TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY
TELAVIV NOTES
AN UPDATE ON MIDDLE EASTERN DEVELOPMENTS BY THE MOSHE DAYAN CENTER
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Volume 5, Number 24 December 26, 2011

Women in the "New Egypt": What Next?

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An Egyptian blogger made headlines last month when a friend of hers tweeted a photograph of her posing nude. The photograph of 20-year-old Aliaa Magda Elmahdy, first posted on her blog "A rebel's diary,"[1] was viewed by over one million people after it was tweeted with the hashtag #nudephotorevolutionary, and Elmahdy's "Followers" jumped from a few hundred to over 14,000.[2] The incident generated widespread controversy: some detractors accused her of attention-seeking, others expressed concern that her actions would risk strengthening the position of Islamists in the upcoming parliamentary elections, while still others lauded her revolutionary push for female liberation.

More seriously, opposition to Elmahdy has also taken the form of threats on her life. In an interview on the eve of the first round of Egypt's parliamentary elections last month, Elmahdy told Cyberdissidents.org, an international organization promoting the voices of online dissidents, that she had received thousands of threats from "individuals, unions and Islamists. They are afraid that I might influence others and change the position of women in Egyptian society." Elmahdy was forced to go into hiding.[3]

The Elmahdy incident is not just another example of the powerful role of new media platforms in the political upheaval of the 'Arab Spring.' It also highlights a key issue surfacing in the post-Mubarak era: women's rights, and women's place in the "New Egypt." Women were visibly active in the January 25 Revolution that led to the overthrow of Mubarak. However, a number of subsequent incidents have indicated that the position of women in Egypt's ongoing civic and political struggles remains problematic.

An Amnesty International report published on November 21 argues that not only has the interim regime under the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) failed to address deeper issues related to women's rights that were endemic under Mubarak, it has in fact actively marginalized women in the reform process since his ouster, and has been complicit in physical and sexual abuse, including subjecting women to forced "virginity tests."[4] Indeed, the latest round of violence between Tahrir Square protestors and the security forces included brutal beatings and disrobing of women, videos and photos of which have gone viral.

Under Mubarak, legislation pertaining to women's political participation and personal status laws, collectively known as the "Suzanne Laws," after Mubarak's wife Suzanne, who headed the National Council for Women, secured a quota for women in parliament. The laws also mandated that divorced mothers can retain custody of their children until an older age, and included a law on visiting rights for divorced parents. Additionally, the *khul'* law on divorce allowed women to initiate divorce proceedings in court without the consent of their husbands, and even to divorce them without their consent, as long as they were willing to return their dowry.

Since the fall of the Mubarak regime, however, there has been a backlash against these laws, and the women's rights activists and advocacy groups that had been associated with the regime. A March 28 article published in the ostensibly liberal *Al Wafd* newspaper argued that the laws were enacted to serve the regime's political interests, and that they had a "destructive impact" on the Egyptian family.[5]

This backlash was concretized by the SCAF. For example, the quota that guaranteed 64 parliamentary seats (12 percent) for women was cancelled in July this year, and replaced with an amendment to the electoral law requiring all political parties to have at least one woman on their candidate list. According to Amnesty International, this proviso is "a token measure that fails to ensure women's full political participation."[6] Indeed, in the first stage of elections to Egypt's lower house of parliament, of the 376 women candidates running, not a single one was elected.

A March 8 demonstration for women's rights in Tahrir Square to mark International Women's Day, in which mainly women participated, was met with a hostile counter-protest. The hundreds of women in the rally were attacked verbally and physically, accused of following Western agendas and going against the country's cultural values, while security forces stood by passively. Throughout the year, Amnesty's claim that "Egyptian women are not on equal footing" was given credence by periodic incidents of abuse of female journalists reporting on the Tahrir Square protests, including the Egyptian-American journalist and women's rights activist Mona Eltahawy, who was beaten and sexually assaulted after being arrested during clashes in Cairo in November.

What do these incidents say about the future of women in the "New Egypt"? And how far can one say that the January uprising was at all related to women's rights in any case? In Eltahawy's view, it has everything to do with it.

“It is nonsense," she told an interviewer, "to keep repeating the mantra that Egypt’s revolution ‘wasn’t about gender.’ What revolution worth its salt can be fuelled by demands of freedom and dignity and not have gender nestled in its beating heart — especially in a country replete with misogyny, religious fundamentalism (of both the Islamic and Christian kind) and which for 60 years has chafed under a hybrid of military-police rule?"[7]

However, the overall picture since Mubarak's fall seems to indicate that for the Egyptian mainstream, while the revolution was certainly political, it was not necessarily a social one, at least in the manner that secular women's rights activists would have it.

The results of the first stage of Egypt’s landmark elections on November 28 provided further evidence to that effect. With a historic voter turnout of 62 percent — a significant proportion of which were women — the electorate placed the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Freedom and Justice Party in the lead with 36.6 percent of the vote, and the ultraconservative Salafi Al Nour Party, a newcomer on Egypt’s political scene, second with 24.4 percent. The liberal Egyptian bloc came in a distant third, with 13.4 percent of the votes. The second stage, held on December 14, produced an even greater majority — approximately 70 percent — for the two Islamist parties.

The tensions between Islamist and secular currents regarding the role of women in society should not be viewed in purely rigid, dichotomous terms, however. While many non-Islamist women maintain strong cultural affinities to their heritage, notions regarding the promotion of women’s rights are present in both streams. Nonetheless, activists such as Mozn Hassan, the executive director of Egypt’s Nazra Feminist Studies Center, are worried that the radicalism of the Salafis “can be dangerous for women on social levels,” with moral and social pressure put on women in the public sphere and the political arena. Speaking to the Global Fund for Women, Hassan declared: “I don’t think we will lose the laws we’ve gained, but we will definitely not gain more. [These groups] are also creating legal discourse against women, civil liberties and human rights defenders, especially women human rights defenders.”[1]

Still others resent the international focus on women’s rights as an issue in the aftermath of the revolution in the context of Islamist gains. Filmmaker Cressida Trew, who is making a documentary about women in Egypt’s revolution, told *The Guardian* newspaper that for some women this is seen as “culturally imperialist." The place of women will be decided on Egyptian, perhaps even Islamist terms, and any renegotiation will entail a long process of social and cultural change.[2]

[1] http://www.globalfundforwomen.org/impact/media-center/news-releases/163-2011/1971-how-will-egyptian-election-results-impact-women
[2] http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/dec/01/egypt-revolution-women-elections

It seems, in fact, that this process has already begun, as Egyptians watch the aftermath of the revolution unfold before their eyes. In the wake of the recent regime violence against women, which brought widespread national and international condemnation that forced the SCAF to issue a public apology, women marched in Cairo on December 20. In contrast to the March 8 women's rights demonstration, this time, not only did the protestors number tens of thousands, but they were protected by a chain of men, enabling them to protest safely.

In terms of long-term social change, though, the gains attained by women under Mubarak are widely viewed in Egypt as top-down reforms that did not reflect the will of the majority. After the results of the first stage of the elections came in, the Muslim Brotherhood appealed to critics to "respect the will of the people" in the vote. Time will tell in what way the "will of the people" will manifest itself when it comes to the rights of Egyptian women.

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The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.

TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation.