



EGYPTIAN IDENTITY AFTER THE REVOLUTION

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The euphoria surrounding a revolution which succeeds in sweeping away a dictatorial regime and aims to build up a democracy is unimaginable for those who have not experienced it. In a lot of people's minds, there is certainly something romantic about it, which makes revolutions appear like a fairy tale. A democratic revolution is a positive change, which offers hope for a better future for all segments of the society. It is also a promise that the harm and bad which was done will be retaliated, restituted and recompensed.

Indeed, it is a glimpse of hope – but democratic transformation of the institutions, the legal system and the society does not follow automatically.

On 18-21 November, Pia Locatelli, President of SI Women and Judit Tánczos, FEPS Policy Advisor were on a study visit in Cairo, meeting local NGOs and party representatives from the left. The objective of this visit was to gather information on the general position of Egyptian women in the society after the revolution, and to monitor the legal changes and its effect on women's situation, with special focus on the Constitutional changes and the Electoral Law.

Given the fact that the days of the study visit coincided with the outburst of new, violent demonstrations against the government and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), the planned discussions took an angle that was unexpected in the preparation period.

NGO work on women's rights and Suzanne Mubarak's shadow

Several newspaper and magazine articles have written about the contradictory character of Egyptian women's situation currently. Wearing a hijab or posting naked photos is equally seen as an achievement and a vindication of the revolution. But these are of course the two extremes.

Beyond the fact that Egypt is a religious Islamic state, the advancement of women's rights faces another obstacle on the general level. Suzanne Mubarak, wife of the former dictator, was perceived as an important advocator for these rights. The reasons and the genuineness of her actions can be questioned, but the positive effect of her campaigns on issues like banning female genital mutilation, fighting against girls' illiteracy and offering them a better education could not be denied. That is, until now. After the revolution, everything linked to Mubarak seems to be demonised and opposed. Most tragically, this has put a dark shadow on the activities against female genital mutilation, and stigmatised the advancement of women's rights as an issue belonging to the old regime. Her attitude towards NGOs was also problematic. By considering them rather enemies than partners, - as one of our local meeting partner said - she "nationalised" community NGOs. She did not help by adding a political dimension to the society debate, but she'd rather take the issue as a whole and made other NGOs work invisible on the matter. This has created a high level of frustration amongst women's rights NGOs, who felt that their work is not appreciated and the success is dedicated only the Mrs Mubarak. This strategy also weakened civil society in general. NGOs credibility was further destroyed by the high proportion of corruption in these projects.

With respect to the relations between women's rights organisations and the government, there has been some positive improvement. Representatives reported the novelty of working together with the government, as equal partners.

It seems there has also been a change in the strategy of some women's NGOs after the revolution, which focused earlier more on academic, analytical work. Although not classified as grassroots organisations, several of them turned more towards addressing women at grassroots level, instead of exclusively working on the publication of often heavy language academic papers and periodicals.

In the NGOs we met, this outreach to the grassroots level happens mainly by information sessions on the new electoral procedure. The target group of these sessions are vast, women from all social and political backgrounds should be addressed. Each meeting is divided in three main parts. Firstly, information is given on how to vote correctly, in technical terms. Secondly, the electoral coalitions are presented in a neutral way. This second part provides information on the component parties of the elective coalitions, their representatives and the symbols associated with the parties and candidates. Thirdly, there is special emphasis on explaining the consequences of their choice, strictly from a technical point of view. In this part, it is pointed out how votes can get lost, in case the preferred candidate is not the winning one, or what compromises might need to be done, if someone turns to tactical voting.

Academic work continues on the issue of constitutional reform and lobbying for the ratification without reservation of CEDAW. However, on the latter issue, unfortunately a new, more basic aspect has emerged lately: lobbying against the withdrawal from CEDAW. On both topics there is a fruitful and enriching regional cooperation with other women's rights NGOs. Although they are quite different at first sight, the appliance and interpretation of sharia law links closely these two issues.

Women's representation and confusing election rules

The current Egyptian election puts the question of Egyptian identity in the heart of the debate. After the revolution should the country remain a religious or a secular state? Although poverty and poor social conditions prevail in large parts of Egypt, discussion on economic and social rights is seen to be marginal. Accordingly, advocating for more equality for women is also put aside, with the reasoning that "this is not time for women's rights". Although the identity question is closely linked also with women's issues, unfortunately, this reasoning is accepted by many.

Most importantly, the question arises: who will be in the national assembly to raise awareness and initiate positive changes? According to the positive estimates, with the current electoral establishment, the proportion of women in the national assembly will be around 3-5%.

As quotas in the parliament were introduced on the initiative of Hosni Mubarak's National Democratic Party in 2009, this tool was inevitably stigmatised. Consequently, a populist anti-quota approach prevailed. Instead of seeing this as an instrument that helps competent women to get over the difficulty of gender bias, it is seen as an attack on equality in society, which reinforces the prejudice that women are in a weaker position than men. Naturally, this reasoning could be easily undermined. But

due to the recent history of quota in Egypt, which made most of women suspicious and dismissive towards it, wider debate on the issue seems to be impossible.

The new provisions oblige parties to present at least one woman on each electoral list, without precisely indicating the placing. Two third of the parliamentary members will be voted through these electoral lists. One third of the parliamentary seats is reserved for individual candidates. However, due to the networking and financial burden it necessitates to get elected as an individual candidate, our discussion partners held the opinion that probably one individual woman candidate might have the chance to be elected. Generally, parties from the left have a larger number of women activists, members and women are also more present and visible in party committees. The proportion of women candidates (individuals and on electoral lists altogether) for the parliamentary and Sura elections amounts to 20-30%. Still, for various reasons, most of these candidates will probably not make it. Parties from the left, advocating actively for a secular Egyptian state, currently attract less voters than Islamist parties. Even if women candidates are in the leading positions on the lists, this might not be enough to be elected. The conservative, traditionalist environment weighs heavily on women candidates and their negotiation potential in getting winning positions, hence hardly any women were put on the first place of the lists. The problem of succeeding as an individual candidate has already been mentioned.

Additionally, the confusing election rules make it difficult for women to mobilise for getting more visibility and more winning positions on electoral lists. Although we met politically active and conscious people, none of them was fully sure about the detailed rules of the elections. The current exact number of Egyptian governorates is uncertain for most of them. The exact number of places in the national assembly, the proportion and number of seats reserved for individual candidates and electoral lists has changed so often that the different rules are often mixed up. Different information was communicated from different sources on the issue of whether the results will be published after each electoral round or only at the end of the procedure. These are just a few examples. Above all, our sources from different EU institutions and Member States present in Cairo stated that according to their analysis, the electoral system would just simply not work out, in terms of mathematics.

Egyptian identity and a vision on women in society

In the euphoria following the departure of Hosni Mubarak not a lot of people would have predicted that just a few months later, a second revolution will burst out. Egyptian revolutionaries are deeply disappointed with the evolution of the situation in the past few months and there is a general feeling of being back to square one. Maybe Mubarak is gone, but dictatorship remains, as SCAF imposes itself too much on political life. Nevertheless, interestingly, citizens whom we met on the streets were rather enthusiastic and positive about the future. Because of the clashes on the street, we were stuck for hours with the employees of a café near Tahrir Square. For them, it was clearly not the first time this happened, still, they waited patiently, not caring about the loss of the café's whole afternoon and evening income. The hotel employees told stoically that for the same reasons, they had to walk kilometres and it took them 2-2.5 hours to get home. No signs of disappointment, rather a blind faith in a better future, against all.

The logic that elections would bring more stability does not work for the revolutionaries. A lot of them pressed for the formation of a new, civil government as a first step, who would be charged with defining the new constitution and the reform of the electoral law. Therefore, the demonstration which began on 18th November also had the aim of delaying the elections. In fact, at most of our meetings the discussion partners believed that the elections would indeed be delayed, but instead of forming a civil government, the SCAF would use the demonstration to reinforce its powers and position.

Against these expectations, the first round of the elections took place on 28th November, and as this happened without any major atrocities, it seems the second round will also take place as planned on 14th December.

As it was mentioned, this election is about Egyptian identity after the revolution. The new wave of manifestations highlighted again what Egypt should not be. But they failed to draw up a vision on what this Egyptian identity should be. The demonstrators did point out the fact that SCAF is abusing its powers, but just a week before the elections, they did not come up with a viable alternative to show how Egypt should be organised in a democratic way.

The only woman presidential candidate, Bothaina Kamel was also in the fights. She identifies herself as a social democrat, but who stands for the rights of all Egyptians, and has a strong message of advancing social justice. However, as she uses this more general discourse to frame her message, she was criticised by several women's organisations for not standing up explicitly for women's rights. As her small, but rather well identified core electorate can be found amongst the revolutionary youth, her place was certainly in Tahrir Square. Nevertheless, the longer the demonstrations last, the less chance she has to convey her message to other electoral groups.

As the demonstration was located in just one part of Cairo downtown, in the meantime, the activists of Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists continued campaigning in an organised way in other neighbourhoods and in other parts of Egypt with their exact vision on this Egyptian identity. Although in theory, the election results should have not been communicated before the end of the whole procedure, the results published after the first round show also the success of this strategy.

And this vision also includes a strong standpoint on women's auxiliary position in society. Can this vision be linked to the reality of Egyptian society? In a country where 30% families are supported solely by women's labour and an additional 20% is dependent on two salaries, this can be strongly doubted.