

INTERVIEW

## Arab region: A spring without women

Friday 21 September 2012, by [HELIE LUCAS Marieme](#) (Date first published: 17 August 2012).

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**FeministIndia: Women have played a crucial role in the Arab uprising that started in late 2010. After almost year and half, it is being said that women are the biggest losers in this revolution. According to you what has gone wrong?**

Marieme Helie Lucas – Nothing went 'wrong': it was clear from the start that this 'revolution' was neither a socialist one nor a feminist one. In both the cases of Tunisia and Egypt, it was limited to overthrowing the government in place. Although it was initiated by ordinary people who took to the streets for reasons of poverty and hopelessness, in fact it has become a victory of the extreme right political forces that work under the guise of religion.

After the near-eradication of the Left parties/movements and workers' unions that went on for decades, and were either completely ignored or largely under reported by the international media, the only organized political forces in Tunisia and in Egypt were the religious fundamentalists ones. They took over the protest movement.

It is interesting to note that, contrary to their lack of proper reporting when the Left forces were under attack, the international media did denounce government's repression against fundamentalist movements: in that sense, they not only fed the world with a very unbalanced political analysis, but they also promoted Far Right religious movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood exclusively as victims of the state, and not as perpetrators of grave violations of the rights of civilians and notably of women's rights.

As the Muslim Right did previously in other countries such as Iran and Algeria, fundamentalist groups and parties in Egypt and Tunisia manipulated the legitimate discontent that sparked under regimes that did not cater to people's most basic needs. Certainly, Algeria in the nineties is a very good example of their strategy. We can consider that Algeria was the lab for what is now going on in other countries in the region.

The Tunisian and Egyptian regimes were neither more nor less 'undemocratic' than the vast majority of governments in the world today – as is confirmed by the magnitude of the movement of the

'Indignés' which, for over a year, has been protesting their own rulers' policies in many countries in Europe and North America. However the argument of lack of democracy what was broadly used to legitimate overthrowing these governments, regardless of whom and what will replace the existing regimes.

It is hard to believe that politicians and journalists the world over celebrated 'the people' who was making a 'revolution', without ever probing which were the components the of political forces within 'the people' - conceived of in liberal terms as an atomized mass of individuals -, what political trend was increasingly speaking in its name and what were the changes such forces proposed beyond the overthrowing of the rulers.

This is a political mistake that was denounced by many Algerians who experienced exactly the same steps: a youth revolt in 1988, not initiated by fundamentalist groups but immediately hijacked by them, a demand for new elections as the only way to ensure 'democracy', i.e. fundamentalists' demand that supposedly religious laws labelled 'sharia' be enforced on the whole population.

The cancellation of the legislative elections in December 1991 was not the beginning of fundamentalist violence in Algeria as media wrongly reported: violence had been going on since the sixties and increasing with each decade; but it was followed by an even more violent decade of extreme fundamentalist violence on the entire population, that made about 200 000 victims in the nineties: while intellectuals, journalists, artists, were targeted individually and slaughtered, while entire villages were burnt down and eradicated by armed fundamentalists, women were fundamentalists' preferential target - they were beheaded, burnt, mutilated, tortured, raped, forcibly impregnated in order to produce 'good Muslims', and, whether veiled or unveiled, assassinated in large numbers throughout the decade.

This experience of living under fundamentalists' rule, and the intimate knowledge of their political strategies is the reason why Algerian women saw clearly from the start what was in the making in Tunisia and Egypt. However our analysis and our warning signals to the world remained unheard; moreover, when we pointed at the fundamentalist agenda, we were accused of being some hidden supporters of the old regimes....

There is a need to reflect on democracy as a concept and on elections being the only criteria of evaluation of democracy: if we do not, we will end up celebrating Hitler as the champion of democracy, for the very reason that he was elected by 'the people'.

The fact is that, in Tunisia and Egypt, ordinary people were in the streets demanding changes and that populist Far Right forces hijacked the movement to their political benefit. They were smart enough not to appear too visibly at the start of the protest; however, they were there indeed, and they had enough cadres and money (which definitely helped in organizing for tents, distribution of food to the protesters, etc...) to control and to give a political content to the initial protest.

Both in the case of Tunisia and in the case of Egypt, demands were initially limited to: 'Enough!', 'Get out of here' that were the main slogans of protesters. In other words, demonstrators demanded a change but were not clear about formulating the exact content of this change in political terms.

Legitimate popular struggles and uprisings can pave the way to extreme Right populist parties - in the case of Tunisia and Egypt, to religious fundamentalist parties, i.e. extreme Right working under the guise of religion.

**In countries like Egypt and Tunisia, it is believed that women have in fact enjoyed noteworthy legal rights under the Mubarak and Ben Ali regimes.**

## How true is this?

**Women's rights activists and secularists worry that the chances of Tunisia's ruling Islamist Renaissance Party implementing a sharia law in the country is a possibility. In Egypt the quota system that had guaranteed women's representation in parliament has been revoked by the new government. There are allegations that Muslim Brotherhood dominated parliament may lower age of marriage to 14. Women's rights activists in the countries like Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia etc who are already struggling with religious conservative leadership are worried that latest developments in the region can have negative impact in their struggle for equal rights.**

**Do you see a reversal in women's rights in these countries in the wake of this re-emergence of conservative religious political culture?**

Unfortunately, women refuse to see the danger till it is too late. A simple list of the crimes committed by Tunisian fundamentalists between the fall of Benali and the eve of the elections shows what they intended to promote: violent attacks of peaceful women's demonstrations, sexual assaults during these demonstrations, death threats to secularists, beating of men who drank alcohol in bars, threats on women who went to the beach who were forcibly sent home at gun point, threats on women who were not 'properly covered', forbidding legal electoral meetings of the Tunisian Communist Party, attempts at burning of a theatre hall and a TV station that scheduled films they deemed un-Islamic, legal actions in court against secularists for 'offending Islam', armed fundamentalist squadrons checking into private homes if there were alcohol in the house, etc...

All this happened BEFORE the elections in Tunisia, before the fundamentalist party was elected. Why worry only now? We should have worried already at that time, and taken action against fundamentalists then and there.

Since the elections many more crimes were committed such as forced veiling of women, illegal occupation of Tunis University, forbidding unveiled women teachers to deliver their lecture, etc...

What fundamentalists did in Algeria - the nearest country to Tunisia - during the nineties, should have been enough of a warning for Tunisians. Moreover, at least two decades ago, based on their experience of fundamentalism gaining ground in Algeria throughout the sixties, the seventies and the eighties, Algerian feminists did warn Tunisian women's organisations that the early warning signs of the rise of fundamentalism in Tunisia were becoming visible. But we were not heard, our concerns were dismissed on the ground that Tunisia was much more advanced than Algeria and a similar rise of the religious Far Right could never happen in Tunisia.

Meanwhile, Algerian intellectuals who fled Algerian fundamentalists' rule were threatened by Tunisian fundamentalists while they lived in exile in Tunis. But their testimonies were dismissed too.

This sadly reminds me of Iranian women giving us similar warnings well ahead of time, and Algerian women's organisations refusing to see what their Iranian sisters pointed at in our own country.

Now we do warn Senegalese women that we see the rise of fundamentalism in their country, but they answer, just as we Algerians did, and as Tunisians did as well: 'No! Not in our country!, It is far too advanced, liberal, with progressive laws, etc...' It seems one does not benefit from other's experiences.

What do women have to lose? What were the legal rights of women in Tunisia and in Egypt before the revolutions?

In Tunisia, article 6 of the 1959 Constitution -on equality- states that all citizens have the same rights and duties; they are equal before the law. Most Constitutions do so, but these broad statements are usually denied in the name of religion under other laws, and especially under Personal laws/Family Codes/Law of Personal Status that regulate large parts of the lives of women: rights in the family, marriage, polygamy (in fact, polygyny), divorce, repudiation, custody and guardianship of children upon divorce, alimony, inheritance, etc...

Although article 1 of the Tunisian Constitution establishes Islam as the religion of the republic, article 5 -on personal integrity, conscience, belief- states that the Tunisian Republic guarantees the inviolability of the human person and freedom of conscience, and protects the free exercise of beliefs.

Accordingly, the Tunisian Civil Code that applies to all citizens recognizes different personal status and each community is governed by a different family law. This pattern, common to all countries in the MENA region, usually leads to legalizing backwards provisions in family matters. It was not the case in Tunisia where the laws rather reflected the stand for equality between citizens.

Here are some examples of the rights enjoyed by Tunisian women under the family law passed right at independence in 1956 by the first President, Habib Bourguiba, which were improved in later years under the pressure of women's organisations. Let's only look, as an example, at the conditions of marriage that protect women's rights.

In Tunisia the minimum age of marriage for women is 17. Below that age, consent of the wali ( i.e. the matrimonial tutor which is characteristic of Maleki North African Islam) or court permission is required, but article 5 of the Code of Personal Status (CPS) specifies that bypassing legal age of marriage can be done 'only for pressing reasons and for the obvious benefit of both spouses'.

It is interesting to note that, in Tunisia, the wali can be either male or female, a rare instance in the region.

Further, the law endlessly reiterates the will to secure the bride's consent. Under A.9 of the CPS both spouses have a right to contract their marriage or to appoint proxies. A.3 specifies that validity does not require the consent of a wali. Under A.3 of the CPS, there is no marriage without the consent of the spouses. Under A.21 the marriage is declared null and void if performed without the consent of both spouses. A.3 is interpreted in case law that consent should be manifested in an indisputable manner by saying 'yes' before the officiating officer.

The marriage contract further protects the woman : Under A.4 of the CPS, two 'trustworthy' witnesses are required for validity of the marriage. The sex of witnesses is not specified, i.e. it can be women, another rare instance in the region. A marriage lacking witnesses is void under A.21 and 22.

Further, the economic future of the bride is protected by the mahr, which is an essential component of the marriage and a requisite for validity, otherwise marriage is void. There is no maximum or minimum limit for mahr but it must not be 'worthless' (A.3 of the CPS). Under A.12, mahr is the property of the wife, to be disposed of as she wishes.

Under A.4 of the CPS marriage shall be proved only by an official document prescribed by law. The contract is established before two notaries public, if the marriage is celebrated at home or in a private venue, otherwise before a civil status registrar in a Municipal Council Office if celebrated publicly. Without a contract the marriage is null and void. Marriage contracts are civil contracts and must include 1. The exact identity of spouses, 2. The mutual consent of spouses, 3. If spouses are

under age, the guardian's authorisation, 4. The name and signature of witnesses, 5. The mahr.

All these provisions stand against all forms of child marriage and forced marriage, organized by families against the will of girls, that prevail in so many countries in the MENA region. However, if a marriage were to be performed without the bride's consent, it is declared invalid by a court (A.22). If unconsummated, the court's statement is enough to free the woman. If it were consummated and then declared invalid, the woman can claim her mahr, the paternity of children is recognized and the woman must observe idda before marrying again. In both cases, no divorce proceedings are necessary.

Under A.23 of the CPS, women were still to 'obey' their husbands and did not envisage mutual responsibilities. It was amended by Law No. 93-74 of July 12, 1993, and the rights and responsibilities of spouses are now equal in the marriage, including financially: the wife is to participate in supporting the family if she has money and the husband has no right over the wife's money (under A.24).

Polygyny was abolished under A.18 of the CPS: a man can be punished with one year in prison or a fine if he contracts a polygynous marriage. A wife who knowingly enters such a marriage is liable of the same punishment. Under A.21 a polygynous marriage is considered irregular and can be nullified.

Divorce by unilateral repudiation by the husband ( talaq) was outlawed under A.30 of the CPS and divorce can only take place in court. Under A.31 divorce by mutual consent is recognized. Whatever the grounds are, divorce is only possible through the court and after reconciliation efforts by the judge.

All these legal provisions show that laws passed under Bourguiba in the late 50ies were favourable to women, granting them equal rights in many instances, and trying to protect them from families and husbands. It also shows that women's organisations fought for bettering the existing laws, and succeeded in obtaining further rights in the following decades. It did make the status of Tunisian women a wonderful exception in the MENA region.

In Egypt, women enjoyed far less legal rights than in Tunisia ; still, they were much better off than many other women in the region. For instance, age of marriage is codified (16 for girls) while it simply is not in many other countries in the region. The consent of the wali or of a judge is required but their power is limited: for instance the wali could not prevent a marriage on account of the mahr amount or social status. However nothing is said in the law about the consent of the bride: A.5(2) states that two adults are required to testify that there has been some consent between the husband and the wali... In cases of forced marriages, women mostly wait for a few years, separate from their husbands, and then file for divorce.

The wife, far from enjoying equal rights and responsibilities in marriage is entitled maintenance only if she submits to her husband and does not leave the matrimonial home without his permission. The husband remains the one to decide whether going out for lawful work is or is not contrary to what he thinks is in the interests of the family.

While in Tunisia, divorce can freely be initiated by either spouse, talaq unfortunately is legal in Egypt; however under A.5 of Law No 25 of 1929 as amended by Law No 1200 of 1985, a divorcing husband must have the written certification of his talaq notarized by a qualified notary within 30 days of his pronouncement of talaq. The wife must be given personal notification, so as to avoid that she would be unaware of her status of divorcee. Talaq is irrevocable only after the third pronouncement.

While in Tunisia, various conditions related to persons and property, under A.11 of the CPS, can be stipulated in the notarized contract that add to the rights already provided by the law, in Egypt the law only recognized an unconditional talaq tafwid inserted in the marriage contract. Although this provision is far from sufficient to ensure women's autonomy and equality in marriage, it does free the woman of having to prove damages in the event of divorce. The right to work can also be negotiated in the marriage contract.

We could go on looking at the financial settlements of the dissolution of marriage, the rights and responsibilities over the children after divorce, etc... We would see that Tunisian women had the best status in the region, that they were granted more legal rights than Egyptian women, and that generally both enjoyed more rights than most other women of the MENA region. Those interested in the issue should be referred to the handbook produced in 2003 by the international network Women Living Under Muslim Laws ('Knowing Our Rights: Women, family, laws and customs in the Muslim world'), in which are compiled and compared the rights of women under Codes of Personal Status/Muslim Personal Laws in many Muslim countries and communities throughout Asia, Africa and the MENA region. The handbook is available on the WLUML web site and can be downloaded.

How not to see that the gains obtained by women under Bourguiba and Sadate are directly targeted by Tunisian and Egyptian fundamentalists? Not only do girls may now be given in marriage as early as puberty, but FGM (a pre Islamic practice by all historical accounts) is now openly advocated for in Tunisia by preachers from the Middle East; willingly or unwillingly, since 'the revolution', Tunisian women growingly wear a full covering - Saudi style, which is totally alien to their culture's traditional dress code, etc... But have we ever heard any outcry for the protection of 'Tunisian culture' in this case? We rather hear claims that veiling is part and parcel of Islam... as if the world turned a blind eye at the worldwide expansion of a specifically connoted Middle Eastern dress code that increasingly outcast all the various forms of dresses (from boubou to saris to Berber colourful dresses) that were traditionally ours for centuries. Moreover, non-consented marriages, polygyny, unilateral repudiation, obedience to the husband, etc.. are claimed by fundamentalists to be intrinsic to Islam, hence to be sanctified. If one does not want to run the risk of being labelled 'Islamophobic' !.

All women's legal rights in Tunisia and even in Egypt will be eradicated in the name of religion if the fundamentalist version of Islam becomes the law of the state. Is the world prepared to support dissidents of these countries who demand universal rights, or will fundamentalists who openly curtail the rights of women and of citizens be supported in the name of 'democracy'?

Let me take this opportunity to challenge here the use of the term ' sharia law' in the formulation of your question. It is a grave mistake to use the fundamentalist terminology and to label 'sharia law' any of the patriarchal measures that they want to impose as part of religion. It is both a factual mistake and also a political mistake. Additionally, I will also challenge the use of the term 'Islamophobia'.

First of all ' sharia' in Arabic means ' the path to God', i.e. an individual spiritual journey. It does not mean and has never meant any legal provision or set of provisions, any human law of any given country. Any decent Islamic theologian will confirm this translation of the word 'sharia' and its misuse by fundamentalists.

Fundamentalists managed to make the world believe that there is such a set of divine laws and that challenging their views on this matter is an insult to Islam itself.

Progressive forces outside Muslim countries and communities cowardly bend to this false translation/interpretation of the Arabic terminology, for fear of being accused of racism or

'Islamophobia'. 'Islamophobia' is yet another concept that fundamentalists forged and managed to give credibility to: as they portray themselves as the only legitimate representatives of their religion, if one opposes any of their diktats passed in the name of Islam, one is accused of being against Islam. In other words, the fundamentalist mantra is: as we are the only representatives of the true Islam, if you are against us, you are against Islam, thus 'Islamophobic'.

Progressive people and feminists should avoid giving credence to fundamentalists' claims by deconstructing their terminology and by refusing to use it. All fundamentalists of all religions want to impose their backward interpretations as THE only true version of their religion. However when it comes to Christianity, one would not dream of agreeing that Opus Dei's view of religion is the only true one. They know that, for instance, the Liberation Theology in Latin America promoted different views of Christianity. Or when it comes to Hinduism, one would not agree to support, for instance, sati that is promoted by fundamentalists as part and parcel of a good wife's behaviour supported by true Hinduism.

How come this very simple political analysis of the forces that promote different versions of religions is not made when it comes to Islam? How come even progressives around the world do accept the most backward practices promoted by fundamentalists as perfectly legitimate? Regardless of progressive interpretations by progressive theologians of Islam, regardless of the progressive laws of countries that are now in danger of being changed to the worst?

A second reason to ban 'sharia law' from your vocabulary, is to compare the different religious laws in Muslim countries and communities - all said to be perfectly in accordance with Islam: one can see how different they are from one another. This should at the very least point at the fact that they are man made, not God given.

Under these various laws, women's space range from being strictly closeted into four walls throughout their lives, given in marriage as a child, having no access to property or inheritance, etc... to situations where women can go out freely, earn their living, adopt children in or outside a marriage, marry or remain single, participate in political affairs and become heads of state.

For example, if we consider the legal age of marriage, it ranges from being married as a child such as in Gambia or Iran, to a minimum age that can be challenged in court, such as in Algeria, Malaysia, Egypt, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Morocco or Nigeria. In matters of rights and duties in marriage, equal rights between spouses exist for Muslims in Turkey, Fiji, the Central Asian Republics, Indonesia, Tunisia, while Malaysia, Iran, Egypt, or Sudan codified the wife's obedience. In matters of divorce, while Algeria, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Nigeria, Malaysia, Senegal or Turkey recognize divorce by mutual consent, an unlimited right to unilateral repudiation by Talaq is the rule in Sri Lanka, Sudan, Gambia, India or Nigeria.

If one looks at the diversity of the so-called Muslim laws across the world, which one of these legal provisions, all taken by governments that claim this is perfectly Islamic, is THE 'sharia'? And who has the capacity and the right to decide upon it? Are we going to allow the Muslim Right to decide upon it?

These are some of the questions raised by the improper use of the term 'sharia law'. I urge feminists to drop using it. And 'Islamophobia' as well...

A closer analysis would demonstrate that laws unfavourable to women are derived not just from religion but from various sources: indeed, there are different, and sometimes opposite interpretations of religion that shape laws, but laws are also inspired by non religious very different cultural practices across the MENA region, Asia and Africa, and even incorporate colonial

patriarchal measures long outlawed in the former colonizers' countries.

Let me give you a few examples:

- *On opposite religious interpretations:*

Algeria made polygamy (in fact polygyny) legal in 1984 (supposedly waking up to religion 22 years after independence!), arguing that the Qur'an itself grants each man 4 legal wives. Meanwhile Tunisia as early as 1956, banned polygyny, based on the second half of the same verse which explains that polygyny is allowed only if a man treats its 4 wives perfectly equally; Tunisian legislators decided that this was a clear indication not to allow polygyny, as, they said, if a man can give the same amount of money, the same house, the same dresses to his wives, he certainly cannot love them equally.

- *On cultural influence:*

FGM, a pre Islamic practice geographically limited to the sphere of influence of Pharaonic Ancient Egypt- is now supported and propagated by fundamentalist groups as an Islamic obligation, throughout the world. It gained ground in more and more countries in Africa. Recently, in the past few months, preachers came to Tunisia to lecture about the benefits of FGM, where it was unheard of, as FGM is totally alien to the local culture. These preachers received a vibrant welcome and their visit received an extensive coverage in the media. It is now seen as an Islamic practice.

Some twenty years ago, fundamentalist groups advocated it in Sri Lanka. Today it has been introduced in Europe: it has been practiced in the Muslim enclave of Sanjak in Serbia, on adult women, for the past two decades, and casualties are reported by local hospitals. Women are increasingly scared to mention it and the Serbian authorities turn a blind eye to it.

Similarly, veiling, a Middle Eastern dress code designed to protect against desert winds and heat both men and women, be they Christians (as any depiction of Virgin Mary attests to), Jews or Muslims, could be another example.

- *On colonial laws:*

In independent Algeria (1962), the 1920 post WWI natalist French law criminalizing any knowledge or practice of contraception or abortion was prorogated, in the name of Islam, till 1976, despite a fatwa by the High Islamic Council of Algeria stating in 1963 that contraception was licit in Islam and that abortion could have large indications including that of the mental health of the mother to be.

In Pakistan, at independence in 1947, the Parliament used the Victorian law denying any form of inheritance to British women in order to attempt to curtail the inheritance rights of Pakistani women, till women themselves challenged it on the basis of their religious rights.

Fundamentalists attempt to eradicate diversity, the diversity of cultural practices, of laws, of interpretations of religion, of dress code, etc... by imposing a patriarchal backward supposedly religious law to all, across continents. Will we let them do it? In the name of Islam? In the name of democracy? Or will the world support anti fundamentalists, give them visibility? Examples such as the Shah's Iran, Taliban's Afghanistan, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Kadafi's Libya and now Bachar Al Assad's Syria leave very little hope, where ordinary people were further physically crushed by armed fundamentalists, and their already meagre liberties totally suppressed, under the pretext of combating tyrants. In all these cases, imperialism and their media, were instrumental in supporting the most backwards alternatives to 'undemocratic' governments. This is logical and expected. But not just imperialism: short-sighted Left parties and media, the world over, also supported



fundamentalists as 'people's champions' against states.

**This year March 8<sup>th</sup> celebrations by women were attacked by groups of men in Cairo. Women were asked to "go home and wash clothes". Many Egyptian women have started tweeting and writing about the alarming developments on the streets where women are attacked/insulted/abused for not "covering up properly" by Islamist men/groups. Please comment.**

Isn't it surprising that the world discovers these abuse and attacks on women while they have been going on uninterrupted for months since the revolutions?. In Egypt, several women journalists were raped on Tahrir square itself by demonstrators as well as in the police stations: they publicly testified about it; women demonstrators were sexually molested during demonstrations by fellow-demonstrators (not just by plain cloth policemen hidden in the crowd); hundreds of women were submitted to so-called 'virginity tests' by the police; numerous photos of women dragged half naked by plain cloth police went around the world, including the famous 'blue bra' photo. Bearded men armed with sticks attacked Tunisian women peaceful demonstrations, and the women were sexually molested too. That happened months ago..., a year ago...

To me the question is: why is it now that these questions are raised? How does it make sense politically to start pointing at Islamist groups only now, while they were present and active since the beginning?

Is it the usual anti-state syndrome of the Left that praised 'the people' and refused to identify within it the Muslim Brotherhood and other Far Right movements? Is it the fact that fundamentalists were opposing the state and bringing down 'tyrants' that protected them so far? Is it that they now lose their immunity in the eyes of the Left - now that they were elected and officially came to power?

**Egyptian journalist Mona Eltahawy recently published a controversial article (Foreign Policy Magazine) in which she argues that the entire Arab region has a celebrated history of misogyny and culturally the region has always tolerated violence against women. Do you agree? Do you think this as one the reasons why women are excluded from the current decision making process and the growing attack on women by Islamist groups? Do you agree that women are facing a serious challenge in the post revolutionary Arab world?**

All the countries around the Mediterranean area have a common history of misogyny and violence against women. It was only yesterday - if I may say so - that in Sicily, Greece or Spain 'honour crimes' were frequent, that women were punished by death and that the executioners were men in the family. These are predominantly Christian countries. Not Muslim ones. Not Arab ones.

However culture per se and some of its most backwards aspects and practices do not develop regardless of a political context: some contexts help promote progressive aspects of culture while other contexts favour backward practices.

Violence today in the MENA region does not happen in a political vacuum, it flourishes in a specific political context: the rise of Extreme Right political groups which all enforce anti women rules.

Like Nazis, the Muslim Right sends women back to 'the Church, the kitchen, and the cradle'. Marine Le Pen, the present leader of the Far Right party National Front in France stands against reproductive rights as well as for the 'Christian roots' of French citizens. The Muslim Brotherhood too calls for a going back to (our) roots - imaginary ones of course, constructed for their political benefit.

All the various fundamentalist movements play the same role. If we clearly see this as Far Right politics in the cases of the National Front or of the Nazi Party, why can't the world see it as clearly when it comes to the Muslim Right?

Yes, women are definitely facing a serious challenge with the rise of Far Right religious parties, even more so when they become the 'democratically' elected rulers.

Let us remember that in Libya, the very day the provisional government (Libya's National Transition Committee) took over, this provisional government that represented the struggle against the 'tyrant Kadhafi' and people's desire for democracy, it unilaterally decided to suspend any existing law and to replace all of them by 'Sharia law' - whatever that meant in their views - and we demonstrated earlier that it can cover anything and everything!

While the world celebrated the advent of 'democracy' in Libya, the very first move of the new rulers was an autocratic one: decreeing the law, rather than consulting the people. What a step forward! However we failed to hear the voices of 'democrats' the world over condemn this undemocratic act.

Women in Muslim countries and communities spoke up, but theirs was a lonely voice. In a statement dated October 25, 2011, WLUM points at the fact that the legal change initiated by the interim government targets specifically women: 'when we consider which laws have been de facto annulled and changed for religious ones, we see that these are laws that directly affect the rights of women in marriage, divorce, guardianship, polygamy, inheritance, etc... i.e. family codes or laws of personal status. Women are directly targeted by this change in laws and will lose many acquired rights in the process.'

I really enjoyed Mona Eltahawy's brilliant and courageous piece: she dares denounce what women were subjected to during demonstrations, not just by the police but also at the hands of male demonstrators in Tahrir Square. For this she has been accused of betrayal of her community, of siding with imperialist countries, of playing into the hands of racists, and of feeding into 'Islamophobia' ! Even feminists of Muslim descent living in the USA fiercely attacked her in the most indecent and sordid way, and so did the Left. While Mona herself was badly beaten by the police ( they broke her arm) and sordidly assaulted sexually, she is denied the right to testify and analyze the forms of violence against women she was a witness to and experienced herself. In the name of national cohesion against the external enemy!

This shows what her detractors' priority is: the main - and in fact only - danger as they see it is 'Western imperialism'; they deny the existence of our local national home bred Far Right forces and the threat it is for women and all the non-fundamentalist citizens. This position deprives anti fundamentalist citizens of any means to adequately address the rise of their Far Right forces: the danger is located outside, far from them in North America. This is so disempowering...

Although one can point at numerous instances in which 'Western imperialism' and the Muslim Right struck a deal (such as the Northern Alliance and then the Taliban in Afghanistan, and presently the armed opposition in Syria), many continue to deny that they may work hand in hand.

**Do you see direct link between increasing Islamisation seen across the world with the ongoing Islamophobia in the west, including America's so called war on terror?**

As previously argued, I think choosing to use the term 'Islamophobia' rather than racism, xenophobia, or any already existing concept is extremely dangerous and fuels into the fundamentalist agenda.

May I remind you that the only man killed by the police after the London bombing was ...a Brazilian

citizen whose skin was brown enough to make police think he may have been Pakistani ?

It is not Islam that is attacked; it is people deemed to be Muslims, regardless of their personal faith. A Christian Egyptian would be submitted to just as much xenophobia and discrimination as a Muslim Egyptian would be, as both are seen as 'Arabs' from the Middle East. Ordinary people in Europe and North America are totally ignorant about Islam, what racists hate is foreigners, strangers whom they see as intrinsically backwards, stealing their jobs in a context of economic crisis, wrongly benefiting from social measures, etc....

Turning a faith into a race is the most scary political move one witnessed since the Jews were persecuted by the Nazis as a 'race', implicitly derived from the religion they were supposed to believe in, although many of them living in Western Europe were not believers at all any more.

Everywhere in Europe, governments, media and ordinary people speak of 'the Muslims' while a good percentage of those presumed 'Muslims' declare themselves agnostics or atheists (around 25% of French citizens of Muslim descent in France, a figure that matches that for presumed Catholics), while a vast majority of those who do not dare declare themselves openly without religion do admit to not actually practicing any religion at all (over 85%, again the figure for presumed Muslims matches that for presumed Catholics). We have to face it: so-called Muslims in France are mostly... non-believers! These disturbing statistics- disturbing for racists who prefer to ignore them, as it points at our 'sameness' rather than at our differences - should clearly help challenge the concept of 'Islamophobia'. When real people, when 'Muslims' are assaulted - not ideas -, it is not because they supposedly believe in Islam, it is because they come from elsewhere.

There is no doubt that fundamentalists promote the world over their ultra conservative views of the world under the mask of religion. Is this 'Islamisation' ? Progressive theologians and believers in Islam, as well as non-believers, would rather call this political phenomenon a rise of the Far Right.

What struck me in the Left discourse on the war-on-terror in America is that one discusses anti terror without ever discussing terror. Again this analysis gives priority to what imperialists do. What prompted the 'war on terror' was indeed the need to secure access to oil resources, but also the bombings and attacks on Paris, London, Madrid, New York... Why deny it? Why condone and legitimate fundamentalist violence as a simple reaction to imperialism? To oppression there can be responses from progressive social actors (such as women fighting for their rights) or dangerous responses from the Right and the Far Right. Those are dangerous mainly for the peoples in their countries. Supporting the Far Right in the name of anti imperialism is a crime.

Part of the problem is that anti fundamentalists have little or no access to the media; fundamentalist Muslims are much more 'exotic' and appealing to the media than ordinary citizens from Muslim descent who go to the mosque 3 times in their lives, who don't pray, don't fast - just like most Christians or Jews do in Europe today -, and when they do not eat pork, it is just out of habit rather than a religious practice...

In the quasi-total public invisibility of anti fundamentalists, of progressive Muslims or of non-believers of Muslim descent, it is then easier for fundamentalists to claim that they represent the real Islam.

This rise of Muslim fundamentalism takes place in the specific political context of rising Far Right movements in Europe: Far Right parties are visibly winning a growing number of votes in each election, in several countries they win around 30% of votes, in many other countries above 15%. These parties are traditionally xenophobic; in the context of the economic crisis, these parties stir hysteria against citizens of foreign descent, in this case against 'the Muslims'.

Both Muslim fundamentalists and traditional Far Right xenophobic parties concur in building up violence against each other, both look for physical confrontations that would rally more troops to their respective causes.

At the turn of the century, when Italian workers were the main source of immigration into France, there were pogroms against them and dozens were killed and hundred wounded by lynching mobs of French workers in a noted instance in 1911 in the South of France. The Museum of Emigration in Rome bears witness to the fact that France was far from being the only country where such events happened.

These Italian workers were 'white', Christians and Europeans. They were not 'Muslims'. Poles, Russians, Spaniards, Portuguese also faced hatred when they migrated to France. Each new wave of immigration had to face more or less violent forms of discrimination and xenophobia. It is now the case for migrants from North African (i.e. Muslim) descent.

But today citizens of Italian origin (or other origin) are fully integrated into the population of France. Today as well, despite real discrimination in access to housing and jobs, French citizens of migrant North African descent are increasingly climbing the social ladder thanks to the system of free, compulsory - and secular - education. More and more of them are teachers, researchers, artists, journalists and cadres in the industry - not just unqualified workers. Not enough of them, yet, however a small but significant percentage of so called 'Muslims' show that the process is on its way, just as happened with any other previous wave of immigration in France. Today more than 30% of marriages in France are 'mixed marriages', a success compared to the meagre % around 5% in the UK or Germany.

We should not let Far Right parties and movements (that includes the Muslim fundamentalist Far Right) break this trend in Europe. We need to give maximum visibility to alternatives to fundamentalists and to refrain from adopting their terminology in our own analysis. This indeed fuels into the fundamentalist agenda.

### **As feminists what would be the biggest lesson we have learned from the Arab spring?**

There are three major areas we should reflect upon:

As progressive citizens, we should keep in mind that popular revolts are not necessarily progressive ones, that popular discontent in and by itself is not a political agenda; this agenda can be determined in a crucial way by Far Right forces that hijack the protests to their benefit. We should reflect on the limits of parliamentary democracy when it brings Far Right movements into power: elections in and by themselves are no guarantee of social rights for people in general and for women in particular.

In the specific context of increasing religionizing of politics that prevailed towards the end of the XX° century, it is essential for women's rights that feminists fight for secularism, i.e. a total separation of religion and politics. Under secularism, the state declares itself incompetent in religious matters, it does not interfere with organized religions, the Church for instance. It does not recognize organized religions as political partners and does not grant them any representativity. Secularism only recognizes individuals as equal citizens, speaking for themselves. Secularism does not mean, and should not be seen as meaning, that the state interferes with religions on an equal footing, is equally tolerant vis a vis each religion. This is a perversion of the concept, which prevails in the UK for instance.

However, in a secular state, the state guarantees freedom of belief and of practice of their religion

individuals; it also guarantees the same citizen's rights to non-believers, agnostics and atheists. The case of France is a good example of the fact that women's organisations led by women of migrant North African descent are increasingly choosing to fight for secularism as a preferential way to counter the rise of the Muslim Right and its adverse effects on women in particular. Slowly a similar trend appears in other European countries among women of 'Muslim' descent who are taking the lead in this matter, but also in countries like Pakistan when an important coalition of women's organisations took a similar stand.

As feminists, we should remember that women have always been part of revolutionary movements and have repeatedly been ignored and sent back to their domestic duties after revolutions. This is equally true of Olympe de Gouges in the French Revolution, of Alexandra Kollontai in the Soviet Revolution or of many women of my generation in the struggles for independence in Africa or Asia in the second half of the XX<sup>o</sup> century...

Women have been part of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, but they were not in the leadership. They could not shape the political agenda. We women hardly ever access these political positions during revolutions.

Moreover 'women' as such are not necessarily progressists or feminists, as shown by the growing number of women who join fundamentalist groups. There were also numerous women in all the Far Right movements such as the Nazi party in Germany or the Fascist party in Italy.

In order to advance the feminist agenda regarding women's rights, we need not just women but progressive feminists, thinkers and politicians in the leadership of uprisings, and strong feminist organizations to support them as well as to monitor their actions.

The worldwide feminist movement of the 70ies recruited its women cadres from the Left where women, rightly so, were disappointed by the prevailing patriarchy. However they benefited from the political culture of the Left. This is less and less true of today's feminists and we need to recreate among feminist organisations the kind of progressive and non-patriarchal political culture that is needed to re-think strategically the place of women in popular uprisings.

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## **P.S.**

\* From SIAWI <http://www.siawi.org/article3635.html>

\* An edited version of this interview was published by FeministIndia  
<http://feministsindia.com/no-spring-for-arab-women/>