

NEWSROOM

Tunisian Feminist Scholar Khedija Arfaoui Visits Bentley Valente Center for the Arts and Sciences, Discusses Issues Facing Muslim Women

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October 19, 2012



Dr. Khedija Arfaoui, a feminist activist and one of the leading intellectuals in Tunisia, joins Bentley as a visiting scholar with the [Valente Center for the Arts and Sciences](#). At a recent campus presentation Arfaoui shared her insight, experiences, and understanding of the two years following the Jasmine Revolution, the name given to the popular uprising that toppled the regime of Tunisian President Ben Ali in January 2011, eventually, leading to a thorough democratization of the country. During Arfaoui's time at Bentley, Mourad Ben Cheikh's documentary film about the revolution *No More Fear* was screened and a campus-wide open forum on the Arab Revolution was held.

This was Arfaoui's second visit to the Bentley campus, thanks to her professional collaboration and friendship with Modern Languages Chair [Jane Tchaicha](#), whose academic focus encompasses the examination of issues surrounding Muslim women in North Africa. Arfaoui is known around the world for her outspokenness on feminist issues in the Arab world. "Bentley is emerging as an international school," said Professor Tchaicha, "and because of long-standing relationships that many faculty have developed, our students can benefit from a first-person perspective on global issues from scholars like Arfaoui."

Arfaoui shared her insights about events following Tunisian street vendor [Mohammed Bouazizi](#) setting himself on fire in December 2010 in protest of unjust government action against him, thus triggering the Jasmine Revolution and culminating in the country's democratic transformation. Her observations paint a picture of a country still in the midst of a complex evolution -- as she describes a country where Islamic fundamentalists, purported to be bankrolled by the Gulf States and who bought votes from the populace in the form of favors and gifts, have gained power and are attempting to impose their will on citizens. "The revolution took place for dignity," Arfaoui said during a recent interview. "The revolution never mentioned religion."

As a player on the world's stage, Tunisia is important to watch because, says Arfaoui, "If Tunisia doesn't succeed in building a democracy, none of the other Arab countries will have a chance." She described Tunisia as being "the most avant-garde country," one that has enjoyed the legacy of French culture and rule, where women have had rights since 1956 and "regressive" customs, such as polygamy, have been outlawed. The events in Tunisia raise the thorny question of whether democracy always leads to a better situation. Under Ben Ali, Arfaoui acknowledged that there were some freedoms, but also fear and corruption. Under the new regime, there is democracy, but also social unrest. "Democracy is something we have been dreaming of," she says. "Your country was built on it, and it was not built easily. We are what is called a young democracy. We hope we survive."

[Watch Arfaoui address the Valente Center.](#)

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