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Gender and Tahrir Square: Contesting the State and Imagining a New Nation

Ahmed Kadry

This article argues that the concepts of 'State' and 'Nation' should be treated as separate from one another, hence more than one image of the nation is possible at one given time. During the early days of the January 2011 Egyptian revolution, a contestation emerged between Mubarak's *state* and the protesters in Tahrir Square over the image and notion of the Egyptian *nation*. Both the state and the protesters attempted to exclude one another from their respective discourse of the Egyptian nation. While reflecting back on a number of women's voices who joined the early days of the Tahrir Square protests and using qualitative fieldwork interviews with Cairo-based feminist and political activists, this article points to the complexity of a newly forged image of Egyptian nationhood. In Tahrir Square, this image appeared to be largely framed within gendered criteria where notions of manhood and hyper visible gender equality were intrinsically linked to the broader objective of removing Mubarak and his regime. This raises the question of whether new gender paradigms of equality can continue to exist beyond Tahrir Square's imagination of a 'new' nation.

Keywords: Egyptian revolution, gender, Tahrir Square, nation, state

Introduction: Separating the State and the Nation

Extensive research and analysis has been carried out on the history of women's socio-political rights activism in Egypt in the twentieth century (for example, Badran, 1995 & 2009; Baron, 2005; Bier, 2011; Botman, 1999; Hatem, 1992 & 2002). Much of this research has centered on the impact that the 1919 and 1952 Egyptian revolutions had on the lives of Egyptian women, such as the rise in the number of government programmes for Egyptian women to integrate them into the formal economy. This was part of Gamal Abdel Nasser's economic nation-building programme during his presidency (Hatem, 1992, p. 231). In the case of the 2011 Egyptian revolution and its aftermath, the call for advancing women's rights by gender activists has not limited itself to equal access to education and employment, but has extended to other spheres such as equal political participation in post-Mubarak governments and parliaments.

Simultaneously, other sides to gender inequality have sought to be confronted such as attitudes towards discussing and addressing sexual harassment and violence against women. Consequently, women's rights advocacy is not limited to concrete targets (for example the number of women's seats in parliament) but includes realms that are often difficult to gauge and track down.

The 1919 and 1952 revolutions remain useful as comparative models for reflecting on the 2011 revolution because while they greatly differed in scope and outcomes, the two earlier revolutions illustrate the political dynamics addressed by opposition groups and the state about the role of Egyptian women in public life. However, what is also clear is that the nature in which the 'woman's question' was addressed by political and state actors was intrinsically linked to their political-nationalist agendas. For example, Laura Bier notes about the 1919 revolution that "Egyptian womanhood became the terrain on which British colonial officials and an emerging nationalist bourgeoisie contested Egyptian moral and political authority for self-rule" (2011, p. 27). Moreover, Selma Botman observes that when addressing the role of Egyptian women in society, Nasser and the Free Officers' movement, which overthrew the monarchy in July 1952, did not show a desire in granting women civil rights but saw women's role "as a means of achieving economic modernization and nation building" (1999, p. 52). Consequently, a contestation centered on the 'woman's question' appears in both revolutions to be between the state and opposition forces, and framed around furthering political objectives in an attempt to monopolise the *meaning* of Egyptian nationhood.

In Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak's seminal work *Who Sings the Nation-State?*, they open up an array of questions on the concepts of the state and nationhood, as well as critiquing how and why people are included and excluded from a nation-

state. They underscore that the terms 'state' and 'nation' are not synonymous, but rather can intersect and diverge at the same time. They further argue that "the state signifies the legal and institutional structures that delimit a certain territory" (2010, p. 3). However, they add: "[S]ince the state can be precisely what expels and suspends modes of legal protection and obligation, the state can put us in, some of us, in quite a state. It can signify the source of non-belonging, even produce that non-belonging as a quasi-permanent state" (Ibid., p. 4). The medium through which a state can include and exclude is crucial to our understanding of what is meant by the term nation, and how this concept is used. Butler and Spivak go on to say: "[T]he state binds in the name of the nation, conjuring up a certain version of the nation forcibly, if not powerfully, [and] it also unbinds, releases, expels, and banishes" (Ibid., p. 5). This concept of the nation, which Butler and Spivak discuss here as a tool used by a state to include and exclude, is done through a set of criteria that define the state's image of the nation. As a result, the concept of the nation appears homogenous on the surface and unwelcoming to anyone who does not fulfill the state's criteria of this image. More importantly, exclusion from the nation still occurs within the confines and mechanisms of the state, such as through its prison system.

This separation of the concepts of the state and nation offers a critical lens to view and understand how the January 2011 Egyptian revolution was contested, and how concepts of gender such as manhood and womanhood were evoked as a criteria by political actors to define who is included and excluded in their respective versions of the nation. Moreover, as will be shown later, since successive Egyptian governments as well as the various political opposition groups in the post-Mubarak era have tended to gender, or have used gender, to further their political objectives,

some women's rights groups and independent activists have felt the need to use an apolitical discourse in their work, which has been challenging.

Extracts from a total of thirty qualitative interviews that were conducted between September 2013 and March 2014 are used in this article to further this analysis. Interviews were conducted with Cairo-based women's rights NGOs, unregistered women's rights groups that are mostly self-funded, as well as independent activists who have a feminist or women's rights agenda. As a result of being based in Cairo, their chosen protest location was predominantly Tahrir Square. All of these groups and individuals do not frame their women's rights advocacy within any religious framework, while they may personally hold religious beliefs and practices.

Gendering Political Objectives

Protesters in Tahrir Square and across the country were not just successful in mobilising in mass numbers, but attempted to challenge the state's previously unquestioned authority to define what is the *nation*. For example, in the lead up to the protests on 25 January 2011, Asmaa Mahfouz, a leading figure in the revolutionary 6 April group, posted a video of herself stating: "Show your honour and manhood and come down to Tahrir on 25 January. If not, then you are a traitor to the nation, like the police and the president are traitors" (2011). It is thus evident from this extract that Mahfouz's language immediately appropriates a discourse which lays a claim to legitimacy to define and lay out the criteria on what it means to be a part of the nation, and what, or rather, who, is a traitor to the nation. In Mahfouz's case, her understanding of the nation goes hand in hand with her politics, whereby those who

join in the protests against Mubarak are part of the nation, and those who do not, join Mubarak outside the realms of nation.

Furthermore, in the video, Mahfouz speaks of concepts of dignity and social justice, and just like the above extract, evokes concepts of gender. Throughout the video, she addresses her audience with masculine nouns. Thus, it is within the realms of gendering her politics and bedding gender elements within what she defines as the nation, that Mahfouz's video is perhaps most compelling in understanding how she challenges the *state* in defining the nation and challenges Egyptians, particularly men, to either join her or else face exclusion from her version of the nation. She specifically evokes notions of honour and manhood in direct association with her planned protest against Mubarak. Consequently, those who do not join in these protests will have their honour and manhood challenged by Mahfouz, and her criteria for who should be included and excluded within the nation are based upon gender boundaries. During the video, she also ignores any presupposed notions of Egyptian gender performativity (Ghannam, 2013, p. 31). She proudly states: "People, have shame. I posted that I, a girl, am going down to Tahrir Square and I will stand alone, and I'll hold a banner and perhaps some people will show some honour. I even wrote down my phone number so maybe people will come down with me, but no one came except three guys" (2011). By stating that she is going to a public place like Tahrir Square on her own, coupled with the fact that she offered her telephone number freely to the public, she directly challenges normative expectations about her as an Egyptian woman. In this way, she begins to not only set out, but embody, her own image of the nation through new depictions of a woman's behaviour.

This new arena that Mahfouz creates for herself as a woman, as well as in the way she challenges men, goes hand in hand with the new politics she is trying to

outline for the nation. Once the protests broke out on 25 January, the presence and

participation of women in Tahrir Square was something that the protesters themselves

were keen to make visible to local and international media. For example, Sarah W.,

who works for two prominent women's rights NGOs in Cairo and who protested in

Tahrir Square in an independent capacity, notes:

> I remember when the cameras were there and journalists would be asking
> questions, and there would be men telling women to be visible, saying 'come
> to the front with your hair and stuff'. And it wasn't just the men. We as
> women ourselves would put ourselves on display every time we were
> attacked as *Ikhwan* (Muslim Brotherhood) by saying 'look at me, I'm
> obviously not a thug or *Ikhwan*' (Kadry, 2013c).

This suggests that the protesters used the presence of women to counter any

attempts by Mubarak's state to delegitimise their presence as either thugs or members

of the Muslim Brotherhood, who had been demonised since the 1950s (Hopwood,

1991, p. 39). Interestingly, it leaves open the question of what a woman who is

'obviously not *Ikhwan*' looks like, as well as problematising this attempt by the

protesters to present a certain type of woman as positive and an '*Ikhwan* looking'

woman as negative. In other words, it appears that not only were the protesters trying

to forge a new image of the nation separate from that which had been propagated by

the state, but they were also recycling stigmas propagated by the state when referring

to the Muslim Brotherhood. However, what is clear is that as the protesters presented

themselves as the harmonious nation based on religious, gender, and social class

equality (El Saʻdawi), they simultaneously placed Mubarak and his state outside this

new frame of nationhood, or as traitors to the nation as Mahfouz stated.

Through Mahfouz's video, we get a glimpse of gender and political objectives

being amalgamated. This is not to say that Mahfouz was advocating anything specific

on gender or women's rights, but her discourse on social justice and honour are

certainly gendered. It is no surprise, therefore, that reports of sexual harassment of women in Tahrir Square during the early protests were damaging to the reputation of the protest movement as a whole because it questioned the narrative of gender equality. Paul Amar argues that in response to this harmonious and peaceful image that the protesters were presenting, the Mubarak regime responded by trying to dispel it through counter measures. In light of the CNN's reporter Anderson Cooper being attacked and beaten by plain-clothed police officers belonging to the state, Amar notes that "journalists articulated a tentative new discourse in which brutality in Egypt, including sexualized brutality, was seen as an instrument of state terror deployed tactically by the police state" (2011, p. 301).

Consequently, not only had Mubarak fail to challenge the legitimacy of the protesters by dispelling their harmonious image, but he also placed the cause and blame for all brutality and gender disparity on his own state institutions. This in turn supports Mahfouz's discourse, where she links the concepts of dignity and honour to her political objective of ridding Egypt of Mubarak's regime, and Mubarak's attempts at brutality only legitimise her claims that to remove his regime was a broad social and political revolution.

However, where Mubarak was unsuccessful, the governments which have succeeded him have also gendered their political objectives. Specifically, with the case of the virginity tests conducted on female protesters in Tahrir Square by military doctors in March 2011 (Hafez, 2014, p. 173), the tests were not denied but in fact justified by the SCAF (Supreme Council of the Armed Forces), arguing that,

> [t]he girls who were detained were not like your daughter or mine. These were girls who had camped out in tents with male protesters in Tahrir Square, and we found in the tents Molotov cocktails and drugs. We didn't want them to say we had sexually assaulted or raped them, so we wanted to prove that

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they weren't virgins in the first place. None of them were [virgins] (Borkan, 2011).

As a result, just as Mahfouz had earlier claimed a new image and space for women in Tahrir Square and linked this newly found space to her wider objective of a new political regime, the military council which succeeded Mubarak also attempted to appropriate and alter the narrative of women in Tahrir Square for their own political objectives. In this case, the *state* attempted to exclude these women from the frame of Egyptian womanhood (as not being considered legitimate daughters), and in turn, exclude them from their image of the *nation* that matched their political discourse. What this highlights is that women, specifically their bodies, are a key component that forms a particular image of the nation that both the protesters and the state have tried to appropriate and customise to suit their own political agendas. This brings us back to the theoretical questions posed by Butler and Spivak, on whether a legitimate notion of the nation can exist when such notions are based upon the criteria of who speaks for the nation at a given time, or even simultaneously. As seen by both the protesters and the state, this is a fluid process that makes it impossible to homogenise any one image of the nation or any one image of Egyptian women.

New Gender Possibilities from Tahrir's 'New Nation'?

Even though the protesters in January and February 2011 attempted to carve out a new image of the nation in contestation to Mubarak's state, including the emphasis on gender equality, this leaves avenues for critique on whether new gender paradigms were in fact created in Tahrir Square and their sustainability beyond the Tahrir days and the fall of Mubarak (Elsadda, 2011, p.84). In the same video where Asmaa Mahfouz calls upon the protesters to join her whilst trying to establish a new space for

herself as a woman by ignoring gender taboos, such as giving out her mobile phone number to the public, she states: "If you have any honour and dignity as a man, come down, come and protect me, and other girls in the protests" (2011). This statement appears to stand in contradiction to Mahfouz's earlier notion of doing away with existing gender expectations. Mahfouz now asks men to protect women, much in the same way as Mubarak was most notably perceived as the father and protective figure of Egyptian women (Al-Ali, 2000, p. 45). This then implies that while Mahfouz is speaking of a new nation and aiming at breaking away with previous gender roles and expectations, gender depictions seem to have remained unchanged. What does this reveal about the possibility of gender equality, specifically women's rights, being advanced in the post-revolutionary period if the protesters themselves calling for revolution did not embody a change in their discourse from previous perceptions of gender roles and dynamics?

Sally Zohney, who is in her late twenties and works at a United Nations organisation in Cairo as a Youth Initiatives Associate, is a prime example. She is also actively involved in several other initiatives which aim to raise awareness about problems pertaining to women, such as domestic violence. Protesting against Mubarak in an independent capacity in January and February 2011 in Tahrir, she recalls:

> It was national and it was gender blind. I was not a woman again, I was a citizen. Finally! I was not a woman of 'Oh my god there's a woman!' which is not comforting. I'm not … I'm not an alien to the society. But for the 18 days I was like everyone, everyone was like everyone. And I know all these rosy words that we say 'the rich were like the poor and the Christian like the Muslim'… [but] a woman was like a man for real. For absolute real (Kadry, 2013b).

Zohney appears to support the popular narrative that Tahrir Square carved out a new space for gender equality and that this equality stemmed from the unitary desire of male and female protesters to remove Mubarak; what she refers to as 'national'. This builds on Mahfouz's call to protest in order to embody a new nation which excludes the state. Does this evocation of the nation, or new nation, facilitate a platform to alter gender expectations, or even promote gender equality, in the post-revolutionary period? On women's participation in uprisings against colonialism which evoked the concept of nationalism, Marnia Lazreg argues that the leap of faith that a revolution will naturally produce enhanced gender equality, falsely expects too much from a discourse based on national oppression beyond its primary objective of liberation from an oppressive government, and that it is natural that women, just like men, would want to be part of that process (1994, p. 118). In the case of Egypt in January 2011, this seems to resonate because while the protests may have visibly appeared as gender-equal and harmonious, neither the call to protest nor the protests themselves were related to progressing gender rights, even if the call to protest, as seen with Mahfouz, was gendered. In another example, Beth Baron remarks in her expansive study *Egypt as a Woman: Nationaism, Gender, and Politics* about the first feminist movement in Egypt in the early twentieth century, that in the protests which led to the 1919 revolution, "not all women nationalists were feminists" (2005, p. 9). This same point can be considered in 2011 where Mahfouz and other female protesters should not be assumed to be promoting a feminist discourse or paving the way for new gender roles or paradigms.

Butler and Spivak further explain: "[T]hose modes of national belonging designated by 'the nation' are thoroughly stipulative and criterial: one is not simply dropped from the nation; rather, one is found to be wanting" (2010, p. 31). While the

protesters occupying Tahrir Square were creating and embodying a new version of the nation, and in doing so, Butler and Spivak might argue, are excluding those from the nation who do not fulfil their criteria, it must also be considered that this new nation was not only excluding Mubarak and his regime, but excluding other Egyptians as well. For example, Engy Ghozlan who is a women's rights activist and co-founder of HarassMap in December 2010, an initiative which maps out where sexual harassment against women takes place on a daily basis in Egypt, notes about her experience in the Tahrir Square protests:

> I think people exaggerate. There is this fascination and Tahrir fetish that I am not a fan of. Yeah it was good. It was a good eighteen days. I mean I smoked in Tahrir and it was fine and I remember thinking 'this is crazy; I'm smoking in Tahrir and no one is looking or saying anything to me'. And I was never sexually harassed there either. But the moment you left Tahrir, you would get harassed again. So just because Tahrir was good didn't mean Egypt on the whole was in a good place during those days (Kadry, 2013d).

This could possibly suggest that the protest movement in Tahrir Square may have existed in a vacuum, as did its version of the nation, and was not just exclusionary towards the state but any Egyptian who did not conform to its criteria. This connects with Juan Cole and Deniz Kandiyoti's observation about "how the culture of nationalism tends to create a positive image of the nation as homogeneous while defining itself against a hated and despised Other or set of Others, within and without" (2002, p. 189). This is the crux of the discussion here because no single claim to speak on behalf of, or to embody the legitimate nation, can be sanctified, because any vision or version of the nation is inherently exclusive. In turn, any attempts to expand these new gender expectations and paradigms across the country struggle with its claims to legitimacy and survival because the version of the nation,

in which it was founded, finds itself competing against other forms of the nation from both the state, even in its post-revolutionary form, and others within the population.

Conclusion: Gender after the Tahrir 'Nation'

> I went to a talk organised by HarassMap where a woman on stage, with her back turned to the audience, described how she was raped by her uncle. After that I contacted HarassMap and told them I need to help. I need to get involved to stop this (Kadry, 2013a).

Nagy, who is twenty six, admits that he did not have any awareness of gender rights or equality prior to 2011. He was, however, like many young Egyptian men and women, determined to see Mubarak's political regime brought down (Ghannam, 2013, p. 1), and so he found himself in Tahrir Square during the protests of the first eighteen days. During this experience, he was inspired by how well everyone treated each other, and believed that "Egypt would be like Paris in two years". In particular, he saw that women were just as capable and courageous as men, and he began rethinking everything he had been told and learnt on gender roles and expectations from his family and wider society. After Mubarak's removal and seeing that sexual harassment of women was an endemic problem, in 2012 he started the anti-sexual harassment group *Dudd Taharrush* (Against Harassment), while simultaneously working for HarassMap. Nagy's case demonstrates that the embodiment and vision of the nation that was on display in Tahrir Square has extended in some form beyond the early protest movement. While it can be argued that the protests did not contain a specific gender agenda, or that the call for protests may have in fact recycled existing gender expectations and performances, the visibility of equality at the protests can be seen to have had a lasting impact on some individuals. In the case of Nagy, setting up

Dudd Taharrush means that his experience in Tahrir Square may impact others who were not present there at the time.

However, Ramy Raouf, who is Deputy Director of Nazra for Feminist Studies, points to the difficulty of rethinking gender roles and expectations where "you start questioning your identity and your religion, and questioning your father and your mother, questioning how you were raised and questioning the music you listen to, and your grandparents. It's a very threatening process" (Kadry, 2013e). It may be possible, therefore, that the case of Nagy as someone who was greatly influenced as a protester in Tahrir Square, and who has since applied what he saw and learned beyond Tahrir, is an exception. However, Nagy together with other men and women like him whom I interviewed, perhaps provide evidence, and hope, that the 2011 revolution has opened up new horizons for discussions on gender equality, albeit perhaps small and ever fading horizons.

Notes on contributor

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