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The Muslim Sisters and the January 25th Revolution

By Mona Farag¹

Abstract

As the world watched in anticipation and trepidation the powerful force that was the January 25 revolution, one vital question stuck in everyone's mind: how large was the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in the events that took place during those 18 days prior to the stepping down of Mubarak? More importantly, with the newfound sense of freedom and democracy that has overtaken Egypt's streets, how will the future of the Muslim Sisters be impacted? This paper will focus on the activities spearheaded by the Muslim Sisters during the revolution and the months leading up to the People's and Legislative Assembly, and will assess their political standing within the Society of Muslim Brothers and within its newly formed political party: the Freedom and Justice Party. A review of the commentaries and reactions to the activities that took place by the Sisters during and after the revolution will be assessed. These sources will also clarify the picture of what characterises Egypt's political playing field today: post-January 25 revolution and the influx of newly formed political parties onto Egypt's political field. This paper will conclude with a 'Predictions' portion of the analysis of the Muslim Brotherhood's political future, in light of the upcoming elections and the endless opportunities it holds for the well-organized movement that is the Muslim Brotherhood.

Introduction

The year 2011 witnessed the breath-taking Arab Spring where a chain reaction of social movements and people uprisings swept the region, and began to shape and define the new Middle East. A year later, the Middle East has transformed into the focal point for the submerged Islamist factions and organizations to burst out of their hiding place, and to democratically compete for their place in Arab society and government. With the dominant Islamist trend, came a series of burning questions and concerns, in the event that some of these countries will function now with a more Islamist agenda than ever seen before. In the case of Egypt, two of the main issues circled around Coptic rights and women's rights. To better understand what the Islamists' intentions are towards women's rights; one must analyse the treatment of women within their organizations, parties and social movements. With the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) winning 43.4% of the peoples assembly seats (The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2012), they have the biggest representation of the Islamist wave in the government, and they are known to have a large female contingency within the 84-year old organization (Abdel-Latif 2009b). This study will shed light on the Muslim Sister's activities both on a social level¹ and on a political level, to give a clearer picture of their treatment of women and their view of women's standing and place within an Islamic framework.

The Muslim Sisters: A Brief Introduction

The majority of states in the Middle East have witnessed an impressive array of political enlightenment and turmoil during its modern history. Like most great movements in world

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history, feminism and Islamism were borne as a response to insufferable authority. In this case, both forces took to Egyptian streets in defiance of British occupation and lingering colonial sentiments in the early 1900s. A schoolteacher by the name of Hasan al-Banna formed the society of Muslim Brothers in 1928. The Brotherhood grew into a formidable organization in little time, as a response to the westernization and deterioration of the Egyptian society, as al-Banna viewed it. Al-Banna believed that a return to the true and pure principles of Islam would save Egypt as a whole from permanently falling into the snares of British influence and rule. During the formative years of the MB, al-Banna supported Egyptian women and young girls by creating a school in Ismailiya to teach girls -“future mothers”- about their religion (Baron 2005, 209). In 1932, his “Institute for Mothers of the Believers” developed into the first branch of the Muslim Sisters (*al-Akhwat al-Muslimat*), which were mostly the female relatives and wives of the Muslim Brothers. The Muslim Sisters eventually opened a branch in Cairo. During that time, the Muslim Sisters division was tasked with ‘women-friendly’ issues such as education, health and children’s issues (Baron 2005, 209-210). Branches of the Muslim Sisters spread throughout Egypt, and within four years, it boasted a membership of five thousand women.

Egypt’s history of women’s movements had just as many Islamist activists as secular voices. Zaynab Al-Ghazali’s legacy stands on its own, however, as she was the only female activist to publicly state her loyalty and affiliation to the Muslim Brotherhood, all while keeping her organization separate and independent from that of the Brotherhood. At the young age of eighteen, al-Ghazali formed her own women’s organization: the Muslim Ladies Association in 1937. al-Ghazali , managed to break the status quo of women in the Brotherhood , i.e. the Muslim Sisters were known to exist but rarely publicly associated themselves with the Muslim Brotherhood (Abdel-Latif 2008b, 3). She was the first Muslim Sister who was publicly active - both socially and politically - during the Nasser years; when most Muslim Brother male members were jailed. Initially, al-Ghazali set out to offer help and assistance to the families that were left behind to fend and provide for themselves, while their husbands - Muslim Brotherhood members - were in prison. The organization was adamant to keep their work and vision alive, which resulted in al-Ghazali’s shift in focus to save the MB from dissolution (Roded 2008, 258). Due to their banned status, al-Ghazali provided Muslim Brotherhood members with food, medical attention and other services. During that time, she was instrumental in keeping the MB as a political movement alive, until she was imprisoned as well, during the Nasser era (Lewis 2007, 24-25).

The Sadat era allowed for the Muslim Brotherhood to resume their activities, but did not grant them legitimacy, by legally recognizing them as an organization. As a result, Egypt was described in the 1980s and early 1990s, as a time where Islamist activities dominated and started to infiltrate Egyptian popular culture, young Islamists who were affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood led a lot of these activities. As for the Muslim Sisters, their work reverted back the social movement of *da’wa* at the grassroots level, thereby not appearing in any public roles. The Muslim Sisters remained shut out from the public eye, until their political participation in the mid 1990s, 2000, 2005 and 2010 elections,² when several of them ran in Egypt’s parliamentary elections, and campaigned for both male and female Brotherhood parliamentary candidates.

January 25th revolution 2011

The sight of Tahrir square filled to maximum capacity, with both men and women from different backgrounds and social classes, united for one common purpose was a sight that most Egyptians would never thought would ever take place. Those 18 days brought together different

political currents for the purpose of building a better Egypt, a country where democracy can finally take root after decades of corruption and authoritarianism weeding its way into every Egyptian household. When people left their homes and camped out in Tahrir Square during those 18 days, they joined the uprising as Egyptians, and not as liberals or Islamists or leftists, and most definitely not representative of any particular gender. Women of different backgrounds and religions had a common goal: to see Mubarak leave and give back to all Egyptians their will to choose. Niqab - wearing conservatives were part of a cohesive entity alongside liberal and secular Egyptian women. The revolution was a testament of human will and the desire to achieve something bigger and more important than the lines and classes that previously divided the people.

Initially, the Brotherhood was aware that this protest was to happen and chose not to take part in any of it (PBS Frontline Series 2011). But as the days passed and the situation in Tahrir Square grew worse, the movement no longer belonged to one faction or party - it took on a whole new persona of nationalistic anger and indignation directed at a failed government emanating from all classes, educational background, and from all walks of life in Cairo. When the Brotherhood joined the people and the movement in Tahrir, they joined as Egyptians and not as a socio-religious movement with an agenda of its own. The goal of the revolution was clear: to regain the dignity and rights of the Egyptian people. However, as days passed in the confines of Tahrir square, several different groups took it upon themselves to help see this cause through and lend a helping hand. A temporary hospital was set up where many of the protestors with medical degrees took up shifts to help out the wounded and beaten up. Security checks were set all around the square, to ensure that no acts of thuggery would contaminate what the people were there to achieve. Food, water and blankets were provided during those cold nights in the square. Technological-savvy youth and those with media outlets and professional expertise headed several information units within the square, to ensure that a continuous flow of information and images were being transmitted to international news agencies; even during the days where internet access was suspended and cellular phone lines were severed.

Within each and every one of these initiatives that flourished and supported the protest, Muslim Brotherhood members were partaking in the process to ensure its success. With the organization's extensive history in mobilizing and thriving under extreme and inhospitable conditions, the revolution was just another chapter in their continuous struggle against an oppressive regime. Naturally, the Muslim Sisters were part of all the continuous support system that transformed Tahrir Square into an "exercise in nation-building" - as described by one of the activist bloggers who witnessed and engaged the Square throughout these events (Mahmoud Salem, Ranting of a Sandmonkey, comments posted on July 16, 2011). In the past, the Muslim Sisters were seen as the silent partners of the Brotherhood, walking behind them and shadowing them in public events such as student protests which took place within the confines of a university's walls (Magdy 2011). However, the revolution forever shattered this image, as the toppling of the old government had given way to a more public and transparent role for the Muslim Sisters within the Society and its political party.

The Muslim Sister's history is one that thrived behind the scenes, bustling and mobilizing to support the organization of the Muslim Brothers and its movement. Many Brotherhood members that were interviewed attributed the Sister's underground activism to the constant threat of military and political crackdown the Muslim Brotherhood experienced over the Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak eras (Abdel-Latif 2008a, 13). During those trying times, both the Muslim Brotherhood and the Sisters did not feel comfortable to take on more exposed roles within

Egypt's political arena. However, with the 18-day uprising, the rules and restrictions changed. The Muslim Sisters were the women responsible for ensuring the security of the Square, by stationing themselves at security checkpoints and patting down female entrants (Interview with G.R. 2012). The Sisters especially thrived in the area that they were most accustomed to: support services. They provided unremitting support to all activists in the form of food, shelter, medical supplies and aid. The Sisters even took part in helping the protestors fight against acts of thuggery, by providing ammunition in the form of rubble and blocks of stones that they carried and transported in their long, conservative clothing (Magdy 2011). Years of working underground as part of a large and well-organized grassroots movement have provided them with an innate sense of responsibility and support towards their brothers, sons, husbands and male counterparts overall. During an interview with a Muslim Sister who had been a member of the Muslim Brotherhood since 1977, she portrayed the events that took place on January 25th when she was protesting with other Muslim Sisters, and which was quite revealing of their years of oppression under Mubarak. She described how she continually pulled young boys and men away from the grasps of the police, who were trying to arrest them and beat them down during the initial protests that took place not far from Tahrir square (Interview with H.A.M 2012). The youth that she was trying to protect, were not Muslim Brotherhood affiliated, but were average Egyptian youth who shared her same vision of a future of social and democratic equality for future generations. Another Muslim Sister who is an editor for the Al-Azhar Journal *Sout al-Azhar*, described her daily activities during the uprising as putting her best skills and expertise to the best possible use - by setting up several units and offices around the Square as outlets for both the protests and news agencies to exchange information, images and general news bites; to ensure that the most comprehensive story was spread globally through the several mediums available today (Interview with H.Z. 2012).

The Muslim Brotherhood's ability to mobilize and utilize in whatever situation they were placed in, was even more evident after February 11th, 2011. It could be said that they were the main entity that benefited from the dissolution of the previous government, as they were finally to step out from their hiding place and identify themselves to the world through the formation of their political party: the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP).

The Freedom and Justice Party and the elections of 2011/2012

The FJP was founded on April 30th 2011, and from that moment its members and its 'helicopter parent'³ - the Muslim Brotherhood's mammoth organization - have been working tirelessly to fully participate in the first democratic action that was to take place in Egypt since the MB's inception in 1928. Today, the FJP has offices all throughout the country, as they have built on existing connections and relations that were established by the MB. The FJP has also created a hierarchy within the party that mirrors the meticulous defragmentation of the MB organizational structure; a structure that intricately connects its Supreme Guide to all levels including the smallest unit named "the family unit". The Muslim Sisters are active members of the party and have already established a system of communication with every female party member within Egypt. The female party members with senior roles meet weekly and monthly, to discuss present complications and future solutions. For example, the city of Cairo is divided into four districts: central, North, East and West. There is a female member responsible for all the members within their districts, to which they meet with on a monthly basis. However, those four

women meet with their senior, who is a female party member responsible for all of the party – related activities that concern the women - within Cairo (Interview with M.A.H. 2012).

However, the Muslim Sisters within the MB organization are still a separate entity and do not fall under the organization's hierarchical structure (Mitchell 1962, 164-182).⁴ As aforementioned, such exclusion was attributed to the Brothers' concern for the women's safety in regards to the constant political crackdowns that were targeting all MB- related activities and members. This is not the case anymore, as all members of both the organization and party proudly identify their association and political standing.⁵ In effect, the MB organization is looking to revitalize their dated structure and intend to integrate the Sisters within the new and democratically charged organizational hierarchy.⁶ The People Assembly elections that took place in 2011 delivered quite a shock to the Egyptian masses and the world as a whole. With 60 per cent of the seats allotted to Islamist movements (Vasfi 2011), the world was forced to reassess their view of Egypt and entertain the possibility of an Islamist majority in parliament that could change the course of Egypt's political history and geopolitical standing. But what was more shocking was the low female representation, where a majority of these elected few, were FJP members. The representation of women in parliament was calculated at two per cent – resulting in one of the lowest representation of female politicians in the world's governments (Sholkamy 2012). Such results support the fears and concerns of feminists who have claimed that once the revolution was over, the call for equality rights and women's rights, would be pushed back in favour of more pressing issues – such as national security and economic security (el-Sadda 2011). Having said that, it cannot be denied that the FJP successfully mobilized able and educated Muslim Sisters, to represent the party in both the elections, and in the Parliament. The Democratic Alliance which consisted of ten parties – including the FJP - had 80 women running in the People Assembly elections, where 76 of these women belonged to the FJP (Leila 2011).

The Islamist faction of this electoral race managed to empower and support Egyptian women better than any leftist or secular party (Interview with O.K. 2012).⁷ However, the events that led to this representation with the People Assembly are far from simple. The new election law stipulates that within every electoral race and within each Proportional Registration list one female candidate must be included, but it is not necessary to place women in winnable positions on the list (Leila 2011). Despite the fact that the FJP managed to place a large number of its female candidates in the top half of the list, a lot of the more deserving women were placed in the bottom half of the list – due to agreements with other parties within the alliance, and due to the size and importance of the districts that they were running in (Interview with M.A.H. 2012). For instance, Dr. Manal Aboul-Hassan was placed fifth on the FJP list in the Cairo constituency, and Nagafa Abdel-Mawla was sixth on the same list. Whereas, Wafaa Mustafa Mashhour, daughter of the sixth Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, was on top of the FJP list for the district of Assiut and Maha Abul-Ezz⁸ was second on the list. The Sisters fared well in Alexandria as well, where the FJP placed a female candidate third of the party list (Leila 2011).

It is evident through viewing their campaigning exercises and events, as well as their media training workshops, that the FJP were better equipped and ready to take on the challenges of the first democratic elections to take place in Egypt (Interview with N.A. 2012). The FJP was able to provide the necessary training and support, to be better prepared to hold their ground, against the secular and liberal parties that might have had more political exposure and experience than the Sisters of the MB. The FJP's confidence in its female candidates is telling in the numbers that joined the election race and the percentage of women put on the top of list.

Unfortunately, women affiliated with other parties didn't fare as well due to their decision to place most of their female constituents at the bottom of the list. The Reform and Development Party placed only one woman in the seventh place on their list. The Free Egypt Party placed its only female candidate last. Only ten women are on the Wafd Party list – which is affiliated with the oldest political party in Egypt's history (Leila 2011). On the other hand, the Salafist Nour Party had fifteen women running in elections.

When the dust settled and the winners were announced, the numbers couldn't lie. Long after the complicated calculations and fractioning of seats between party lists and individual seats, only 8 seats out of 480 were awarded to women. The remaining four women that joined the Assembly were from the ten seats appointed by SCAF.

A year later

To many of the Egyptians not affiliated to religious parties - the revolution still continues. However in the mind of many of the Islamist movements, the revolution has succeeded, as people took part in free and democratic elections. In regards to women's rights and their place in Egyptian society, the MB ensured that the Sisters were publicly represented in the FJP and the parliament. But does that mean that gender equality is one step closer to taking root in Egypt? Do the Sisters represent and empower all Egyptian women's issues and concerns? More importantly, is the Egyptian society more readily acceptable to let a woman represent them fully in parliament without their over-protective parent - in the form of the MB and the FJP? The harsh reality represented in Egyptian streets seems to indicate otherwise. Firstly, most of the active Sisters are adamant not to be placed in the same category as secular feminists, as they insist that women and men are not equal - in the sense that each gender has their role to fulfil and should not fight for equal standing in society. To most Islamist women, it is not the fight for equal rights, but for the establishment of complimentary roles for men and women to work together to further improve the state of the Egyptian society (Ezzat 2002). These women are fighting for rights within an Islamist framework, and without defying any of the norms set forth by Islamic jurisprudence. In the case of Egypt, Islamist women seek to better implement Islamic sharia within the Egyptian society, towards a more Islamic state and society. Prominent female Islamist thinkers, such as Heba Raouf Ezzat encourages such a transition for Egypt's society; through the reinterpretation and reassessment of Islamic jurisprudence and *hadiths*⁹ that pertain to women's issues and rights (el-Gawhary and Ezzat 1994). Within the confines of the Islamist framework is where the work of most Islamist women thrive. Their vision for a better society is not necessarily a step towards advocating a better representation for women in Egypt's public life; but more of working towards a more Islamic country through affirming a woman's strengths and position within any Islamic society.¹⁰ This is most telling in the words and vows of the MB's female MP Azza Garf. During her short assignment to Egypt's new Peoples Assembly, she publicly stated her intentions towards dissolving most of the pro-women laws passed during the Mubarak era - under the direction and encouragement of the former First Lady Suzanna Mubarak - claiming that they are un-Islamic and a detriment towards the establishment of a more sharia-based society. Existing laws regarding issues such as banning female genital mutilation and women's divorce rights were criticized by Garf, as tools that further incite the fragmentation of Egyptian society (Topol 2012). Secondly, the society as a whole seem to be still largely influenced by archaic patriarchal norms – which is evident in an informal poll conducted before the People Assembly elections by one blogger. Dalia Zaida reported that not one of the 1,400 voters she interviewed would consider voting for a woman nominee in the upcoming presidential elections (Bohn 2012).

The Muslim Sisters have relived their glory days of functioning as a collective force which had successfully mobilized MB members and supporters during and after the January 25 revolution, towards an important goal; much like they did during the Nasser era; at a time where the continuity of the MB organization was threatened in the face of widespread arrests and military crackdowns. It is clear that the Muslim sisters are a strong force within the MB, and much of the grassroots movements that the MB is involved in, are thriving mainly due to the Sisters' formidable diligence. However, the increasing number of Muslim Sisters in the media and political roles is not necessarily indicative of growing gender equality within the Egyptian society. A year later - little has changed for the women who tested their equal standing with men as Egyptians, as they called for the dissolution of a corrupt government, by protesting and chanting for a better tomorrow; and through blogging and conversing with international media to gather support for the revolution. As for the Sisters, they have become more vocal and more politically active, confident to move forward and work towards the goal set forth by their political party and by the MB. It seems that their interest in partaking in political action is to collectively ensure political reform through piety and religious discourse. The Muslim Sisters are first and foremost representative of the Muslim Brotherhood and are in effect, striving for the popularization and expansion of their organization that they have represented in the past- either through *da'wah* activities or during political campaigns and elections. In the end, numbers do not lie, and today's parliament is characterized by the lowest female representation since the 1952 revolution. In addition, with the MB's female MP Azza Garf's risqué comments regarding dissolving all the laws passed in the past decade that benefitted women – such as raising the age of marriage, female genital mutilation and allowing for women to divorce their husbands – is a major step backwards for women's rights in Egypt's largely traditional society (Fadel and Hassieb 2012). Sadly, the January 25 revolution did not reap many benefits for the Egyptian women's cause, as reports of sexual harassment of women during protests and marches still flood the news (El Deeb 2012), thereby debilitating vision of a future where women and men can rely on one another to stand up and fight for their equal rights against an oppressive force - whether it be a Mubarak-like regime or military forces. Only time will tell whether the long-term goals of the Muslim Sisters will be more Islamic-centred, i.e. Muslim Brotherhood -centric, or it may diverge to become more gender-associated, thereby including female masses and accommodating their plights and demands for equality and better political representation.

Notes

¹ The Muslim Sisters have always been active on the social level, - also known as *da'wa*- which describes the act of proselytizing or preaching of Islam. this article will focus more on the social activities that took part in during the 18-day revolution exclusively.

² Jihan al-Halafawi and Mekarim al-Deiry were the Muslim Sisters who ran in the Peoples Assembly elections in 2000 and 2005 respectively. Dr. Manal Aboul-Hassan was one of several women to run in the 2010 elections.

³ Nathan Brown described it this relationship as the MB acting as the helicopter parent¹, hovering closely to its infant, the FJP, protecting it and dictating its future direction. A telling act of such parental behaviour, is the permanent reassignment of three members of the Supreme Old Guide - Muhammad Mursi, Saad al Katatni, and Essam al Eryan- to the FJP to run it. Refer to Brown 2011.

⁴ For more on the organizational structure of the Muslim Brothers, refer to R. Mitchell, *The Society Of Muslim Brothers*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1969). pp. 164-184.

⁵ During many interviews conducted with both male and female members of the MB, it was plainly stated by each, the nature of their work in the FJP and how long they have been active members of the MB. That was not the case before the revolution, especially in regards to the Muslim Sisters.

⁶ It has been hinted at, but not officially stated, that the MB is currently working on restructuring their organizational pyramid, with an intention to finally integrate the Muslim Sisters chapter.

⁷ The interviewee who was running in the People's Assembly election stated that each of the candidates received training and attended workshops, and were assigned a media spokesperson.

⁸ It is interesting to note that Maha Abul-Ezz also ran for a seat in the Legislative Assembly, when she didn't gather enough votes during the People Assembly elections.

⁹ A hadith is a saying or a collection of sayings by the Prophet Mohamed (PBUH) that have been witnessed and documented by his attendees or Islamic scholars.

¹⁰ Several outspoken Muslim Sisters such as Zaynab al-Ghazali, and Islamist scholars like Dr. Ezzat stressed their dislike of secular feminist trends as it devalued and dissembled the family unit, by encouraging women to enter the workforce and fight for an equal standing at the expense of a woman's most important role within a society; that of a mother and a wife. These roles are paramount towards the establishment of a stable and strong Islamic society, by supporting and educating the future residents of an Islamic state. However, that does not necessarily mean that those scholars push for women to retreat back to their homes and solely assume their primary roles as mothers, but to participate in the building of an Islamic society, without losing sight of the importance of a cohesive family unit, as the first stepping stone towards a strong and unified *umma*. For examples, refer to Ezzat 2000, 134-136 and al-Ghazali, 1990).

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