

Omar Ahmed: Post-Mubarak: A better situation for women?



Omar Ahmed majored in foreign trade at the University of Helwan. He is the General Secretary of the Egyptian's Women Union (EWU). After many unsuccessful attempts, EWU was formed shortly after the revolution in March 2011 in order to promote gender equality through awareness raising.

Since the outbreak of the revolution on January 25th, I have witnessed many thousands of women in Tahrir Square among millions of protesters. I have seen women from different social classes and backgrounds, university students, doctors, teachers and housewives. Muslim women with and without "Hijab" as well as Christians have been there. No one asked why they had come, as everyone in Tahrir had the same reason: forcing Mubarak to step down.

On January 28th, known as the day of anger, some men who participated in the demonstrations said that they felt guilty when they saw women marching on the streets, facing the gun shots and gas bombs, while they were watching them on television from their safe homes. This was a trigger for them to join the revolution.

The revolution called for freedom, dignity and social justice but today, nine months after the revolution, there is a gap. About half of the Egyptian population might not be represented in the first parliament elections or even worse than that, the right to vote may be taken away from them.

Although Mubarak's regime had many negatives, women somehow benefited from some laws for a better status of women. To give an example, the right for women to divorce called "Khula" was introduced during Mubarak's reign. However, it is extremely complicated and requires the women to pay back the dowry paid by her husband prior to the marriage. These laws are at risk now of being changed, amended or even abolished as many protesters claim that most women's rights were only designed to please the ex-first lady Suzanne Mubarak and that they are against Islam. Protesters also adopt the belief that these laws were made to make women superior to men, something they would never accept.



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Suzanne Mubarak had taken credit for many laws targeted to improve the status of women and children but in fact these laws were established due to the efforts and struggles undertaken over many years by brave activists like Dr. Nawal Al Saadawi and Dr. Mona Helmi. For instance, they were claiming that illegitimate children are to be named after their mother. However the law came into light as Suzanne Mubarak's law for children in 2005, allowing over one million illegitimate children to be Egyptian citizens and have the right to go to school.

The way women are treated after Mubarak stepped down is not promising as hundreds of women were attacked by groups of men during their march on the International Women's Day, March 8th. One day later when the army cleared Tahrir square from protesters, 18 girls were arrested, tortured and subjected to virginity tests. However, the army leaders at first denied it and banned any news related to virginity tests to be published in Egyptian media. After a while a senior army general confirmed in a CNN interview that virginity tests were made and added that those girls were "non-virgins" and deserved it. He said that they should not be seen as "our daughters" because during the revolution they were spending nights in tents with men.



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The Constitutional Amendments Committee appointed by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) did not include any women. The interim government formed by Prime Minister Essam Sharaf has only one female minister (from the ex-regime) while Mubarak's government had four female ministers. After SCAF was criticized for hindering the participation of women, it enforced another law calling on all political parties to have at least one woman on their electoral list.

Some weeks ago the Salafi party, called El Nour, had what they called a "feminist conference". However, there was no single woman on the panel. On the other hand, the Muslim Brotherhood has their own department for women called "The Muslim Sisters", who are experienced and organized. They are trained to speak to the media and to arrange protests. Some of them are progressive, others are more radical. During the protests, some of them got even detained. Their exposure in Tahrir, coupled with the ouster of Mubarak, has raised the hopes that the "Muslim Sisters" might gain further emancipation and more equality within the organization. Today we cannot expect much from them now as regards the improvement of the status of women. Maybe after a generation of freedom and political participation, they will manage to be equal to their brothers and then work for the liberation of other women.

The major threat for modern women is that Islamic groups like the Salafi and the Muslim Brotherhood consider women as "second class citizens". They were asking thousands of women who demonstrated in Tahrir to go back home and be housewives.