

Will the Arab uprisings truly become Arab springs?

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Good morning everybody

I would like to begin by thanking you for affording me the opportunity to speak before this distinguished gathering. I have spoken before many international audiences on various angles of the January 25th uprising, and I am always amazed at my affinity for analysing this particular topic. The title chosen for this session infers a concern that the uprising may not end up into a spring. I want to quickly assure you that it *will* be a spring. You will no doubt wonder how I can be so sure. This uprising epitomises the awakening of the power of Egyptian youth, the most vibrant **segment** of our society.

Last January, Egypt's youth took to the streets demanding political change, and didn't go home until they got it. The 18 days leading up to the ouster of former president Mubarak demonstrated to the world that the youth are a force to be reckoned with. While they were initially dismissed as 'the Facebook youth', the months that followed saw even their fiercest critics set up Twitter accounts just to appeal to the youth of the revolution.

Having spent the past 11 years of my life campaigning for the rights of women and children in a culture which, for various reasons, has increasingly grown to neglect these basic rights, it was with a special sense of pride that I watched women camped out, side by side with men in Tahrir. It is an undeniable fact that women were instrumental in the success of the Egyptian revolution.

On the morning of February 12th I was full of hope; hope that Egypt would build upon the once unthinkable gains secured over the 18 days of the revolution: political freedom, presidential campaigns, a flourishing economy, gender equality, and much more. Instead, Egyptians; who inspired the world with their revolution, have since fallen prey to sectarian strife, and political squabbles, which have in turn taken their toll on various pillars of the economy, namely tourism, foreign direct investment, and production.

Commented [MK1]: You mention at the end that they are the biggest segment

Ladies and gentlemen, the events of the past nine months have taught every Egyptian an invaluable lesson in political change: that Mubarak's ouster, though once unimaginable, was perhaps the easiest part of Egypt's journey towards democracy; a journey which was underestimated by all stakeholders and observers. I will share with you 5 of key realisations:

1. Prolonging the transition is a double-edged sword: Many Egyptians are today realising that we are at a juncture where the '**camp in Tahrir till we get what we want**' attitude is no longer effective, and only serves to further engrain chaos and rebellion as a means of gaining usurped rights. As it stands today, prolonging the chaos is allowing strong fundamentalist groups who have been working underground for years to monopolise the scene. Prolonging the transition also allows opportunists to cause civil strife in the name of political change. It is quite striking to compare the youth of the revolution with striking air traffic controllers, transport workers, and factory employees asking for sporadic, and often unrealistic demands, all the assumed pretence of liberation from the oppression of the past. Prolonging the transition will continue to lead to the Youth's revolution being derailed and manipulated for individual agendas.
2. Overruling the law: The unregulated media apparatus is edging closer towards tabloidism and fuels the belief among many Egyptians that the accused do not deserve a fair trial. People are slowly realising that the rule of law is their only protection against military trials, and that it must apply equally to women, Christians, children, persons before the courts and all other segments of society.
3. The economy: Short sighted media reports play on economic ignorance had caused many Egyptians to call for economically destructive policies such as raising wages without production, nationalization, and reversing privatization contracts. Today, Egyptians are realising that not all privatisation is bad or corrupt, and that many privatisation programmes created jobs, increased production, increased GDP, and contributed positively to the economy. The journey to democracy has taught us that instability gives rise to less Foreign Direct Investment, and tourism, two

pillars of our economy which the average Egyptian is starting to realise we cannot do without.

4. Most relevant to our forum here, Human rights gains have been abandoned in the fight for other human rights. I find it ironic, and heart wrenching that while so much was done for women's rights under an oppressive regime, all these rights have now been swept under the virtual rug of the current revolutionary regime. The revolution's quest for democracy and freedom of expression has brought banned activities of fundamentalist groups opposing women's rights to the forefront. They threaten relapse into more traditional ways of thinking and silencing advocates for women's rights. They are taking full advantage of the unregulated quasi-tabloid media as a tool to convey their backward regressive ideals to the masses. Extremists wickedly portray all the gains achieved by women as the "corrupt laws of the previous regime". Threats are flagged nowadays to repeal achieved gains. US Secretary of State Clinton expressed her concern on Women's Day that "the gains that have been made in women's rights might be eroded during this transitional era". She reminded us that women in Egypt have made critical progress and cited 2 examples; raising the age of marriage and banning female genital mutilation. Rania El Malky, Chief Editor of Egypt Daily News put the crisis in the right context when she wrote that "Women in Egypt, despite having made enormous leaps in access to education and jobs and through their activism in the public arena, continue to be exploited by religious extremists from both sides to further their own political agendas."

The avant-garde role of women during the revolution has been betrayed and pushed back stage. The political and social role of women has become besieged amidst various political maneuvers by conservative religious groups.

Empowering women is "smart economics, as the chief of the World Bank so aptly put it. Economies that compete best are those that suffer less disparity in access to equal opportunities between men and women. Women who represent just under 50% of Egypt's population are no more than 24% of its labor force. They are currently absent from the political

and constitutional dialogue that will shape the future of Egypt. Their representation in the Cabinet is reduced from 4 to 1; and their quota in parliamentary elections has been abolished.

In summary, the journey to democracy has taught us that lost gains are difficult to restore- be the little time we have left until the elections, economic gains, women's rights, or foreign currency reserves, and in so doing ladies and gentlemen the Egyptian people are making their way along the next stage of the path to democracy. I count on the youth to lead civil society organizations operating in the field of women's rights to face such a threat. I have absolutely no doubt that Egypt's uprising will develop into an Arab Spring. My confidence is based on faith in the ability of Egypt's youth in doing what they do best: being a catalyst for change. The real question however, is how quickly they will be able to achieve this, and to what extent Egyptians will be able to protect their gains, and minimize their losses during the transition. Women's rights sit at the top of issues at risk of having their gains squandered. This will hold particularly true if fundamentalist and conservative political groups are able to gain ground and reshuffle Egypt's political agenda. The danger of such groups lies in their ability to manipulate religion, always a powerful tool that appeals to the masses, to prey on the minds of the average Egyptian's dormant conservative mentality to further their own political agendas which often reduce the status of women to that of the middle ages.

We need constant reminders of the positive outcome of laws that have liberated and enhanced women's status and to build on these gains as we still have a long way to go

Ladies and Gentlemen, Egypt is a great country with many attributes that render it truly unique. Whereas I have lived through the repercussions of socialist and free market policies, I have yet to live in a democratic Egypt which observes its citizens' rights, but I can almost smell the sweet taste of democracy around the corner. Egyptians must realise that the efforts they exert during the current transitional period will shape the dynamics of our society for years and generations to come. We must pull together and set common goals for ourselves and strive to

achieve them collectively and with the ultimate good of our nation at heart.