

Bourguiba did a lot for Tunisian women. But was he their emancipator?

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Demonstrators gather in support of women's rights and equal justice in Tunis in June 2022. Photo by Yassine Mahjoub/NurPhoto via Getty Images

Tunisia's National Women's Day is often associated with Habib Bourguiba, the country's first president, who pursued the policy of state feminism. Bourguiba ruled the country for 30 years after its independence from France in 1957. In 1987 he was ousted in a coup d'état by Zine El Abedine Ben Ali. Bourguiba's state feminist policies earned him the moniker of the emancipator and liberator of Tunisian women.

But was he really their emancipator?

Like most Tunisian women, I grew up thinking this idea was true because this was the message the Tunisian educational system and media had communicated. When I started researching the history of the Tunisian feminist movement, however, I discovered that the reality was much more complex.

Bourguiba's state feminism

State feminism refers to the government's adoption of policies that foster women's rights and improve women's lives. Bourguiba was the pioneer of state feminism in Tunisia. He used his powers to pass reforms that vastly improved women's legal status.

These reforms were imposed from the top down and promoted women's rights in a number of areas.

A few months after the country's independence from France, Bourguiba instated the Personal Status Code. This granted women unprecedented liberties and social autonomy. It eliminated men's practice of immediate divorce and provided equal divorce rights for women and men. Women's consent became required for marriage. The right of a guardian to marry off a woman without her permission was abolished. Polygamy was also outlawed.

As a result of these changes, the labels "the father of feminism" and "Tunisian women's liberator" were given to Bourguiba. The labels reflected the paternalistic and patriarchal aspect of the Bourguibist feminist policies. They also mirrored the state's monopolisation of the feminist cause.

In reality, Bourguiba deliberately marginalised Tunisia's autonomous feminism. Different women's unions appeared in the pre-independence period. Yet, after independence, Bourguiba opposed, marginalised and dissolved them. He outlawed their activities in the name of "national unity" and replaced them with the National Union of Tunisian Women in 1958.

The result, according to Tunisian researcher Chouaib Elhajjaji, was that he killed the grassroots movement and turned it into a government sponsored one.

Bourguiba co-opted women's rights by linking the National Union of Tunisian Women to his Socialist Destourian Party. He transformed the Women's Union into a tool for his state feminism.

The result was an ambiguous policy. It presented itself as freeing and modernising, while maintaining a level of conservatism. This is what explains Bourguiba's reinforcement of women's traditional roles as wives, mothers and guardians of Islamic tradition in his speeches, despite his revolutionary ideas.

Co-opting women's rights served his nationalist agenda, but not the feminist cause. The women's union could not criticise the state's gender politics.

My reading at Tunisia's National Archives allowed me to notice the constant praise of Bourguiba in the publications of the Tunisian Women's Union, particularly its journal *Femme* (Woman). The journal refers to Bourguiba repeatedly as the emancipator of Tunisian women. Indeed, the fact that he appointed the union's first president, Radhia Haddad, reflects his hegemony over this female organisation.

Haddad herself would later criticise the lack of freedom of expression and association. Other feminist activists, like Amal Ben Aba and Zeineb Cherni, also joined in denouncing the state's hold on feminism. The state cracked down on them.

This created a need for an independent form of activism capable of acting outside the state agenda. As a result, an autonomous feminist movement emerged in Tunisia in the 1980s.

Independent feminism

The independent groups signalled their divergence from the government's official "feminist" structures. They allied themselves with opposition parties because they saw a link between the fight against sexism and the fight against authoritarianism.

Tunisian feminists chose to qualify their activism as "autonomous" to differentiate it from the state's approach.

For instance, in 1987, the Tahar Haddad cultural club was founded as part of the push for independent voices. Its growth was challenged by Bourguiba's decision that only his women's union could operate. This hindered the actual political representation of the autonomous women's movement.

The Tunisian independent feminist movement wanted to end the patronage of Bourguiba over women's rights. Activist Sana Ben Achour illustrates this in her comment on the determination of the independent feminists who founded the Tahar Haddad Club to achieve their goals in spite of Bourguiba:

Our relationship {with the National Union of Tunisian Women} was conflictual because the Tunisian feminist movement was born out of the will to break with tutelage, more particularly with the father figure, the figure of Bourguiba ... We no longer wanted to hear the discourse, which made Bourguiba know what was best for us, women.

Ben Achour throws light on the important problem of Bourguiba's appropriation of achievements made in the women's rights arena. This centralises the father cult. It also erases the role that Tunisian women's rights activists played in advancing women's rights. The most notorious example of this erasure is the Personal Status Code, which was celebrated as Bourguiba's achievement.

As Elhajjaji explains, this has resulted in

*ignoring the female activists who fought for these laws. School history books rarely mention names such as *Bchira Ben Mrad*, *Radhia Haddad* and *Manoubia Ouertani*, but instead, it's Bourguiba who is celebrated as the women's 'saviour' and 'liberator.'*

Amira Mhadhbi, who exposes the oppressive aspect of Bourguiba's state feminism, illustrates this further:

President Bourguiba was declared the 'liberator of Tunisian women.' ... This initiated a culture of political patriarchy. By effectively outlawing other forms of political leadership, Bourguiba stalled the women's movement in its broader fight for autonomy from male authority.

The evidence presented so far reflects the limitations of Bourguiba's state feminism. It is undeniable that the state feminist policies he pursued have benefited Tunisian women and girls in multiple areas. But, if independent feminists were deliberately marginalised by this male figure, then can we continue to call him the emancipator of Tunisian women?