

These “virginity tests” will spark Egypt’s next revolution

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There’s a thin line between sex and politics, and it is nonsense to keep repeating the mantra that Egypt’s revolution “wasn’t about gender”. What revolution worth its salt can be fuelled by demands of freedom and dignity and not have gender nestled in its beating heart – especially in a country replete with misogyny, religious fundamentalism (of both the Islamic and Christian kind) and which for 60 years has chafed under a hybrid of military-police rule?

If the “it wasn’t about gender” mantra is stuck on repeat so that we don’t scare the boys away, then let them remember the state screwed them too, literally – ask political prisoners, and remember the condoms and Viagra found when protesters stormed state security headquarters.

Lest we forget, we replaced Hosni Mubarak with a supreme council of Mubaraks – aka the supreme council of armed forces (SCAF) – a general who recently spoke to CNN kindly reminded us how the patriarch sounds [1]. Speaking on condition of anonymity, he admitted that female activists detained during a Tahrir Square demonstration a month after Mubarak’s overthrow had indeed been subjected to “virginity tests” [2] – as the women have insisted all along. “The girls who were detained were not like your daughter or mine,” the general said. “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).”

I have no doubt he genuinely believed that explanation would actually make sense. It is, after all, very rare for Egyptian women to spend the night outside their home, and couples must present a marriage certificate if they want to book a hotel room together. But even the patriarch misfires.

Almost exactly five years ago, Mubarak unwittingly politicised many previously apolitical Egyptians when his security forces and their hired thugs began to deliberately target for sexual assault female activists and journalists at demonstrations [3]. In conservative Egypt, where most women endured daily street sexual harassment in silence [4], the regime was determined to fondle and grope women in the hope it would shame them back home. Instead, women held up their skirts torn into pieces for the media to see. It’s one thing to be groped and harassed by passers-by, but when the state gropes you, it gives a green light that you are fair game.

The next year, mass sexual assaults in downtown Cairo targeted girls and women during a religious festival. The police watched and did nothing. The state denied the assaults took place, but bloggers at the scene exposed that lie; this encouraged women to speak out and forced men to listen. For many Egyptian men, this was the first time they realised what it meant for their mothers, sisters, wives, daughters to navigate the battlefield that Egyptian streets had become. More than 80% of women now say they’ve been street sexually harassed, and more than 60% of men admit to having done so.

And with the virginity tests, here is SCAF retracing that thin line between sex and politics again, in the hope of shaming women away from demonstrating. The council has already replicated many of the other sins that had Mubarak facing the wrong end of a revolution: military trials for civilians,

detentions and torture (by military police now, state security then), and an intolerance of critics.

Let's be clear, "virginity tests" are common in Egypt and straddle class and urban/rural divides. Be it the traditional midwife checking for a hymen on a bride's wedding night, or a forensics expert or doctor called in after a prospective bridegroom's suspicions, young women are forced to spread their legs to appease the god of virginity. But no one talks about it.

But it's different when the state/SCAF is the one forcing women's legs apart. A protest is planned for Saturday. It's a perfect time for gender to come out of the revolution's closet.

This must be our moment of reckoning with the god of virginity. The rage against the military must also target the humiliation brought by those tests, regardless of who carries them out.

So far, Egypt's Arab-language media has largely looked the other way. As Fatma Emam, a young revolutionary, told Bloomberg soon after Mubarak was forced to step down: "The revolution is not only taking place in Tahrir, it is taking place in every Egyptian house. It is the revolution of fighting the patriarch."

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P.S.

* The Guardian (blog). Posted by Mona Eltahawy Thursday, June 2nd, 2011 at 10:49 am.
<http://www.monaeltahawy.com/blog/>

Footnotes

[1] <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/05/30/egypt.virginity.tests/?hpt=T2>

[2] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/the-womens-blog-with-jane-martinson/2011/jun/01/womens-rights-arab-revolution-virginity-tests-tahrir>

[3] See on ESSF (article 23614), [Egyptian police sexually abuses pro-democracy detainee](#).

[4] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/oct/23/egypt-women-sexual-harassment>