

# Egypt: the politics of sexual violence in protest spaces

Sunday 7 July 2013, by [TADROS Mariz](#) (Date first published: 3 July 2013).

**There was a new wave of sexual assault against women in Tahrir Square last week, but women refused to let the assaults on their bodies silence their voices. These attacks were commensurate with the pattern of politically motivated sexual violence that emerged, and grew, under the Muslim Brotherhood's reign, argues Mariz Tadros.**

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When Tamarod "Rebel", a youth led initiative called for a mass revolt against the Egyptian government on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June to impeach the president and declare early elections, some were worried that half the population- women- would not turn up. Since the informal political ascendancy of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2011, and the coming to power of President Morsi on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July 2012, a pattern emerged of organized, targeted sexual assault on women in protest spaces [1]. It is believed that these acts of sexual violence are neither random nor of the same nature as social forms of sexual harassment prevalent in society. It is believed that the ultimate aim of these targeted assaults is political [2]: to intimidate the women and their families from allowing them to join protests against the status quo. Though the army and the former Mubarak regime were both responsible for using sexual assault to oppress the dissenters, the use of sexual assault increased both in number and intensity after the Brotherhood became politically empowered [3].

If the intention of these politically motivated acts of sexual assault [4] was to compel women to stay at home, it did not work. Out of the roughly 17 million or so who revolted on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June, no less than half of them were women. The presence of women of all ages, and backgrounds in these protests excelled that of the Egyptian revolution of January 2011. Rural women and women from the Delta and Upper Egypt who had a very low level of participation in the 25<sup>th</sup> of January revolts of 2011 were the first to take to the streets on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June. Coptic women who have conventionally been the top target of the Islamists in assault [partly because they represent disproportionately the highest percentage of non-veiled women] had transformed their choir hymns into subversive songs about the men in beards who gaze at the nakedness of their "exposed toe nails".

But weeks before the 30<sup>th</sup> of June, anti-sexual harassment groups had started to plan for the protests [5], predicting that opponents of the revolt [read the Brotherhood and their Islamist allies] would strike again [6], using sexual violence to clear the protest spaces.

And it happened. On Friday the 28<sup>th</sup> June as protestors filled Tahrir Square, there were five cases of sexual assault [7], the women were transferred to hospital unconscious. What was striking about these assaults was that they followed exactly the same pattern followed in previous incidents of sexual violence in protest spaces. For one, they happened by encircling these women, blocking outsiders from getting through to save them, and collectively assaulting them using extreme violence and sustaining the attacks over a long duration of time. A Dutch journalist was gang raped

and suffered severe injuries that required hospitalization. Two days later, on the day of the biggest protest ever, OpantiSh (Operation Anti-sexual assault) [8] documented 46 cases of sexual assault against women protestors in Tahrir, some involving their violation with sharp objects.

On the 30<sup>th</sup> June, Essam el Haddad, the presidential advisor stated in a press conference that the incidents of sexual assault in Tahrir Square were regrettable and he blamed the protestors who were “out of control” [9]. Immediately thereafter the Muslim Brotherhood channel, Misr 25 and other Islamist channels began a smear campaign against the protestors, shaming the way they treat women and contrasting that with the way the Islamists that have congregated in Rab’a el Adaweya square in Cairo treat their women- not a single case of harassment there, they argue. This discourse is very much in tune with the narrative of sexual assault that was widely disseminated and believed by supporters of the Islamist movements is that the revolutionaries are the ones that assault their women, the latter going to protest because they have no morals and want to be assaulted.

OpantiSh responded by issuing a statement condemning the government’s attempt to make political gains out of these assaults [10]. The statement pointed to the disconnect between Haddad’s discourse of concern for women who have been assaulted with the absence of any genuine measures to treat the assaulted in a humane way by his public officials, including the Minister of Health himself. The government’s stance on women’s exposure to politically motivated sexual assault was loud and clear in February when the Muslim Brotherhood MPs in the Shura Council [acting parliament in the past six months] were asked about the incidents of sexual assault against women in Tahrir Square on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January. Reda Al-Hefnawy, a Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) member had blamed women protestors for the sexual violence they experienced [11]. “Women should not mingle with men during protests.....How can the Ministry of Interior be tasked with protecting a lady who stands among a group of men?”

However, there are a series of indicators to suggest the Muslim Brotherhood, other Islamist allies and the government are implicated in these acts of assault. First, in all of these incidents, it was always demonstrators who tried to save women from the hands of organized groups that orchestrate attacks through highly organized and planned operations of assault in exactly the same spaces in Tahrir Square. Women and men demonstrators who tried to save the assaulted women were often subjected to sexual violence and assault themselves. The response of the Muslim Brotherhood-led government in condoning these acts as a natural consequence of women not taking the necessary precautions to protect themselves suggests a governmental complicity in doing nothing to bring to justice the perpetrators of such acts.

Second, as early as November 2011, Islamists were directly involved in acts of sexual assault on women and men who were protesting the army’s rule [12]. One young man’s account explains how he and other protestors, women and men, were sexually assaulted by the Islamists in Tahrir Square during that time.

Perhaps the most blatant acts of assault instigated by the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists directly on women and men in protest spaces occurred at el Ettehadeya on the 5<sup>th</sup> of December 2012. Ola Shehab, a young political leader in the Popular Socialist Front was there on the 5<sup>th</sup> of December when she was captured by followers of the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis [13]. She recounts that she was wearing a loose jacket and trousers, had her face covered to protect against tear gas, and had a helmet on to protect against attacks. “I realized they could not see I am a woman. They started sexually harassing me from behind when they were thinking I am a man.” When they removed Ola’s helmet and realized she was a woman, “another wave of sexual harassment continued...grabbing me from the front”. While Ola was retained the Muslim Brothers who came to “interrogate” her would introduce themselves, their ranks within the movement and where they came from, a gesture which Ola believes emanated from their belief that they would not

be held accountable for their actions. Plus they believed that she would not live to tell anyway, given that they had made up stories to the Salafis that Ola was in possession of Molotov cocktails and that she had killed ten Salafis. Lina Megahed was also kidnapped and sexually assaulted [14]- until a Salafi man had compassion on her and helped her escape.

Not surprisingly, though women and men filed lawsuits and named their perpetrators at el Ettehadaya, none of them were brought to justice- sending a clear signal from the regime of where its allegiances lie. Yet through it all, women continue to go out to the street in droves- refusing to let anyone take away their voices by assaulting their bodies.

**Mariz Tadros**, 3 July 2013

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**P.S.**

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<http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/mariz-tadros/egypt-politics-of-sexual-violence-in-protest-spaces>

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## Footnotes

- [1] <http://www.ids.ac.uk/publication/politically-motivated-sexual-assault-and-the-law-in-violent-transitions-a-case-study-from-egypt>
- [2] See on ESSF (article 29144), [State complicity in the sexual abuse of women in Cairo](#).
- [3] [http://www.pathways-of-empowerment.org/Uncovering\\_Stories\\_of\\_Sexual\\_Assault.pdf](http://www.pathways-of-empowerment.org/Uncovering_Stories_of_Sexual_Assault.pdf).
- [4] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/heather-mcrobie/patriarchy-and-militarism-in-egypt-from-street-to-government>
- [5] See on ESSF (article 29145), [Harassment free zone - A fight against sexual assaults in Egypt](#).
- [6] [http://www.pathways-of-empowerment.org/Shaming\\_the\\_Shameless.html](http://www.pathways-of-empowerment.org/Shaming_the_Shameless.html)
- [7] <http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2013/06/29/anti-harassment-groups-gear-up-for-30-june-protests/>
- [8] <http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2013/07/02/group-at-least-17-new-cases-of-sexual-assault-reported-on-monday/>
- [9] <http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2013/06/30/essam-el-haddad-tahrir-crowds-are-out-of-control/>
- [10] <https://www.facebook.com/opantish>
- [11] <http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2013/02/11/shura-council-members-blame-women-for-harassment/>
- [12] <http://vimeo.com/69164791>

[13] [http://www.pathways-of-empowerment.org/Shaming\\_the\\_Shameless.html](http://www.pathways-of-empowerment.org/Shaming_the_Shameless.html)

[14] <http://vimeo.com/69165069>