

## CHAPTER 19

# Women and the Egyptian Revolution: A Dream Deferred?

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### INTRODUCTION

The events that took place in Egypt between January 25 and February 11, 2011, arrested the world's attention. All eyes were on Tahrir Square, at the center of Cairo, witnessing the power of nonviolent civil resistance to overthrow one of the most entrenched dictators in the world. The message was unified, "Mubarak Out," and the tactics were myriad: demonstrations, marches, acts of civil disobedience, political satire, creative messaging, labor strikes, and more. In just 18 days of action, these protests led to the announcement by Vice President Omar Suleiman that President Hosni Mubarak would step down, ushering in an era of excitement and uncertainty. What has occurred since that historic day has been uncharted territory for Egyptians, who had been under Mubarak's rule for more than 30 years.

The success of the movement, and its unprecedented brevity, were due to many factors, including a dedication to nonviolent action, unity of vision, and the inclusion and participation of a large cross-section of society. This final aspect, the wide range of participants, was key: nonviolent civil resistance movements need all the bodies they can get, and therefore, extensive inclusion is vital. In Egypt, women became involved in all aspects of the movement—from background planning to front-of-the-line protesting—providing the necessary people power to fuel the overthrow of Mubarak. The ways in which men and women participated in the protests reflected gendered dynamics of Egyptian society, from the nationalist

rhetoric that fueled the protests, to the online and physical spaces in which they operated, to the nonviolent strategic tactics they employed.

In the aftermath of the revolutions, though, we have observed a reversion to an atmosphere of repression, in which activist women are shouted down and shut out of positions of power. What did women actually achieve through their participation, and how can they attain their goals of expanded political and public inclusion? While the answer is still unclear, in order to be more involved in post-Mubarak Egypt, women must continue to speak up and speak out to ensure that their voices are not silenced by men.

### **WOMEN, NONVIOLENT ACTION, AND THE CYCLE OF MARGINALIZATION**

Nonviolent action, or civil resistance, is a civilian-based method of waging asymmetric conflict. It has been used in struggles for human rights, democracy, self-rule, social justice, anticorruption, and the overthrow of dictatorships in countries all over the world and throughout history. Using “nonviolent weapons” such as boycotts, strikes, protests, petitions, and sit-ins, nonviolent movements often apply traditional military strategic thinking, tactical diversity and sequencing, and creativity to build pressure against their opponents and force them to make concessions or acquiesce. Nonviolent movements that succeed in achieving their objectives tend to involve the effective application of three principles: unity, planning, and nonviolent discipline (Chenoweth, 2008). Without these components, it may be difficult for a movement to understand its opponents, develop strategies that weaken its opponents’ pillars of support, and recruit participants to join the struggle.

Women’s participation is essential to any successful nonviolent movement. Because civil resistance relies quite literally on “people power,” women’s active and authentic participation will be an essential strategic element. Without mass mobilization, both men’s and women’s know-how, and networks working together to undermine the opponent, nonviolent movements will fail to shake powerful regimes. Revolutionary leaders, consequently, rely on and seek out the participation of women, who account for half of the population and often play critical roles both as supporters and key players in revolutions (Henderson and Jeydel, 2007).

In some cases women are able to use specific tactics unavailable to men because of their particular roles in society: as mothers, daughters, and sisters, and symbolically as “gatekeepers” of peace and as the embodiment of the nation. “Women, in many societies, are not seen as a threat. They are often viewed as complacent, apolitical, and solely concerned with their children and home. These assumptions allow them a certain cover, and even provide them with hidden venues in which they can organize” (Henderson and Jeydel, 2007, p. 73).

During the height of military dictatorship in Argentina, mothers of “the disappeared”—political activists and intellectuals abducted, arrested, and often killed by the regime—came together for weekly marches in the Plaza de Mayo seeking to be reunited with their missing children. Organized through religious and social groups, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo showed up every week wearing white scarves embroidered with the names of their children, employing their respected societal role as protective mothers strategically. Despite the extreme level of repression in Argentina at the time, mothers, and later grandmothers, were able to march in public without being attacked by police and security forces. In Liberia women across religious groups united to fight for peace, issuing petitions and protests outside of formal peace talks. The women threatened to disrobe in front of negotiators, which is culturally considered extremely shameful, if they failed to come to a peace agreement. In Serbia, after careful calculation of an anticipated response by the Serbian forces under Milosevic, the student-led nonviolent movement OTPOR placed women carrying roses at the front lines of their protests to protect protestors from arrest or abuse by the police and security forces.

In addition to employing a variety of methods that play on traditional and perceived women’s roles in society, women’s movements throughout history and across the globe have been largely nonviolent and thus have contributed greatly to the canon of nonviolent action. Because women have historically been excluded from formal political structures, they have a tendency to utilize nontraditional forms of political organizing and action, including shrouding political dissent under the notion of “social justice” in order to create space to voice their demands and address their concerns. Some women’s movements have utilized the rhetoric of democracy and human rights strategically: to increase the participation of popular masses who may not otherwise support a movement perceived to be dedicated solely to women’s issues. The assumption is that ultimately democratic gains will result in women’s rights. But many feminists are critical of this approach and argue that women’s movements ought to put their issues at the forefront of their activism rather than sidelining their own interests for the sake of more palatable goals.

In Egypt, women were not mobilized around women’s issues but rather fought side by side with men as citizens to oust Mubarak and “were instrumental not just in protests but in much of the nitty-gritty organisation that turned Tahrir Square from a moment into a movement” (Rice et al, 2010). All too often the contributions of women to national democratic movements rarely translate into an equal share in the core decision-making of transitional regimes (Rice et al., 2010). Carla Power (2011) writes, “Women are good for revolutions, but historically revolutions haven’t been so good for women,” alluding to the marginalization women often face after a revolution succeeds and power changes hands. Capitalizing on the

participation of women, “revolutionary leaders are adept at promising rewards for women in return for their support,” explain Henderson and Jeydel (2007, p. 73), “but they are much less successful in (and committed to) working to ensure that these benefits actually materialize under the new order.”

In the post-revolution transition period, issues such as women’s rights, equal political representation, and family law are relegated to the feminine sphere and therefore subordinated to more important (i.e., masculine) causes, such as national self-determination or democratic governance, for which the revolution fought (Henderson and Jeydel, 2007). What results is a cycle of post-revolution marginalization in which women are mobilized to join revolutionary causes, galvanized by rhetoric of increased rights and political participation both as women and as citizens, and subsequently pushed out of the new political space that was presumably created on their behalf.

Although the motivations and mobilization of Egyptian women in the January 25 movement were not explicitly shaped by expectations of increased women’s rights under a new regime, the movement’s focus on democratization and freedom implied that women, especially those taking part in the protests, should enjoy the fruits of the new democratic system as equal citizens of Egypt. Unfortunately, despite Egypt’s remarkable success in its nonviolent overthrow of Mubarak, the course of the Egyptian revolution and its aftermath are proving to align all too closely with the expected cycle of post-revolution marginalization of women. As the dust settles in Egypt, women find themselves excluded from power and decision making in the transitional period and even targeted as women for their participation in the movement during the 18 days.

### REVOLUTIONARY REVERBERATIONS: EGYPT’S GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

The Egyptian case was not the first such successful overthrow of an autocratic leader in the wave of nonviolent pro-democracy movements sweeping the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), which scholars are now calling the “Arab Spring.” However, by virtue of Egypt’s geopolitical importance and the revolution’s profound influence on other regional youth and democracy movements, the Egyptian case carries unique implications for regional politics, the field of nonviolent civil resistance, and the future of women’s political space in Arab societies.

With 83 million people, or 22 percent of the overall population of the Middle East region, Egypt is the most populous Arab country and is geopolitically situated at the center of the region, influencing the regional cultural, economic, and political climate (Central Intelligence Agency, 2009). As incumbent president for 30 years, Mubarak’s regime represented the

prototypical entrenched Arab dictatorship: any opposition was marginalized or persecuted, and the space for political decision making was tightly secured in the hands of elites and Mubarak's inner circle (Singerman, 2004). Additionally, Mubarak enjoyed the strong support of the United States. Having received over \$60 billion in military and economic aid since the Israel-Egypt peace treaty at Camp David in 1978, Mubarak's Egypt was "the linchpin of Pax Americana" in the region (America's Lieutenant, 2010). Thus, beyond domestic political implications, the unlikely nonviolent overthrow of Mubarak, a superpowers-backed ruler, entails a recalculation of American foreign policy and a critical evaluation of America's support for autocratic regimes versus popular democracy movements. In the midst of the protests, Egyptian journalist Mona Eltahawy (2011) explained,

Mubarak is our Berlin Wall. When Tunisia had its revolution and toppled Ben Ali, everyone thought, "Beautiful little Tunisia, you're so brave. But it's never going to happen anywhere else." Now it's happening in the traditional leader of the Arab world. . . . Every Arab leader is watching right now in terror, and every Arab citizen is elated and cheering Egypt on, because they know the significance of this.

Egypt's revolution achieved the virtually unimaginable—deposing one of the region's most durable dictators in a matter of days through nonviolent strategic action. Even before the Tunisian revolution there had been numerous cases of civil society groups in the MENA region successfully using nonviolent strategies to secure social and political gains. However, the barrage of media coverage and international attention garnered by the Egyptian case gave nonviolent strategic action a new place of prominence in international politics and the Arab world. Egypt's success has since inspired other movements throughout the region as "the governed have discovered that they can, if necessary, take back their consent to be governed and thereby compel regime change" (Freeman, 2011). As a result of Egypt's revolution, nonviolent strategic action has emerged as a key tool for Arab civil society.

Nonviolent strategic action, and particularly its gendered uses in the Egyptian revolution, also has significant implications for women as political players in a region in which women are typically marginalized politically and face significant socioeconomic inequalities. A 2010 Freedom House report finds that progress on women's rights and empowerment in MENA has been "stymied by the lack of democratic institutions, an independent judiciary, and freedoms of association and assembly" (Kelly, 2010). The Egyptian revolution not only created a political opening for citizens and a possibility to reshape new democratic institutions, but also reacquainted Egyptian women, on a mass scale, with a strategic tool—nonviolent action—by which to potentially seek and secure rights and

equality in the coming period of democratic transition to power. Whether these tools and skills will translate into improved conditions for women in a new MENA, however, remains to be seen.

### WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS IN EGYPT: A BRIEF HISTORY

As women have a long history of activism in Egypt, their involvement in the January 25 movement was hardly unprecedented. Elite women had established a political culture in Egypt by the late 19th century, and were actively involved in the struggle for Egyptian independence. During the 1919 national revolution, women participated in letter writing campaigns, petitions, strikes, marches, and demonstrations against the British (Nadje, 2000). Women's demands in these protests were nationalist, not specifically feminist, in nature. However, Egyptian women's rights movements emerged as part of, or perhaps in reaction to, the nation building process that followed (Baron, 2007).

Huda Sha'arawi and the Egyptian Feminist Union led the first phase of feminist activism in Egypt (Baron, 2007). During the postcolonial period, the women's movement was elitist and largely welfare oriented (Nadje, 2000). The second phase, during the 1940s and 1950s, was headed by Doria Shafik and the Bint El Nil (Daughters of the Nile) group; it revolved around political rights, equal pay, education and literacy campaigns, and health and social service programs (Nadje, 2000).

Women also played an active role in the 1952 independence movement; however, nationalist priorities soon overtook the political sphere, and women's groups and issues were relegated to the periphery. Some have described the appropriation of women's issues by the state that ensued as "state feminism" (Nadje, 2000). The 1956 constitution declared all Egyptians equal under the law, regardless of gender, origin, or ideology, and the state granted women the right to vote and to run for political office. However, discriminatory Personal Status laws were maintained (Nadje, 2000). Under President Anwar Sadat, due largely to the insistence of his wife, Jehan Sadat, the Personal Status Law of 1979 granted women legal rights in marriage, polygamy, divorce, and child custody (Nadje, 2000). Nonetheless, the state did not have a comprehensive program to guarantee women's rights, nor did women have any autonomous representative groups of their own.

Independent women's activism did not officially resurface until 1985, when President Mubarak amended the Personal Status Law, taking away many of the rights women had gained in the past (Nadje, 2000). The late 1980s and 1990s saw the emergence of a number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) devoted to women's issues, leading to the "NGOization of the movement" (Tadros, 2008). The women's movement splintered during this period, as differences among the groups were underlined.



For example, prominent women's rights activist Nawal al-Sa'dawi transformed the dialogue on women by taking on the sensitive issues of women's reproductive rights and sexual violence against women, facing opposition from women and men alike.

Women still face major economic, political, and religious obstacles to advancement in Egypt. These include limited employment opportunities, few positions in parliament, and the reinforcement of traditional gender roles due to a rise in religious conservatism. While they continue to engage in activism, participating in such forms of protest as strikes and sit-ins, women have been noticeably less active in explicitly feminist causes. The marginalization of feminist activism may be linked to the emergence of state feminism with semigovernmental institutions such as the National Council for Women (NCW), established in 2000 by Suzanne Mubarak, the wife of the former president. NCW has co-opted female activists, claiming to act as a representative voice for Egyptian women (Tadros, 2008), though it faces significant opposition from women's groups who view it as a tool of the state and have called for its immediate disbanding (Coalition of Women's NGOs in Egypt, 2011). However, the different forms of women's activism have yet to come together in a unified movement, which will be essential to the realization of women's goals in Egypt moving forward.

## GENDERING NATIONALISM

The history of Egyptian feminism is rooted in the identity of the state itself, which at its core is "imagined as a woman" (Baron, 2007). The word for Egypt in Arabic, *Misr*, is gendered female, and the nation is commonly referred to as Umm al-Duniya, or "Mother of the World." Historically, the nation was linked to the concepts of fertility, morality, and honor, all of which were associated with the female domain, as women were charged with the biological and cultural reproduction of the nation (Baron, 2007). There seems to be an inherent contradiction in the centrality of women in the imagery of the nation during nationalist movements and the exclusion of women from the political sphere once nationalist objectives have been achieved.

According to Beth Baron, women were also used as "subjects and symbols around which to rally male support" (Nadje, 2000). She said, "By depicting the nation as a woman, nationalists hoped to stimulate love for the nation and draw male youth to the cause. . . . The man was the actor, the speaker, the lover; the woman was acted upon, the listener, the beloved" (Nadje, 2000). Twenty-six-year-old Asmaa Mahfouz, called the "bravest girl in Egypt" (Beenish, 2011), played on this sentiment in the video call she made to fellow Egyptians, which many say sparked the revolution. Her language was explicitly gendered as she called upon the masculinity, honor, and dignity of Egyptian men by urging them to come to Tahrir

Square to play the role of both protestor and protector of the women and girls in the demonstrations. She said, "If you have any honor and dignity as a man, come and protect me and other girls in the protest" (Meet Asmaa Mahfouz, 2011). Yet while Mahfouz's speech portrays women as the weaker sex, vulnerable in the face of all-male security forces and in need of protection, she simultaneously exploits this gender stereotype to catalyze the movement.

Nationalists also employed familial metaphors in their rhetoric for political purposes. The nation was portrayed as "one family," with young men as its "sons" and young women as its "daughters" (Baron, 2007). This rhetoric was intended to engender among citizens of the nation the same sense of loyalty and kinship felt among members of a family. The notion of family honor, which hinges on the conduct of its women, was equated with national honor. The rape of Egyptian village women by British soldiers in 1919 was described as the rape of the nation. As British occupation was considered an insult to national honor, it was incumbent upon Egyptians to struggle to protect "faith, honour, and the homeland" (Baron, 2007).

During the January 25 revolution, President Hosni Mubarak used familial rhetoric to inspire loyalty and obedience among the citizens of Egypt. In his final presidential speech to the nation on February 10, 2011, he began, "I am addressing all of you from the heart, a speech from the father to his sons and daughters" (Hosni Mubarak's Speech, 2011). His rhetoric throughout the 18 days was one of a stern father reprimanding his children, threatening to punish those who committed wrongdoing.

## WOMEN'S PRE-REVOLUTION STATUS IN EGYPT

Women in Egypt are considered to be nurturers, mothers, and upholders of national and familial honor and morality. In private life this role is respected and encouraged. In public, though, women's lives are fraught with discrimination and harassment. Women are underrepresented in the political sphere and discriminated against in the law. Although Egypt became a signatory in 1981 to the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which ensures women equal access to and enjoyment of political, economic, social, cultural, and civil rights, its enactment has not been actualized. Instead, women face significant challenges in all of these spheres and struggle to maintain what limited rights they have.

In 2010, the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Report placed Egypt at 125 out of 136 countries in terms of the gap between women and men. This ranking, based on economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment, places Egypt only above such repressive regimes as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and