



Egypt Women Clash Over Sharia Law After Tahrir Shows Equality

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In Tahrir Square, the site of 18 days of rebellion that ousted Mubarak, women were from disparate groups, veiled and not, Christian and Muslim, Westernized and traditional. Photographer: Patrick Baz/AFP/Getty Images

Fatma Emam's mother accused her of wanting to be a man and threatened to disown her if the 28-year-old joined the protests in Tahrir Square. She went anyway.

"There are so many women who like me defied their families," Emam said after spending five days and four nights in downtown Cairo. "The revolution is not only taking place in Tahrir, it is taking place in every Egyptian house. It is the revolution of fighting the patriarch."

The women who rallied against former President Hosni Mubarak challenged social taboos in a culture that favors men. Now the triumph of the uprising has given way to cautious optimism among liberal activists who want an entirely secular legal code, with no Sharia, or Islamic-based, laws.

They are at odds with other women in the pro-democracy movement as the military sets the stage for the new Egypt, suspending the constitution and dissolving the parliament.

"Women in this country have always participated in revolutionary movements, and then they have had to fight inch by inch to get what they should get when things return to normality," said Margot Badran, author of "Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences" and a senior scholar at the Washington-based Woodrow Wilson Center who was in Cairo when the

revolt began Jan. 25. “It is like driving with the emergency brake on. You are driving, but it is pulling you back.”

Husband’s Permission

In Tahrir Square, the site of 18 days of rebellion that ousted Mubarak, women were from disparate groups, veiled and not, Christian and Muslim, Westernized and traditional. They were as outspoken as men, leading chants and banging iron rods on power poles to sound the alert of approaching pro-regime marchers. It was remarkable in a country where until 2000 a wife couldn’t leave the country without her husband’s permission and until 1999 a rapist could avoid prison by marrying his victim.

While Egypt in 1957 was the first Arab country to elect a woman to parliament, just four won positions in 2005. The People’s Assembly then created 64 seats for women. With the legislature disbanded, the fate of the 64-seat quota is unknown.

The military will keep the Mubarak cabinet, which includes four women, in place for the time being during a transition period to a new elected government, according to a statement from the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. The council appointed a committee Feb. 15 to rewrite the constitution.

Traditional, Conservative Views

As progressive as Egypt has been when compared with some other Arab countries, many in the country hold traditional, conservative views. Women would rather not work outside the home, according to a government study that found about 3 percent of all women in the workforce were in supervisory positions. Divorce for women often comes with stigma. Staying single into one’s 30s brings the label of spinster and pressure to marry. Being the victim of sexual harassment can subject a woman to questions about how modestly she dresses.

The Tahrir Square campaigners were from a mosaic of groups orchestrated largely by young cyber activists holding a broad mix of views on social issues. The country is about 90 percent Muslim, and Egypt’s best organized opposition group, the Muslim Brotherhood, combines public support for democracy with a backing for Sharia law. The brotherhood -- which issued a draft position paper in 2007 that said a woman or a Christian couldn’t be head of state --- announced plans Feb. 15 to form a political party.

Having Four Wives

“The Islamic Sharia does not conflict with freedom and democracy,” Asmaa El-Erian, 21, the daughter of a Muslim Brotherhood leader, Essam El-Erian, who was imprisoned repeatedly by the Mubarak government.

El-Erian’s goals for the new Egypt are in sync with her more liberal sisters when it comes to envisioning greater participation in politics and more power in government, though she said the head of state should always be male because “men are more strict and firm.” She said she rejects the demands of some activists to end a man’s freedom to have four wives.

“God has allowed polygamy,” she said. “Maybe many people don’t prefer it, but it is not religiously forbidden.”

Jehan El-Halafawy, a 59-year-old Muslim Brotherhood member who has run unsuccessfully for parliament, dismissed calls for secular family laws as part of “an external agenda.”

“We cannot deviate from the basics of religion,” she said. “When there are clear religious texts about certain topics, then you cannot open the door for negotiations.”

Open to Interpretation

The idea that women shouldn’t engage in politics or even rule as a head of state, on the other hand, is out of date, El-Halafawy said. “The cultural views in our society are that when women contest politics, they compete and butt heads with men,” she said, “and thus many men reject this.”

Activists like Nehad Abul Komsan, a founder of the Egyptian Centre for Women’s Rights in Cairo, contend that Sharia law, which is based on interpretations of the Koran and religious writings, can lead to discrimination. While women are allowed to file for an expedited divorce in Egypt, they must return their dowries and can’t receive alimony if they do. Men can divorce wives by simply declaring, “I divorce you.” Women inherit half what male family members do.

“More women need to be engaged in the discussions,” Abul Komsan said. “When we talk to leaders they say it is not the time to talk about gender issues; it is the time to talk about the future. But we can’t have a gender-blind future.”

Hurling Stones

Literacy rates are lower for women than men, at 59.7 percent and 83.3 percent respectively, according to the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics. While women made up 49 percent of the population in 2006, they were 22 percent of the workforce, agency data show.

Estimates by the United Nations and other research groups are that more than 80 percent of women have undergone the genital mutilation that tradition holds protects their chastity. A

survey last year of women aged 15 to 29 by the UN Development Programme found 50 percent had been subjected to sexual harassment and 99 percent to verbal harassment from men.

Legal reforms could change that, said Abul Komsan, who links sexual violence to political oppression. “When people feel they aren’t respected,” she said, “why should they respect others?”

In Tahrir Square, women said they weren’t hassled or bullied during the protests.

Support From Afar

“Women were spending the night out there, they were cleaning the streets alongside men, they were hurling stones with the men,” said El-Erian, who was in the plaza for three days. Sally Moore, a 32-year-old who is a member of the Youths’ Coalition of the Egyptian Revolt of Anger, an alliance of protest groups, said women rejected the offers of men to shield them during clashes with pro-regime forces. More than 300 people died in the country during the demonstrations.

“We said, ‘Sorry, we’re just like you,’” Moore said. “Being a woman does not mean that I need your protection or that I have to support you from afar.”

For Nawal El Saadawi, a 79-year-old former political prisoner whose 1969 book “Women and Sex” was banned in Egypt, what was notable was how she was treated with esteem by young men in the Muslim Brotherhood.

“They said, ‘We read your books and we differ on some points but we respect you, we love you and we believe in equality,’” she said. “This revolution is making a new social contract. It is creating a new value system.”

Declining Female Representation

Egypt, the most populous Arab country with 80 million people, has a long history of powerful women, with rulers in ancient times that included the pharaohs Cleopatra, Nitocris and Hatshepsut. The Egyptian Feminist Union was founded in 1923 by Hoda Shaarawi, who shocked the country by going unveiled. Rawya Attiya, a Liberation Army officer, became the first Arab female parliamentarian after campaigning in a military uniform.

“Egyptian feminists have inspired women activists across the region across the last century,” said Isobel Coleman, author of “Paradise Beneath Her Feet: How Women Are Transforming The Middle East” and a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York.

At the same time, Coleman said, a strong Islamic movement “has pulled in another direction.” Women made gains under Mubarak’s authoritarian rule “that in a democratic system probably wouldn’t have passed,” she said. “How these things play out in a more democratic system remains to be seen.”

Under Mubarak, Egypt in 2003 appointed its first female judges and in 2009 named its first female university president.

An Islamic Framework

Still, female representation has declined since 1984, when women occupied 36 of 458 seats, according to the Cairo-based Women Living Under Muslim Laws. The supreme court in April overruled State Council judges who decided women couldn't serve on the body that settles cases brought against the government because they are too emotional and too busy raising children.

Liberal activists may have to negotiate within an Islamic framework, Coleman said. She said that happened in Morocco, where parliament in 2004 raised the minimum marriage age to 18 established joint responsibility for children and granted women more rights in the negotiation of marriage contracts.

In Egypt, parents like Fatma Emam's mother often put more restrictions on daughters than sons. Emam, a research associate at Nazra for Feminist Studies in Cairo who describes herself as an Islamic feminist, hasn't returned home. She said she is "very hopeful about the country's future.

"People have come out of their shells," she said. "Egypt is liberated."

The 25-year-old who helped spark the demonstrations with an online video, Asmaa Mahfouz, said her father refused to allow her to stay in the plaza after dark. "No girl of mine spends the night away from home," Mahfouz said he told her.

In the video, Mahfouz said: "I, a girl, am going down to Tahrir Square. Come down with us and demand your rights."

Her foray into politics has changed her, she said. "I was very scared. I was shy, as a girl, to go up to people and talk," she said. "I have become much stronger."

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