



# Averroes Policy Forum

Advancing Policy Dialogue



**Women Political**

**Representation in Tunisia**

An Unprecedented

Backslide

Civil Society Series

Averroes Policy Forum Papers discuss timely policy topics impacting the MENA region featuring insights from active civil society leaders. The papers are also used to create an active engagement with decision makers amid more inclusive policy dialogue.

---

**Author;** Kathya K. Berrada

Senior Program Manager at the Arab Center for Research, Morocco.

**Civil society contributor;** Olfa Ben Fraj

Project Manager at Jasmine Foundation, Tunisia.

## At glance

### New Electoral Law: Backsliding Loom:

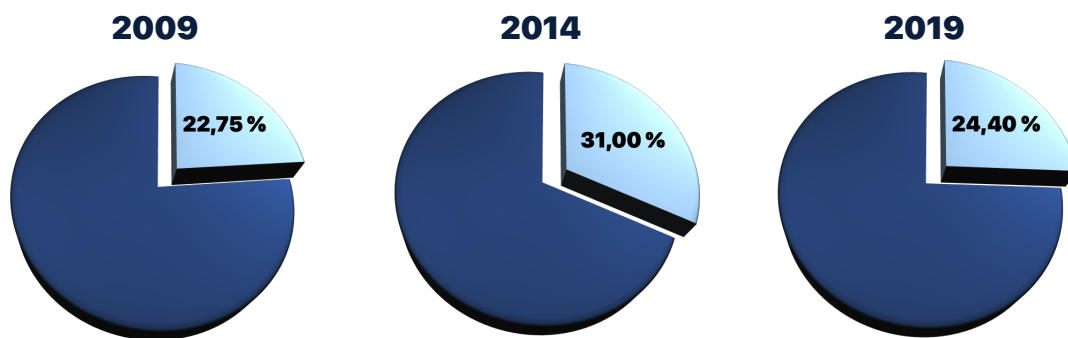
- Removing the women's quota system: A highly controversial electoral law provision.
- Cutting public funding for political campaigns: An addition challenge for women pursuit of political representation.
- The new 400 signature requirement: Further challenging women's active role in politics.

### Civil society lens:

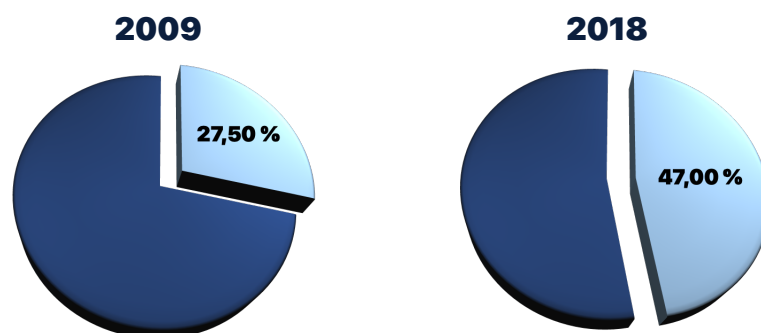
- An overall opposition to the new electoral law provisions impacting women's political representation.
- Lack of CSOs backed programs amid women's political leadership.
- Greater proportion of women in CSOs contrasting with their lower political representation.

### In numbers:

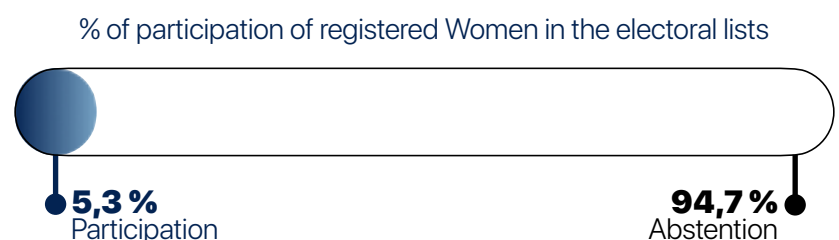
#### Women Representation in the Assembly of People Representatives



#### Women representation in local councils



#### Percentages related to the participation of women in the 2022 elections



## **A New Electoral Law Challenging Women's Political Representation**

The appointment of Najla Bouden as Tunisian prime minister coupled with a record of ten women to the 24-cabinet member appeared at first glance as an advancement in the promotion of women's political representation. Yet the following successive decisions of President Kais Saied leading to the replacement of the Tunisian hybrid parliamentary system with a system that grant him extensive powers deeply question his overall political orientations with major concerns when it comes to upholding democratic principles.

As regards women political representation, president Saied has sent mixed signals. In a rather unprecedented shift, the new electoral law introduced by Kais Saied in September 15, 2022 eliminates the principle of gender parity in elected assemblies. Additionally, under the new electoral law, potential candidates need to gather 400 signatures of registered voters from their constituency to run for office. Besides, candidates cannot finance their campaigns via public funding and must rely instead on their own means. Those new requirements are expected to create further burden for women who are less likely to have the same local networks for both the signature and access to financial resources. While it is too early to evaluate the impacts of the new electoral law on women political representation in Tunisia, a major decline in female candidates for the last December election was already noticed with only 215 Women in over 1430 candidates running for seats.

## **Decades of State Feminism: A top-down Support for Women's Political Rights**

In the Arab world, Tunisia was often referred to as the most advanced country when it comes to women's rights. Bourguiba state feminism policies earned him the title of emancipator and liberator of Tunisian women. With state feminism broadly defined as the government endorsement and adoption of pro women's rights policies, Bourguiba advanced in a top-down approach a number of reforms amid improvement of women

**The highly controversial new Tunisian electoral law introduced by president Saied includes provisions directly impacting women's political representation**

social and political rights. Yet, the state feminism orientations at that time also reflected the government monopolization of the feminist cause. Indeed, Bourguiba outlawed the activities of pre-independence feminists' organization and replaced them with the National Union of Tunisian Women in 1958 directly linked to Bourguiba's party.

President Ben Ali continued to show an official state endorsement for women's rights. As such, an electoral law passed under his presidency required parties to respect non-discrimination between genders without however specifying particular women's representation modalities. Moreover, a number of state agencies were created in support of gender equality such as the Center for Research, Documentation and Information on women founded in 1990. Nevertheless, Ben Ali continued to pursue a state feminism marginalizing independent and autonomous women's rights organizations. The growing threat coming from islamist movements under Ben Ali presidency led to further official endorsement of women's rights as a way to appeal to moderate middle classes internally and gain international support as seemingly progressist ally.

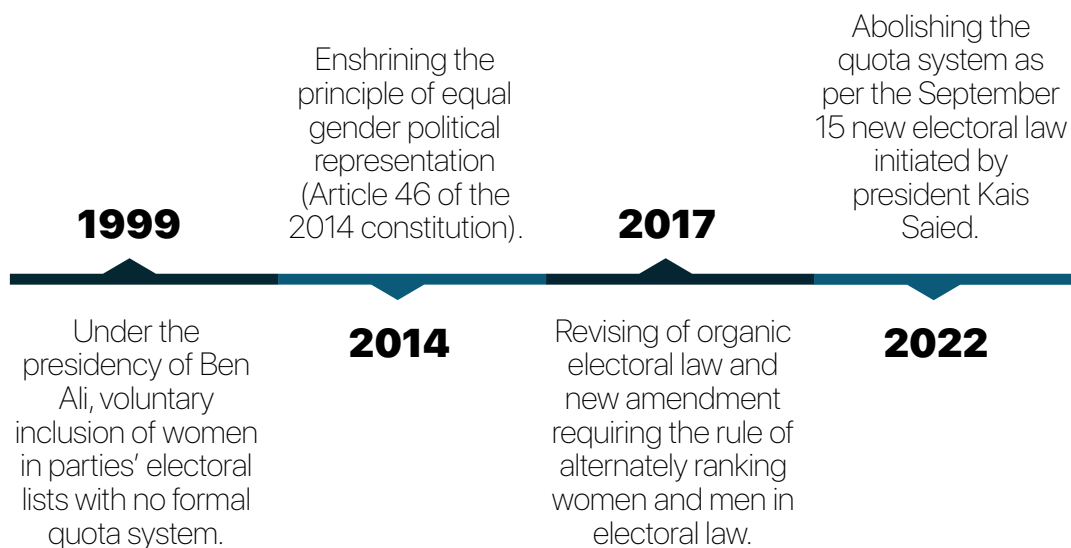
## **The Jasmine Revolution: A stress Test for Women's Political Rights**

The Jasmine revolution represented a real stress test for women's rights in Tunisia. Following more than half century of top-down pro-women rights policies with no real test for popular support, those rights were about to be challenged by the emergence of political and religious expressions banned under the previous regime. Yet, the constitutional drafting process following the 2011 revolution proved an overall orientation to preserve previously secured women's rights by enshrining them in 2014 Tunisian constitution. The drafting process itself provoked large debates when it comes to references to Sharia versus a more secular wording as regards women's rights

In term of results, women accounted for 31% in the Assembly of people representatives in 2014. A 2016 electoral law included

**The constitutional process following the Jasmine revolution proved an overall orientation to preserve previously secured women's rights by enshrining them in the 2014 Tunisian constitution**

the principle of parity and alternation between men and women on candidates list for all elections. As result, women made 47% of local council positions following the 2018 elections.



# CIVIL SOCIETY LENS

## Insights from the interview with Olfa Ben Fraj, Project Manager at Jasmine Foundation, Tunisia.

- > The political openness brought by the Jasmine revolution allowed for the emergence of more independent and autonomous women's rights groups breaking away from the state quasi monopoly over the gender agenda.
- > Civil society organizations expressed an overall support for the quota system as a necessary measure toward greater women political representation. Yet, some CSOs expressed their skepticism when it comes to its real endorsement by political parties beyond the legal constraints to comply with it.
- > In recent years, the mistrust often expressed by COSs when it comes to political parties created a real dichotomy between both stakeholders leading to a lack of cooperation which in turns jeopardized the emergence of CSOs led programs in favor of women political participation in Tunisia.
- > The scarce programs amid women political engagement and leaderships in Tunisia are often initiated and implemented by international organizations such as the EU and not by locally grown Tunisian initiatives.
- > Women representation at differently levels of CSOs are high and sharply contrasting with low political representation. This is mainly due to the grassroots work nature of CSOs where women often show more proximity with local communities.
- > Civil society organizations are clearly opposing the latest electoral law both in terms of its new provisions as well as its unilateral drafting process which marginalized the plurality of the Tunisian voices.
- > The abolishing of the quota system as promulgated in the new electoral law has been heavily criticized by CSOs on different fronts from which the fact that no evaluation of the quota system was conducted to comment on its efficiency or lack of it.

## References

- Abdo-Katsipis, C. B. (2017). Women, Political Participation, and the Arab Spring: Political Awareness and Participation in Democratizing Tunisia. *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*, 38(4), 413–429. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1554477X.2016.1268870>
- Ben Amar, N. (2016, January). Women’s political participation in Tunisia. *Arab Citizenship Review* No. 14, 21 January 2016 [Policy Paper]. [http://www.epc.eu/pub\\_details.php?cat\\_id=1&pub\\_id=6252](http://www.epc.eu/pub_details.php?cat_id=1&pub_id=6252)
- Historic leap in Tunisia: Women make up 47 per cent of local government. (2018). UN Women – Headquarters. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2018/8/feature-tunisian-women-in-local-elections>
- Ibrahim, A. (2022). Are women’s rights used as a smokescreen in Tunisia? ALJAZERRA. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/9/29/has-female-representation-in-tunisia-govt-advanced-rights>
- Shalaby, M. (2016). Challenges Facing Women’s Political Participation Post Arab Spring: The Cases of Egypt and Tunisia. In M. Shalaby & V. M. Moghadam (Eds.), *Empowering Women after the Arab Spring* (pp. 171–191). Palgrave Macmillan US. [https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-55747-6\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-55747-6_8)
- SheVotes: Tunisia Understanding Barriers to Women’s Political Engagement in Tunisia. (2020). International Republican Institute. Retrieved January 6, 2023, from <https://www.iri.org/resources/shevotes-examines-barriers-to-womens-political-engagement-in-tunisia/>
- Supporting women candidates for parliamentary elections in Tunisia | International IDEA. (2022). <https://www.idea.int/news-media/news/supporting-women-candidates-parliamentary-elections-tunisia>
- Women in Tunisia: Has a female prime minister changed Tunisia? (2022, July 12). BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-62053997>
- Women’s political participation in Tunisia and Morocco since 2011. A comparative analysis. (n.d.). Retrieved January 6, 2023, from <https://thesis.unipd.it/handle/20.500.12608/24409>