

**Report From Tunisia: The Many Faces of Islam**

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In recent years the Middle East (Muslim societies in particular) have been places of extremes. Saudi Arabia and Iran impose severe restrictions on the freedom of women while Tunisia and Turkey have no such restrictions.

In a recent visit to Tunisia -- that small strip of land lying between the eastern border of Algeria and the Mediterranean sea-- I was chauffeured around by two young, very independent, Tunisian ladies. Both had recently received their "license" (or Bachelors of Science) in psychology, and were now working on completion of their Masters theses. They were also applying for graduate study for their Ph.d's in Canada and France.

Likewise, at the conference on "Attitudes Toward Science," at which I gave a paper on the Internet as a new medium of commercial and intellectual development, more than half of the participants were female. And no young women wore any kind of head covering. In general, no young women will be seen in the cities of Tunisia wearing any kind of traditional (or modified "modern") Islamic head covering that we associate with Islam. For these Muslims the fear of "mixing", the mingling of males and females together in public, has been lifted.

When I asked one of my young female escorts, "Who arranges the marriage for young people?" she quickly and exuberantly replied, "the girl does!" This seemed to imply a complete liberation of young people, as marriages, especially in Arab and Muslim countries, have traditionally been arranged by the parents. But, I said, "The bride still has to wear the [heavy] traditional jewelry of Tunisia," that I had seen on display in the famous Bardo Museum in Tunis. "Yes," she replied.

In brief, modern Tunisia is a place in which women are about as "liberated" as they can be, though this same young lady told me that when she was in Quebec, Canada applying for graduate study, she "really felt free." A measure of how significant this liberation of women in Tunisia is can be gauged by the fact that since 1991, there has not been one case of "honor killing" in Tunisia. These are killings in which a husband, brother, or father killed a wife, sister, or daughter who was suspected of having an adulterous or illicit sexual alliance. As a result, the Tunisia government enacted a new law in 1994 which made such liaisons strictly the girl's responsibility, and any violence done against her is exempted from the traditional category of "crime of passion" (or honor), which would exonerate the perpetrator.

But even more fascinating is the fact that what was formerly treated as a crime of passion revenging honor, has now turned into a form of mental illness. My colleague who is a practicing psychologist, told me about two cases in which the grooms were distressed by the fact that their brides were probably not virgins, and this resulted in divorce. But the emotional energy connected to this knowledge was now transformed into mental anxiety and actually treated by a psychologist, while the two couples ended up divorced-- a far better result than murder. But this progressivism of Tunisia stands in marked contrast to Jordan, where CNN viewers recently learned, about 100 honors killings occur each year.

However, the path by which Tunisian women gained such freedom of action and movement was almost solely due to the bold actions of the great Tunisian

former president, Habib Bourguiba, now 96 years old and in poor health. Bourguiba came to power in the 1940s and in 1956, as President, he fashioned legislation that greatly modernized Tunisian law, which was then based on traditional Islamic law --the *shari'a*. The new law eliminated polygamy (the only Muslim country to have done so) made marriage a civil event that had to be registered by the court, expanded the rights of women to apply for divorce, and also granted them the right to work. Women were thus freed from the requirement that they ask their husbands or guardians for permission to work, to travel, or to move about unescorted. Today women appear everywhere, but, apparently due to a shortage of work, the streets seem overwhelmingly populated by men, men on their way to cafes serving tea and "chicha"-- Turkish water pipes (but no drugs), where they sit and sipping tea for hours.

Yet Bourguiba and his successors have maintained a one-party state, forbidding the formation of autonomous opposition parties, and never allowing women or other groups to attain intellectual independence. All associations are fundamentally controlled by the state, even sports clubs, which are given a list of candidates for elective office chosen by the government. The current President Ben 'Ali, who took over in a bloodless palace coup in 1984, was an expert in military security, including computer technology, and has used that knowledge to restrict all freedoms that we take for granted in the U.S. A family of opposition leaders told me that both their "Hotmail" and "Yahoo" email accounts have been blocked by the government. Similarly, there appears to be an electronic filter in place so that if certain words appears in a fax transmission the system automatically shuts down, giving the user a "sorry, technical difficulty," message.

As we were discussing such matters, my host (who had been an ambassador and high official in Bourguiba's administration in the 1980s), laid out the abstracts of the conference proceedings, which contained both the abstract of my paper as well as my CV. "All of this," he said, "was read and approved by government officials before the Conference was held." Somewhat surprised at this news, I relied in jest, "Shall I held straight for the airport?" Of course, it was true that my colleague at the University of Tunis who had organized the conference had worked with officials in the Office of the Secretary of the Interior, and that the Conference was as much sponsored by the Ministry of the Interior as by Center for Social and Economic Research that my colleague directed. There had been some difficult moments while organizing the conference, but the Conference went off just as planned with no interference.

In short, Tunisia is a paradoxical country where tranquillity seems to prevail, where people are secure in their person and property (unlike Indonesia, where every middle class home is guarded by walls with barbed wire and broken shards of glass). But university campuses in Tunisia are severely controlled by security guards at every location: at the main gate, around the campus, between floors in the buildings, etc. Moreover, Presidents Bourguiba and Ben 'Ali, apparently fearing student unrest, made it a point to break up the national university into several campuses, each with only three or four departments. Thus one campus houses the Psychology and "Humane Sciences" while another houses Economics, Political Science, Management and the School of Law. The Natural sciences and engineering are located on still other campuses scattered around Tunis, a city of about 1 million.

Similarly, there is no freedom of the press: all newspapers are basically cheer-leading sections for the government, those in French as well as Arabic. Some time ago a leading soccer player retired with considerable wealth and was asked what else he would like: he replied that he would like a villa like President Ben 'Ali's in Argentina. The news of this secret palace was revealed to the Tunisia people via Spanish and Italian TV, and soon thereafter those international TV sources were blocked.

With the arrival of the Internet, the possibility of freedom of expression and public organizing in "cyberspace" are going to be great threats

to such a security state. At the same time the Internet opens up vast new possibilities for commercial and economic growth on a global scale. Tunisia and the other developing states of the Middle East (but also Southeast Asia) will have to make a choice between restrictions on freedom and enhanced economic development. In this regard, the 21st century represents a powerful new cultural and political threat to many traditional ideas and practices in developing countries located throughout the Middle East.