

Egypt: Women, Revolution and the Future

Friday 4 March 2011, by [MOGHADAM Valentine](#) (Date first published: 11 February 2011).

VALENTINE MOGHADAM IS director of the Women's Studies Program and a professor of sociology at Purdue University. She responded to some questions from Against the Current early on February 11, 2011, shortly before the announcement of Hosni Mubarak's resignation.

Against the Current: The role of women in the Egyptian uprising and particularly at Tahrir Square has been notable. What have you observed, and do you think a lasting transformation of gender roles may develop from this struggle?

Val Moghadam: The historical record shows that women have been participants in many political struggles, from revolutions to national liberation struggles and all manner of social movements. And yet not all gender outcomes are favorable to women. In my own work on gender and revolution, I have identified two outcomes: patriarchal and egalitarian.

What determines the outcomes? The following factors are important: (1) pre-existing gender roles, or women's legal status and social positions prior to the revolutionary outbreak; (2) the degree of women's mobilizations, including the number and visibility of women's organizations and other institutions; (3) the ideology, values, and norms of the revolutionary movement or new government; and (4) the new state's capacity and will to mobilize resource endowments for rights-based post-revolutionary development.

External factors — such as wars or invasions (a negative external factor) or transnational links and the promotion of women's rights by international organizations (generally a more positive external factor) — may be influential as well. Ultimately, though, configurations of domestic politics and social relations play a larger role in determining outcomes for women.

In Egypt's case, the pre-existing conditions include a very conservative society and culture. Since 1995, Egyptian women have held just 2% of the seats in parliament; the chambers of the judiciary were only recently opened to women; and the country's family law privileges men.

Unlike several other Middle Eastern countries (Turkey, Iran, Tunisia, Morocco), Egyptian women have not been able to form strong or prominent women's organizations with a sizable constituency. So the pre-conditions are not favorable to a lasting transformation of gender roles.

ATC: Has the scale of the uprising in Egypt, and the speed of the "transmission" from Tunisia, come as a big surprise? We knew that the regime was profoundly alienated from the population, but could anyone anticipate something like this?

VM: Middle East specialists have long been aware of the problems of authoritarian regimes, widening inequalities and income gaps, high rates of youth unemployment, deteriorating

infrastructure and public services, and rising prices attenuated only by subsidies (which governments were slowly withdrawing).

I recall an article written back in 1995, under the pen name “Cassandra,” which described the serious problems in Egypt and predicted a mass uprising. While it took 15 years for the outbreak to occur, the accumulation of injustices, inequalities and outrages resulted in the mass social protests that we have been witnessing.

The trigger, of course, was the Tunisian movement. Clearly solutions to the malaise and to the mass protests include a democratic transition, economic reform centered on the needs and rights of citizens, justice for those harmed by past policies and oppressive laws, and institutions that will enable equality as well as guarantee rights.

ATC: Can you compare the dynamics of this uprising with the 1979 revolution in Iran, especially given the widespread fear over Egypt turning into another “Islamic Republic”?

VM: The Muslim Brotherhood is very conservative — in terms of social, cultural, and even economic matters — but it is not quite like [Iran’s Ayatollah] Khomeini and his movement. A clerical-based theocracy is not on the agenda for Egypt.

However, the Muslim Brotherhood has long advocated for Sharia law, arguing that “Islam is the solution” for Egypt’s problems. Scholars of the Middle East also have noticed the MB’s “grey zones” — ambiguities or silences on issues such as equality for Egypt’s Christians as well as women.

In August 2010, the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights (whose activities I follow) issued a press release criticizing the Muslim Brotherhood for the mock presidential elections held by its Youth Forum, which denied the request by the Forum’s Muslim Sisters’ Group to be included in the nominations. While the Youth Forum claimed that Sharia law denied women access to political decision-making, the ECWR statement argued that the Brotherhood’s stance violated Egypt’s constitutional equality clause as well as the gender-egalitarian spirit of Islam.

The Muslim Brotherhood needs to be much clearer about issues of citizen equality and rights, and about economic justice. But I don’t think they can be, because they are similar in orientation to what used to be called the Moral Majority in the USA. Most ominously for women, the Muslim Brotherhood would in all likelihood call for the strengthening of the country’s conservative family laws (as they did in the past).

ATC: How far do you think this democratic upheaval can spread in the region — realizing of course that it may take a variety of forms in different countries? In particular, will women throughout the Middle East take inspiration from Egypt?

VM: The year 2011 will forever be known as the year that began with mass protests for regime change and democratization, most notably in Tunisia and Egypt, but also in Algeria, Jordan and Yemen. But it may be helpful to place the current protests in a larger context.

The year 2002 saw the publication of the first Arab Human Development Report, in which the authors, all from the region, identified three major deficits in the region: gender inequality, authoritarian rule, and restrictions on knowledge. In 2003-04, the Moroccan family law underwent profound reform, the end result of an 11-year feminist campaign that tied national development to women’s participation and rights.

In Iran in 2007, women’s rights activists launched the One Million Signature Campaign, a grassroots movement for the repeal of discriminatory laws with a door-to-door call for women’s equality through constitutional change. And last but certainly not least, the summer of 2009 saw the Green

Protests in Iran, the first genuinely democratic mass protests of the region in the new century, with a huge participation of women, which challenged the results of a rigged election and called for an end to authoritarian rule.

These events should be seen as precursors to the mass protests in Tunisia and Egypt, seeds that were planted earlier in the new century that have seen fruition with the mass grassroots demands for regime change and democratization.

Meanwhile, and rather outrageously, the dreadful regime of the Islamic Republic has been trying to take credit for the protests, claiming that we are likely to see the institutionalization of Islamic rule throughout the region, in a demonstration effect of its own policies and especially its foreign stance.

If the Iranian rulers are a model for anyone, it could be some elements in the Muslim Brotherhood (as well as within Rachid Ghannouchi's Al-Nahda Islamic movement in Tunisia), who would want to take a tough line on the United States and Israel, encourage the practice of Islamic values and norms, and strengthen Sharia-based family law. (The latter is why Tunisian feminists protested in advance of Ghannouchi's return to Tunis on the 30th of January.)

I do believe that we are seeing a wave of democratic social movements in the region. But all this depends on whether the regimes in power can be persuaded to ensure a peaceful transition, if citizen rights are guaranteed by the new governments, and representatives of women's organizations are able to take part in transition processes, including the writing of new constitutions.

ATC: What turns people into heroes in situations like this?

VM: Mass social protests like the ones we have seen in Tunisia and Egypt have a dynamic of their own, creating a collective identity, a profound sense of unity of purpose, and a fierce determination. This can be very heady, very exhilarating, but of course there are risks, such as being physically attacked, or arrested and jailed, or even killed.

In many cases, people dismiss the risks and soldier on. These are the true heroes of such movements — though of course people like the deceased Khalid Said of Egypt and Mohammad Bouazizi of Tunisia will always be revered as heroes and martyrs.

In Iran's case in June 2009, the risks proved to be too serious for the protesters, largely because the regime's brutal reprisals were quite shocking. Will the protests in Tunisia and Egypt reverberate back in Iran, and will we finally see the end of the repressive and reactionary Islamic regime?

If we were to use the analogy of Eastern Europe, the transitions in Tunisia and Egypt may be closer to those of Poland and Czechoslovakia, and Iran's will be closer to that of Romania, which entailed much more violence. Just a thought!

P.S.

* From Against the Current, March/April 2011, No. 151.