

In the Wake of Arab Revolts: Women's Rights in the Balance

Interview with Hanan Abdel Rahman-Rabbani

Perspectives: It seems that many women, also young women representing different social groups, have been participating in the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt and have been present in the public. Is that true?

RABBANI: The revolutions in both Tunisia and Egypt were of a popular nature where various sectors of society participated in the protests leading to the toppling of the two presidents and continued to take part in the events taking place in the aftermath. As women have always been active participants in the political, economic and social spheres in these two societies, it was only normal that they would play a role in the protests. The fact that these protests were led by youth encouraged more young women to be in the forefront and to have their share in paying

difference was witnessed between secular and religious women as all felt part of the same people believing in the same cause. Melting down social, ideological and political barriers among the masses and strengthening the sense of solidarity and collectivity were in my view, among the most important achievements of the two revolutions.

Perspectives: In the past months, you have been travelling between Tunisia and Egypt in order to talk to women's rights activists and network between them. Did they have an active role in the revolutions? If yes, how? If not, why not? And what are the issues they are now discussing jointly?

RABBANI: Before and after the revolutions, my work brought me in touch with women's organizations to support their work on protecting and promoting women's rights, more so in Egypt –before the revolution- than Tunisia. My impression is that civil society actors participated in the revolutions as citizens concerned about the future of their country rather than organized groups. Civil society organizations have been criticized for not taking a leading role in the revolutions as they were taken by surprise by the rapid development of events in the two countries. The fact that the protests were initiated and led by youth with no clear political affiliations or visible leadership contributed to the success of the revolts. Moving away from the traditional conventional way of thinking and acting in the framework of political activism brought in a refreshing approach which attracted large numbers of supporters many of whom were never interested or involved in politics. After the revolutions, it was interesting to conclude that priorities in relation to women's

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the price for freedom and democracy. Women were among the martyrs, injured, detained, and the price they paid extended beyond that when they were attacked, harassed and subjected to humiliating tests of virginity carried out by the army in Egypt on March 9th. In Tahrir Square, women were there leading the protests, using their creativity and talent in writing slogans, performing art, providing support to other protestors and keeping the moral high. No



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rights in the context of the transition in Tunisia and Egypt were identical. My own assumption was that in Tunisia, promoting women's rights in the democratic transition would start at a more advanced level in light of the progressive personal status law and the gains achieved in the realm of women's rights over the years with full political will on the part of the Tunisian regime. The reality now is that extensive efforts need to be exerted to ensure that women play a prominent role in the democratic transition and their concerns are identified and incorporated in any attempts for reform and democratization. In both countries the need exists for awareness raising programs at the community level on human rights and women's rights issues, capacity building in terms of knowledge and skills for women's organizations and activists, support for newly emerging initiatives and organizations in addition to mainstreaming a gendered approach across all thematic work related to the political transition. This could be done through strengthening role and involvement of women in the political reform process manifested in any drafting or amendment of the constitution and legislation, promoting active participation of women in the elections processes as voters and candidates, and ensuring that the transitional justice processes are gender sensitive where gender justice is a prominent component guaranteeing provision of tools and mechanisms to address women grievances in an appropriate and sensitive fashion.

As women's groups in Egypt and Tunisia are currently very much focused on the situation within their own country and with the commonalities I outlined above, it is imperative that initiatives to coordinate efforts in both countries and encourage cooperation are strengthened. This will help women's groups to see the picture differently, more objectively, learn from each others' experiences, strategize together on issues of common concern, and provide a sense of solidarity to each other. Regional coordination at a larger level is also important and would help deliver experiences

and lessons learnt to women in other countries to utilize in the event their countries undergo similar political transitions. What we are doing at this point is to play the role of a facilitator in providing global and regional expertise related to women's role in political transitions and to strengthen the element of coordination between the two groups keeping in mind that the details of the situation of women vary from one country to the other.

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Perspectives: Are women's rights activists currently able to position themselves strategically in decision-making processes? (for example, did they participate in the committee for constitutional amendments in Egypt? Are they included in the Tunisian committee to safeguard the revolution?)

RABBANI: I think that the sense of euphoria in Tunisia and Egypt was overwhelming for all sectors of society including women. Women were very optimistic that with the feeling of political freedoms from the authoritarian regimes, their own freedom from discrimination and oppression will inevitably prevail. To their disappointment, this was not the case and the scenarios which unfolded shortly after, reminded them of the Algerian women's experience when they actively participated in the Algerian revolution for independence but were pushed back to their traditional roles and excluded from real representation in running the affairs of the newly independent Algeria. This scenario was also repeated in the context of Palestinian women in the aftermath of the Oslo agreement and the ensuing establishment of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

In Egypt, the first blow came when the Higher Military Council, the interim military body currently ruling Egypt set up a committee to amend certain constitutional provisions to enable the country to move forward on Presidential and national elections. The committee was assigned to amend the defective articles of the constitution including articles 76, 77, 88, 93, 189, while article 179 is set to be eliminated. The problematic angle is the fact that the committee was composed of 8 all male law professors, counselors, lawyers known for their constitutional law expertise with the absence of women representatives despite the fact that Egypt has a number of strong women experts in Constitutional law. Similarly, the newly appointed transitional government has only one female minister on board. This reality has spurred extensive debate among women's groups creating a division of two positions; one calling for the inclusion of women in the constitutional committee and considering their exclusion a manifestation of discrimination against them and the other being more apprehensive of creating political conflict and divide among the people of the revolution. The latter arguing that their ideology and women's

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rights activism is an integral part of their political ideology which leads them to think of the larger picture rather than the women focused dimension. Their biggest problem with the composition of the constitution was the fact that some members come from conservative ideological backgrounds which is bound to

influence the amendments negatively rather than the mere absence of women in the committee.

The second unexpected blow to the women's movement was when hundreds of women's activists commemorated the International women's day on March 8th by marching to Tahrir Square, the place that witnessed the birth of their revolution and was the home of all forms of opposition expression since January 25th. The women's march was attacked by the same people who protested for days and succeeded in overthrowing President Mubarak. The women were harassed, labeled with humiliating names, some were sexually assaulted and eventually forced to leave the square. Another incident targeting women took place on March 9th when the army was trying to evacuate protesters from Tahrir Square and picked up at least 18 females and detained them temporarily at the Egyptian National Museum nearby and later on transferred 17 of them to a military detention centre. According to Amnesty International and other human rights organizations, while in custody, the women were interrogated, harassed, beaten, subjected to electric shocks and strip searches while photographed by male soldiers. The military went further by asking the women about their marital status (an indication of their virginity). Later on an alleged doctor performed tests of virginity on some of the women by force threatening them with prostitution charges. Some of these women were subjected to more abuse after the tests, on the account that their tests revealed otherwise. On March 11, all 17 women were brought before a military court where several of them received one-year suspended prison sentences and released on 13 March. It is not easy to pinpoint the reasons behind this incident in light of the general atmosphere in Egypt and to place it in the right context. The only explanation in my view is that even though the revolution succeeded in toppling the president, the regime is still entrenched in all sectors of society and more importantly the old patriarchal mentality and

misperceptions regarding women still prevail in Egyptian society and this will require years of work to achieve change. On the Egyptian level I can't see strong indications pointing to more involvement of women at the decision making level. This is partly related to the new realities which opened up a good space for all sectors of society and political orientations to be engaged in the debate. Women's rights, as a result, may end up being compromised in order to maintain political and social stability in the country. To face up to this unfolding situation women will have to come up with innovative strategies and approaches to ensure their representation in the democratic transition.

The Tunisian scene is slightly different as women's rights and status were safeguarded by legislation since the inception of the Tunisian Republic after independence in 1956. The culture of secularism was the ideology adopted and enforced by the regime since the time of the former president, Habib Bourguiba. Women were active participants in decision making and in all aspects of life with high education levels and achievement rates. During the revolution, Tunisian women played active roles in the popular protests all over the country. In the aftermath of the revolution, only two women were appointed ministers as part of the transitional government. Similarly women were represented in small numbers in the three commissions which were established to deal with political reform, investigating corruption, and looking into the human rights violations committed during the two months of the protests. In a recent move, members of the three commissions including professionals, law professors, lawyers, academics and activists have been combined into a larger body called the "Tunisian Committee to Safeguard the Revolution". Additional members were invited to join this body which is viewed by many Tunisians as a transitional Parliament. Tunisian women are represented in a way that has not been very satisfactory to many activists; however, the door is open for more involvement as many decision makers are in favor of

promoting women's participation in all aspects of governance.

Similar to Egypt, Tunisian women marched on March 8th to commemorate the International Women's Day with a big demonstration in the centre of Tunis. The march included women activists and many male supporters of women's rights. There were incidents where some men made fun of the protesters and called for women to go back to their traditional role at home and media coverage of the demonstration itself was not sufficient in giving it the space it deserved in the press. New dynamics are emerging in the Tunisian society as the long-time banned Islamist movement "Al Nahda (Renaissance)" is back to the country and operating openly and strategically. Since the revolution, 51 political parties have emerged with varying ideologies and political direction. Tunisian women will have to act quickly and firmly to make sure they preserve their legal and social gains achieved over the years in the context of the democratic

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transition. Any compromise in their rights at this point will shake their status and undermine their gains for many years to come.

In other countries undergoing popular protests against authoritarian regimes like Yemen, Bahrain, Libya, Jordan among others, the picture of women and their role in the revolutions are fairly the same as Tunisia and Egypt with varying details. In Yemen for example, which has a long tradition of conservative tribalism, women have been active in the protests nationally and their voices were heard internationally. They have been present in the Change Square (Sahat al Taghyeer) in Sanaa in increasing numbers especially after the 25th of March in the aftermath of a

dramatic attack launched by the army on the peaceful protesters, resulting in the killing of over 50 of them and injuring hundreds. Women

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from all walks of life including mothers, sisters and other female relatives of those killed are steadfast on participating in the rebellion against Ali Abdullah Saleh to end his 33 year rule of Yemen. Hundreds of Yemeni women demonstrated on March 8th peacefully to commemorate international women's day and to prove yet again that they are an important component of society that shouldn't be overlooked in any political or legal reforms in the aftermath of the revolution.

Perspectives: What are the main concerns and priorities of women's rights activists in the moment?

RABBANI: After the revolutions, intensive work is underway on preparation for the presidential and national elections. Different civil society groups are busy preparing for these important events by raising awareness of the communities in relation to their role in the elections especially among women promoting their participation as voters and candidates. Civil society organizations started identifying priorities relating to needs during the transitional period and the ensuing democratic transition. In this context, adopting a gender approach to the transitional justice process lies in the heart of the democratic transition challenges. This will ensure that women's roles and concerns are incorporated in the process to achieve gender justice. Legal reform is an additional area that deserves attention in a context that presents a golden opportunity to capture the moment

and take advantage of the prevailing spirit of the revolutions to remind people that their aspired political freedom can't be complete if not extended to include social freedoms and non discrimination which will guarantee justice and end marginalization of women and other vulnerable groups in society. The road for women's movements in both countries is still long and a lot of work lies ahead to achieve these goals.

Perspectives: Tunisia until now has the reputation of being the most advanced Arab country in terms of women's rights. At the same time it was one of the worst police-states in the region. How do you explain this contradiction?

RABBANI: Tunisia had a unique position in relation to advancing women's rights in legislation and social practices for nearly six decades. Tunisian personal status law of 1956 is considered the most advanced in the region and Tunisian women's activists have been leading women's activism in the Arab world as they have always set the bar higher than others in regional meetings,, a dynamic that managed to strengthen the Arab regional discourse on women's rights. Notwithstanding this progress in women's status, the situation of women in rural and remote areas was far from perfect and Tunisian women have always complained about their inability to express their opinions freely in issues related to politics. This proves that promoting women's rights without basic human rights and freedoms is meaningless. It has always been puzzling to find a logical connection between advancement of women's rights by a highly authoritarian regime while repressing freedoms and violating human rights. The former Tunisian regime used women's rights and their advancement as a cover to beautify its image in western perception and present itself as a modern and secular state. The dichotomy between advancing women's rights while violating other basic human rights is intriguing and can only be perceived as part of the regime's agenda to claim civility and legitimacy

in the eyes of the outside world. This fake image makes the possibility of discrediting or

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criticizing the regime for its human rights record and repression more challenging. Promoting women's rights and secularism was as well one of the tools used by the regime to fight Islamists and limit their influence in the country.

Perspectives: Are women's rights activists in Tunisia, Egypt, and other countries afraid that Islamist actors might gain more social and political weight after the revolutions?

RABBANI: Women activists in Tunisia and Egypt have woken up from their euphoria trying to deal with reality and keep up with speedy developments on the grounds. The future looks uncertain and identifying a specific direction where the two countries are heading is a challenge at this point in time. Among the many issues they have to deal with is the growing political influence of the Islamist movement, known for their good mobilization and organization skills which came into play during the constitutional referendum in Egypt. In Tunisia, where secularism and modernity have been the norm, the society has been witnessing a slight shift to religious conservatism as the number of veiled women on the streets of Tunis has been visibly growing since the mid nineties. The previously banned Al Nahda movement is active and has formally become a recognized political party with its leadership returning to Tunisia from exile. The regime change has brought different elements into play. While freedom and the sense of liberty prevail, democracy dictates involvement and participation of various political and ideological views including Islamists. Tunisian women are

worried that in the midst of political negotiations over power, their rights will be used as bargaining chips and compromised for the sake of political stability and in order to please certain political parties. This is a great challenge ahead and women need to rally support from progressive forces to strengthen their voice in the quest for justice and non-discrimination.

In Egypt this is a more obvious dilemma but the difference here is that Egyptian women have always been dealing with these dynamics in a traditionally more conservative and religious society. However, the emerging context requires bolder, more creative and strategic approaches in presenting their concerns and advocating for their rights.

Perspectives: What kind of support do women's rights activists need right now? What is their stance on receiving international support?

RABBANI: Women in Tunisia and Egypt need moral support and solidarity especially from women activists in the Arab region so they don't feel alone dealing with emerging challenges of the democratic transition. They also need support from international organizations which can offer them the opportunity to explore and learn from women's experiences in similar situations in the world. Women activists expressed interest to meet with women from South Africa, Eastern Europe, Latin America, Turkey and Indonesia to look at lessons learnt in order to come up with national strategies to consolidate women's role in the democratic transition. Additional work is needed to incorporate women into the transitional process for gender justice. Awareness raising within the community and working to strengthen women's participation in the elections and leadership skills remain a priority especially during these important times. As for donors, dealing with women's organizations should be done with utmost sensitivity and understanding of the current political context. Women's organizations in the Arab region have been historically accused of adopting a western agenda which

contributed to their alienation. Added to that, the women's rights agenda in both countries was co-opted by the old regimes for the purpose of window dressing internationally. A good example is the way Egypt's first lady, Suzan Mubarak, was associated with women's advancement in Egypt through spearheading the National Council for Women, an Egyptian governmental body created by Presidential decree in 2000 to deal with women's issues and represent them in international forums and her name was closely connected to certain family related legislations. It will take time to uproot this association from the hearts and minds of post revolution Egyptians so to give the women's movement legitimacy and true national identity. Today in the midst of the ongoing witch hunting campaigns and settling accounts, any miscalculated move could result in harming the movement and setting it back especially in Egypt where authenticity of any action is a prerequisite for acceptance and endorsement. In Tunisia, on the other hand, a culture of donor-recipient dynamics was almost nonexistent in the absence of active civil society organizations.

Today, international donor organizations are actively working to provide support to the limited number of NGOs which were able to function during the Ben Ali regime and the many new initiatives and NGOs emerging after the revolution. It is vital that Tunisia doesn't get turned into another Iraq in relation to donor money that contributed to corrupting civil society organizations at the time of its inception. Even though Tunisian organizations welcome funding and support from certain donors, they are well aware of the shortcomings that donor money could produce if not handled strategically. Some NGOs are already playing an important role in coordinating the work of existing and newly emerging initiatives by providing information and discussing ethical guidelines related to funding and civil society work in general. At this time promoting and strengthening volunteerism within civil society will result in engaging youth and emerging voices in addition to maintaining a good solidarity spirit in the coming period.

Interview by Layla Al-Zubaidi, 9 April 2011.