

Secular Feminists v. The State

Amira Mhadhbi, a Tunisian feminist currently living in London, defines state feminism as “the systematic and explicit governmental exploitation of the feminist cause for political reasons narrowly linked to enhancing the image, prestige and ideological sustainability of the autocratic regime.” Mhadhbi’s definition is correct in the context of any state that adheres to the characteristics she lists. However, a more general and neutral definition of state feminism is any actions a government or state takes for the benefit of women. This description of state feminism transforms into Mhadhbi’s definition when the benefits women should enjoy come at costs that prompt one to question the legitimacy and worth of some rights. That is the case of Tunisia, which on the surface resembles a utopia for women but in reality experiences constant conflict between secular feminists and the state.

The foundations of Tunisian state feminism began with the Code of Personal Status (CPS), passed by Habib Bourguiba on 13 August 1956. These laws granted women essential rights, such as the ability to file for divorce, an age requirement for marriage, and an end to polygamy (Mhadhbi). As Tunisia “progressed,” the state granted women more rights, some of which include parity within the electoral lists, the right to work, travel, and own their own business, and the universalization of education to increase literacy rates in girls. Many of these rights, however, had a caveat: “there is no need for a feminist movement to exist in opposition to the state and where feminist movements do exist they must act in accordance with the state’s political priorities” (Mhadhbi).

Indeed, the consequences for participating in a feminist movement detached from the state were grave. Many Tunisian women experienced violence—physical, emotional, or

economic—as a result of their perceived defiance. While Tunisia’s “feminist” agenda granted women essential rights, it disregarded issues such as economic autonomy and domestic violence. Women who publicly addressed these matters were met with violence by the very state that was supposed to protect them. Mhadhbi highlights that if one were not “politically loyal to the regime,” they could not enjoy their rights. Therefore, the state’s feminism was not for all women, but only for those who conformed to the conventional image of woman as “obedient.” But now, obedience was owed not to a husband, but to the state itself.

Under Zine El Abidine Ben Ali’s regime, many women were classified as “‘national threats’ and threatened with fake pornographic videos,” Mhadhbi writes. The latter threat demonstrates another way the state departs from its status as “feminist.” Threats of pornographic videos were an attempt to make women less respectable and show how the state could carefully use standards (purity norms) that had not changed to discredit independent feminists. Furthermore, secular feminists’ classification as “national threats” reveals a reason behind Tunisia’s oppression of its women: “being secular, they are portrayed as ‘non-believers’; westernized women trying to impose western values on Tunisian women, and thus undermine their religious and cultural traditions” (Mhadhbi).

The above statement is key to what the then-Islamist government believed. However, in her article on Tunisia's state feminism, Ursula Lindsey explains that Ben Ali, although a secular leader, oppressed secular *and* Islamist feminists. Women affiliated with Islamist movements faced rape, torture, and forced divorce while in state custody (Lindsey). Whether the regime was secular or Islamist, some women suffered violence for stepping outside the lines of state control. This shows that Tunisia’s state feminism excluded not only “rebel” secular feminists but also women who defended their rights from a religious standpoint.

Ultimately, the problem is not just secular feminists against the state. As Lindsey and Mhadhbi both suggest, any feminist movement that does not serve state goals is punished. This reveals a deeper issue at the center of Tunisia's politics: the conflict between modernity and religion, which mirrors France's *laïcité*. One striking example is the image of Bourguiba removing a woman's veil on national television, calling it a "wretched rag." His act was not about freeing women, but about proving that Tunisia had moved away from religion and tradition and toward something more Western (Lindsey). While the relationship between secular feminists and the state remains tense, taking more time to understand these issues reveals that the problem is not secularism per se, but any form of feminism that defies the current regime and fixed definitions of modernity.

Works Cited

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