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The Role of Women in the Arab World: Toward a New Wave of Democratization, or an Ebbing Wave Toward Authoritarianism?

By Nadine Sika¹

At the beginning of the new millennium, the third wave of democratization had not yet touched the shores of any Arab country. In the 1990s, analysts believed that economic liberalization would eventually lead to democratization in the region. Instead, it has evidenced the resilience of authoritarianism. By 2005, political developments and openings in the public sphere created some optimism about a “Spring of Arab Democracy,” but the hopefulness was soon over. Many scholars have argued that Arab political culture is not conducive to democracy, and that the Arab world presented a case of “exceptionalism” to democracy. Another influx of studies pointed to various reasons for the persisting authoritarianism that ranged from the structure of political, social, and religious institutions to political socialization, and to the prevailing political economy of the region. Another major obstacle to democratization was the international community’s view and acceptance of the region’s status quo, which preferred stability over democratic uncertainties, especially with the rise of the Islamic tide in most Arab regimes.

In the meantime, state-society relations were gradually changing. The Arab public sphere was transforming. Independent media was emerging forcefully and developing heated public debates. With the enhancement of a free market economy neoliberal economic development processes were on the rise, fostering a “crony” capitalist system of development which ensured high GDP growth and the ascent of new business gentry. However, it excluded the majority of Arab populations. On the one hand, Arab human development indicators were on the rise, with access to education increasing exponentially throughout the past two decades. On the other hand, Arab citizens, especially middle and lower class, were becoming more and more excluded from the economic development of their polities. For example, Egypt and Tunisia have the highest unemployment rates among their educated youth.

The rise of corruption, inequalities, and increased political repression prepared the ground for a decade of social contention on the streets of the Arab World, which can be divided into four waves: the first is represented by embryonic demonstrations on Arab streets that addressed Arab causes in general, rather than specific internal national issues. For instance, people in different Arab countries demonstrated extensively in support of the Palestinian cause, especially in 2000 with the al-Aqsa intifada. Demonstrations were more forceful by 2003 with hundreds of thousands of demonstrators sweeping the region: the rallies were mainly directed against the American invasion of Iraq, while Yemen, Sudan, Jordan, Bahrain, Lebanon, and Syria witnessed the largest demonstrations in years.

Arab citizens’ discontent with their leaders was growing at an unprecedented rate by the early 2000s. In one of al-Jazeera’s talk shows, in 2003, more than 70% of Arab viewers of the show believed that Arab leaders were more repressive and less legitimate than foreign colonizers (Lynch 2003). The second wave of protests emerged in the mid-2000s, and this time it addressed internal issues. For example, an important phenomenon in Egypt was the creation of the Kifaya (Enough) movement in 2004 (al-Shobaky, 2011). For the first time, the protest addressed national political problems and crossed the red line of dissent; it called for the end of the

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Mubarak rule with chants like “No to [Mubarak rule] extension, No to [Gamal Mubarak] hereditary rule” [*Laa lel tamdiid, laa lel tawrith*]. Though the adherents to the Kifaya movement were no more than a hundred independent activists who did not have mass followings, the intensity, boldness, and repertoire of Kifaya demonstrations were important in influencing many other protest movements that emerged not only in Egypt but elsewhere in the Arab World. And though women were not among the creators of the movement, they were quiet but present in the movement and in different demonstrations. Many women activists sympathized with the cause, and were able to quickly develop other campaigns. In Bahrain, for instance, *haq* [right] was an important step in the process of organizing demonstrations in the country, which also crossed many red lines. It demanded changing the constitution and writing a new one which would embrace human rights, democracy, and social equalities.

The third wave of Arab contention was emerging by 2007, moving away from political issues toward socio-economic ones. In this wave, worker strikes and rallies called for better standards of living (al-Shobaki) because the majority of the Arab population felt extreme socio-economic pressures. For instance, in Algeria labor unions enacted many protests in 2008 against the regime’s privatization policies and poor living standards of the working class. Tunisia as well, in 2008, witnessed large demonstrations against a mining company on issues of living standards. In Morocco, labor unions, youth activists, and professionals demonstrated against high prices, poor standards of living, and unemployment from January to October 2007 in 945 protests (Ottoway & Hamzawy, 2011).

The fourth wave of Arab conflict developed by the end of 2010 and early 2011, which today is called the “Arab Spring” of uprisings. This upsurge is important because it is the sum of both the socio-economic demonstrations of the third wave and the human rights and democratic twist of the second wave. The spark in the domino effect of Arab uprisings began in Tunisia when Mohamed Bouazizi, a young but jobless university graduate, set himself on fire and died.

Where is the Role of Women in Arab Contentious Politics?

It is rather ironic, and often a neglected detail that it was a woman officer who insulted Bouazizi, and caused the humiliation that culminated in his death. The episode was mainly portrayed as police brutality in maintaining state security, rather than the overbearing display of a woman’s authority. In my point of view, the dichotomy between a woman’s power and a man’s vulnerability is essential to understanding the forces at work in contention, and the dynamics of women’s emancipation and empowerment in the Arab World. It is at the heart of what Arab women were able to accomplish towards their emancipation and their role in society, but still within the confines of authoritarianism in the region.

Tunisia is an interesting case in point: it embraced “modernization” and “women’s rights” to maintain state absolutism. Bourgeiba was believed to be a progressive leader who thought that women’s rights were part of the larger modernization project he envisioned for his country. Bin Ali and other Arab leaders followed suit, and like Egypt’s Nasser and his successors, tied women’s rights to authoritarianism. They created a silent pact, using the rights of women to perpetuate illegitimate authoritarian regimes. In fact, women who went to different demonstrations against the system were harassed by state security members and thugs, especially in Egypt, while women who conceded to state authority were provided with a respectable status and government employment, just like the woman officer who insulted Bouazizi.

Narrating the Role of Women in the Uprisings

Throughout this introduction, the role of women in contestation has not been mentioned for two reasons: the first is that nobody can deny their role as leaders in different movements, especially youth movements, throughout this decade of contention. Women occupied their space and played their role by being present in major demonstrations, not as representatives of their gender but as valuable and integral members of Arab society. This culture was oppressed through colonialism and dictatorship for the better part of the last millennium, and is longing for a just, equitable, and democratic society.

The second reason is that literature on the theme has largely neglected to analyze the role of Arab women in either narratives of contestation or in their role as social actors in contestation. It is, therefore, the intention of this Special Issue of the International Journal of Women's Studies to bring the role of Arab Women in Contestation to the forefront of international debates. In so doing, this volume represents a significant contribution in the form of narrative and analysis to the Arab woman question.

The Special Issue is devoted to examining the role of Arab women in the ongoing uprisings and revolutions sweeping the Arab world over the past two years. It covers case studies of women in Tunisia, Yemen, Jordan, Bahrain, Egypt, Syria, the Sudan, and other countries in the region. Two major questions are going to be addressed: how influential were Arab women in the "Arab Spring" of uprisings, and to what degree are Arab women's rights to equality and freedom going to be attained and respected after the creation of new regimes, such as in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Syria, which are the countries that are undergoing the most political change thus far. The chances for a wave of democratization will be high if the rights of women are going to be recognized and fostered. On the other hand, an ebbing wave of authoritarianism will drag with it all major steps toward democratic gains if women's roles and rights are disrespected.

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