

MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM

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Is the Arab Awakening Marginalizing Women?

Introduction

Haleh Esfandiari

*Director, Middle East Program, Woodrow Wilson
International Center for Scholars*

Revolutions, like wars, are not kind to women; in fact, they can be brutal to women. Women and children are, in most cases, the victims of upheavals. Even when women take part in revolutionary movements that successfully lead to regime change, they are not invited to the negotiating table. Instead, they are mostly marginalized; their rights become bargaining chips between the factions.

Women took part in all the demonstrations of the Arab Awakening. Hundreds of thousands of women from all ages and walks of life took to the streets of Arab cities where the winds of change were turning into a tornado and sweeping away the old systems. Women, like men, called for an end to dic-

tatorships. They demanded transparency and accountability, as well as respect for human rights, dignity, and the rule of law. In contrast to the Iranian revolution there was no call on the Arab street for an Islamic state. Nor did women make a special plea for full rights for women or equality under the law. They assumed, wrongly as it turned out, that rights and equality would be the natural corollaries of democracy and the rule of law. Besides, as in the Iranian revolution of 1978, women were told to be patient and not to push for their rights until the dictator had been overthrown and the success of the revolution secured. Then, there would be ample opportunity to discuss and negotiate equality.

If women expected revolutions—Iranian or Arab—to lead to an expansion of their rights, the reality has generally been otherwise, and the pattern is almost the same everywhere. Women are excluded from power cen-

About the Middle East Program

Director

Dr. Haleh Esfandiari

Assistants

Kendra Heideman

Mona Youssef

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The Middle East Program was launched in February 1998 in light of increased U.S. engagement in the region and the profound changes sweeping across many Middle Eastern states. In addition to spotlighting day-to-day issues, the Program concentrates on long-term economic, social, and political developments, as well as relations with the United States.

The Middle East Program draws on domestic and foreign regional experts for its meetings, conferences, and occasional papers. Conferences and meetings assess the policy implications of all aspects of developments within the region and individual states; the Middle East's role in the international arena; American interests in the region; the threat of terrorism; arms proliferation; and strategic threats to and from the regional states.

The Program pays special attention to the role of women, youth, civil society institutions, Islam, and democratic and autocratic tendencies. In addition, the Middle East Program hosts meetings on cultural issues, including contemporary art and literature in the region.

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The following papers are based on the authors' presentations at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars on May 14, 2012. The opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not reflect those of the Woodrow Wilson Center.

ters that replace the old regimes. For example, we did not see a single woman in the Revolutionary Council formed after the overthrow of the monarchy in Iran or in the constitutional committee formed to amend a number of articles in the Egyptian constitution after the overthrow of former President Mubarak. The Libyan and Yemeni opposition groups that negotiated the transition after the fall of Moammar Qaddafi and Ali Saleh did not include any women.

Tunisia was a different case, and this is understandable. It is a country with a strong secular tradition and firmly established progressive laws on women's rights. Here, the transitional government invited Lilia Labidi, the most eminent scholar on gender issues in the Maghreb, to join the cabinet. She lived up to her reputation, and among the changes she introduced was removing the objection to a number of articles in the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

Eighteen months into the Arab Awakening women feel they have been left behind in the changes that are taking place in their countries. Since their inception, the revolutions in the Arab world seemed to erase distinctions of religion, class, and gender. In Egypt, tens of thousands of women joined men in Cairo's Tahrir Square, spending 24 hours a day there. Women felt safe and secure in a city known for its sexual harassment of women. For a brief moment, Tahrir Square became a symbol for the possibility of equality and a dignified relationship between men and women. This scene was repeated on Change Square in Yemen and on Pearl Square in Bahrain. And, thanks to blogs, tweets and instant messages, we could see in real-time what was happening in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Libya, and Bahrain.

We basked in the glory of the women and men who made possible these historic turning points, but we came to mourn the ugly scenes that followed. Once the *anciens régimes* fell, the old barriers of segregation went up. Women were harassed, beaten up, and chased out of Tahrir Square. To our horror, we heard reports of virginity tests and sexual assaults on women in

Egypt, imprisonment of women in Bahrain, and the currently indiscriminate killing of women, men, and children in Syria.

Before the Egyptian elections, Mohammed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood candidate, said women and non-Muslims should not be allowed to run for the presidency. He tried to make



amends for this controversial statement after his election as president by announcing he would appoint a woman as vice-president and other women to his cabinet. But there was more to come. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) abolished the quota system which set aside a specified number of seats for women in parliamentary elections. The Muslim Brotherhood acquiesced to this ruling. Egypt's Salafis have called for the enforcement of the *shari'a*. In the newly-elected Egyptian parliament, there has been a call for the decriminalization of female genital mutilation, for lowering the age of marriage for girls from 18 to 14, and for the abolition of a woman's right to file for divorce. Oddly enough, one of the MPs behind these calls was Azza al-Garaf, a woman member of the Muslim Brotherhood party. The new Libyan interim leader, Mustafa Abdul Jalil, announced that restrictions on polygamy will be lifted from Libyan law. He faced a barrage of protests by women, forcing the Libyan interim prime minister, Abdel Rahim Al-Kib, to be more nuanced by remarking that women have an important role to play in the new Libya.

Elsewhere, the picture is mixed insofar as women's rights are concerned. In Tunisia, women have fared better than elsewhere. Rachid Ghannouchi, the head of Al-Nahda party, announced that the new Tunisian constitution will not tamper with women's rights. Forty-nine women were among the 217 representatives elected to the Constituent Assembly (while in Egypt, the number of women in parliament [dissolved then reinstated] dropped from 12 percent to 2 percent).

The situation in Yemen remains to be clarified. Yemeni women have a spokesperson in Tawakol Karman, the journalist, blogger, and human rights activist who was one of the three women to win the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize. In Kuwait, where the Islamists have a majority, women lost the four seats they won in the parliamentary elections of 2009. In Saudi Arabia, women are watching carefully the developments in the region and are pushing for change in a subtle way, not rocking the boat.

Overall, a grey cloud hangs over the future of women's rights in the countries of the Arab Awakening. The Islamists feel emboldened and will try to use their newly gained votes in Egypt, Tunisia, and Kuwait to limit women's rights and

push for the implementation of the *shari'a*. Tribal customs not hospitable to gender equality might reemerge.

But women in the region do not accept that all is lost; nor will they allow the rights earned during decades of struggle to be taken away from them. Islamist women may initially go along with restrictions on women's rights. But, as in Iran, they will soon realize that they, too, are beneficiaries of gender equality, access to education, and employment, as well as laws protecting them in marriage, divorce and child custody cases. Women have grown aware of the power they can wield; they can no longer be relegated to their homes and to traditional roles.



In this publication, based on papers presented at a conference on May 14, 2012 at the Wilson Center, leading women scholars and activists analyze the strategies by which opponents of women's rights seek to marginalize women and the strategies by which women have sought to protect and expand these rights.



Some Lessons from Other Post-Conflict Communities

Rangita de Silva de Alwis


Director, Global Women's Leadership Initiative, Woodrow Wilson Center; Director, Women in Public Service Project Institute 2012, Wellesley College; and Director of International Human Rights Policy, Wellesley Centers for Women

I want to begin by invoking the wisdom of Shirin Ebadi, who said recently, "A revolution is not all about toppling a dictator. Fulfilling a revolution's democratic promises and the institutionalization of democracy are the main aim of a revolution."¹

The Nobel Committee recently reaffirmed what we all knew – that without women's full and equal participation, the promise of democracy will not be realized.

Transitions provide powerful windows of opportunity to address deep-seated gender inequalities, reevaluate the status of women in politics and development, and recast constitutions and legal frameworks, thereby holding significant potential for transforming the lives of women.

I will share some snapshots of other transitional justice processes that might be instructive



for the way forward for women in the Arab Awakening.

Step One

Constitutions embody a people's values, histories, memories, and, most of all, a blueprint for nation-building. Constitutions also provide new beginnings for a community and allow a chance to address political and social flaws that might have given rise to conflict.

For example, the 2003 Rwandan constitution enshrines the following in its preamble:

We, the People of Rwanda,

1) In the wake of the genocide that was organized and supervised by unworthy leaders and other perpetrators and that decimated more than a million sons and daughters of Rwanda;

2) Resolved to fight the ideology of genocide and all its manifestations and to eradicate ethnic, regional and any other form of divisions;

3) Determined to fight dictatorship by putting in place democratic institutions and leaders freely elected by ourselves;²

Step Two

Transitional justice processes must also be marked by an allegiance to international law and human rights including the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which has been ratified by 182 countries.

CEDAW is a critical bulwark in the fight for the advancement of women's rights globally. Morocco and Tunisia have withdrawn their reservations to CEDAW. Jordan has lifted some of its reservations on equal rights to residence, but its reservation on equal nationality rights remains.

Many governments in the region need to take further steps to align national laws with existing international commitments under CEDAW. Women's rights activists continue to hold their governments accountable to CEDAW and its Concluding Observations.³

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted on October 31, 2000, provides critical language reinforcing the significance of gender throughout the transitional process. It mandates that Member States "ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels...for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict."⁴

Several countries have ensured the primacy and supremacy of international law by enshrining them in their constitutions. The transformative potential of human rights law must be a benchmark of standard setting in national constitutions and legislation.

The Rwandan constitution states:

Reaffirming our adherence to the principles of human rights enshrined in the United Nations Charter of 26 June 1945, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the crime of Genocide of 9 December 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 10 December 1948, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination of 21 December 1965, the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights of 19 December 1966, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 19 December 1966, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women of 1 May 1980, the African Charter of Human and Peoples' Rights of 27 June 1981 and the Convention on the Rights of the Child of 20 November 1989.⁵

The South African constitution, too, allows for the consideration of international law when

interpreting the Bill of Rights. The constitution states, “When interpreting the Bill of Rights, a court, tribunal or forum must promote the values that underlie an open and democratic society based on human dignity, equality and freedom; must consider international law; and may consider foreign law.”⁶

Section 187 of the South African constitution is an example of a constitutionally-mandated entity created by a transitional negotiation process that provided for a Commission for Gender Equality.

This shows how gender can be mainstreamed into a constitutional design apart from an equal protection clause.

This past February, Liberia celebrated the launch of the Children’s Law, which marked a legal victory for all children there. Liberia is hailed as one of the first countries to adopt comprehensive legislation for children that is largely based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC). It ensures birth registration for all children and provides ways to educate those living in remote areas.

However, it must be remembered that Egypt was one of the first countries to draft a children’s law in line with the CRC. Ambassador Moushira Khattab, who was one of the architects of this law, used the CRC as a litmus test for lawmaking. Unfortunately, this law is being challenged now in court. Egypt’s law should be hailed as a standard-setting document. These prior gains should not be eroded or tainted but preserved and honored just as much as the new law in Liberia.

Step Three

Another important pivot is to formally and substantively strengthen institutional reforms of gender equality, including temporary special measures as called for in CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), in the last few years, post-conflict countries have “featured prominently in the top 30 of the IPU’s world ranking of women in national parliaments”, and


these countries have been effective at using quotas and reserved seats to “ensure the presence and participation of women in [their] newly created institutions.”⁷

Quotas for women have helped to unlock the potential of women in post-conflict settings to overcome traditional and cultural barriers.

Today, Rwanda is the only country in the world with over 50 percent of women in parliament. This groundbreaking shift in political leadership was catalyzed by the Rwandan constitution of 2003, which provided for an increase in the number of seats to be held by women in all structures of government. Women, as mandated in the constitution, must hold 30 percent of seats in the Senate. Article 185 of the constitution also set up a Gender Monitoring Office “to monitor and supervise on a permanent basis compliance with gender indicators of the program for ensuring gender equality...”⁸ The Ministry of Gender and Women in Development in Rwanda also established a national system of women’s councils in the aftermath of the genocide. The councils are women-only grassroots structures at the smallest administrative unit.

Another important cornerstone of transitional justice is a strong and powerful women’s movement. Democratic governance must be built on a strong women’s movement that can mobilize attention around gender equality. In Rwanda, one quarter of the appointed constitutional commissioners were women. However, the mere presence of women was not sufficient. The combined presence of women with the external pressure generated by women’s organizations created an important space for Rwandan women to mainstream gender as a strategy for national development and security. Another key element was the way in which women in Rwanda came together in the post-conflict period to fill the political vacuum. The Rwandan women’s movement mobilized around the ratification of the new constitution, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) held consultations with grassroots and national organizations.

Anticipatory and early mobilization by women’s groups, in both informal and formal transitional justice processes, is, therefore, critical to



advancing women's interests. In some post-conflict transitional justice processes, women created a parallel agenda to inform such processes and prevent exclusion. For example, in East Timor, the First Women's Congress in 2000 developed a Platform for Action of the Advancement of East Timorese Women, which called for the increased participation of women. This included a 30 percent quota for women in the transitional administration and the constitution-drafting process. These consultations resulted in a Women's Charter of Rights, which received thousands of signatures from East Timorese women. While these models do not always guarantee better outcomes for women, they emphasize the urgency for women's early involvement with constitution-drafting processes so as to minimize exclusion later on.

Shirin Ebadi has said, "The best way to prevent what happened to women in the aftermath of the Iran revolution is to call for women's rights during the struggle. Don't wait for the victory. Choose your allies. Dictate these conditions before the alliance." She has said further, "Look at Iran; do not repeat our mistakes."

When Ebadi saw images of the protestors in Syria, Yemen, and Tunisia, she saw them demanding democracy. "Did anyone say we are against polygamy? That we want divorce rights? That we are human beings and need equal rights? You are making the same mistake Iranian women made. We thought we could demand women's rights after the revolution."⁹ We all know now that it is too late.

Unfortunately, despite UN Security Council Resolution 1325, not a single chief peace negotiator has been a woman.

The Panel of Eminent African Personalities to assist with the Kenyan mediation process included Graça Machel, the Mozambican politician and humanitarian and wife of Nelson Mandela, as one of the three lead negotiators. Critical to the mediation was Machel's connections to the existing network of Kenyan women. These women played a critical role in shaping reforms and calling to address the root causes of violence, including violence against women.

The 2010 Kenyan constitution, inspired by the language of the South African constitution, acknowledges customary laws and exercises of traditions and customs but asks that they be compatible with constitution and international human rights guarantees. Article 2 subordinates customary law to the supremacy of the constitution.

Article 5 of the constitution on family relations borrows language from the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the CRC through its prohibition of child marriage and forced marriage. Supported by a study by women's groups, the Kenyan constitution allows a woman married to a foreigner to pass on the citizenship to her children without any minimum residency. Article 27 also calls for the gender balance in parliament and not more than two-thirds of any one gender to be represented in parliament. A similar provision was enshrined in the Kosovo Law on Gender Equality. The law calls for equal participation of females and males in all institutions to the level of 40 percent.

Step Four

Another tool of this brief panoramic overview is terminology. Constitutions are replete with gendered terminology. In drafting the South African constitution, a decision was taken to embrace the term "women and men" throughout the constitution.

Step Five

Finally, it is important to embrace a holistic vision of inclusive security.

As we saw in Egypt, the fall of a dictator does not usually mean an end to violence against women. So, it is important to focus on drafting anti-violence laws and those which protect women's economic, social, and cultural rights as well. For example, in East Timor's transitional justice process, political representation was not the only goal for women's groups during the transitional period. East Timorese women also urged that the state address gender-based violence, poverty, and social and economic security. Despite the imper-

fect peace, the 2006 Darfur Peace Agreement calls for (1) the right to marry; (2) maternity and healthcare for pregnant women; and (3) access to education, without discrimination as to gender, in Article 3, Paragraph 28 (a). The agreement also

requires parties to combat harmful customs and other activities that demean the status of women.

Making gender central requires a vision of gender equality as an integral cornerstone of democracy and the rule of law.

Endnotes

- 1 <http://www.awid.org/News-Analysis/New-Resources2/Shirin-Ebadi-A-Question-of-Interpretation>
- 2 http://www.rwandaparliament.gov.rw/parliament/DF_DocumentViewer.aspx?id=73b3974e-12e8-497a-bb0b-e3411596deef
- 3 <http://www.bayefsky.com/docs.php/area/conclobs/node/2/treaty/cedaw/opt/0>
- 4 http://www.unfpa.org/women/docs/res_1325e.pdf
- 5 http://www.rwandaparliament.gov.rw/parliament/DF_DocumentViewer.aspx?id=73b3974e-12e8-497a-bb0b-e3411596deef
- 6 <http://www.info.gov.za/documents/constitution/1996/96cons2.htm/>
- 7 http://www.huntalternatives.org/download/30_democracy_governance.pdf
- 8 http://www.rwandaparliament.gov.rw/parliament/DF_DocumentViewer.aspx?id=73b3974e-12e8-497a-bb0b-e3411596deef
- 9 <http://www.global-sisterhood-network.org/content/view/2651/59/>



A Cup Half-Full or Half-Empty: Is a “Women’s Spring” Inevitable in Democratic Transitions?


Fatima Sbaity Kassem

Former Director, UN-ESCWA Centre for Women

My intervention on the subject of women’s rights following the Arab Awakening is in four parts. The first covers women at a glance in facts and figures. The second is analytical. The third is theoretical and explanatory. The fourth is predictive, responding to the question of whether there is a breakthrough for women in politics. I conclude by offering a response to whether a “women’s spring” is inevitable in democratic transitions.

I will present a statistical overview of the education, employment, and legal and political representation of women in Arab countries. Then, I will share facts about the situation of women in countries after the uprisings. Subsequently, I will offer a theoretical analysis for the outcome of elections in these countries, by looking at political parties and religiosity, with a focus on women.

The whole world was taken by surprise in early 2011 as demonstrations, revolts, and unprecedented popular uprisings spread like fire across several Arab countries from North Africa to Western Asia to the Gulf. The “Arab Spring” – better still an “Arab Awakening,” as the title of this conference aptly puts it – promised the birth of a new democratic Arab region. In Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, despots and life-long rulers were toppled in response to peoples’ loud calls of “down with the regime.” In Syria and Bahrain, and, to a much lesser extent, Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Oman, popular demands are being crushed or co-opted by ruling autocrats and monarchs. These uprisings that swept the Arab world are unprecedented for more than one reason. But, above all, these popular social movements are a clear indication that



the wall of fear from despotic rulers and repressive regimes in these countries is irreversibly broken. However, I wish to flag that these uprisings were not religious movements (i.e., did not call for Islamization of regimes) and were not feminist movements (i.e., did not call for women's rights and gender equality).

Women were at the forefront, and their active involvement was visible and vocal. They stood side-by-side with men in the squares of Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Syria, and Bahrain. They demanded freedom, dignity, equality, and social justice for all citizens – not just for women. International and regional media zeroed-in on women as the watershed events unfolded. Female activists gained popularity worldwide for their courage: women like Isra'a Abdel Fattah of Egypt; Salwa Bugaighis of Libya; Basma Qadmani and Suhair Al-Atassi of Syria; and Tawakol Karman of Yemen (the first and youngest Arab woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011), among many, many others.

I emphasize that women were not in the freedom squares to demand their rights for a rightful place in society. Nonetheless, the success of these uprisings raised their aspirations for equality in the reformed and democratic countries. Unfortunately, the toppling of despots and the subsequent legalization of political parties did not perform immediate democratic miracles. The euphoria of success was marred not only by the incidence of various forms and guises of violence against the young female activists, but also by the establishment of “reform-labeled” transitional councils with all-male membership or dominated by men (three women out of 30 in Libya, for example), representing business as usual. Hopes for gender equality dissipated as entrenched patriarchy, conflated with religious orthodoxy, visibly re-surfaced. Female activists disappeared from the political scene, conveniently for men, as gender segregation pushed them back home, marginalizing their courageous partnership.

Against this backdrop, global and public interest intensified to explore the interconnections between religion with ongoing democratic transitions and women's leadership.

Women at a Glance: Facts and Figures

Arab countries are different. Women in Arab countries are not the same. However, there are cross-cutting issues facing women with differing intensities. Improvements in education, health, and employment have been observed, but less so in politics. Illiteracy, poverty, and conflict remain major challenges facing women. Nineteen Arab countries are party to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), but their reservations to CEDAW make the convention ineffective. Morocco and Tunisia withdrew reservations to CEDAW in 2011. At the same time, women acquired partial suffrage rights in Saudi Arabia to be exercised three years later for local government.

Women's Expectations in the Wake of the Uprisings: A Cup Half-Empty or Half-Full?

Despotic rulers were toppled and autocratic regimes were replaced by transitional councils, boards, and committees. Political parties mushroomed once they were legalized and allowed to form and compete. Islamists started gaining ground, and the role of religion in the new states started taking shape in elections. Skepticism grew as the uprisings appeared to be opening a window of opportunity for Islamist and Salafist parties of varying religiosity to step-in and takeover – or rather, hijack – the revolts. Indeed, the uprisings unleashed the powers and influence of these religiously-led groups, which have been repressed under the *anciens régimes*. Lacking visible leadership and failing to organize, the uprisings opened a vacuum in governance, which the moderate Islamists and extremist Salafists quickly filled. This brought to the fore fears from the adverse influence of some religious families on the situation of women. There is a perception that some world religions – Islam, Catholicism, Judaism, and Hinduism – are hostile to women or their advancement. Thus, women's apprehensions of Islamists rose since they are perceived to be antithetical to women and hostile to their assumption of leadership positions.

Expectations of women for full citizenship and equality heightened in the wake of the uprisings until disappointments and frustrations hit them hard in more ways than one. Female activists were harassed, assaulted, violated, and subjected to various forms of violence. They were thrown back home. Their involvement was marginalized, and their courage was slighted. They found themselves outside the decision-making circles and reform councils. Heightened expectations that the uprisings would bring about a long-awaited “women’s spring” suffocated. Instead, women were threatened by the loss of their previously acquired rights from all-male (or negligible female) representation in the transitional councils and by a wave of newly formed – or legalized – Islamist parties of varying religiosities.

To add insult to injury, democratically-held elections gave Islamist parties the upper hand with a majority vote: in Egypt’s parliament 72 percent, Tunisia’s constituent assembly 40 percent, and Morocco’s parliament 26 percent of seats. Even when these parties nominate women – per legislated quotas – female representation remains tokenistic and cosmetic, at best, in terms of its effectiveness – an issue of quantity versus quality.

Given this environment, one is apt to question the prospective role that religion and religiosity might play in a new Arab region in transition, even with democratically-held elections. Questions also arose about how this would influence women’s station, especially their rights and opportunities for sharing in governance, leadership, and decision-making. Further, under such a perceived “women-unfriendly” setting, can we conclude that women’s frustrations are or are not justified?

I look at the cup as half-empty or half-full through the lens of party variation in religiosity to explain the station of women in the wake of the Arab Awakening. Invoking a multivocal understanding of religions, I argue that different parties offer women different opportunities, depending on the intensity of religiosity on their political platforms.

(a) A Cup Half-Empty: Frustrations Justified

First, the success of the uprisings led activists to believe that solutions would be imminent. However, poverty did not diminish. Employment did not increase. Social justice was not realized. Chaos permeates. The military reigns in some countries. Social change does not come overnight. People are impatient.


Second, the political parties that have been allowed to form are conceivably more concerned with consolidating their foothold than with fulfilling women’s aspirations for gender equality. Such an item lies low on their agendas, especially those of conservative and extremist parties with high religiosity.

Third, women saw themselves outside the newly formed transitional political councils and committees. This raised their level of concern and their disappointment in attaining gender equality pursuant to toppling of despots.

Fourth, as Islamists rose to center stage, women’s expectations for achieving gender equality under the reformed regimes dissipated.

Fifth, as soon as the major uprisings cooled down, female activists were sent back home by the male-dominated political arena. Their previously gained rights were threatened: *khul’* (divorce) law, age of marriage for girls, female genital mutilation (FGM) in Egypt, return to polygamy in Libya (and possibly Tunisia), and even doing away with CEDAW and its emphasis on gender equality. Further, these rights were often linked to the first ladies of the *anciens régimes*, which added to the Islamist pressure that prompted their annulment.

Sixth, Egyptian parliamentary elections produced a doomsday scenario for women. Female representation dropped from 12 percent to less than 2 percent, a showcase for pessimists. The amended electoral law did away with the quota for women. Although the law required each party to nominate one woman, it did not specify a ranking on the lists, to ensure that they won. Moreover, four out of the nine women who won in elections are affiliated with the Islamist Freedom and Justice Party. These women are not gender-sensitive or women-friendly. They called for strict adherence to *shari’a* and for revisiting



CEDAW, family laws, and laws related to violence against women (for example, laws against FGM and the *fatwa* on the husband's right to have intercourse six hours after the death of his wife). I should caution that these demands should not be attributed to the uprising. Rather, this reflects the influence of high party religiosity on the station of women.

(b) A Cup Half-Full: Success Stories and Optimism

First, reforms in electoral laws in Tunisia and Morocco called for gender parity in nominations, while in Algeria it ranged between 20 and 50 percent. The quota for women on electoral lists was honored by political parties, irrespective of their religiosity. The outcome of the post-revolt elections in Tunisia and Morocco dispel these concerns. The share of female members of the constituent assembly in Tunisia was maintained at around 27 percent. This was the highest among the Arab countries until Algeria surpassed it in May 2012 with female representation standing at 31.4 percent. In Morocco, the share of female MPs grew from 10.7 percent to 17 percent. This makes female parliamentary representation in these countries comparable to several developed democracies and/or some democratizing non-Arab, Muslim-majority countries.

Second, Tunisia and Morocco honored their promises to protect women's rights. Both countries withdrew reservations to CEDAW in the post-2011 period. In Morocco, the prime minister stood by his promise not to impose Islamic dress or the veil on women. He also appointed a substantial number of women to the newly formed consultative councils. These positive indicators allow us to see the cup half-full.

Third, the uprisings gave room for the rise of Islamists and Salafists. But, these are definitely not Islamic revolutions "à la the Iranian Revolution." More of the Arab populace is following the Islamists because they do not see eye to eye with the more "modern" and Western-oriented liberals. They see them as independent from the West and Western values. They see them as less corrupt and corruptible, and more honest and concerned

with the public good of all Muslims – *al-Ummah al-Islamiyah*. The Islamists are aware that they should live up to such expectations; otherwise, they will be out in the next round of elections.

Fourth, women today are different from how they were before the uprisings. Women, like men, have managed to break the wall of fear. This is irreversible. Women are not voiceless anymore, and are more vocal in their demands. They are building alliances with men, champions of women, and with religious and political leaders. They are more connected with regional and global networks within civil societies. They are aware that they can tap into global support for gender equality. Indeed, women are more organized, assertive, and aggressive in their demands. Women are heeding the advice of Anne Phillips, professor of political and gender theory at the London School of Economics, to "impose their presence" (1995).¹ Women are empowered and politically mature. The uprisings were a watershed for all, but they constituted a turning point for female activism. There is no turning back. This is why I look at the cup as half-full rather than half-empty.

Having listed the factors that led to optimism and/or pessimism, I offer a plausible explanation for the station of women in wake of the Arab uprisings.

Women in Political Parties: Theory of Party Variation in Religiosity and Women's Leadership

Previous research sought to explain female representation by considering the effects of culture and religion within societies. My own research pushes beyond the domestic level into a lower level of analysis: by examining individual political parties. Parties competing in democratically-held elections recruit, select, and nominate women – and men – to public office. I argue that different parties offer women different opportunities, depending on their level of religiosity or secularism. This explains the variation in women's leadership across parties. My theory is that women's leadership is likely to increase in parties of lower reli-

giosity and to fall in parties of higher religiosity. This theory adopts a multivocal understanding of religions in that there is a continuum of multiple religiosities and secularisms on party platforms that bear a varying influence on women's leadership in parties' decision-making bodies. Party religiosity – as distinct from individual religiosity – is the extent to which religious components penetrate political agendas. I tested the theory in Lebanon in a single, in-depth and focused case study. Additionally, in a separate and parallel study, the theory is found to be applicable across 330 political parties in 26 countries in Asia, Africa, and Europe (13.5 percent of the world) whose populations follow the three dominant world religions – Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. The findings from both qualitative and quantitative research are robust and support the central role of parties in advancing the political career of women and the role of party religiosity in that process. This allows us to generalize and gives the theory explanatory and predictive powers, as in the case of the Arab uprisings.

The repressive authoritarian regimes which led to the Arab Awakening in early 2011 gave rise to Islamist parties of varying religiosities and attitudes vis-à-vis women. Indeed, elites in extremist and conservative religious parties continue to exhibit “anti-women” attitudes toward women's leadership and political careers. These attitudes are more pronounced and entrenched when party leaders double as clerics entrusted with interpreting the doctrine and controlling the fate of women within these parties. As such, these “women unfriendly” attitudes and regressive discourses – notably that “politics-is-a-man's-business,” “women's place is at home,” and women's leadership is in violation of the *shari'a* (e.g. invoking *al-Qiyamah*, the Resurrection) – perceptibly block women's ascendance to leadership in religious parties when compared to secular and civil or even confessional single-sect parties of lower religiosity. Some religious parties are willing to overlook their conservative religious stance against women's leadership, when it is in their interest to do so. In this case, a motivation premised on “the ends justify the means” augurs


well for women's leadership, emulating successful experiences in some countries.

The theory of party variation in religiosity and women's leadership can largely explain the outcomes of the last round of elections in Egypt, Kuwait, Tunisia, and Morocco. The results showed that female representation is lowest in Egypt (2 percent), where the combined share of Islamists (moderates and Salafists) was the highest (70 percent). Female representation is highest in Tunisia and Morocco. The case of Kuwait is also evidence in support of this theory as there are now no women in parliament. An inverse relationship between party religiosity and women's leadership is apparent. The outcome of these elections comes as no surprise by looking at party religiosity as one of the main explanatory variables for women's political leadership. However, party religiosity is not static but transforms in response to political challenges. A case in point is the gradual transformation of the religious goals of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jordan and Hezbollah in Lebanon. This promises a light at the end of the tunnel for women's leadership.

Nonetheless, one should go beyond numbers in order to explain female representation and the situation of women in politics. Women's political participation should not only be measured by their share in parliaments or governments. Quantities are sometimes illusionary. We should aim and look for effective leadership. Women's share in municipalities, civil society, professional associations, trade unions, but above all in political parties are all indicators of political participation. As long as women choose politics for a career, are given equal opportunities as men, and socio-cultural barriers facing them are minimized, then their leadership chances and contributions must, by necessity, improve.

Is There a Breakthrough for Women in Politics in Democratic Transitions?

Given the above, can we conclude that there is substantial ground for optimism toward gender equality in the context of the Arab Awakening?



First, parties support women's leadership when it is in their interest to do so even by overlooking traditions or *shari'a*. They often look at women as a "symbol of the modern." This works in women's favor.

Second, electoral laws play a major role in determining women's chances in public office, whether for parliament or local councils. A combination of proportional representation, large electoral districts, closed electoral lists, and quotas for women constitutes a win-win formula for enhancing women's chances in elections. Some Arab countries are moving in that direction, namely, North African Arab countries.

Third, political parties and the community recognize the special contributions that women make to the development of society, and perceive them to be less corruptible than men. Therefore, political parties, community leaders, and family networks tend to nominate women for municipal elections. Municipalities constitute a second-level entry point for women's political leadership after joining political parties.

Fourth, parties nominate more women for municipal than parliamentary councils because this strengthens their foothold at the grassroots level. As such, municipalities constitute an additional electioneering mechanism akin to parties' women's wings. Parties have more incentives to nominate women for municipalities than for parliaments. There is less risk for weaker parties (measured by the number of parliamentary seats they occupy) of losing precious parliamentary seats in doing so.

Fifth, parties consider municipal work a stepping stone for women to parliamentary office.

Sixth, women have more courage to run in municipal than in parliamentary elections. Therefore, municipalities constitute a window of opportunity for women's political leadership. Municipalities are a breakthrough for women in politics.

The outcome of elections in Tunisia, Morocco, and particularly in Egypt and Kuwait provides empirical evidence in support of the theory of party variation in religiosity and women's leadership. It offers a plausible explanation for the

outcome of women's participation in elections. Even when the formal procedures for leadership transitions are relatively open and formally democratic, a "women unfriendly" political culture blocks women's ascendance into leadership roles. Thus, there are formal procedures that are not in tandem with informal political culture in parties with theocratic agendas. These tend to bar women's leadership in theocratic parties with highest intensity of religiosity like the Salafists.

However, in advancing the theory of party variation in religiosity, I do not claim that joining political parties is a magic wand or formula for women's empowerment and leadership. Parties require that women be 100 percent perfect and eligible for leadership, although many men in these positions are not. One should go beyond numbers and shares, since these are only one set of indicators for measuring women's political leadership and effective representation.

The desired outcome should be effective leadership and equal opportunities to share in decision-making. At present, it is observed that the lingering gap in female public office representation is not *sui generis* to the Arab countries. Parties must be enticed – via "women-friendly" electoral laws – by incentives such as gaining electoral strength for nominating more women on their electoral lists. These incentives undercut voter- and gender-bias. This is a necessary but not sufficient measure for enhancing women's leadership. However, women's leadership is also dependent upon women's interests and preferences, but, above all, freedom of choice in picking their own career path. As several party leaders suggest, municipalities are a stepping stone into parliamentary representation. This bodes well for the future of women's leadership. However, even if all these conditions are met, women's involvement in politics remains a matter of personal choice.

I have confidence that women will make it in politics, and I believe in their political abilities and the special contributions they can make to political parties and politics per se. This is largely a matter of choice, and the circle of fear is now broken.

Finally, a “women’s spring” is inevitable. I look at the cup as half-full, but I also recognize the challenges lying ahead in the post-uprising period. The main challenge is for these uprisings not to be hijacked or become devoid of content, or for counter-revolts to take over.

The road to democracy is bumpy and thorny until smooth and peaceful consolidation replaces chaos. A major pre-requisite is equal citizenship for women and men. There can be no development and no gender equality without democracy. Managing to achieve this tripartite relationship

guarantees a “women’s spring” in the Arab countries. I leave you with the one million dollar question: what is the smoothest road to democracy and what kind of democracy do we seek?

Endnotes

- 1 Philips, Anne. *The Politics of Presence*, New York (Oxford UP, 1995).



Egyptian Women After The Revolution: Lost In Translation?


Moushira Khattab

Former Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center; former Egyptian Ambassador to South Africa and to the Czech and Slovak Republics; and Former Minister of Family and Population, Egypt

The January 25 revolution represented many firsts for Egypt. Not only did the people of Egypt stage a mass popular revolt numbering millions in a model civilized manner, but women were also treated as equals throughout the revolution. The truly pragmatic and focused nature of the revolution saw men and women work together to defend Tahrir Square, transport supplies, care for the wounded, man barricades, shout slogans, lead debates, and even work together to clean up the streets of the country that brought them all together. Women played an instrumental part in the revolution, and their efforts – representing roughly half of all protesters – were vital to its success. Women, like men, discovered their power to make a difference. Many promising female revolutionary leaders emerged hopeful and confident and were acknowledged internationally, topping numerous lists of influential women worldwide, including *Newsweek’s* list of “Women Who Shake the World” (March 2012) and the

Guardian’s “Top 100 Women: Activists and Campaigners” list (March 2011) to name a few.

Fifteen months later, reality for women is a far cry from the mass optimism that swept across Egypt after the revolution attained its initial goal of ousting then-President Hosni Mubarak. Women’s issues have been washed away amidst a sea of surging Islamist politics. Throughout its history, Egypt has been a religious and conservative society, and this is now being utilized as a pawn by religious groups against women. What is perhaps the most shocking is that for the first time it is a female parliamentarian, Azza Mohamad Ibrahim Al-Garaf, who is pushing for women’s rights to be scrapped. She is a representative of the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood. The unprecedented open criticism of laws that guarantee basic human rights is also a worrying sign. This is now happening at the highest levels with one of the presidential hopefuls criticizing the law



criminalizing female genital mutilation (FGM) on national television while calling for parents to be given the liberty to decide for their daughters to undergo FGM. Since the revolution, media focus has been on ultra-conservative religious groups with their backward, “dark age” views of women, brainwashing a large proportion of the 97 percent of Egyptians who get their information from television.

Against this back drop, I would like to briefly outline the status of Egyptian women before and after the revolution in terms of legal rights and political and economic participation/empowerment in order to highlight the effect that the revolution has had on women. Whereas women have made varying degrees of advancement in the areas we touch upon at this conference, women’s successful integration into political life, economic life, and education, among others are intertwined, and all have to be supported at the grassroots level, as well as from a national policy perspective.

Political Participation

Despite women playing a pivotal role in earning Egypt its chance at democracy, the tide has turned against them, and they are now being deprived of a chance to set the foundation on which a democratic Egypt is to be built. Three processes are currently at stake: rewriting the constitution, parliamentary elections, and presidential elections.

1. Rewriting the Constitution

Despite the presence of 34 female judges, including a very able Deputy President of the Supreme Constitutional Court, women have been side-lined from the intricate process of rewriting the constitution on two occasions. The first exclusion took place in March 2011, when a constitutional committee was established to draft amendments to the annulled 1971 Constitution, and did not include a single woman. The second took place one year later, when women only received six out of the 100 seats of the Constituent Assembly, after the Islamists conceded under pressure.

Calls for women, who constitute 50 percent of the population, to get at least 30 percent of the assembly seats went unheeded. However, now that the constitutional assembly has been annulled, women may stand a better chance of representation. With a new process of negotiations regarding the composition of the constitutional assembly underway, women may be able to reorganize themselves and to represent a larger portion of the assembly.

2. Parliamentary Elections

Egyptian women have enjoyed political rights since 1956 when the first two females were elected to parliament. In 1984, 36 seats were won by women through a quota system, which was later repealed for being “unconstitutional,” despite another quota for workers and farmers remaining untouched. In 2010, women won 64 seats through the re-established quota and even more seats competing with men. Immediately after the January 2011 revolution, without much public debate or consideration for consequences, the quota was once again swiftly repealed. The result is that there are only 11 (out of 508) female parliament members, two of whom were token appointments by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). Women make up 50 percent of Egypt’s population of 90 million, yet are represented by a 2 percent minority in parliament. This is well below global and regional averages; these statistics are even more shocking when you learn that women made up 30 percent of all Egyptian parliamentary candidates, the majority of whom were running as independents. In an election with 62 percent voter turnout, half of whom were women, this would seem grounds for women’s optimism.

So how did this happen? It is a combination of processes that are non-conducive to women’s accession, in addition to social factors. Political parties used women as publicity tools rather than empowering them to make a

difference. In addition, the increasing inability of the state to provide social services to the marginalized masses has given way to Islamist groups catering for the everyday needs of such masses, in return for their political support and engraining the old-held belief that a woman's place is in the home. June will see a crucial ruling that will determine the constitutionality of the Law on the Exercise of Political Rights. If successfully challenged, the ruling could bring about the dissolution of parliament¹ and hand women's rights groups a second chance at adequate representation. Women would need to lobby for their placement on party ballots and for their rights to vote independently. The Islamist's gradual fall out of favor with the Egyptian public may also result in more female representation in parliament.

3. Presidential Elections

A study released in early May estimates the female voting bloc to be around 25 million.² It also showed that women's issues are either not systematically dealt with, or completely ignored by virtually all presidential hopefuls. Women must use their weight as a voting bloc to demand certain rights from the presidential candidates in return for their support, but this does not seem to be happening. Although there was one female presidential hopeful whose agenda asserted the need to push for women's rights, she was unable to garner sufficient support to formalize her candidacy.³

Legal Rights

A predominantly Islamist parliament, lacking both quality debate and serious proposals for economic or institutional reforms, was quick to discuss several draft laws threatening to catapult Egypt back to the Middle Ages:

1. The right of women to divorce at no fault, known as the *khul'* law, adopted

in 2001 along with the right to child custody;


2. Prohibition of child marriage – the age of marriage was raised from 16 to 18 years in 2008, a law which is now under threat of repeal to lower the age of marriage to 14 years;
3. Criminalizing FGM
4. Today, Egyptian women stand to lose the precious advances they have laboriously worked for and which most saw as a light at the end of the tunnel in the constant fight for their rights.

Economic Empowerment

In the case of economic empowerment of women in Egypt, what you see is not what you get. On the surface, the story of women's economic empowerment is a good one to tell. According to the World Bank's Development Report, women's earning power in Egypt stands at 82 percent of men's earning power – a ratio which places Egypt ahead of developed countries such as Iceland and Germany. Once you dig deeper, however, you realize that the majority (60 percent of women) work in the informal sector, with the rest working in the public sector. While it provides salaries that are in cases higher than those offered by the public sector, the informal sector is seasonal and not a sustainable source of income. It further alienates women and their families from laws regulating the formal labor market. The public sector, on the other hand, pays meager wages but is regarded as sustainable, or what I like to call "stagnant" employment. It guarantees maternity leave and demands shorter working hours.

The post-revolution economic deterioration has gravely impacted women in the private sector. Official figures on unemployment for 2011 show a national average of 12 percent; women's unemployment hit 23 percent compared to 9 percent for men.

So, what can Egyptian women aspire to after the revolution? Economic participation has to start at the grassroots level in much the same way as political participation. Women must speak



up for their right to occupy the same positions as men and their right to a work/life balance. Media and social networking should be leveraged to highlight successful work/life balances and to challenge misconceptions about women's ability to rise to the top. Media should serve as a constant reminder of gains such as:

Egypt topped the *Forbes Middle East's* "Top 100 Most Powerful Arab Business Women in Listed Companies" list. Egyptian companies have 20 women in leadership and senior executive positions: more than any other country in the region.

Female-headed households account for about 22 percent of all households in Egypt. This number has doubled over the past 20 years.

Women own about 20 percent of all firms in Egypt, with women-owned firms being more technologically advanced and more likely to export, as well as employing more women than firms owned by men.

Foreign-owned firms are 30 percent more likely than their domestic counterparts to employ women as professionals. Foreign firms are typically meritocracies, thus realizing and rewarding the contribution of women just as they do with men.

Conclusion

The past decades of state-sponsored feminism may have harmed the popular perception of women's rights, even while furthering some of these rights. Egyptian women should not pay the price for this misperception. Changes in the status of women and women's rights should not

be linked to changes in regimes, especially that Egypt's transitional phase is likely to see many governments and parliaments come and go. Women's rights must be ingrained into society as an inseparable gain of the January 25 revolution, as one that cannot be tampered with under any circumstances. We must never lose sight of the fact that governments are legally bound by international laws to remove all forms of discrimination against women. We must also remember that throughout Egyptian history, it was the initiatives and commitments of enlightened politicians who helped women get their rights. In 1923, women got their right to education through the decree of the Minister of Education. In 1930, Ahmed Lotfy el Sayed, Chancellor of Cairo University, helped girls enroll at the university by smuggling them to the back seats; the following year they were in the front row. The same happened with granting women their political rights in early 1950s. Such enlightened leaders took decisions and did not wait for the approval or the consensus of society.

In closing, I would like to reiterate that January 25 revolution would not have been a success had it not been for the support of women, and we must now remind society that they still need our help to fully realize the goals of that very same movement. Egyptian women represent half of the population, and it is time for us to stand up and be counted. It is time show that we are a force to be reckoned with and one that can constructively contribute during our country's critical nation-building stage.

Endnotes

- 1 Egypt's parliament was dissolved on June 14, 2012: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/15/world/middleeast/new-political-showdown-in-egypt-as-court-invalidates-parliament.html?_r=2&ref=global-home
- 2 Book by Nehad Abu El Komsan, *The Freedom of the Square: Reflections on the Course of the Egyptian Revolution and the Participation of Women* (April 2012)
- 3 Mohammed Morsi was declared Egypt's president on June 24, 2012: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304458604577486420858304122.html>



Iraq: Frustrated Expectations

Rend Al-Rahim

Executive Director, Iraq Foundation; and Former Iraqi Ambassador to the United States

The transition in Iraq that began in 2003 is a continuous process that has gone through numerous phases and is still unfolding. It presents some interesting lessons, both salutary and cautionary, for Arab countries that are in the first phases of their own transition.

Historically, Iraq has had a vibrant women's movement that gained many rights for women. Education was important: the first women graduates received degrees from Iraqi universities in the mid-1940s. Women worked in all professions, including engineering and medicine. Iraq had its first woman minister in 1959. That same year, Iraq adopted a landmark personal status law¹, Law 188, which was, at the time, the most progressive in the region with respect to preserving the rights of women. Throughout the decades of the 1950s to the 1980s, a culture sympathetic to the advancement and participation of women grew in Iraq, encouraged by an expanding urban middle class of professionals and intelligentsia.


For political reasons, the 1980s, and more especially the 1990s, witnessed an erosion of these gains for women. They were discriminated against professionally, and a number of regressive laws were passed in the name of Islam and the preservation of traditions. To counter its critics, the Ba'ath regime in the 1990s donned an Islamic mantle and revived tribalism, trends that had a direct impact on the welfare of women.

The political change of 2003 unleashed potentialities: it threw wide open doors of possibilities and raised expectations and aspirations for many social groups, among them women, but also of Islamist parties of varying persuasions and those who were vested in tribal interests. The beginning of the transition was an open season for all.

After 2003, Iraqi women sought to regain what had been lost in the past two decades and to move forward to secure greater equality of rights. The years of 2003-2005 were ones of struggle for women to assert their rights as equal

citizens. In 2003, they successfully battled a drive by Islamist parties to repeal Personal Status Law 188. They were represented in the government formed under the Coalition Provisional Authority (2003), and the first national government formed in 2004 included four women ministers. In 2005, women led a successful campaign to include gender equality language in the articles of the constitution; their biggest success was in securing a 25 percent quota for women in parliament as a constitutional requirement—against the objections of the more conservative Islamists on the political scene. But a warning bell sounded when Article 41 of the constitution opened the possibility of repealing the personal status law in favor of *shari'a*. The debate over Personal Status Law 188 versus *shari'a* is still unresolved.

A steady erosion of the rights and participation of women began after 2005. It is too simplistic to say that deterioration was caused by a surge of Islamism, since Islam is capable of interpretations favorable to women. Rather, it was an alliance of politicized, narrow-spectrum Islamism with retrogressive and conservative tribal forces that flouted the constitution by encouraging discriminatory practices, exclusion, physical coercion, and psychological intimidation. Several leading women were assassinated, including women's rights activists, journalists, and prominent professionals and academics. Politically active women were targeted for assassination. Psychological coercion forced many women to wear the *hijab* or to abandon their colleges or places of employment. Harassment of non-compliant women proliferated. A patriarchal, conservative subculture hostile to women was on the rise, interpreting Islam and traditions in ways that were harmful to women. The years from 2005 onward saw a rise in polygamy, unregistered marriages, *mut'a* (temporary) marriages, child and forced marriages, honor killings, and gender-based violence.



Successive Iraqi governments after 2005 have done nothing to fulfill their duty to protect women. Many laws promulgated in the 1990s sanctioning discrimination or violence remained on the books. Even when violence or coercion were clearly contrary to established laws (as well as the constitution), as in the case of child marriages, governments have done little to enforce the laws and prosecute transgressors. A culture of impunity regarding abuse of women has been allowed to flourish. On the political level, although women constitute 25 percent of the Council of Representatives (parliament), the number of women ministers has gradually dwindled to virtually nothing. In the current government, there is not a single woman with a full-fledged ministry and only one woman in the cabinet, the Minister of State for Women's Affairs, with a state ministry that has no budget and is powerless.

Nor has the government, or parliament for that matter, attended to the protection and aid of the most vulnerable, neediest women. This group includes an estimated 1.3 million widows; among them are hundreds of thousands who are also internally displaced due to sectarian conflict from 2006-2008. Countless conferences, meetings, committees, and dialogues have been convened to come up with a national strategy on women, without success. Many attempts to draft a law to criminalize violence against women have failed because of differences between strict Islamic interpretations of what constitutes violence and interpretations based on universal human rights law.

There are currently 83 women members of parliament (MPs) in the Council of Representatives. Not all of them defend the rights of women. Some MPs who owe allegiance to Islamist parties are ambivalent about equal rights for women. For example, some are reluctant to uphold Personal Status Law 188 and advocate adopting *shari'a* as family law. Others find restrictions on polygamy contrary to Islamic *shari'a*. Yet others adhere to a belief in *wilaya*, the supposed guardianship of males over females. Their reluctance to fully endorse women's rights may arise from genuine personal conviction or the necessity of conform-

ing to a party agenda. Yet, paradoxically, all women MPs from Islamist parties believe fervently in the political right of women to assume public offices of responsibility, such as being a member of parliament.

The picture is not all bleak. The transition in Iraq is continuing, and, while doors of opportunity are no longer wide open, social and political evolution goes on. Women of different religious and political persuasions, both Islamist and secular, have been able to form alliances on selected issues, such as education for girls and support of social benefits provided to widows. Since 2009, with the ebb of sectarian conflict, intimidation of women has declined. There has been a resurgence of activism and advocacy for women's rights driven largely by civic leaders, academics, and lawyers. The NGO community and women's organizations have been particularly energetic and vocal in pushing to implement the equality and non-discrimination enshrined in the constitution, enforcement of laws, and legal reform.

Further, there is a serious push to strengthen the institutional support for women, either through making the Ministry of State for Women's Affairs a full-fledged ministry or by establishing an independent commission for women's affairs. Some women activists are becoming more familiar with gender-responsive budgeting, a development that can significantly improve the lot of women in Iraq. One must note here the important role played by the international community, including UN agencies, in its steady support of women's rights—support which should continue despite the challenges.

On balance, the past nine years have seen improvements at some levels, deterioration on others. The improvements are largely the guarantees in the constitution, whether in the provision of a 25 percent quota for women in parliament or more generally in the language of the articles that prohibits gender-based discrimination. The constitution, despite its many shortcomings, remains the gold standard against which laws and practices must be measured. Its deterioration, on the other hand, is due to narrowly male-centered

interpretations of Islam and the resurgence of patriarchal, tribal-based customs that favor male dominance. The tension between the normative standards established by the constitution and the regressive elements in society is bound to continue for some time to come.

Endnotes

- 1 Personal status laws pertain to familial relations, including marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody.



Arab Awakening Brings Hope, Change to Saudi Women

Caryle Murphy

Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center

While many Arab women fear a loss of rights and empowerment as a result of the Islamist political “surge” now underway in the region, women in Saudi Arabia are not as gloomy.

This is because Saudi women, who have long lived under an Islamist government, have seen improvements in their status in recent years. And the Arab Awakening has reinforced this trend.

For decades, Saudi women have endured many restrictions on their personal freedom and participation in the public sphere. Under the so-called “guardianship” system that prevails in the kingdom, women must have the written permission of a male relative, usually father, husband, or brother, to do a great many things women elsewhere can do on their own, including travel abroad, attend university, get married, appear in court, and even have some types of surgery. Saudi women are still being prosecuted and jailed for the crime of “disobeying” their fathers.

So, unlike women in the MENA region, who fear they will be forced to accept new restrictions on their personal autonomy, Saudi women believe they can only look forward to improvements rather than setbacks.

Recent improvements to women’s status in the kingdom have largely come about because of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz. Since coming to the throne in 2005, King Abdullah has made it clear on many occasions that he wants women


to have more opportunities and more visibility. He has signaled this in many ways, for example, by including women in the official delegation on his first foreign trip, by appointing the first woman to the all-male Council of Ministers (Deputy Education Minister Norah Al Fayez), and by founding what will be the world’s largest all-female university. The king also made his intentions clear when he posed for a now-famous picture that ran on the front pages of many Saudi newspapers. It showed the king, smiling contentedly, surrounded by a large group of Saudi women, most of them with their faces uncovered.

On two occasions, most recently in May 2012, the king publicly fired senior clerics who criticized his moves to advance women.

These actions have won the Saudi monarch deep affection from the vast majority of Saudi women, and foreign diplomats who attended the 2011 formal opening of the new all-female university reported that women in the audience greeted him “like a rock star.”

Public Campaigns

Encouraged by the king’s stance on women’s issues, Saudi women had launched two public campaigns before the Arab Awakening. One demanded a reform of divorce and child custody laws, and fairer treatment by judges in these matters. The second, called “*Baladi*,” or “My



Country,” was to get the right to vote. Women held workshops in various parts of the country to discuss why they should have this important right and strategies to advance their campaign.

In addition, female human rights activists have been vocal in the press about the need for the kingdom to adopt a law prohibiting child marriage, and to set minimum legal ages for marriage. Although the government says it is studying this issue, no mandate has yet been announced.

Finally, and perhaps most significant for women, there has been a national campaign, emanating from the royal court, to address the issue of domestic and child abuse. One of the king’s daughters, Princess Adelah, has been prominent in leading this effort, which has, among other things, run consciousness-raising workshops for policemen, judges, and doctors, and established hotlines and shelters for female and child victims of domestic violence.

That was the backdrop in the kingdom against which the events of 2011, known as the Arab Awakening, took place.

Many Saudi women were deeply touched by the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt. They said they were inspired and encouraged by the women who participated in the uprisings in these countries. “We see that we can get something done,” they said. As a result, Saudi women became more vocal about getting their rights.

The most prominent example of this was the 2011 driving campaign in which on June 17 more than 60 Saudi women, in locations all over the country, drove cars to protest the ban on female drivers. Many of them videotaped their driving and then tweeted what they had done, which is how journalists knew there were 60-plus participants. It was the first time in many years that so many women had participated in a high-profile public protest.

In addition, Saudi women have become increasingly active on Twitter and Facebook in debates about the future of Saudi society. Both conservative and progressive women are tweeting their views and using this social media tool to express themselves.

Then, in early 2012, female university students led campus protests at universities in Abha and Al-Qassim to complain about the condition of their facilities and how they are treated. Male students joined in later. Although campus protests such as this were fleeting, they did signal rising consciousness among young women.

It is important to note, however, that while Saudi women were encouraged by the Arab Awakening and admire what women in other Arab countries have done, they do not generally favor the same kind of tactics, that is, street protests or open confrontation. There is a widespread belief that working quietly, and in a polite, non-confrontational manner, is the most effective way to bring about change in the Saudi context.

The Arab Awakening has also had an impact on the Saudi government, prompting it to take more steps to improve the status of women.

For example, the official reaction to the 2011 driving protest was to ignore it. It was evident that police had been ordered not to stop women drivers, and for the most part, police looked the other way when women were driving. Of course, there were some exceptions, including a few arrests. In addition, one judge in Jeddah issued a verdict of ten lashings for one young woman who was taken to court by prosecutors. But this verdict was annulled and never carried out.

Political Participation

Then, in September 2011, the king issued two major royal decrees regarding women. First, he announced that he planned to appoint women to the all-male *Majlis Al Shura*, or Consultative Council, in its next term, which will be in 2013. Officials have not yet disclosed how many women he will appoint, who they will be, or even if they will be seated in the same room as the male members. One official suggested that the female members would not be allowed in the main hall with the male members in order to respect the kingdom’s strict gender segregation in public places; they would have to participate in the sessions remotely, perhaps by video conference, in a separate room.

The king also announced that women will be allowed to run as candidates and vote in the next Municipal Council elections scheduled for 2015.

Although both the *Majlis* and the Municipal Councils are powerless bodies, without legislative or financial mandates, the king's decrees were important symbolic steps. They were the first time in the kingdom that men and women have been given equal political privileges. As such, they provide a foundation on which to build further advances for women.

Pace of Change

But perhaps the most important step for women, since the Arab Awakening, has been that the Saudi Labor Ministry has redoubled its efforts to get Saudi women, who now make up over 60 percent of university graduates, into the workforce.

In June 2011, King Abdullah ordered owners of lingerie shops to replace all their male salesclerks – mostly expatriate men – with Saudi female clerks. He gave them until January 2012 to implement the order, which was done. This step opened hundreds of jobs to women, and they are set to soon replace male clerks in cosmetic stores as well.

Increasingly, too, women are getting more opportunities in the higher education sector, with females now able to study law, engineering, pharmacy, and architecture at some Saudi universities. In addition, a significant percentage of Saudis studying overseas on government scholarships are women.

Finally, the new head of the “morals police” (the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, a force that famously patrols public places such as shopping malls to enforce gender segregation and modest dress), has announced that his officers would no longer harass women for not covering their faces. While many Saudi women veil their faces voluntarily, many others only do it because they are forced to do so by the *mutaween*, or religious police. Now,

those who choose not to cover their faces will not be harangued.

Indeed, the Arab Awakening has had a positive effect on women's situation in Saudi Arabia in that it has quickened the pace of changes that are giving them increased opportunities.

Looking ahead, Saudi women are likely to increase their efforts to have more liberty and personal autonomy. Increasingly, young women are asking for their rights and saying that religion and tradition must be separated. Because while they accept restrictions that they view as religiously mandated, they are no longer willing to accept restrictions that are rooted solely in cultural traditions, such as the ban on female drivers.

While Saudi women in the years ahead may become more organized in their activism, there is not yet a strongly articulated desire for assistance from the outside or coordination with non-Saudi women. Perhaps this is because Saudi women feel that their situation is unique and needs specific ways of being addressed.

In addition, the level of political consciousness among most Saudi women remains low. Many do not want change in their lifestyle and say that they are happy with the way things are now. It is not hard, for example, to find women who say that they do not want the ban on female drivers lifted.

Finally, there is a low tolerance level in both the government and society at large for activism. One woman who participated in the driving campaign was fired from her job with a government charity. Another was told she had to choose between her job at a women's economic training center and her activism in the campaign for female suffrage. She chose the latter.

Saudi women still face many obstacles in their struggle for their full rights as Muslim women. But their task has been made easier by a generous king and by the still unfolding events of the Arab Awakening.

Tunisia: Policies and Practices for Promoting Social Justice for Rural Women during a Democratic Transition¹

Lilia Labidi, *Visiting Research Professor, Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore; Former Minister of Women's Affairs, Tunisia; and Former Fellow, Woodrow Wilson Center*



In this presentation, I will discuss the strategy and actions of the Ministry for Women's Affairs (MWA) of the first transitional government following the Revolution of 14 January 2011—after the date on which former Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali stepped down—to bring social justice to the population of Tunisia's rural women and remedy the wrongs they had suffered. I will also discuss the situation of rural women in Tunisia and how their economic and legal rights were put at risk by a combination of the state's absence from these regions and the monopoly exercised there by the UNFT (l'Union Nationale des Femmes Tunisiennes, or National Union of Tunisian Women). The UNFT is the women's organization that was created after Tunisian independence in 1956 to promote the rights of women and was for decades the only organization legitimized to deliver certain services to women.

In order to put into context the situation of rural Tunisian women, we should point out that in 1980 an estimated 800,000 Tunisians were undernourished. This number represents 12.4 percent of the population, concentrated in the Center-West region (15.2 percent) and the North-West region (13.8 percent). Poverty had an impact on education: 20,000-30,000 children were not in schools; and for every 100 children who registered for the first year of primary school, only 37 reached the first year of secondary school and only 13 obtained their baccalaureate.² Starting in the 1980s, even though the schooling of girls improved, the number of dropouts continued to be high in rural areas. The proportion of illiterate women remains very high, as evidenced in the chart below.

Table 1: Women's illiteracy in 2000 in Tunisia³

Age of women	1980	1990	2000
Illiteracy among women aged 15 – 24	44.9%	29.9%	19.4%
Illiteracy among women aged 15 and older	64.9%	51.9%	40.2%

Poverty also has consequences for the family. First, there is the exodus of men from rural areas toward Tunisian cities and abroad. Secondly, migration has been affected by the closing of Europe's borders; now it is often clandestine migration, resulting in many deaths. Agriculture

in many areas has become feminized, but women are also increasingly adopting modes of migration that used to be reserved for men.⁴ The regions where women's unemployment is highest are those same regions where demonstrations leading to the Revolution of 14 January 2011 began.

Table 2: Rate of women's unemployment by region in 2007⁵

Region	Overall rate of unemployment.	Rate of women's unemployment.
South-West	20.0 %	28.7 %
North-West	19.6 %	26.2 %
South-East	17.6 %	30.5 %
Center-West	14.3 %	19.3 %
District of Tunis	13.9 %	16.6 %
Center-West	11.7 %	14.0 %
North-East	10.3 %	11.0 %
Total	14.1 %	17.8 %

The proportion of women as heads of household has risen quickly in Tunisia, and women have had to improvise to gain income, often working in the informal sector.⁶

Table 3: Women heads of household in rural areas⁷

Country	% of women in 1970	% of women in 1990
Tunisia	11	26
Algeria	4	8
Morocco	12	19
Egypt	6	9 (18% between 1998-2006) ⁸


The UNFT against Women

Tunisian women had gained, since independence, a Personal Status Code that protected their rights, which provided crucial legal and psychological security to women. Paradoxically, women in urban areas benefited most from this Code – 30 percent of judges are women, 70 percent of pharmacists, 40 percent of doctors, and 40 percent of university teachers – yet for five decades the state hardly existed for the women in rural areas. With the 2011 revolution, even those who had been training rural women complained that they were not officially registered as UNFT's workers. Rural women's lack of knowledge about their rights leaves them vulnerable to many dangers, including various forms of private and public violence; as such, rural women and poor women are unable to defend themselves from legal and economic injustice. We are in the presence here of a subtext,

an implicit division of responsibilities between the state and the UNFT. The UNFT is in charge of the future of rural women, together with the ATM (Association Tunisienne des Meres, or Tunisian Association of Mothers, created in the 1990s and led by Saida Agrebi, who went into exile following the revolution), which the only organizations legitimized to represent women across the country. Both have failed to respond to women's needs.

Policies and Programs for Women

What are the possibilities for Tunisian women? A study carried out before the revolution on 229 women in greater Tunis by AFTURD (l'Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche et le Développement, or the Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development), an independent feminist



NGO dealing with research and development for women, showed that in the fields of micro-entreprises, 84 percent of these women lived in precarious situations; suffered from a lack of qualifications, work contracts, and a social safety net; and had little seniority in the field. The study's authors recommended providing free medical visits and free medicine for the sick, setting up support structures in schools for children in vulnerable situations, bringing financial services closer to women; assisting in housing services, and creating centers for handicapped children in these neighborhoods,⁹ all of which showed the weakness of public services in these areas.¹⁰

Faced with women's suffering and the limited financial and technical means possessed by the MWA (a ministry that in the past had been a window for the government's propaganda and gave great visibility to the First Lady), several meetings were organized where Ministry's previous activities were presented and discussed with the public. The ministry developed a policy to promote political parity and economic equality among the regions. Civil society and the MWA mobilized their resources—through meetings, brochures, television spots, and radio messages—to help inform women throughout the country about women's rights, citizenship, democracy, and gender parity. Tunisia also lifted its reservations on the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), with the support of several women's organizations and the broader population, in line with the tradition of Tunisian reformism that valorizes women's rights, which led to the promulgation of the Personal Status Code in 1956.

Reforms were adopted only after an evaluation of previous events. Among the ministry's initiatives to revise the legal codes, Lobna Gouia, MWA's director of human resources, presented the results of her study of the Ben Ali law of 2006 that gave women working in the public sector, while caring for a sick person, the possibility to work half-time and receive 75 percent of their salary, while keeping their rights to promotion, vacation and social security programs. Her study showed that, in fact, the actual salary received was

closer to 50 percent, once all the social deductions were made. She called it a “cosmetic law” because it served more as propaganda for the government than it served the interests of women. At the national level, the number of women using this benefit went from 1,504 in 2007 to 504 in 2008, and, among all the employees in the MWA, women benefitting from it were extremely rare. Insaf Zitouni, a clinical psychologist, initiated a critical and historical study of the evolution of the family, showing the importance of new models involving single mothers, divorced women, and the nuclear family.

Recovering rights and fulfilling duties were at the center of the editorial line of a brochure developed by Salsabil Klibi of the Faculty of Legal, Political and Social Sciences of Tunis at the University of Carthage. The brochure was distributed at meetings to women in the different regions and explained the different components of citizenship and democracy. A strategy titled, “Women, the culture of citizenship, and democracy,” directed by Anis Zahraz, was set up with women from the regions to determine the reasons that led girls to abandon schooling and resulted in women's unemployment. The strategy tried to identify the resources for capacity-building and the legal procedures that would help defend women's rights. The program entitled “Economy of solidarity,” directed by Basma Arfa with the participation of Imen Ben Salah and Malika Ouerghi, produced brochures informing women of the different training programs set up by the Ministry in collaboration with other ministries. Training and follow-up were developed by specialists. The purpose was to enable women to benefit, as Ibn Khaldun¹¹ had long ago suggested, from technical training based on scientific knowledge, that is, from training delivered by university institutes and professional training centers, rather than, as formerly done, by UNFT personnel who themselves needed to be trained. The beneficiaries of these new training programs were later supported in their search for micro-credits.

Kaouther Baghdadi, an agricultural engineer and Director-General of the National Center for Agricultural Studies, who had wide experience

with women agriculturalists in Tunisia and in numerous African countries, developed a program for the MWA to maximize the success of agricultural projects for rural women. For example, she calculated the cost of setting up vegetable gardens for the women of Sejnane in northern Tunisia and coordinated technical support for this program with the CRDA (Commissariats Regionaux au Développement Agricole, or Regional Offices for Agricultural Development) of the Bizerte region. The program also allowed women artisans to secure a portion of their food needs using elevated henhouses, chickens, kitchen gardens with basic vegetables, and beehives, etc. In addition, having the possibility of selling or trading their surplus foods, the women artisans were no longer obliged to sell their product at cheap prices. Kaouther Baghdadi was also behind an agricultural product transformation project set up for women in Gabes, Kasserine, Tozeur, etc. Sonia Boudicha of the Ministry of Higher Education's Institute of Agricultural Transformation and Houyem Zgolli from Agricultural Transformation Institute's Professional Training Unit put in place several programs in this area.


Brahim Toumi, Director-General of the Tunisian Agency for Professional Training, set up several training programs for hundreds of women in Tunisian embroidery at the Al-Bachia School of Tunis, the Jewelry School of Gammarth located in the seaside resort town, and at the Iron School of Nabeul, a coastal city, where women would learn painting and sculpting with glass. Women of varied ages participated. We were all surprised when the father of one of the girls in the training program came to assess the program, because his youngest daughter wanted to join it and a third daughter wanted to stop preparing for the Baccalaureat and join her sisters in the program. The father said that he was ready to invest in such a business for his daughters.

Training programs in mosaics, in products made from the wild plant called *halfa*, and in the production of dolls, were also set up. Zied Zaoui, director in charge of training and Soukayna Manai of the department of creation

at the National Artisanry Office, an institution with which the MWA had signed an agreement with in 2011, supervised a group of women from Tozeur.¹² In three months, women received training, learned how to use new technology, and gained knowledge of artistic research, communication, sales, and Internet use.¹³ Chosen by their local administration, they benefited from the support of the region to rent space at a modest rate and were given sewing machines that came from a Chinese gift to the MWA to help women propose projects. The women of Sejnane and Tozeur were awarded a grant by the MWA of 1,000 dinars each. These programs, among others, were coordinated by a staff that was devoted to women's causes. Among them, Ahmed Mosbah, administrative director-general, identified the structures with which the ministry could collaborate and supervised the financial aspect and the implementation of the programs in the field; and Driss Mnajja, in charge of publications and communication, oversaw coordination between regional offices and the regional offices of other ministries.

To conclude, I would like to point to the success of these programs, which created a new dynamic. Women realized that the MWA in 2011 was no longer just a showcase and that they could count on its seriousness; they recovered their dignity and liberated themselves in taking their destiny into their own hands. They were able to participate collectively and individually in the Annual Artisan Fair held in March 2012, which enabled them to exhibit their products and to make others aware of them, and it also gave them great personal satisfaction. This is only the beginning of a process, much still remains to be done. The goal was to try out specific approaches and to test results so that the MWA would be better able to elaborate, with its partners, ways to defend women's rights and aspirations.

From February to December 2011, the MWA's staff and its employees in the regions showed great commitment as members of the first transitional government to address issues of social injustice. They worked with research centers,



new NGOs, and professional training institutes to set up specific programs aiming to show that the MWA had a serious interest in all its citizens: women and men, urban and rural, in the formal

and informal employment sectors, and women's activities whether they were in the agricultural domain or in the workforce as artisans.¹⁴

Endnotes

- 1 This discussion grows out of research I carried out at the Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore in 2012 and is based on field observations during my visits to different Tunisian regions between February and December 2011 with the aims of identifying women's needs, hearing their suggestions, and discussing with regional, technical and political authorities the possibilities and means for repairing social injustices accumulated over the previous decades.
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- 3 Source: Rafika Hammoudi. *Nonformal education for girls*. UNESCO, 2000. p. 20. Cited in Hassan R. Hammoudi. *Education des adultes et développement*. www.iiz-dvv.de/index.php
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- 10 The provisional government of Hamadi Jebali, put in place following the Tunisian elections of October 2011, raised the number of families benefitting from social aid programs from 185,000 to 253,000 and set up a program to construct 30,000 residences for a price lower than 35,000 dinars per unit. www.kapitalis.com/kapital/34-economie/9596-les-programmes-de-m-jebali
- 11 Abderrahman Ibn Khaldun. *The Muqaddimah. An introduction to history*. Translated and introduced by Franz Rosenthal, with a new introduction by Bruce B. Lawrence. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. 2005. p. 317.
- 12 The Ministry of Regional Development also contributed 80 dinars per month to the candidates.
- 13 This training involved Hayet Ben Said, Wafa Sali, Rabaa Hemmi, Intissar Intefa, Soumeya Dhahri, Ourida Sliai and Yemna Ben Boubaker, all from Tamarzah, Douz, Degueche and Tozeur.
- 14 I would like to thank all those who worked with dedication 12 to 14 hours per day, including Saturdays and Sundays, to bring these projects to a successful conclusion, without any economic benefit other than their salaries. All were motivated by the nature of the work and the aim to repair social injustice.



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