The University as an Open Space: A Report from the World Social Forum
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The International Affairs Program is one of the largest majors in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities at Northeastern University, which is located in the heart of Boston, MA, USA.
The Arab Spring of 2011 began in Tunisia, following the self-immolation of a young street vendor whose frustration at his inability to ply his trade in the face of bureaucratic obduracy seemed to symbolize the loss of dignity of an entire population. The Dignity Revolution, as Tunisians call it, was a call for economic, political, and civil rights: [president] Ben Ali, dégage, and Emploi, notre droit, were among the key slogans. Citizens demanded jobs, a stronger welfare system, and an end to cronyism, police surveillance, and excessive presidential powers. After Ben Ali’s departure, a relatively smooth transition period of elections and constitution-building followed. Unlike in Egypt, the police are not beating protestors, the new president formed a coalition government, and 28 percent of the constituent assembly is female.

Still, Tunisian society appears polarized and divided between Islamists and secularists, with their divergent political, economic, and cultural goals. At the center of the debates lie issues of the place of religion in public and political life, and gender relations. At the University of Manouba, a Dean was accused by an Islamist woman in niqab of physical assault, when she and a friend accosted him in his office to demand the right to attend class fully covered, which he considered inappropriate for a classroom setting. The assassination of the noted lawyer and secular political figure Chokri Belaid – attributed to radical salafists who emerged seemingly from nowhere after January 2011 – was a shocking display of violence.

It was in this context of political and cultural contestation that the World Social Forum took place in Tunis, convening at the University of Tunis, el-Manal campus. The local organizing committee included the longstanding feminist groups Femmes Démocrates and AFTURD, along with several newer ones formed after January 2011, the large trade union UGTT, and several human rights and student groups. For five days, the University was an open space for deliberative democracy, as numerous workshops organized by groups throughout Tunisia, the Arab region, and the world addressed questions ranging from the future of the World Social Forum to more immediate questions of women’s rights, economic rights, and environmental protection.

The WSF opened with a Women’s Assembly, and the venue – the Amphitheatre of the Law Faculty – was filled to capacity, with perhaps one-third of the audience being men. As I looked around the hall, I could see feminists from Algeria as well as Tunisia (from groups such as CIDDEF and UNFA), Marche Mondiale des Femmes (with purple flags), Mexican activists protesting femicide/disappearances of women, and representatives of ATTAC, the French-originated international group calling for a tax on financial speculation.

Ahlem Belhaj, president of Femmes Démocrates, speaking in both Arabic and French, cited the
feminization of poverty, violence against women, and “an economic system that exploits women and men” as the main challenges facing the world’s women, and she called for international solidarity to end these realities. Turning to the “complex situation” in Tunisia, she referred to “a war against women in the form of violence in the public space and in political space”. Belhaj reminded the audience of how the Islamists in the constituent assembly had tried to replace the constitution’s language of equality between the sexes with “complementarity”, but “we insisted on equality, and we won.” Women were determined to struggle for equality and constitutionalism, she said, adding that they were “well mobilized to confront the counter-revolution.” She ended by saying that the presence of so many people from across the globe “is an enormous resource for us” but emphasized that “la lutte continue.”

I have been to Tunisia on research trips or to attend policy conferences many times, and I know many Tunisian scholars, feminists, and left-wing activists. During the WSF, however, I was struck by the unprecedented open atmosphere that prevailed throughout Tunis. The Women’s March proceeded through the city center and ended at the Olympic Stadium, where the famed Brazilian singer and former minister of culture Gilberto Gil spoke and performed. Basma Belaid, widow of the slain political leader, was a guest speaker at the opening ceremony as well as at a session on human rights the following day. At the University, I saw groups of young Tunisian anarchists and others waving communist flags; I met women members of the main trade union and members of the constituent assembly; I attended a workshop on secularism in the Maghreb that openly discussed the right of people to change or discard religion as well as practice it. There, one speaker made the cogent point that “we need to be mindful of what kind of secular state we want. What we should strive for is a state of its citizens that guarantees the universal and fundamental rights of citizens to life, health, schooling, expression, equality.”

Everywhere, Tunisian feminism was vocal and visible. At one informal group discussion, one woman said “I cannot understand the Western fascination with Islamist parties or moderate Islam; the agenda is the monopolization of political power and the fusion of religion and politics.” At a Femmes Démocrates workshop on violence against women, speakers demanded an end to polygamy and unequal inheritance, and constitutional guarantees of equality and freedom from domestic violence. A woman from the Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc spoke of the Springtime of Dignity campaign to reform the penal code in favor of women’s bodily integrity. Another Moroccan said that the constitutional amendments of July 2011 had not addressed “our opposition to patriarchy and the problems of la mondialisation capitaliste.” An Algerian feminist lawyer explained how “during the years of terrorism [the 1990s], women were always the defenders of the Republic, and we fought, without international solidarity. We then demanded our rights as women, and achieved some progress. But we want clearer language on women’s rights”, citing Articles 19 & 20 of the Algerian Constitution as examples of “double language.”

Law professor Hafidha Chékir of Femmes Démocrates described how Tunisian feminists were working for parité and for consistency with all international conventions. The Islamists in the constituent assembly may have agreed to withdraw their insistence on a reference to Sharia as a source of legislation and settle for “the fundamentals of Islam”, she said. But the problem was that in the 3
fundamentals of Islam, a family may be polygamous and there is no equality in divorce. Interestingly, she said that “the Islamists want a reference to égalité des chances [equal opportunity], but this is not the same as real equality.”

The WSF was doubtlessly an eye-opener for international participants previously unaware of Tunisian, and indeed Maghrebian, social movements and coalitions. For sociologist Rose Brewer, “I was moved by the spirit of young radical Tunisian women. They are incredibly committed to gender justice and social transformation. To share space and time with them was powerful.” For the Tunisians intent on building a new state based on economic, civil, and political rights, the WSF was an important demonstration of international support. To this observer, Tunisia is an incubator for the redefinition of democracy and equality, with the attendant issues of the role of the University, free speech, religious freedom, academic freedom, and the rights of women. I will be paying close attention to the outcome of the constituent assembly’s work and to the next elections.

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