

# Tunisia: Laying the Basis for a Sustainable Civic Engagement

Anis BOUFRICHA and Meriem JERBA

In the post-2011 Tunisian context, a proliferation of civil society associations has laid the basis for the reclaiming of public space for the country's citizens. Building on the recent Anna Lindh/Gallup polling, the authors highlight the progress made for women's equality and an established belief among Tunisians in their individual action to pursue the common good. A high level of interest among citizens towards people on the northern Mediterranean shore also offers a renewed perspective for Tunisia in its Euro-Med relations.

Three years have passed since the first revolutionary movements that have invaded the area and shaped the geo-strategy of the Euro-Mediterranean region, allowing the emergence of several societal and political movements. Some are conservative currents, and others are liberal. Some are ideological and others are more pragmatic. Some seek to ensure a level of societal continuity and others are calling for a model that breaks with the entire post-independence heritage. It is important that in light of this dynamism and the bewildering change that some events are undergoing, we can understand the dynamics that led to the current landscape in Tunisia that many observers might describe as the most successful country in its different steps towards democracy.

## New spaces for dialogue and associative life

The involvement of some political, social and other civil society groups in the scene led to the development of a constitution qualified as one of the most modern and vanguardist in the whole Arab region, providing equal rights to women and introducing a system based on universal principles of human rights and the respect of freedoms.

The day after the exit of the dictator, Tunisians found themselves facing a country in need of healing from its wounds, required to join forces against the dangers they may encounter and boost the economy, but also break with a system that has marginalised the majority of Tunisians to the benefit of a mafia family and a corrupt, oppressive system.

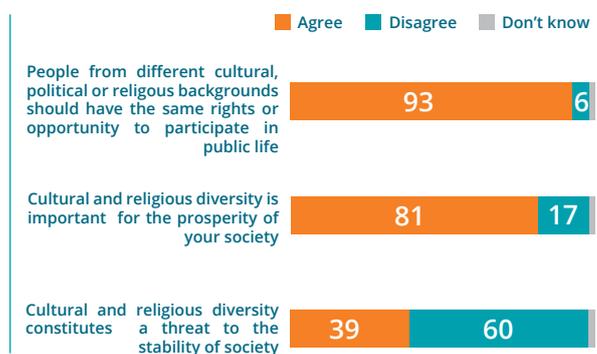
At that time, a large and spontaneous impulse began, led largely by Tunisian youth throughout the country. Indeed Tunisia has witnessed a significant associative boom since the revolution, with the creation of more than 5,000 associations in the different governorates of the country and in various fields: civic engagement and governance, cultural and artistic creativity. These associations have led to the development of the situation on the ground,

breaking the passivity experienced by most Tunisians before, allowing an unprecedented appropriation of public space for dialogue and mutual respect, and setting in motion the civic engagement process.

## Openness to cultural diversity

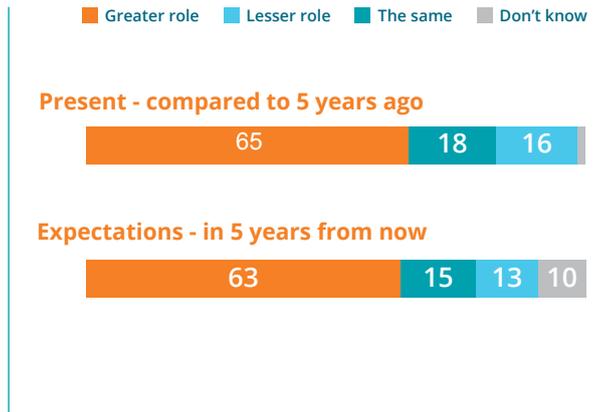
The cultural openness of Tunisia to its Euro-Mediterranean environment has allowed the emergence of some very open debates, focusing on current and urgent issues. The desire for a democratic and pluralistic socio-political model is more motivated among a population, increasingly educated and informed about the debates taking place on the northern shore of the Mediterranean. 70% of respondents are interested in cultural aspects and political exchanges in Europe. Only 47% are interested in religious aspects, and this says a lot about the priorities of Tunisians. The openness of Tunisians is even clearer through other Survey results indeed 93% of respondents believe that people of different ethnic and religious orientations should have the same rights to participate in public life. (Chart 27.1)

**Chart 27.1**  
Views about political, cultural and religious diversity in Tunisia



**Survey Question:** Could you please tell me, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? **Base:** % of all respondents, where 'Agree': sum of 'Strongly agree' and 'Agree somewhat' answers, and 'Disagree': sum of 'Strongly disagree' and 'Disagree somewhat' answers © Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll 2012).

**Chart 27.2**  
Women's role in Tunisian society



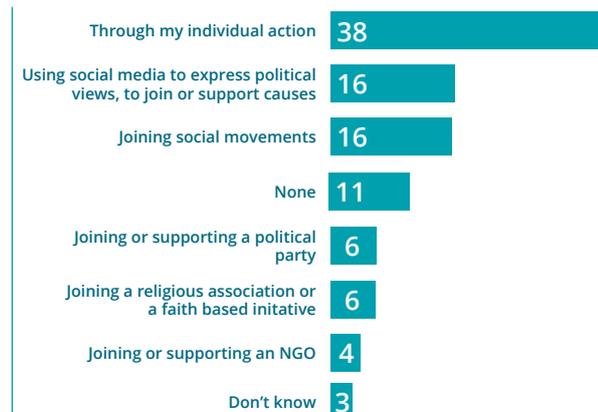
**Survey Question:** Do you think that women in your society today play a greater role, the same or lesser role than they did 5 years ago? And what role will they be playing in 5 years from now? **Base:** % of all respondents (© Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll 2012).

Dynamics and openness to others has led over time to a more remarkable professionalisation of different components of civil society. A major presence of Tunisian women, who rich in achievements but feeling threatened, were mobilised to defend their rights and those of Tunisian society also. Tunisian women were present during the most important phases that the nation went through, side to side with their country men. One of the major battles fought by the Tunisian woman was particularly the mobilisation about the draft Article 28 of the Tunisian constitution stipulating that women were complementary to men. Its elimination is the greatest proof of activism in favour of gender equality in Tunisia. This is well and truly expressed through statistics. In fact 65% of respondents believe that women have had and will have a big role in Tunisian society. (Chart 27.2)

### A determination for civic engagement

The gender advocacy battle was not separate from that carried out by activists for the cause of the rights and freedoms through the defense of universal human rights. An example is the mobilisation for the constitutionnalisation of the Tunisian pact of rights and freedoms that brought more than 50,000 signatures from across the country. This link of the Tunisian cultural with universal human rights finally resulted in a clear reference in the Tunisian constitution of belonging to the principles of universal human rights crowning a long process of advocacy and mobilization led by Tunisian civil society and controlled by large organisations with major presence in the field of civic struggles namely the UGTT Trade Union Center, the Tunisian League for Human Rights, CAWTAR, Arab Institute for Human Rights, which constitute a basis for Tunisian associations newly created.

**Chart 27.3**  
Most efficient ways of solving problems in Tunisia



**Survey Question:** How do you think you could most efficiently contribute to solving the problems in your country? **Base:** % of all respondents (© Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll 2012).

All this dynamism and the movements that Tunisia has witnessed since 2011 are now safeguards against a return to the dictatorship pre-uprisings, and this explains the optimism of those interviewed with 71% of respondents optimistic about the future of the country. Also 44% of respondents believe that the Tunisian revolution will have a positive effect on the European neighbour.

Despite the important role of civil society in shaping the new democratic and free Tunisia, this movement remains fragile given the lack of group organization, noting that 38% of respondents believe in individual action (Chart 27.3). Thanks to the commitment of hundreds of Tunisians through their civic activities, a constitution enrolling in the principles of freedom and dignity was approved. Even if still much remains to be done by Tunisians to confirm the stability of institutions and the rule law as guarantor of freedom, walking through the streets of Tunis, one can notice the presence of many young people full of life and hope for a better Tunisia, but also more determined than ever not to go back in time.

**Anis BOUFRICHA** is Coordinator of the Anna Lindh Foundation Network in Tunisia.

**Meriem JERBA** is Project manager at CAWTAR (Center of Arab Women for Training and Research).