

## THE TUNISIAN AND EGYPTIAN REVOLUTIONS, FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF WOMEN AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS\*

or what is the point of a revolution if one cannot dance?

Since the beginning of the year, major upheavals have taken place along the southern Mediterranean coast. Just when no one dared anymore to dream of such a possibility, seemingly well entrenched dictatorships were swept aside by a groundswell of popular demand for liberty, dignity, and justice.

It happened first in Tunisia, then Egypt.

While these events did not take place without violence and pain, the overall impression that remains is one of an explosion of solidarity and liberty, a wonderful opening to endless possibilities. This impression undoubtedly is reinforced by the fact that women, in great numbers and in a very vocal manner, suddenly appeared and seemed extremely at ease in a generally masculine setting.

The dictators were overthrown, and the revolutions are underway: several months later, what has happened to that promising movement, that creative and joyous combat of women and men fighting for equality and liberty?

### A VERY RELATIVE CHANGE

Before the revolution, the Tunisian association scene was full of fictitious organizations controlled by the Ben Ali family, with only a few independent human rights groups that included several women's associations. Since the revolution, these independent associations appear to be the only organized groups in a country that had been completely locked down, and they are receiving a sudden surge in demand from people wishing to become members. Never having had the opportunity to develop the organizational capacities needed to respond to such a situation, these associations are asking women to create their own associations with a promise to support them in the process.

In Egypt, the situation is different: prior to the revolution, there were numerous independent associations in Egypt, of which several dozen were engaged in the struggle for equality and human rights. However, these associations often were crowded out by numerous NGOs focused more on attracting funding than achieving change. They furthermore had to suffer seeing Egyptian women represented at international conferences by the National Women's Council, an organization created and presided over by Susan Mubarak, the wife of the President.<sup>1</sup>

1. Since the revolution, women's associations have mobilized themselves to

In each country, and as in every revolution, negotiations now are taking place between the different political camps revolving around governing bodies and agencies overseeing the transition to democracy.

But as in every revolution, women are finding themselves being gradually excluded from the political game.

In Tunisia, following a first provisional government that decided, quasi unanimously, to leave in place the reservations made to CEDAW,<sup>2</sup> a second government is in place today that includes only 2 women among its 22 ministers. One is in charge of the Ministry of Women's Affairs<sup>3</sup> while the second is responsible for the Ministry of Higher Education.

Political parties, which are proliferating, hardly have any women in their decision making bodies: only one party has a woman in the post of secretary-general.

In parallel, many independent women have committed themselves to working on the transition to democracy.

During the national conference of women for equality and citizenship organized in March in Tunis, many women insisted on the need to establish a constitution stipulating equality and the separation of church and state, with the implication of parity in decision-making bodies, the lifting of reservations, a full and complete citizenship status.<sup>4</sup>

Soon after the conference, a number of these women were invited to join the High Commission for the Realisation of Revolutionary Goals, Political Reforms and Democratic Transition. There, they defended -- and on April 11 won! -- the establishment of parity for the election of the Constituent Assembly scheduled on July 24.

denounce this organization, which never condemned the violations against Egyptians during the revolution. They demand the establishment of a committee formed by consensus of women's and civic organizations, composed of women known for their independence, integrity, and efficacy, that would represent Egyptian women and ensure the participation of women in the construction of political life.

2. The Tunisian State had made reservations based on a very conservative interpretation of Muslim religious texts to the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

3. That feminists are calling to be transformed into the Ministry of Equality.

4. This was the occasion to present the manifesto of women for equality and citizenship <http://www.manifeste.pour.l.egalite.et.la.citoyennete>

\* This article is based essentially on numerous testimonials from the main actors in the Tunisian and Egyptian movements. The complexity of the current situation inevitably implies that some information will be subject to change in the near future.

Thanks to this vote, men and women must be equally represented on all lists, with the male and female candidates presented in alternating order. The article also decrees that any list that does not respect this equal representation will be invalidated. It was a gruelling battle because the High Commission today has among 161 members only 35 women, with certain defenders of democracy, such as the League of Human Rights and the Tunisian Labour Union, failing to name a single woman to represent them.

This was an occasion to observe that when women are involved, the lines between democrats and conservatives are easily blurred: some so-called progressive parties defended the proposition of a 25% quota, judging this to be sufficient, while there were members of the Islamist party, Nahda, among the 51% of the men in favour of parity.

In Egypt, the new government has 2 women among its 24 ministers: the Minister of Solidarity and Social Justice, already a minister under Mubarak, and the Minister of International Cooperation. The national committee in charge of drafting the new constitution, which now has completed its task, did not include a single woman or a man with feminist sympathies. In the proposed constitution, the authors furthermore stipulate that the president of the republic must be married to an Egyptian woman, thereby revealing, beyond xenophobia, the incapacity of those drafting the constitution to imagine a woman in the office of president. One hundred and seventeen organizations, including women's associations, signed a letter to protest this proposed constitution. They demanded that a committee of some one hundred individuals from diverse backgrounds be in charge of drafting the constitution on the basis of equality, the protection of human rights, and citizenship. Despite their opposition campaign, this discriminatory constitution, which was supported strongly by fundamentalists, was adopted in a referendum on March 20.<sup>5</sup>

## MENACING SHADOWS

We thus see that women must defend tooth and nail what they call in both countries the principles of the revolution: liberty, equality, dignity.

These women, and the men who share their dream of a more open, more egalitarian society, must face two threats, both resembling each other in their intent to dominate through the use of violence. The first threat comes from those who were overthrown by these revolutions, the second from those who participated in it but with the goal of imposing their own iron vision of society.

The first group is active on all levels, trying to maintain

5. Since this article was written, a positive development has taken place: the Committee of complaints and propositions of the People's Assembly approved on April 16 a bill against sexual harassment presented by the deputy Georgette Qllini.

themselves in positions of power through sabotage and the latent threat of violence.

In Tunisia, the atmosphere is more one of confusion, incivility and latent aggression which may be maintained on purpose.

In Egypt, there are reports of violence on the part of the army, an army that had presented itself as being the protector of the revolution. Since the first days of the uprising, eyewitness reports have been pouring in indicating that the army never ceased to arrest and torture individuals considered subversive. Eighteen women arrested by the military on March 9 have testified to being beaten, threatened with arrest for prostitution, tortured with electric shock, and subjugated to body searches and virginity tests while soldiers photographed them naked.

The second group consists of the supporters of the fundamentalist movement: they include at one end of the spectrum so-called moderate fundamentalists, on the other, the radical Salafists. They are organized and pursue their activities like extreme right parties around the world.

Among the Islamist parties in Tunisia, five are officially recognized; the others dismissed democracy out of hand and were refused recognition.

Their strategy takes many forms. Civic-minded, they clean neighborhoods that have been swamped by garbage left by municipal authorities and vote in favor of parity. Practical, they take control of mosques little by little, buy votes, and demonstrate for the wearing of the niqab and the return of women to the home. Violent, they impede groups of artists from playing in front of children in refugee camps, attack rallies in support of secularism, undertake smear campaigns against women and denigrate publically active women, organize attacks on cultural centers...

In Egypt, violence has long been used by fundamentalist and today is carried out openly: on March 8, the demonstration for International Women's Day was attacked with a mixture of physical violence and sexual harassment by fundamentalists expressing their refusal to allow women to participate in the public and political sphere. Since then, more and more information is reaching us that indicate an escalation in the systematic use of violence by Salafists to impose their vision of morality. In the governorate of Munifia, the house of an unmarried woman whom they declared was dishonourable was besieged and burned down, the woman threatened with death if she tried to return; in Quena, a Copt, accused of turning his house into a brothel, was physically abused and his car was burned. In addition, more and more women are receiving threats on Facebook that they will be punished if they do not wear "proper"<sup>6</sup> clothing.

6. Or the *hidjab*.

Alongside this open aggression, an underground propaganda machine worries many Egyptian women's associations: it involves calls to repeal all laws concerning the rights of women and children under the pretext that they were issued under the influence of the wife of the ex-president, Susan Mubarak. These laws, while not egalitarian, at least protected some rights. The women's associations are up in arms over this pretext, which they consider to be an insult to themselves and to everyone who has fought since 1919 for the recognition of human rights in Egypt. They are demanding the military council and the transition government, and every individual and organisation concerned in Egypt, to take a clear position against these reactionary tendencies and to defend the rights of women according to the principles of the revolution.

### **MULTIPLE BATTLEFRONTS AND PALM LEAVES<sup>7</sup>**

And so everything is accelerating and time, which had been suspended for a magical moment of solidarity, attention, and consciousness full of humanity<sup>8</sup>, has resumed its course, and hate mongers and profiteers accelerate their plans.

The women who in times of political repression and anti-democratic closure maintained places where they could meet, discuss, watch over, and seek the support of international networks to defy the law and reinforce their strength, today find themselves the only ones able to articulate feminist demands in the new decision making bodies.

They are obliged, even when this was not particularly their initial field of action, to invest themselves in all areas where decisions for the future management of their country are being taken so that they do not wind up forgotten by their revolution.

At the same time, as much an illustration as an allegory of the revolution underway, they are highly solicited by the media and diverse bilateral and multilateral institutions (different overseas assistance agencies, European Community, United Nations) and they must respond to these overtures, which provide them an opportunity to transmit their message and find support.

Women activists must fight on multiple fronts; in the private domain as always: for their family and their work, as few are salaried employees in their organisations; and in the public domain: in their own women's organisation, in bodies monitoring the democratic/revolutionary process, in public relations at national and international levels. They are under continuous pressure, whether to react to new political events, respond to the attacks of a so-called democracy building movement that is ready to evict women and everyone

7. With reference to a poem by Louis Aragon « ... a day of palm, a day of leaves at the front, a day of bare shoulders where people love each other... ».

8. Sexual harassment disappeared from the streets during the weeks of the revolution.

deemed unconventional by mainstream society and managing the day-to-day complications of life in a country in turmoil.

Today, they need places to reflect on the strategies they need to pursue, alliances they absolutely must consolidate, urgent actions that they must undertake collectively, and move beyond their different conflicting points of view. This is complicated by the fact that the sudden liberty of expression, coupled with a political redeployment, has led to interminable debates over minor contentious issues that end in frustration and lassitude.

However, despite the obstacles in front of them, the clearly affirmed desire of the women and men who carried out the Mediterranean revolutions for more justice, dignity, and liberty are in their favor, echoing and reinforcing the values they always have upheld.

The challenge facing the women's movements and defenders of democracy, male and female, is to take this life affirming force, which is strong among the younger generation, and construct from it a movement of thought and action; this requires them to leave the beaten path of conventional activism and establish new forms of organization that are flexible and solid.

In times of emergency, women must be quick to fight tooth and nail against whatever the dominant powers devise for them. They also must, and above all, be a force of creative proposition to bring into their movement the partisans of a more generous world. It is now up to us to show our solidarity and share our experiences, our successes, and our know-how in terms of organizing groups and making the most of potentials.

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#### NEWSLETTER FROM THE MEDITERRANEAN SHORES

Information letter from the Mediterranean Women's Fund (MedWomenFund)

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