

cerning religion and social life. Furthermore, in 2012, the Ministry for Religious Affairs in Tunisia organised a round table entitled “Towards a vision of reforming the religious media in Tunisia”, during which three main subjects were debated: “A critical approach of the religious media under the old regime,” “The reality of religious programmes in the audio-visual sector,” and, “Religious pages in Tunisian newspapers after the revolution.”

In what way do religious programmes and publications portray women and define their role in society? Are there significant differences between religious media affiliated to Islamist movements and private independent media? To answer these questions we rely on the outcome of media monitoring undertaken by the CAWTAR media centre throughout 2013 (January – May/September – November 2013), specifically concerning an analysis of the religious issue. This monitoring involved the following media:

1. Three Islamist newspapers (*Al-Fajr*, *Edbamir*, *Es-sabwa*)
2. The programme entitled *Ezzawaj Mawadda* broadcast by the Islamist radio station *Ezzitouna*.
3. The programme entitled *Tawassol al Qoulub* broadcast by the privately-owned television channel *Hannibal tv*.

Generally speaking, the outcome of this observation of the media study reveals the absence in religious columns of subjects concerning women, reflecting the lack of a clear and rational religious debate on women. This leads to an exaggeration in addressing issues con-

cerning women as well as a stereotyped image of women, their role and their position in society. In truth, women were not present at all in the media studied, except for subjects portraying a stereotyped woman and the traditional outlook, relegating all women to the private sphere. Women were absent in other subjects addressed as if they were not concerned with anything linked to public life.

What attracts attention is the absence of significant differences between religious or political-religious media and the independent and privately-owned media. For example, the programme *Ezzawaj Mawadda* broadcast by the radio station *Ezzitouna* affiliated with the Islamist party Ennahda and the weekly show *Tawassol al Qouloub* broadcast by the privately-owned television channel *Hannibal*, had the same attitude in the manner in which they addressed matters concerning women. Women were considered here as incapable of reflecting on themselves, relegated to the traditional role of bearing children without going beyond the borders of the private sphere. These programmes also emphasised women's duty to obey their husbands, the head of the family, and their inability to participate in making decisions and to demand equal status with men.

The question that arises is to understand whether these similarities concerning the image of women in the religious outlook presented by these two aforementioned media, are the result of stereotypes deeply rooted in the Tunisian mentality, or whether they were to be blamed on the rapprochement between Larbi Nassra, the owner of *Hannibal* television, and the party in power, Ennahda.

The only detectable difference concerns the written Islamist press, and more specifically the newspaper *Al-Fajr*, affiliated to the Islamist party Ennahda. The manner in which matters concerning women are addressed in the daily newspaper's religious columns, mainly concern the use of the veil and the full veil, as well as the law forbidding the veil in the army and the right of women wearing the *nigab* to attend schools. The choice of subjects addressed by this newspaper depend greatly on the country's political and economic situation and the priorities outlined by political and ideological competition, setting Ennahda in opposition to secular political movements.

One also sees that religion is no longer the only reference mobilised to address questions linked to the garments worn by Muslim women, since post-revolution political change has imposed the inclusion of a "human rights" approach in debating the subject. This corresponds more to the logic of partisan and ideological struggles than to purely religious and spiritual considerations, thereby reflecting the awareness of those responsible for this newspaper of the need to confront their opponents, mainly political ones, on the basis of the same "universalist" reference points.

Conclusions

The polarisation of the Tunisian media between an Islamist and a secular front has not yet been clearly defined. What effectively emerges from this analysis is the entanglement of interferences between the political, economic, religious and journalistic sectors. The media

are therefore a battlefield and Tunisian women, and the manner in which their image is portrayed, are the gateway to all change, whether within the Islamist versus secular or the political versus economic dichotomy.

Women are at times concealed by the media, depending on priorities outlined on the basis of the evolution of the country's political, economic or security situation, or exploited by the religious-political media for propaganda purposes. The only thing that seems to have not changed, compared to the pre-revolution period, is that the public sphere remains a domain from which women are definitely excluded.

This invisibility/exploitation is not only the result of a currently hypothetical and fluidly outlined polarisation. The lack of competence among journalists as far as gender equality in the media is concerned and a clear desire to rectify matters, are the elements that one should take into account when rethinking the way in which media professionals should treat all issues concerning women.

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Conclusion

Pietro Longo

In the aftermath of the Jasmine Revolution, the media landscape in Tunisia has undergone important changes. The fall of the Ben Ali regime has indeed opened wide margins of freedom for exercising citizenship rights. This is particularly valid for rights and freedom of expression.⁸² In a brief timeframe, the disappearance of censorship – previously enforced by state apparatuses, such as the Ministry for Tele-Communications – has enabled a significant number of new newspapers, radio stations and television channels to flourish. Within this process, it is important to consider the significant increase of online newspapers and blogs. These are managed by professionals and by mere ‘improvised’ journalists. In a similar way to political parties and associations, media has also experienced a kind of ‘excess of democracy’. This sudden and unregulated explosion is entirely comprehensible in the aftermath of decades of authoritarianism which the country rapidly tried to escape from between the end of 2010 and 2011.

⁸² A. Driss, “Arab citizenship review no. 3”, *Democracy and Citizenship in north Africa after the Arab Awakening: Challenges for EU and US foreign policy (EuSpring)*, August 2013; Id, “The New Tunisian Constitution and Citizenship Rights”, op. cit., May 2014.

For sixty years, the rigid control imposed by the Bourghiba and Ben Ali regime on means of mass communication distorted the function of the ‘fourth estate’. This is what the media should function as in a pluralistic setting, in which information is the cornerstone of democracy. Throughout this process – geared to limit civil society’s field of action – the example of the control exercised by the regime on the press is very significant. For a long time, and since its foundation, *La Presse* newspaper retained poll position in sales and diffusion, even before Tunisia gained independence (1934). Despite representing a specific view of Tunisia shared by the Francophone elite of the Destourian party, this newspaper became a reference point for citizens who wanted to be informed.⁸³ In addition, the fact that this newspaper was, since its birth, published in French reflects specific editorial and choices of the public which it was directed at.⁸⁴ In short, the press played an important historical role in the delicate process of constructing national identity, and in defining the ‘tunisianité’, which is still defended today as being specifically Arab, Islamic and Maghrebian. Yet, the employment of the press as a means for promoting national identity could only occur at a very high cost: quashing the right to information and freedom of expression in a context hungry for information. In fact, according to statistics, Tunisia is the third largest producer of newspapers in North Africa, following Algeria and Egypt.⁸⁵

⁸³ E. Webb, *Media in Egypt and Tunisia: From Control to Transition?*, Palgrave, New York, 2014, p. 63.

⁸⁴ The Arab version of *La Presse*, *Assabafa*, wasn’t a translation of the French one.

⁸⁵ M. Camau, V. Geisser, (edited by), *Habib Bourghiba. La trace et l’héritage*, Karthala, Aix-en-Provence, 2004, pp. 202-203.

Another element which was formerly part of this process of identity construction but was actually employed by ‘old regimes’ to maintain power, was Tunisia’s exclusion from international media circuits. But from the Eighties, with the eruption of the Ben Ali’s regime, the advent of pan-Arabic satellite channels, and the subsequent diffusion of internet, isolating Tunisia and its ‘request for information’ became an increasingly arduous task. Restricting freedom of expression, political and opposition rights, Ben Ali based the legitimacy of his ‘White Revolution’ on strengthening the social state. He promoted the education of youth and encouraged foreign investment (even if this fell within the framework of *crony capitalism* or client capitalism).⁸⁶ To facilitate these openings his regime indiscriminately used censorship, obstructing the development of new digital media. It soon became obvious that the Benalid regime was based on a strong contradiction: by obstinately isolating the country from the flow of information, it failed to reconcile itself with the promise for economic reform and a greater opening to tourism and foreign capital.

In order to resolve this dilemma, the regime experimented a curious, and diabolical strategy of separating political and economic information. This consisted in rigidly controlling the former, while continuing to manipulate the latter but leaving it relatively free.⁸⁷ For example, Tunisia was the first amongst Arab countries to introduce the data diffusion system in line with International Monetary Fund (IMF) requirements. This was

⁸⁶ E. Murphy, *Economic and Political. Change in Tunisia. From Bourguiba to Ben Ali*, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 1994.

⁸⁷ M. Camau, V. Geisser, op. cit., p. 205.

designed to enable European investors to access the country's macroeconomic data, necessary for stimulating enterprises and increasing capital investments. On the other hand, political information was side-lined, and despite the existence of alternative mass communication means alongside those centrally managed by the state, dissent was not permitted. According to a practice already tested by Bourghiba, the opposition press did not receive any support from public funding. This substantially contributed to weaken it.⁸⁸ The fact that this policy was devised to avoid the president becoming an object of attack and contestation by other political elements was not a mystery. Following a decision by Bourghiba in April 1981, the country opened itself up to a tame and controlled multi-party system in occasion of the congress of the Socialist Destourian Party that year.

While, the Jasmine revolution swept this system away, it also revealed the structural shortcomings of the information sector in Tunisia. Despite the HAICA's enormous efforts for regulation, the legal domain defining the media's field of action is still largely dominated by uncertainty. The *Independent Agency for Audio-Visual Communication*, which emerged in the transition period and incorporated by the new Constitution in 2014 (Article 127) attests to this. In the post-revolutionary context, media was also the object of a great need for transition, and it is precisely at this juncture that many new and promising realities of information emerged. The *Tunisia Live* portal is a good example of how a newsroom 'from below' was created with few means in

⁸⁸ Ibidem, p. 347.

Tunisia and solely spurred on by an original idea put into practice by young journalists. The editors who are also the project's founders, underline the importance of their work. Indeed, this is completely independent from parties and solely financed to inform users. None of the journalists who work here are professionals. Indeed, for the most part they are university students who studied in Tunisia or France, and in some cases spent a semester in the United States as trainees for some of the most well-known international newspapers.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, *Tunisia Live* is not legally recognised as a newspaper but is registered as a simple cultural organisation. This demonstrates the extremely uncertain phase Tunisia media is undergoing.

The fact that the state failed to carry out important policy reforms relating to the journalistic profession in the phase of constitutional transition is evident. These include the modification of their code of ethics, and sanctions incorporated in the penal code for defamation (another way in which the Benalid regime kept the opposition press in check). As a consequence, this affected the quality of information products. This is particularly valid for newspapers, which have been primarily reduced to party spokespeople, unsympathetic to the need of making information in an objective way.

Exercising the right to information and freedom of expression undoubtedly requires the dismantling of censorship. However, this alone is not enough. Nowadays, Tunisian journalists are capable of carrying out interviews they deem necessary, they have regained the

⁸⁹ Interview with Ramla Djaber Djerbi, co-founder of *Tunisia Live*, November 2013.

right to contestation and can express objective opinions on the conduct of public affairs.⁹⁰ What is still lacking is a sensible use of this freedom. In other words, the capacity for Tunisian journalists and editors to inscribe information into the framework of democracy, the multiple-party system, and in general of polyarchy.⁹¹ An authentic liberalisation of Tunisian media that goes beyond the simple proliferation of newspapers or new radio-television stations will only occur by investing in training of journalists, and in acquiring certain professional standards. This is also true with regards to salary levels. As El-Issawi underlined in his essay, without these elements, information content is destined to stay in second place.⁹² Furthermore, a greater professionalization could prevent the manifestation of an awful spectre: the polarisation of media between a religious and secular field – a reflection of the political landscape.

It is true that after the revolution media allied itself with political forces: *Al-Fajir*, the main paper linked to Ennahda circulates freely in the country's newsagents, alongside other newspapers of an opposite tendency, such as *Al-Maghreb*. Periodicals have flourished for the past three years. These include *Realité* or *Leaders*, which sympathise for the Nida Tounes party or the democratic pole. On the television plane, Tunisian spectators are exposed to *Al-Mutawassit* programmes on a daily basis. The latter is a pro-Islamic channel, which also proposes youth entertainment programmes vaguely following the

⁹⁰ Fatima el-Issawi, *Tunisian Media in Transition*, Carnegie Endowment for the International Peace, July 2010, pp. 1-2.

⁹¹ R. Dahl, *Polyarchy: participation and opposition*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1971.

⁹² Fatima el-Issawi, op. cit., p. 3.

MTV format. *Hannibal* channel, founded by Larbi Nasra (close to President Ben Ali) in 2004 and *Nessma tv*, founded in 2007 and presided by Nabil Karoui (recently fined for “offence to public morality” after projecting the animation film *Persepolis*) continue to persist. Despite being explicitly tilted towards Nida Tounes, both channels also propose religious programmes during the month of Ramadan or for Muslim festivities. This varied and fluid landscape appears to confirm that a real polarisation of mass media does not still exist in Tunisia. The turbulent but ‘sensible’ management of the constitutional transition by the Troika (Ennahda, CPR and Ettakol) may have avoided this danger. Nevertheless, it could indeed occur depending on the evolution of the political scenario. In other words, Tunisian media do not yet appear to possess their own autonomous maturity vis-a-vis political opposition with which they simply drift.

A real test of this is the presence of women in media, especially on tv channels and the facility with which female journalists are able to carve out their own space within newsrooms. Women are frequently hidden by local television according to priorities defined by the country’s political and economic evolution, and security. At times the image of woman is instrumentalised. This is particularly true in the case for media that propose religious content for mere propaganda ends. Instrumentalisation can be avoided through decisive state intervention aimed at containing the euphoria brought by the new freedom of expression, on the one hand, and on the other, for the supervision of media content. In this transition phase, control on standards is necessary

as long as it does not re-transform itself into a form of censorship, or even worse, a silencing of voices on political information. Journalism in Tunisia is a profession, which is still being defined: the margin of autonomy enjoyed by post-Ben Ali journalists is still not clear. What is certain is that this space is much larger than in the past. The hope for the future is that this freedom will grow, so that a sensible use of information can become an expression of civil society's voice, and a counterweight to the political world.

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