Women's Movements between Islam and Secularism: the Role of the History of Contention in the Case of Iran and Tunisia

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Abstract

This paper investigates women's movements in Muslim-majority countries (MMC) and how at times, they relate to Islamic values or secular discourses. Drawing from the literature on the topic, I consider that the study on feminist movements in MMC has overlooked the factors determining women's collective identity and action, and focused on the societal causes behind their mobilization. Instead, I adopt a heterogeneous approach to identity-creation, and ask: "*Why do some women's movements in Muslim-majority countries appeal to Islamic values rather than secular values for their campaigns?*". Through a most-similar system design (MSSD), I conduct a secondary literature analysis on the evolution of the state-women's relations, in both countries. Building on the ideologically structured action theory, I argue that the history of contention of Iranian and Tunisian women's movements influences the repertoire that these groups currently adopt. I find that state's relationship with the West and the state's institutional premises are the aspects to direct women's movements' campaigns. Namely, when countries oppose Western ideas of feminism and if countries direct the debate on gender equality on whether women should or should not acquire certain rights, women's movements might find religious discourses more appropriate to the context. If countries look for foreign approval and if they approach women's empowerment from a state's perspective, women's groups can either comply with state-led secular principles, or can try to oppose the system. Lastly, I elaborate on the results and discuss the limitations of my methodology.

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Introduction

Muslim-majority countries (MMC) have enduring fame for oppressing and marginalizing women based on Islamic religious traditions (Joseph, 2000). Public opinion research demonstrates that citizens of MMC are less sympathetic to gender equality issues which, is often linked with the effects of Islam in the region, and the apparent clash between religion and democratic values (Alexander & Parhizkari, 2018). Yet, women's movements have been flourishing in the Muslim world (Cherif, 2010), and these groups are advocating for more equal rights and women's extensive political participation and representation (Tajali, 2015). These groups have not all been adhering to the same processes of campaigning for their goals, that is to say, they have occasionally opted for Islamic discourses or secular ones, when establishing the "core identity claim" (Tajali, 2015, p. 566) of their movements.

For instance, Iran has witnessed the spread of prevalent Islamic feminism, meaning that women's campaigns find in Sharia and religious teachings, the path to achieving gender equality, reform of Islamic institutions, and access to power (Mahmoudi, 2019). On the contrary, Tunisia has been characterized by a stronger presence of secular feminism, which has provided the foundations for women's feminist campaigns, in terms of economic emancipation, family laws, and citizen status; drawing from more nationalist motives than religious ones (Masciavè, 2019). Considering political contexts where women are underrepresented and male elites impose a discriminatory rule on women, such as Iran and Tunisia, this research seeks to investigate the factors that condition feminist groups' identities, whether built on religious rhetoric or a secular one. In other words, I aim to answer the following research question:

Why do some women's movements in Muslim-majority countries appeal to Islamic values or secular values for their campaigns?

This thesis aims to add to the body of literature that tracks Muslim women's processes of questioning and rediscovering their agency in scenarios that restrain their access to rights,

engagement in political demands, and empowerment, because of the established political authority. The given research question finds its relevance based on the fact that the existing literature extensively discusses women's social and political status in MMC and the violations of their rights, but ignores the implications of their past with regards to groups' strategies of mobilization and collective identity-creation. Overall, my research tries to contribute to the academic debate that investigates "how, when, and why women's rights advance" (Cherif, 2010, p. 1144).

The following sections of the paper will review the approaches to collective identity and mobilization of women's movements, starting from the perspective of social movements' (SMOs) dynamics. Secondly, a theoretical argument will be outlined based on the hypothesis that the history of contention of Muslim women's movements determines the characteristics of the repertoires of contention employed for feminist campaigns, whether on a religious basis or a secular one. I ground my argument in groups' ideologically structured action (ISA). The methodology section elaborates on the most-similar system design (MSSD) adopted for Iran and Tunisia and offers an overview of the types of women's movements in the countries. I conduct a secondary literature study on the history of women-state's interactions in both countries and through the lens of ISA, I show how women's groups repertoires of action reflect state's opportunities. I find that state's relationship with the West and the institutional premises of the political structure are the historical aspects guiding women's mobilization.

The Concepts of Islamic and Secular Feminism

The main concepts relevant for this thesis are women's movements, Islamic feminism, and secular feminism. Firstly, I see a conceptual continuity between SMOs and women's movements as feminist movements follow the same patterns as SMOs, in terms of identity claims and subsequent mobilization strategies. Della Porta and Diani (1999) observe that the definition of SMOs is as fluid and intersectional as the organizations themselves; however, they settle that SMOs are a "social process consisting of the mechanisms through which actors engage in collective action", and where

members “are involved in conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents […]; share a distinct collective identity” (p. 20). As waves of SMOs have emerged with time, women’s movements can be viewed as a phenomenon of the “new social movements” era (p. 6) of the 1960s. Building on Della Porta and Diani’s (1999) conceptualization of SMOs, I stress that feminist movements take upon various collective identities, which implies that different motifs of identity-creation are at play over time, as this thesis studies.

As my research question seeks to identify the link between women’s movements and their relations with secular or Islamic values, it is necessary to explain the concepts of Islamic feminism and secular feminism. Sirri (2021) illustrates that, as a strand of feminism, Islamic feminism is an all-encompassing movement that advocates for the recognition of women and other marginalized actors for their historical significance. It opposes Muslim patriarchy and white Western feminists, which both endure to the disadvantage of Muslim women’s agency. Islamic feminism aspires to feminist gender discourses within the boundaries of Islamic language and sources of legitimacy, questioning the construction of “Islamic gender norms” (Sirri, 2021, p. 5) and their legacy in MMC. Overall, Islamic feminist scholars advocate for the reinterpretation of the Quran, and the deconstruction of the assumptions about the teachings of the Hadith and the Sharia, favouring a deeper feminist reading of the religious texts (Karmi 1996; Mernissi, 1991; Wadud, 1999). I define secular feminism vis-à-vis Islamic feminism, to draw a parallel between the discourses of women’s groups in MMC.

Badran (2005) describes that secular feminist movements build on “secular nationalist, humanitarian/human rights, and democratic” (p. 6) narratives, and that in the scenario of the Middle East, secular feminism also originates from the opportunities brought by the ideological progressiveness of Islamic modernism. Women’s demands in MMC are secular to the extent that they relate to the condition of women’s citizenship, and derive from the realization that females are treated as second-class citizens. Hence, secular feminism forges a new vision of nation and nationalism, which goes beyond the religious community and separates state institutions from

religious institutions. Consequently, this trend objects to the gendered concept of nation, nationalism, and citizenship, calling on the patriarchy of MMC's family laws and private codes (Jalal, 1991; Moghissi, 1996). Sirri (2021) and Badran's (2005) conceptualizations of Islamic and secular feminism are the starting point of this paper.

Literature Review: Tracing Women's Trajectory on Identity and Action

I. A Multifaceted Approach to Collective Identity-Creation in Women's Movements

My research seeks to distinguish the factors that motivate women's groups to pursue Islamic rhetoric or a secular one; meaning that I also investigate how feminist movements have different collective identities. Therefore, it is essential to begin this thesis with a discussion on identities in SMOs, to grasp the identity-creation processes that happen in women's movements as well. Rupp and Taylor (1999) hold that SMOs do not adopt an immediate collective identity, which is dynamically forged according to the interactions within the group instead (Mueller, 1992; Taylor & Whittier, 1992). In fact, in SMOs, collective identity is treated as a product of the organizations themselves, based on "common interests, experiences, and solidarity" (Rupp & Taylor, 1999, p. 365), and not as an a priori claim. Thus, the realization of a collective unit represents the ultimate goal of the movements, which is to politicize identities.

However, such an approach favours a monolithic view of SMOs, supporting that a single collective identity drives participation. These accounts ignore that movements' members negotiate between identities and interests all the time and at all levels, suggesting instead that several identities coexist simultaneously for different purposes. Gamson (1991) provides a three-layers approach to collective identity, showing that groups appeal to: an organizational identity, which is built for people that do not necessarily belong to the larger movement; a movement identity, which refers to how specific organizations relate to the broader movement and a solidary identity, that depends on people's social attributes, such as gender, race, class, and ethnicity (as cited in Rupp & Taylor, 1999). A multifaceted framework for SMOs' collective identity, rather than a unitary

paradigm, reconciles with the fact that feminism was never a homogenous political ideology. Thus, feminism can only be comprehended in relation to the interpretation of collective identity that women's organizations assign to the general movement. This thesis aims to study the case of Islamic and secular feminist movements in MMC to investigate how differently women perceive themselves and their goals, and how this translates into diverse mobilization strategies, whether based on Islamic principles or secular human rights discourses. As such, it is now necessary to review the actual dynamics of identity-creation within the scope of women's movements.

The starting point is Melucci's (1995) focus on the process-making stage of identities, which is described as a "system of interactions" (p. 60). The scholar's view represents a middle ground between a unitary perspective on identities and one that stresses their characteristic heterogeneity. The author analyses the feminist movement in Italy during the 1970s and maintains that each sub-group's different conception of the movement's purpose is equated with the several feminist orientations that individual members perceived. It comes then that, a "high degree of elasticity" (p. 61) is ascribed to collective identities, to both promote general visibility for public mobilization campaigns, and to allow for further ideological development of the movement. Basir, Ruebottom and Auster (2021) offer a practical example of such flexibility of identities, by examining the case of Libyan locals and Libyan diaspora struggling for women's rights in the country. They argue that an exclusive and inclusive source of collective identity is an "(un)common past" (p. 3). Through such lenses, the movement's outsiders were called in by their Libyan identity to partake in the battle. Yet, when the local institutional crisis hit, the diaspora was cut out from the movement for not being able to share the same experiences, namely the outbreak of the Libyan civil war. The emergence of a new factor of collective identity changed the relational dynamics of the in-group, as an uncommon past became the trait through which diasporic members were excluded.

Moreover, Basir et al.'s (2021) findings support this paper's idea that feminist movements cannot be considered a homogenous phenomenon, and that collective identities are constantly being redefined according to their environments. Such a statement seems to contrast Hobson and

Lindholm's (1997) account of the existence of an initial step of "cognitive framing" (p. 483) in identity-creation, by which women would conceive an ideal picture of a "just society" (p. 483), and overcome race, class, ethnicity, family status, and rural/urban cleavages (Kaplan, 1982). The pre-existing frame would facilitate the creation of a "common vision" and "shared meanings" (Hobson & Lindholm, 1997, p. 483) across and within women's groups. I challenge such cognitive framing as it cannot account for the contextual differences affecting feminist movements, while favouring a uniform view of women's groups' development. My study tries to cover the shortcomings of current scholarship on collective identity-formation, by supporting that movements constantly negotiate their identities according to their history of contention, associating with either religion-oriented values or secular ones.

II. Beyond Collective Identity: Strategies of Mobilization and Collective Action in Women's Movements

The literature so far highlighted the main limitations of a unitary perspective on women's movements' processes of collective identity-formation, and how the evidence of certain feminist movements contrasts with that. Having in mind the case of Iran and Tunisia – two MMCs where women's groups have coordinated around different identity traits –, this section reviews the mechanisms that condition participation and mobilization in SMOs and thus, women's campaigns, starting from the assumption that identities alone cannot explain the variation in movements' organization.

Polletta and Jasper (2001) review the logic behind the choice of tactics and strategies of mobilization in SMOs. They claim that collective identities determine mobilization to the extent to which a movement's activities ideologically embody the core of its character, making identities "expressive rather than a strategic logic" (p. 292). Yet, these same strategic choices acquire meanings with the collective identities that motivate them. In other words, SMOs' processes of mobilization and collective action, and groups' identities are sustained by a mutually constitutive

relation; and such argumentation supports the aim of my research, that is to establish the elements determining women's movements' choices of identities in MMC.

When discussing incentives for women's movements' collective action, the existing literature mainly adopts a historical approach, meaning that feminist groups have been organizing because of different factors, according to the social and political status that was assigned to them. Kaplan (1982) labels it as "female consciousness" (p. 545), that is women's awareness of the expectations projected on them due to a specific "class, culture and historical period" (p. 545). Women's demand for rights might unroll in accordance with or against that social role. Therefore, feminist mass action began to happen when women acknowledged the advantageous implications of the attributes that were given to their identities, and mobilized for collective action by portraying their private selves in the public life (Blair, 1980; Epstein, 1981; Hagemann, Michel & Budde 2008). For instance, Noonan (1995) builds on such a historical perspective by studying a recurrent source of mobilization for women, that is maternity. The author shows how Chilean women were affected by the gendered discourse that the authoritarian regime dedicated to them, and understood their role as strictly related and concerned with maternal issues, such as family healthcare. It followed that women's demands for rights were addressed only as far as they pertained to their mother status, which shaped the following cycles of feminist mobilization. The mother-child relationship was the one domain in which women could be active and claim a political agency. Therefore, the previous debate proves that identities and mass action cannot be considered as static and unitary, but rather must be plotted in the broader contextual picture, to understand why women's movements arise the way they do. I intend to establish the key components of women's identity and mobilization by conducting a comparative case study.

On another note, having in mind the characteristics of Iran and Tunisia, that is, nonreceptive political and social contexts to the detriment of gender equality, Taylor's (1989) theory of SMO in "abeyance" (p. 761) is relevant too. The author focuses on scenarios where the political and social arenas are not responsive to movements' demands, producing a hostile environment for the

organizations; that have to turn to other mobilization strategies to sustain themselves in abeyance. It comes then that SMOs might have to reconstruct themselves into abeyance organizations, which, if on the one hand, do not have enough capability to overthrow the status quo momentarily, on the other, still represent motives of change in stand-by. An abeyance situation can be the outcome of "changes in opportunity structures" (p. 762) that might promote or hinder the SMOs, or the "absence of status vacancies" (p. 762) to welcome the new voices. The result is that movements have to adapt to the abeyance framework thus, preserve mobilization over time through the "survival of activist networks, [maintaining the] repertoire of goals and tactics and [by transmitting a] collective identity [among the group members]" (p. 762). Since Taylor's (1989) framework of abeyance structures was drafted in the case of women's movements' continuity in the post-war period, the theory is especially related to the topic of this paper. In fact, despite the adverse political elites, women's movements are still making their voices heard in MMC. Thus, it can be argued that these SMOs are becoming abeyance organizations that must embrace new mobilization techniques to compensate for other contextual factors.

Understanding Women's Movements through the History of Contention

So far, I have outlined the boundaries of this thesis' topic, while the following section will exhibit the theoretical argument through which the research question can be addressed, the subsequent hypothesis and expectations from the case studies. My question seeks to recognize the conditions under which women's movements appeal to Islamic values or secular values in very similar settings; that is to say how and why feminist groups align and mobilize around certain collective identities, rather than others. The history of contention is the factor that this thesis will examine, as I hold that this independent variable explains the shifts in direction of women's campaigns in Iran and Tunisia. I ground my hypothesis in SMOs' ideologically structured action (ISA), through which I can follow movements' logic and choices of repertoires of contention and discuss how repertoires are contextually informed.

Zald (2000) describes ISA as the mechanism linking group's ideology and behaviour, claiming that the understandings and interpretations that SMOs have of the structure of the political environments they operate in, regulate the patterns of collective action. The idea of ISA lays in the argument that SMOs' mobilisation derives from sensemaking processes and beliefs about the institutional surroundings, in relation also to how movements believe that that structure should work. Moreover, a group's adherence to such political ideology might be "less explicit and less coherent" depending on actors and time (p. 4). In fact, ISA is responsive to changes in the political structures, counter-activities from rival actors to the SMOs, and the previous ideologically structured actions that the movements have undertaken. Overall, the interpretative aspect of ISA implies that SMOs assess the most effective actions to oppose or sustain the political environment, based on the perceptions of the existing political opportunities (and limitations) that groups identify. In other words, movements select certain repertoires of contention according to their perceptions of the "institutional logic" (Carmin & Balser, 2002, p. 370).

However, Tilly (1993) illustrates that a "repertoire of contention" (p. 264) refers to "a set of routines" (p. 264) that guide collective action and represent the "language" (p. 268) that rules the interaction among all the actors involved, as well as between group members and rival parties. A repertoire connects in-group members through "shared understandings, memories, and agreements" (p. 268), but it also signals to antagonist actors in the movement how to respond and adapt to these repertoires, which results in a restricted choice of "alternative collective action routines" (p. 265) for the mobilizing group. Therefore, repertoires are shaped by both "contending actors" (p. 268) and thus, are affected by the specificity of time and place.

As the array of strategies that movements can implement gets more limited throughout time, because of repertoires' responsiveness to opposing actors, and since shifts in repertoires are rooted in "creative modifications or extensions of familiar routines" (McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly, 2001, p. 49), I argue that to comprehend the emergence of two distinct rhetoric for women's groups'

identities in Iran and Tunisia, one should account for the "history of contention" (Tilly, 1993, p. 267) behind these groups. Therefore, I suggest that:

H1: Women's movements appeal to Islamic values or secular values for their campaigns based on the history of contention.

I consider that following the legacy of the history of contention, I can trace the constant interplay between SMOs' interpretations of the political structure and their choices of mobilization vis-à-vis the state's responses, and the subsequent evolution of group's repertoire over time.

For instance, after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iranian women's activity started engaging with the rethinking of gender in Islam, as a form of contention, since the political context only left room for religious narratives. Thus, feminist groups concluded that they could be committed to the re-interpretation of the male reformist exegetical analysis of the texts, which would then turn into a request for a direct feminist reading of the scriptures (Ahmadi, 2006). Similarly, in post-independence Tunisia and under Ben Ali, only secular women's groups were approved and institutionalized by the state, spreading an anti-Islamist rhetoric against the Ennahda and Islamist women, who were seen as obstacles to women's rights (Yacoubi, 2016; Zlitini, 2012). The following Tunisian feminist movements had to remain on the same secularist track to comply with the state-backed feminist policies, for Tunisian women to fight for empowerment (Arfaoui, 2007; Moghadam, 2018). Hence, nowadays I expect that Iranian women's movements affiliate with Islamic principles, while their Tunisian counterparts advocate for secular values, based on the patterns of the history of contention.

Methodology

I. Research Design and Case Selection

I conduct a comparative case study, between Iran and Tunisia. Because of my theoretical framework, a comparative case study can highlight the specific features of the two scenarios that influence women's groups' choices. This type of study will allow me to produce generalizable

findings on why and how certain women's movements endorse Islamic values or secular ones, by analysing the history of contention. Iran and Tunisia can fit a most-similar system design (MSSD), which describes the comparison of almost identical cases that differ only in the outcome variable – in my study, women's campaigns. The MSSD ensures that the similar background variables are controlled and ruled out, and identifies the independent variable(s) (IV) of interest causing the different outcomes between the cases (Steinmetz, 2021).

The case selection of Iran and Tunisia is based on the fact that in the two countries, women's groups have respectively followed an Islamic trend of feminism, and a more secular one; which translates into different values of the DV. I developed this argument by descriptively studying the discourses portrayed by existing women's organisations, such as "One Million Signatures" (OMS) in Iran, and "Aswat Nissa" (AN) in Tunisia. For instance, it appears that the OMS resolves to Islam and religious narratives to justify the validity and reasonableness of the group's objectives, by illustrating that gender equality is in accordance with God's will and is rooted in the religious prescriptions of the texts (Khorasani, 2009; Tahmasebi, 2008). By contrast, AN has mobilized in the name of values that highlight the role of women as Tunisian citizens, and not as religious devotees, and sustained that gender equality is at the basis of the rule of law and democracy, and not of sacred texts like for Iran (Aswat Nissa, 2019). I restrict my timespan of analysis to the set-off of the current political establishment, that is to say the overthrown of Iran's last Shah, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, following the 1979 Islamic Revolution. For Tunisia, my starting point is the foundation of the Tunisian Republic (1956), after the independence from France, and the secularist and anti-Islamic trend that occurred from then on. Drawing from the theoretical argument and hypothesis previously exposed, I maintain that by tracing back the history of contention of women's movements, I can explain today's difference across countries and the contextual diversity of the cases.

It has to be remarked that the categorization of my cases in such a religious-secular dichotomy is also the product of a theoretical abstraction for the purpose of this paper's research

design. In fact, the empirical reality will demonstrate that groups' appeal to certain principles is more complex. However, the case studies do present comparable background features that justify the use of a MSSD and the research of an independent variable of interest altering the values of the DV across Iran and Tunisia, and Gorman (2019) exactly draws a parallel between the countries. Firstly, both states have a Muslim-majority population and the countries' identity has intertwined with the legacy of Islam. Secondly, both countries were submitted to a past of Western influence, whether through direct French colonialism for Tunisia, or through the exploitation of natural resources by the British Empire, like in Iran. Thirdly, in both cases, women have always been active actors for change in revolutionary times against the political establishment, which had not anticipated their resistance (Vaez, 2011). These control variables suggest that women's movements in the countries should have organized in similar manners nowadays, namely either by reinforcing their Islamic identity or by embracing a more Western-based feminism. Yet, the characteristics of Iranian and Tunisian feminist campaigns differ.

II. Methods of Data Collection, Operationalization and Data Analysis

In view of the theoretical argument of my thesis, I maintain that conducting qualitative research allows me to explore in an interpretative manner the evolution of women's movements in Iran and Tunisia vis-à-vis their relations with the state. In this way, I attach meanings to women's groups' repertoires of action, through the lens of ISA, and I test how the history of contention hypothesis determines feminist alignment to Islamic or secular values. I operationalize women's movements as the major feminist trends of the period and I look at states' attitudes toward gender equality through the politics implemented.

I conduct a secondary literature analysis to critically review state-women's relations in Iran and Tunisia, starting from the time set in the previous section until recent years. In view of my hypothesis, I argue that this type of study fits well with a historical approach, as it allows me to cover a large period of analysis, without having to collect primary data. However, I point out that

other methods of data analysis might have provided more insightful information on women's intentions for collective action, such as interviews, which were not feasible due to time restrictions and logistics. Similarly, I had no means to include literature written in Persian/Farsi or Arabic in my study, which reduces the local perspectives offered on Iran and Tunisia's history. Thus, the analysis of the identified timespan is indicative and encounters some limitations. A final section on the comparison of the findings concludes the analysis.

A Comparative Analysis of Iran and Tunisia's Women's Groups

I. Iran

The 1979 Islamic Revolution and the Khomeini Decade (1979-1989)

The outbreak of the Revolution translated into the revocation of many of the rights that the Pahlavi rule had granted to women, like the right to divorce, lowering women's legal age for marriage to nine, enforcing the obligatory *hijab* and gender segregation in schools. The Islamic Law of Retribution was passed and it established punishments for female adultery or violations of the dress code, through stoning, blood money and flogging. Despite the harsh measure adopted by the established regime, a large share of women had actively participated in the revolution against the monarchy, appealed by Khomeini's plan of Islamization of the country. In fact, conservative women and traditional families that had been discriminated against and marginalized during the modernisation phase of the dynasty, saw in the religious movement a chance for justice and equality. Religious gatherings, holy prayers at the mosque and public demonstrations became the arenas where women's issues could gain visibility, as long as groups abided by the Islamic framework of the uprising (Koohestani, 2012).

However, as the theocratic rule was strengthened, both conservative women and more progressive groups realized that the Islamist gender policies that Khomeini adopted were symbolic of the oppressive rule that the cleric had formed, and implied the exclusion of women from political participation and professional life. Consequently, Iranian women learnt that their demands had to be

framed strategically in a way that they could be sustained under such a regime. The group's ISA is synthesized in the fact that even pro-revolution women's groups acknowledged the shortcomings of Khomeini's political structure and had to reinvent themselves into what Taylor (1989) would identify as abeyance organisations, to sustain the mobilization. Likewise, the secularist faction had to compromise with the concept of Islamic feminism in order to strive through the opportunities of the theocracy (Tohidi, 2016). Islamic feminism appeared as the discursive tool through which women could protest the authoritarian state, combining the strife for rights with a religious motif. Moreover, the label had the power to call on Iranian women as a whole, bridging the gap between religious and secular women, as the first groups' ideological attachment to the Islamic Revolution had weakened due to the consequences of the theocratic regime on women's conditions (Sadeghi, 2010). Islamic feminism was the only notion of feminism that women deemed acceptable, as it was distant from Western notions of feminism that otherwise would have undermined their mobilization, in view of the strict anti-colonial, anti-imperialist and anti-American stances of the regime.

As a consequence, women had to adapt their repertoires to what they conceived were the most effective strategies of contention, that is proving that a feminist reading of the scriptures could result in more equal rights, and searching for the help of more progressive clerics to justify their interpretations of Islam and to facilitate the leverage of their accounts (Hoodfar & Sadr, 2010). Even the hazardous demonstrations against forced veiling were mitigated by statements in support of the regime. Such act avoided that women's behaviour could be labelled by the clerics as radical and Western-led (Sanasarian, 1982).

President Rafsanjani, President Khatami and the Reformist Era (1989-2005)

The last years of Khomeini's presidency witnessed the burst of the Iraq-Iran war (1980-88) which required women's assistance at the front but also led women to enter the workforce while replacing their husbands as breadwinners of the family. Despite women's economic empowerment,

the reformist period initiated by Rafsanjani (1989-1997) did not envision any further political and civic role for women. The President was known for his pragmatism as the gender equality issue was systematically depoliticized and approached through economic liberalization programs (Sadeghi, 2010). As women's level of education rose and in view of the reformist context, feminist groups understood how to implement their deepened knowledge on Islamic teachings to their advantages. Women's presence in the journalist and media sector became the main activity of contention during the period, as well as a vehicle of representation, agency and awareness – i.e., through the publication of feminist magazines, such as *Zanan* (Povey, 2012). The launch of *Zanan* was the product of women's interpretation of the new "institutional logic" (Carmin & Balser, 2002, p. 370) of the reformist presidency, which enabled them to discuss politics, gender violence and sexuality through an Islamic feminist stance.

President Khatami (1997-2005) continued the reformist and pragmatic trend, yet gender equality was addressed in terms of women's civic empowerment, placing the issues in the political opportunities' realm. The presidency pushed for the emergence of women's non-governmental organisations and civil society groups which opted to rather follow a rights-oriented campaign and advocated for changes in the legal system. In fact, the political structure implied that entering the secular-religious cultural debate could have triggered the opposition from the conservative factions (Moghadam, 2004). For instance, the OMS campaign's relevance was due to its capacity for adaptiveness, which is central for abeyance organization's survival of actors and objectives, according to Taylor (1989). Following the ban on *Zanan*, the OMS constructed repertoires that needed to match and foresee rival actors' responses to the groups' mobilization. The repression of *Zanan* was indicative of which strategies were to be avoided, as the alternative choices for collective action clearly became more limited. The association developed techniques of "networking, multiple leadership and horizontal organization" (Ardalan, 2013, p. 138), to ensure the movement's responsiveness to the shifts in the political structure. The main repertoire used was the door-to-door, face-to-face promotion of the movement's goals to spread free information about the

agenda. The group also avoided occupying public spaces, which could have endangered them against the state. In conclusion, the OMS' adherence to ISA not only allowed them to survive through Khatami, but also to anticipate the neo-conservative trends that were returning with the popular support for Ahmadinejad, since the movement stressed its "authenticity" and localness vis-à-vis rumours of Western and international support (Tohidi, 2016).

President Ahmadinejad's Neo-Conservative and Populist Backlash (2005-2013)

The conservative wave of Khatami's final years led to the election of President Ahmadinejad. The leader gathered consensus by voicing the concerns of lower-class Iranian women, who felt excluded and disadvantaged by Rafsanjani and Khatami's reformist priorities. This period was characterized by anti-civil society attitudes, quick and violent crackdown on protesters and opposition actors. Since some of the women's groups had already been categorized as NGOs in the previous years, they preferred to temporarily stop their fight for the advancements of rights in such abeyance framework, as they were unable to act overtly or in more informal settings without facing repression or censorship (Moghissi, 2012).

In view of the political structure, women's mobilization had to adjust to Ahmadinejad's rhetoric and abandon any secular or Islamic source of identity that could justify their quests. To circumvent the repressive techniques of the rule, the gender equality issue needed to be politicized in terms of power relations, especially because the hardship of the regime pictured women's groups as a threat to national security, regardless of their religious affiliation. It is remarkable how women's identity for collective mobilization needed to be deconstructed and constructed again, beyond the secular-religious binary. The new narrative on gender power relations is an example of how beliefs are informed by the specificity of the context and in relation to the opportunities available. Moreover, the poor improvements that the reformist phase had brought, indicated that internal discourses on women's rights had to proceed from "social forces arising from below, outside the official discourse of the established authority" (Sadeghi, 2010, p. 221). The given shift

from top-down sources of discourses on gender equality to bottom-up ones after the reformist experience, indicates how the set of alternative repertoires available to SMOs is bound to decrease as the actors involved interact, and the repertoires systematically follow the history of contention of groups.

Considering the violent repression measures such as arrest, rape, torturing and killing, the Iranian women's movement was left with almost no strategy to progress during the President's first mandate. It is interesting to note that, at the dawn of Ahmadinejad's re-election in 2009, the technological innovations of social media and online activism embodied the new repertoire of action for the women's movement at the time. Adding to the turmoil of the 2009 Green Movement which contested the undemocratic and corrupted re-election of Ahmadinejad, women's groups strategically maneuvered around the lack of public spaces of contention and turned to cyberspace as a form of resiliency, while nourishing their internal and external ties, by referring to exiled activists and to the Iranian diaspora (Fathollah-Nejad, 2013).

President Rouhani and the US Sanctions (2013-2021)

Rouhani introduced himself as a moderate leader, who never explicitly expressed his stance regarding women's rights, yet he committed to increased female representation in politics and in the labour sector. However, the President's main concern was to work toward an international deal on Iran's nuclear program, which was indirectly tied to the status of women in the country (Hanna, 2020). In fact, although the US-led economic sanctions targeted the government to revise the nuclear deal, they also pushed for an improvement in human rights as a whole. The sanctions worsened the conditions of Iranian citizens first and foremost and strengthened the autocratic aspect of the rule. Due to the economic collapse, not only women's role in the workforce declined, but women's groups were also subjected to strict scrutiny as a securitized perspective on civil society groups was adopted.

In Ahmadinejad's phase women's movements reached out to diasporic involvement as that strategy fitted the constraints of the local political structure. The awareness of a heightened anti-imperialist and anti-American sentiments at the regime level, motivated by US sanctions, logically implied that women had to stress their ideological distance from Western notions of feminism and foreign meddling in their fight. Furthermore, diasporic communities in the West carried more radical stances on gender equality, in relation to the Islamic Republic and women's groups could not be associated with them (Haghighatjoo, 2016). As a consequence, it was best for women's movements to fit in the local structure, to abandon discourses on human rights and transnational solidarity as a source of repertoire.

II. Tunisia

Habib Bourguiba and State Feminism (1956-1987)

During the last years of the French protectorate, Tunisian women were involved in the fight for national independence, and their active involvement in the liberation process determined why women's demands for equal rights drawn from their status as citizens, once independence would be achieved. In the aftermath of the birth of the Tunisian Republic, the state's first President Habib Bourguiba prioritized a modernist agenda for the country, engaging in the secularisation of Tunisia and in women's empowerment. The two aspects were viewed as the main indicators of a democratic and developed nation-state, according to the long-standing Western standards imposed on the country. However, the promulgation of state-led feminist policies only reinforced patriarchal rhetoric and authoritarian structures, since it suppressed any alternative and independent form of women's agency (Yacoubi, 2016). For instance, the enactment of the Code of Personal Status (CPS) in 1956 should have legally protected gender equality by establishing a sovereign secular justice system, yet it simply implied a marginalization of the role of Islam in the society.

It was obvious for women's groups that in that scenario, the only feasible opportunity to sustain their fight was by working within the feminist apparatus of the state. Having acknowledged

that Bourguiba was more concerned with countering the Islamist opposition to his rule, rather than actually granting equal rights through the CPS, women decided to join governmental feminist organization, such as the National Union of Tunisian Women, and had to act as protectors of the code from the Islamist threat. If on one hand, this implied that Tunisian women could not ensure autonomy and inclusivity in their feminist actions, on the other, it constituted the only instrument to bypass the state's sanctions on independent movements (Tchaïcha & Arfaoui, 2011), and survive in the absence of new opportunities.

A turning point was the rise of Islamism in the early 1980s across the North African and Middle Eastern regions. The wave constituted a regional and international input for women's mobilization at the time. Considering Bourguiba's increasingly corrupted and unjust regime, especially regarding women's rights, Islamist thinking represented an alternative political discourse and a source of women's agency different than state feminism (El Houssi, 2018). Therefore, Islamism served as an opposing force to the regime and embodied an expression of how the Tunisian establishment should have worked, that is to say, by incorporating the array of women's religious diversity. In accordance with the trend, women exploited the momentum and reappropriated of the *hijab*, which became the movement's repertoire of action until the next political phase. The fact that the practice and ritual of veiling regained the function of political contestation demonstrates that groups' repertoires are based on usual routines in their history of contention. The *hijab* was a symbol of national identity, both against France in pre-independence Tunisia, and against Bourguiba.

Ben Ali's Regime and the oppression of the Islamist revival (1987-2011)

In the midst of religious conservatism, Tunisia's next leader Ben Ali had to mediate between the demands of the Islamist opposition and the legacy of Bourguiba's state feminism, while seeking to preserve the image of a modern Tunisia in front of the foreign public, in terms of women's rights. The Ennahda state's opposition started being beneficial only for conservative women, since the

Islamic party offered an opportunity for women from rural and poor classes to counter state feminism (Yacoubi, 2016). The gender-based policies were not benefitting traditional women, who even clashed with more progressive groups. Moreover, the misinterpretation of Islamism put forth by the state contributed to the misrepresentation of religious women as a fundamentalist threat to the gains of the CPS (Arfaoui, 2007). In other words, the political and social environment had become hostile to Islamic voices. Until the Tunisian Revolution, the movement never really managed to resist both Bourguiba and Ben Ali's monolithic perspective on women's rights, to the detriment of feminist diversity. The ban on the Ennahda party in 1991 illustrated to women that the Tunisian feminist discourse could not draw from religious narratives in that setting.

After having suppressed the Islamist wave, Ben Ali could finally recommit to Bourguiba's state feminism. The President approved the two major women's associations that emerged in the previous era, namely the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD) and the Association of Tunisian Women for Research on Development (AFTURD), which investigated several strategies of women's mobilization. Since international actors had proved to be important variables for women's movements, the organizations sought to create transnational networks with women's groups in the Maghreb and Middle-East. However, as Ben Ali's rule took more restrictive stances, such as violating basic human rights and ignoring the democratic features that a modern state like Tunisia should have acquired, the leader responded by institutionalizing the ATFD and the AFTURD in the regime apparatus (Ouanada, 2020). It was then clear that both Bourguiba and Ben Ali had instrumentalized women's bodies and rights in order to justify authoritarian practices and gain Western support for sharing same visions on gender equality. Therefore, women's associations recognized that the structure of the regime only allowed them to participate in political and civic life as long as they were present in public spaces and mobilized under and in accordance to the secular state system.

The Jasmine Revolution and the Constitutional Transition (2011-2014)

In January 2011 mass protests occurred in the street against nepotism, corruption and suppression of all freedom operated by Ben Ali's regime. Women represented a large share of the protesters and took the opportunity to put gender issues at the top priorities of the Jasmine Revolution. In practical terms, women engaged in the democratic transition of the country, and in view of the power vacuum at the state-level, women realized they could upgrade the conversation on women's rights from a top-down structure, to a horizontal arena of public debate among Tunisian women from all backgrounds (Charrad & Zarrugh, 2013). The removal of the leader and the victory of the Islamist Ennahda party during the country's first democratic elections in decades, equated with the possibility of the resurgence of the secular-Islamist debate on the future of women's status. Even though the ideological divide was wide, the context of the uprising made women understand that the occupation of public spaces for civic resistance against an institutional patriarchal power was the most logical action to take (Chebbi, 2019). The occupation strategy was built on women's mobilization during the liberation movement, and interestingly it repeated itself as soon as another state's authority was dismantled. From being instrumentalized in the previous years, women's reappropriation of their bodies was their strategy of mobilization for the democratization process of the country.

Such non-ideological mobilization represents today's women's movements' preference to appeal to discourses that refer to democratic values and citizenship rights as the basis of "Tunisianité" (Debuysere, 2016). The given repertoire proceeds from habits rooted in the past, dating back to pre-independence and post-revolutionary Tunisia. Especially during the writing of the current 2014 Tunisian Constitution, the Islamist and progressive women's groups had clashing beliefs on how the Tunisian system should have looked like. Article 28 on the complementarity of women to men in the Tunisian family was the subject of opposition. While conservative women in support of the article were sustaining equality among genders and roles in the family and were blaming the opposition's instrumental misinterpretation of the content, secularist women's groups

recognized a threat in the Islamist victory and were occupying the streets while hoping to protect and maintain the rights of the CPS.

The clash evolved as a reflection on the role of Islam in the state and the function it should have taken in the new constitution, which should protect basic human rights and thus, freedom of speech and religion too (Ouanada, 2020). While Islam is recognized as the religion of the state and does not play any function in the legal system of Tunisia, ambiguities are left in relation to the place of Islamist perspectives on women's rights. Therefore, while the logic of the institutional structure certainly advantages secular groups, Islamist groups do not find explicit opportunities for their mobilization under the system and thus, have to reconstruct and adapt their ideas through human rights universalistic discourses.

III. Discussion

In the analysis above, I studied the evolution of women's movements in Iran and Tunisia to investigate how these groups' identities and actions follow strategies that are contextual to the specific political scenarios. This section offers a discussion of the findings.

The type of relation with the West is the first difference between Iran and Tunisia. Throughout the period examined, Iran has always portrayed anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist, anti-American and anti-Western sentiments, which clearly signalled the discourses on gender equality to be avoided. Under Ahmadinejad, women's groups looked for the Iranian diaspora's support, yet when US sanctions hit the country's economy under Rouhani, women realized that they could not afford to be affiliated with Western concepts of feminism, and that to survive in that environment they had to maintain Islamic discourses. On the contrary, Tunisia's past as a French protectorate explains why state's leaders always strived for the approval of the West. Until the Jasmine Revolution, official discourses on feminism were led by the state in the name of a modernised country, which translated into secular and anti-Islamic approaches to gender equality. Tunisian

women understood that they could only carry on with their campaigns by existing within the state apparatus, that is to say, by occupying public spaces and gaining visibility from there.

A second aspect marking a difference between Iran and Tunisia is the institutional premises. While being an Islamic Republic, Iran never provided a reason for alternative rhetoric on gender equality than the ones based on the scriptures. After the failure of the reformist phase, when Rafsanjani and Khatami committed to women's empowerment through a pragmatic approach, women's groups recognized that their struggle could not be handled by the state and that they needed to develop a different narrative "arising from below" (Sadeghi, 2010, p. 221). As a consequence, women opted for the politicization of their quest beyond the religion-secularism dichotomy. Indeed, groups needed to adapt their repertoires of action to the regime based on how they perceived the institution, that is to say, by using Islamic narratives and activities as channels for women's rights. It is crucial to point out that Iran presents clashing state-women's relations not because the two parties embody the religious-secular divergence, but because they represent the undemocratic-democratic opposition, which truly hinders gender equality (Hoodfar & Sadr, 2010).

In Tunisia, the institutionalization of gender equality through the CPS and other feminist policies implied that women's movements could mobilize both within the established secular framework, or challenge it from the outside. The presence of Islamist forces that threatened the state feminist ideology even prior to independence, represented an alternative source of discourses for women. It comes that groups' repertoires of action could either stick to the channels already established by the state, such as by participating in the licensed feminist associations, or they could be reflective of the opposing identity, see wearing the *hijab* as a practice of contestation. Going back to my theoretical argument, Islamic women's groups' contribution symbolizes an ISA based on the belief of how state structures should function, that is by protecting religious pluralism. The given internal variation in Tunisia echoes the polarization of women's movements' religious-secularism cleavage, and that lies in the meaning of the Tunisian state identity.

Conclusion

By conducting a comparative case study, this thesis sought to identify the conditions that motivate women's appeal to religious or secular values for their movements in MMC. In the MSSD, the history of contention is the variable of interest whose qualitative values mark the difference across women's campaigns' outcomes in Iran and Tunisia. Specifically, the type of relation with the West and the institutional premises of the countries regulate whether women's groups refer to Islamic discourses or secular ones. According to my analysis, if countries reject foreign ideas on feminism and if countries shape the conversation on gender equality on whether women should or should not acquire certain rights, women's movements might find religious discourses more effective. Whereas if countries aim to foreign recognition and if they engage with women's empowerment from the state-level, women's groups can either remain in state structures and employ secular principles, or they can try to oppose the system. Although I have argued that SMOs behave on behalf of the perceptions that they formulate on political structures, and I have favoured a multifaceted approach to collective identity-creation, I find that a strategic perspective on identities might be too narrow. Similarly, the role of religion and Islam as an actual reason for women's achievements of rights should not be underestimated. In the realm of gender equality in MMC, a simple policy recommendation for international organisations and NGOs operating in these areas, is to draft women's development programs in compliance with the specificity of local identities and structures.

From the analysis above, another noteworthy aspect that emerged was the function of regional and transnational actors, with whom women's groups can create alliances, networks and nourish the debate on women's rights. For instance, in the case of Tunisia, the Islamist wave that covered the Muslim-majority world represented an opportunity for Islamist voices inside the country to counter the regime. Thus, when reproducing such research design, I suggest that further research is conducted on the presence or absence of regional or transnational actors and investigate how that impacts the trajectory of women's movements. Moreover, the MSSD was detailed on a

theoretical abstraction on Iran and Tunisia, meaning that the generalization of my findings presents some limitations and it cannot fully account for very recent times. Similarly, I recommend that such a comparison between women's movements in MMC is proposed on pairs of cases that present similar political and institutional structures, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia or Tunisia and Morocco.

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