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Art show riot reflects religious divide in new Tunisia



A general view of the Abdeliya Palace, which is closed by authorities, is seen in Tunis June 27, 2012. REUTERS/Zoubeir Souissi 1/2

By **Lin Noueihed** | TUNIS

The artist agreed to be interviewed but asked not to be named. Picking up a piece of work vandalised by Islamist zealots at a recent arts fair in a suburb of Tunis, she said: "Don't describe it or people will know who I am."

Tunisian artists have gone to ground since Salafi Islamists broke into Abdeliya Palace on June 10 and destroyed a handful of works at the Printemps des Arts fair to protest against art they deemed insulting to Islam, then ran riot for days.

One of the most controversial works on display was an installation depicting veiled women as punching bags. Another showed veiled women in a pile of stones, a comment on the stoning of adulteresses in Islam. The work that caused most anger spelt the words "Sobhan Allah" or "Glory to God" in ants.

While condemning the violence, which killed one person, the culture and religious affairs ministers also criticised the artists for crossing the shifting limits of free expression.

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Tempers have since calmed. But the incidents were the latest to raise fears among secular intellectuals that the freedoms won when last year's revolt ousted secular dictator Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali are slowly being circumscribed by religious mores imposed by zealots, not the once-feared police.

"Under the old regime, if you didn't touch on Ben Ali or those that surrounded him, you were alright," said the artist. "Now, the definition of what is forbidden is expanding and it could include anything because art is about interpretation.

"They are targeting the people who ask questions, the intellectuals ... anyone who can think and make others think. Journalists, students, artists. Maybe we represent a danger and will push others to refuse something or maybe we don't correspond to their model of the Tunisian."

The artists' union has threatened to sue the ministers, and a petition to support Tunisian artists is circulating online, but the tight-knit community has been careful not to draw attention to those whose work was on display after a listing of artists' names on Facebook caused deep anxiety.

Comments by a leading Tunisian cleric, later censured, suggesting that the offending artists should be killed has raised further fears that they could face physical attack.

IMPOSING CONSERVATIVE VALUES

The dispute mirrors a wider divide that has dominated Tunisian politics since October, when the Arab Spring's first election ushered in a government led by the moderate Islamist Ennahda, which was banned under the old regime.

On one side stand the many Tunisians who see the revolution as an opportunity to express a religious identity suppressed by Ben Ali and independence leader Habib Bourguiba, who crushed Islamists of all stripes, sending thousands into jail or exile.

On the other are Tunisia's Francophile elites, its urbane intellectuals, artists, academics and business people, who closely guard their secularist principles and see the end of dictatorship as a chance to broaden freedom of expression.

Meriem Bouderbala, one of the curators at Printemps des Arts, hugs her knees and flits between a smattering of English and the French she naturally speaks after growing up in France.

Framed works of original art lean casually against walls around her villa, which has the relaxed feel of an artistic retreat.

"After the revolution, artists had a feeling of freedom. They wanted to express freely. They produced very powerful art," she said.

"The artists were not expecting this reaction. That is why they feel so fragile. They turned to the government but it is not supporting them so they feel they have hit a wall."

Bouderbala said artists should reach out more to ordinary people and avoid elitism. The unnamed artist agreed that it was imperative to take art from the galleries to the street. But the gulf is wide.

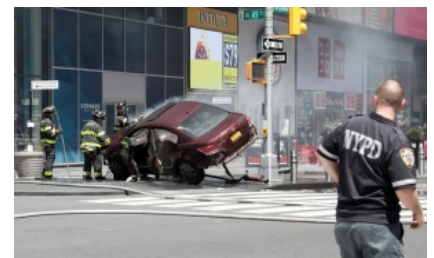
From the bearded youths who sell religious tracts outside Tunis' Fateh Mosque to the fashionistas who crowd the clubs in upscale suburbs, Tunisians can seem to inhabit different worlds.

While analysts say their numbers are not significant, Salafis, who follow a puritanical interpretation of Islam, want to live in an Islamic state ruled by sharia, or Islamic law. They do not believe in democracy and many did not vote.

They want the Koran for a constitution and dismiss the lively debates between secularists and moderate Islamists over the shape of the new constitution currently being drafted.

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moderate Islamists over the shape of the new constitution currently being drafted.

Many ordinary people have little sympathy for the artists.

"The secularists should stop provoking Muslims because it will cause a reaction, even among people who don't pray," said Moncef Isaimy, who runs an Internet cafe in a working-class part of Tunis where some of the worst rioting took place.

ENNAHDA'S DILEMMA

Caught between such conflicting visions for the new Tunisia, Ennahda has promised not to name sharia as a source of legislation in the new constitution. But a surge in violence has fuelled concerns that the ruling party is either unable or unwilling to rein in extremists seeking to impose their values.

Attacks on alcohol vendors in Sidi Bouzid, the central town where the Arab Spring began, sparked clashes last month. Salafis have rampaged through the northwestern town of Jendouba.

An often violent standoff at Manouba University - between Salafis demanding female students be allowed to wear the face veil and a principal who refuses to bend on the issue - has lasted for months.

Ennahda leader Rachid Ghannouchi has repeatedly said that in the new Tunisia, Islamists would not be jailed for their opinions, as they were under Ben Ali, but only for their deeds. Ennahda points to its tough response to the riots as proof that it is living up to its pledge to punish violence.

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But secularists suspect the group at best sympathises with extremists and at worst is in cahoots with them to ultimately transform Tunisia into an Islamic state.

Little has changed for Tunisian women since the revolt, but Meriem Zeghidi, a spokeswoman for the Tunisian Association for Democratic Women, worries that basic rights in marriage and divorce won since independence in 1956 are now in danger.

Feminists are demanding women's rights be enshrined in the constitution to protect against creeping religious conservatism.

"The Salafis are people who are behaving undemocratically in the street. These are people who adopt violence and that is worrying because everything that happened from the January 14 revolution to the elections was peaceful," she said.

"We must ask ... why the government is doing and saying nothing about this?"

Locally-made wine still flows in Tunisia's restaurants and its beaches are crammed with bikini-clad bodies at the weekend.

But the riots have catapulted the debate on the limits to freedom of expression to the top of the political agenda.

The media have already come under threat. Earlier this year, a court fined a television boss for airing the animated film *Persepolis*, which angered some Tunisians with its depiction of God, banned in Islam. A newspaper publisher was fined over a photo of a Tunisian-German footballer with his apparently nude girlfriend.

Members of parliament, mostly from Ennahda, have suggested that future violence could be averted by passing a law banning blasphemy, which would simply discourage provocative work.

Secularists say this would take Tunisia into dangerous territory. Who, they ask, decides where these red lines are?

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