

#Manich Msamaha: Anti-Corruption is a Feminist Agenda

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Ikram Ben Said is a Tunisian feminist and founder of Aswat Nisaa, a Tunisian organization working on women's political participation and advocating for gender-sensitive public policies.



Brief Analysis



October 18, 2017

On September 13, the Tunisian parliament adopted a highly controversial “reconciliation in the administrative field” bill. The law offers amnesty to public officials involved in financial corruption under the Ben Ali regime (1987-2011) and is a lead initiative of Tunisian President Beji Caid Essebsi.

On September 14, Essebsi abolished a 1973 Ministry of Justice directive which had prohibited marriage between a Tunisian Muslim woman and a non-Muslim man. While the latter is a remarkable step toward bringing legislation in line with both the constitution and international standards, the former is a major setback for a country that already suffers from severe corruption and a culture of nepotism.

Some argue that this is your typical carrot-and-stick approach, while others have called it two steps forward, one step back. This is déjà vu politics, manipulating public opinion and mainstream media in the West by playing “the woman card” and pretending that Tunisia is the most progressive country in the Middle East and North Africa. Only rule of law, accountability, and transparency can ensure social justice for all, women and men alike.

Our President does not understand that women were on the front lines of the revolution and that he cannot use old tactics in a new era. Our President does not understand that there is a new generation of intersectional feminists who can embrace and applaud progressive social measures while also demanding complete rule of law, accountability, and justice. Feminism is an intersectional fight that aims to end all forms of oppression. We could limit it to the focus on social freedoms, or we could broaden our awareness and capture the many different forms of oppression that women disproportionately experience.

Tunisia's “reconciliation law” will do more harm to poor and working-class women than to middle- and upper-class women. We need to acknowledge that women are not a homogeneous group and are oppressed not just by direct sexism but by an unequal economic system, classism, racism, homophobia, and so on. This perspective could only widen our views and approaches in how we think about advocating for voiceless women and shaping policies. It is this awareness that makes young feminist groups like Aswat Nisaa protest in the street and join the Manich Msamaha (“I will not forgive”) campaign. Feminist issues are not just about sexism and women cannot fully enjoy their rights in a corrupt state.

Studies show that corruption in public service has a disproportionate impact on women. According to a 2008 United Nations Development Fund for Women report, women are more vulnerable to the impact of corruption than men. Since women make up most of the poor population and are the primary caregivers, they disproportionately rely on public services, like health care and education, whose availability and quality are reduced and attacked by corruption.

In addition, corrupt cultures enforce gender inequality and discourage female entrepreneurship and political participation. In a United Nations Development Programme survey, *The Impact of Corruption on Women - Strategies for Change*, the author asserts that since in developing countries many women work in informal sectors, they are often subject to bribery demands to secure work licenses or to obtain a small business loan. Furthermore, when it comes to political participation, corruption in politics blocks women's access to resources and high-level positions. This lack of political agency makes it even more difficult for women to hold officials accountable.

I am calling on Tunisian feminists of all generations: we should not remain silent in front of this major setback. We were on the frontline during the revolution demanding freedom and justice for all. More than ever we need to stand up, organize, and mobilize against this law because the anti-corruption fight is also a feminist one. It is our fight. ❖

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