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Politics Of Gender In The Recent Democratic Transitions In The Middle East And North Africa

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**POLITICS OF GENDER IN THE RECENT DEMOCRATIC
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AFRICA**

Canan Aslan Akman

ABSTRACT

The weakness of a direct causality between democratic transitions and women-friendly outcomes remains a major finding of research on the gendered impacts of transition processes. In the recent Arab uprisings leading to regime changes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), women's mobilization was a significant aspect of the regime changes. By contextualizing the gender dynamics and the outcomes of the democratic transitions in Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco and Libya, this article analyzes and compares Arab women's transitional politicization. It also inquires into women's roles, demands and predicaments within the patriarchal structures of the transitional polities. These transitions presented both opportunities as well as challenges for Arab women under new constellations of balance of power in their respective political systems, which led to the rise of a new gender agenda. It is contended here that specific structural and agency-related factors have been intertwined to constrain women's transitional mobilization and the post-transitional quest for empowerment. The fragility of the gender equality agenda in the post-dictatorship Arab world has been shaped, to large extent, by the legacies of previous state-led gender equality projects on by women's (pro-) feminist activism, as well as by the nature of the transition processes and women's civil society participation during and in the aftermath of the transitions.

Keywords: democratization, transition, gender, mobilization, feminism, patriarchy.

ÖZ

Demokrasiye geçiş süreçleri ve kadın-dostu sonuçlar arasındaki doğrudan nedensellik ilişkisinin zayıflığı, geçiş süreçlerinin toplumsal cinsiyet açısından sonuçlarını inceleyen araştırmaların önemli bir bulgusudur. Orta Doğu ve Kuzey Afrika (MENA)'daki rejim değişimlerini getiren son dönem Arap ayaklanmalarında, kadınların hareketliliği demokrasiye geçişin önemli bir boyutunu oluşturmuştur. Bu makale, Tunus, Mısır, Fas ve Libya'daki geçiş süreçlerinin toplumsal cinsiyet dinamiklerini ve sonuçlarını kendi bağlamlarında değerlendirilmekte ve Arap kadınlarının bu süreçteki siyasallaşmasını inceleyerek karşılaştırmaktadır. Çalışmada kadınların rollerine, taleplerine ve erkek-egemen dinamikler altındaki geçiş dönemi açmazlarına da bakılmaktadır. Bu geçiş süreçleri Arap kadınlarına, siyasi sistemin değişen güç dengelerinin altında oluşan yeni toplumsal cinsiyet gündemi içinde hem fırsatlar hem de karşıkoşular getirmiştir. Makalede, kadınların demokrasiye geçiş dönemi hareketliliğini ve sonrasında güçlenme arayışını yapısal ve aktörlere içkin belirleyicilerin içiçe geçerek kısıtladığı öne sürülmektedir. Diktatörlükler sonrasında Arab dünyasında, toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği gündeminin kırılabilirliği, büyük ölçüde, geçmiş dönemdeki devlet eliyle yürütülen eşitlik projelerinin kadınların (pro-)feminist aktivizmi üzerindeki mirası, geçiş döneminin doğası ve geçiş sonrasında kadınların sivil topluma katılımı ile şekillenmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: demokratikleşme, geçiş, toplumsal cinsiyet, hareketlilik, feminizm, erkek egemenliği.

INTRODUCTION

Recent regime changes in the aftermath of the popular uprisings in several countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have ushered in a period of protracted uncertainty regarding the larger liberalizing impact of the transitions beyond the institutionalization of competitive elections. The 'Arab Spring' came into being as a result of the accumulated grievances of a heterogeneous constituency against a background of exhausted legitimacy of the

authoritarian regimes. Arab women were on the forefront in the anti-regime protest and mass mobilizations demanding democratic rights, socio-economic justice and political freedoms which shook the region under almost a dynamo effect.¹ However, after the departure of the authoritarian leaders, women's voices were lost in the post-transition politics overshadowed by the masculinist contestation for power. As Moha Ennaji-- a prominent observer of women's rights in the region and a scholar of gender politics-- observed, Islamist forces which came to power or shared power during the transition in several countries continued to exclude women from politics since they paid lip service to the protection of women's existing rights, forcing women into 'an overall pessimism and... the fear of the loss of their rights' (Ennaji, 2013).

This article inquiries into the gendered nature of the recent transitions in the MENA region by looking at women's roles and experiences in the popular uprisings which triggered regime changes to understand how gender issues have become one of the most contested terrains of democratization². Considering the fact that the record of democratic transitions worldwide in fostering gender justice and progress in women's rights has been mixed, it problematizes patriarchal dynamics which stifled women's transitional mobilization and constrained the prospects for women's post-transition empowerment. The analysis contextualizes Arab regime changes by referring to the cases of Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco and -- a lesser extent- to the relatively violent case of transition in Libya. Just as uncertainty was conceptualized as an inherent feature of democratic transitions in the empirical analyses of democratization processes, the fate of democratization following the transitions in these countries has remained precarious due to problems of building democratic institutions under the impact of domestic and international forces influencing the power constellations in these polities (Brynen, *et. al.* 2012: 299).

Existing research demonstrated that women's entry into the political arena during transitions was likely to generate specific demands to improve the condition of women during the transition and in the emerging democracies (Waylen, 2007, 1993; Jaquette and Wolchik, 1998:4). It is when women as a group played important roles in the struggles against authoritarianism, and when gender equality becomes a part of the core demands of human rights during transitions that there would be stronger prospects for a favorable framework to

¹ The 2011 Nobel Peace Prize went to a Yemeni journalist and human rights activist Tawakkol Karman for her inspiring role for women during the pro-democracy uprisings following the mass mobilizations in Tunisia.

² Analytically, a transition refers to the interval that follows the demise of an authoritarian system until the establishment of a democratic regime. It is the first stage of the democratization of a polity which leads to the transfer of power through free and competitive elections (Linz and Stepan, 1996:3).

realize equality reforms and greater legitimization of women's demands (Moghadam, 2013: 220). From Latin America and South Africa to the Philippines in the 1980s and the 1990s, women's active involvement in democratization and labor movements led to an increase in their participation in politics through egalitarian policy instruments such as gender quotas and gender budgets and led to expanded roles for women's organizations. However, women's experiences and gendered outcomes of transitions displayed regional variations. In Eastern Europe, feminist uniting around the themes of gender equality only gradually emerged after the transition. In fact, this delay led to 'democratization with a male face', characterized by decreasing rates of women's political participation and labor force participation, as well as by the dismantling of positive discrimination measures and initiatives (Moghadam, 2013:221).

Latin American women's protest activism against the political repression and socioeconomic policies of the military-authoritarian regimes from the late 1970s to the end of the 1980s along with their participation in human rights and grassroots organizations promoted women's politicization and feminist consciousness (Waylen, 1993:573, Hensman, 48-51).³ However, in the aftermath of the transition, women's access to political institutions remained low despite the fact that parties in the new era of competitive politics made a special effort for appealing to the women voters. The creation of official special bodies by the state to deal with gender issues in Brazil and Chile owed much to the feminist pressure in political parties and the NGOs. At the same time, however, the politicization of gender issues in the post- transition period led to the cooptation of the gender agenda by male-dominated governments (Waylen,1993: 579, 582).

Viterna and Fallon (2008: 669, 684) concluded on the basis of their comparative analysis of Argentina, South Africa, Ghana and El Salvador that transitions were most likely to create gender-friendly outcomes in the presence of four factors: the completion of the transition process, the existence of a cohesive coalition within the women's movement, the existence of a transitional ideology which is receptive to women's demands and the legacy of women's previous feminist activism. Waylen (2007) also underlined the significance of the institutional legacy of the undemocratic regime as one of the key variables to shape women's experiences with democratic transitions. In the MENA cases, it is important to consider the significance of women's previous mobilizations together with the legacies of state-led gender equality projects since especially the

³ Perhaps the most prominent example of the Latin American women's mobilization both as mothers and the victims of the dictatorship was the demonstrations of *the Mothers de Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina. which continued for decades after the transition.

latter has had overwhelming influence on women's civil society participation in the region.

Regarding the nature of the democratic transitions, whether the process unfolded through transparent and accountable negotiations which included minorities and women seems crucial for its subsequent egalitarian impact. In contrast, those 'rapid' transitions which could not provide women and other groups sufficient time to get organized during the critical stages of democratization were likely to lead to their exclusion from the transition, thereby curtailing their representational potential. An important criterion for the completeness of the transition is the extent of the turnover in the elites; i.e. whether the remnants of the old elite cling to power or not. In the Argentinean and the South African transitions, where the outgoing regime held little control over the reconstruction of the new democracy, women could make use of the 'new political openings in which to participate in the construction of a new state apparatus.' Another relevant aspect of the transitions is the existence or the absence of 'master frames' with which other sectors could also identify with to push the democratization further (Viterna and Fallon, 682). These features were also likely to play significant roles in the gender politics of the Arab transitions. In other words, both the nature of the transition and institutional-structural factors are likely to shape the capacity of women to influence male-dominated political agendas, how women came forward publicly with what demands, how they articulated their demands as well the reaction of men to their public activism, and women's resistance to the assertion of male power during democratic transitions.

As women took to the streets side by side with the male protestors in the Arab uprisings, they were acting in defiance of their roles imposed on them by patriarchy. The involvement of women across different social classes in the popular uprisings meant that there was a clear gender-dimension to these anti-regime protests despite the fact that feminist demands were not a central aspect of women's anti-regime mobilization. However, transitional mobilization opened up new windows of opportunities and presented new challenges for these women who hoped that their egalitarian demands would be part of an impending social justice agenda (Tzoreff, 2014:73) It can be hypothesized that the process of institution-building and the rise of new constellations of power among the political actors during transitions were likely to generate incentives for the male-dominated political systems to be receptive or indifferent to women's concerns and demands. It is contended here that in the MENA cases both structural/institutional and agency-related aspects of gender politics, i.e., the legacy of the authoritarian state policies regarding gender policies, women's past and recent activism as well as the gendered nature of the transition processes

significantly influenced women's capacity to influence the transitional and post-transitional processes.

1. ARAB WOMEN'S PRO-DEMOCRATIC MOBILIZATION AND RESISTANCE TO MASCULINIST ASSERTION OF POWER

At the time of the 2011 uprisings which led to the Tahrir Revolution in Egypt and the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, both Mubarak and Ben Ali regimes were 'liberalized autocracies' which had allowed some degree of autonomous organization and expression for social and political opposition. However, liberalized autocracies laid the seed of their own destruction by generating the opportunities for 'the evolution of autonomous precursor movements which, in the right conditions, could evolve into movements of political contention' (Joffe, 2011: 517). Arab women's pre-transitional political mobilization in the region was an important aspect of these earlier opposition movements. The Arab Spring resistance was particularly significant in terms of unleashing patriarchal pressures over their new public activism.

The Dynamo Effect in the Uprisings and the Politics of Gender

Popular uprisings that shook the Arab countries first started in Tunisia in December 2010 after a young street vendor, Mohammed Bouazizi died after setting himself on fire in protest of state oppression, economic difficulties and the corruption of the regime under President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali rule. This incident led to mass protests which spread to other cities by sparking uprisings in the neighboring countries demanding free elections and democracy. As the regime was unable to crack down the uprising, only two months after the start of the protests, the President fled the country paving the way for a peaceful transfer of power through an interim government and new elections. Since then, Tunisia's transition path saw a relatively smooth process of drafting and approving a new constitution, the holding of free parliamentary elections and the first free elections for presidency in the country's history on 22 December 2014. Educated Tunisian women had already been active in the civil society within parties, trade unions and feminist organizations putting significant effort into maintaining and updating Tunisia's egalitarian gender legislation (Pratt, 2006: 143). During the mass protests, women took to the streets along with the Islamists, secularists, trade-unionists and the leftists. They inspired women living in the other Arab authoritarian countries (Moghadam, 2013: 229).

In Egypt, long before the Tahrir revolution, the Mubarak regime under hegemonic single-party domination of the National Democracy Party (NDP) had been under domestic challenges from Islamist groups, the labour movement and also from judicial criticisms of the corrupt electoral process (Brichs, 2013; 135). Egyptian women were already active in the Egyptian public spaces in

protests movements and organizations as well as in cyberspace protests against deteriorating socio-economic conditions. The Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (ECWR) criticized the violation of women's human rights, in particular endemic sexual harassment against women and their political marginalization in the electoral process, Islamic parties and movements (Moghadam, 2013). In 2011, with their massive participation in the Tahrir Square protests, Egyptian women were not only opposing the Mubarak regime but also protesting their social and political exclusion.

In Morocco, social unrest could not be contained in the context of rising unemployment rates and high utility prices which led to mass protests. As the '20th February Movement' organized by youth and women's groups along with other civil society actors spread to other cities, the monarchy was quick to respond with promises of constitutional changes and social measures including increases in the minimum wages and public service salaries. Subsequently, constitutional changes limiting the King's powers were approved in the July 2011 referendum. The reforms prevented the radicalization of the demands without leading to a full-blown violent confrontation with the regime which—in stark contrast to Tunisia-- still enjoyed large-scale popular legitimacy. The protestors were also unable to sustain movement activism and forge an effective opposition front due to the endemic weakness of civil society (Joffe, 2011: 511). In fact, Morocco had been undergoing a gradual and controlled democratization process since 1998. Women's NGOs and feminists had been on the forefront of the progressive legal changes during this process as in the case of the Family Law Reform. While some women's organizations addressed feminist concerns such as legal discrimination and violence against women, others were active in the advocacy of human rights and addressed women's socio-economic problems and their practical needs (Ennaji, 2011:80-81). Due the weakness of the civil society under political repression, women were voicing their demands through the internet by using new social networking media. Women's organizations launched websites to raise awareness on gender discrimination and to challenge patriarchal controls on women (Moghadam, 235).

In Libya, since 1969, Quaddafi's self-proclaimed 'state of the masses' claimed to embody direct democracy; in reality, it was a monopolistic regime without parties and political competition and with only limited role for the civil society. Libya's oil wealth undoubtedly contributed to the endurance of this system which financed political patronage. Political and socio-economic discontent were the major factors behind the mass uprising which broke out in February 2011. Since Quaddafi was only in partial control of the military, the escalation of state violence against the protestors turned into a civil war which lasted eight months (Brynen: 28). After a NATO intervention in support of the revolutionaries, Quaddafi was killed in October 2011 by rebel forces leading to a

complicated process of transition in a country torn along tribal, regional and kinship identities.

Besides economically motivated protests, in the Arab uprisings the appeals to social justice, freedom, dignity and respect for human rights were accompanied by demands for the removal of the leaders from power (Joffe, 2011:526). These uprisings were made possible by the success of organizing without leadership and formalized structures (Pace and Cavatorta, 2012, 132). The widespread use of satellite technology especially by the younger generation was the most important factor which speeded up the momentum of the protests and spread it to other cities and countries (Brynen et al.: 112). Dissemination of information among the youth through the social media (with twitter communication and Facebook campaigns) quickly connected and encouraged thousands of people with access to internet and mobile phones (Abdullatif, 2013: 22).

In the course of these revolutionary uprisings, women came out as individual protestors, organizers, supporters and followers of demonstrations, strategists and the reporters of the events. Women were present in the public demonstrations alone, or with the other family members, even with their children, transcended the physical and social barriers between men and women in the public sphere (Radsch, 2012; 4; Dabashi, 2012:187). In Egypt, during the 18-day uprisings in Tahrir Square, about half of the protestors were women, veiled or unveiled across the generational divide. They included the liberals, feminists, seculars as well as women affiliated with the Islamists (Tzoreff, 86).⁴ They chanted protests but cared for the wounded and the hungry among the protestors.

The active and multitude roles played by women from Tahrir to Binghazi was indicative of the 'massive presence' of women in these countries in schooling and in paid employment reflecting the structural changes the Arab states went through over the past decades. As Wolf reflected, although 'two generations ago, only a small minority of the daughters of the elite received a university education', by 2011 women constituted more than half of the students at Egyptian universities (quoted in Dabashi, 2012:184). By the time of the Jasmin Revolution in Tunisia, women's literacy rate was 71 per cent, and they comprised more than one-fifth of the waged workforce and made up 43 per cent of the local unions.

These young women also extensively used the social media to mobilize the youth (Abbas, 2012). In fact, citizen journalism emerged as an effective form of

⁴ Most of these women came from from the female wing of the *Ikhwan* (the Muslim Brotherhood), the Muslim Sisters.

cyber activism for women activists to challenge the pro-regime portrayal of the uprisings in the domestic media. In Tunisia, Facebook coverage of Bouizza's tragedy quickly spread information about the protests. Most of the Egyptian women cyber activists and citizen journalists had been experienced in the former protest movements and campaigns for human rights. They had risen against and protested sexual harassment against women during the April 6 Youth Movement and the *Kefaya* Movement (2004-2007). Women's blogs had thousands of followers including journalists and international NGOs. In Libya, where the internet usage was much lower compared to the other countries due to the regime's tight control, female participation in cyber activism was relatively limited. However, there too, cyber activism became important for women's protests since women's participation in the street protests were more risky under armed repression and social conservatism. During the violence which erupted after Quaddafi resorted to armed repression of the opposition, Libyan women victims of rape used social media to draw domestic and international attention to the misogynist violence of the regime.

Women's cyber activism had the effect of generating a sense of empowerment for young women (Abdullatif, 2013: 19.) One could even find among the Islamic female cyber activists in Egypt future political aspirations (Radch 29, 36). Women continued to use the social media to make their voice heard and to promote solidarity across the Arab world during the democratic transitions. A case in point was an influential Facebook campaign organized by women activists with the objective of expanding democratic rights to women and highlighting the need to complete the Arab revolutions by implementing women's rights. By the mid-2012, the campaign attracted more than 55.000 supporters throughout the Arab world including Tawakkul Karman from Yemen and the Egyptian writer Nawal Al-Sa'adawi (Chernitsky, 2012).

The Patriarchal Face of the Pro-Democracy Protests: the Assertion of Male Violence

Writing of the male sexual violence, harassment, intimidation and humiliation of women protestors in Egypt following the high-tide of the protests, Moruzzi (2013) claimed that , " ...if in 2011 Egypt's Tahrir Square became the positive international symbol of the ability of peaceful mass protests to bring down a dictator, by 2013 it has also become the site of the patriarchal order's most symbolic defensive retaliation.' Women protestors were subjected to sexualized attacks from the security forces driving them out of the public spaces under the Mubarak the regime. Women suffered from physical attacks, threats of rape and sexual humiliation. Brutal beatings during the protests and other degrading treatment such as the virginity tests and sexual assaults were weapons of intimidation and repression used by the regime forces. Cyber activists also were subjected to sexual insults and threats on their social media profiles

(Radsch, 2012: 22-23). Later, during the SCAF (the transitional Supreme Council of the Armed Forces) rule, women protestors were also subjected to violence again to discipline them. Young women activists who slept in the tents along with male activists were accused of prostitution; they were insulted and forcibly taken by the military for detainment. The Egyptian army defended the conduct of virginity tests on female protestors by the need to clear themselves from any accusations by women demonstrators that they were raped by the soldiers.

In Egypt, men's hostility to women protestors was shared by men across the political divide, foremost among were the radical Islamists, who objected to the inclusion of women's equality demands into the democracy agenda of the Revolution. When on 8 March 2011, a group of 200 women demonstrated in the Tahrir Square to commemorate the International Women's Day by demanding equal rights and an end to sexual harassment, they were attacked by male Islamists who told women to return their homes. The police also told the women that 'it was not time for such rallies' (The Economist, 2011). After the new elections and after President Morsi took power, the unreformed state security system acted with the same vigor against female protestors in public demonstrations. In November 2012, for example, women who participated in the protests of the new Constitution were sexually assaulted (Mourizzi, 2013). Following the ousting of Morsi from power, there were reports documenting how Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers attacked and sexually assaulted women who were among the thousands of Egyptians celebrating the inauguration of President Sisi in Tahrir Square (Ibrahim, 2014).

The use of sexual violence against women during the pro-democracy mobilizations as well as the impunity rendered to the male perpetrators of violence shattered women's expectation that the political changes would also bring gender justice. However, women also resisted against the re-assertion of masculine power to discipline and punish women activists. For example, a lawsuit was brought by 23-year-old Samira Ibrahim against the army for the virginity tests forced on her and six other women. This act of reclaiming her dignity was a slap in the face of the revolution by publicly challenging and condemning the gender injustice inflicted on women. Ibrahim's initiative led to a court ruling which declared virginity tests imposed on her illegal. In December 2011, large-scale demonstration by women from all walks of life and ideological convictions protested their mistreatment in the hands of the police and the military to condemn sexual violence. As a result, the transitional authority, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces, (SCAF) apologized from these women by issuing a public statement (Tzoreff, 92). In August 2012, the National Council for Women launched a campaign to raise awareness about combating sexual harassment. As a result, the Ministry of Interior decided to install cameras on

Cairo's streets to identify harassing men. During the ongoing street demonstrations in the Egyptian transition, women continued to expose acts of male violence against women through Facebook campaigns. As sexual harassment against women in the public spaces increased under the Muslim Brotherhood government, hundreds of women gathered to protest it in February 2013 (Ibrahim, 2014).

In Tunisia, where women's massive presence in the anti-regime demonstrations were also unprecedented, similar instances of male violence from the police along with male protestors were also reported, though not to the extent suffered by the Egyptian protestors (Abdullatif, 2013:19) More importantly, liberal and secular women became the target of harassment coming from Islamic men after the transition. Therefore, secular Tunisian women's major concern in the aftermath of the regime change was the preservation of their rights due to the rising visibility of religious conservatism under the increased political leverage of the political Islamic actors in the new polity.

2. THE LEGACIES OF WOMEN'S PREVIOUS STRUGGLES UNDER THE SHADOW OF THE STATE-LED EQUALITY POLICIES

Arab women taking to the streets and to the public arenas in support of democratic ideals had their mothers and grandmothers as predecessors in the nationalist and anti-colonial struggles. Women's organizational activism at the turn of the century and in the later period was concentrated on legal changes to improve the status of women through the reform of the *Shari'a*. For example, the Egyptian Feminist Union led by Huda Sharawi struggled for progressive changes in the personal status laws related to divorce and child custody. In Egypt, women achieved some success in pushing the state to amend existing laws to restrict polygamy and to set minimum marriage age to advance the social conditions of women (Khalidi and Tucker, 1996: 14) Political reforms in the 1960s to the 1990s extended suffrage rights to women in the Arab world with the exception of the Gulf states.⁵

However, it was the top-down state-feminism rather than women's autonomous activism which deeply shaped Arab women's social conditions and political presence in male-dominated projects comprising anti-imperialism, populism and national identity construction (Hatem, 1996: 172; Manea, 2011, 14). These state-led reforms made it possible for women to enjoy relative judicial equality in several states but not equal citizenship with men. In Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt and Libya promoting women's access to education and civil status to protect them from the ills of early marriage, and steps taken to ban or

⁵ Suffrage for women was granted in Egypt in 1956; Tunisia in 1959, Morocco in 1963 and Libya in 1964.

restrict polygamy were undertaken to protect the welfare of the family rather than to emancipate women as individual citizens (Pratt, 2006: 36). In Libya, for example, the Quaddafi regime's state feminism promulgated egalitarian laws by committing itself to the United Nation's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)-- albeit with significant reservations. Polygamy was not legally permitted, still it was possible under certain conditions. In Egypt, although the Constitution banned discrimination on the basis of sex, women were legally allowed to inherit only half as much as men and were disadvantage in obtaining divorce and child custody. In contrast, in Tunisia the secularization project of President Bourguiba promoted women's emancipation and integration into the economy in the context of promoting a moderate Arab-Muslim identity. The regime created and sponsored the Union Nationale de la Femme Tunisienne (UNFT) in 1958 with branches throughout the country to propagate women's rights (Pratt, 56). In 1956 the Tunisian Personal Code abolished polygamy and male repudiation, banned forced marriages and placed all personal status matters under the jurisdiction of civil courts (Charrad, 2011: 106-113). However, women were legally obliged to obey their husbands as the head of the family (Haghighat-Sordellini, 2010: 16). In Egypt, social policies pioneered by the Nasserist regime were continued under the Sadat regime during which the President's wife Jihan also took on a pioneering position to promote women's rights. However, Sadat's pro-Islamist policies and the economic liberalization program led to significant set-backs in gender equality (Hatem, 1996:184).

In Tunisia, the regime's monopoly over the discourse and policy on women's rights was challenged in the 1970s by the rise of Islamism and with independent women's organizations. In the 1980s, economic downturn and the Islamist movement started to threaten women's rights. Along with the state-level work on women's rights promotion, women established organizations to promote equality and to lobby for further reforms despite the periodic state repression directed to them (Moghadam, 45).⁶

After decades-long state feminism in the Arab world, women's efforts at autonomously organizing transcending nationalist discourses and objectives were 'denounced as European infiltration and a threat to the nation.' Hence, women activists tried to legitimize their demands within nationalist and Islamic discourses (Badran, 1993:13). For example, Aminah al Said, the former member of the Egyptian Feminist Union dissolved in 1956 started to work for the government to mobilize women's support for the regime policies (Bier, 2011: 36, 111). As the Mubarak regime continued with the co-optation of the women's agenda under a more conservative political climate and an unfavorable judiciary

⁶ A national machinery on gender equality, the CREDIF, was created in the early 1990s.

and parliament for equality, some of the former gains of women were withdrawn through changes to the Personal Status Law and the cancellation of reserved seats in the parliament in 1987 (Hatemi, 1996: 185-186).

With the Islamist movements opposing the existing regime on the terrain of women's rights along with others, women's rights activists was caught in the dilemma of challenging existing patriarchal restrictions and opposing the Islamist agendas simultaneously. Many women's groups including women's sections of political parties found it more convenient to direct their efforts to 'protecting the legacy of the state-led modernization project' (Pratt 143). Another legacy of state-feminism which integrated women's agenda into nationalist-developmental discourses was the failure on the part of women to arrive at a consensus over their priorities. Moderate ones focused on women's rights in the public sphere by refraining from directly confronting patriarchy upheld by the state. Still, the new women's organizations in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia emerged in the 1980s with radical agendas, thereby making themselves targets of social hostility and marginalization (Hatemi 190; Pratt, 144).⁷ Meanwhile, Morocco's conservative Family Law was replaced with a more liberal family law in 2004 despite opposition from Islamic groups. The new law constrained polygamy and raised the legal age for marriage. Moroccan feminist activists often framed their demands on the basis of egalitarian interpretations of Islam (Moghadam, 2013:235; Sadiqi, 2010:40).

The growing popularity of Islamic feminism and what some scholars call 'hybrid feminism' in the 1990s could be understood as a quest by educated urban Arab women to deal with the dilemma of engaging with the state over women's rights especially in the context of rising Islamic threat. From Iran to the Middle Eastern countries including Turkey, a new generation of feminist women built their argument to challenge mainstream masculinist positions by referring to the sacred texts to 'engage with modernity' (Badran, 2009: 222). Islamic feminism has produced critical discourses of equality and social justice for women based on Quranic mandates (Abdullatif, 2013: 16). Many women's rights advocates in the Arab world struggled to improve women's position in both public and private spheres within the confines of their faith. Islamic feminists like Zaynab Ghazali (1917- 2005) believed that Western feminism's premises were alien to the reality of the Muslim women and that Islam provided women rights within the context of the family (Graham-Brown, 1996:8).

Since the 1960s, Arab women's educational and employment opportunities increased especially in the expanding public sectors under structural dynamics

⁷ For example, the AWSA founder Nawal El Sadawi raised sexual violence against women and female genital mutilation as public issues in Egypt. The NWRC was also a pioneer organization which challenged male violence against women in the public spaces (Patt, 144).

stemming from globalization processes and the social policies of the populist-authoritarian governments. However, growing dependence of women on the state under ushered the rise of 'neopatriarchy'. The rise of Islamic fundamentalist movements and social conservatism constituted a bulwark against translating the improved educational and employment status of women into empowerment (Hahghighat-Sordellini 2010: 108). In the 1990s, international norms of women's human rights were exported to some of the MENA countries leading to the creation of national machineries for gender equality and to the proliferation of NGOs funded by donors tied to these official organs. However, the institutional framework of neo-patrimonial authoritarianism produced further dependency for these organizations under state patronage (Mayer, 1995: 104-132; Kandiyoti, 2012).

3. TRANSITIONAL DYNAMICS AND ACTORS: TUNUSIA, EGYPT, MOROCCO AND LIBYA IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The transition literature held that the nature of the transition (its modes, actors and dynamics) constituted a crucial factor shaping the direction of the subsequent democratization processes. Karl (1990,13), for example, stated that transitions proceeding through negotiations (and pacts) among the pro-democratic actors and the sectors of the old elite produced restricted democracies in which some interests of the powerful actors would continue to enjoy protection at the expense of the others. As put forward in the preceding sections, the propensity of democratic transitions to engender gender-friendly outcomes was closely related to the nature of the transition processes in terms of the dominant themes of democratization, the ideology of the leading actors, their negotiations and the emergent institutional framework of the new polity.

It can be contended that a form of electoralism in the sense of associating the onset of the competitive electoral process with democratization by the elites and the masses has been a marked fault line of the post-Arab spring transitions. Nevertheless, as Landolt and Kubiceck (2014: 985) emphasized, with respect to the transitions in the MENA, the ousting of the old regime made it possible for many political players to enter the arena but not all of them have turned out to be 'committed democrats'. Although the Islamists have not been the central actors in the uprisings, they became the 'key beneficiaries' of the revolutionary processes (Pace and Cavatorta,2012:134). Their commitment to democracy was the most dubious from the very beginning. Despite their initial cooperation in the overthrow of the dictatorships, secular and Islamic actors were likely to diverge over priorities and strategies to bring about democracy between and among themselves.

Comparative analyses of the recent Arab transitions tend to take the Tunisian case as a relative success story in terms of realizing a full transition from a liberalized autocracy into an electoral democracy with the greatest prospects of deepening the democratization process. In contrast, the Egyptian transition was beset by many difficulties and ultimately was suspended by a military intervention under popular pressure. The Moroccan transition remained as a limited political opening in the context of a constitutional monarchy. The violent case of the Libya's regime change has turned out to be a protracted transition in view of the existing challenges of institution-building.

In Tunisia, the protest movement turned into fully-fledged effective societal opposition which provided a sense of unity for the immediate objective of the demonstrators--i.e., ousting of the President and drafting a new constitution. After 1980, the major trade union movement *the Union generale des Travailleurs Tunusiens* (UGTT), human rights organizations and individual journalists and lawyers could escape from the full control of the regime. Tunisia's constitutional tradition functioned as an effective check against arbitrariness and provided for a degree of accountability and allowed limited political pluralism so long as it did not challenge the hegemony of the RCD, the single party of the regime.⁸ The apolitical nature of the Tunisian army also facilitated the transition, since under the Bin Ali regime, it was marginalized to prevent it from constituting a challenge to the regime. The RCD's closure by the court was a milestone in the Tunisian transition (Joffe, 2011: 514, 519). During the constitutional assembly work following the October 2011 elections parties came into disagreement over the constitutional structures and the role of Islam in the system. The debates survived well into the June 2013 elections when the Islamist *Ennahda* emerged as the central actor to the fear of the seculars and the women's groups⁹. However, the party leaders focused on convincing the secular forces of its commitment to democracy by opposing the adoption of Shari'a and by displaying a pragmatic platform (Landolt and Kubicek: 993).

The most significant aspect of the Tunisian transition was the institutionalization of consensual politics which culminated in the adoption of 'the Constitution of the Second Republic' with 92 per cent of the valid votes cast in favor of it in the referendum. The constitution was the work of a high Commission for political reform which included both legal experts and representatives from political parties reflecting the existing balance of forces during the transition. Hence, the inclusionary nature of this process provided credibility to the transition. The final text emerged as a result of a compromise

⁸ Rassemblement Culturell et Democratique.

⁹ Following the National Constituent Assembly elections, the Ennahda which won 40 per cent of the seats, entered into a coalition with the two secular parties.

among parties and it introduced a semi-presidential system based on a dual chamber parliament which distributed power and increased the number of veto players in the system (Landolt and Kubicek 973). Besides the consensual drive of the transition dynamics in Tunisia which would foster the inclusion of societal demands, other factors such as the state's traditional secular orientation, women's significant labor force participation rates, female parliamentary representation which ran higher than the global average, the existence of a relatively liberal family law, and strong network of feminist organizations and policy institutions prevented the resurgence of a patriarchal backlash on women's rights.

In the case of Egypt, the partial success of the transition stemmed from the fact that despite the strong upsurge against the regime, the actors in the popular mobilization lacked the capacity to make their agendas accepted by the army by those social groups in coalition with the army. Previously, after the middle-class dominated *Kefeya* protest movement against the abuse of power by Mubarak, temporary steps to upgrade authoritarianism led to the growing popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) as the country's most potent Islamist forces amidst prevailing electoral irregularities and growing voter apathy. Following the spread of the mass protests from Tahrir to other cities, the military refused to intervene and to crack down the protestors. The common denominator of the opposition groups which united them was the toppling of the President, and yet there was no other unifying vision, political understandings and visible leadership. In the Egyptian case, it was the army not a civilian force which sacrificed the President, and it did so with a rather defensive objective to maintain the essentials of the regime by restructuring the state. After the SCAF took power as the transitional authority until the new elections, the MB emerged as the best-organized political actor in the country. While the Brotherhood favored a quick transition in the hope of dominating politics, other established parties and the young secular and liberal activists who were involved in the uprisings leading to Mubarak's fall supported a gradual transition. Meanwhile, figures from the former NDP (National Democracy Party) and other actors connected with the old regime were determined to protect their privileged positions (Brynen et. al, 2012:24-25). As a result, during the SCAF rule there were no substantial institutional reforms (Lampridi-Kemou and Azaola, 2013:146).

In the subsequent elections for the Egyptian parliament which would appoint a the Constituent Assembly to draft the new constitution the newly formed Freedom and the Justice Party (FJP), the electoral arm of the MB and the fundamentalist *al Nour* Party together--- won 70 per cent of the new parliament. The lack of consensus among the military, parties and the courts survived into the presidential elections as result of which the FJP candidate Mohammed Morsi won a narrow majority. The chaotic process of transition

until the popular election of the President in 2012 was reflected in the alienation of many Egyptians from the political process.¹⁰ The new Constitution had a liberal spirit albeit with considerable room for the Islamic norms retaining the *Shari'a* as the 'principle source of legislation' and retained the military autonomy in the system, 'at the cost of growing unpopularity'. It prescribed a semi-presidential system which strengthened the parliamentary power to dismiss the government (Landolt and Kubicek, 999-1002). Ultimately, President Morsi's alienation of the secular and liberal sectors and his unpopular measures of political control together with the declining MB popularity largely due to lingering economic problems prepared the ground for the military intervention. The coup further divided the Egyptian public, boosted political apathy and deepened transitional uncertainties.

In contrast to the Tunisian case, then, the Egyptian the transition following Mubarak's departure was marked by the failure of the pro-democracy coalition of the secular and Islamist regime opponents. In Tunisia, the new parties formed after Ben Ali's departure possessed a pro-democratic agenda, and elections were conducted freely. All actors worked together 'remove the vestiges of the old regime' (Landlot and Kubicek, 2014: 995, Pickard, 2014, 260). Moreover, Tunisian civil society was committed to liberalization, and the media was no longer state-controlled.

In Morocco, just as the majority of the mass public including the protestors were not motivated by the incentive for the removal of the monarchy, the King closed the doors for an eventual democratization encompassing genuinely free elections and an accountable system. Previous political liberalizations of the 1990s were merely cosmetic changes to marginalize radical elements, reflecting the pragmatic motives of the monarchy. In Morocco, the reformist response of the King Mohammed VI and the absence of serious erosion in the mass support for the regime meant that the 20 February Movement resulted in the preservation of the 'essential prerogatives of the existing power-structures intact' (Joffe, 511). The new Constitution reiterated the country's commitment to human rights, gender equality and the prohibition of torture. After the November 2011 elections, the Islamists and the secular block shared the parliamentary seats with the Justice and Development Party JDP winning the largest share of representation (107 out of 395 seats). The moderate nature of the JDP platform included both a commitment to social reform and an attachment to core Islamic values (Haynes, 2013:184). The Constitution introduced significant liberalizing changes including strengthening the powers of the legislature, bolstering the autonomy of the judiciary from the executive and allowing for the selection of

¹⁰ In Egypt, the turnout rate for the parliamentary and presidential elections was in the range of 40-50 per cent; the referendum turnout for the new Constitution was 33 per cent.

the prime minister from the party having the highest number of parliamentary seats. However, the King retained the power to veto governmental decisions and to authority to dismiss the government (Brynen et. al: 2012:35).

In Libya, the monopolistic nature of the Quaddafi dictatorship and structural factors had promoted the endemic weakness of the civil society and institutions. The collapse of the dictatorial regime resulted in a civil war. The rebel forces (National Transitory Council-NTC) who took control of the country lacked the organizational strength to build effective state structures. The Civil War further polarized the society. The interim government established on November 2011 was beset by poor administrative capacity prevailing tribal, regional and ideological conflicts also led to localized violence. A constituent Assembly was formed to write the new Libyan Constitution, and national elections were held in July 2012 for the 200-member National Congress to appoint a new cabinet. (Brynen et al, 29-30).

During the Arab regime transitions, the position and the strategies of the new and traditional Islamist actors became crucial for the orientation and the fate of the transition process.¹¹ The transition process demonstrated that the major Islamist actors shifted their priorities and moderated their discourses (Al-Anani, 2012). In Tunisia, secular worries centered on the pragmatically-oriented *Ennahda's* heterogeneous composition. Increased public visibility of the Islamists (veiled women and bearded men) heightened societal tensions. In both the Tunisian and the Egyptian case, the major question was the extent of the democratic commitment of the Islamic political actors. In Egypt, the Morsi-led Islamist administration lacked the background and experience of 'developing political accords with competitor and rivals' (Haynes, 2013: 179). The more liberal Islamic parties and the pragmatic MB were confronted by the Salafi hardliners. The MB's willingness to cooperate was further constrained by the political and economic challenges of governance.

The peaceful Tunisian and Egyptian transitions and the violent Libyan transition were characterized by higher uncertainties as opposed to the Moroccan case in which the transition remained as limited liberalization under the control of the monarchy. However, Tunisia has displayed more progress toward democratic institutionalization under relatively more favorable conditions for the women's rights. In contrast, the Egyptian transition characterized by a politicized judiciary and a divided secular and Islamic front deepening polarization under a system of expanded presidential powers has not augured well for the emergence of a women-friendly political milieu during and after the regime change.

¹¹ In Egypt since the fall of Mubarak, fifteen Islamic parties (both official and unofficial) were founded. (Al-Anani, 2012: 468)

4. WOMEN'S POSITION AND GENDER EQUALITY DURING AND AFTER THE TRANSITIONS: PROBLEMS, FACTS AND PROSPECTS

As previously explained, in the MENA cases covered in this essay, women's activism and the assertion of feminist demands and concerns through the streets protests, social media activism and organizational struggles were very important to voice their demands and to protest their oppression during the regime changes. Subsequently, women's groups and organizations focused both on preserving their existing legal status and on pushing for the expansion of their rights and public participation, which created significant repercussions in their respective polities.

Women's Continued Activism and the Emergent Gender Agendas

To start with, in Morocco, the 20 February Movement led to a dynamic agreement between the regime and the opposition. The agenda for political reforms was determined by the Monarchy rather than the social and political forces (Volpi, 2013: 977). Although Morocco had withdrawn all of its reservations from CEDAW in 2008, there were still legal provisions which were not compatible with the international norms of gender equality. Prior to the transition, there was significant progress in women's rights through the amendments to the Family law, to the Penal Code, Labor Law and the Nationality Law. Following the pro-democracy movement, in the second half of 2011, the new constitutional amendments endorsed by a referendum affirmed the country's commitment to human rights and gender equality (Ennaji, 2011: 215).

As in the other MENA cases, women's groups in Morocco effectively utilized the internet facilities and social media networks during 2011 and 2012 for mobilizing women to demand gender equality reforms. In May 2011, a high-profile meeting was organized in Rabat to discuss women's roles during democratic transitions which was also attended by the government representatives. Reflecting women's strong presence in the civil society, five out of eighteen members of the Consultative Commission for the Constitutional Reform were women. During the process of drafting the new Constitution, the Springtime of Dignity Coalition issued a memorandum calling for the insertion of international norms of gender equality stemming from the CEDAW into the new Constitution and demanded the institutionalization of affirmative action policies for women. During this process, social policy amendments extended health coverage to lower income sectors (Moghadam, 2013:235).

In the immediate post-Mubarak era during the Egyptian transition, the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (ECWR) criticized the exclusion of women from the transitional political organs. It demanded more women in the judiciary,

in municipal administrations and as provincial governors through press releases and petitions to official bodies. The ECWR also closely monitored discriminatory practices and sexual assaults on women during and after the transition (Moghadam: 234). Although there were many qualified female judges in Egypt, no female judges were invited to the committee working on moderating the controversial articles to the Constitutional draft (Abdullatif:19). The issue of criminalizing sexual violence and harassment was an ongoing issue raised by women during the transition and especially under the Islamic-led government. As a result, a positive amendment to the Penal Code criminalizing rape and sexual harassment was passed in July 2014 during the interim government on the eve of the General Sisi's inauguration (Middle East Institute, 2014).¹²

In Tunisia, the UGTT and other feminist organizations were significant actors of the civil society in 2011. Women were also present in *the Haute Instance pour la Realisation des Objectifs de la Revolution, de la Reforme Politique et de la Transition Democratique* which had a female vice-president. Following the Islamist *Ennahda's* electoral victory in the elections of October 2011, feminists were on alert and they demanded inclusion in the new political bodies and insisted on the preservation of the existing family law. Tunisian women protested those initiatives or debates suggestive of any potential retreat from the existing legal and institutional system. A case in point was their protests of an attempted change by the Constituent Assembly to replace the word 'equality' with 'complementarity' in the draft of the new constitution (Moghadam: 231). Secular women and feminists also organized a conference at the University of Tunis to discuss the women's movement's fate after the transition. Their major concern was the protection of the liberal 1957 Personal Status Code promulgated under Bourguiba which prohibited polygamy and one-sided repudiation by men and which allowed abortion. The *Ennahda* leaders declared that there would not be any setbacks in women's established rights (Aliriza, 2011). It supported the method of women's nominations in alternating order in the lists, and it nominated one unveiled women in the parliamentary elections.

Following the general elections of 2011 the new government in Tunisia sent an official notification to the UN with regard to its withdrawal of the existing reservations to the CEDAW implemented through a decree law by the transitional government on October 24, 2011 (Human Rights Watch, 2014). This meant that the discriminatory provisions in the personal status codes of the country would be amended to realize women's equality within the family with the husband especially with regard to taking decisions about children. The future

¹² However, the amendments were found insufficient by the feminists and women activists who also drew attention to the problem of effectively implementing the law.

of the necessary gender reforms and equality policies to materialize equality guaranteed by the new Constitution of January 2014 has come to depend largely on the coalition -building process in the political system. The fact that the Constitutional Court has become a critical institution 'to play a central role in ensuring the balance of power and the rule of law' (Pickard:262) has turned the Court into a major institutional resource for domestic human rights and women's rights activists, women politicians and for political parties to advance their demands.

Finally, in the post-Quaddafi Libya, women found themselves under a more vulnerable position, compared to women in the other cases, under prevailing security challenges, uncertainties regarding the institutional infrastructure of the new polity, and insufficient provision of basic services to the impoverished masses. Quaddafi's state feminism had formerly monopolized gender policies in a patrimonial structure led by the female members of the dictator's family behind a facade of radical egalitarian policies. The rise of Islamic social conservatism was a major challenge faced by the Libyan women. The Islamic jurisprudence, Quaddafi's political Project and local customs together constituted the patriarchal foundations of the Family laws which allowed polygamy under strictly constrained conditions. Only a minority of women in the cities with access to education were the beneficiaries of these policies. Libyan civil society was weakened substantially under the political repression. Women, however, played critical roles during the uprisings through informal networks leading to the fall of the dictatorship. They were also active during the civil war. After the war, women's rights were turned into public issues raised by male contenders for power; however, women found themselves excluded from the highest levels of decision-making and from the transitional authority. The National Transitional Council Chairman (NTC) Mustafa Abdul Jalil declared in his speech celebrating Libya's 'liberation' on 23 October 2011 that the basis of the legal system would be *Shari'a* and that restrictions on polygamy would be removed. During the transition, women activists attempted at autonomous organizing to generate an agenda of gender issues. In November 2011, an international women's rights conference was held, organized by the Voice of the Libyan Movement, and it came up with recommendations to the NTC on gender equality reforms to be undertaken in the new regime (Spellman-Poots,2011).

Women's Quest for Equal Representation in Politics

In the Arab transitions, women's political representation and the question of parity in electoral recruitment were subject to intense debates during the constitutional and electoral law reform processes. Tunisia's new Constitution introduced strong protection for women's rights by giving the state the

responsibility to ensure gender parity in elected assemblies. The new electoral law introduced the parity principle which stipulated that half of the candidate shortlists must be women and that the order of male and female candidates must alternate. It made it mandatory that each list should contain at least one candidate below the age of thirty (Brynen. et. al, 164). However, with more than a hundred parties running in the elections women's electoral chances largely dependent on their ranks in the shortlists. Only one group of party alliances, the Democratic Modernist Pole promised to put women at the head of half list lists (The Economist, 2011). As a consequence, in the election of 2011, a total of 49 women could enter the 217-seat Constituent Assembly rendering the ratio for women's representation 24 percent. 42 of these women entered the parliament from the list of the Islamic *Ennahda*.

In Egypt, although the new law lowered the voting age to from 30 to 25, the SCAF abolished the women's quota which was introduced in 2009 under the sponsorship of First Lady Suzanne Mubarak, allocating 64 seats out of 518 in the People's Assembly to women. The new also law banned international monitors. The electoral system was subject to disagreements which led to revisions under pressure from political parties and youth groups. The SCAF intervened to amend the final version of the law with concessions to the Muslim Brotherhood while limiting the electoral chances of the liberal, leftist and the Revolutionary Youth coalition (Brynen, et al. 2012: 165). In the November elections, in which 70 percent of the MPs were elected from the party lists and the law mandated the presence of at least one female candidate, but only applicable for constituencies with more than four candidates. Hence, women ended up with a parliamentary presence of 2 percent of the seats in stark contrast to the 12 per cent in the previous parliament (The Middle East Institute, 2013). Four out of nine women MPs were elected from the list of the (Freedom and Justice Party) FJP. In contrast, the Islamist (Salafi) *Nour* Party placed women aspirants at the very bottom of the party tickets. The post-revolutionary Egyptian government was also significant for the marginal existence of women with only two ministers (as the Minister of Social Affairs and the Minister of Scientific Research) (Sholkamy, 2012).

In Morocco, prior to the new parliamentary elections of November 2011 held following the constitutional referendum the election system was amended to make more room for the hitherto underrepresented sectors including women and young men. Accordingly, two-thirds of the 90 seats to be elected from the national seats (besides the constituency lists) were reserved for women (Haynes: 184). As a result, women's parliamentary representation rose from 11 per cent to 19. This was thanks to a significant increase in the women's quota (originally introduced in 2002) from 30 seats to 60, a remarkable progress given the political marginalization of women in the country (Darhaour, 2013). However, women's

cabinet presence decreased from eight to one under the Islamic Justice and Development Party-led government (Ennaji, 2013).

In the post-war Libya, women came out publicly with demands for greater presence in the new polity. Two women were appointed in the NTC, which then selected two women for the transitional cabinet. However, the stigma attached to politically active women during the Qaddafi era was not easy to come over. Political parties were heavily dominated by men. The first version of the new electoral law introduced 10 per cent parliamentary quota for women. However, Libyan women activists who formed the Libyan Women's Platform for Peace (WPP) objected the threshold in the electoral law draft. The WPP and other civil society groups demanded a 40 per cent quota in the new parliament while other women activists demanded parity in representation. The final draft of the law introduced a zipper system of quotas for the seats reserved for party nominations (a total of 80 seats). Six-hundred and forty-seven women ran in the July 2012 parliamentary elections and thirty-two women were elected. Women's experiences in the elections indicated that the hurdles to be passed in the male-dominated Libyan political system was huge; yet the electoral competition clearly demonstrated that male politicians came to understand the appeal of the women's votes (Doherty, 2013).

The Islamist Uncertainties and the Danger of a Backlash?

It can be contended that attending to women's rights issues and the promotion of women in the new regime have become the soft-belly of the Islamist actors since their pro-democratic orientation would be tested on their stances on the gender agenda. The moderate Islamists in Tunisia and Morocco have displayed progressive and respectful stances on individual freedoms and women's rights. The *Ennahda* leaders in Tunisia opposed to any negative changes to the existing personal status laws. Party leader Ghannouchi publicly declared that his party was supporting gender equality in education, politics and work. However, the Salafi parties were supporting the institution of the veil for women in the universities. The promotion of women in politics by the Islamists led to concerns on the part of secular women who were already disturbed by the incidents in which women were forced to wear hijab in schools. The assassination of the secular Tunisian opposition leader during the transition was also an alarming event for the secular groups since Belaid was a defender of women's rights. In Morocco, in January 2013 the Islamist dominated parliament adopted a decree which lowered the minimum age for girls from 18 to 16. This measure was protested by the feminists as a major setback in women's right (Ennaji, 2013). In Egypt, Islamic forces displayed ambivalence to women's rights and minority rights. While the Muslim Brotherhood was publicly supporting gender equality in education, employment, healthcare, etc., one of its members

and the FJP rejected the right of women to stand for the presidency in the elections (Al- Annani, 2012: 471).

Another particularity of the MENA transitions regarding gender equality policies has been the rise of a backlash in the realm of the institutionalized women's rights policies through discrediting the policies undertaken by the outgoing regimes. These policies came to be associated with the corrupt elite rule in the populist discourses of the forces which claim to dismantle authoritarian legacies. In Tunisia and Egypt, first ladies Leila Trabelsi and Suzanne Mubarak continued the tradition of appropriating women's rights issues by the regime; they launched and sponsored semiofficial equality bodies; such as *the Union Nationale de la Femme Tunisienne*. Ms. Mubarak had supported the quota laws and laws banning female genital mutilation and allowing women to become judges. In the –post- Mubarak era, the SCAF repealed the quota laws without much resistance. In fact, the women appointed through this system were seen as 'stooges' of Mr. Mubarak. (The Economist, 2011) The new policies were then portrayed as restoring gender relations to 'their authentically national or Islamic sanctioned forms'. Even some feminist groups, especially the Islamists, criticized the quota system on the grounds that women should be elected on ground of merits, not through the quota system. This perspective resonates well in a country like Egypt in which the issue of women's rights has had strong connotations of a Western imposition. Another important constraining legacy of the authoritarian state's-cooptation of the women's rights agenda was the weakening the national machineries for gender equality. In the aftermath of the revolutions, these institutions were rendered too ineffective to push forward a new agenda and endorse the existing laws. For example, the Union Nationale in Tunisia was in disarray after the First lady was gone. Obviously, this situation further contributed to the weakening of women's rights activism (Kandiyoti, 2012).

5. CONCLUSION

Arab women have been at the forefront of the popular uprisings expressing deep-seated socio-economic discontented and political resentment directed against repressive and corrupt rulers. By taking a historical perspective, this comparative analysis looked at the gender dynamics in the recent Arab transitions by underlining the impediments preventing women from turning into agents in the gender equality agenda of the post- transition democratization processes. The nature and the consequences of Arab women's transitional activism, i.e. their roles, demands and their continued subordination demonstrated that periods of political upheavals fought in the name of equality and democracy have been heavily colored by gendered dynamics which compromised women's roles during democratization and perpetuated their

subordination in the patriarchal system. In particular, the Arab transitions brought about a re-assertion of patriarchal controls over women, as in the case of the sexual violence and repression against women directed by men across the political spectrum, as women defied the conventional gender norms and trespassed the public-private divide.

The MENA transitions involved revolutions in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia and partial transformation Morocco with different, yet comparable outcomes in terms of progress in democratization after the ousting (or reforming) of authoritarian rulers. In almost all of the cases however, transitional certainties have not been completely eroded largely due to the precariousness of the unity and consensus among the politically relevant actors. Most importantly, despite the fact that the recent Arab regime transitions have been characterized by the entry of new religious and secular actors including tribes, clans, women and youth movements into the political scene, traditional ones such as the army, clergy and trade unions as well as the Islamists continued to enjoy sufficient weight to shape regime changes and democratization dynamics. The major Islamic parties in Egypt, Morocco Tunisia and Libya which emerged as the major beneficiaries of the political openings have moderated their discourses and embraced pragmatism during the transition. The implications for women and women's rights of this changing state of affairs on the Islamic front-- the ambiguities regarding their democratic commitment notwithstanding—depends on the institutional arrangements for power sharing, the divisions among the Islamists themselves as well as on the leverage of the existing women's groups vis a vis any re-assertion of a conservative agenda.

Overall, the Arab transitions have not produced a distinct progressive gender agenda; on the contrary, women's political representation has experienced a visible set-back. Women's public presence has continued to be controlled under patriarchal premises. This situation could be partly attributed to the intensity of competition among male contenders for power and also to the decreasing centrality of the civil society actors, since they were eclipsed and overshadowed by political institutions, parties and other conventional institutions and processes.

The case of Tunisia with a near-completed of the transition and strong institutionalization of women's rights and that of Morocco with the lesser transitional uncertainties have emerged as a relatively more favorable modes of transitions for gender equality compared to those of Egypt and Libya. Even in these cases, the real hurdle seems to be the problems of implementing progressive legal reforms and the operation of the consensual mechanisms in the new constitutions. This however, largely depends on whether democratization would come to denote something more than the institutionalization of a

competitive electoral process. In the recent transitions in the MENA countries, the lack of genuine progress in women's human rights so far and the precariousness of their previous gains have demonstrated that women have once again been overshadowed both as agents and the objects of democratization.

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