NOREF Policy Brief

Arab Muslim women after the uprisings: the encounter between the liberalisation of Islamist politics and the feminisation of Islamic interpretation

Aitemad Muhanna

Executive summary

Women's participation in the Arab uprisings has been inspired by the expansion of an Islamist-based model of Arab women's activism and a gradual shrinking of secular liberal women's activism. The uprisings have provided outcomes that prove the possibility of combining Islam with democracy through the political success of Islamist parties in the post-uprisings era, like in Tunisia and Egypt. Although this new de facto political map of the region has largely frightened liberal women, the victory of moderate Islamist voices may also be promising, especially when they are in a position to provide a state governance model. The determining factor in combining Islam with democracy is the willingness of the two major players – Islamist parties and the international community – to ensure that the main debatable issues – religion, gender and human rights – are not discriminated against in the name of either religion or Western democracy. However, the actual practice and outcomes of moderate Islamist discourse remains under experimentation, and it is a space for Islamist and secular women's and human rights organisations to co-operate, monitor, negotiate and strategise, to ensure that gender issues are engaged in policy discussions and formulations as a substantial issue for real democratisation.

Aitemad Muhanna is a research fellow at the LSE Middle East Centre pursuing post-doctoral research on gender, religion and sustainable human development in the Gaza Strip. Originally from the Gaza Strip, she has extensive experience as a gender and development specialist and activist in Palestine. For the last twenty years, she has worked on policy-oriented research programmes and publications for Oxfam-UK, Sida, UNIFEM, UNDP and the World Bank, to name just a few. For several years, she conducted research and contributed to the Palestinian *Human Development Report* as part of the *Arab Human Development Report.* She is a member of the Arab Research Hub and the research consortium of Pathways of Women's Empowerment. She received her PhD in Development Studies from the University of Swansea in 2011. Her publications include the book *Women and Work in Gaza;* a book chapter entitled "The Gaza Strip after the Israeli withdrawal: an assessment of reality and a future vision"; and a research paper entitled "Palestinian children in the labour market under the Israeli occupation".

The Arab uprisings have taken place spontaneously and simultaneously across many Arab countries, aiming to topple dictatorial regimes and rebuild Arab societies based on the principles of democracy, equality, freedom and social justice. These are the common demands of all protesters in the different Arab countries – Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Libya and Syria – irrespective of the ideological origin of these terms: secularism or Islamism. The people who sparked the uprisings in the Arab countries, particularly in Tunisia and Egypt, were the less ideologised and politically active. The main motives for their revolutionary action were the harshness of their day-to-day lives and the daily humiliation they experienced at the hands of the regimes and their apparatuses. They reflect the meaning of their human agency identified by individual and collective human dignity, disregarding differences based on class, religion, gender, ethnicity, education and politics. This identification of individual-collective human action during the Arab uprising applies equally to men and women. This was therefore the starting point of the Arab uprisings: common sense and common demands that no one in the world could deny or disregard.

Within this collective mass movement for democracy, Arab women stood shoulder to shoulder with the men, struggling for a better future for themselves and for their male counterparts. Arab women, equally with men, showed no fear of the regimes and their military apparatuses. This is the revolutionary moment that guaranteed the continuity and successful outcome of the mass protests. Fear is replaced by self-sacrifice and accompanied with the determination to restore human dignity, which was humiliated by the so-called secular regimes supported by the international community and its ambivalent claims of universal human rights. Although gender issues were not apparently part of the protesters' demands, the equal participation of women in the mass protests has contributed to gender-equalising the protesters' demands, assuming that the millions of women – secular and religious, educated and uneducated, old and young – did not join the protests with empty minds or faked aspirations. However, women's consciousness and aspirations to join the protests do not necessarily reflect a single ideological, political and feminist framework. The form and quality of their participation – women's individual initiatives to use Facebook and Twitter and other visual and written media channels to advocate for democracy and justice – are a strong indication of their self-determination to bring about change, whether based on their religious or secular faith. The massive participation of Arab women in the uprisings against dictatorship is a reflection of their accumulated experiences of interaction with multiple combined (as well as contesting) political, social and cultural discourses throughout their life histories and across generations – mainly traditionalist, modernist/liberal and Islamist discourses. Therefore, perceiving women's important role in the Arab uprisings as separable from their past experience and as surprising is a mistake.

Context

Women's participation in the Arab uprisings was inspired at a time when an Islamist-based model of Arab women's activism was flourishing in most Arab countries against the background of a gradual shrinking of secular liberal women's activism. Islamist male leaders have increasingly taken note of women's activism in Islamist movements and realised that it is impossible in today's world for a movement to gain international legitimacy without incorporating the issue of women's rights.[1] This model has been expanded in most Arab countries and the increasing religiosity of women has enhanced their participation in politics and in national and international media. In the Arab uprisings, many reports and testimonies assert that the majority of female protesters were veiled and their motive for participation is social justice as they understand it in terms of Islam. The Yemeni activist Tawakkol Karman is a strong example of those Muslim women who achieved recognition at the national and international levels during the Arab uprisings. Karman uses her Islamic beliefs to advocate for equal citizenship for both men and women, and for social justice compatible with international human rights laws.[2]

---

1 See Omayma Abdellatif and Marina Ottaway, "Women in Islamist movement: toward an Islamist model of women's activism", Carnegie Paper no. 2, Carnegie Middle East Center, June 2007 no. 2.

2 See her Facebook page and some of her videos on YouTube and Twitter.

The Arab uprisings broke out while an intellectual and political debate about the possibility of combining secularism with Islamism at the socio-economic, political and feminist levels came to the forefront among male and female scholars, activists and politicians. The uprisings came have provided outcomes that demonstrate this possibility, considering the differences and complexity of its application in the different Arab countries and the risk it may bring to women's rights under *sharia* law. In Tunisia, for example, the Islamist party al-Nahda, which won the parliamentary and presidential elections, favoured maintaining the country's progressive personal status codes, which grant Tunisian women the same rights as Tunisian men. Al-Nahda has also publicly expressed its unwillingness to impose a conservative dress code upon Tunisian women and showed its commitment to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. In the Tunisian election on October 23rd, women won around 25% of the seats in the new Constituent Assembly, whereas they had won only 11% under Ben-Ali's secular regime.[3] Despite the complexity of the post-uprising context in Egypt compared with Tunisia, the initial victory of Islamist parties in the November 2011 parliamentary election, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, has apparently resulted from the enormous participation of poor and less educated Egyptian women in the election. The moderate voice of some leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood, such as Abou el-Fotouh and his youth supporters, has been drawing the attention of many secular Muslim and non-Muslim people in Egypt, especially young and educated Muslim women. These voices have also encouraged the conservative leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood to moderate their political and social agenda, aiming to keep a united vision for the Brotherhood. Abou el-Fotouh said that "the new Egyptian government will be based on constitutional law and stand on respect for human rights, equality between men and women, and independence of the judiciary."[4]

This emerging discourse used by Islamist political parties in the post-Arab revolution era stands in contrast to a less organised and less publicly supported liberal and feminist discourse. The de facto changing equation of political power in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in favour of Islamists is not a sudden outcome. It has been influenced by the approaches used by the international community in Muslim and Arab countries since September 11th 2001. To fight Islamist terrorism, the United Nations, the World Bank and other international donors deliberately supported faith-based actors and specifically Muslim charities in Egypt, Palestine and Afghanistan that included women. This support allowed such faith-based community development actors to present themselves as the major providers of welfare services and mediators of social change while simultaneously undermining the more radical Islamist groups and discourses. Islamist political and social forces, on the other hand, used this dynamic to mobilise Arab people, especially Muslim women, for their political and social agenda within an Islamist framework.[5] This dynamic has particularly weakened the secular women's movement, which by its elitist leadership and approach has failed to build a strong base in poor Muslim communities.

Outlook

The post-uprising de facto political map has, however, not yet been finally articulated. It is most probably moving towards the political victory of pragmatic moderate Islamist discourse, which seems to be supported publicly by Arabs, as well as by regional and international political leaders. There are attempts to develop an Islamist model of governance without necessarily opposing the international measures of democratic governance, despite the ideological risk this Islamist discourse may entail. If this happens, Islamist and secular forces will face a great challenge because both find themselves in a position where they need to maintain their political power in the region and legitimise their democratic performance.

Secular liberal women and women's organisations in the region have largely feared to lose what they have achieved in terms of their individual liberty and human rights under the previous secular

---

3 See UNDP & RBAS, *Arab Human Development Report 2005: Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World,* 2005.

4 See http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/05/could-the-muslim-brotherhood-win-egypts-presidency/238914/.

5 See Hania Shalkomy, "Creating conservatism or emancipating subjects? On the narratives of Islamic observance in Egypt" and Deniz Kandyoti, "Disentangling religion and politics: whither gender equality?", both in *IDS Bulletin,* vol 42, no. 1, January 2011.

regimes. I expect, on the contrary, that the victory of Islamists, particularly the moderate parties, is promising compared with the past, which was characterised by militarisation, violence and violations of international human rights. The political victory of moderate Islamist parties in the MENA region can be perceived as the starting point for reshaping the world order. For the first time in the contemporary history of the Middle East region, I believe that the historical binaries, as well as antagonism between Islamism and secularism, may be coming to an end. After the end of the al-Qaeda threat,[6] both Islamist and secular forces, especially those in Europe, have realised that militarisation has become a serious burden on their countries' economies and political stability. Therefore, it is not a solution to any form of conflict in the region. A number of political leaders in Europe have realised that Islamist politicians are pragmatic enough to negotiate all debatable political, economic and social issues, especially when they are in a position to provide a governing model with negotiable foreign policies and international relations. The determining factor in combining Islamism with secularism and Islam with democracy is the willingness of the two major players – Islamist parties and the international community – to ensure that the main debatable issues – religion, gender and human rights – are not discriminated against in the name of either Islam or Western democracy, which have been the dominant discourses used equally by these two players in the MENA region. However, the actual practice and outcomes of the moderate Islamist discourse remain under experimentation, and it is the task of Islamist and secular women's and human rights organisations to co-operate, monitor, negotiate and strategise to ensure that gender issues are engaged in policy discussions and formulations as a substantial issue in real democratisation.

Gender-based recommendations for bilateral and multilateral actors:

1) Put the Islamist conservative leaders in contact with Islamic feminists[7] in the MENA region and Europe and encourage democratic discussions on the issues of gender incorporation in governments within Islamic frameworks.

2) Support female Islamist leaders in getting involved in mutual learning visits in countries that have experienced a successful model of constitutional change, particularly the reform of *sharia* law, within Islamic frameworks, such as Turkey, Morocco and the recent experience of Tunisia. Also integrate these women into international gender-based forums in order to acquaint them with the new gender challenges they face in their home countries.

3) Push towards co-operation between secular liberal women's organisations and Islamist female leaders in government and non-governmental organisations: secular organisations provide Islamist leaders with experience of women's activism and the struggle for gender mainstreaming in government institutions and policies, and encourage female moderate Islamists to resist patriarchal interpretations of Islam, which is the common ground of struggle for both of them.

4) Support a link between the mosques movements – which used to be the main source of conservative Islamist knowledge, as well as the major site of women's mobilisation – and civil society and government institutions, in which the moderate interpretation of Islam can be mobilised and applied in the day-to-day lives of poor and uneducated women living in marginalised areas.

5) The victory of Islamists will increase women's participation in the labour market, at least in

---

6 See Fawaz Gerges' articles at http://fgerges.com/editorial-articles.php?id=159.

7 The Islamic feminist discourse refers to the Qur'an and Sunna to work toward women's advancement and gender equality, and some of its scholars put forward the possibility of occupying common ground with secular feminists in their attempts to improve women's legal status and social positions. Islamic feminists have gained increasing recognition by many Western scholars, feminists and non-feminists, and have to a growing extent positively influenced the social agenda of the male-dominated Islamist parties or movements in the MENA region. See Val Moghadam, "Islamic feminism and its discontents: notes on debate", http://www.iran-bulletin.org/women/Islamic_feminism_IB.html, April 2000.

the first phase, because Islamists usually put forward their female members as favoured candidates to fill any gaps in the labour market (see the experience of Hamas and Hizbullah). This is a good opportunity to challenge conservative Islamists by supporting women's economic development programmes and advocating for women's equal participation in education and in the labour market within a moderate Islamic framework.

Following these recommendations is undoubtedly a long-term process full of possibilities of both success and failure, but they have the potential to liberalise political Islam and Islamic women's activism. This depends on the capacity of women's and human rights organisations in the region to know how to invest in Islamic frameworks, while disregarding gender labelling, to ensure gender equality. Through this process, religion in time may remain a symbol of identity, but not a constraint to women's equal participation in development and politics.