

Arab Uprising & Women's Rights: Lessons from Iran

Wednesday 10 July 2013, by [MOGHISSI Haideh](#) (Date first published: 1 July 2013).

Haideh Moghissi compares and contrasts the situation facing women in the aftermath of the Arab Spring in the light of her experience during the Iranian Revolution and offers both warning signs and hope for a different path.

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FEW PEOPLE WOULD consider the changes in regimes in the Arab countries as the birth of a new order that will transform aspects of the societies that bred the revolts. Regime changes carried out through a revolution are just the first stage of a lengthy process whose ultimate outcome is defined — among other factors, and if intervention of foreign powers is not at issue — by the strategies adopted in the post-revolution period.

Most notably, the outcomes vary based on whether or not efforts are made to control or expand the revolutionary demands, and whether political participation by the citizenry is encouraged, motivated, or inhibited. The political elites who take up power in the aftermath of a revolution invariably want to consolidate their position and restrain and overcome opposition. The democratic forces that revolt against deprivation, inequality and tyranny want to see revolutionary demands met and promises delivered.

Right now we are witnessing this phenomenon in relation to the uprisings that have come to be known collectively as the "Arab Spring." Sadly, the aftermath of revolutionary activity is bringing forth changes that run counter to the ideals and visions of the original change-seeking forces. Most notably, the swift turn in favor of Islamist parties in the wake of these uprisings — for example, in Egypt and Tunisia — while not unexpected, is worrisome indeed.

For a variety of reasons, the establishment of full-fledged Islamist states, à la Iran, may not be in order. But the very experience of Iran warns us of the serious challenges ahead for democratic forces. The devastating example of the reversal of revolutionary aspirations and demands in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution, following the establishment of an archaic, rights-negating, misogynist theocracy, bore enormous costs for women, who had supported the revolution in the millions and in different forms.

For women in particular, a revolution whose mobilizing demands were freedom, democracy and social justice turned into a huge prison under the self-appointed guardians of Shari'a. In fact the

repeated defeats of progressive social and political movements in Iran throughout the 20th century have been profound for Iranian women: the most basic demands of activists of women's "right to have rights," to use Hannah Arendt's profound concept, are still those first articulated in the early 1900s that have remained unfulfilled ever since.

The Fate of Democratic Uprising

The Iranian revolution and its consequences have been defining experiences for the region and indeed for the world. For this reason, it is quite enlightening to examine the experiences of the revolution's democratic forces, and in particular those of women activists both during and, even more so, after the event. The troubling movements evident in Tunisia and Egypt that aim to curb the activism of women, as well as undermine their existing legal and civil rights, make one wonder if a similar fate awaits women in Arab countries following the recent changes of regimes in their societies.

This question is inevitably linked to whether the political spaces opened by the popular uprisings remain open to gender-conscious women and secular activists. And will the secular Left and liberal forces that revolted against dictatorship on a platform of democracy, social justice and rights, support the struggles for gender democracy as an integral dimension of the revolution? Or would they place the concerns of female citizens in lower priority to other revolutionary demands, as it happened in Iran?

For Iranian women, what we are witnessing in relation to Tunisia and Egypt is distressingly familiar. We worried from the start about the situations emerging in Arab countries. We understood very well the hidden meaning of President Mohammed Morsi's statement after his victory in the election — that the Muslim Brotherhood's success reflected the second conquest of Egypt by Islam. [1]

The human rights lawyer and 2003 Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi expressed these concerns in March 2012 when she called upon Arab women to learn from the experiences of women in Iran and warned them against making the same mistakes. [2] So did Algerian scholars and women's rights activists, including Marieme Helie Lucas, Karima Bennoune and others who had learned, from the events of the early 1990s in Algeria, the atrocities of which militant Islamists are capable in the name of "Islamic justice" as well as the brutal response of the army.

The developments that have taken place in the region so far uphold our misgivings. For example, consider that after the devastating, bloody uprisings in Libya, the first "revolutionary" statement of the interim government, as announced by Mustafa Abdel Jalil, was a promise to lift the restrictions on polygamy and to follow the Shari'a in legal matters. This has encouraged Salafists' campaign for gender segregation in education and other areas of public life.

In Egypt the new constitution, hastily put together by the Assembly's heavily stacked Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi members and then voted on in a rushed referendum — in which only 32% of the electorate participated — stressed "the rulings of the Sharia" as the basis of legislation. The document mentions women's rights only in the context of family, and utilizes the insinuating language of protection of their dignity and morality in a way remarkably similar to Iran's constitution.

Fear now looms over the heads of women who thought that by participating day and night alongside men in the Tahrir Square protests, they had gained respect as well as recognition as citizens with rights equal to men. Now they fear rollbacks of the reforms to family law passed in 2000 and 2005, the Islamists' push for abolishing the minimum age of marriage for girls (presently 18), and reports

of a draft law that would cancel the ban on female genital mutilation.

Hope of equality has already been shattered by systemic and deliberate attacks on women, from virginity tests of arrested activists to sexual harassment of women protesters aimed at humiliating, frightening and pushing women out of the streets. [3]

Ominous Signs

Events in Tunisia point in the same direction. Reports of the deterioration of Tunisian women's status, including the increase in violent crimes and rape and the visible intimidating presence of Islamist police, who operate independently from the local police, are worrisome. [4]

So are debates on television over returning polygamy to Tunisia in order to address demographic imbalance; hard-line Salafists attacking hotels and bars and clashing with liberal, left-leaning students in universities; and moral censorship of artistic works by the Salafi-inspired Jihadists, a small but robust political force in North Africa, determined to re-islamize the society.

Attacks on the headquarters of the trade union UGTT and left parties by the self-proclaimed League for the Protection of the Revolution and other terrorizing actions culminated, so far with impunity, in the assassinations of one of the left leaders, Chukri Belaid.

For many of us who lived through and survived the establishment of the Islamic regime in Iran, these acts, while not surprising, nonetheless are distressing. Iranian women from all walks of life also participated in the 1979 Revolution. More importantly, secular women, believers and non-believers alike, waged the first mass protests against Ayatollah Khomeini's demand for the re-veiling of women in public places, a directive that occurred just a few weeks after the collapse of the Shah's regime, ironically, on the eve of the International Women's Day of 1979.

We rightly saw Ayatollah's statement as the opening of the floodgate to other regressive measures, which did indeed follow. The spontaneous insurrection of women, with no support from any of the left or liberal organizations and parties, led to massive gatherings in front of the offices of the Provisional Government, followed by sit-ins and work stoppages in ministries, hospitals, government agencies, and girls' high schools.

These activities lasted two weeks, despite the continued attacks of self-styled hezbollahi thugs on the protesters. Many women's associations and groups were formed in public and private institutions and agencies, and in every university. The strength of the women's movement against re-veiling forced a temporary retreat on the part of the clerical state.

However, it was only a temporary and minor success. The *hijab* (head-covering scarf — ed.) became mandatory several months later, after the bloody suppression of left anti-government forces in the universities, the regime's invasion of Kurdistan and Turkoman Sahra, and the closure of all universities and expulsion of leftist professors and students under the ploy of the Islamic "cultural revolution." All liberal daily newspapers were shut down on the Ayatollah's direct instruction to the gangs to "break the pens of the journalists."

To reverse this new atmosphere of repression and the advances of the Islamists would have required the formation of a coalition and the mobilization of the middle classes, along with the working class who had participated in the uprising in various ways, hoping for the betterment of their lives and an end to authoritarian rule in Iran. What was needed was to take seriously the alarming signs of the rising tide of authoritarianism in religious garb, and to form the broadest possible united front

against the Islamists' ideological and organizational assaults.

Such a coalition did not materialize. The absence of the full support and assistance of the community of secular intellectuals, and the left's theoretical confusions over Ayatollah Khomeini's "anti-imperialism," facilitated the processes that made Khomeini the unchallengeable and uncompromising leader of the revolution, rendering women activists defenseless in the face of the political avalanche.

The state-run media propagandized that the royalists and supporters of the United States had infiltrated the women's movement. The takeover of the U.S. Embassy (November 1979) and the Iran-Iraq war (1980-'88) made the situation even worse, and assisted in rolling back the modest legal gains achieved by women under the Shah's regime as well as introducing unimaginable new restrictions on women's social status and mobility. In the process women's voices against the Islamists' gender agenda were silenced.

The Movement's Weaknesses

The women's movement was not blameless in this process. At the outset we had failed to listen carefully to Khomeini's rhetorical pronouncements that the new government would provide women with all rights denied to them, "within the confines of the Shari'a." The meaning was crystal clear. However, the dominance of populist, anti-imperialist tendencies or unrealistic expectations about the revolution within the ranks of the most active, gender-conscious sections of the female population — urban, educated, middle-class women — prevented us from seeing through the revolutionary promises and the Islamists' medieval agenda wrapped in nationalist garb.

Undoubtedly, unaware or unappreciative of the intense debates and struggles that had been integral to the process of winning minimal gains for women in personal status laws during the 1960s and '70s, we had taken for granted our existing rights and personal liberties. Worse, a good part of the opposition either chose silence or joined in the regime's hostile discourse against the social and legal reforms of the previous regime as a "corrupting influence of the West," in effect helping to discredit activists of women's rights and their demands.

This one-sided perception is now echoed in Egypt. As women's rights activist Hoda Elsadda pointed out in a conversation with Deniz Kandiyoti, one of the key obstacles faced by activists of women's rights in Egypt is

"[a] prevalent public perception that associates women's rights activists and activities with the ex-First Lady, Suzanne Mubarak and her entourage, that is with corrupt regime politics. This public perception is already being politically manipulated to rescind laws and legislative procedures that were passed in the last ten years to improve the legal position of women, particularly within Personal Status Laws (PSL)." [5]

Similar perceptions in Iran, accompanied by the new regime's formidable and systematic suppression of the women's movement led to the dismantling of limited legal reforms of previous decades, including the pre-revolutionary Family Protection Act, and other draconian changes in the civil and criminal codes, which pushed back women's legal and social status by a century.

The account of the troubling outcomes of the revolution in Iran is not of course to suggest that the people's quest for social justice, democracy and dignity in Arab countries are already lost because of the Islamic character of the new regimes.

First, as should be obvious, the plight of people in the region cannot be reduced to Islam, or even to the rising tide of Islamism. The growth of Islamism is not the cause but the result of a set of policies pushed on the region and obediently carried out by corrupt local tyrants.

Decades of neoliberal economic policy, state retraction from welfare services, privatization, and breakup and distribution of public assets among the regimes' cronies enriched a small minority while squeezing the rest of the population, in the process enraging and frustrating the majority of the working poor. Government corruption, huge income gaps, poverty, unemployment, suppression of political freedoms, free expression and open debate, and consistent containment of democratic alternatives have been, with some variations, the familiar pattern.

The universal resentment of the Western powers for their pursuit of their own geopolitical and economic interests, as well as their military adventures and double standards, particularly in relation to Israel/Palestinian relations added to the people's discontent. All these circumstances discredited and made a mockery of the very concepts of Western democracy and human rights, and helped Islamists to appear as champions of national dignity and justice.

Decades of suppression of the left weakened this section of the opposition and its mobilizing possibilities, making mosques the only venue for mobilizing discontent, a circumstance that assisted in the growth of Islamist parties and in their organization of their supporters. The post-uprisings' election results in these countries confirmed the obvious, that left and independent forces did not have the same chances for organization and could not effectively compete with the Islamist parties.

Understanding the Threat

Iran's Khomeinists, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), Morocco's Justice and Development Party, as well as many other brands of Islamism, all grew and flourished as a result of this economic and political mess.

Depriving the masses of possibilities for political education, and taking away their sense of dignity, economic security and hope, made them impressionable and receptive to the idea that Islam is the only viable and culturally suitable response to social injustice and misery. This is particularly so when jobs, and medical and other welfare services, are also offered as the invisible aid of God, of course with dollars pouring in from cynical regional oil-rich powers.

An army of the underclass is also ready to execute in vented religious moral prescriptions that focus on controlling women's sexuality and moral conduct.

Differences do exist between Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and Tunisia's al-Nahda with the Al-Qaeda/Taliban criminals in Afghanistan, Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia, Lashkar-e Islam in Swat in Northern Pakistan or the mindless Ansar Din gangs in Mali. However, the Islamists' focus on women's bodies, and their male-defined purity and honor, signify that given the opportunity, they would violently block all public spaces from the secular activists for women's rights and at best, try to control them within the confines of the Sharia.

Hence, Islamists' political gains are accompanied everywhere by losses for women. Indeed, contempt for women's intelligence and emotional and moral stability is the marker of religious prescriptions and the moral regime of various brands of fundamentalism.

For this reason, it is not helpful to exaggerate the differences among the Islamists, or worse to ignore the fact that, with the rising influence of Islamism since the mid-1970s, the gendered

character of the practices associated with the state/society relationship has transformed.

Hence it would be misleading to argue, as some do, that Islamist parties in Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere are the equivalent of Christian Democrats in Germany or Sweden — or that Islamists today are not the Islamists of 1979 and that they are more inclusive and more flexible in the interpretation of the Sharia.

The officially approved measure for the moderate and democratic brand of Islamism is, of course, whether or not an Islamist party or regime is prepared to collaborate with the West. Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, for example, has scored high in this respect, and its assessment benefited from its mediation between U.S./Israel and Hamas during the last round of Israel's attack on Gaza in 2012.

This willful clouding of the Islamists' persistent agenda of reshaping the rights and lives of their female citizens is in accord with the American and British governments' Cold War strategy of identifying the Saudi Arabia and Qatari-backed Wahhabis as reliable partners in Afghanistan, Yemen, Bahrain, Egypt and elsewhere against the secular left and nationalist forces.

A False "Anti-Imperialism"

Even more disturbing, however, is the unjustified advocacy that radical Islamist groups receive from a portion of the left and from anti-racist, antiwar scholars and activists of the West, hailing the political and moral challenges that Islamists pose to Western hegemony and its liberal values. The Islamists' gendered practices, sometimes even their cruelty against women, do not seem to generate much concern, let alone open condemnation.

The rationale sometimes is that populations suffering from poverty, unemployment and neocolonial aggression should not be polarized by raising gender-related questions. Such a rationale fails to acknowledge that women represent the overwhelming majority of the armies of the poor, unemployed and exploited in these societies, in addition to being daily targets of misogynist humiliation and violence.

At other times the reality of anti-Muslim racism in the West is invoked to silence criticism of Islamist gendered practices. The point overlooked in these sorts of reasoning is the question of balance: Social realities are multi-dimensional and integrated, and we do not have to choose between forces of oppression in an effort to determine whether one is more detrimental than another to a peaceful and dignified life for women.

Notwithstanding all of the foregoing, I don't think anyone can truly anticipate the direction that the Arab uprisings will take in the near future. The societies that have gone through revolutionary upheavals in the last couple of years now face a new order whose parameters, complexities and contradictions are not yet sorted out.

It is possible, and one should certainly remain hopeful, that the unfinished revolutions in the region will produce results more favorable to the democratic forces that started the uprisings. Aside from the existence of vibrant civil societies that refuse to pack it in and go home, certain differences between the revolutionary processes in Iran versus those in Tunisia and Egypt may also positively influence events and turn back the tide of Islamist authoritarianism.

To begin with, Ben Ali's and Mubarak's early exits, designed to prevent total breakdown of the whole system, didn't permit the new regimes to promptly consolidate their power as occurred in Iran. The Muslim Brotherhood and al-Nahda won the elections and state power; but since the whole system in

Tunisia and Egypt had not collapsed, they are not in total control of the old regimes' armed forces or the security apparatuses even though they work together against the common enemy, the secular liberals and the left.

The influential presence of Egyptian and Tunisian opposition forces is another important element that was absent in post-revolutionary Iran, where many leading industrial and business owners, top generals and bureaucrats and other propertied classes departed the country before the Shah's fate had been decided and where left activists who had been for decades the main target of political repression were organizationally too weak to have real clout in post-revolution politics.

All this is to say that the existence of diverse, politically disaffected interests in a post-uprising milieu offer an opportune moment to democratic forces, change-seeking unemployed youth, women's rights activists, trade unions, and the poor and middle classes to regroup and reshape themselves, to communicate their alternative visions and strategies for change and to stop the Islamists' ideological and political onslaught.

Hopeful Possibilities

Other important differences between the experiences of Iran and the new revolutionary countries in the region need special attention as well. First, both Tunisia and Egypt escaped the immediate bloody episodes of post-revolution Iran. The five-minute trials and executions of hundreds of the former regime's figures, army generals, ministers, members of parliament, top bureaucrats, and lower-ranked army officers and security police within the first weeks and months after the revolution deeply polarized the society and desensitized people against violence.

This continued later, after the Iran-Iraq war, the massacre of several thousands of political prisoners on Khomeini's direct orders before his death, and the post-Khomeini kidnapping and assassinations known as "chain-killings" of prominent figures inside and outside Iran. The killings had a demoralizing effect. Disappointed at the outcome of the revolution, many turned against the revolution but kept quiet, fearful of the regime's unimaginable brutality.

It was only during the 2009 rigged presidential elections that we witnessed the rising up of Iranians from all walks of life against the 30-year rule of the Islamists. Yet the regime's incredible brutality that knows no limits and no humanity dampened people's protests, killing the change-seeking enthusiasm known as the Green Movement — an enthusiasm that inspired people in the region but was not rekindled inside Iran by the Arab uprisings two years later.

A second important factor that may positively affect the outcome of the Arab uprisings is that the demands of the revolutions nowhere included the establishment of an "Islamic state," the rule of the Sharia or a return to fading Islamic observance. As such, these were popular uprisings of overwhelmingly Muslim populations with distinctly secular demands.

Besides, in the absence of a charismatic leader comparable to Khomeini with his remarkable talent in manipulating people's religious emotions and getting away with unimaginable crimes against the opposition, the governing Islamists in Arab countries are not so easily able to oust the opposition — notwithstanding the recent case where arrest warrant was issued against the Egyptian satirist Bassam Youssef for allegedly "in sulging Islam."

Khomeini and his associates also succeeded in rallying people around the idea of a foreign threat and successfully diverting attention, temporarily at least, from the original economic and political demands of the revolution. Evidently, the opposition forces in Arab countries so far have not lost

their focus on the very issues that prompted the revolts: the military dictatorships; the high unemployment of youths who constitute from 50-65% of the total population in the Arab countries; the low wages, police harassment, brazen state corruption; and the concentration of wealth, businesses and job opportunities in the hands of those connected to the regime.

This is to say that the signs of hard challenges ahead in the Arab countries are many, particularly for the active opposition in which women are a part. But we also see many signs of militant Islamists losing their grip on people in every Muslim-majority country that has tasted a dose of Islamists' violence and illusory plans to restore Islamic traditions that have nothing to do with people's genuine concerns and urgent needs.

In fact the speed of popular disillusionment and delegitimization of governing Islamists in these countries is astonishing. Obviously in a situation where half of the population lives in a state of poverty and, in the case of Egypt, factories have closed since 2011, and foreign currency and tourism have drastically shrunk, people need bread, not preaching on how to be better Muslims. Rana Jawad reported from Libya in September that she was astonished by the number of people telling her that the mere existence of religious parties is an offensive concept.

Surely the case of Iran, following the establishment of the Islamic regime in the country, has warned people in the region that when it comes to freedom, dignity and social justice, a religious state is no alternative to a pseudo-secular authoritarian state. It may have also alerted the secular nationalist and left oppositions in Egypt and Tunisia, Libya and other Arab countries to the urgent need for pushing back the Islamists' offensive through forming the widest possible coalitions of change-seeking individuals and political parties, religious minorities, youth, trade unions, women's groups and other organized sections of civil society.

Cases in point are the coalition of 33 women's rights organizations in Egypt that came together around the issues the women wanted to see included in the constitution, such as a law criminalizing sexual harassment. Ten left-leaning parties and movements have also formed the Democratic Revolutionary Coalition (DRC), based on the understanding that all opposition forces and not only the left should work together in this dangerous phase of Egypt's revolution. The liberals have formed their own coalition, the National Salvation Front, consisting of Popular Current, Dostour Party and others.

The "Coalition for Women of Tunisia," made up of 15 registered NGOs, was announced in September 2012. Its objective is to preserve and defend women's rights stipulated in Tunisian law since Independence (the Personal Statute Code or CSP, promulgated in 1956, and all amendments added until 2010). The Libyan Women Forum (LWF), representing eight women's rights organizations, formed immediately following the election results in 2011, represents another step in the same direction.

These significant developments make one remain hopeful that the unfinished revolutions in the region might produce results more favorable to the democratic forces that started the uprisings.

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P.S.

* From Against the Current n° 165, July/August 2013 : <http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/3934>

Footnotes

[1] Team FI “No Spring for Arab Women” <http://feministsindia.com/tag/islamic-feminism/> August 14, 2012.

[2] Shirin Ebadi, “A Warning for Women of the Arab Spring,” The Wall Street Journal WSJ.com, March 14, 2012.

[3] The Shoura Council’s human rights committee in mid-February 2013 blamed women protesters for the sexual harassment to which they had been subjected. See SIWI, 17 February.

[4] English Alarabiya.net/en/views/2013/04/09/post-revolution.women.

[5] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/hoda-elsadda/egypt-battle-over-hope-and-morale>.