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Political Change and Gender Politics in Egypt

By Rasha Souhail Mansour¹

Abstract

The paper aims to explore the relationship between informal institutions, institutional change and gender equality² in the context of the political struggle that took place in the aftermath of the 25 January uprising in Egypt. The paper argues that although the 25 January revolution presented Egyptian feminists with an excellent opportunity to put gender equality on the political agenda and build gender equality issues into the fabric of the new institutional and governmental blueprints and structures, they have failed to do so for several reasons. First, because of the monopoly exercised by two powerful inherently conservative patriarchal institutions, namely the Muslim Brotherhood and the Military establishment, not only over the formal political institutions, but also over informal institutions. The paper uses a single case study approach analyzed from a feminist institutionalist perspective. It draws upon insights from existing literature and upon the author's personal experience as first-hand witness to these events, as well as semi-structured interviews with a number of prominent feminists representing different political and ideological schools. This method was chosen to gain deeper insights into the perceptions of feminists who were directly involved in the events of that 'critical juncture' either through formal political institutions, or informally through engagement in street politics, about the multiple intersecting and complex institutional barriers, constraining women's agency during that time.

Keywords: Egypt, women in Egypt, gender equality, political struggle, 25 January uprising, gender politics

Introduction

Ten years have passed since the 25 January 2011 Revolution. This paper aims to revisit this crucial point in the making of contemporary Egypt from a feminist institutionalist perspective, with the aim of tracing the process of institutional change with respect to women's rights during three phases; rule by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (February 2011-June 2012), rule by the Muslim Brotherhood (June 2012-June 2013), and rule by the current regime since July 2013. It situates this change within the context of the political struggle among the three forces that took part in the January Revolution, namely the armed forces, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and the revolutionary youth.

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² Defined by the OECD as equal enjoyment by women and men of socially valued goods, opportunities, resources and rewards.

The paper aims to answer the following questions: what kind of constraints did the women activists³ operate within? What institutional resources were available to them? What were the formal and informal rules that constrained or enabled change? It draws upon insights from existing literature and draws upon the author's personal experience as first-hand witness to these events. The research is also based on semi-structured interviews a number of prominent academics and activists belonging to different political and ideological schools, including Judge Tahani El-Gebali⁴, Journalist Amina Shafik and others.

Most of the scholarship on post 25 January uprising focus on the power struggle between the Muslim Brothers and the Military (El-Bendary 2013, Bassiouni 2016, El-Sayyid 2017), in which women are treated as a residual category. The few studies that do shed light on gender issues tend to focus on the role of women as participants in the Revolution (Badran 2011, DS mostapha 2015, Kadry 2015, Al-Natour 2012) or as victims/survivors of gender-based violence and other atrocities committed by different political actors (Tadros 2015, Sorbera 2016). Others have argued that women and gender issues have been "used" by different political groups to mobilize support for their own political agendas and were then "sidelined" when it was time to divide the new political pie (Morsy 2014, Tadros 2014).

The paper argues that the 25 January revolution presented Egyptian feminists with a golden opportunity to put gender equality on the political agenda and build gender equality issues into the fabric of the new institutional and governmental blueprints and structures. However, they have failed to do so due to the monopoly exercised by two powerful inherently conservative patriarchal institutions, namely the Muslim Brotherhood and the Military establishment, not only over the formal political institutions, but also over informal institutions.

Institutions and Institutional Change

Institutions are defined as 'The formal or informal procedures, routines, norms and conventions embedded in the organizational structure of the polity or political economy.' (Hall & Taylor 1996, 6-7). They are product of past political strategies, political conflict and compromise (Thelen and Steinmo 1992:10). Once created, institutions have a tendency to persist and are resilient to change.

Nonetheless, periods of political and/or social instability make way for institutional restructuring and can allow opportunities for the contestation of rules and underlying norms and values (Mackay & Waylen 2014). Reforming institutions entails by definition the 'de-institutionalization of old rules, norms and values and the institutionalization of new ones [...] simultaneously presenting opportunities and constraints to political actors as "old settlements" are weakened and the political space opens up for contests over competing agendas' (Lowndes and Wilson 2001: 24). This has important implications for feminists and others seeking to promote reform. Opportunities for feminist interventions are created by political change and institutional restructuring, because according to Katznelson (2003) there exist 'multiple possibilities inside unsettled moments of uncommon choice' and 'structurally-induced unsettled times can provoke

³ The term 'women activists' is used in place of 'feminists' due to the negative connotations that some attach to the latter, seeing it as 'a product of 'decadent' Western capitalism. See for example Kumari Jaywardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World in the C19th and C20th: History of the Women's Movement*. Lecture Series, The Hague: Institute of Social Studies, 1982.

⁴ Egypt's first-ever female judge appointed in 2003.

possibilities for particularly consequential purposive action' (277, 283). This may explain why periods of democratic transitions are characterized by heightened women activism.

In theory, successful intervention to insert new values, structures and processes may deeply influence the future development of an institution (Mackay & Waylen 2014). The concept of path dependency— 'the long arm of the past' (Offe 1996, 219)—explains how choices made early in the life of an institution, will consistently determine subsequent choices. Thus, institutions become self-perpetuating. According to Pierson (2004: 10), path dependency and 'lock-in'—are particularly likely in the case of political institutions because of the legally codified and binding nature of rules that set out a certain path and set of roles and relationships. However, institutional design is only the first step. The 'constitutional moment' is followed by a longer phase of institutionalization and ambiguity as the new structures and norms codified in overarching arrangements are either embedded and consolidated, modified or discarded in the processes by which they are transformed into everyday rules and practices (Mackay & Meer 2003, Waylen 2007, Kenny 2009). Institutional reform is often "filtered" by those responsible for implementing it. The result may be institutional changes that are "differentially interpreted, mediated and (in some cases) neutralized" (Lowndes & Leach 2004, 559). Reforms related to gender equality have been particularly susceptible to this process of 'filtering'. While 'embedding' institutional change is always difficult, reforms that challenge gender power relations could be especially difficult to institutionalize. Feminist political scholarship (FPS) has shed light on what appear to be particular 'vulnerabilities' of gender reforms to resistance, erosion, drift and reversal (Mackay 2014).

Here, the study of informal gendered rules may explain the gap between formal institutional change and outcomes. Informal rules are constantly interacting with, supporting, complementing or completing formal institutions (Waylen 2014). In patriarchal societies, it is generally accepted that informal gender rules tend to reinforce the status quo while subverting positive reform. For example, despite formal laws criminalizing FGM and child marriage, the extent to which informal norms condone and even favor such practices is widely documented (The Kelleher 2014). Informal gender rules are often 'invisible' as they are 'naturalised' as part of the status quo (Waylen 2014).

Kantola (2007) argues that gender provides a 'central structuring dynamic' of institutions and that the state is 'the gendered effect of discursive and structural processes'. The focus thus 'shifts from women's exclusion from state institutions to understanding the gendered structures of these institutions and to transforming them' (Kantola 2007; 270, 271). This is important because 'if institutions are gendered, then they can also be "re-gendered"' (Kenny and Mackay 2009: 277). This is where agency comes into the analysis, through 'strategic behaviour by political actors to masculinize and/or to feminize political structures, rules and forms' (Beckwith, 2005: 133).

Kabeer (1999) defines agency as the "ability to define one's goals and act on them." Agency is crucial for understanding institutional change and continuity and has been the focus of feminist scholarship as well as policy-oriented research. In fact, Waylan (2017) has argued that feminist and gender scholarship has put too much emphasis on agency and neglected the structural constraints that can have negative effects on outcomes. This research aims to show that the question of institutional change is fundamentally about the relationship between structural constraints and agency. Individual choice is constrained by the gendered formal and informal institutions and yet at times of political change these very institutions and rules are challenged by human agency.

Egyptian Women and the ‘Revolution’

Egyptian feminism is at least a century old. Ever since the famous Huda Shaarawi took off her veil in public as a gesture of defiance against institutionalized patriarchal oppression, Egyptian women have found their way from seclusion to participation in public life incrementally, using a variety of institutional tools ranging from advocating the re-interpretation of religious texts to invoking international conventions of human rights and fighting every battle to advance their agenda.

The January 25 uprising was one such battle, and it was lost. In order to understand precisely why, we ought to look beyond the Muslim Brother’s reactionary agenda and the military establishment’s political ambition. The outcome of this struggle for a new institutional order in Egypt was not determined by a single political actor nor by a single institution but by a constellation of choices made and decisions taken (or not taken) at several ‘critical junctures’ in an institutional setting marked by power differentials.

During the last decade of the Mubarak regime, in response to pressures from the Bush administration, steps were taken towards political liberalization, relaxing restrictions on freedom of association and freedom of the press (Dalacoura 2005). In this period some important institutional reforms were made in favor of gender equality, the most notable being the new Personal Status Law in 2000 and the ‘Nationality Law’ of 2001.

At the time various parties were competing to influence the ‘women agenda’ in Egypt; the most prominent were the National Council for Women (NCW), a number of secular women NGOs and the Islamists (Tadros 2014). However, from 2000 onwards only the NCW, headed by the First Lady, had enough political leverage to push through legislative reform. Increasingly feminists found that they had to work in the shadow of the Council. Those who chose to swim against the current, so to speak, who defied those (informal) rules were marginalized, persecuted and portrayed as outcasts. When the FGM law was passed for example, Nawal El-Saadawi, a renowned physician and feminist, commented by saying:

I fought a lot against female and male circumcision for the past sixty years, and I lost my job and reputation and was opposed by religious men and the Physicians’ Syndicate for this cause. And when they issued the law, no one mentioned me and recognition was given to Suzanne Mubarak because she is the President’s wife. (Nawal El-Saadawi quoted in Tadros 2014)

Thus, gender reform became the prerogative of the NCW. The regime had managed to appropriate women’s issues in an effort to portray itself as ‘modern’ (to the international community) and benevolent (to the public), and in so doing opened the door for some important reforms. The extent to which these reforms were ‘transformative’, however, is debatable. The claim that they do tip the gender balance of power in favor of women is controversial. The Khul’ clause of the new Personal Status Law for example allows women to divorce their husbands unilaterally, without the latter’s consent, no small achievement in a conservative patriarchal society. However, several scholars have documented how the intended outcome of these reforms—the empowerment of Egyptian women—has been diluted in practice (see for example Samaha 2016, and Sonneveld 2010).

According to prominent Judge Tahani El-Gebali, laws are very important, however, how we understand laws, how we interpret them and how we implement them are equally important.⁵ Perhaps this is why, legislative reforms did not “spill over” to the political arena. Women remained underrepresented in party membership and in the parliament. The quota system, which was reinstated in 2010, reserving 64 seats for women, was another important reform but far from being transformative, women failed to win any additional seats and the legitimacy of the women MPs was called into question (El Baradei and Wafa 2013), especially when they failed to secure any meaningful social or economic gains for millions of working-class women.

As the storm gathered momentum in January 2011, women played a powerful role in mobilizing popular support for the ‘Revolution’. Women’s rights at this stage was not on the agenda. Women political activists (sometimes called revolutionaries) were clearly taking a gender-blind approach (Tadros 2014). Whether they believed that gender equality would be part and parcel of what they believed was going to be a new democratic state, part of social justice—one of the slogans of the revolution—or whether they believed that gender issues would come at a later stage when the dust had settled was not clear.

However, by early March 2011 when a number of women activists were subjected to a what became known as “virginity tests” (Amnesty 2011, BBC 2012) it finally dawned on Egyptian women that the road to democracy and gender equality was going to be longer and steeper than initially anticipated. And as the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) and the Muslim brotherhood sat at the negotiating table, women finally realized that they had no place in the new political arrangement. In the power struggle that ensued women were systematically targeted by the military and by the Muslim Brothers (Amnesty International 2015). They were now being pushed out of the street literally and out of the public engagement space figuratively and the two conflicting dominant discourses—echoed by the media—regarding women activists, reflected the dichotomous manner in which those women came to be viewed in the Egyptian society. They were either glorified as heroines and champions of the cause (Hafez 2014) or vilified as westernized and undisciplined rebels with questionable motives and ethics (Willow 2012, Tadros 2018).

Although women participated in large number in the events that constituted the 25 of January uprising, they did not present themselves as “feminists” nor did they espouse a feminist agenda. At this juncture identities were fluid and the lines between gender, classes and political ideologies became largely irrelevant, as Egyptians united in the face of one adversary and in pursuit of one common goal—ousting Mubarak. According to Amina Shafik, a prominent journalist and political activist who grew up in Nasser’s Egypt:

Women are part of the people, not a group apart, their concerns and demands are the concerns of all Egyptians. They aspire for a better life for themselves and their families. And when they joined the 25 January revolution, it was for democracy and human rights and social justice for all. How can we talk of women’s rights in the absence of democracy and human dignity?⁶

But as women became increasingly singled out for sexual and gender-based violence by the military and the Muslim Brothers, reality dawned (Amnesty 2015). This was no longer a glorious moment, this was no longer a ‘second war of liberation’ the whole affair has been reduced

⁵ Interview with Judge Tahani El Gebali, first woman to be appointed judge in Egypt. The interview took place in her office in Zamalek.

⁶ Interview over the phone on 17 November 2019.

to a bitter political struggle in which competition over women's bodies was becoming increasingly critical, because "containing women meant containing the Revolution."⁷

Women—who led and inspired the Revolution and rallied for democracy, human dignity and social justice—had to be ejected from the picture, or at the very least their influence had to be neutralized. The easiest way to accomplish this was to make these women lose their credibility in the eyes of the public (Hafez 2014). Because of the predominantly patriarchal and conservative culture of the vast majority of Egyptians, this was not difficult to achieve. In a society that attaches a special importance to the idea of honor, viewed almost exclusively in terms of women's chastity, violating women's bodies, and more importantly allowing the media to circulate these 'incidents' and repeatedly broadcast photos and videos of women being assaulted and their bodies exposed on the streets of Cairo, had had the intended effect. Insinuations about these women's promiscuity and questionable ethics were widely propagated (Holmes 2019, 93).

When a photo of a young woman lying on the ground, her dress ripped open, a group of uniformed men looming over her, dragging her by the arm went viral on social media, this put the Egyptian public in an awkward position (Soueif 2011, Jadalliya 2017). Initially it elicited denunciations then attention was quickly diverted to the question of why the woman in the photo was wearing a blue bra! And the incident became known as the 'woman in the blue bra' incident (Hafez 2014). Another way of dealing with this awkward situation was for Egyptians to differentiate between SCAF and the army. This differentiation was crucial in distancing the army from any misdeed and to keep the image of the army intact.

In December 2011, a woman activist who had sued the military for sexual assault won the case. The Supreme Administrative Court ruled in favour of the victim and ordered that virginity tests on female detainees be stopped (Amnesty 2012). The verdict was considered a moral victory, and even though the physician implicated was acquitted later by a military court (Ahram Online 2012), the verdict encouraged women to reclaim their place in the public spaces of participation. In December 2011 SCAF, in an effort to appease widespread indignation at continued violations, issued an 'apology' to 'great Egyptian women' (Ahram Online 2011). However, the systematic politically-motivated violence against women did not subside and in fact intensified during the Muslim Brothers regime.

The MB who had initially joined the 25th of January uprising on the side of the revolutionary Youth before deciding to trade partners when it was time for negotiation, democracy was not on the agenda, nor women's rights needless to say. The Shura council of the MB for example did not include a single woman, nor did the Guidance bureau. The role of the Muslim Sisters, who include among their ranks a number of highly educated academics and professionals, is to support the organization in achieving its aims, but not as partners in decision making and certainly not as leaders. In fact, the Muslim Sisters were supportive of a very reactionary agenda in terms of women's rights, including decriminalizing FGM and lowering the age of marriage.

Pakinam El-Sharkawy, who served as an advisor to President Morsi, said before the 57th session of the Commission on the Status of Women: 'The formulation of international policies to combat this phenomena [of violence against women] must be based on a balance between the values shared by humanity and the cultural and social particularities of countries and peoples.' (Statement of H.E. Pakinam Al Sharkawy). The statement is legitimate enough. However, it did not fail to arouse the suspicion of secular feminists when seen against the backdrop of the clashes over the Personal Status law that emerged immediately after the Revolution and the statements

⁷ Interview over the phone with a young female activist who asked to remain anonymous. Interview took place 16 November 2019.

made by the Grand Mufti with regards to amending the Personal Status law in favor of men. Again women – this time Salafi women - participated in the protests against the Personal Status law and called for its amendment. This is especially significant; women mobilizing in protest of a law that they stand to benefit from—and that was adopted after decades of lobbying and mobilizing—willingly forfeiting their rights for ideological reasons. This clash also meant that Egyptian women stood divided. The two camps differed on almost every important matter from the constitution to the family laws. Barlow and Akbarzadeh remind us that Islamic and secular Muslim feminism have always been competing movements (2006: 1482), and now the competition was resumed.

In 2013, when Egyptian women took to the streets again this time in support of the military in their bid to oust the MB, they were convinced that the MB had lost their legitimacy, which they had, and that the military was intervening to rid Egypt of some sort of ‘foreign occupation’. Former Vice President of the Supreme Constitutional Court, Tahani El- Gebali famously stated that the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood is in fact an ‘occupation’.⁸ Again the women who gathered in the millions in ‘Itihadiya’ on the fateful night of June 30th, had only one aim in mind; to remove President Morsi and the MB from power. Believing that the military is the only party that will safeguard the nascent democracy from falling into undemocratic hands.

Thus, with popular support, the military were able to eliminate the MB once and for all and re-establish itself as the undisputed leader of post Mubarak Egypt. Not only did the military succeed in consolidating its authority over Egypt’s political institutions and bureaucracy, but also managed to re-embed itself in the Egyptian society and psyche through the media and extensive use of propaganda. As early as February 2011, posters of a soldier carrying an infant in his arm started to appear in all the important public spaces. Other posters showing young boys in military outfits waving Egyptian flags were widely circulated. Videos showing elderly women hugging soldiers with motherly affection were aired on Egyptian TV channels on a daily basis. The slogan ‘the army and the people are one’ was adopted by some public figures, leading newspapers and was echoed on social media (see for example Al-Masry Al-Youm newspaper 2011).

The special bond between Egyptians and their army is deeply rooted. Since ancient times the army has been the guardian of Egyptian ‘land and honor’ (al-ard wa al-‘erd). During the colonial period, the army supported by the nationalists called for political independence, Colonel Ahmed ‘Urabi and later the Free Officers, and Gamal Abdel Nasser, became emblematic of this special relationship. Egyptians may disagree on the policies of Nasser, especially his socialist experiment but not on his person; he is in fact known as ‘the eternal leader’. This perception of the army as the guardian, protector and ultimate refuge, is coupled with other notions that are deeply ingrained in the Egyptian mind, such as *jihad*, which lies at the heart of Islamic faith and the 1973 victory against Israel, believed to be nothing short of a miracle.

Insinuations at similarities between President El-Sisi and the late President Gamal Abdel Nasser were being echoed in the media long before his election. A few months before his election, Sisi was directly asked how he felt about being compared to Nasser in a talk show hosted by two very popular anchors, he answered that he is often compared to Nasser and that he hoped to be like him (Al-Masry Al-Youm 2018). In the times of Nasser, state feminism was the order of the day, and Egyptian women made important gains in terms of political and economic empowerment in the 1950s and 1960s albeit the conservative personal status law remained unchanged. It remained to be seen whether President Sisi will champion women’s cause as Nasser had done before him.

⁸ See video on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_gPOjeYPO8

Women's Agency and the Gendered Institutional Order

Asmaa Mahfouz, one of the founding members of the April 6 Youth Movement who is known in Egypt for her role in mobilizing for the January 25th protests that sparked the uprising, recorded a video message urging others to join: 'If you have honor and dignity as a man, come...come and protect me and other girls in the protest.'⁹ The message is clearly gendered, Asmaa is appealing to the sense of honor in her young compatriots, and she is in fact asking them to 'live up' to the traditional image of masculinity and fulfil an essentially patriarchal duty; protecting her and 'other girls' in the protest.

Her address is interesting for many reasons, but particularly because it simultaneously undermines and reinforces male supremacy—on the one hand she is clearly taking the initiative and calling for the men to 'act like men' and join her in her decision to go to the protest. Her audience is a man, she is addressing her audience using the word (*enta*), denoting the masculine singular, as if she is speaking to each man alone. By thus taking the lead she is challenging patriarchal values, and on the other hand she is reproducing them by demanding (physical) protection for herself and other women, insinuating that failing to join her and protect her would signify a lack of 'manhood' (in the most traditional sense) in her audience. She is in fact invoking conventional values to achieve a progressive aim. The fact that Asmaa is veiled adds another layer to the complicated picture. Her demure and conservative appearance belies her revolutionary agenda, her quiet manner and soft voice (traditionally favorable feminine attributes) contradict her fiery language and passionate words (traditionally perceived as masculine traits). It is almost difficult to reconcile her conservative appearance, typical of an Egyptian middle class young woman, with her unconventional role as a revolutionary and a leader. But Asmaa is not unique in this case. The same could be said of Tawakol Karman of Yemen, Zainab al-Khawaja of Bahrain and others. Although their aim was purely political, not feminist, in the course of the fight for the 'political' they have challenged traditional gender roles, by assuming control of the situation and calling for the men to follow. What Asmaa and her peers tried to do was utilize the informal gender rules and norms (e.g. men 'should' protect women) in their struggle to change the formal rules of the political game (e.g. initiate a democratic transition). However, choosing to situate their discourse within the established gender order, had the unintended consequence of reproducing it.

The testimonies of women who have been subjected to mass sexual violence and gang rapes show recourse to a similar strategy which further reinforced traditional gender stereotypes. One well-known activist explained in a televised interview how her friend appealed to the sense of 'honor' in her would-be-rapists. She explained how she singled out one of her assailants and pleaded with him to protect her, saying she was a wife and mother and begging him to 'spare her honor'¹⁰. By thus invoking the traditional image of woman as a wife and mother and appealing to the traditional values of masculinity, she was able to persuade the man to help her get away.

The epidemic of mass sexual assault persisted for a year and did not end until after the 30 June uprising. These were not sporadic episodes but a systematic tactic that was attributed at the time to groups affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, and had several important effects; first it reinforced that notion that 'women belong at home', those who venture outside are bound to pay the price. This message was made all the more clearer given the conspicuous lack of action on the part of the police and the military to protect those women. Second, they have overshadowed earlier episodes of violence against women that took place during the reign of SCAF, and finally they have helped further alienate and discredit the Muslim Brotherhood. After those episodes it has

⁹ See the video on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgjIgMdsEuk>

¹⁰ See the video on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZVNosY-2DA>

become clear that the Muslim Brothers were not only the enemies of Egypt, but also the enemies of Egyptian women. Thus, when then Field Marshall Abdel Fattah el-Sisi addressed the Egyptians asking them to endorse his next step, women rallied around him. The military establishment's spotless image had been restored and its past violations against Egyptian women thrown into the 'memory hole'¹¹.

During this period of political change or 'critical juncture', the choices of feminists have been constrained (or enabled) by the formal and informal rules that inevitably shaped possibilities for reform. Let us examine the choices available to feminists in terms of their strategic calculations, unintended consequences, path dependency and past cultural traditions, in light of the unequal distribution of power among the main political forces, with the military possessing mostly coercive and normative power, the 'Islamists' having normative and utilitarian power (Al-Sayyid 2017, 72).

Women were initially united in the early months of the Revolution but stood divided in the power struggle that followed. In the beginning, women chose to subsume their demands within the wider aims of the Revolution, choosing to prioritize democracy and social justice over gender-specific issues. Eventually they became divided with the 'secular' feminists advocating the goals of the Revolution and supporting the revolutionary youth, while the Muslim Sisters backed the increasingly conservative and autocratic rule of President Morsi and his Party.

Secular feminists continued to work as they did before, by forming coalitions of existing NGOs and creating new women's groups, many of which were social media-based that centered mainly on issues of women's rights and women's political representation. There were even efforts to resurrect Huda Sha'arawi's Egyptian Feminist Union which was banned back in the 1950s (Egyptian Feminist Union website). In June the Arab Alliance for Women (AAW) organized a convention during which a 'Women's Charter' was announced and ratified by 500 NGOs and gathered 500,000 signatures from 27 different governorates. The Charter asserted the role of Egyptian women in the Revolution and articulated a set of demands including the political representation of women, social and economic rights, and the future of the National Women's Machinery as well as other demands (UN Women).

In July of 2011, the Muslim Sisters held their own conference. It was attended by hundreds of 'Sisters' and saw the participation of the granddaughters of Hassan Al-Banna. The conference, titled "Women from Revolution to Renaissance," discussed the important role of women in the Revolution and in the future of Egypt (Ruta 2012). However far from espousing gender equality or aiming to challenge the traditional gender balance of power, the Muslim Sisters who were becoming more visible and more vocal were fighting for rights within an Islamist framework, and without defying any of the norms set forth by Islamic jurisprudence (Farang 2012).

The viciousness of the backlash against women after the initial eighteen days of protests led to the resurgence of feminist consciousness and put women's issues in the limelight of the political scene (Pratt 2015). Women activists now sought to claim their space in the public sphere by resorting to demonstrations and marches. This eventually proved to be strategic miscalculation. Assuming that the public would support them, as they did the revolutionary youth before, they continued their protests, without realizing that the public was exhausted of the state of uncertainty, insecurity, and economic downturn. More importantly, they failed to realize that the masses were skeptical and even suspicious of their feminist agenda. This suspicion became clear when the poorly attended rally on International Women's Day was attacked and dispersed by groups of unknown men in Tahrir Square, who accused the activists and their supporters of making demands that were against Islam (International Federation for Human Rights Report 2012, Chick 2011).

¹¹ The expression is borrowed from George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*.

The women's efforts to influence the course of events remained limited, and all political power was concentrated in the hands of the SCAF despite several civilian cabinets a few of whom were sympathetic to women's demands. On the level of political parties, women's membership remained low, and women's issues were never prioritized even in parties that were deemed progressive such as the Social Democratic Party and the Tagammu' Party. According to Waylen (1994, 339):

“once the transition has begun and political parties have reconstituted and resumed their activities, the focus tends to shift away from women's organizations and social movements in general and toward more conventional forms of institutional politics, particularly when the opening is controlled by the military.”

This is precisely what women activists had failed to recognize. They mistakenly believed that they could mobilize public opinion in support of their cause as the Revolutionary youth had before. They did not understand that the institutional framework had changed and that what constituted a successful call for democracy under the Mubarak regime failed to produce the same result under SCAF, and in fact had the unintended consequence of alienating large segments of the population and reinforcing the idea that activists are “westernized” or espouse “foreign agendas”.

As for the Muslim Sisters, they never acted as or pretended to be an independent political player. They threw their weight behind the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and its Freedom and Justice Party. The Muslim Brotherhood made a strategic miscalculation when it alienated other political players including the Salafis¹² and the revolutionary youth, banking on its electoral victories and capacity to mobilize large segments of the population. It possessed utilitarian resources and limited coercive resources, which it used to intimidate the revolutionary youth and women activists. It also counted on the normative resources gained by couching its discourse in Islamic doctrine. Another strategic error was the misconception that they could bring the military under civilian control (Al-Sayyid 2017).

At a moment of crisis, Egyptians, men and women, looked to the army to restore order and stability. The army was called upon in June 2013, to intervene in what some thought would constitute the “corrective revolution” that would take the country along the path of the slogans of the January revolution, which the MB had presumably abandoned (Lesch 2013). The military, an inherently conservative and deeply patriarchal institution, first sought to eject women from the picture by restricting their freedom of movement and intimidating political activists with sexual violence. Then in an effort to win secular feminists over in their fight with the MB, adopted a more reconciliatory tone and passed laws that criminalized sexual harassment and condemned the MBs for violating the rights of Egyptian women (see Al-Masry Al-Youm 2013).

In reality however, neither the military nor the MB were sympathetic to the feminists' demands. From the beginning both forces sought first to control women by limiting their freedom of movement and hence expression through systematic sexual violence, and also by waging a media campaign aimed at vilifying women activists, and when this did not bear fruit, they both at

¹² Before 2011, Salafists in Egypt generally rejected participation in formal politics and adopted an either apolitical or militant position, unlike the Muslim Brothers who had entered electoral politics in the early 1980s. After 2011 a shift occurred in the Salafi position and a number of Salafist political parties were established. The ideological differences between the two camps remained however, and deepened with political competition. For more details on the relationship between the Muslim Brothers and the Salafis in Egypt see Annette Ranko & Justyna Nedza (2016) Crossing the Ideological Divide? Egypt's Salafists and the Muslim Brotherhood after the Arab Spring, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 39:6, 519-541, DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2015.1116274

different times tried to coopt women by adopting a reconciliatory discourse which was not backed by meaningful institutional change.

For example, if we look at the Constitutional Declaration of 2011, adopted by SCAF, we find that women are mentioned once in Article 38:

The law will govern the right of candidacy for the People's Assembly and Shura Council according to the determined electoral system, including at a minimum the participation of women in both assemblies (Constitutional Declaration 2011).

In the revised version of June 2012, Article 38 was cancelled and the document made no mention of women or women's political representation. When finally, after a bitter struggle a civilian president was elected and a new constitution was adopted in December 2012, again women found themselves further marginalized. The first Constituent Assembly, which was later ruled unconstitutional and dissolved, was dominated by the Islamists insisting on basing the new constitution on the Shari'a. The second Constituent assembly had only seven women out of 100 members, several of who resigned after months of debate over the role of Islam in the new constitution. The last Constituent Assembly, which produced the 2014 Constitution after the overthrow of Mohamed Morsi on 30 June 2013, was not elected, but appointed by the interim President Adly Mansour and included only five women out of 50 members.

The final product of the Committee, the constitution itself, reflected the relative power of the different components of the committee. For example, the Constituent Assembly refused to allocate a quota for women. As a result, the original 2014 Constitution stipulated in article 11 that: "The state shall seek to take necessary measures to guarantee adequate women representation in parliamentary bodies, along the lines identified by the law". This was later addressed by the adoption of Law No. 46 of 2014, which required party lists to include a certain number of women.

Currently, 89 female members hold seats in parliament, making up 14.9 per cent of representatives. Also, eight women have been appointed in the latest Egyptian cabinet, an achievement that was hailed as historic by the official Egyptian media. According to Judge Tahani El-Gebali it matters little how many women sit in parliament. She explains:

Making the system more inclusive in general is good, and more inclusive of women is even better. But the question is not how many women are in parliament, the question is what political resources do these women have? Are these women able to bring about meaningful improvement in the balance power? In laws and institutions that serve to empower women and better their lives? This is the crux of the matter.¹³

The question of course is a very valid one. To what extent have women MPs succeeded in putting gender equality on the agenda of the parliament? This is a question that deserves a separate research project. However, existing research shows that although women MPs have championed policies in favor of women in terms of health care and education, the contributions thus far have been far from revolutionary (Abdelgawad and Hassan, 2019).

More importantly, gains made by women in terms of political representation are still viewed by a wide segment of the population as a gift bestowed by an enlightened leadership. A quick look at the media headlines would serve as a good example: 'Women gain unprecedented

¹³ Interview with Judge Tahani El Gebali in her office in Zamalek, Cairo on 1st of March 2019.

position in President al-Sisi' era' the headline of a recent issue of Egypt Today (Bakry 2019). Another telling headline, is an assertion in Egypt's official daily newspaper, by the then minister of social solidarity Ghada Wali: '2014 constitution gave Egyptian women unprecedented rights.' (Ahram Online 2017).

Some scholars have identified a new gender discourse that started to emerge in Egypt after 30 June 2013. Zaki (2015, 39) argues that a new state feminism in Egypt is 'instrumentalizing' women and their issues for political gains.¹⁴ According to a prominent professor of political science, who prefers to remain anonymous, the political representation of women is not enough and it is not proof of the improvement of women's position in general; women continue to be marginalized in the labor market and harassed in the public sphere.¹⁵

Historically, successive regimes in Egypt have espoused women's issues and rights selectively in accordance with the regime's agenda and in return for popular support or in an attempt to project a modern image on the international scene. In the fifties, Nasser granted women the right to vote, and in turn state feminism contributed to the legitimacy of Nasser's regime (Hatem, 1992). In the seventies and nineties Sadat and Mubarak respectively encouraged women's rights, partially for reasons of international relations. More recently President Sisi lavished praise on Egyptian women for their perseverance in the face of the painful austerity measures adopted as part of Egypt's transition to neoliberalism. He also praised them for their role in helping to "preserve Egypt's identity" during the struggle against the MB (Egypt Independent 2019). To what extent could this discourse be translated into tangible political and social gains for women will be determined to a large extent by women's agency in the coming period and their ability to utilize the institutional resources available to them, including their power as the country's largest voting bloc, to push for new institutional arrangements more in tune with their demands. In order for this to happen women in the parliament and government and outside of them, must cease to see themselves as representatives of narrow interests and espouse a wider feminist agenda.

Conclusion

The paper aimed to answer the following questions: What kind of constraints did women activists operate within? What resources were available to them? What were the formal and informal rules that constrained or enabled change? The findings show that from the beginning women's choices were limited, with inadequate political representation and gender-blind electoral laws that put them at a disadvantage. On the informal level, women were further disadvantaged by a patriarchal tendency to be skeptical if not outright suspicious of women's participation in politics. The institutional resources available to women activists were minimal as all political power remained firmly in the hands of the military. This was compounded by women's tendency to act and organize as they did in the Mubarak era, when the political scene was rather stagnant. This proved to be a fatal miscalculation. Path Dependence dictated forms of organization and mobilization that deepened existing divisions within the women's movement and what used to be a competition among women's NGOs for funds and political favors turned into a competition for legitimacy and popular support.

As for the Muslim Sisters, they also made a fatal strategic miscalculation when they insisted on subordinating women's rights to the MB's political agenda rather than offer a new vision. They had a golden opportunity to do so when the MB took power however, they chose to

¹⁴ <https://journals.openedition.org/ema/3503?lang=en>

¹⁵ Interview in her office in Giza on 31 October 2019.

throw their weight behind the Freedom and Justice Party, and echoed an equally reactionary discourse on women's place in society. This had the unintended consequences of alienating secular feminists, and diminished the ability of the movement to attract the support of the urban educated classes. Path dependence dictated on the Muslim Sisters modes of action and organization that undermined their legitimacy in the eyes of a large segment of the population as an alternative project to the westernized secular model, which had already lost much of its legitimacy due to its close association with the former first lady. Despite the window of opportunity presented by the rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Muslim Sisters did not attempt to challenge existing rules that prevented them from establishing themselves as an independent movement. Past cultural traditions prevented them from liberating themselves from the protective umbrella of the Muslim Brotherhood and they contended themselves to play a supporting role, which aimed to legitimize the gender ideology of the Brotherhood. They were also adamant on keeping their distance from secular feminists, insisting on articulating a conservative gender ideology within the framework set by Islamic jurisprudence.

The implications of this failure by both camps is a missed opportunity with long lasting consequences. For the Muslim Sisters, their failure to organize independently from the Muslim Brotherhood and failure to articulate a viable alternative vision of an Islamic feminism that could accommodate the principle of gender equality and political representation for women, meant that their political appeal remained limited. Secular feminist likewise, failed to transform their long experience in women activism into an inclusive movement that could cross the divide of class and ideology. Their political appeal and influence remained limited and hence they missed a political opportunity that is not likely to repeat itself in the near future.

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