



أنداء العالم العربي
enda inter-arabe

Revue de presse



Women are reshaping Tunisia's political landscape

THE WINDSOR STAR

27-08-2013

Despite the recent political chaos in the country, Tunisia cannot be written off as a potentially failed state. Behind the scenes, citizens - especially women - are keeping Ennahdha, the Islamic party ruling in a coalition with two secular parties, from slipping into extremism.

The country was thrown into turmoil late last month after the second assassination of an opposition leader by a suspected hardline Salafist. Mohammed Brahmi, a member of the National Constituent Assembly and member of the Popular Movement Party, was, according to Interior Minister Loutfi Ben Jeddou, killed by the same weapon used on Feb. 6 to kill Chokri Belaid. Both opposition leaders, who were strong critics of the ruling Islamist Ennahdha Party, were part of the same leftist coalition.

On Friday, opposition members rejected dialogue with Ennahdha, saying the government must resign before any negotiations begin. Opposition leaders say they are pushing ahead with plans for a rally Saturday outside the National Constituent Assembly building in Bardo, a suburb of Tunis. The rally will kick off a week of protests that organizers are calling "Rahil," or departure week.

International Women's Day this year saw hundreds of gatherings to celebrate the accomplishments of Tunisian women and the continuing fight for equal rights. La Presse, one of Tunisia's key French newspapers, highlighted the invaluable role women have been playing in the development of post-revolution Tunisia.

The World Social Forum, held in Tunis during the spring, was mostly organized by women from the Tunisian Association for Democratic Women, the Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development and the Tunisian League for Human Rights.

Today, more women than men are graduating from Tunisian universities and women occupy posts in politics, academia and business as well as in dynamic non-government organizations (NGO).

In the elected National Constituent Assembly, 26 per cent of the members are women.

Women's rights legislation introduced in 1956 by Habib Bourguiba, the first post-independence president, gave Tunisian women a head start in the Arab world.

And when Ennahdha proposed Shariah law as the basis for a new constitution, a huge protest by women led to the party's withdrawal of the proposal. As issues arise, protest groups - including female judges, lawyers, doctors and leaders of technology companies - march peacefully to effect change. Here are some of their stories: Essma Ben Hamida Eager to break barriers, Ben Hamida is a leading proponent of social and economic justice for women in post-revolution Tunisia.

With her husband, Michael Cracknell, she directs Enda Inter-Arabe, a Tunisian microcredit organization that since 1995 has helped lift more than 400,000 clients, mostly women, out of poverty through loans for businesses as well as financial and business training. She responded to the country's unemployment crisis by offering a special loan program to young people for enterprises larger than most microcredit schemes. "Over 2,000 entrepreneurs, half of them women, took loans for hairdressing, dressmaking, restaurants, grocery stores, pizza shops, taxis and for call centres, computer shops and daycare/tutoring services," she said.

To promote democratic practices, she works with other NGOs and offers civic education coaching to Enda clients in local communities. "We want women to be aware of their rights, to get on voters lists, for example, and learn about the policies of the various parties."

A former international journalist specializing in development issues, Ben Hamida is also a founding member of Sanabel, a Cairo-based microfinance network of 83 members from 12 Arab countries.

In her view, the Arab world will be saved by its women.

Ben Hamida graduated from a Tunisian university and supported herself by working as a freelance journalist. Later, she became United Nations bureau chief in New York for a Tunisian news agency. After writing for a Rome-based wire service, she returned to Tunisia to launch the country's first microfinance institution.

In 2009, Enda Inter-Arabe was ranked No. 21 of the top 100 microfinance institutions in the world. In 2010, Ben Hamida was named the year's social entrepreneur at the World Economic Forum for the Middle East and North Africa.

Essia Nciri The revolution may not have delivered the changes Tunisians dreamed the government would provide, but behind the scenes it has spurred support for the marginalized from women like Nciri, who runs Enda Inter-Arabe Microfinance's branch in Sidi Bouzid, birthplace of the Arab Spring.

Nciri, 32, knows about poverty. Her mother supported a family of seven by raising animals when her father died after a long illness.

After graduating from university with a degree in multimedia, she began working as a credit agent in 2005 when the branch first opened. She supervises 17 loan officers handling 7,000 clients.

"I saw the branch as a baby that had to be nurtured because of the 20-to 30-per-cent poverty here in the city and the 40-per-cent poverty in the rural areas," she said.

"In surrounding villages, I went door-to-door working with farm women needing loans to raise animals and to grow fruits and vegetables.

"During the revolution, some clients faced enormous problems, but we didn't abandon them," she said.

One of them was Zaynub Ajmi, 39, mother of two boys ages 11 and seven. "Nciri," she said, "saved me from economic collapse. "One night during the revolution," she said, "thieves came into my shop and stole stock and money for a total of 4,000 dinars or about \$2,600. "Enda came to the rescue with a 'disaster' loan to relaunch my enterprise and at a low interest rate that allowed me to quickly pay it off."