

Electoral Practice of Tunisian Women in the Context of a Democratic Transition

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Women gained the right to vote in the Arab and Muslim worlds at different times that varied from country to country. In some countries this took place in the 1930s, and the most recent one was in 2011 (see Appendix 1). The 1980s marked a turning point in most of these countries because of the emergence of new women elites—women who had benefitted from the improved health services that had lowered the rate of maternal mortality and access to their countries' universities and to the labor force (see Appendix 2, 3). By the 2000s, these elites were demanding greater participation in formal politics and the application of quotas, which stipulated that women are guaranteed a certain proportion of representatives in elected bodies (see Appendix 4). Images showing women in several countries waiting in long lines to vote appeared in newspapers, on television, and, most recently, on social media. These images had a great impact on the political education of the region's youth. The "Arab Spring" was one of the expressions of this.¹ The younger generations are increasingly hostile to forms of discrimination, including when women candidates are not allowed to put their photographs on political posters whereas men are allowed to do this² or when possible women presidential candidates are rejected in some countries and accepted in others.³ Our question here is whether all these factors are enough to produce a new political culture that includes women and whether we see changes in the behavior of the political elites, particularly in the Tunisian context.

In Tunisia in 2011, following the revolution that led to the overthrow of former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's regime, the main Islamist party, Ennahda, voted for political parity. Ennahda's decision was in response to women's demands and surprised other political parties.⁴ This new political reality meant that 5,000 women were candidates for the National Constituent Assembly (Assemblée constituante tunisienne, ANC) in the 2011 elections and women were 7 percent of heads of lists. Ennahda won 89 of the 217 seats in the National Constituent Assembly in the 2011 elections, which led to an increasingly mobilized civil society and polarized political forces over the subsequent three years. Negotiations and power plays among the various forces within the National Constituent Assembly, political parties, national organizations, and civil society outside the Assembly led to a constitution that replaced the suspended 1959 constitution. In January 2014, 200 National Constituent Assembly members voted for the new constitution, 12 voted against, and 4 abstained.

The constitution's advances in the area of secularization are considerable,⁵ and it protects freedoms of religion, expression, assembly, etc. and women's rights. The following articles illustrate these advances:⁶

Article 34

The rights to election, voting, and candidacy are guaranteed, in accordance with the law. The State seeks to guarantee women's representation in elected councils.

Article 40

Work is a right for every citizen, male and female alike. The State shall take the necessary measures to ensure the availability of work on the basis of competence and fairness. All citizens, male and female alike, shall have the right to adequate working conditions and to a fair wage.

Article 46

The State shall commit to protecting women's achieved rights and seek to support and develop them. The State shall guarantee equal opportunities between men and women in the bearing of all the various responsibilities in all fields. The State shall seek to achieve equal representation for women and men in elected councils. The State shall take the necessary measures to eliminate violence against women.

I. Is the political scene in 2014 different from that of 2011?

The final number of voters registered for the October 2014 parliamentary elections is 5,285,136, of whom 359,530 are abroad. There are a large number of political parties and of independent electoral lists reproducing the characteristics of the October 2011 elections. The coming legislative elections are also characterized by strong participation from the less developed regions of the country: of the more than 1,300 candidate lists in 33 districts, Kasserine has 69 lists, Sidi Bouzid has 64 lists, Gafsa has 62 lists, Kairouan has 61 lists, and Jendouba has 60 lists. The high number of candidate lists in these districts testifies to the great desire of populations in these regions to take control of their situations after many decades of being marginalized by central authorities.⁷ However, the youth who participated in the 2011 revolution continue to suffer from unemployment and discrimination—a recent study by the World Bank shows that in 2014, 33 percent of those between 15 and 29 years old are neither in educational institutions nor training courses and are unemployed. Discussions about programs to change this situation are avoided and the political scene is dominated by the candidates' behavior.

The political party lists represent 90 parties in all, of which only four—Ennahda, Nidaa Tounes, Congrès pour la République (CPR – Congress for the Republic), and Union Patriotique Libre (Free Patriotic Union)—are presenting lists in all districts (27 districts in Tunisia and 6 abroad) and were able to begin their election campaigns on time. Twenty-seven parties are presenting only one list. Of the 365 independent lists, 112 are in Kasserine (31 lists), Gafsa (28 lists), Jendouba (27 lists), and Sidi Bouzid (26 lists). Another particularity of this election is the formation of a network calling itself the Union of Tunisian Democratic Youth, which is composed of some 30 associations and presenting 14 lists.

Among the most significant developments following the October 2011 elections was the emergence of the Nidaa Tounes party. Nidaa Tounes was founded in 2012 by Béji Caïd Essebsi, the prime minister in the interim government from March to December 2011. The party sees itself as extending former President Habib Bourguiba's philosophy. Although it had not been formed at the time of the 2011 elections, it has succeeded in gaining the adherence of several

ANC members—independents and other political parties. Nidaa Tounes encouraged Ennahda members to vote to withdraw the ANC’s proposed law on excluding those who had played important political roles under Ben Ali. This allowed several figures from Ben Ali’s regime to become candidates for the 2014 elections, including Kamel Morjane, founder of the Al-Moubadara party; Abderrahim Zouari, candidate of the Destourien Movement founded by Hamed Karoui; and Mondher Zenaidi, an independent candidate—all of whom had been ministers under Ben Ali. On the other hand, we see the absence of important Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique (the RCD or the Constitutional Democratic Rally —Ben Ali’s party) women as candidates in this election, as was the case in the 2011 elections. Abir Moussa, a woman lawyer who was a member of the RCD and defended it in court proceedings, is the only candidate who is a former member of the RCD. She is nominated as a head of the list for the Mouvement Destourien party, in Béja. Will two other parties led by the younger generation—Afek Tounes headed by Yassine Brahim (a minister in the transitional government under Béji Caïd Essebsi in 2011) and the Union Patriotique Libre (Free Patriotic Union) headed by the very rich businessman Slim Riahi—have their predicted success? Surprises may come from how women voters respond to the appeals of the two leading parties, Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes, who are neck-and-neck in the polls.

Table 1: Lists registered in August 2014 for the legislative elections and accepted by the ISIE (Tunisia’s Independent High Authority for Elections), for 10,972 polling stations.

Geographical areas	Number of political party lists	Coalition lists	Independent lists	Lists accepted by the ISIE as of 30 Sept. 2014
Tunisia	807	134	441	1,230 (compared to 1,517 in 2011, of which 654 were independent)
Abroad	83	17	18	97 (compared to 145 in 2011)
Total	890	151	459	1,327 accepted from 1,500 lists submitted (15,652 candidates) in August 2014.
After challenges were heard and processed	803	159	365	148 women heads of lists (11.26 percent of all lists)

Newly registered women voters were more numerous than men for the 2014 elections. And among the 13,000 parliamentary candidates, 47 percent are women. Women constitute 11.26 percent of heads of lists in 2014, compared to 7 percent in 2011. This increase of more than 50 percent seems to indicate that parties have understood that the presence of women as heads of lists might attract women voters.⁸

Data that we have analyzed for 13 major political parties show that none had a woman as head of the list in the 6 districts of Le Kef, Kairouan, Tataouine, Kasserine, Gafsa, and Tozeur. The number of women at the heads of the lists of these parties is, in decreasing order, 10 for the coalition called the Union pour la Tunisie (Union for Tunisia—UPT), 7 for Congrès pour la République (Congress for the Republic), 6 for Courant Démocratique (Democratic Current), 5 for Afek Tounes, 5 for Front Populaire (Popular Front), 5 for Ettakatol, 4 for Al Joumhourri, 4 for Al Mubadara, 3 for Ennahda, 3 for Nidaa Tounes, 2 for Mouvement Destourien (Destourien Movement), and 1 for Alliance démocratique (Democratic Alliance). And Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes—the two strongest and politically polarizing parties—are among those with the fewest number of women as heads of lists, contrasting with their discourse that aims to attract women.

The following chapters will focus on women who are engaging in public life and formal politics.

Table 2: Women heads of lists for 13 major political parties, by district

District	Women list heads	District	Women list heads
Tunis I	Leila Bahri (Nidaa Tounes); Emna Ben Othman (Al Jomhuri); Samia Hamouda Abbou (Courant Democratique)	Monastir	Selma Lazhar (Courant Democratique).
Tunis II	Lobna Jeribi (Ettakatol); Selma Mabrouk (UPT); Samira Chaouachi (Almoubadara).	Mahdia	Ahlem Sebai Safi (CPR); Assia Hadj Salem (Front Populaire)
Ariana	Amel Maghrebi (Courant Democratique)	Sfax I	Samira Bouricha (Afek Tounes)
Ben Arous	Selma Baccar (UPT); Maya Jeribi (Al Jomhuri)	Sfax II	Basma Oum Ezzine Rekik (UPT); Souad Cheffi (Front Populaire)
Manouba	Tasnim Gazbar (UPT)	Gabes	Boutheina Ganounou (Afek Tounes); Rafiaa Chabchoub (Front Populaire)
Zaghouan	Hayet Ben Yeddem (CPR)	Medenine	Samira Meri FERIAA (Afek Tounes)
Bizerte	Souad Kassami/Guessmi Hajji (CPR); Monia Ben Nasr (UPT); Zohra Bennacer (Afek Tounes).	Sidi Bouzid	Manel Kadri (UPT); Mbarka Brahmi (Front Populaire)
Beja	Fethia Saidi (UPT); Abir Moussa (Mouvement Destourien)	Kebili	Oumaima Aribi (Mouvement Destourien); Aicha Fdhili (Afek Tounes)
Jendouba	Chahiha Haouli(Almoubadara), Lobna Mechichi (Courant Democratique)	France I	Sihem Badi (CPR); Sayda Ounissi (Ennahda); Nadia Chaabane (UPT); Sabria Laayouni (Almoubadara)
Silian	Najet Laabidi (Courant Democratique)	France II	Karima Sioud (UPT); Sonia Hassine (Front Populaire)
Nabeul I	Salma Elloumi Rekik (Nidaa Tounes); Selma Znaidi (Ettakatol); Nejla Bourial (Alliance Democratique); Hayet Mejrouh (Almoubadara)	Italy	Ines Chaalala (Ettakatol); Imen Ben Mohamed (Ennahda)
Nabeul II	Hanan Turki (Al Jomhuri); Meherzia Laabidi (Ennahda)	Germany	Mouna Allaoui/Allami (CPR); Lobna Maaroufi (Ettakatol)
Sousse	Noura Ben Hassine/Hassen (CPR); Nahla Ben Khalifa (Al Jomhuri)	Arab world	Wafa Toumi (Courant Democratique)
		Americas	Lamia Mlih (Nidaa Tounes); Ibtissem Triki (CPR); Radhia Ben Amor (UPT).Afef Daoued (Ettakatol)

Map 1: Women heads of lists for 13 political parties



A. What lessons did women learn from the 2011 elections?

To answer this question, we will look at the paths taken by two woman candidates, Bochra Belhaj Hmida and Souad Abderrahim, from two different political parties. They were among the candidates with the most media coverage during the 2011 election campaign.

Bochra Belhaj Hmida, a lawyer and former president of the Tunisian Democratic Women Association, joined the Ettakatol party after the revolution. She was put as head of the list in her home district of Zaghuan after the party had offered her the second position on their Tunis list. She had only limited means at her disposal during the campaign, and she was a target of rumors about her personality and her candidacy, which caused some damage to her campaign. She was traumatized by attacks from her political opponents, whom she identified as Ennahda party activists, and by the behavior of other candidates on her list who abandoned her in the middle of the electoral battle. She also expressed a number of complaints against Ettakatol. As soon as the results of the election were announced—she lost, but her party won 20 seats in the National Constituent Assembly—she resigned from Ettakatol. Other resignations followed, and in 2014 there were only 12 Ettakatol National Constituent Assembly members of the original 20. Hmida joined Nidaa Tounes as soon as it was formed, because the new party united many opposition groups, rejected excluding former RCD figures from political life, and attracted business figures who were looking for a strong party because they had been victims of strikes, sit-ins, and demonstrations. In this way, Nidaa Tounes benefitted from what came to be known as “political nomadism” and had five National Constituent Assembly members by 2014, even though it had not yet been formed at the time of the October 2011 elections.

For the October 2014 elections, Hmida is second on the list for the district Tunis 2. This list is headed by Saïd Aïdi, former minister of Employment and Professional Training in the Béji Caïd Essebsi transitional government that was formed shortly after the revolution. But during the election campaign party, personnel in the poorer outskirts of Tunis (Sidi Hassine, Mellasine, and Hay Hlel), confronting some difficulties similar to those Hmida faced in 2011, announced their collective withdrawal from the Nidaa Tounes Party, complaining of the absence of resources and expressing the view that the party was serving as a cover for RCD members.⁹

Souad Abderrahim had been a member of the executive committee of the Islamic-oriented General Union of Tunisian Students (UGTE) and had been imprisoned for 15 days in 1985 for her political activities. She decided shortly thereafter, in the face of a hardening of the Bourguiba and then Ben Ali regimes, to withdraw from politics and to pursue her pharmaceutical studies and career. She once again became active in civil society after the revolution and when approached by the Ennahda party she agreed, while remaining independent, to support their program and become head of the list for the Tunis 2 district for the October 2011 elections. Because she is a pharmacist and entrepreneur and does not wear the hijab, she contributed to Ennahda’s image of a political party that was open to diversity and reassured women of the party’s intent to defend women’s rights.

Her success in the elections put her in the limelight, and she subsequently became a controversial figure. Her discussion on Radio Monte Carlo with Hmida and Nadia Chaabane about her views

against women who had children outside marriage angered many feminists and civil society associations. The anger was such that on the ANC's opening day, Abderrahim was physically attacked. Since then she has been repeatedly criticized in the press as Ennahda's "passionaria," as the party's feminist alibi, as Tunisia's Sarah Palin, as Souad Le Pen (a reference to the French politician Marine Le Pen), and has had cartoons mocking her. She was depicted as dancing in a bikini with three Ennahda figures in a satirical skit on television.¹⁰ She seems to have been especially affected by the reaction to a video showing her son dancing the "Harlem shake" with a group at a secondary school in a chic area of Tunis—something that annoyed the education minister. Mohsen Marzouk, of the Nidaa Tounes party, criticized her by saying, "Leave Abderrahim's son alone... he shouldn't have to pay for his mother's mistakes. We who defend individual freedoms, we don't confuse political differences with human rights."¹¹ And she appeared uncomfortable in a discussion with the Tunisian Democratic Women Association's president on the very controversial issue of "complementarity" (a term proposed for the constitution and initially supported by Ennahda, describing the relationship between men and women), trying both to defend Ennahda's position and to understand many women's opposition to it. Traumatized by the physical attack and shocked by constant criticism from the opposition, she appeared to television and radio audiences as a woman in tears.

During this period, we saw from newspaper articles the divergence appearing between her and the Ennahda party. Abderrahim announced that she would be an independent candidate in the coming elections and joining Nidaa Tounes was "not out of the question," a statement that she immediately denied making.¹² She had always taken an independent stance, recognizing that without the work of Bourguiba she would not have been able to become what she was, even though the Ennahda party criticized Bourguiba's cultural legacy. She also differed from Rached Ghannouchi, head of the Ennahda party, regarding the role of the satellite television channel Al-Jazeera in the revolution. Finally, she felt it necessary to remind Meherzia Laabidi¹³ (an Ennahda party National Constituent Assembly member) that she had been named National Constituent Assembly vice president thanks to the votes of ANC members, and, therefore, she ought to apologize to a colleague whom she had offended.¹⁴ From that period on, her absence from Ennahda's public meetings was noticeable. She did not take part in the August 13, 2013 demonstration on Avenue Habib Bourguiba in downtown Tunis to commemorate the passage of the Personal Status Code, at a moment when Ennahda was under attack by an opposition that wanted to dissolve the National Constituent Assembly and topple the government, similar to the unrest in Egypt in the preceding months that led to the military takeover.¹⁵ In August 2014, Abderrahim announced she would be heading her own list, an independent one, in Ariana.¹⁶ And Ennahda, which had begun with 89 members in the National Constituent Assembly in 2011, was down to 85 in 2014.

These biographical notes testify to the difficult experiences these two women political figures faced following the December 17, 2010 –January 14, 2011 revolution. They did not escape unscathed from their participation in formal politics, and their experience recalls similarities in the lives of a number of women before the revolution—women like Sihem Ben Sedrine, Radhia Nasraoui, and Zoulaikha Gharbi¹⁷—who suffered penalties for opposing authorities, denouncing corruption, defending human rights, or supporting a spouse who opposed the regime.

B. What place have the major political parties given to women candidates in the elections?

If Ennahda's strategy in 2011 was to put Abderrahim as the head of the list to attract Tunisia's women voters, what is its strategy for the coming elections? Does Nidaa Tounes have a strategy in this area? Do the independent lists run the risk of scattering the votes, as happened in 2011?

The Nidaa Tounes party, which attracted many women who feared their rights would not be protected after the 2011 elections, disappointed many when it named only one woman head of the list for the 2014 elections for all of Tunisia: Selma Elloumi Rekik, a woman entrepreneur in the district Nabeul 1. Nidaa Tounes finally named another woman head of the list only after accusations of nepotism forced Hafedh Caïd Essebsi, Béji Caïd Essebsi's son and head of the list for Tunis 1, to withdraw his candidacy. Faiza Kefi—a former member of the executive committee of the National Union of Tunisian Women (UNFT) and minister and ambassador during the Ben Ali period—and Leila Ouled Ali Bahri—another former member of the National Union of Tunisian Women's executive committee who had worked under Ben Ali in the office of the Ministry for the Affairs of Women, Family, Children, and the Aged—were mentioned as possible replacements. After several days of uncertainty, Leila Ouled Ali Bahri, then second on Tunis 1's list, was officially named as a second woman head of list for Nidaa Tounes.

In addition to undergoing a withdrawal of personnel from some poorer areas, Nidaa Tounes also underwent the decamping of a number of its important woman figures, such as Jihene Hdhairi, Lamia Sellami, Rim Ben Aich, Chayma Remili, Fatma Gharbi, Tasnim Gazbar, Olfa Youssef, and Salwa Hamrouni. Fatma Gharbi is a National Constituent Assembly member who withdrew her support for Béji Caïd Essebsi's presidential candidacy. Tasnim Gazbar joined the Union pour la Tunisie (Union for Tunisia). Olfa Youssef is an academic and an author of a number of books who announced her withdrawal from Nidaa Tounes on her Facebook page, saying that she realized that she could not be a member of any party. Two weeks later, she said that she would support the candidacy of Kamel Morjane, head of the Al-Moubadara party. Salwa Hamrouni joined the advisory committee of Mustapha Kamel Nabli, an independent candidate for president.

The frontline women candidates of Nidaa Tounes echo the symbols of the previous regime—business women and National Union of Tunisian Women members. Did Nidaa Tounes put liberal feminists like Bochra Belhaj Hmida, a lawyer and former Tunisian Democratic Women Association president, in a secondary position to avoid attacks against the party for its feminism?

Now, with the new constitution having been promulgated under the “Troika” government led by the Ennahda party in a coalition with the Congress for the Republic party and Ettakatol, and with Ennahda reinforcing its position as promoting moderate Islam, Ennahda seems to have chosen to expand its base to include more of the middle classes—it named three women wearing the hijab as heads of lists for the 2014 elections: Meherzia Labidi (Nabeul 2), Sayda Ounissi (France 1), and Imen Ben Mohamed (Italy), all of whom had been victims of cultural, political, and/or economic discrimination under the previous regimes.

Meherzia Labidi is one of the 33 members of the National Constituent Assembly elected in 2011 who are now candidates for the 2014 elections. She has also become the focus of controversy.

She has been sharply criticized by some women who identified her with the party's initial position in favor of putting the term "complementarity" in the constitution to describe the relationship between men and women—a term that reinforced fears that women's rights were in danger. This controversy led to the slogan, "Meherzia is not the Tunisian woman." When Labidi was questioned by a journalist about this slogan, she answered by saying that Tunisian society needed to go beyond the "one-ness" model (referring to the "one-party" model under Bourguiba and the "one-party in power" model under Ben Ali), because the Tunisian woman had many aspects.¹⁸ Why has the party invested so much in her when she is being criticized in such a way?

Meherzia Labidi is a translator and interpreter, holding a Masters degree in English literature and theatre studies. She is a member of several international organizations, ranked sixth among eight women who made the world a better place in 2014, and co-author of the book *Abraham, Réveille Toi, Ils Sont Devenus Fous* (Abraham, wake up, they have become mad).¹⁹ She therefore stands out among the 84 percent of Ennahda party candidates who hold university degrees and who hope to enter the next parliament. Among the 46 percent of Ennahda candidates who are women, she is the only Ennahda woman head of list in Tunisia.²⁰

The Ennahda party continues to solicit the support of women who do not wear the hijab. Among these new political figures not wearing the hijab, we find Arwa Ben Abbas and Hayet Omri. Arwa Ben Abbas is an interior architectural designer, second in a head of the list position by Abdelfattah Mourou in the district Tunis II. Hayet Omri is a science researcher. She has won several international honors for her discoveries but has not been offered a full-time position in Tunisian universities, working there only as a substitute and receiving no income from this for the past two years. She is second in a list headed by Naoufel Jammali, the Minister of Labor in the Larayedh government of March 2013 to January 2014.

There are some other cases, in addition to those of Bochra Belhaj Hmida and Souad Abderrahim, where women have been publically vilified for expressing controversial opinions, reinforcing the view that measures need to be implemented so women will not be discouraged from entering public life and formal politics.

One case concerns what was revealed on the television program *Klem Ennass* (Words of the People). Naoufel Ouertani, the host of this program, announced that a political party had tried to bribe him, offering him money if he fired Maya Ksouri, the psychologist television figure known for her strong language and character, from his program. Maya Ksouri had previously criticized Nidaa Tounes. Mohsen Marzouk, one of the leaders of Nidaa Tounes criticized her on his Facebook page, citing her lack of objectivity toward the party.²¹ In order to dishonor and weaken her, a photograph was posted of her together with a man, a lawyer, who was not a relative, which led some to attack her behavior.²²

The second case concerns an interaction between Béji Caïd Essebsi and Meherzia Labidi. A journalist reported that Meherzia Labidi said that Béji Caïd Essebsi's government was indulgent toward Ansar al-Shari'a—a movement founded in April 2011 by Abou Iyadh and which the Larayedh government put on the list of terrorist organizations because it was implicated in several terrorist actions. Essebsi responded to that report during an episode of "Thank you for

being here” on the public television channel Al-Wataniya, on October 1, 2014 by saying “Meherzia Labidi is a woman, only a woman.”²³

The next day, at a press conference where he presented his party’s program, he said, “I didn’t insult women and I respect Madame Meherzia Labidi... Our success depends on women.”²⁴ But the damage was already done. His response unleashed strong reactions among women on social networks, who saw his comments as an attack on women in general and as sexist views toward a political figure representing state institutions. The reactions of women members of Nidaa Tounes were awaited with great expectations. Bochra Belhaj Hmida tried to see the situation in a nuanced manner when she stated on the radio, “I consider his words to be an error. Apparently, to say that he’s not responding because he respects women can seem positive but, in reality, the contrary is true... I can ask him to explain his mistake, but I will never forget that his government lifted Tunisia’s reservations regarding CEDAW.”²⁵ Fourteen intellectuals, among them the woman academics Raja Ben Slama, Dalenda Lagueche, and Malika Ouelbani, issued a statement publicized by the media several days after the remarks in which they declared their intention to vote for Béji Caïd Essebsi.

Synda Tajine, a young woman online journalist, reacted quickly, writing, “It’s only Béji Caïd Essebsi, head of the main ‘democratic and modernist’ opposition party. A current presidential candidate said this, on national television, in front of a large audience.”²⁶ Many women, unhappy that Nidaa Tounes named only one woman as a head of the list in Tunisia, stated that they had had enough, and that they were no longer going to vote for Béji Caïd Essebsi.

Other critical voices included that of Ahlem Kamarji, vice president of the Union Patriotique Libre party (headed by Slim Riahi) and responsible for women, family, and children’s issues in that party. Kamarji stated on the *Tounissiya* television channel that she was not surprised by Béji Caïd Essebsi’s remark. She was not surprised because this was not his first error; Essebsi had made remarks of a similar sort on several occasions concerning other individuals. Kamarji also linked Essebsi’s sexist remark to the absence of Nidaa Tounes women in public debates, stating that they were not visible in the way Tunisian women activists had been after independence.²⁷ The Tunisian Democratic Women Association published a communiqué denouncing Béji Caïd Essebsi’s remarks, saying that his statement “conveys a humiliation and contempt towards women and reflects a masculine mentality of discrimination based on exclusion, which considers women second-class citizens.”²⁸ And, to top things off, the online Tunisian news outlet *Tunisie numerique* revealed on October 9, 2014 that the women’s images used on a Nidaa Tounes election poster were not of Tunisian women but of Spanish women from a Spanish poster from 2012.²⁹



C. The *niqab* invites itself to the Tunisian elections

Some women candidates for the 2014 elections wear the *niqab* (face veil). We need to examine the genealogy of the debate over the *niqab* in Tunisia to better situate the debate about these candidates. Interim President Moncef Marzouki's first speech after his election in October 2011 was a turning point in the public life of women. He classified women according to whether they wore the *niqab*, the hijab, or were uncovered (*safirat*). This last term, which comes from classical literary Arabic, shocked many women who consider it to be an affront and a pejorative term toward women. He continued to defend wearing the *niqab*, and a photograph of Marzouki with a woman wearing the *niqab*, a woman who was among the prize winners at a competition for learning the Qur'an organized at the Carthage Presidential Palace, circulated widely on social networks. He was sharply criticized by the secularist elite for whom the hijab and *niqab* are symbols of backwardness.

When the administration of the Faculty of Letters, Arts, and the Humanities refused to allow a woman student to cover her face in the fall of 2012, some 50 students organized a sit-in and confined Dean Habib Kazdaghli to his office, demanding that students wearing the *niqab* have the same rights as other students. Professors in this faculty held a meeting and decided to forbid the *niqab*. The Minister of Higher Education, Moncef Ben Salem, refused to take a position on the wearing of the *niqab* at the university. An online poll of 217 university faculty members showed that 69 percent did not approve of wearing the *niqab* in university classes.³⁰ As this incident continued, five women students wearing the *niqab* were faced with disciplinary proceedings. Fatouma Haji, a student, brought a complaint against the dean, who was acquitted

after a long trial. An international network of higher education institutions promoting academic freedom gave him the “Scholars at Risk” award in April 2014 in Amsterdam in recognition of his courage. Fatouma Haji was sentenced to four months in prison for having damaged the dean’s possessions. But the arrest by the police of several women wearing the *niqab* in public space led to some anxiety. President Moncef Marzouki argued in his inaugural discourse that wearing the *niqab* is an expression of fundamental personal freedoms that cannot be attacked, and that if there is doubt regarding the identity of the individual wearing the *niqab*, the search must be carried out by women officers.

The approaching elections means the *niqab* again comes back into focus. Some women candidates wearing the *niqab* were sharply criticized on the Internet and in the press. The list for “the people want” (recalling a slogan of the revolution) in the city of Mahdia included four women candidates; Basma ElHaj Amor and Latifa Mohamed wear the hijab, Houda Houta wears the *niqab*, and Zahra El Bédoui uses roses instead of her photographs on posters (*zahra* means “rose” in Arabic), just as some members of the Al-Nour Party did during the 2012 Egyptian elections.

Rabiaa Ismaïli of the Medenine district is another candidate on “the people want” list who wears the *niqab*. When she was questioned about the violence, she said she condemned it but refused to answer questions relating to the Personal Status Code. The Personal Status Code was put into effect in 1956 and advanced women’s rights by abolishing polygamy, instituting judicial divorce,

The poster is for the "List of the People Want" (قائمة الشعب يريد) in the Mahdia district (ولاية المهدية). It features a central logo with the text "الشعب يريد" (The People Want) and a map of the district. The candidates listed are:

- صلاح الدين الخيام (Salah al-Din al-Khiam)
- أحمد طه الجريبي (Ahmed Taher al-Jaribi)
- بسمة الحاج عمر (Basma al-Hajj Umar)
- هدى حوتة (Huda Houta)
- ولاية المهدية (Mahdia District)
- وحيد الجمالي (صانير) (Wahid al-Jamali (Sanir))
- أمين عباس (Amin Abbas)
- زهرة البدوي (Zahra al-Badawi)
- لطيفة محمد (Latifa Mohamed)

The poster also includes a ballot box icon and the number 15, indicating the district's number in the election.

establishing equal pay for equal work, and so on. Ismaïli also refused to answer questions related to polygamy, saying that these matters were not on her election campaign program. Fanciful items circulated on the Internet including, for example, an appeal supposedly from the Ennahda party calling upon women to not wear the *niqab* but to wear pants and high-heel shoes—an attribution that was quickly rejected by the party.³¹

II. Will Tunisians choose a woman to be president?

The names of seven women were circulated regarding the presidential elections to be held in November 2014. There was Widad Bouchamaoui, a very wealthy woman and president of UTICA (an organization of business leaders and entrepreneurs), whose name was often cited, but she refused to become a candidate. Badra Gaaloul, Professor of Military Social Science and President of the International Center for Strategic, Security, and Military Studies, announced her candidacy but withdrew it several days before the formal registration closed. The five others are Emna Mansour Karoui, an entrepreneur and president and founder of the political party Democratic Movement for Reform and Constructions; Kalthoum Kannou, a judge and former president of the Tunisian Association of Magistrates; Leila Hammami, a teacher in the United Kingdom who announced on her Facebook page that she was withdrawing after accusing some unnamed National Constituent Assembly members of having asked for money in return for their support; and, finally, Cherifa Ammar and Moufida Amdouni. These last three are unknown figures. Only Emna Mansour Karoui is supported by a political party—the same one she founded in 2011.³²

The ISIE (High Independent Authority for the Elections) confirmed only 27 of the 70 candidates registered, including four individuals from the previous regime, three National Constituent Assembly members, four businessmen, and four legal figures. Five of the original 70 were women, and Kalthoum Kannou, one of the four legal figures, was the only woman candidate confirmed by the ISIE. Several of the rejected candidates brought a complaint against the ISIE. The ISIE brought complaints against several candidates, accusing them of fraud concerning patronage and support. Leila Bahria, president of the Observatoire Chahed, argued that among those candidates confirmed by the ISIE, nine had cheated in order to collect the required number of sponsors.³³

In November 2014, Tunisians will choose the president—male or female—who will preside over the fate of their country. Will voters refute people like Khélil Zaouia, Minister of Social Affairs in the Troika government and a member of the Ettakatol party, and others who stated that they did not see “that essential quality necessary to occupy the position of President of the Republic, that a woman would be able to unite all Tunisians” in any of the three women potential candidates (Karoui, Kennou, and Hammami)?³⁴ Neziha Rejiba, a journalist who is also known as Om Zied, resigned from the Congrès pour la République (Congress for the Republic party) and declared to Tunisian journalist Samira Dami that she would support Kalthoum Kannou. Rejiba listed the reasons she supported Kannou including that Kannou had become a candidate to challenge Ennahda’s plan to have a consensus candidate, she had high moral standing and had suffered much under Ben Ali’s regime, she had no relationship with the dictatorship, her political history was blank, she was not involved in court cases (unlike other candidates), she was a judge

and her knowledge of the law would be very useful in her position, she listens, and she would surround herself with competent people.³⁵

Will Kannou succeed? That is not the principal issue. Her candidacy in itself is of great importance. Kannou has broken the ice and is sending a significant message for women who must still struggle against hoaxes, rumors, fraud, and low blows, which, as Hédia Baraket has written, “decredibilize” the election process.³⁶ For example the video clip “Keep your eye on the accord” demands that the political figures of the 23 political parties who signed an accord to keep high ethical values during the campaign place the national interest above all else and that they defend peace and the values of solidarity, love, and coexistence among all Tunisians. None of these political party figures is a woman.³⁷

Conclusion

This discussion has allowed us to show how Tunisian women have displayed new forms of behavior in public life and formal politics in the context of democratic transition. Tunisian women have benefitted since the country’s independence in 1956 from an improvement in healthcare and access to education, gained the right to vote in 1959, and today have access to the media and to social networks. Since the Tunisian revolution, Tunisian women have conquered fear and exercised their freedom to hold meetings and demonstrations. Their voices and actions contributed to a new constitution in which “equality” between men and women, rather than “complementarity,” was enshrined in that fundamental document that women National Constituent Assembly members helped write.

Tunisia’s political parties have evolved and learned to accommodate the political parity adopted in March 2011 by the High Authority for the Realization of the Aims of the Revolution, Political Reform, and Democratic Transition, the institution formed after the revolution to establish new government guidelines. Women who have been active in associations that were feminist, cultural, and/or social have become increasingly politicized. They have joined political parties and then left them when the parties did not respond to their aspirations. They have also publicly supported a candidate and then withdrawn their support in favor of another, have practiced “political nomadism” by choosing a party that offers better opportunities for leadership, and have become candidates in legislative and presidential elections, and so on.

Yet, some aspects of recent political behavior toward women are similar to those observed under President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and even during the elections of 2011. This political behavior includes widespread misogyny reflected in attacks on women by political parties and the media, the absence of women in the media and on television programs, and the lack of discussion of economic questions. Among recent developments causing concern, in part because they contribute to political tensions, are:

- political polarization between the two main political parties;
- a “political nomadism” that has seen many figures switching parties;
- a scattering of votes among the many smaller political parties;

- the high number of acts of political vandalism related to the elections—in one week more than 700 were counted in greater Tunis and approximately 100 in the Kef region—a number that is likely to increase in the coming weeks during the election period;
- the return of youth who have gone to fight in Syria and Iraq raising the fear that this will lead to attacks within Tunisia;
- the risk of paralysis in economic and political life, in part as a result of pressure put on the transitional government by trade union groups demanding wage increases and also a general disaffection of Tunisians toward the political process, which may lead to a low election turnout;
- and finally, the threat by some political parties that they will not accept the election results arguing that corruption and secret agreements delegitimize the process.

And all this is taking place in a context where the media, the judicial system, and the police are still in the hands of people from the former regime.

However, there are significant new aspects that are grounds for some optimism. Among these are the increase in the number of women candidates who are the heads of lists; the resignation of women and youth from political parties that did not express values of dignity and democracy, which were central demands of the revolution; and the appearance of the *niqab* on election posters and/or the absence of photographs for some women candidates and in some cases for all candidates.

We also see efforts made toward a more inclusive political system. Ennahda has abstained from presenting a presidential candidate, despite being the strongest Tunisian party, because it says it wants a consensus government rather than a government dominated by one party. And there are several presidential candidates from Le Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique (Constitutional Democratic Rally) who were prohibited from political activity in 2011. All these factors, including perhaps above all, the greater political activism of women, testify to the cultural and political upheaval that has occurred since the onset of the “Arab Spring” in Tunisia. Such factors provide Tunisians with some hope that the transition will indeed lead to a democratic form of government.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Date women gained voting rights in the Arab and Muslim worlds

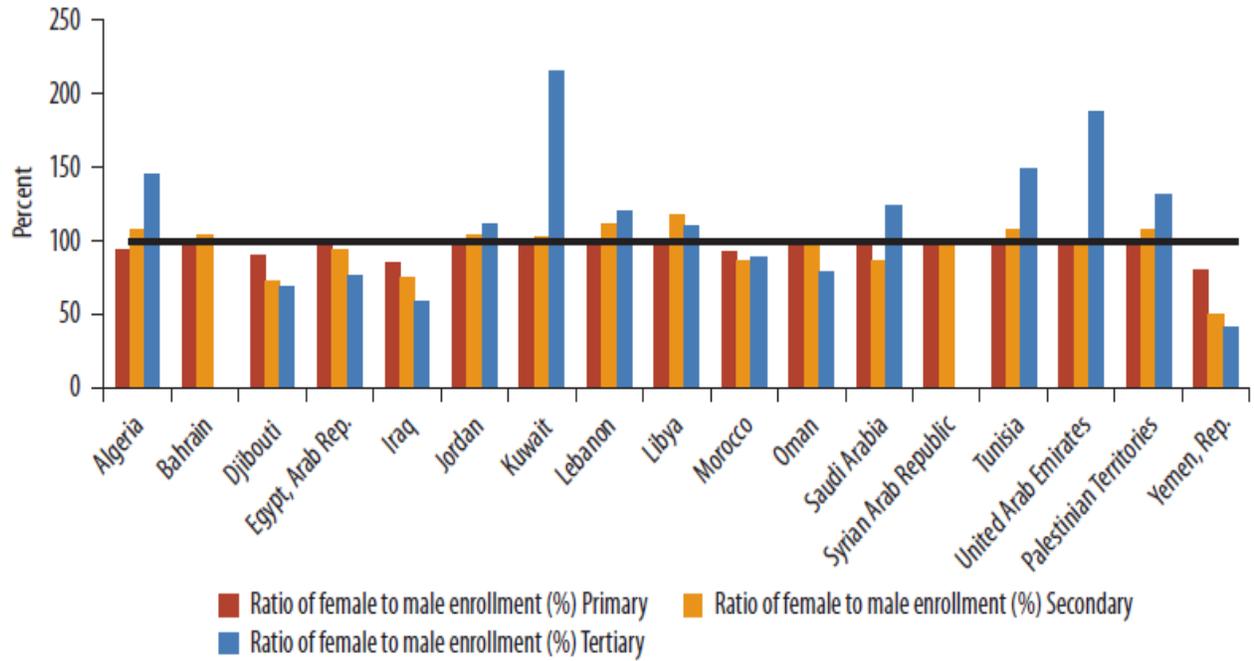
Country	Date	Country	Date
Turkey	1930	Yemen	1967
Indonesia	1945	Bangladesh	1972
Lebanon	1952	Bahrain	1973
Pakistan, Syria	1954	Jordan	1974
Egypt	1955	Iraq	1980
Tunisia, Malaysia	1957	Qatar	1999
Algeria	1958, when still a French colony; 1962, upon independence		
Morocco	1960	Oman	2003
Mauritania	1961	Kuwait	2005
Afghanistan, Iran,	1963	United Arab Emirates	2006
Libya, Sudan	1964	Saudi Arabia	2011

Appendix 2: Maternal Mortality Ratio (per 100,000 live births) and Labor Force

Country	Maternal mortality ratio 2004-2008	Maternal mortality ratio 2009-2013	Women labor force indicators 1980	Women labor force indicators 1995
Algeria	92	89	15	21
Egypt	50	45	26	29
Jordan	53	50	15	21
Mauritania	360	320	--	--
Morocco	130	120	34	35
Tunisia	48	46	29	30

Source: World Bank 2014

Appendix 3: Female-to-Male Enrollment Ratios: MENA, 1975-2010



Source: WDI 2011 (World Bank multiple years).

Appendix 4: Quota and Percentage of Women in Parliaments in the Arab World

Country	Year of Elections	Year quota was Adopted	Women as Percentage of Parliament
Algeria	2012	2012	31.6%
Egypt	2011	2010 (Quota of 65 seats for women, 12.7% of parliament)	1.97% (8 elected and 2 named)
Iraq	2014	2005	25.3%
Jordan	2013	2003	12%
Morocco	2011	2002	16.71%
Tunisia	2011	2009(at least half the party's list must be women); 2011(political parity)	49 women(42 belong to the Ennahda party), in October 2011, of a total of 217 seats. With some elected ANC members moving to other positions and women replacing them, the number of women rose to 61 in 2014, or 28.1%.
Libya	2012	2012	16.5% in 2012
Kuwait	2009		2009(4 women enter parliament for the first time)
Syria	2003		12%
Palestine	2006		12.8%
Saudi Arabia	2013		19.8%
United Arab Emirates	2011		17.5%
Bahrain	2010		10%
Lebanon	2009		3.1%
Oman	2011		1.2%

¹ In Algeria, in 1991, women succeeded in having the Constitutional Council abrogate the article that allowed the husband to vote in place of his wife (<http://eleuthera.free.fr/html/198.htm>); in Afghanistan women have been trained to oversee elections (Reuters and The Associated Press. Afghans vote in historic elections, undeterred by threats (5 April 2014), <http://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/1.583878>) And in Iraq, despite violence, women went to vote (Reuters. Election day bomb in Iraq kills two women on their way to polls (30/4/2014) <http://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/1.588182>)

² In Saudi Arabia women were granted the right to their own national identification cards in 2001, and in 2013 30 women became members of Majlis al-Shura, 20% of the seats. Ahmed Al Omran relates in “Uneven Playing Field for Saudi Women in Local Elections?” how Hatoun Al Fassi, historian of women’s history, characterized forbidding women to use their identity photos as “a clear discrimination.” (19 February 2014, <http://blogs.wsj.com/middleeast/2014/02/19/uneven-playing-field-for-saudi-women-in-local-elections>.)

³ The 30 woman candidates registered for presidential elections in Iran learned that, with the law lacking clarity, they were not able to present themselves as candidates. (See Iran election: Cleric rules out women candidates. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22560976> (16 May 2013))

⁴ Lilia Labidi. “*The Arab Spring in Tunisia: Parity, Elections and the Struggle for Women’s Rights.*” In Fahed Al-Sumait et. al (eds), *The Arab Uprisings: Catalysts, Dynamics, and Trajectories.* USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publisher, 2014.

⁵ Shari’a is not mentioned as a source of law in the new constitution which recognizes that “The State shall protect religion, guarantee freedom of belief and conscience and religious practices ...” (Article 6). The role of Islam as Tunisia’s religion and the civil nature of the state are indicated in the Preamble, “our people’s commitment to the teachings of Islam and its open and moderate objectives, to sublime human values and the principles of universal human rights...”

⁶ The unofficial translations in this paper of the new Tunisian constitution are taken from: http://www.jasmine-foundation.org/doc/unofficial_english_translation_of_tunisian_constitution_final_ed.pdf

⁷ According to a UNICEF study in 2014, the administrative region of Sidi Bouzid has the highest rate of infant poverty for those aged between 24 and 59 months – 38.2%, compared to 3.9% in the Tunis region. The northwest, which in the past had been considered the “useful” region of the country, has been neglected. In 1975 its population was 19% of the country’s total but today it reaches only 10%, despite still having conditions suitable for agriculture, hydrocarbons, etc. (See Tarek Nehdi. Le marasme du secteur pétrolier en Tunisie, (9/10/2014) <http://nawaat.org/portail/2014/10/09/le-marasme-du-secteur-petrolier-en-tunisie/>)

⁸ To become a member of parliament one must be a voter with Tunisian nationality for at least 10 years, possess one’s identity card or passport, have reached 23 years of age at the time of candidacy, cannot have a judicial record, and have proof of tax payment for the preceding year. Holders of official and governmental positions (judges, mission heads, holders of diplomatic or consular positions, etc. cannot be candidates for the parliament.

⁹ Demission collective. (5 October 2014) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2E3QbsZap2g>

¹⁰ Souad Abderrahim was the target of several cartoons and skits where she was shown holding an adult Islamist with a beard as a baby, dancing in a bikini in the presence of male members of

her party, or in a meeting with women members of Ennahda. See: Hammadi Jebali Calife. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oSLPS6y1FYE>; Réunion entre femmes Sonia Toumia, Souad Abderrahim, Yamina Zoghلامي, Soumaya Ghannouchi, Meherzia Laabidi, Habiba Triki, Samia Ferchichi, Kaouther Ladgham et Najiba Berioul. http://www.hanafi-art.com/enEnnahda_reunion_entre_femmes.html; Hamadi Jebali : Le rêve du 6ème Calife, <http://www.hanafi-art.com/hamadijebali7.html>; Souad Abderrahim, La Sarah Palin à la Tunisienne! <http://www.hanafi-art.com/souadabderrahim5.html>

¹¹ Soufia B.A. Mohsen Marzouk defend le fils de Souad Abderrahim. MAG14 (23/2/2013) <http://www.mag14.com/national/40-politique/1591-tunisie--mohsen-marzouk-defend-le-fils-de-souad-abderrahim.html>

¹² Souad Abderrahim à Nidaaa Tounes? <http://www.baya.tn/2013/05/30/souad-abderrahim-a-Nidaaa-tounes/> (30 May 2013).

¹³ Meherzia Laabidi is not related to the author.

¹⁴ Video: Souad Abderrahim remet Meherzia Laabidi a sa place (Souad Abderrahim puts Meherzia Laabidi in her place). http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_hOMtf9TfIk (5 June 2013)

¹⁵ Lilia Labidi. "Tunisian Summer 2013: A Season of Political Turmoil." Insight Spring 2014, Pp. 23 – 41. MEI, NUS, Singapore.

<http://www.mei.nus.edu.sg/publications/mei-insights/tunisian-summer-2013-a-season-of-political>

¹⁶ Souad Abderrahim is presented in a list of independents for Manouba. (28 August 2014) <http://www.tuniscopes.com/article/51905/actualites/politique/souad-abderrahim-534613>. In addition, Hamadi Jebali, former prime minister in the Troika government (24 December 2011 to 13 March 2013), after resigning from the secretariat of Ennahda, announced several weeks later that he would not be a candidate for the presidential elections.

¹⁷ L'Union l'Arlennais. Dans les geôles de Ben Ali arrêtés, torturés... (25 February 2011) <http://www.lunion.presse.fr/article/a-la-une/dans-les-geoles-de-ben-ali-arretes-tortures>. This article describes how women were abused, tortured, terrorized, and suffered attacks on their honor. Some were forced to divorce a spouse held in prison, as in the case of Fraj Eljami.

¹⁸ Meherzia Laabidi comments on the slogan "La femme tunisienne n'est pas Meherzia" (Meherzia is not the Tunisian woman) and speaks about Amina Tyler and Femen http://www.shemsfm.net/fr/video/meherzia-laabidi-commente-le-slogan-la-femme-tunisienne-n-est-pas-meherzia-et-parle-d-amina-femen_45590

¹⁹ France: Ed. de l'Atelier, 2004.

²⁰ Among the Ennahda party candidates for the legislative elections of October 2014 16% are relatively young; of all Ennahda candidates, 10 are former ministers, 9 businessmen, 11 jurists, 6 doctors, and 64 teachers (6 in higher education, 47 at the secondary level, 6 at the primary level).

²¹ Maya Ksouri criticized Nidaa Tounes during the program "Klem Ennass," broadcast on the television channel Et-Tounssiya, 14 February 2014.

²² Soufia Ben Achour. Nidaa Tounes cloue Maya Ksouri au pilori. (13 February 2014) <http://tn.webradar.me/portal/71140527>

²³ Beji Caid Essibsi répond à Mehrezia Laâbidi : Ce n'est qu'une femme après tout (vidéo) (1 October 2014) [http://www.businessnews.com.tn/BCE-rÃ©pond-Ã-Mehrezia-LaÃ¢bidi--Ce-n'Ã©st-qu'Ã©-une-femme-aprÃ©s-tout-\(vidÃ©o\),534,49914,3](http://www.businessnews.com.tn/BCE-rÃ©pond-Ã-Mehrezia-LaÃ¢bidi--Ce-n'Ã©st-qu'Ã©-une-femme-aprÃ©s-tout-(vidÃ©o),534,49914,3)

²⁴ Sâara A. "Notre réussite dépend de la femme." (La Presse, 2 October 2014).

²⁵ Béji Caïd Essebsi justifie ses propos contre Mehrezia Labidi, Bochra Bel Haj Hamida parle d'une "erreur." (3 October 2014) http://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/2014/10/03/beji-caid-essebsi-mehrezia-labidi_n_5926964.html?utm_hp_ref=maghreb-politique

²⁶ Synda Tajine. Le sefsari est le nouveau bikini ! (2 October 2014) <http://www.businessnews.com.tn/Le-sefsari-est-le-nouveau-bikini-!,523,49929,3>

²⁷ Ahlem Kamerji intervient sur l'écran de la télévision AlTounissiya <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbIR3wMKmAY>

²⁸ L'ATFD dénonce les déclarations de BCE à l'égard des femmes. Mosaique FM (3 October 2014)

<http://www.mosaiquefm.net/fr/index/a/ActuDetail/Element/42585-l-atfd-denonce-les-declarations-de-bce-a-l-egard-des-femmes>

²⁹ Ramsis. Elections – Communication : Rien ne se perd, rien ne se crée, tout se dérobe ! (9 October 2014)

<http://www.tunisienumerique.com/tunisie-elections-communication-rien-ne-se-perd-rien-ne-se-cree-tout-se-derobe/236227>

³⁰ The poll was carried out in September 2012 by *Tunisie sondage* in collaboration with *TBC Partners*.

³¹ H.B.H. EnEnnahda appelle ses adhérents à ne pas porter le niqab pendant la période électorale; Jelassi dément. Réalités onLine. (6 October 2014)

<http://www.realites.com.tn/2014/10/06/enEnnahda-appelle-ses-adherentes-a-ne-pas-porter-le-niqab-pendant-la-periode-electorale-jelassi-dement/>

³² Emna Mansour Karoui holds a Masters degree in management studies from the Université de Strasbourg, France.

³³ Unsigned. Présidentielle: Neuf cas de triche détectées dans les parrainages des candidatures, selon l'Observatoire Chahed. (29 September 2014) <http://tunisie14.tn/article/detail/presidentielle-neuf-cas-de-triche-detectees-dans-les-parrainages-des-candidatures-selon-l-observatoire-chahed>.

To be eligible for the presidency the candidate must be Tunisian, Muslim, at least 35 years of age, insert into his/her filings for candidacy a commitment to give up any other nationality, be sponsored by 10 members of the elected assembly or 40 heads of elected local councils or by 10,000 registered voters distributed over at least 10 districts, and deposit with the Tunisian treasury a sum of 10,000 dinars that will be returned if the candidate wins at least 3% of the votes.

³⁴ Khalil Zaouia ne "croit pas une femme capable de rassembler tous les tunisiens." (1 August 2014) <http://www.tunisienumerique.com/tunisie-khalil-zaouia-ne-croit-pas-une-femme-capable-de-rassembler-tous-les-tunisiens/231620>

³⁵ Samira Dami. 3 questions à Néziha Rejiba (Om Zied) – Pourquoi je soutiens Kalthoum Kennou? (La Presse de Tunisie, 24 September 2014).

³⁶ Hedia Baraket. Le Programme Politique - Qu'est ce qui fait perdre ou gagner les candidats ? (La Presse de Tunisie, 1 October 2014)

³⁷ E. Z. Des hommes politiques et des partis signent une charte d'honneur pour les élections (8 October 2014).

<http://www.businessnews.com.tn/des-hommes-politiques-et-des-partis-signent-une-charte-dhonneur-pour-les-elections-video,520,50068,3>

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