



What lies ahead for Arab women

by KAMILIA LAHRICHI

Journalist based in Hong Kong

Despite playing a very important role during the uprisings in the Arab world, Arab women's rights are now threatened. Women have to be united to reaffirm gender equality in private, social and public life.

The Arab Spring has moved in a retrograde direction. Religious parties have hijacked the secular movements sweeping the Middle East and North Africa that have called for justice and freedom. Most importantly, these Islamist groups have marginalized the role of women in politics and society, shifting their role away from social activism to political under-representation.

After two centuries of advocacy for women's emancipation in the Arab world, women progressively acquired fundamental rights, namely in the areas of family law and politics, resulting in the devaluation of men's place in the society. During the protests, women marched alongside men and were involved in the reform process, from organizing labor union strikes to suffering military abuses and calling for the overthrow of Arab regimes. Despite the pervasive social conservatism in Arab societies, which sometimes limited their participation in the demonstrations, Arab women have attracted the world's attention when three female activists were recipient of the Nobel Prize in December 2011 for their active role in the Arab Spring.

Today, there are several reasons not to be sanguine about the outcome of these revolutions. Islamism, not freedom, triumphed. Arab societies consider an ideology that can strangle women's rights as a major backbone. As elections in Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt resulted in Islamists' landslide, there is now a call for reversing the rights women have recently acquired because religious groups equate them with the former Westernized and corrupted regimes. In addition, issues deemed to be more pressing to reform Arab nations have overshadowed women's rights. During their electoral campaigns, Islamic parties have stressed their political virginity and put the fight against corruption at the heart of the political agenda, thus relegating gender equality.

Deplorably, instances of women's under-representation in politics after the North African elections are widespread. In Morocco, where the feminist movement succeeded in 2004 in limiting polygamy, abolishing repudiation and ensuring women's economic security after a divorce, disappointment was high. The newly formed

government featured 30 male ministers and only one female – veiled. In response to this setback for democracy, Moroccan women demonstrated on January 19 in front of the Parliament while Islamist Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane was presenting his political program to the government and asserting that Islam is the bedrock of Moroccan identity. A petition of the Women's Tribune Association denounced women's "under-representation among the staff of all national political parties".

In Egypt, there was not any woman in the committee responsible for revising the constitution, a task of national importance. There was no woman appointed to be governor either. The military also decided to eliminate the quota ensuring women 64 seats in the parliament, which was established during the Mubarak era. Furthermore, as the Muslim Brotherhood gained momentum during the demonstrations in Tahrir Square, the country witnessed a further Islamization of the society. Radical factions started to emerge. Salafi cleric Mustafa al-Adawi issued a *fatwa* (religious edict) in December 2011 prohibiting Muslim women from wearing high heels in public. Another Salafi leader refused to appear on a TV talk show because a woman host was not wearing a headscarf. As for Sheikh Hazem Salah Abu Ismail, he opposed the mingling of the sexes in public places.

The drawback to women's rights was felt to a lesser extent in Tunisia, which abolished polygamy and legislated women's equality in marriage, divorce and child custody after its 1956 independence. Despite the fact gender-segregated polling places was established for the first time in strongholds of the Islamist party En-Nahda during the Jasmine Revolution, women managed to gain 23 percent of the parliament's seats. Yet, as most of them are En-Nahda members, they will likely reflect Islam's traditional views on women. For instance, the party's female spokeswoman, Souad Abderrahim, declared in November 2011 that single mothers are a



disgrace to Tunisia and "do not have the right to exist".

How did secular movements, which leitmotifs have been democratization, freedom of speech and fair elections, undermine gender equality in public affairs and threatened women's recent social and political achievements?

The point here is not to demonize Islamist parties. In fact, large groups of women voted for religious factions that institutionalized gender discrimination in the past, such as the majority of the Moroccan female bourgeoisie and many Western-educated Egyptian women. What is hard to fathom is how those women were seduced by Islamist parties' moderate rhetoric of gender equality when Islamist leaders do not even shake women's hands for fear of being sullied. Many Arab women are responsible for believing that Islamism, the *first and foremost* cause for discrimination

“ Women must unite not to be excluded from the decision-making process, counter radical Muslims’ mounting pressure to push them back into traditional roles and call for a cabinet reshuffle in countries that neglect their role. ”

against females in the Arab world, could bring about positive change.

Let us remember that the reason why Muslim women suffer from such discriminatory legislation as “guardianship laws”, which enable men to treat them like chattel and imprison them in the status of minors, is because most family laws in Arab countries are based on interpretations of sharia (Islamic law). For example, Muslim daughters inherit only half of what sons do. Muslim husbands hold property a wife acquired during marriage and can forbid their wife(s) to travel without a chaperon. Muslim women’s testimony in court counts as half the value of men’s.

What is puzzling is that it took two centuries for the Islamic feminist movement to reform sharia-based laws, which are sacred and therefore difficult to change. Yet, it took a few months for other women to reverse this path and turn to an ideology that ascribes to Muslim women the role of obedient wife, daughter, sister or mother. That is why the Islamic veil or the burqa (cloaking the entire body) hides women’s identity behind their function. Egyptian, Moroccan and Tunisian women who voted for Islamist parties thought that democracy and Islamism could work together. In reality, democracy refers to civic responsibility whereas Islamism deals with blind obedience to a dogma.

One Moroccan lawyer specialized in Islamic family law explained to me that she now

receives about twice a day open letters and petitions that denounce the setback to women’s emancipation.

On the other hand, the increasing Islamization of Arab societies has counter-weighted the Arab feminist movement, creating an environment conducive to the rise of Islamist parties. Ironically, hundreds of thousands of Moroccan Islamist women demonstrated in Casablanca in March 2000 against the government’s National Plan for Integrating Women in Development. This program aimed at “removing the conditions of inequality between men and women”. Nevertheless, Islamist female activists contended that it was not consistent with the teachings of sharia.

The brutal truth is that women across North Africa and the Middle East have now to work together with Islamists in order to preserve the status they have recently acquired.

Great challenges lie ahead. If it took women months to depose dictators, it might take years to overcome the predominant male-dominated mentalities in the Arab world. Women must unite not to be excluded from the decision-making process, counter radical Muslims’ mounting pressure to push them back into traditional roles and call for a cabinet reshuffle in countries that neglect their role. Islamist parties will also have to appeal to women in order to stay in power, as they are undeniable economic actors.

The Arab Spring, which motto is the political, social and cultural transformation of unfair societies shall not be over until it benefits both men and women. ●

www.kamilialahrichi.com

Twitter: @Kam_Lah