

FROM CATALYST FOR FREEDOM TO TOOL FOR REPRESSION

**Gendered Disinformation and Online Abuse Against Women in
Politics in Tunisia**

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AUTHORS

LUCINA DI MECO

Lucina Di Meo is a gender equality expert and women's rights advocate recognized by Apolitical as one of the 100 Most Influential People in Gender Policy for her work on gendered disinformation. She's the co-founder of #ShePersisted, a global initiative addressing gendered disinformation and online attacks against women in politics through research, support to women leaders and advocacy. Lucina is the author of "[#ShePersisted: Women, Politics & Power in the New Media World](#)," a study of the relationship between women in politics and social media in 30 countries. Her work has been featured by the New York Times, the BBC, Time Magazine, the Washington Post, Politico, El País, The Hill and Voice of America. Lucina has written on gendered disinformation and social media harms for the Brookings Institution, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Council of Foreign Relations, the National Endowment for Democracy, Ms. Magazine and the Women's Media Center, among others.

Throughout her career, Lucina has worked with a wide range of international organizations and nonprofits, including Vital Voices, the Wilson Center, International IDEA, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, UNDP and UN Women. Lucina is Vice President of Room to Read, a global nonprofit working to end gender inequality through education, and an Advisory Board Member of Fund Her, an organization working to elect progressive women to state legislatures in the United States.

SARAH HESTERMAN

Sarah Hesterman is a program associate with #ShePersisted. She recently obtained a Master of Research in Social Research at UCL after completing a dissertation focused on online sexual violence and harassment facing women politicians in the United States. Throughout the past eight years, Sarah has worked with and for several women's and girls' organizations, including the United Nations Foundation's Girl Up campaign, Women without Borders, All In Together and the 1,000 Dreams Fund. She was previously named one of the BBC's 100 Women for her work campaigning for adolescent girls' rights in the Middle East and has spoken at multiple public engagements about the issues facing women and girls globally.

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INTRODUCTION

Viewed by many as one of the most progressive countries in the Arab world and a blueprint for legislative advances toward gender equality, Tunisia is rapidly sliding into autocratic rule. Pivotal advancements made by civil society and women's rights activists since the Arab Spring are now more in danger than ever before.

In this context, many are questioning the role currently being played by digital platforms. Social media initially represented a key tool used by activists to spark the Arab Spring and promote women's rights through movements like #EnaZeda. According to **Bochra Belhaj Hmida**, a lawyer, politician and president of the Individual Freedom and Equality Commission, "after the uprising, a tremendous number of women who had never been engaged politically, never even been on social media because they were afraid of Ben Ali's regime, found themselves mobilizing politically, involving themselves in civil society, and encouraging others to vote in a spontaneous movement throughout the country."¹

Yet, the same digital platforms that were once celebrated for their equalizing and democratizing potential are now coming under scrutiny, as disinformation and online hate become ever more common features of the political landscape in Tunisia. Women candidates and politicians face an onslaught of technology-facilitated gender-based violence, amidst elections that have been deeply impacted by efforts to backslide democracy. In the 2023 parliamentary elections, a low voter turnout of 11.4% was characterized as a negative response to President Kais Saied's consolidation of power, and following changes made to electoral laws undermining progress towards gender parity, only 11.5% of the candidates were women.²

Digital platforms are being used as weapons to shame feminist activists and those who are most outspoken against autocratic rule—pushing these voices out of the public arena and, in effect, suppressing the issues they advocate for.

This case study analyzes the intersection of gender, technology and democracy in Tunisia. It focuses on the dynamics, goals and modus operandi of gendered disinformation campaigns that target women in politics and activism and how they play into efforts to undermine democracy, women's rights and liberal values.

In order to do so, it relies on a combination of desk research, some basic targeted social media monitoring of posts including the names of women leaders on Twitter and Facebook and interviews with local women's rights activists, women in politics and experts.³ This study highlights the evolving role of social media as a tool for women's rights to a tool to abuse women, and the timid response of social media platforms—and Facebook in particular—to threats to women's rights and democracy in the country. Also investigated is Big Tech's failure to prioritize effective measures for transparency and accountability, even during elections.

Because Tunisia has been one of the most advanced countries regarding women's rights and democracy in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) region, and an early adopter of social media as an important site for activism, what is happening there is particularly concerning. It represents a cautionary tale of fragility for many new democracies and calls into question long-held promises of social media's potential.



TUNISIA

Facts at a Glance

16.23%⁴ % of women in national parliament

79%⁵ Internet penetration rate
(as of early 2023)

7.24M Number of social media users out of
entire population (as of early 2023)
OF AROUND
12.4 MILLION⁶

Most popular platforms (as of early 2023): Facebook, YouTube and Instagram.⁷



**Women's Rights
and Democracy
in Tunisia:
A Story of Lost Hope
and Missed Opportunities**

WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY IN TUNISIA

After the ousting of autocratic former president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in 2011 during what came to be known as the Arab Spring, Tunisia lived a historic democratic transition, met with great hope and expectations.



Many Tunisians—including feminist activists—viewed this as an opportunity to finally gain access to the political and civil rights they were unable to exercise under the former regime and to advance women's rights. The drafting of a new constitution in 2014 also heralded an unprecedented advancement towards democratic governance.

However, initial excitement surrounding hopes of free speech and political participation began to shift to distrust in political processes, as an economic crisis, corruption and threats to national security festered. As many people became increasingly disenchanted with the promises of the Arab Spring, Kais Saied was elected president in 2019 through a populist campaign centered around fighting corruption, with wide support from both secularists and Islamists.⁸

On July 25, 2021, Saied suspended parliament and dismissed Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi, a move that academics, journalists and activists have protested as a coup. He followed with an unconstitutional dissolution of the High Judicial Council, and took control of the electoral commission in April 2022, further sliding Tunisia into authoritarianism, and marking the end for the country's "democratic experiment."⁹

Like democracy, progress on women's rights in Tunisia is now in danger.

The Arab Spring provided Tunisian women with an extraordinary opportunity to become engaged in highly visible advocacy, reaching its peak in 2014 with the adoption of a new constitution. This constitution was celebrated as being "one of the world's most gender progressive," as it established the right to equal political participation for women.¹⁰ In the following years, the country made progress toward protecting women from all forms of violence and human trafficking, ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women and saw organizing to demand action against discrimination and violence.¹¹

However, this progress was standing on shaky ground, as it mostly benefited and related to women in urban areas, while those in rural areas, characterized by higher levels of unemployment and a more traditional lifestyle, were generally left behind.¹²

In recent years, gender issues have declined in importance to the point of having “disappeared from the public debate,” according to **Yosra Frawes**, former president of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women.¹³ Conversations on gender equality—often crystallizing around the role of women in society—have become divisive. **Marc Owen Jones**, an expert on disinformation and digital authoritarianism in the Middle East, finds this reflective of a larger pattern in the region of “anti-feminist backlash,” through which “feminism has been very much stigmatized.”¹⁴

As a result, women’s rights are increasingly under threat, as a strong anti-gender movement is framing them as part of a Western ideology opposed to Tunisian societal norms and religious beliefs.¹⁵ As an example of this backsliding, in 2018, the major Islamist political party Ennahda opposed legislation on equal inheritance for women, although the party had enshrined gender equality in the constitution and has had individual MPs who championed legislation to strengthen women’s rights.¹⁶

In this worsening environment for feminist activism, restrictive gender norms are increasingly being used to undermine democracy and women’s already limited political participation.

Last year, Kheira Benkhelifa, one of the 57 judges of the High Judicial Council, was dismissed on the ground of “contempt of morals.”¹⁷ After admitting to having an affair, she was forced to obtain a medical certificate to assess the status of her virginity. The certificate was published on social media in June 2022 by a supporter of Saied, grossly violating Ms. Benkhelifa’s privacy and making her the target of overwhelming amounts of online abuse.

The Tunisian Association for the Defense of Individual Liberties called this out as a tactic from Saied “to liquidate his adversaries” by weaponizing their private lives, a common strategy throughout his efforts to concentrate power.¹⁸ **Marwa Fatafta**, MENA Policy and Advocacy Manager at Access Now, notes that “the timing of course is illuminating as it just came about as judges decided to strike against the president’s decision to arbitrarily dismiss them.”¹⁹




According to Lilia Labidi, an anthropologist, psychologist and former Minister for Women’s Affairs in 2011 after the fall of the Ben Ali regime,

“the question of women” has been utilized for centuries in Tunisia as a tool to evade more “fundamental questions,” attack opposition and distract from democratic failures.²⁰

Today, restrictive gender norms are weaponized in the form of attacks against candidates and public figures, dissuading women from political participation: a 2019 study conducted by the International Republican Institute in Tunisia found that 74% of female survey respondents resisted engaging in politics due to fear of violence.²¹

Given this context, few celebrated Saied’s appointment of university professor Najla Bouden as Tunisia’s first woman prime minister in September 2021, and the appointment was interpreted by many as “genderwashing.” As the president continues to consolidate his power, “appearing to be pro-women has been one way to make authoritarianism more palatable to Western allies, pacify liberal voices domestically and vilify Islamist opposition,” and is considered “a ploy to divert the attention of the international community.”²² Activists have decried Ms. Bouden’s failure to signal any commitment to equality and believe there has been no movement on women’s rights since her appointment.²³



How Social Media Turned Its Back on Women —and Democracy— in Tunisia

HOW SOCIAL MEDIA TURNED ITS BACK ON WOMEN—AND DEMOCRACY

Social media was a key tool in mobilizing protests and civil actions against the regime of Ben Ali in 2011. This ushered in a new era of cyberactivism in Tunisia, which was instrumental in advancing democracy and women's rights.

In 2019, more Tunisians were registered on Facebook than those registered to vote, and as of 2023, over half of the entire population was registered on the platform, while only 2.8% used Twitter.²⁴

During the Arab Spring, activists like **Lina Ben Mhenni** shared updates regarding the self-immolation of street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi and played a crucial role in documenting demonstrations and mistreatment of protestors on social media platforms and in blogs.²⁵

Social media was a powerful tool for women's rights activism, too. Online movements spearheaded by women in MENA cultivated a regional, collective identity and marked a shift for many women into the public sphere. Women were able to effectively work alongside one another to defy authoritarianism and co-create a feminist agenda through the "tactical use of digital technologies."²⁶

In 2012, Tunisian feminist activists began taking to Facebook to demand bodily autonomy and denounce sexual harassment through the #EnaZeda movement, North Africa's iteration of the #MeToo movement. Women's rights groups like Aswat Nissa, Falgatna (We're Fed Up) and the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women spearheaded the unprecedented campaign.²⁷ This is one of many examples of how Tunisian women have utilized social media to mobilize following the revolution, as identified by Ms. Belhaj Hmida.

According to **Ikram Ben Said**, the founder of Aswat Nissa, the increasing use of digital platforms has had implications for women's activism, however:

"social media, which helped us organize during the Revolution, demobilized us: by sharing a Facebook post or a Tweet, people thought that they were defending their rights and participating. This is not true. Nothing can replace the physical gathering and political and civic organizing. Worse, when women activists were arrested by the regime or abused online, digital activism isolates them because the only solidarity manifestation they get is just a tweet, a repost or a private message."²⁸ Furthermore, in the last few years, social media platforms—and Facebook in particular—have come under increasing scrutiny for their role in the backsliding of democratic institutions and women's rights in Tunisia.



Ms. Fatafta finds, "on the one hand, social media companies are not taking their human rights and user safety responsibilities seriously in the region. On the other hand, Arab governments are weaponizing online spaces to target women activists and dissidents. The media ecosystem is heavily controlled, so it's easy to plant the seed of a fake story on some random media website, then have it migrate to social media. The disinfo will then ping-pong between the two."²⁹

Disinformation online has become a regular feature of recent electoral processes.³⁰ It was particularly prevalent during the 2019 elections, as reported by journalist Salsabil Chellali: "fake polls, forged electoral posters asserting nonexistent political alliances, and unfounded rumors" swept across digital platforms, with the intent of manipulating voters.³¹

Facebook pages with unclear political affiliation were used to spread disinformation, and a study conducted by Democracy Reporting International revealed such pages were generating 38.5% of political messaging between May and October 2019 ahead of the autumn elections.³² Targeted online harassment was also widespread leading up to the election, taking the form of “orchestrated campaigns on Facebook to discredit candidates and spread hate speech,” as well as malicious language and regional discrimination.³³

Foreign interference attempts have been a prominent feature of the latest political campaigns in Tunisia. Nearly 800 Facebook pages, groups and accounts were taken down after a coordinated campaign originating in Iran was uncovered in January 2019, including those targeting Tunisia, and throughout 2019 and 2020, similar campaigns were identified as originating from Egypt, France, Russia and Israel.³⁴

These campaigns were identified as “coordinated inauthentic behavior on behalf of a foreign or government entity,” as Russian-linked disinformation groups used fake accounts to pose as people from other countries to spread disinformation more effectively.³⁵

There is also evidence of attempts by other Arab nations, like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, to infiltrate Tunisian digital media and spread propaganda supportive of Saied’s 2021 actions to consolidate power.³⁶ Of this interference,

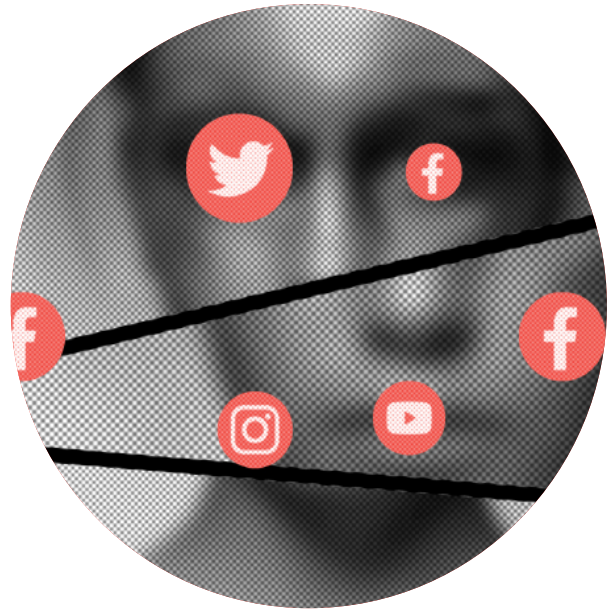
Mr. Jones found that at the beginning of Saied’s coup, a large majority of the content that came up when searching for Tunisia on platforms like Twitter or Google originated from accounts based in the Gulf region: “it was overwhelming, the majority of the information was, ‘this is great,’ ‘he’s overthrowing the Islamists,’ those kinds of narratives.”³⁷ Mr. Jones also notes the implication this has for women: “what it means is, if you’re a woman journalist in Tunisia, or an activist, and you get on the wrong side of the foreign policy of the Gulf states, they can come for you.”

Photo credit: Giacomo Ferroni/Unsplash

Social media platforms— initially seen as an empowering space for women’s rights activists in Tunisia—have in fact increasingly become weapons against them, particularly for those women who criticize the government.

In a 2021 report, the Centre de Recherches, d’Etudes, de Documentation et d’Information sur la Femme (CREDIF) identified that 80% of Tunisian women had faced some type of online harassment at some point.³⁸

Across the Arab region, online attacks have been especially targeted at women activists and human rights defenders, who experience “gender-based discriminatory campaigns” and widespread online harassment.³⁹ According to a UN Women study in the Arab States, 70% of women activists and human rights defenders in the region reported feeling “unsafe online,” after receiving insulting and hateful messages and unwanted sexual content and communications, and 35% of them reported the existence of a “continuum between online and offline VAWG,” highlighting the very real physical dangers that can stem from violent speech on social media.⁴⁰ Highly visible women in Tunisia are also subjected to doxing, which “often occurs as part of defamatory campaigns full of hate speech, bullying and inciting violence.”⁴¹ Doxing has become an emerging tactic to silence women. According to Ms. Fatafta, “their personal information is publicly shared without their consent and weaponized against them to spread disinformation, tarnish their reputations and intimidate them into silence. From Tunisia to Palestine, it’s a repressive and violent tactic against women used by many governments and their security apparatus across the region. They are telling women: dare to speak up, and you will be scandalized.”⁴²



In the words of Feryel Charfeddine, a feminist activist who faced attacks on Facebook in 2017, the platform is simply “not a safe place for women.”⁴³

Boudour Lamouchi, the peace program manager at the Tunisian nonprofit WeYouth, reported that after the death of Ms. Ben Mhenni, a group of feminist activists carried the coffin of the blogger, an unacceptable act according to a certain conception of Islam: “this act was a means of advocacy to further highlight the role of women in society and how we should fight against women's rights violations and patriarchal society. As a result of this act, however, many activists received insults, death threats and humiliating comments about their bodies in their private mailbox and in their Facebook comments and suffered sexual and psychological abuse.”⁴⁴

The consequences are far-reaching, as online abuse greatly threatens women's freedom of expression and civic engagement.

Ms. Ben Mhenni, in retaliation to her activism during the Arab Spring, faced threats of intimidation, defamation campaigns, online abuse and physical stalking. Speaking out about her experience in 2013, she stated:

“I feel threatened, just for blogging and criticizing the government and the awful, regressing situation in Tunisia. I’m on an assassination list and under police protection. I feel like I have lost my own freedom while trying to fight for my country and my people’s freedom. If we don’t react to what is happening, every subject will soon become taboo.”⁴⁵

According to Ms. Frawes, the “targeting of women who are active on social media is not by chance. The lynching of women who express themselves freely on social media, of women activists or women political figures, has the aim of eliminating women from public space.”⁴⁶

These attacks are even more pronounced against women with marginalized identities, who are the target of violent, vicious gendered disinformation and online hate campaigns which have racist, in addition to sexist, undertones.

In Tunisia, anti-Black sentiments have been fueled by the president himself, who in February 2023 publicly adopted the “great replacement theory” when warning “of a ‘criminal plot’ to overwhelm” the “predominantly Arab country with Black Africans,” indicative of the underlying racial dynamics fueling social tensions in the country.⁴⁷ According to Khawla Ksiksi, the co-founder of the Voices of Black Tunisian Women collective, Saied’s comments ignited a new ripple of racism in a country where Black women already experience intersectional oppression: “my skin colour says I don’t belong so as black Tunisians we have to constantly prove that we are enough.”⁴⁸



Hanène Zbiss, a journalist and university professor, finds that “we are living in something like a democracy after the revolution in 2011, but we still have people who think that a woman doesn’t belong in the public space. And even if she is in the public space, she needs to be quiet and to respect male authority. **When they notice there are some brave women doing their work, if they are journalists, deputies, politicians and figures in civil society, these women start to be attacked, virtually harassed, targeted physically, or while doing their work, and this has become more violent if they, for example, have black skin or they are LGBT.**”⁴⁹



Gendered Disinformation and Online Abuse as Political Weapons in Tunisia

GENDERED DISINFORMATION AND ONLINE ABUSE AS POLITICAL WEAPONS

#ShePersisted works to address gendered disinformation in the form of the spread of deceptive or inaccurate information targeting highly visible women, such as political leaders, journalists, activists and other public figures.

Available data analytics from political campaigns—both in Europe and the U.S.—show that women politicians are more likely to be targeted with higher volumes of online abuse and disinformation. These attacks are also more likely to be steeped in sexism, often focusing on a woman's character and sexuality, and they are “stickier,” or harder to recover from and fight with traditional tools like fact-checking and media literacy.⁵⁰

According to Kristina Wilfore, a global democracy activist and co-founder of #ShePersisted, “gendered disinformation campaigns build on, and are rooted in, deeply set misogynistic frameworks and gender biases that portray masculine characteristics as those fit for leadership while painting women leaders as inherently **untrustworthy** (insinuating a woman is dishonest or not trustable is a tried and true attack), **unqualified** (one of the biggest barriers women face when seeking office), **unintelligent** (tropes about women as dumb and unfit for the job are a prominent feature of gendered disinformation, made worse with objectifying sexualized content), and **unlikable** (which for women can be the death knell of their campaign).⁵¹

Gendered disinformation is often coordinated and spread with malignant intentions. It aims to manipulate the public into developing falsely informed understandings of women politicians' track records, with the ultimate goal of portraying women in the public sphere as incapable of holding leadership positions, or otherwise discrediting them. Perhaps most devastating, women may be dissuaded from running for office or from entering public debate due to the widespread nature of gendered disinformation and online abuse, and this can especially affect young women. To evade the very public and dangerous attacks facilitated by social media, women may also disengage from politics or self-censor and refrain from speaking out on women's rights and individual liberties.

Gendered disinformation against women politicians in Tunisia is pervasive. It weaponizes narratives aimed at attacking their morals—through stories and fake, humiliating images questioning their sexuality (e.g., framing them as sexual slaves of male political leaders, prostitutes or promiscuous).

Alongside attacks surrounding morality, women in politics are also portrayed as unqualified, attacked for a perceived inability to lead and are targeted with accusations of poor mental health.



According to Henda Gafsi, a feminist, lead urban planner for the District of Tunis and Senior Advisor at CILG-VNG International, women who are outspoken about

“individual and sexual freedoms, equality in general, including equality in inheritance and women's demands for access to decision-making positions” are most viciously attacked with gendered disinformation and cyber-harassment.⁵²



Ms. Labidi sees a parallel between what is happening now and what happened during the colonial period in how women's bodies are weaponized to repress freedom. In colonial times:

“European photographers took photos of teenage girls and women, highlighting a primary eroticism. These photographs served to humiliate the Tunisians and send a violent message of domination from the colonial powers.”⁵³

Similarly, fake nude photos of Tunisian women leaders are now being shared online, as a way to humiliate women and discourage them from taking an active part in public life.

The women who are attacked the most are those who are outspoken on women's rights and human rights issues. In addition, women holding important political posts are targets of vicious disinformation campaigns, with openly sexist undertones that are also meant to undermine the democratic institutions they represent, often calling for their elimination or a reshuffling.

Below are some illustrative examples from our analysis of how gendered disinformation has been viciously deployed against women leaders and political activists who challenge the government or conservative norms. A necessary caveat is that while this analysis represents an important effort to map and begin to make sense of gendered disinformation in Tunisia, wide scale data analytics and a thorough monitoring of social media channels over an extended period of time would be needed to gather more evidence and achieve a more comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon and the malign actors behind it.

Future research should aim to map the weaponization of digital tools to facilitate malign behavior, including basic listening and trend monitoring, mapping and tracking malign actors, tracking monetization and the role of advertising, conducting terms of service compliance experiments and analyzing the activity of political actors.

SIHEM BENSEDRIINE is a journalist and human rights defender who formerly led the controversial Truth and Dignity Commission, investigating corruption and human rights violations committed by the Tunisian state from 1955 to 2013.⁵⁴ She has faced many attacks throughout her decades-long career, including imprisonment and being assaulted and surveilled by police.⁵⁵ As someone with a highly visible role, she has also been the target of orchestrated gendered disinformation and online abuse. For example, in 2021, a rumor spread on social media claiming that she had been placed under house arrest because of lies and mismanagement in her committee work and alleging that she was leading “crusades” against opponents and spending public funds on herself.⁵⁶ Images of her have also been edited and posted online depicting her as “two-faced.”⁵⁷

Ms. Bensedrine said of the attacks, “they are using the same methods as before [the revolution]: denigration, to smear me and to attack my credibility. That causes me pain because I thought that was behind us. But, in fact, they are using the same weapons that Ben Ali used against me.”⁵⁸ In 1993, she was the target of a gendered disinformation campaign claiming that she was a prostitute, supported by doctored sexually explicit images.⁵⁹

These attacks are not only affecting Ms. Bensedrine—they represent a much broader threat to democratic institutions and human rights in Tunisia and, according to Ms. Labidi, their aim is “discrediting the transitional justice process.”⁶⁰



Sihem Ben Sedrine est le symbole ultime de la déchéance morale de ce pays.

Sihem Ben Sedrine is the ultimate symbol of this country's moral decay.



L'ESPIONNE SIHEM BEN SEDRINE A FAILLI...MAGOUILLÉ...ET TRAHI.....ELLE MÉRITE LA TAULE. !!!

THE SPY SIHEM BEN SEDRINE IS ALMOST.... FOOLED... AND TRAITOR..... SHE DESERVES THE TABLE !!!

SIHEM BENSEDRIINE

Photo credit: UN Geneva / Flickr



Sihem Ben Sedrine's nerve is limitless.

The one who was appointed mainly thanks to Ghannouchi then held the time she held thanks to Nahdha, despite the deviations committed, her extreme authoritarianism and endless abuses, is now turning against them and bringing them down flames.

The craftswoman of transitional injustice who wanted to disguise national history, demean the authentic militants of the country and sully their memories also wants to take advantage of the situation born of 07/25.

Sihem the racketeer whose venal side has not been sufficiently shown to the public, although the only affair of the BFT and its role in making Abdelmajid Bouden a resistant against the power of Ben Ali attests to it, must be judged .

Hundreds of billions of public money have been wasted. Privileges were granted to the cronies and rascals of the Madonna of the IVD.

If there's justice in this country, it can't miss it.

Examples of Ms. Bensedrine being accused of ignoring national interests and engaging in corruption. Note the use of the gendered moniker “Madonna of the IVD” (the Truth and Dignity Commission) to describe her.



BOCHRA BELHAJ HMIDA, a lawyer and politician who heads the Individual Freedoms and Equality Commission, has received widespread recognition for her advocacy of women's rights, family law and LGBTQIA+ issues.⁶¹ Ms. Belhaj Hmida has been the target of multiple gendered disinformation campaigns, such as those framing her as corrupt and unpatriotic for reportedly "misleading" Tunisian women into false feminism and planning to "penalize circumcision," a Muslim and Tunisian tradition.⁶² These campaigns were followed by large waves of online violence, including death threats, even incited by well-known public figures.⁶³ For example, in 2018, a radical Islamist preacher called for the public stoning of Ms. Belhaj Hmida and the commission members on Facebook to "purify" the country.⁶⁴ In an interview that year, Ms. Belhaj Hmida declared that "almost every ten minutes, there is a post that calls for murder and spreads disinformation to arouse a popular and violent movement against our work."⁶⁵ In 2020, Ms. Belhaj Hmida accused MP Abir Moussi's husband of "keeping a Facebook page in her name, the publications of which have caused her harm and represent a threat."⁶⁶ The following year, she was sentenced to six months in prison for accusing a former government official of corruption, but stated she intended to appeal.⁶⁷



Voici pourquoi Bochra Haj Hmida veut imposer au peuple Tunisien son programme Anti - Islam

This is why Bochra Haj Hmida wants to impose her Anti-Islam program on the Tunisian people



Bochra Belhaj Hmida, as Sonnia b, Toumia said: "li pipil, li grand pipil tinisien" will never forgive you for your hypocrisy and your shenanigans to you and your fellows from Nidaa, Tahy , 9alb, Joumhour , ElAmal and other fake tokens.

We, the vast majority of the people acknowledge having discovered your true nature. You are dangerous dictators, sellouts to Turks and Qataris.

In the future it is your right to criticize anyone, but do so with common sense, real arguments and not with lies.

A word of advice, you are politically toast, so stay at home... Ditto for all your fellow human beings.

Examples of accusations claiming Ms. Belhaj Hmida is corrupt, anti-Islam, unpatriotic and influenced by foreign powers.

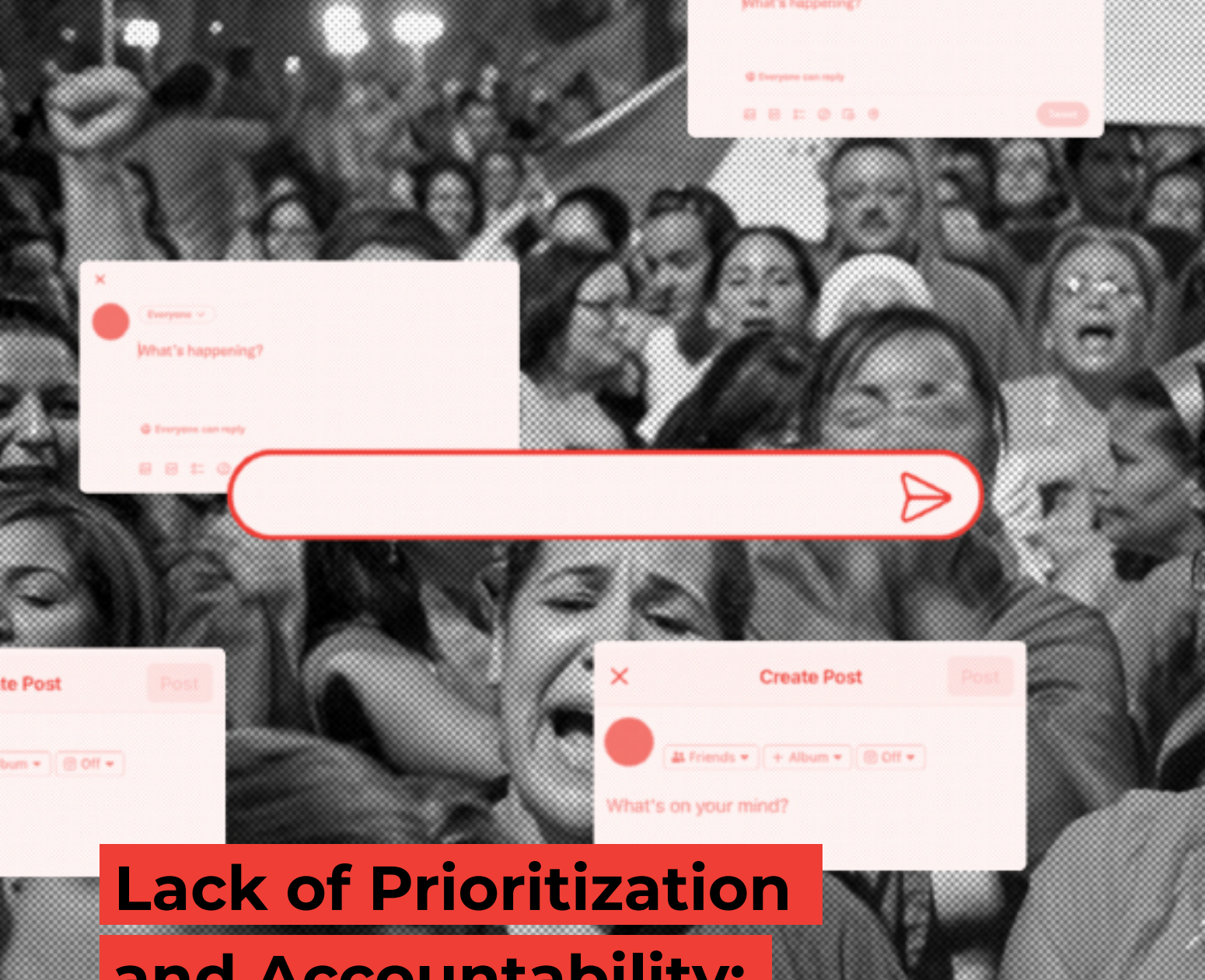
BOCHRA BELHAJ HMIDA
Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons

FATEN KALLEL was the Tunisian Secretary for State Youth Affairs from 2016 to 2017 and is currently a political activist, sitting on the board of the political party Afek Tones.⁶⁸ In a personal interview, Ms. Kallel expressed that sexism is prevalent in many forms of online abuse against both women and men in politics, as women are attacked “from the point of view of morals,” while men get attacked “on their virility when they defend individual freedoms or equality.”⁶⁹ She also reported that after being appointed Secretary of State, she was the target of a gendered disinformation campaign claiming she was the granddaughter of the Advisor to the President and had therefore obtained her position because of family connections, not her qualifications: “I had to react publicly to deny the facts, since I had no line with this gentleman and I come from a middle-class family that has no connection to politics.”

FATEN KALLEL

SALMA ELLOUMI REKIK is a former Minister for Handicrafts and Tourism and was a presidential candidate for the Al Amal party in 2019.⁷⁰ Ms. Elloumi Rekik has been the subject of multiple fake stories, as well as gendered disinformation campaigns, accusing her of spending her time as minister traveling the world, signing empty agreements and enriching herself while Tunisian citizens are living in poverty.⁷¹

JAMILA KSIKSI, a late member of parliament for the Ennahda party and Tunisia's first Black female MP, has faced racialized abuse from social media users on the internet and fellow politicians alike, such as when she was called a “slave” and a “monkey” after publicly criticizing the Free Destourian Party.⁷² Ms. Moussi, the controversial president of the Free Destourian Party, also alleged Ms. Ksiksi was part of former president Ben Ali's party by publicly sharing what Ms. Ksiksi claimed was a photoshopped party membership card.⁷³ Of the attacks she's faced, Ms. Ksiksi has stated, “they attacked me on my skin color and my physique and inflamed social networks with abject racist remarks. I always say that racism exists in a fringe of Tunisian society, and yesterday part of this parliamentary bloc expressed it in the most infamous of ways, they do not have the culture of respect and tolerance.”⁷⁴



Lack of Prioritization and Accountability: The Role of Digital Platforms in Tunisia's Backsliding

THE ROLE OF DIGITAL PLATFORMS

After being praised for the part it played during the Arab Spring and the #EnaZeda movement, social media has been increasingly questioned for its role in the erosion of women's rights and democracy in Tunisia, while legal measures taken against online disinformation and gender-based violence have proven ineffective at best.

The Independent High Authority for Audiovisual Communication (HAICA) has spearheaded an initiative to target disinformation and teach journalists fact-checking skills, but disinformation is still an urgent challenge to democracy in Tunisia, one which the country's legal and regulatory systems appear unable—or unwilling—to tackle.⁷⁵ For example, although Article 86 of the 2001 Telecommunication Code addresses disinformation, it was implemented before the inception of social media companies and is therefore inadequate to tackle disinformation spread on digital platforms.⁷⁶ Instead, provisions like Article 86 and the 2022 Decree-Law No. 54, focused on combating cybercrime, have actually been used to suppress the freedom of speech of bloggers, activists and journalists to target vocal opponents to the government.⁷⁷

When it comes to women's rights, although violence against women is explicitly mentioned in Law 58, there is no legislation that specifically addresses online violence, and while some provisions in the Tunisian legal framework could be used to tackle doxing, gendered disinformation and other forms of abuse according to legal scholar Aymen Zaghdoudi, in reality, weak enforcement of existing legislation does little to protect women subjected to attacks.⁷⁸ According to **Mounira Balghouthi**, project coordinator for Marsadnissa Tunisia, an organization that observes court decisions relevant to women's rights, **online violence against women reflects “the gap between laws and reality.”**⁷⁹

In this context, social media companies have faced stark criticism for failing to better protect activists and democratic processes.

Mr. Jones finds that:

“there is this default assumption that these technologies are somehow related to freedom of speech and of liberty, but they are not.”⁸⁰

He identifies a lack of transparency from social media companies regarding their operations in the MENA region, and believes “these companies need to do more in a lot of different areas, like tackling hate speech and tackling digital misogyny, but the incentives don't exist to make them do that.”

Facebook was specifically criticized for failing to provide social media monitors with access to information about sponsored ads during the 2019 elections in Tunisia. Social media monitors found it difficult to observe and analyze posts on the Facebook platform due to restricted access to information and tools for collecting real-time data.⁸¹ The company failed to provide transparency around their actions and support for operations pertaining to monitoring content during the election period, and monitors had to rely heavily on manual analysis. Tunisian observers were also not permitted to view information such as the amount of money spent on or the target audiences for sponsored political ads that were no longer active.⁸²

Access Now published an open letter in September 2019—with the support of 14 Tunisian civil society organizations—asking Facebook “to implement effective measures for transparency and accountability towards your users in the context of the upcoming Tunisian elections.”⁸³ Such actions have been taken in western countries like the U.S., but not in Tunisia nor many other Global South nations.⁸⁴

Even though Arabic is the fourth most utilized language online, Facebook has been repeatedly accused of not prioritizing “support for democracy advocates where Arabic is spoken.”⁸⁵ Facebook did not implement any specific measures to counteract election-related disinformation in the MENA region during the 2019 elections, political crises and regime changes. But, such measures were applied in other parts of the world, such as the European Union and the U.S.⁸⁶

Facebook partnered with only one third-party fact-checker for the entire MENA region in 2019, while working with seven fact-checkers in the U.S. alone.

Facebook responded to the open letter from Access Now by saying they had indeed taken measures in the MENA region to combat misinformation, including making their ad library available in Tunisia—an effort that was denounced as too little, too late.⁸⁷

According to Ms. Fatafta, as a result of Arabic content moderation being under-resourced, “disinformation, gender-based violence, smear campaigns and coordinated inauthentic behavior attacks take place with little to no action from platforms. When they’re prompted to take action, sometimes it’s too late—the harm is already done.”⁸⁸

Things might be getting even worse. According to Lena-Maria Böswald, emerging artificial intelligence technologies “can move gendered disinformation to the next level,” as they allow for the quick and inexpensive creation of misleading content, posing a new challenge to social media companies that are already failing to address online harms facing women on their platforms.⁸⁹

CONCLUSION

Following the Arab Spring, Tunisia has been heralded as a success story within the MENA region for progress on democracy and women's rights. Yet, the country is now quickly sliding into authoritarian rule, as Kais Saied's concentration of power threatens the hard-won advances of the last decade.

Digital technologies have played a duplicitous role in Tunisia's democratic journey. During the Arab Spring and through the #EnaZeda movement, social media platforms provided Tunisian activists, and particularly women activists, unprecedented opportunities to engage in civic action, denounce sexism and harassment and demand progress on women's rights and civil liberties. Increasingly, however, social media has now become a tool for repression, as politically-motivated disinformation, doxing and hate campaigns are used to attack and silence women who speak out in opposition to the government and defend women's rights, human rights and democratic institutions.

This case study examines how tech-facilitated gender-based violence and gendered disinformation against women in politics and political activists are eroding women's rights and democracy in Tunisia. Importantly, it also highlights the role social media companies have played in this deterioration, by failing to take decisive action and neglecting to allocate resources to address these problems despite recurring demands from activists.

According to Ikram Ben Said, "as we witness the abandonment of the revolution's promises of 'freedom, dignity, and justice,' we must remember that there is no democracy without women's rights and no women's rights without democracy."⁹⁰ Because Tunisia has been viewed by many as a beacon of hope for liberal values in the MENA region, what is happening within the country has implications well beyond its borders. Ms. Fatafta believes "if Tunisia's fragile democracy collapses, that will be the end of an era. What hope will there be for political mobilization? The entire region will plunge into repression and conflict. It is a demoralizing scenario."⁹¹

What happened in Tunisia also represents a cautionary tale for many fragile democracies on how quickly social media can turn against the very activists that it promised to bolster, and become one more tool of authoritarian repression.

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