

Feminism and the Post-‘Arab Spring’

Written by Bronwyn Winter

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BRONWYN WINTER, OCT 21 2013

The first thing one should say at the outset about the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ is that the name itself is disliked in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and not used there. It was a term coined in the West—whether in France or the US is not clear—by analogy with the ‘European Spring’ of 1848 when a wave of revolutionary uprisings spread across a number of European countries, and in France resulted in the creation of the short-lived Second Republic (1848-51). Different terms are used in different countries. For example, in Tunisia, where the trigger event occurred (self-immolation by street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi on December 17, 2010), the term Sidi-Bouazid revolution was widely used at first. So, in this article, I will talk about Arab-world upheavals.

The second thing one should say at the outset about the Arab-world upheavals is that the revolutions are on-going. As African-American lesbian feminist poet Pat Parker told us many decades ago, revolutions are neither neat nor pretty and they certainly are not quick (Parker 1981). This observation may seem self-evident but it is essential to recall it here within the context of a feminist discussion of events. As we have seen, it is neither the ouster of Ben Ali in Tunisia nor that of Mubarak in Egypt, both of which happened very quickly after the beginning of the upheavals (January 14 and February 11, 2011, respectively), nor the organisation of elections in these two ‘leading sites’ of the uprisings within 12 and 18 months respectively, that can be said to have completed the revolutionary process—far from it. When one considers the outcomes for women, these doubts as to the completeness or success of the revolutions—even partial or in development—are amplified.

Women’s Role in the Arab Uprisings

In all countries directly affected by the upheavals, from Libya to Yemen to Syria, there has yet to be any conclusive outcome to the revolutions. This is most evident, of course, in countries that have descended into armed conflict, such as Libya or now Syria, where the humanitarian crisis is extreme, or are suffering the fallout from muscular backlash from the former power machine, as in the case of the army-backed coup d’état in Egypt. The latter is reminiscent of the ruling, army-backed National Liberation Front’s cancellation of elections in Algeria in 1992, which the Islamist party Islamic Salvation Front was poised to win, leading to a decade of civil war. One can only hope that Egypt’s political crisis will be resolved more quickly and with fewer deaths than in Algeria, where up to 200,000 lives were lost (although estimates vary significantly). But for feminists, the Islamist parties who lost out to the army in both Algeria and more recently in Egypt did not have the democratic legitimacy that they claimed and that has been portrayed as such in the international media. Egyptian feminist historian Hoda Elsadda, head, at the time of this writing, of the Freedom and Rights committee in the Egyptian Constituent Assembly, comments that even if they are “writing a constitution while there are people clashing on the street and dying” this Assembly is “more expressive of the Egyptian people than the previous assembly (in 2012), which had been dubbed “elected”” (Elsadda 2013).

Even if, according to a commentator writing in The New York Times in May 2013, Yemen for one has been ‘making strides’ in its transition to democracy (MacFarquhar 2013), the situation of women in Yemen—as elsewhere in the countries affected by the upheavals—remains a cause for grave concern (Human Rights Watch 2013). Similarly, in Egypt, “the regime did not change [for women] after the [25 January] Revolution. Nothing has changed; there is only a blocked door that we are pushing against for three years now” (Elsadda 2013). Moreover, there are indications in many countries that women’s situation is backsliding rather than improving. Yet, women have been celebrated in international media as being at the forefront of the uprisings since their start, notably in Egypt and Tunisia. How, then,

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can such disastrous outcomes be explained?

To understand Arab women's role in the uprisings, it is important to stress that those countries in which women have been politically the most visible and vocal—notwithstanding often violent and sexualized backlash against them—are countries with already-existing and often well-established feminist movements and other rights organizations (trade unions, human rights organizations and so on), as well as access to transnational networks (Sorbera 2013). Those networks include women elsewhere in the Arab world and in diaspora in Europe and North America, and related solidarity networks (such as in France and Italy for Tunisian and Egyptian women).

Although women's movements have, historically, had varying degrees of success in ensuring government attention to women's rights in different contexts, they have nonetheless been a significant part of the pre-upheaval scenario in all countries, whether we are talking about Tunisia, which has the Arab and indeed Muslim world's most progressive personal status law (1957, amended in 1983), and is historically one of the Arab world's most secularized countries, or Bahrain, which despite its higher standing on the UN Human Development Index, only granted suffrage to women in 2002, and where developments in rights continue to be heavily influenced by both Sunni and Shia Islamic politics (Karolak 2012). Even in countries not considered main players in the uprisings, such as Morocco, there have been associated social upheavals in which women have been active; here again, their activity presents both continuity and discontinuity with existing feminist formations, in terms of themes and types of activism (Salime 2012). That is, younger women in the Arab-upheaval countries who have chosen other and often more individual means of intervention, in particular facilitated by online fora (such as blogging, web-based literary production or social network activism), do not always identify with established feminist groups, but they have nonetheless grown up in an environment where such activism is part of the political landscape, and socio-political history. Women from intellectual elites are more easily visible and audible, but this does not mean that poorer women or rural women have not been involved in the uprisings: their participation has, on the contrary, been significant. As with all revolutions in contemporary history, however, the urban intelligentsia has occupied the largest discursive space.

Women Before and After the Uprisings

At the same time, the existing authoritarian regimes against which women and men alike were protesting have also been factors in the backlash against women. Even though there are significant differences from one country to another (monarchy versus republic, countries with relatively high overall human development such as Bahrain versus those at the other end of the scale such as Yemen), the following aspects are relatively common factors : freedom of speech and the press was severely curtailed ; corruption was rife and dissidents were jailed, killed, tortured or exiled (or a combination of the above) ; and the worldwide economic recession was exacerbating existing socioeconomic inequalities that the regimes were doing little or nothing to address. In many but not all cases, the regimes were backed by a strong and politically active army. In all cases, male violence against women, perpetrated by both state and non-state actors in both public and private spheres, whether in the name of religion, tradition or antifeminist backlash, was, and remains, endemic.

None of these pre-uprising factors have disappeared, and it would be naive to assume that they would, in the short space of less than three years. Through a mixture of incompetence, lack of sufficient means and lack of political will, new regimes have done little or nothing to address issue of inequality, corruption or violence against women (or indeed against other dissidents). On the contrary, the situation for women is becoming more precarious, both politically, such as through attempts to introduce sharia law, and in the day-to-day (Eltahawy 2012, Chaieb 2013, Moghadam n.d.).

The precariousness of women's situation is exacerbated by the rise of Islamist movements, which also operate transnationally. In countries in which there has been a transition to a new regime (even temporarily, as in the case of Egypt), the balance of political power has lain in the hands of Islamist parties, which are also dominating or seeking to dominate the opposition in transitional situations (whether relatively peaceful, as in Yemen, or violent, as in Syria). Yet these movements have not systematically been at the origin of the protest, often appropriating it from the top rather than generating it from the grassroots. (This is the case, for example, in Tunisia.) In many cases, including that of Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen, the situation is further complicated by factionalization within the Islamist parties, with

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extreme factions giving covert support to violent salafist agitators. In virtually all cases, Islamist parties have had the overt political and sometimes financial support of the West and covert financial support from the Gulf (Saudi Arabia and Qatar in particular). In the case of Syria, the West has been less eager to weigh in to the conflict for fear of seeing another Islamist regime emerge in the region, but Western non-intervention has also meant that the civil conflict in Syria has escalated with catastrophic humanitarian consequences.

At the time of this writing, Tunisia and Morocco are the only ‘post-upheaval’ countries in which the majority Islamist party has been able to rule in relative peace—notwithstanding salafist violence including many death threats against intellectuals and feminists that have been particularly troubling in Tunisia. Salafist activism has also been present for some time in Morocco : Moroccan salafist leaders, for example, outspokenly condemned the 2012 French ‘crusade’ in Mali (Bennani 2013). In Tunisia, the relative peace has been in part because of strong civil society networks and the absence of a strong army that maintains its pre-revolution political power, the latter being contrary to the case of Syria or Egypt. In Morocco, reformist monarch Mohamed VI had successively introduced reforms including a 2006 reform of the family code and a 2011 revision of the Constitution increasing civil and women’s rights, in the poorest and most feudal country in the Maghreb. Moreover, the Moroccan Justice and Development Party, which won the majority of seats in the 2011 elections and has now formed a coalition government (announced October 10, 2013), had been a considerable, and peaceful, oppositional force for some years.

Yet commentators observe the same sorts of problems in both countries: palpable socio-economic degradation, worsening infrastructure and dysfunctional political institutions and legal systems (McManus 2012, Mullin and Patel 2013). Again, women have been active in the coalition of political parties, intellectuals and civil society organizations that have pushed for the three-party ‘Troika’ coalition’s resignation and the temporary installation of a technocrat government to maintain order and a minimum of functionality while the new Constitution is finalized. At the time of this writing, the Troika has ostensibly bowed to pressure from the U.S. to resign but negotiations are dragging and the official resignation is yet to occur.

There has also been international media and activist intervention in post-Arab-upheaval MENA countries in ways that are not always productive. The ‘jihad for sex’ in which impressionable young Tunisian women have supposedly gone to Syria to offer themselves to Islamist fighters, is suspected of being a hoax, although it has met with considerable credence including among Tunisian feminists. Also problematic has been the intervention of Femen, and former Tunisian Femen member Amina Sboui. Sboui had caused controversy, and incurred three months’ imprisonment, by publishing topless photographs of herself on her Facebook page. She resigned from Femen in August 2013, citing Femen’s ‘Islamophobia’ and lack of financial transparency (Bonal 2013). Other Tunisian feminists and left activists have commented that Femen’s, and Amina’s, actions have not been productive for local feminist campaigns as they are unrelated to any political project, and that more broadly, Femen has not been sensitive to the local context (personal communications, Tunis, September 2013).

At the same time, the political left has not necessarily been women’s friend, and feminists have a hard time either acceding to politically important roles or being taken seriously when they do. Even where political parity measures have been introduced, in countries such as Morocco and Tunisia, they have not necessarily resulted in significantly increased numbers of women in parliament (although Morocco has more women in cabinet than previously) and certainly not in increased numbers of feminists.

Women in MENA are thus left caught between masculinist politics of the left, that has yet to leave its Ben Ali or Mubarak-era politics fully behind, and the new Islamist international that is politicising religion in ways that divorce it from the day-to-day cultural understandings and practices of citizens. Replacement of one type of authoritarian state by another is very far from a feminist revolution. The transformation heralded by the 2011 uprisings thus still remains, for women—and indeed for many of their male fellow citizens—a very long way off indeed.

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