

# An Arab Spring for Women

Monday 2 May 2011, by [COLE Juan](#), [COLE Shahin](#) (Date first published: 26 April 2011).

**The “Arab Spring” has received copious attention in the American media, but one of its crucial elements has been largely overlooked: the striking role of women in the protests sweeping the Arab world. Despite inadequate media coverage of their role, women have been and often remain at the forefront of those protests.**

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As a start, women had a significant place in the Tunisian demonstrations that kicked off the Arab Spring, often marching up Bourguiba Avenue in Tunis, the capital, with their husbands and children in tow. Then, the spark for the Egyptian uprising that forced President Hosni Mubarak out of office was a January 25 demonstration in Cairo’s Tahrir Square called by an impassioned young woman via a video posted on Facebook. In Yemen, columns of veiled women have come out in Sanaa and Taiz to force that country’s autocrat from office, while in Syria, facing armed secret police, women have blockaded roads to demonstrate for the release of their husbands and sons from prison.

But with such bold gestures go fears. As women look to the future, they worry that on the road to new, democratic parliamentary regimes, their rights will be discarded in favor of male constituencies, whether patriarchal liberals or Muslim fundamentalists. The collective memory of how women were in the forefront of the Algerian revolution for independence from France from 1954 to 1962, only to be relegated to the margins of politics thereafter, still weighs heavily.

Historians will undoubtedly debate the causes of the Arab Spring for decades. Among them certainly are high rates of unemployment for the educated classes, neoliberal policies of privatization and union-busting, corruption in high places [[1](#)], soaring food and energy prices, economic hardship caused by the shrinking of employment opportunities in the Gulf oil states and Europe (thanks to the 2008 global financial meltdown) and decades of frustration with petty, authoritarian styles of governing. In their roles as workers and professionals as well as family caregivers, women have suffered directly from all these discontents and more, while watching their children and husbands suffer, too.

In late January, freelance journalist Megan Kearns pointed out the relative inattention American television and most print and Internet media gave to women and, by and large, the absence of images of women protesting in Tunisia and Egypt. Yet women couldn’t have been more visible in the big demonstrations of early to mid-January in the streets of Tunis, whether accompanying their husbands and children or forming distinct protest lines of their own—and given Western ideas of oppressed Arab women, this should in itself have been news.

## Women Take to the Streets from Tunisia to Syria

To start with Tunisia, women there have, in fact, been in the vanguard of protest movements and social change since the drive to gain independence from France of the late 1940s. Tunisian women have a relatively high literacy rate (71 percent), represent more than one-fifth of the country's wage earners, and make up 43 percent of the nearly half-million members of eighteen local unions. Most of these unionized women work in the education, textile, health, city services and tourism industries. The General Union of Tunisian Workers (French acronym: UGTT) had increasingly come into conflict with the country's strongman, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, and so its rank and file enthusiastically joined the street protests. Today, the UGTT continues to pressure the government formed after Ben Ali fled to move forward with genuine reforms.

In all of this, women opinion-leaders played an important part. To take one example, although like most prominent Tunisians movie star Hend Sabry [2] had been coerced into supporting Ben Ali and his mafia-like in-laws [3], when the anti-government rallies began she broke with the autocrat, warning him in a Facebook post against ordering his security forces to fire on the protesters [4]. Later, she admitted to being terrified at making such a public gesture, lest her relatives in Tunis be harmed or she be permanently exiled from her homeland.

In Egypt, the passionate video blog or "vlog" of Asmaa Mahfouz [5] that called on Egyptians to turn out massively on January 25<sup>th</sup> in Tahrir Square went viral, playing a significant role in the success of that event. Mahfouz appealed to Egyptians to honor four young men who, following the example of Mohammed Bouazizi (in an act which sparked the Tunisian uprisings) [6], set themselves afire to protest the Mubarak regime.

Although the secret police had already dismissed them as "psychopaths," she insisted otherwise, demanding a country where people could live in dignity, not "like animals." According to estimates, at least 20 percent of the crowds that thronged Tahrir Square that first week were made up of women, who also turned out in large numbers for protests in the Mediterranean port of Alexandria. Leil-Zahra Mortada's celebrated Facebook album of women's participation in the Egyptian revolution [7] gives a sense of just how varied and powerful that turnout was.

As in Tunisia, Egyptian women make up a little more than one-fifth of wage-earning workers—and labor has long been a powerful force for change in that country [8]. Before they began to mobilize around the Tahrir Square protests, Egyptian workers had staged over 3,000 strikes since 2004, with women sometimes taking the lead [9]. During the height of the protests against the rule of long-time dictator Hosni Mubarak, unionized workers even formed a new, nationwide umbrella trade union.

In Libya, women's protests proved central to the movement of entire cities out of the control of Col. Muammar Qaddafi [10], as with Dirna in the western part of the country in February. What makes the prominence of women demonstrators there so remarkable is that city's reputation as a stronghold of Muslim fundamentalism. The abuse of women, a central issue in countries like Libya, even burst into consciousness when a recent law-school graduate from a middle-class family in Tobruk, Iman al-Obeidi, broke into a government press conference in Tripoli [11] to charge that Qaddafi's troops had detained her at a checkpoint and then raped her. Her plight provoked women's demonstrations against the regime in the rebel-held cities of Benghazi and Tobruk.

On April 15, Yemeni president for life Ali Abdullah Saleh scolded women for "inappropriately" mixing in public with men at the huge demonstrations then being staged in the capital, Sanaa, as well as in the cities of Taiz and Aden. In this way, the issue of women's place in the mass protests against decades of autocracy was, for the first time, explicitly broached by a high political

figure—and the response from women couldn't have been clearer. They came out in unprecedented numbers throughout the country [12], and even in the countryside, day after day, accusing the president of “besmirching their honor” by implying that they were behaving brazenly. (It is a longstanding value in the Arab world to avoid impugning the honor of a chaste woman.) In other words, they turned his attempt to invoke Arab mores about women's seclusion from the public sphere into a rallying cry against him.

Women of a certain age who lived in the southern part of the country found the president's taunt particularly painful, given that they had grown up in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), ruled by a communist regime that promoted women's rights. They were not subjected to more conservative norms until Saleh united the PDRY with northern Yemen in 1990. Unlike in Tunisia and Egypt, only about a quarter of Yemeni women can read and write, only 17 percent have finished high school, and only 5 percent are wage earners, though most work hard all their lives, many on farms [13]. Still, in urban areas such as Aden, Taiz or Sanaa, middle- and upper-middle-class women have an important place in the professions and business, or as schoolteachers, and more than a quarter of college students are women.

Faced with the power of outraged women, Saleh quickly backed off [14], maintaining that, as a secular Arab nationalist, he believed they should be full participants in the political affairs of the nation. He had simply been wondering aloud, he claimed, how members of the opposition Islah Party, a fundamentalist Muslim organization, were so willing to allow women to march in the streets against him when they favored women's seclusion on all other occasions.

In Syria as well, on several occasions, women have shown their strength and bravery, turning out in forceful demonstrations—sometimes without men, but with their children in tow. Near the town of Bayda, for instance, thousands of women shouting “We will not be humiliated!” cut off a coastal road [15] to protest a heavy-handed government policy in which the secret police of President Bashar al-Assad had arrested their demonstrating male relatives. On other occasions, Syrian women have staged all-female marches [16] to demand democracy and changes in regime policy.

## **Protecting Women's Gains**

Despite the centrality of women activists to the Arab Spring, they have seldom been recognized as of real significance by most of the male politicians who will undoubtedly benefit from what they have accomplished. It was, for example, striking that women were without representation on the commission appointed to revise the Egyptian constitution in preparation for September elections, and that only one woman (a Mubarak holdover at that) was appointed to the twenty-nine-person interim cabinet.

In addition, patriarchal forces such as Muslim fundamentalist groups and clergy are determined that women's rights should not be expanded in the wake of these political upheavals. As an omen in the wind, when a modest-sized group of 200 women showed up at Tahrir Square on March 8<sup>th</sup> to commemorate International Women's Day, they found themselves attacked by militant religious young men who shouted that they should go home and do the laundry [17].

Women's groups and progressive movements are understandably apprehensive about the possibility that, in Tunisia and Egypt, Muslim fundamentalist movements will become more influential in parliament and push through laws to the disadvantage of both women and secularists [18]. Yet they have been remarkably unwilling to let such considerations deter them from embracing democracy, something secular-leaning dictators Ben Ali and Mubarak had warned them against.

The likelihood of an actual Muslim fundamentalist takeover in either country remains minimal for the foreseeable future. In Egypt, the military government has so far retained a Mubarak-era ban on the Muslim Brotherhood putting up candidates under its own banner. As a result, its candidates will run as the representatives of other small parties. In addition, the organization has pledged to contest parliamentary seats in only a limited number of electoral districts, so as to allay middle-class fears that their goal is an Iran-style fundamentalist takeover of the country. Admittedly, Muslim conservatism will likely burgeon as a political current more generally in Egypt, whatever the shape of the next parliament, posing a challenge to women's rights.

For instance, some Brotherhood officials have let slip that they will indeed be working for the implementation of a medieval form of Islamic law [19], which would include the segregation of women and men in the workplace, while the mufti or chief adviser on Islamic law to the government in Egypt has called for a "review" of secular personal status laws that favor women, and which had been supported by Suzanne Mubarak, the fashionable wife of the deposed dictator.

In Tunisia, the long years of repression under Ben Ali left the leading fundamentalist group, al-Nahda or the Renaissance Party, weakened. In any case its leader Rashid Ghannouchi has been speaking of institutionalizing a "Turkish model" and says that, unlike the Egyptian Brotherhood, he supports the right of a woman to become the country's president [20].

In this, he is looking to former Turkish fundamentalists like Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Abdullah Gul who, tired of being imprisoned by and butting heads with the secular Turkish establishment, founded the Justice and Development Party. Since coming to power in 2002, they have fought for a pluralistic system as a way of making a place for more traditional Muslims in society and politics without pushing for the implementation of medieval Muslim legal codes.

Still, as backlash reactions like the attack on the International Women's Day protest have set in, activists on women's issues and progressives are wondering how to ensure that women's gains this spring not be rolled back. In Egypt, prominent newscaster and critic of the Mubarak regime Buthaina Kamel [21] has her own idea about how to gain women's rights in a new, more democratic environment. She is running for president [22], something inconceivable in the Mubarak era.

Even if her run gets little traction, her candidacy is nevertheless deeply symbolic and historic—and another strikingly brave act by a woman in this new era in the Arab world. (Her decision is, of course, opposed by the Muslim Brotherhood.) Other Egyptian women are hoping that the constitution can be rewritten to strengthen women's rights, and that the sixty-four seats set aside for women in the previous parliament will be retained [23].

Politicians in the transitional government of Tunisia, for decades the most progressive Arab country with regard to women's rights, are determined to protect the public role of women by making sure they are well represented in the new legislature. Elections are now planned for July 24, and a high commission was appointed to set electoral rules. That body has already announced that party lists will have to maintain parity between male and female candidates [24].

In such a list system, you don't vote for an individual but a party, which has published an ordered list of its candidates. If the list gets 10 percent of the vote nationally, it is awarded 10 percent of the seats in parliament, and can go down its ordered list until it fills all those seats. Parity for women means that every other candidate on the ordered list should be a woman, ensuring them high representation in the legislature. This procedure is sometimes called a "zipper" gender quota. Quotas for female legislators are common in Scandinavia and in the global South.

Although the Tunisian requirement for gender parity remains controversial in some quarters,

Ghannouchi's al-Nahda Party recently came out in support of it. In contrast, Abdelwaheb El Hani, leader of the newly founded right-of-center party al-Majd, complained that the rule was "a violation of freedom of electoral choice," and insisted that he doubted it would be effective in promoting women's representation [25]. In contrast, the leftist al-Tajdid (Renewal) Party praised the move as "historic" and pledged to make women's equality an "irreversible accomplishment and an effective reality in Tunisian political life." Indeed, al-Tajdid wants an explicit equal rights amendment put into the constitution.

## **Giving Women a Fighting Chance**

The Arab Spring has proven an epochal period of activism and change for women, recalling the role of early feminists in the 1919 Egyptian movement for independence from Britain, or the important place of women in the Algerian Revolution. The sheer numbers of politically active women in this series of uprisings, however, dwarf their predecessors. That this female element in the Arab Spring has drawn so little comment in the West suggests that our own narratives of, and preoccupations with, the Arab world—religion, fundamentalism, oil and Israel—have blinded us to the big social forces that are altering the lives of 300 million people.

Women have been aided by this generation's advances in education and the professions, by the prominence of articulate women anchors on satellite television networks like Aljazeera and by the rise of the Internet and social media. Women can assert leadership roles in cyberspace that young men's dominance of the public sphere might have hampered in city squares.

Their prominence in the labor movements and at the public rallies in Tunisia and Egypt, moreover, underlines how much more of a public role they now have than is usually acknowledged. Even the trend toward wearing a headscarf among women in Egypt during the past two decades has been seen by some social scientists as a step forward. It has been a way for women to enter the public sphere and work outside the home in greater numbers than ever before while maintaining a claim on conservative ideals of chastity and piety.

Women activists of the Arab Spring have come from all social classes, since it has been a mass movement. Middle- and upper-class women often focus their political energies on issues of political representation and on laws affecting women's equality. Seeking constitutional guarantees of electoral parity is one possible way of responding to any patriarchal political backlash.

Working-class women are particularly concerned with wages and workers' rights. Stronger unions would improve women's prospects for greater rights. Women's health, literacy, and material well-being are concerns of all women. During the age of the dictators, the nation's wealth was often usurped by a narrow elite of politically connected families. A democratization of politics could potentially lead to more state resources being devoted to women and the poor.

Keep in mind that women such as Buthaina Kamel knew the risks when they called for Mubarak to step down. Whatever their patronizing appeals to feminist themes, authoritarian regimes like Mubarak's and Ben Ali's politically oppressed and stole from everyone in society, including women, and they had proved increasingly unable to deliver the social services and employment on which women and their families fundamentally depend for a better life. Before, women could be marginalized at will by the dictators whenever they made demands on the regime. Now, at least, they have a fighting chance.

**Juan Cole and Shahin Cole**

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## P.S.

\* From TomDispatch.com, April 26, 2011 :  
<http://www.tomdispatch.com/archive/175384/>

Shahin Cole holds an LL.B. from Punjab University Law School in Pakistan and has lived in Egypt and Yemen.

Juan Cole is the Richard P. Mitchell Professor of History and the director of the Center for South Asian Studies at the University of Michigan. His latest book, *Engaging the Muslim World*, is just out in a revised paperback edition from Palgrave Macmillan. He runs the *Informed Comment* website.

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## Footnotes

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