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Sika, Nadine and Khodary, Yasmin (2012). One Step Forward, Two Steps Back? Egyptian Women within the Confines of Authoritarianism. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 13(5), 91-100.

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Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol13/iss5/9>

## **One Step Forward, Two Steps Back? Egyptian Women within the Confines of Authoritarianism**

By Nadine Sika and Yasmin Khodary<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the pre-and post January 25<sup>th</sup> political dynamics in Egypt, how these have affected the role of women in the private, public and political spheres. It analyzes the dynamics of the development of Egyptian women's organizations, and the extent to which these may develop into an Egyptian feminist movement. An overview of historical, political, and social contexts of the role of Egyptian women's organizations will provide an understanding of their main accomplishments from Nasser to Mubarak. The study shows how the early women's organizations were directly linked with the ruling authorities and how these have added to the authoritarian structure of the regime. The paper moves to analyze how women's organizations have later evolved into more independent organizations, how they have influenced independent women activists, who have positioned themselves against the authoritarian power structure of the Egyptian political system. The paper finally assesses the extent to which women's rights are going to be protected or rolled back under the rule of the military and later the Islamists in the post-Mubarak era.

*Keywords:* January 25<sup>th</sup> Uprising; Women's Organizations; Egypt; Authoritarianism

### **Introduction**

The Egyptian January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011 uprising was fundamental in bringing the role of women's organizations and individual women to the forefront of Egyptian politics. During the 18-day uprising, Egyptian women demonstrated side by side with Egyptian men. The struggle against the dictatorship and the common goal of ousting Mubarak was far greater than gender politics. Nevertheless, two weeks after the ousting of the president, precisely on the International Women's Day, women demonstrators were harassed by military police who subjected many activists to so-called "virginity tests." Indirectly, they were accused of being prostitutes. Samira Ibrahim, one of the women activists who underwent the virginity test, filed a law suit against military police, and TIME magazine placed her on the 100 most influential people in 2012. Women in Tahrir Square are the symbol of women's empowerment: their demonstrations express their longing to end gender discrimination and promote gender equality, but the regimes' response to their activism is a clear message that they still have a long way to head.

This paper attempts to understand the dynamics of the Egyptian feminist movement from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century until today. It will look at how the dynamics of Egyptian politics affected the movement in past decades, and how these changed from being mainly dependent on the regime to attain certain rights to standing up in the face of authoritarianism. Lastly, this study will address how the post-January 25<sup>th</sup> political dynamics will further affect the role of women in

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the private, public, and political spheres. An overview of historical, political, and social contexts of the role of Egyptian women's organizations will provide an understanding of their main accomplishments from Nasser to Mubarak. The paper will address the extent to which women's rights are going to be protected or rolled back under the rule of the military and later the Islamists in the post-Mubarak era.

### **The Role of Women's Organizations: How They Evolved and What They Have Gained so Far**

The first women's organizations developed with the formation of the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) under Huda Sha'arawi, the pioneer of feminist movements in 1923. Its purpose was to raise women's awareness to the point of making political and social equality with men a reality. The importance of this organization was its close association with the 1919 revolution, where women were present in the streets alongside their male counterparts to contest British colonial power. This organization was composed of middle and upper class educated women, who considered women's rights an intrinsic part of the modernization process in Egypt. This organization was closely associated with the nationalist political movement of the newly emerging Wafd political party. With the exception of the Muslim Women's society established in 1936 by Zaynab al-Ghazali, membership of early feminist movement in Egypt was not religiously inclined as much as it was associated with the larger Egyptian liberal modernist experience. By 1942, the Egyptian Feminist Party was established, and a few years later in 1948, Doria Shafiq established the Bint al-Nil organization with the goal of attaining gender equality in the social and political spheres.

### **The Nasser Regime and Gender Politics**

After the end of the monarchy and the ascendance of the Egyptian Free Officers to power in 1952, women's organizations gained momentum. Feminists believed in the importance of advancing women's rights with the development of the new Egyptian Constitution. The Free Officers however, did not intend to grant women many political and social rights. Hence, the first signs of women's protests to claim their rights and equalities started in 1954, after Nasser gained political power. Shafiq and her associates went on a hunger strike to pressure the regime to grant women the right to vote. Their strike succeeded in attaining this demand, and in the 1956 Constitution women were granted the right to vote for the first time in Egyptian history. In light of this development, Nasser ensured the amalgamation of women's rights with modernity, development, and the welfare state. Women received some economic and political rights, and gained limited rights to equality in public life. Nevertheless, women in the private sphere remained subservient to men, and family laws discriminating against women remained untouched by the Nasserite regime.

Nasser, who became president of Egypt in 1954, introduced laws that further developed his popularity within the confines of an authoritarian state structure. He guaranteed state employment to all university and high school graduates, and introduced national insurance policies that facilitated the development of a new social contract (Kassem, 2004). Within the newly emerging sociopolitical structure, women were granted the right to education and employment as much as their male counterparts. Nasser guaranteed economic rights to the working class and the peasantry regardless of gender, all while the latter submitted to his authoritarianism (Bush, 1999; Kassem, 2004). The Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) was developed as a mobilizational organization that worked as a leading political party in 1952. In

1956, the National Union, another type of mobilizational organization, replaced the RCC with the same functions as a dominant political party. This was soon to be replaced by the Arab Socialist Union (ASU) in 1962 (Hilal, 2010). Judges who belonged to the Supreme Constitutional Court were coerced into joining the ASU (Hill, 1971), thus ensuring the loyalty of the three branches of government to the ASU. The regime retained political power and influence by developing a dominant political party system under which all opposition would be submerged. State hegemony extended to civil society actors by enacting law 32/1964, highly restrictive of freedom of action and freedom of association of civil society. Provisions of this law ensured that the Ministry of Social Affairs regulated the actions of all civil society actors. In this context, women's organizations became associated with the authoritarian state structure that ensured that women's rights became part of a larger state-led developmental strategy, all restricted by state authoritarianism. For instance, the Nasser regime outlawed the first Egyptian Feminist Union as an independent organization, and transformed it into a service-oriented charity organization. Afterwards, it worked directly under the government, and its independent work was hampered by the Ministry of Social Affairs.

State feminism under the Nasser regime produced women who were economically independent of their families, but dependent on the state for employment, important social services like education, healthcare and daycare, and political representation. While state feminism created and organized a system of public patriarchy, it did not challenge the personal and familial views of women's dependency of men that were institutionalized by the personal status laws and the political system (Hatem, 1992, 233 in Al-Ali 2002, 13).

### **Sadat and Women's Organizations**

After Nasser's death in 1970, Sadat took power and reinstated a state-centrist approach to politics, while developing free market capitalism through his economic liberalization "*infitah*" policies. He sidelined all of Nasser's entourage, and replaced all ministries with his own trusted personnel, thus retaining power for himself. He developed the 1971 Constitution to further embed the power of the presidential office. The Constitutional Court was an important institution, and the legislature played a big role by instilling legitimacy, especially after opening up the floor to political parties (Kassem, 2004). In 1976, Sadat developed his own political party, the National Democratic Party (NDP), and announced that the ASU would be split into three different ideological platforms: one for the left, one for the center, and one for the right. As a result, government officials resigned from the ASU and became NDP members. The limited political liberalization process developed by Sadat did not end state hegemony over civil society; rather, the role of the state in regulating civil society remained constant, and Law 32/1964 remained in place. In addition, syndicates and unions remained under heavy-handed state control. Like his predecessor, Sadat adopted policies targeting women in the framework of reform and modernization, still within the confines of authoritarianism. He promoted women's rights and equality in the public realm of education, employment, and in political participation. During the 1970s, assisted by his wife, Sadat enacted some progressive laws for the enhancement of the right of women in the personal status law, especially the right to divorce. This law was contentious: it failed to pass in the People's Assembly. Undaunted, Sadat enacted a presidential decree to pass the law, in contradiction to the Assembly's vote (Elssada, 2011: 91). Though the

law only guaranteed women what should be theirs, women's rights started to be seen as purely interlinked with the personal authority and acceptance of president and his wife, Gihan.

### **Mubarak: The Flourishing of Women's Organizations within the Confines of Authoritarianism**

After the assassination of Sadat in 1981, Mubarak took power and the economic liberalization policies previously instated threatened the legitimacy of the regime and its ruling NDP. In the 1990s, with growing economic constraints on the Egyptian state, the Mubarak reshaped the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the Egyptian public sphere, to help the state in the development process. The number of civil society organizations, including women's organization, increased exponentially for the coming decades, from no more than 10,000 in 1998 to almost 30,000 by 2008 and the increasing intervention of the state in the affairs of different organizations, most women's organizations became associated with state officials. Like any other organization, they had to be recognized through law 32/1964, which was effective until 2002 when the government enacted law 84/2002, another highly restrictive piece of legislation on civil society's freedoms. It stipulates that all non-profit organizations should be registered with the Ministry of Social Solidarity or face criminal penalties. In addition, this Ministry must approve the different activities of civil society organizations, and has the right to intervene in the internal affairs of any organization and dissolve it if it receives foreign funds or if it is affiliated with international groups without official permission.

In 1993, the Egyptian government appointed Aziza Husayn head of the National Preparatory Committee for NGOs, before the convention of the UN Conference on Population and Development in Egypt in 1994. Husayn seized this opportunity to advance women's rights by mobilizing different women groups and activists to lobby for a right-based approach to women and development. Women's rights were conglomerated with Egypt's right-to-development process, and Suzanne Mubarak became associated with the newly emerging women-for-development movement. According to Nawla Darwish (2012), the Mubarak regime sought to gain legitimacy in the international community as an arbitrator of civil society. It increased the number and scope of civil society organizations, but according to Darwish, women's organizations never developed into a full-fledged feminist movement because each group had a different outlook on the role of women in society; some were more leftist leaning, others were more conservative, some aligned with the political authority, and others addressed issues that were previously taboo in Egyptian society. For example, prior to the first Beijing Conference for women in 1995, the New Woman Organization addressed the issue of violence against women in Egypt but political authorities tried to stop this issue from being addressed in Beijing (Darwish 2012). The Egyptian Center for Women's Rights has been more conservative in its outlook on certain issues, and has relentlessly opposed leftist-leaning organizations on specific women's rights, like the equal right to heredity, which directly opposes Shari'a law. Nevertheless, the 1990s were a breakthrough for the development of an embryonic feminist movement that lobbied for the enactment of important laws to enhance the status of women in both the public and the private sphere.

At the beginning of the new millennium, the Mubarak regime established the National Council for Women, which collaborated with different women's organizations. This move reaffirmed the regime's support of women's development in the Egyptian public sphere. The adoption of the new marriage contract for the protection of women's rights, along with the khul' law, was a first step toward emancipation. "In 2000, Law No. 1 was passed: it sought to rectify a

backlog of cases by reforming procedures; it granted women the right to khul', provided they forfeit their financial rights; facilitated access to court in the case of 'urfi marriages; and introduced the new marriage contract, with a list of conditions in an appendix." (Alsadda, 2011, 92). More rights were granted to women with the introduction of a family court system to protect the right access to alimony and child maintenance and custody of children by women until age 15 (Alsadda, 2011). Moreover, the feminist movement developed many campaigns to abolish female genital mutilation (FGM). The embryonic movement was able to lower the percentage of FGM from almost 100 percent in Egypt in the 1970s to approximately 75 percent in 2008. Moreover, according to a national demographic health survey conducted in 2008, 63 percent of women believe in the importance of FGM, compared to 82 percent in 1995. Though this percentage is still very high, the 20 percent drop in the perception of women towards FGM is significant.

In 2010, women were granted a quota for participating in parliament, in accordance with the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals. However, with the January 25<sup>th</sup> uprising the 2010 Parliament was dissolved, and the quota system was abolished. It is important to contextualize the role of women's organizations within the socio-political context of the Mubarak era. Along with the National Council for Women, they were struggling to attain equalities and rights especially where the personal status law is concerned; but their direct association with the regime and with the religious establishment helped them to mobilize and encourage, especially al-Azhar, the supreme religious institution, toward their rights. This was essential especially with the increasingly more religious attitude of the Egyptian public since the Sadat era (Bayat 1997). The women's movement ensured that al-Azhar would provide *fatwas* that promote women's rights and show that there is no contradiction between these and Islam. al-Azhar showed that the khul' law was in accordance with Sharia, and insisted that FGM is not an Islamic practice (UNFP 2010).

As part of the general development process in Egypt, women's level of education increased since the 1990s. For instance, literacy rates increased from 44.4 to 66.4 percent from 1990 to 2010. Unfortunately, unemployment levels also increased, especially amongst youth who have higher education levels and skills. Unemployment is highest amongst university graduates, and is second highest among high school graduates with young women having the highest unemployment levels. According to the ILO, Egypt, along with Morocco, Israel and Turkey "face a low rate of labour force participation due to the low involvement of women in the market economy, a significant high unemployment of the educated labour force, particularly among women" (Abdel-Khalek 2010: 2).

Female Education and Employment levels in Egypt from 1990-2011

Series	1990/91	2000/01	2005	2009	2011
Literacy rate of women 15-24 year-olds	---- *	68	78.9	77 UNICEF	---- *
Net enrollment ratio of <u>Girls</u> in primary education	----*	86.4	90.5	93.8	---- *
Ratio of girls' enrollment to boys in primary education	0.83	0.92	0.94	0.96	---- *
Ratio of girls enrollment	0.79	0.93	0.94	0.96	---- *

to boys in secondary education					
Ratio of girls enrollment to boys in tertiary education	0.57	---- *	0.77	---- *	---- *
Percentage of women Employed to population ratio	16.1	16.0	18.3	24 UNICF	---- *
Proportion of seats held by women in national parliament	3.9	2.0	2.9	1.8	12.7

Source: United Nations, Millennium Development Goals Indicators, <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/mdg/Data.aspx>.

\* Unavailable Data for that year.

### The Emergence of a New Feminist Movement?

In the past two decades, two contradicting trends occurred: higher education and unemployment. Women attained higher levels of education, and with those came higher expectations for better standards of living and some private rights; this was thanks to the growing influence of the “Gender and Development” (GAD) tendency of the newly emerging women’s movement that had as its objective empowering women. In spite of education, they still have higher unemployment levels than men, and they still endure practices that discriminate against them in the private and public sphere, like harassment on the streets. Facing these issues, women joined the growing protests that sprang up in the early 2000s. Women activists emerged as a direct reaction to and interaction with the political protests that began with the iconic Kifaya movement in 2004. Kifaya was the first movement to question Mubarak’s power by demonstrating in the streets, something that was never done before in Egypt. The campaign “The Street is Ours” is important in that respect. In May 2005, Kifaya had a small demonstration in downtown Cairo, in which women activists were present. Thugs and former NDP adherents violently harassed women who were participating in this demonstration. The police did not stop harassment of these women, but rather watched the incidents without applying the due process of law. In reaction, women activists mobilized some five hundred women to gather in front of the Journalists’ Syndicate to call for the resignation of the interior minister Habib al-Adly, who is the symbol of state security discrimination and harassment against women. The mobilization process was conducted through social networking sites. “The call circulated on the web and spread by cell phones and other means through a network of women who had never been political, but now wanted to do something”. Activists were able to mobilize women who were not socially or politically active before, along with women who had experience in developing feminist movement, but also women who were from different socio-political perspectives. Women activists were able to generate consensus for action against the regime by combining different sociopolitical forces together, like Islamists, leftists, feminists, and liberals to contest the power and brutality of the Mubarak regime. With the Kifaya movement, they conducted a conference, which led to a campaign called “The Street is Ours” (Schemm 2005; Al Mahdy 2008.). This demonstration developed a new movement called Women for Democracy. Though it was short lived, it was essential in bringing the issue of women’s rights with feminist activism to the forefront of public debate within the structure of anti-authoritarianism, rather than within the

traditional “Women And Development” approach, which was the norm during the previous decade. Women activists publicly expressed their rage against the regime together with other movements. This was their manifesto: “in light of the current events in Egypt which have seen a dangerous rise in repressive practices, women became the primary bearers of this repression in its different forms, whether on the street, at work, in means of transportation, demonstrations, or police stations. We believe that these practices are part and parcel of the ruling regime’s policies aiming at subjugating and oppressing the Egyptian people” (Al-Mahdy 2008: 385). The seeds of a new feminist movement in Egypt thus grew side by side with the seeds of the new protest movements.

Some women’s organizations started to break away from the traditional women’s rights movement, which operated since the Nasser era. Older groups, like the New Woman Organization for instance, networked with various activists to develop an alternative to authoritarianism and patriarchy. They learned new conventional and unconventional forms of contestation. So, even though many of the new female activists were not previously part of the feminist movement, they learned from the emerging protests to criticize and contest authoritarian power structures at work in the political sphere. For example, in 2006 the Ghazl al-Mahala textile plant workers went on their first wave of strikes to demand that the government fulfill its promise to pay the yearly bonus. “Women workers played an impressive role in the strike. The strike in December last year was started by 3000 women workers, and they are still active” . Leftist women’s organizations, especially the New Woman Organization, aligned with female workers in al-Mahala by providing legal advice, workshops, and legal training to acknowledge their right to protest. According to Darwish (2012), women protesters in al-Mahala were harassed by state security personnel, and were threatened with rape in front of their families if they would not stop their activism and continue to call for demonstrations. Women’s organizations stepped in to provide psychological help, especially for the first two women who called for demonstrations and strikes, namely Amal Said and Manal al Demerdash, to ensure that their right to protest was protected.

Two years after the first wave of workers’ strikes, female activist Esraa Abdelfattah who had not been politically active before, called for a general strike in solidarity with al Mahala workers in 2008, by posting it as a Facebook event. Her unconventional mobilization strategy through this social network inspired other activists who later used it for the “April 6<sup>th</sup> movement”, which called for the end of authoritarianism, before and after the January the 25<sup>th</sup> uprising.

During the 18-day uprising, Egyptian women, previously not engaged in any activism, took their demands massively to the streets, not in the name of women emancipation, or women equality, but as an important part of the national struggle against authoritarianism, to create a better life for themselves and their families. According to Mozn Hassan, the director of the Nasra Feminist Studies Centre in Cairo, “No one sees you as a woman here; no one sees you as a man. We are all united in our desire for democracy and freedom.” She explains that the freedom women experienced at Tahrir Square made them return again and again, bringing along their friends, sisters and mothers in an unprecedented high turnout. Prior to January 2011, Heba Kalaawy (2012) never took part in any activism, but with the upsurge of demonstrations she saw herself as an active actor in the making of the new Egyptian history.

## **Gender Politics in the Post-January 25<sup>th</sup> Uprising**

The first parliamentary elections after the ousting of Mubarak were held in November 2011 and January 2012, respectively. The public turnout was unprecedented in Egypt's history, but unfortunately, the quota for women was abolished, and the direct result was less than 2 percent representation of women in both Upper and Lower Houses of Parliament. The majority was won by the Muslim Brotherhood's newly founded political party, the Freedom and Justice Party, followed by the Salafi Movement's also newly founded political party, al-Nour Party, constituting a clear majority of Islamists in Parliament. The 2012 Ministerial Council, which consisted of 26 ministries, included only three women. The low percentage of women's representation in both the Parliament and the government is a clear indication that women's rights and representation are not on the agenda of either the Islamists who have legislative powers, or the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces which holds executive power in the interim. Rather, both tiers of political power attacked what little women had already obtained in past decades. The Freedom and Justice Party and al-Nour Party relentlessly lobbied against:

- The cancelation of the khul' law
- The cancelation of the Penal code which protects women from sexual harassment
- The cancelation of the right of women to travel alone without the consent of a male relative
- The cancelation of the new family status law which provides woman the right to have custody over her children until the age of 15
- The cancelation of the Amendment to Article one of the Egyptian nationality law number 26/1975 which grants children born to an Egyptian mother and a foreign father the right to an Egyptian nationality
- The legalization of FGM
- The abolishment of the 18 year legal age for marriage (ECWR, 2012).

Islamists have used a number of women activists of the "Muslim Sisterhood" in Parliament to mobilize against the Convention Against all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). According to these women, the CEDAW is a manifestation of atheism that should be abolished from the Egyptian legislation (Lotfy 2012).

The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces has relentlessly used force against women activists, from conducting virginity tests to dragging them and stripping them of their clothes during demonstrations. The military legitimized its actions by stressing the patriarchal social structure in Egypt, and stating that decent women belong at home, implying that those who contest the regime are indecent. Women's organizations are mobilizing against these beliefs, and have not ceased to exist; in fact, new groups have developed in response to attacks against women activists.

To counter this overt opposition, women resorted to unconventional means of activism in public and in cyberspace. "Another feminist movement which sprang after January 25, was the Baheya ya Misr movement which, in line with the Women for Democracy movement, calls itself 'a movement that is open for all spectrums of Egyptian society, seeking to mobilize widespread support for the promotion of women's rights within the confines of citizenship rights'". This movement developed in early March 2012, before the commemoration of International Women's Day on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March. A few young women activists networked to insist on gender equality and the right of women to demonstrate on Egyptian streets. One of the first campaigns this movement conducted was the Women Graffiti campaign, which shows women's rights through graffiti of famous Egyptian women on the walls of downtown Cairo.

Older women's organizations, which have been very active during the 1990s also changed their course. They called for networking to advance more women's rights and to recognize women's movements among the rest of national protest movements. For instance, after the January 25<sup>th</sup> uprisings, women's organizations developed a new front: the Coalition of Egyptian Feminist Organizations. It pressed for many issues including the inclusion of women in Parliament and in the Constitutional Committee as a part of a front for the development of a civil and democratic nation.

## Conclusion

This essay points to three main historical and political characteristics of women's organizations in Egypt. The first is a link to nationalist movements. Egyptian feminist movements initially developed through an alignment with the anti-colonialist movement that started with the Wafd Party in the early Twentieth Century. The second characteristic is an alignment with the authoritarian state structure to attain women's rights in the public and private sphere. Numerous women's NGOs were established and later operated under state authoritarianism. The third characteristic is the development of a newly emerging feminist movement that merged with political movements; for the first time it positioned itself against authoritarian power structures in the Egyptian political system. Whether or not the stance will be able to change the dynamics of authoritarian and patriarchal politics in the long run remains to be seen. Nonetheless, as Hoda Badran puts it, men's nationalism seems to have a patriarchal character, because when nationalist pressure finally starts to reap benefits, women's political rights and the matter of their equality with men is highly ignored.

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