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Tunisia

Women will not allow their rights to be ignored during the transition

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This interview with Souhayr Belhassen, President of the International Federation of Human Rights was carried out by Égalité on March 7, 2011. She was first asked: "How did Tunisian women participate in the revolution."

Throughout the month of protests in Tunisia we saw a huge presence of women from all walks of life. It was not only those who had lost children, husbands, or other relatives killed during the uprising. We have seen that the flame of calls for democracy and equality has been passed down from our generation to the next. This is just as reassuring as it is moving. This generation has tremendous energy and creativity. They have shown it in the streets, as they have through social networks and blogs.

We must also recognize the role that women have played for many years in resistance to the dictatorship and repression. It is evident that women will play a full role in the construction of a democratic Tunisia.

It is also the "Tunisian exception" that brought about this revolution: Tunisia had the first constitution in the Arab world in the 19th century, the first trade union, the first Arab and African human rights organization and a Personal Status Code which, unfortunately, remains unique in the Arab world, which abolished repudiation and polygamy, access to the contraceptive pill and abortion, as well as to education.

With the recognition of Islamist political parties, is there a risk you think the Personal Status Code risks being challenged?

No, the rights protected by the Personal Status Code of 1956 are established. There is no going back. Now, we need to go beyond this and achieve full legal equality.

Women are fighting to preserve a modern society in Tunisia. We want the Personal Status Code to continue to evolve towards equality and freedom for both sexes. We want women to have equal rights to inheritance. Today, as in the sphere of education, women want equal participation in political life. This is why women are on centre stage. They know that the future of Tunisia depends on their struggle.

How can women's rights be strengthened in Tunisia today?

First and foremost, we want to ensure that the new Tunisian democracy, which we hope to see emerge from this uprising, guarantees the full rights of women and gender equality. We must remain vigilant. We must remember that protecting human rights and democracy means protecting of the rights of women. We must recall the principle that there can be no genuine democracy without gender equality.

We have to ensure that there are women in all the new political bodies. We must call for parity and, at the very least, quotas of women among those elected. Political parties calling themselves democratic will not be able to do less than the former RCD, the party of the ex-President, Ben Ali), which had established quotas of 30% on electoral lists.

We must also call for the reform of laws that remain discriminatory, starting with the provisions on inheritance.

We need to support the work and struggle of women's associations, like the Association tunisienne des femmes

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démocrates (ATFD), the Association des femmes tunisiennes pour la recherche et le développement (AFTURD) and the Collectif Maghreb Egalité 1995, partners of FIDH, who resisted during the dictatorship, and have always associated the three words: democracy, freedom and equality. These women's movements are extremely active in the creation of a democratic Tunisia.

Currently they are putting together a dossier of claims that would ensure gender equality and the protection of women's rights in a democratic Tunisia.

Are there risks that women will be excluded from the transitions in Tunisia and Egypt ?

It is a real fear. There are already some worrying signs that women are being pushed aside in the political transitions. It is deeply concerning that women that there is not a single woman on the new Egyptian Constitutional Committee. This is unacceptable.

We must remember history. In Algeria, for example, in the 1950s women participated in the struggle for independence. However, after independence they were largely excluded from political and public life. Today the Algerian Family Code still discriminates against women, polygamy still exists, men are considered "head of the family" etc.. Women have been forgotten in the "post revolution."

Political transition first... women's rights later. We should remember that nothing is guaranteed, in order to ensure that women are not excluded from reconstruction, since women's rights are never considered a political "priority." We should not forget that since women have protested and have sacrificed themselves in the name of these revolutions, they will not allow their rights to be ignored or forgotten during the transition.

FIDH will continue to work alongside its member organisations and partners in Tunisia, Egypt and throughout the region so that memory of women's participation in the revolutions and uprisings is preserved and so that women can obtain equal rights.