tunisia. LET created a gender election observation guide that the ISIE [election committee] used to study, apply, and practice during the elections. It documented violations during the elections and gave the ISIE their recommendations. ISIE adopted the recommendations and things changed for the better after the 2011 elections, disaggregating data by Gender for the first time.

Tounissiet also engaged the state on gender parity after the revolution. They worked with the Ministry of Women and the ISIE on gender parity before the elections, according to *Tounissiet's* other Vice President *Saida. *Tounissiet* also worked closely with the municipalities on implementing a comprehensive electoral gender quota ahead of the 2018 elections. *Tounissiet's* Executive Director Mona* explained that *Tounissiet* had a gender parity project that aimed to politically rural women before they worked with LET

We work on women's political rights. Women's empowerment in the public sphere and political sphere... For example, we've been working with municipal governments. We worked with them before the [2018] elections. We worked in the interior and rural areas. We selected 50 women from agricultural areas—25 from Tabraba and 25 from Sidi Thabet. We used our l'AECID [foreign donor] project to work with them for a year and a half from 2015 to 2017

Fear of Backsliding on Women's Rights

While they worked tirelessly to empower women politically, LET and *Tounissiet* feared backsliding on women's rights, albeit for different reasons. Secularist feminists feared Islamist domination and Islamist feminists feared a return to repression from the Ben Ali era when they were not allowed to occupy space in politics or civil society. To both groups, a return to authoritarianism could lead to increased violence. While they fear different actors, these common threats helped them form a coalition.

The state used various tactics to scare Islamist women, such as rape threats, forced veil removals, and isolation *before the revolution*. *Tounissiet's* President Hanen* described how the state used her politically active Islamist fiancé's mother and sister to silence him.

The security forces would search her house at night and threaten to rape her daughter.

They punished her by threatening her daughter, who was at the time a single girl.

Hanen* explained how the state pressured her to remove the veil after the state imprisoned her fiancé for his Islamist views.

After the crisis passed, I returned to university. The police came to my house [in 1993] and told me, "you have to remove the veil, and we will stop monitoring you." That is what happened...It was the first time I felt like I was not being monitored. Do you understand? I changed jobs, and I moved to a new apartment that was farther away. I felt like I was safe.

Hanen* also described the extreme isolation and loneliness that she experienced under the dictatorship. Isolation was likely a state tactic used to discourage collective identity formation and mobilization.

At that time [during the 1990s under Ben Ali], there was no keeping in touch with others.

There was no room for free speech. Everyone kept to themselves. Their families. Their children. Their husband. Once the [2010-2011] revolution came, everything changed.

Tounissiet also worked on political violence early on during the transition, according to *Tounissiet* founder and former *Ennahda* Member of Parliament (MP) and Deputy Minister Amira*

We [*Tounissiet*] were effective, meaning on how women can stand up to political violence and electoral violence. We excelled in those areas, meaning *Tounissiet* produced two films. One film was about transitional justice, and the second was about combatting gender-based electoral and political violence.

Secularist women experienced violence at the hands of emboldened Islamists and Salafist extremists *after the revolution*. Extremists often threatened outspoken secularist feminists and vandalized their property and businesses. They targeted outspoken secularist feminist scholar Amel Grami by sending her death threats and allegedly using their political connections to ban her from Egypt. In 2013, Egyptian security forces detained Grami at the Cairo Airport and deported her, according to Grami. During that time, the Freedom and Justice Party, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's political wing, and *Ennahda's* sister organization ruled Egypt. When I asked LET President Maha* why she established LET, she explained that Islamists threatened women's rights after the revolution.

In 2011 we started hearing voices calling for polygamy. We started hearing voices demanding women return home and leave their jobs for [male] youths who are unemployed. We started hearing voices that said, "women! You have a lot of rights! It's time to review the rights for everyone, including the Tunisian woman's rights!" so we started to fear for our rights.

Two secularist feminists—former ATFD President and Member of Parliament (MP) Bouchra Bel Haj Hmida and former ATFD President and presidential adviser Saida Garrache—received death threats. . Both Garrache and Hmida explained that men inflict political violence on women when threatened. In some instances, extremists physically threatened secularist feminists, something Tunisian feminists never imagined before the rise of political Islam in

Tunisia. For instance, Salafists vandalized the pharmacy of LET founder Salwa*, which forced her to shut down her practice but motivated her to participate in the women's movement.

In March 2011, Salafists and *Ennahda* members attacked my pharmacy and threatened me directly because of an ad of a woman in the window. The woman was wearing shorts. They claimed that I was provoking them. I closed down my pharmacy and realized that I feared for women's rights. I feared for the fate of my country. This pushed me to help create LET.

LET President Maha* was concerned about increased political violence. She explained LET's contribution to the debate on political violence in Tunisia.

It started with LET, by the way, the concept [political violence], and we included it in the law. No one was really convinced of it when *Les Femmes Démocrates* [ATFD] and AFTURD and we started as a coalition talking about political violence, they said: No. What's this? It's not. So, we started talking about it and making an example of it and talking about the concept in itself, and we convinced them, the Ministry of Women and it was included in the law and hopefully.... we voted. It was a LET product...the political violence. At least, I mean, in the law, and now we are trying to make observatory about this concept.

Sharing a Feminist Identity and Grievances

While common tasks and common threats partially explain how an unlikely coalition emerged, they ignore the role of gender. Despite their ideological differences, LET and *Tounissiet* shared a collective identity and common grievances as women, activists, and feminists, which helped them form the unlikely feminist coalition. Many LET founders were immersed in liberal and Tunisian feminist thought and engaged in activism, while *Tounissiet* founders engaged in student organizing in response to regime repression against Islamists and

were well-versed in Islam and Islamic jurisprudence. Despite their different motivations for becoming activists, founders from both organizations gained experience organizing under authoritarianism, which helped them mobilize after the revolution.

LET Vice President Sawsan* is a well-respected trade union member who had decades of organizing experience before starting LET. Similarly, LET President Maha* explained how *Club Taher Haddad* and secularist feminist figures and writings influenced her, especially as a student. When I asked Maha* if she became an activist after the revolution, she explained that her activism predated the revolution and was ingrained in her.

I was always an activist..always keeping up, staying active, present, and aware in this [women's rights] field and others. *Tounissiet* founders became activists during the Ben Ali era. *Tounissiet* President Hanen* was a student activist and condemned authoritarianism, especially during one of the severe crackdowns against Islamists in the 1990s. Other Islamist feminists had experience with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as well. *Tounissiet* Executive Director Mona* has had experience running NGOs since the 1980s. Her knowledge helped the organization build capacity during its early years.

I have been a civil society activist for years, since the 1990s..1980s..since I was a student.

I worked for ten years in an NGO that was among the first to raise awareness and engage in intellectual thought... from 2004 to 2015. I was an NGO administrator then *Tounissiet* invited me to join them.

Feminism is another collective identity that LET and *Tounissiet* share. During interviews, all respondents identified as feminists without hesitation. In Tunisia, feminism appears less politically polarizing among women activists perhaps than in other contexts, in part because of

Tunisia's long history of progressive women's rights and activism. LET Vice President Sawsan* confirmed that she was a feminist, and that feminism was common, given the historical legacy of women's rights in Tunisia.

Of course, I identify as a feminist. I am convinced by everything that we do at the organization [LET] Of course, feminist. We are convinced of feminism. Here in Tunisia, we don't have... We had women's rights before, under Bourguiba [first President of Tunisia], so it is not something strange to us. It is something that is found in our food and water, meaning women's rights are untouchable.

Funders also played a role here, bringing secularist and Islamist women together after the revolution around their shared identity as women. During the early years of the transition, UN Women and Search for Common Ground invited LET, *Tounissiet*, and other women's organizations to join a workshop. According to respondents, these workshops were the first attempt at coalition work among secularist and Islamist feminists after the revolution. Search for Common Ground aimed to bridge the ideological gap between groups and convince them to work together during the democratic transition, according to a secularist feminist respondent. *Tounissiet* Vice President Yasmin* explained that once the participants discussed their differences and knew one another, they realized their differences were insignificant. She explained that their collective identity and common grievance around violence helped them recognize their similarities.

There aren't disagreements in women's civil society; for example, we cooperate on the anti-violence law.

While ideology divides the women's movement in Tunisia, it also strengthens it. LET's and *Tounissiet's* different ideological orientations gave them access to many political actors,

which worked in their favor since it allowed them to reach a wider audience and build broader coalitions with political actors. While LET and *Tounissiet* lobbied all political parties within the government, *Tounissiet* aligned with *Ennahda*, given their shared ideology, and LET allied with *Nidaa Tounes* and other secularist parties. *Tounissiet* and LET could thus help to build bipartisan political support for progressive gender legislation on gender quotas and violence against women.

A Coalition Collapses

While the unlikely feminist coalition greatly benefited from intersectionality, different identities and deep ideological divisions ended the short-lived coalition. The coalition partners did not agree on the reasons behind the coalition's collapse. *Tounissiet* respondents claimed that LET left the coalition because it had a disagreement with the donor. LET respondents did not corroborate those claims, pointing instead to external political events and the high costs of remaining in the coalition after the broad government coalition at the political level collapsed.

During interviews in March of 2018, coalition members openly discussed their cooperation. However, by December of 2018, they refused to acknowledge one another or the coalition. *Tounissiet's* Executive Director Mona* about *Tounissiet's* adversaries was the only *Tounissiet* member to criticize secularist feminists openly.

We only have an issue with radical leftist women's organizations...*Femmes Democrats*, l'AFTURD, LET...LET won't work with us. They call us Islamists.

Some of LET's and *Tounissiet's* leadership even denied the coalition's previous existence after its collapse. Yet the coalition was no secret because feminists within the women's movement knew about it. For instance, a Tunisian feminist I met in 2019, who worked for an

international non-governmental organization (NGO) confirmed the coalition's existence. She explained that LET refused to discuss the coalition because secularists (in general) chose to distance themselves from "those Islamists" and no longer wanted to be associated with them.

So *why did* the coalition end? There is no obvious reason. However, its members' struggle with (1) external political circumstances and (2) high costs of remaining in a coalition. In part, the coalition was encouraged by, external forces, including donors and political parties, influenced coalition formation and collapse. As noted above, LET and *Tounissiet* came together under a common European grant, which added pressure to their collaboration because their funding was tied to their cooperation. More important, however, were changes in the domestic political context. The broad government coalition collapsed in 2018 and the feminist coalition dissolved shortly after.

Tunisian politics became deeply polarized after the *Ennahda* - *Nidaa Tounes* coalition at the political level collapsed in late 2018. This development likely caused a domino effect in the women's movement since the feminist coalition formed when politics were less divisive.

One major politically divisive issue that partially ended the political coalition is inheritance reform—a feminist issue. In November 2018, secularist President Beji Caïd Essebsi presented parliament with draft legislation to reform inheritance law, which is currently rooted in Islam, or *Shari'a* law. Parliament, which Islamist *Ennahda* dominated, refused to review the draft legislation and postponed voting. The draft legislation died in parliament. LET, and *Tounissiet's* views fall in line with the two political parties and their views on inheritance.

The coalition dissolved when the costs of staying in a coalition became too high. Initially, LET calculated that the benefits of partnering with *Tounissiet* outweighed the costs. However,

the renewed (and intensified) debates over inheritance reform may have made the costs outweigh the benefits. In March 2018, secularist feminists organized the first-ever inheritance equality march in the Arab World. Islamists staged a counter-protest across the street from secularists downtown in front of parliament. LET paid a high price for agreeing to work with Islamists while other secularist women's organizations were (and continue to be) suspicious of *Tounissiet* and Islamists in general.

After the coalition's collapse, LET continued to work with other secularist feminist organizations on violence against women and inheritance reform. *Tounissiet* quickly moved on to another secularist feminist partner, *Aswat Nissa*, after the coalition collapsed. *Tounissiet's* Executive Director Mona* told me about their potential collaboration, which is outside the scope of this article, in early 2019.

Yesterday I spoke with *Aswat Nissa*. It's a women's rights organization in Tunisia. We said that we would work together on vertical parity in the elections law. If there is work to be done, we do not have a problem and will work with them.

Conclusion

The literature on feminist coalitions has often focused exclusively on liberal feminist coalitions. Scholars have paid less attention to conservative women or unlikely feminist coalitions. An important question, however, is under what conditions do women form unlikely coalitions.

Focusing on an unlikely feminist coalition that emerged in the post-revolution period in Tunisia, I have argued that Islamists (conservatives) and secularists (liberals) formed a coalition because they faced similar threats, shared common grievances, and shared a feminist identity. As feminists, they feared potential backsliding on women's issues, including the reversal of

progressive gender legislation that they helped pass after the revolution. The formation of the coalition was also facilitated by the fact that prior to the coalition they had been working on common tasks, notably violence against women and gender quotas.

I suggest that this unlikely feminist coalition challenges assumptions that women from different ideological backgrounds cannot cooperate. These women led two new women's rights organizations that emerged after the revolution and carved out a space for themselves in the women's movement. I cannot claim that my findings apply to all feminist coalitions nor that they can be transferred to other countries. However, this study opens an avenue for further research on liberal-conservative feminist cooperation, especially in Tunisia and other Middle East and North African (MENA) countries. In the broader MENA, women have to continuously negotiate over women's rights with each other and with the state (Charrad and Stephan 2019). Scholars should further explore these relationships. Scholars have already documented similar coalitions before the Arab Spring in Egypt (Singerman 2006), Morocco (Moghadam and Gheytanchi 2010), and Jordan (see the works of Janine Clarke and Jillian Schwedler). Yet, much remains to be understood about the nature of such coalitions since the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring provided previously marginalized political actors, including Islamists, new political opportunities to participate in politics and to potentially influence state discourses around women's rights. Further analysis of coalitions between secularist feminists and newly empowered Islamist feminists since the Arab Spring would further enrich the MENA social movement and gender politics bodies of literature.

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