
Politik und Gesellschaft des Nahen Ostens

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Die Reihe beschäftigt sich mit aktuellen Entwicklungen und Umbrüchen in Nordafrika, dem Nahen Osten, der Golfregion und darüber hinaus. Die politischen, sozialen und ökonomischen Dynamiken in der Region sind von hoher globaler Bedeutung und sie strahlen intensiv auf Europa aus. Die Reihe behandelt die gesamte Bandbreite soziopolitischer Themen in der Region: Veränderungen in Konfliktmustern und Kooperationsbeziehungen in Folge der Arabischen Revolten 2010/11 wie etwa Euro-Arabische und Euro-Mediterrane Beziehungen oder den Nahostkonflikt. Auf nationaler Ebene geht es um Themen wie Reform, Transformation und Autoritarismus, Islam und Islamismus, soziale Bewegungen, Geschlechterverhältnisse aber auch energie- und umweltpolitische Fragen, Migrationsdynamiken oder neue Entwicklungen in der Politischen Ökonomie. Der Schwerpunkt liegt auf innovativen politikwissenschaftlichen Werken, die die gesamte theoretische Breite des Faches abdecken. Eingang finden aber auch Beiträge aus anderen sozialwissenschaftlichen Disziplinen, die relevante politische Zusammenhänge behandeln.

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Anna Antonakis

Renegotiating Gender and the State in Tunisia between 2011 and 2014

Power, Positionality,
and the Public Sphere

With a foreword by Prof. Dr. Cilja Harders

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Anna Antonakis
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*In memory of Sofiane Chourabi, journalist and friend.
And Noura Borsali, feminist historian, who was so kind as to participate in this
study.*

Foreword Cilja Harders

Tunisia's transformation is often taken to be model for a peaceful, negotiated transition from dictatorship to democracy, the last and only hope of the "Arab Spring" which all too soon turned into an "Arab winter". Since 2011, women's rights have been a highly visible, controversial and highly mobilizing issue in Tunisia – again leading to the perception, that the Tunisian transition is an outstanding example of emancipatory gender politics in a conservative context. This is not entirely wrong, claims Anna Antonakis, but it is definitely not the full story of the transformation. What is more, these narratives do not do justice to the struggles of women and the many shortcomings and pitfalls of a transition processes.

In this highly accessible and rich book, Anna Antonakis creates a multivocal assemblage of feminist and women's discourses and practices in the turbulent times since 2011. She successfully deconstructs those academic and public narratives, which depict the political dynamics in Tunisia between 2011 and 2014 as a simple ideological struggle between "secularists" and "islamists". Instead, she shows how, among others, women's rights and the state feminist legacy are used by actors of transformation and actors of restauration. Gender issues were indeed an arena and a battle field in the Tunisian transformation. But, as Anna Antonakis shows, the smoke of these battles tends to marginalize many other grievances, which drove the revolution. First and foremost, these concern structural marginalization of the "hinterland", socio-economic issues and a non-declared class-struggle.

In her innovative conceptual framework, Anna Antonakis infuses the quite Eurocentric concepts of the public sphere with a thorough analysis of power structures. Among others, she proposes the compelling concept of "dissembled secularism" in order to understand the highly ambivalent features of state feminism under Bourgiba and Ben Ali. This legacy fed into the production of a "stable patriarchal regime of consensus", which marks the Tunisian political system today. This system is based on an elite-centered politics of ideological polarization as driving force of the transformation process. In this polarization women's right's narratives were used time and again in order to accentuate ideological

difference at least on a discursive level, while on the ground, secularists and islamists tend to share rather conservative gender perceptions. As a result, voices arguing for fundamental changes of the existing gender-regime were sidelined. At the same time, issues of class, inequality and marginalization were silenced by both camps and women's rights activism was caught between a rock and a hard place in many of the struggles, Antonakis looks at.

This exciting, insightful and thoroughly thought-through book offers a critical and nuanced evaluation of the impact of feminist action on the gender regime of post-revolutionary Tunisia. Tunisian feminists, Antonakis argues, brought indeed substantial changes to a hitherto very limited and controlled public sphere. Still, the differences between the pre-revolutionary and the post-revolutionary gender system are smaller than most women activists would have hoped for.

Berlin, November 2018

Cilja Harders

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Anna Antonakis,

Berlin, December 2018

Preface

In the year 2011, a “revolutionary spirit” contesting established neoliberal economic and hegemonic norms took grip of the world. In 2010 and 2011, men and women in the streets of Tunisia chanted the call for change expressed in the slogan “Work, Freedom and National Dignity!” (“*Choghl, hourria, karama watanaya!*”) (Azouzi, 2013, p. 22), inspiring a global uprising in 2011. The demands were communicated under various oppressive conditions in wider national and international public spheres in demonstrations and blockades, poems and posts. Their struggle included different demands: social and economic justice, freedom of expression and the elimination of arbitrary state practices and corruption. But specifically, the uprisings in Tunisia and other countries across the region have – at least initially – carried the hope for a “revolution of women” and a renewal of the gendered social contract (Wahba, 2016, p. 67) as well.

This revolutionary spirit addressing inequalities went far beyond the narrative of the “Arab Spring” that originated in Tunisia but seemed to include the 99% of different parts of the world. Today, it appears that right-wing and fascist ideologies and conservative backlashes have channeled and co-opted resentments and have been garnished with racist and sexist ideologies. On the other hand, we are witnessing an increasing feminist awakening, expressed in states’ foreign policy agendas or self-mediated practices by women.

Before and after the uprisings, negotiations around women’s rights have been an instrument to mark the boundaries between secular and religious political camps, obscuring the actual struggles over state power. (Charrad, 2008, p. 111; Gray, 2011, p. 285; Marks, 2013, p. 224, Khalil, 2014, p. 196). However, scholars in these fields have not yet fully traced the different processes allowing gender to become a purely discursive marker for cultural-political differentiations in the public sphere. While this essential literature has exposed the centrality of gender in its instrumental function for nation building, power politics and (popular) mobilizations, it often remains focused on capitals and negotiations around legislation and institutions only.

The question of how the mere subject of feminism is negotiated in media industries, political institutions but also in everyday interactions and self-mediated practices online has not been addressed. Because of this, we lack understanding on global anti-feminist mobilization and its rise in popularity in recent

years. I expect this research to contribute to further understanding on the restoration of authoritarian structures and conservative backlashes by exploring emancipatory and inclusive negotiations around gender in different publics and their geopolitical implications.

I started developing this study in 2012, building on two distinct research endeavors. In 2009, I undertook field research in Tunisia on the situation of secular feminist organizations under authoritarian rule. I sought to combine this interest in feminist activism with my research on the dynamics of online and offline mobilizations during the “revolutionary period” from December 20th, 2010 until the ousting of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali on January 14th, 2011. I argued that counter-publics created online could break the information monopoly of the hegemonic authoritarian publics sphere in Tunisia. Still euphoric about the role of social media in the process and the newly gained freedom of expression, I planned to critically investigate the use of social media by women in particular to enlarge their space of activism and break taboo issues in feminist publics. Even though I was aware of digital divides, that is the unequal access to Internet infrastructure, I soon discovered that an investigation of only online participatory practices of women’s activists would rely on the core assumption of a modernist democratization paradigm incorporating a technological optimism. I see the danger of glossing over the actual power struggles taking place in the country that were de facto determining the aims and interests of the activists.

My previous research in Tunisia before the uprisings in 2009 was both the empirical and thus conceptual inception of this project. The change I experienced from a highly controlled public where even speaking the name of the president was problematic to new vocal expressions of the many has furthermore sensitized me to state feminist politics as a powerful instrument for domestic and foreign politics alike, because women’s rights in Tunisia have often been singled out and exploited to “whitewash” the regime’s control over the public sphere.

In the research perspective proposed here, “positionality”, amongst others, aims to shed light on the producer of knowledge and does so with regards to gender relations in different societies. Becoming aware of my own privilege and bias throughout the project, in its conceptualization, the interview situations, as well as the writing process, was certainly not easy. I had received a three-year research grant from HBS enabling me to do this project. I’m aware that Tunisian feminists and scholars do not have this privilege. Along that line, I claim that we are lacking an “outsider’s perspective” that would give new insights to identity struggles and political co-optations within the feminist movement in Western societies. In times of patriarchal and misogynist backlashes, true transnational feminist solidarity becomes more crucial than ever. In this context, it was very helpful to read Angela Davis’ chapter on her visit to Egypt and the response of Egyptian feminist scholar Sara Salem on the possibilities of transnational femi-

nist solidarity (Salem, 2013). Furthermore, I'm thankful to the numerous commentators and friends who pointed out problematic issues on different levels of this study.

In the course of this study, I temporarily acquired a position in the German public sphere from which I could analyze the situation of the policy process that was still ongoing in Tunisia and acquired symbolic power which is "constructed as the power to define how the social world is and should legitimately be ordered" (Bourdieu, 1995, p. 38). I believe that conscious usage of the resources and knowledge matter and are worthy of scrutiny. Here, the idea of "intellectual activism" that has been laid out by Patricia Hill Collins becomes crucial, and bears the empowering idea that everybody is able to make a change and shift power relations with their own means:

"As people push against, step away from, and shift the terms of their participation in power relations, the shape of power relations changes for everyone. Like individual subjectivity, resistance strategies and power are always multiple and in constant states of change" (Collins, 2000, p. 275).

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List of Abbreviations¹

AFTURD	Association de la Femme Tunisienne pour la Recherche et le Développement, Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development
ANC	Assemblée Nationale Constituante, National Constituent Assembly
ATFD	Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates, Tunisian Association of Democratic Women
CAWTAR	Center of Arab Women for Training and Research
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination against All Discrimination against Women
CPR	Congrès pour la République, Congress for the Republic
CREDIF	Centre de Recherches, d'Etudes, de Documentation et d'Information sur la Femme, Centre for Research, Studies, Documentation and Information on Women
CSP	Code du Statut Personnel, Personal Status Code
FSN	Front du Salut National, National Salvation Front
HIROR	Haute Instance pour la Réalisation des Objectifs de la Révolution, des Réformes Politiques et de la Transition Démocratique, Higher Commission for the Fulfillment of Revolutionary Goals, Political Reform, and Democratic Transition
IRIE	Instance Régionale Indépendante pour les Elections, the Independent Regional Authority for Elections
ISIE	Instance Supérieure Indépendante pour les Elections, the Independent High Authority for Elections
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender
LTDH	Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme, Tunisian Human Rights League
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MIT	Mouvement Islamiste Tunisienne, The Movement of Islamic Tendency
PDP	Parti Démocratique Progressiste, Democratic Progressive Party

1 In this study, mainly French acronyms will be employed.

POCT	Party Ouvrier Communiste Tunisien, Communist Worker's Party
RCD	Rassemblement Constitutionnelle Démocratique, Democratic Constitutional Rally
UDC	Union des Diplômés Chômeurs, Union of Unemployed Academics
UGET	Union Générale des Etudiants Tunisiens, General Union of Students of Tunisia
UGTT	Union Générale Tunisienne de Travail, Tunisian General Labor Union
UPL	Union Patriotique Libre, Free Patriotic Union's Party, al-Itihad al-Watany al-Hurr
UTICA	Union Tunisienne de l'Industrie, du Commerce et de l'Artisanat, The Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handcraft
UWAW	Uprisings of Women in the Arab World
WSIS	World Summit on the Information Society

Note on Language, Transliteration and Citation

Throughout this book, I have adopted a simplified transliteration scheme. Where there exists a common English or French spelling of proper names – most notably in the case of party or city names like Ennahda or ElKef – I have opted for the most commonly used spelling.

In the following, quotes from the interviews will be highlighted by indentations; they have been translated into English by the author. Original quotes from the interviews over one line, will have a separate, indented paragraph, to highlight the respondents' contribution to this book. All other quotes from literature over four lines will be indented and *petit*.