

The Central Role of Women's Issues in Post-Arab Spring North Africa

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Women's demands in North Africa are increasingly diversified and polyvocal as new actors and agents gain visibility in the public sphere of authority. This diversification is being nourished by new values, such as all citizens' dignity in the public sphere, and new approaches, such as the use of social media and transnational networking. Women's issues and women's rights are at the center of these dynamics; just as they have been before. Although the Arab Spring did not specifically target women's issues, it is thanks to decades of women's struggle for their rights that issues like education and health care were top on the agenda of the mass protests. Furthermore, it was the protest culture that secular women's activists instilled in the public sphere that opened the door to large-scale demonstrations. Given the rapidity with which events and changes are taking place, we need both a diachronic and a synchronic perspective to understand what's happening. Women's issues are creating what I will refer to as the «Center».

I define the Center as an ideological middle-ground space between the increasingly antagonistic paradigms of secularism (separation of religion and politics) and Islamism (use of religion in politics) in the post-revolution North Africa. It is a space in which a reconfiguration of social space is taking place: the Center itself holds, but with diachronic and synchronic aspects that move. This reconfiguration is based around the twin dichotomies of conservative/modernist and Islamist/secular.

The conservative-modernist dichotomy in North Africa was born during the colonization period. While both trends supported nationalism, they significantly differed in their reactions to the West and modernity. Conservatives opposed any influence of the West, especially in family and social matters, and modernists viewed the West as a symbol of progress. From the 1970s onward, and with rampant political Islamism in the background, the conservative-modernist dichotomy developed into a secularists-Islamists one. It is important to note that this new development did not supplant the initial modernist-conservative dichotomy but politicized, and thus polarized, the dichotomy and rendered it more complex. In politics, modernists tend to support secularists and conservatives tend to support Islamists, although the latter are not necessarily against modernity and some of them may support secularists.

A number of women-related issues are now raised in the Center: Islamist rhetoric that aims at rolling back women's achievements in terms of rights, the escalation of gender-based violence pursuant to the escalation of terrorism in the region, domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, etc. In addressing these issues, secular feminist forces are trying to gain initiative. Women's rights are increasingly included in "mutual accountability frameworks" between

donors and aid recipients in governmental institutions with the aim of regulating political dialogue, aid, trade, gender aspects, and wider economic relations.

The Center exhibits the following characteristics: it does not have a clear leadership; it transcends the boundaries of the secularist-Islamist dichotomy; it uses conventional and social media; and it is porous, i.e. has open boundaries that are often variable and not clearly delineated. Hence, seemingly incompatible standpoints, like secularism and Islamism, may co-exist and converse without converging in this space. Subsequently, the Center is bound to be complex and multifaceted because it addresses different important facets of a complex and quickly changing reality. In practical terms, the Center expands beyond the reform movements of the 1990s-2000s and as such, does not easily fall in the Anglo-American or Western European frameworks of what constitutes a “political center” because the base of social reform is expanded and the relationship with politics is not direct.

Theoretically speaking, the way secularism and Islamism are applied varies from country to country in North Africa (and the Arab-Muslim world at large) because although all Arab-Muslim countries consider Islam a state religion and legal reference (thus part and parcel of politics and religion) Islam does not play the same political role in every country. The differences were constructed during the state-building phases when each country chose a specific madhab as a frame of reference that fitted its political structure. For example, Morocco chose the Maliki madhab because this school acknowledges the religious authority of the ruler and hence suited a multi-ethnic and multilingual country like Morocco. In other words, the way political and religious authorities function in Muslim-majority countries, as well as the means and degrees of the application of shari’a law in their legal systems, varies. In Morocco, secularists do not in general see their stance as opposing Islam, but they see it as opposing Islamists in an overarching context where monarchy (expected to protect both trends) rules. Indeed, the secularists and Islamists in Morocco exhibit surface commonalities and deep underlying divergences. In sum, while we all understand what secularism means theoretically, it is tailored to the specific historical and sociopolitical nature of each country. Within the Moroccan ruling system, where both the supreme religious and political authorities are prerogatives of the king, the majority of the secular and Islamist forces do not contest this reality. Of course each trend has its own moderate and extremist versions, but in general both secular and Islamist forces acknowledge the position of the king as the supreme and ultimate arbiter in cases of clash between parties, as well as a source of stability.

Within this framework, women’s issues constitute genuine fuel in the battlefield of ideas. This fuel is used by politicians (men and women) for specific political aims, whereas women’s movements use it to score more gains. The moving grounds may either bring secular and Islamist women together on the premise that after all they are fighting for the same rights, or separate them when the rights are too much politicized.

It seems that in the long run the Center will allow a broadening of the support base for women’s rights movements, through engaging new youth activists and women in rural and urban slum areas. Initiatives to transform development programs that embed gender equality and women’s participation are a valuable start. However, there is a growing feeling that the chief obstacle to these goals is the rise of fundamentalist movements in the region and the failure of political Islam to manage politics and be inclusive in governance.

By way of conclusion, I would say that whatever the constraints, in the case of North Africa, the use of gender as a lens through which emerging politicized identification processes are analyzed is a promising field of inquiry which brings together various intellectual voices in the region and across the globe. This in turn allows a contextualization of the dominant post-revolution narratives in the region - the public role of Islam in women’s roles, recent reforms regarding women’s legal status, etc. Gender politics is crucial in forging these narratives, and hence, exemplifies how the three axes of identity—religion, ethnicity, and gender— were activated during the revolution moment and nourished in the aftermath of the revolution.

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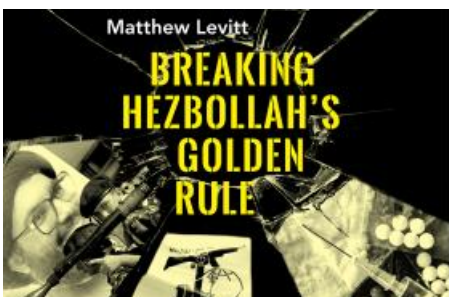
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