

# On the Front Lines of Change: Women in the Arab Uprisings

by Isobel Coleman

## SUMMARY

Women played a central role in the uprisings sweeping the Middle East, and now, as some of these countries undergo transitions, women's rights must be incorporated into broader demands for social, economic, and political reform.

Greater political freedom in the Arab world will inevitably bring long-suppressed religious parties into the political mainstream, which will require a reconciliation of their demands for Sharia with women's rights.

Both the Bush and Obama administrations have prioritized women's empowerment, since this is an issue that is not only important from a development perspective, but is also less controversial for Arab autocrats.

Going forward, it is important that the United States move beyond rhetorical support for women, and encourage gender equality in both the political and legal spheres.

This should include conditioning financial aid and political support on the progression of women's rights, using media to shine a spotlight on these issues, and building cross-country networks to strengthen women's groups in the region.

Since the Arab uprisings began in Tunisia more than six months ago, women have been on the front lines of change: protesting alongside men, blogging passionately and prolifically, covering the demonstrations as journalists and newscasters, and launching social media campaigns. From Tunis and Cairo to Riyadh and Sana'a, veiled and unveiled female protesters have become the iconic image of the Arab revolutions. Their defiance has surprised many in the West who have long viewed Arab women as oppressed victims of conservative patriarchy and religion. Yet young Arab women today are significantly better educated, marrying later, having fewer children, and more likely to work outside the home than their mother's generation. Their demands for greater freedom have been building for years.

The status of women's rights varies widely across the Arab world, from the relatively progressive environment of Tunisia, where women have long enjoyed legal, political and even reproductive health rights, and play an active economic role, to conservative Saudi Arabia where women have virtually no rights. Saudi women must have a legal guardian's permission to do many basic activities, from seeking employment to accessing health care; they are neither allowed to vote nor drive a car. Yet, in every Arab country, women's rights continue to be contested. It is an issue that divides conservatives from progressives, fundamentalists from secularists.

As the political landscape of the Middle East is reshaped, how effectively women's rights are incorporated into broader demands for social, economic and political change in the Arab world will in many ways be a bellwether for the future of democracy in the region. Greater political freedom will inevitably bring long-suppressed religious parties into the political mainstream – indeed, it already has. Islamist organizations like al-Nahda (Renaissance) in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt are influential players in their new political landscapes. The reconciliation of their demands for Sharia (Islamic law) with women's rights, and more broadly human rights, will be an important determinant of how democracy and law evolve in these countries. In recent months, there have been some troubling incidents underscoring the risks inherent for women during this fluid time. It is in the interests of the United States to champion not only pro-democracy movements in the region, but also to support women's rights as a way of bolstering progressive forces of change in the Middle East.

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## RECONCILING SHARIA WITH WOMEN’S RIGHTS

### Tunisia

The Arab uprisings started in Tunisia, a country with a brutally repressive political climate, but a relatively high standard of living (its GNP per capita of nearly \$10,000 is the highest among non-oil Arab states). Part of its economic success can be attributed to decades of laws that have promoted rights for women. Shortly after Tunisia’s independence from France in 1956, President Habib Bourguiba, the country’s secular authoritarian leader, pushed through a Personal Status Code that was remarkably liberal for its time. It granted divorce rights to women, abolished polygamy, set minimum marriage ages, permitted access to birth control and even some access to abortion.

When Zine El Abidine Ben Ali assumed power from Bourguiba in 1987, he ruled with an iron fist but continued to advance women’s rights by passing more reforms to the Personal Status Code. Over the years, Ben Ali expanded parental, divorce, and custody rights for women, strengthened laws to protect women from domestic violence and continued to emphasize girls’ education and female employment. As a result, Tunisian women today have achieved broad gains in education and have one of the highest rates of female workforce participation in the region, at close to 30 percent. Cynically, Ben Ali lost no opportunity to highlight his positive track record on women’s rights to assuage concerns from Western allies about Tunisia’s serious human rights abuses.

Within Tunisia, women’s rights—and especially family law—have been criticized, particularly by Islamist leaders who denounce the reforms on religious grounds, but also by conservative men and women who feel the changes contradict Sharia and undermine traditional values. Ben Ali harshly suppressed Islamist groups, and expressions of Islam in general (including the wearing of the headscarf), and he jailed and exiled numerous Islamist leaders. He conveniently justified that repression partly on the grounds that Islamists did not support women’s rights. Now, many of those same Islamists leaders are back in Tunisia and actively participating in the new political dynamic. It remains to be seen what stance they will take on women’s rights, but Tunisian secular feminists worry about the potential for backsliding.

In the months after Ben Ali’s ouster, various secular women’s groups have held public protests in Tunis to bring attention to their demands for an expansion of women’s rights. At times, angry mobs of men have countered them, with shouts and pushing, insisting that women’s rights are against Islam, or criticizing the women’s groups for having been complicit with the detested Ben Ali regime. (Ben Ali’s much-hated and corrupt wife, Leila, had attempted to co-opt the women’s agenda. Before her hasty retreat into exile, she served as chair of the Arab Women’s Organization.) Women leaders in Tunisia remind their critics that they were as much against the regime as anyone, and that independent women’s groups regularly had their activities disrupted.

At the end of January, Rachid Ghannouchi, head of the popular al-Nahda party, Tunisia’s leading Islamist organization, returned from 22 years in

exile. He was met by thousands of supporters at the airport. While in the past Ghannouchi denounced Tunisia's progressive Personal Status Code, he now mildly affirms women's rights as a fact of life in Tunisia. Still, his secular critics remain suspicious. They contend that Ghannouchi's "liberal makeover" is a tactic to appeal to moderates and gain votes. Ghannouchi remains coy about whether he will run for president, but polls show that he has considerable support. His al-Nahda party will undoubtedly emerge from the Constituent Assembly elections in October as a strong political force, and women's groups will be compelled to reconcile popular demands for Sharia with a defense of their rights.

## Egypt

Women's rights face similar, but perhaps even deeper-seated challenges in Egypt, where women's educational, workplace and legal gains are more recent and less widespread, and the general population is more conservative and traditional than in Tunisia. The inspirational images of gender solidarity in Tahrir Square in the early days of Egypt's revolution soon gave way to ugly episodes of targeted harassment of women. A hastily planned march in Tahrir Square on March 8th, International Women's Day, attracted a few hundred women, but was marred by angry men shoving the demonstrators and yelling at them to go home, saying their demands for rights are against Islam. Around the same time, the Egyptian military rounded up scores of women protesters, and in a show of raw intimidation, subjected many of them to virginity tests. The Egyptian Constitutional Committee, appointed by the Supreme Council for the Armed Forces (SCAF), included no women and the interim government has only one female cabinet minister—a remnant of the Mubarak regime who has been resistant to democratic initiatives in the past. Moreover, SCAF recently announced that quotas previously in place to ensure that women occupy seats in parliament would be eliminated.<sup>1</sup> While these quotas were criticized for being yet another vehicle for the ruling National Democratic Party to dominate parliament rather than advancing women's rights, a *reformed* quota system would have been a positive step in Egypt's political development.

Newly empowered conservative religious voices, including Salafists and members of the Muslim Brotherhood, have stated their intention to revoke portions of Egypt's Personal Status Law. That law has been amended over the years to give women more family rights, particularly with respect to marriage, divorce and custody, but conservative Islamists contend that these changes are against Sharia. Various polls show that a large majority of Egyptians believe Sharia should be "a source" or "the source" of law in the country.<sup>2</sup> A recent Pew poll also found that while a majority of Egyptians (59%) expresses support for democracy, an overwhelming proportion (85%) believes that Islam has a positive influence on politics in the country. Clearly, reconciling women's rights with Sharia will be

*“Some Islamist leaders have moderated their attitudes on the issue of women's rights as they try to appeal to a broader demographic in a more democratic Egypt.”*

1 David Kirkpatrick, "Egypt Rulers Outline Plans for Elections." *The New York Times*, July 21, 2011.

2 Isobel Coleman, "Are the Mideast Revolutions Bad for Women's Rights?" *The Washington Post*, February 20, 2011.

*“The same attitudes conducive to women’s rights tend to be more tolerant of religious freedom and minority rights and will help strengthen Arab democracy over the longer term.”*

imperative in Egypt going forward. Women’s groups can no longer count on the secular authoritarianism of the state to backstop them. On the other hand, some Islamist leaders have moderated their attitudes on the issue of women’s rights as they try to appeal to a broader demographic in a more democratic Egypt. For example, Dr. Abdel Moneim Abou El-Fotouh, a long-time Brotherhood leader who is popular among younger members and was recently expelled from the party for declaring himself a candidate for the presidency, and several other high-ranking members of the Muslim Brotherhood have stated their support for any Egyptian citizen—including a woman—to run for president. However, other Brotherhood leaders remain outspokenly against many existing laws for women in Egypt.

### **WOMEN AT THE CENTER OF U.S. FOREIGN ASSISTANCE**

Prior to the Arab uprisings, the Obama administration, like the Bush administration before it, supported women’s empowerment in the Middle East as a means of strengthening civil society and bolstering progressive forces. The Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), launched in 2002 to promote reform in the region, has continued to focus on strengthening women’s rights under President Obama. The State Department has also emphasized female education and economic opportunities for women since these areas are recognized not only as important from a development perspective, but also less controversial for Arab autocrats. President Obama, in his 2009 Cairo speech that sought to help “reset” relations with the Muslim world, promised that the U.S. stood ready to “partner with any Muslim-majority country to support expanded literacy for girls, and to help young women pursue employment through micro-financing that helps people live their dreams.” Indeed, in a follow-up conference focused on entrepreneurship in the Muslim world the following spring, Arab women featured prominently.

Consistent with her broader theme of putting women at the center of U.S. foreign assistance, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also spoke out frequently on the importance of women’s empowerment in the Middle East. And Melanne Verveer, Ambassador at Large for Women’s Issues, focused attention on women in the Middle East through her newly created office. There was no lack of supportive rhetoric for women in the Middle East from the United States.

As women have asserted themselves on the front lines of the Arab uprisings, U.S. officials have continued to offer mostly moral support, sending messages of encouragement and using media to draw attention to women’s issues. In his speech on the Arab uprisings in May 2011, President Obama focused specifically on the important role of women in rebuilding their societies, while Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has called for the inclusion of women in transitions towards democracy.

International organizations, such as the United Nations and the World Bank, have promised financial support for women leaders and their organizations as a way of bolstering civil society in the Arab world. Former Chilean president Michelle Bachelet, the new head of UN Women, has promised to allocate part of her annual budget to support Arab women in their quest to



become more politically and economically involved.<sup>3</sup> NGOs are also taking an active approach, setting up new programs to engage with women leaders in the region. These are positive steps given the limited resources these organizations can muster locally.

## SUPPORTING WOMEN'S RIGHTS BEYOND RHETORIC

U.S. interests are best served by supporting women's rights across the region because political systems amenable to women's rights are more likely to be inclusive, representative and protective of human rights generally. The same attitudes conducive to women's rights tend to be more tolerant of religious freedom and minority rights and will help strengthen Arab democracy over the longer term.

The challenge for Washington is to engage constructively to promote women's rights without being seen as too heavy-handed. It is also important that women's rights are recognized as a key human rights issue, and not compartmentalized. In countries undergoing transitions, Washington must incorporate discussion of women's rights into broader conversations about political reform. With elections fast approaching in both Tunisia and Egypt, the U.S. should proactively reach out to women leaders to understand their concerns and provide targeted support. It should also make clear to transitional governments the importance of sustaining the gains that women have made in these countries. Beyond rhetoric, it should support specific gains for women both politically (through electoral processes that benefit women) and legally (through constitutional changes).

In countries resistant to change, most notably Saudi Arabia, the U.S. should not shy away from difficult conversations about women's rights as a critical component of reform. Washington's tepid responses to the Saudi women's driving protest in June reflected the administration's desire not to put additional stress on its already strained relationship with Saudi Arabia. Secretary Clinton did speak out more vocally on this issue, but only after being publicly called on to do so by Saudi women themselves.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To strengthen and support the work of Arab women leaders throughout the MENA region, the United States should:

- *Use economic leverage effectively.* The United States, along with its G8 partners, has promised to invest in economic and social reforms throughout the Middle East. Some of those programs should be specifically targeted to strengthening the capacity of women NGO leaders, better preparing women for politics, and supporting women business leaders. Additionally, new funding for these countries should be contingent on progression toward democracy. Protection of women's rights should be positioned as an important marker of that progression.

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<sup>3</sup> Bill Vamer, “Arab Uprisings Create Opportunities for Women's Rights.” *The Peninsula*, March 8, 2011.

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## ABOUT POMED

The Project on Middle East Democracy is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to examining how genuine democracies can develop in the Middle East and how the U.S. can best support that process. Through dialogue, research, and advocacy, we work to strengthen the constituency for U.S. policies that peacefully support democratic reform in the Middle East.

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- ***Use political leverage effectively.*** As constitutions are rewritten, the inclusion of women's rights should be carefully monitored. Washington should support local actors encouraging women-friendly amendments such as political quotas for women and laws to protect and extend women's rights.
- ***Use media to shine a spotlight on women's issues.*** U.S. policymakers should use their official bully pulpit to draw attention to the issues women face. The rights that women are fighting for in Tahrir Square and beyond reflect a broader anthem of human rights and dignity that the U.S. should firmly stand behind in official statements. Media can also be useful in shaming governments toward better behavior. For example, extensive international coverage of the virginity tests conducted by the Egyptian military on female protesters engendered public outrage and helped force the military to renounce such actions.
- ***Use back-channels to maintain focus and pressure on these issues.*** Administration officials should consistently raise women's rights in high-level bilateral meetings with Arab interlocutors. Private diplomacy is just as important as public diplomacy in putting pressure on leaders.
- ***Use convening power to build networks and strengthen women's groups.*** The U.S. should encourage cross-country dialogue and invest in training to build capacity of women leaders in the region. Many of the issues they face are similar across borders, and they can learn from each other's experiences.
- ***Pursue a nuanced approach toward the region's various Islamist groups.*** The position of some Islamist leaders in the region is clearly at odds with women's rights, and more broadly with democracy. Others, however, express support for democracy and adopt the language of human rights. Women's rights should be a litmus test to distinguish between these groups. Moderate Islamist leaders like Mr. Ghannouchi and Dr. Abou El-Fotouh should be judged by how well their rhetoric is matched by actions on women's rights.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Arab uprisings have redefined the political landscape of the region. Arab women face challenges in dealing with newly empowered Islamist groups, but also opportunities in defining a women's agenda free from state control. Over the long term, this can create a more legitimate, sustainable and broad-based women's movement. Islam remains a potent cultural and political force – one that women's groups must take into account as they push to sustain and expand their rights in this new environment. The United States should actively identify and offer support to the region's established and emerging women's rights groups to help promote political, legal and economic gains for women.