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Tunisia

“We are in solidarity with Amina the Femen”

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In Tunisia, Amina remains in prison. The young Femen, who had posed bare-breasted on social networks, was arrested in possession of a teargas bomb, leading to her trial. On Thursday May 30, 2013, new and more serious charges were notified to her, notably that of association with malefactors. Passions run high around her case, with notably the demonstration of three European Femen arrested on Wednesday May 29 before the Tunis court after stripping off their clothes. They also risk a prison sentence. Tunisian feminist organisations have not denounced Femen, even if they do not share its methods, as Ahlem Belhadj, president of the Association tunisienne des femmes démocrates (ATFD – Tunisian Association of Democratic Women) explains [Olivier Rogez].

Do you approve of actions of the Femen type to approve women’s rights?

Posed like that, I would say no. We don’t adopt the same methods of struggle, but we understand perfectly the choice that they made. We express solidarity with Amina against all the forms of violence that she suffers.

You say that you don’t adopt the same methods of struggle. Why is that Tunisians can’t or don’t want to adopt the same methods of struggle? Why don’t they have the possibility of demonstrating like Ukrainian or French women?

Not all feminists around the world adopt Femen, it isn’t just a question of Tunisian women. It is a question of faith in methods of struggle. Each group, each social movement, each individual, chooses the method of struggle which works for them. But we, in Tunisia, have not debated inside the ATFD, we understand that methods of struggle like this are employed, but we do not insert ourselves within them.

Do you think this type of action is too radical in the Tunisian context?

This can have different types of reaction. This can led people to reflect correctly, but can also radicalise certain extremist current or even moderate currents who become extremist on the matter.

Some of your activists denounce the increasingly common aggression notably from the security forces against so called “modern” women, that is those who are independent or who dress in western styles.

Effectively, there is a model of society which is being imposed on Tunisian women which is completely unacceptable. The Ennahda party has always said they want to change society from below so as afterwards to make changes at the legal level. Until now, none of the laws acquired for women’s rights has been touched. But at the same time in practice in everyday life, there are acquired liberties which are threatened and violence is a major instrument, precisely to dominate women and lead them to leave the political and public field.

In your view, Ennahda has not yet changed its conservative vision of what should be the role of women in society?

Today there is a battle on the model of society that we want. And Ennahda has a model of society that feminists do not necessarily share. Ennahda knows very well that the real rampart against Islamism in Tunisia is women’s rights

and the question of women. That is why the response in relation to this is variable according to the relationship of forces. One minute [the idea of male-female – ed.] complementarity is introduced, then they go back on it, but other articles have been introduced in the Constitution which can threaten women's rights. There are many threats, but there is a lot of mobilisation to meet these threats and the question remains open.

Precisely, to advance the cause of women, you want principles to be registered in the Constitution. And when we read the last draft of the Constitution, it stipulates that male and female citizens have the same rights. That gives the impression that you have succeeded in advancing your positions. Is that really the case?

Effectively, in relation to the proposal of complementarity, we can consider it as an advance. That is under the pressure from the street. But the draft Constitution is really ambiguous and contradictory: they give with the right hand and take back with the left. When you have an article, article 136, which stipulates that Islam is the state religion, and not the religion of Tunisians, we know very well that this leaves the door wide open to all kinds of attack.

In the same text, there are setbacks like on the question of the family: it says that the state should preserve family cohesion. We know very well that when the rights of the family are advanced before the rights of the individual, women's rights are always hurt. Women's rights in the fight against violence have been refused in the name of family cohesion. We know it. Women who are victims of violence have been told by the police: “your family and its cohesion must come before everything”. And if this is constitutionalised it will really hit women's rights. Today, they cannot take measures to modify the law but they introduce big open windows for subsequent regressions. And this is what makes us afraid, today we fight so that this Constitution does not open breaches, that it conforms to our expectations in the area of non-discrimination and equality.

The Tunisian feminist movement has existed for a century. Does this depth and historic anchoring give you enough strength to oppose the changes proposed by Ennahda?

Tunisian women and men have been marked by this progressive, modernist current. It has marked the recent history of Tunisia. The last century has been truly a century where Tunisians have produced many progressive readings of the Koran and of Islam. We cannot now reverse all that. There is a progressive history of Tunisia, of truly modernist readings of our cultural heritage which, I hope, will allow Tunisia to pass through the current difficult times.

From the [RFI site](#).