

North African Women's Rights in the Aftermath of the Arab Spring

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Women's rights movements more or less thrived in North Africa¹ prior to what is known as the Arab Spring: the Egyptian movement (1920s), the Moroccan movement (1940s), the Algerian movement (1970s), the Tunisian movement (1980s), and the Mauritanian movement (1980s). These movements basically fought for authority in a space-based patriarchy and managed to feminise the public spheres of power, especially civil society. With all the region's ups and downs, women's movements managed to make significant educational, social, political and legal gains. From the end of the 1970s onward, the success of the Iranian revolution (1979), the downfall of the Soviet Union (1991) and the subsequent emergence of the US as the sole superpower led to the emergence of 'political Islam.'¹ This gradually resulted in a complex situation where women's voices started to be categorised as 'secular' or 'Islamic.' The question to ask at this juncture is: What has become of all this in the aftermath of the uprisings that the media dubbed the 'Arab Spring'?

In reflecting on the fate of women's rights some three years after the commencement of the Arab (but also Berber, Coptic, etc.) revolts in North Africa and in the sixth year after a global financial and economic crisis, words from the introductory paragraph

of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, published in 1859, resonate strangely across time and place:

"It was the best times, it was the worst times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way."

Amidst this dilemma, three things come to mind:

1. A paradoxical situation
2. The realisation that North Africa is not the Maghreb and the Maghreb (Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco) is not the Middle East (with Egypt being both North Africa and the Middle East).²
3. Shifting strategies as a response to shifting challenges

A Paradoxical Situation

Two major paradoxes have emerged after the Arab Spring. On the one hand, there was a spectacular street presence of women of all ages, ideologies, ethnicities and social statuses during the political mobilisation phases of the uprisings (this has been well documented by all types of media), but, on the other hand, these women were then excluded from decision-making posts after the uprisings. As mobilisers and political actors during the revolutions, women stunned the world by braving gunfire, successfully manipulating social media, and actively

¹ North Africa is a broad regional sweep covering the coastal region from Egypt to Mauritania, stretching from the Atlantic to the Suez Canal, and from the Mediterranean across the Sahara Desert. The countries of North Africa are: Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania.

² The expression 'North Africa' includes Egypt.

pushing for democratic elections. Their image has been repeatedly used to provide a narrative for the Arab uprisings, yet the outcome for them was not so positive. The governments elected by the people after the revolutions represented women either poorly or not at all. For example, in Egypt, the women who bravely stood up to army-sanctioned 'virginity tests,' were absent; the constitutional committee appointed by the Supreme Council of Armed Forces includes no women. Indeed, women won fewer than 10 of the roughly 500 seats, making up only 2% of the first post-Arab Spring parliament in Egypt (compared with the 12% of seats that they held in the previous government). In Tunisia, the October 2011 elections allowed 49 women to be elected to the Constituent Assembly, that is 22% out of 217 seats. However, the backward direction of the political discourse was exemplified by the woman who was allegedly raped by policemen and then, when she filed a complaint, was accused of public indecency. In Libya, which had not had a civil government in four decades, women were used as pawns in complex politics, tainted by tribal and central power interests. In Morocco, women won 67 parliamentary seats (out of 395, that is 17% of the seats), but there was only one woman in the elected government (compared with the previous 2007 government which contained seven women). In addition to all this, women were excluded from the transitional governing bodies, constituent assemblies and committees that rewrote the first draft constitutions. Furthermore, debates on the appropriateness of women as heads of state increased public rhetoric about women's proper place in the domestic sphere, strident campaigns by Islamists to roll back relatively progressive family law, and, most tragically, increased politically motivated violence against women.

With respect to the second paradox, on the one hand, the political Islamisation of the region is a fact (with the adjectives 'moderate' and 'Salafist' added to reflect the different doses of Islamisation); yet, what most women's rights advocates (scholars and activists) gained during the decades that preceded the Arab Spring were also 'Islamic' gains: women's rights advocates in the region fought to improve, and not replace, Sharia (Islamic) laws and they targeted patriarchy not Islam. Moreover, many secular and Islamic feminists (scholars and activists) worked together, showing that Islam had never been a

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problem so far as women's rights advocates in the region are concerned.

The Maghreb Is Different from North Africa and the Middle East

One of the major revelations of the Arab Spring is that in matters of women's rights, the Maghreb is different from the Mashreq (the Middle East). An important indicator of this is that in the post-Arab Spring period, more women were elected/appointed in the Parliament in the Maghreb than in the Middle East. The main reason for this may be formulated in the following terms. As a social movement, the women's rights movement 'functions' in the male-dominated public space and, hence, is bound to either clash or interact with three powerful sources of authority in this space: politics, economy and religion. In Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries such as Yemen or Kuwait, women's issues have never been positioned as a crucial player in the political games of the public sphere. By contrast, in the Maghreb, especially Tunisia and Morocco, they are. Ever since their independence, the countries of the Maghreb have 'used' women's rights as part of the State's socio-political dynamics, as a means of modernisation. In post-Arab Spring Tunisia, the relatively high number of women in the Parliament was partly made possible by the 1956 Personal Status Code which protects women's rights. Indeed, this Code was heavily instrumentalised by women's NGOs in the recent political campaigns as a shield against extremism and a guarantee of women's rights. In Morocco, more women had access to the Parliament due to the success of the One Million Signatures to reform the *Mudawwana* (Family Law) in the early nineties, after which women's issues became

part and parcel of the ideological wars that opposed secularists to Islamists. The fact that the King is the highest political and religious authority and that the interests of the monarchy coincided with those of women in the face of rampant Islamism, facilitated the strategising between the two and led to various reforms that somehow saved Morocco during the Arab Spring uprisings.

Shifting Strategies

Another characterising feature of the post-Arab Spring uprisings is the dramatic shift of strategies on the part of women's rights movements. Five such shifts may be singled out:

- First, women's rights highlighted as a *genuine prerequisite for democracy*. While women's rights are sometimes seen as secondary to democratic change, gender equality needs to be presented as an essential prerequisite of true democracy.
- Second, acknowledging the strength of the law and fighting the side-lining of the concept of gender equality as a human right in the implementation of the new constitutions. This means working towards the inclusion of gender equality in every process of democratisation and understanding that gender is not only a symptom but also the backbone of every development strategy, because it is the main engine of economic development.
- Third, the push for more interaction between liberal/secular and Islamic feminists in the region in spite of the fact that Islamic feminists work more from inside Islamic political parties. Avoiding polarisation and seeking a centre where democracy and liberalism are maintained.
- Fourth, the avoidance of blaming religion and understanding that religion becomes very complex

when mixed with politics in a region with high female illiteracy and a strong space-based patriarchy.

- Fifth, the use of social media to foster grassroots movements and allow visibility of political action.

Conclusion

What we are witnessing in North Africa right now is the beginning of a *process* by which democratisation is becoming rooted in the region. Democratisation in the region is very much a *process*, not a government programme implemented by staunch democrats. This is why maintaining and improving women's rights in the region is absolutely crucial. It is and will remain the litmus test of any future democracy. It is true that the region is being Islamised, but we need to understand that religious identity and faith are two different (and possibly opposing) concepts in politics. The reason for this is that the religious field in North Africa is becoming increasingly diversified, and hence increasingly less likely to be reconstructed as political ideology. Because of religious diversification, what we are witnessing is a deconstruction of Islam where the aim is not so much a secularisation of society but an 'autonomisation' of politics from religion, and of religion from politics. Again women's rights in the region are crucial to the striking of this very balance.

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