

The Arab Spring and the Role of Women

SAIFUZZAMAN

Assistant Professor

Department of Political Science, Kazi Nazrul University, Asansol (W.B.) India

ABSTRACT

The social movement known as the Arab Spring brings together various groups, including educated women, demanding the overthrow of decades-old dictatorial regimes. It begins in Tunisia and then spreads to bordering Arab-speaking countries of North Africa, Egypt and Libya. The Arab Spring seems to represent a new era of liberation for women in the Arab world. From Tunisia to Bahrain, from Egypt to Syria, women from all backgrounds demanded democracy, social justice, freedom, dignity and equality. Across the region, women occupied public spaces despite different degrees of freedom. Yet, it remains to be seen whether women will be afforded the opportunity to play substantial roles in the futures of their respective countries, or whether they will be marginalized, secluded and silenced. In this paper, I try to examine and chronicle roles played by Arab women during Arab Spring, the concerns and challenges they face and what strategies women should adopt to ensure their rights, in post-revolutionary periods. Finally, this paper concludes with the fundamental questions which need to be answered and the strategies which should be adopted regarding whether and how Arab women will indeed benefit from the ongoing change in the Middle East.

Key Words : The Middle East, Arab Spring, Arab women, Empowerment, Challenges

INTRODUCTION

The 'Arab Spring' is a term generally used in the media and in literature to refer to the Arab revolutionary momentum that gathered strength toward the end of 2010 to the present, and accomplished major gains by toppling some dictatorial regimes in the across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), such as in Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Tunisia. Kingdoms in Morocco, Jordan and Bahrain enacted reforms to varying degrees in attempts to stave off wider scale protests. Terribly, Syria descended into a brutal civil war. The popular unrest similarly known as the 'Arab spring' and sometimes as the 'Arab spring and winter', 'Arab Awakening or Arab Uprisings' and quite a few Arabs also calling it the 'Tunisian intifada' and we also call this the revolution of Mohamed Bouazizi. Like their counterparts in Libya, Egypt, Yemen and elsewhere, Tunisian women were an integral part of the protest movements in that which was later known as the 'Jasmine Revolution'. The term coined from American

journalist Andy Carvin and by the western media it called the Jasmine Revolution or Jasmine Spring, after Tunisia's national flower and in keeping with the geopolitical terminology of 'color revolution'.¹

The spark of the Arab Spring came when a Tunisian policewoman named Fedya Hamdi slapped Muhammad Bouazizi, a 26 years old fruit vendor in the town of Sidi Bouzid, in central Tunisia. Demeaned, Bouazizi set himself on fire in the front of a town hall on 17 December 2010. 'It is rather ironic, and often a neglected detail that it was a woman officer who insulted Bouazizi, and caused the humiliation that culminated in his death'.²

The Tunisian revolution set off the Arab Spring with repercussions throughout the region. It is a zenith of the socio-economic crisis and political oppression that exist in the region. The changing role of women in MENA societies is another aspect of the Arab Spring to consider. Indeed, women participated alongside men in the Arab Spring movements, entering what is considered to be a male sphere. The impact of these revolutionary

movements on the status of women in society, however, proves problematic. Despite the prominent role of women in the protests, ultimately the political transformations may increase men's domination of the public sphere.³

Arab women and Political Development :

Throughout history, Arab women have been active partners, alongside men, in efforts of national liberation and development in the Arab world. Examples are in Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Iraq, Tunisia, the Palestinian Territories and other parts of the Arab world. Within the context of the Arab Spring, Arab women actively participated in anti-regime protests and demanding social and political change, calling for justice and fighting for human and social rights.

The events in Tunisia are of far greater significance for west Asia, and the Arab world in particular, than the immediate fact of a people's revolt forcing a head of the state out of power. For one, it is a rare example of people trying to force out a regime, rather than yet another coup effecting regime change. Second, this is, patently, a secular uprising, not something instigated by Islamism. Third, not without reason, the events in Tunisia a cause for worry for many of the authoritarian regimes in west Asia.⁴

Since the 1956, when Tunisia gained independence from France, Tunisia has had the Arab World's most progressive laws on women's rights, although men remain privileged notably in the question of inheritance. In the 2011 revolution, Tunisian women participated massively in protests demanding democratic change. Bloggers, journalists, activists, trade unionists, students, and mothers mobilized and took to the streets to call for Ben Ali's resignation, freedom and dignity. According to Souhayr Belhassen, FIDH President, "Throughout the Tunisian revolution, women and men were equal. Women of all ages, from all backgrounds a dell walk of life participated in strikes and demonstrations". However, during the transitional period has seen victories for women: the adoption of a law establishing parity on electoral lists and the announcement of the withdrawal of reservations to CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women). Nevertheless, women represent more than 27% of the Constituent Assembly elected in October 2011. As of March 2012, in the 41-member government, there were 3 women. Tunisia thus remains the country in the region with the highest proportion of women in parliament.⁵

Women's encounter with the Egyptian uprising of 25 January 2011, or the 'Egyptian Spring', is similar to Egypt's springtime. Their presence on Tahrir Square during the uprising was eminent. During the 18-day uprising, Egyptian women demonstrated side by side with Egyptian men. The struggle against the dictatorship and the common goal of ousting Muhammad Hosni Mubarak was far greater than gender politics. Nevertheless, with the emergence of the turbulent transitional period, from the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), to the Muslim Brotherhood's hold on power, women's rights and their role in the governance process of Egypt was largely neglected.⁶

In the case of Libya, the protests broke out across the country in February 2011; their main goal to an end to Muammar Al Qaddafi's 42 year rule. Throughout the revolution, the country women actively participated and were involved in communicating information from one town to another, smuggling weapons, organizing relief and supporting the injured and families. Moreover particular women took up arms and fought alongside men. However, after the end of revolution, the transitional authorities (National Transitional Council) have thus far failed to take measures to ensure the representation of women in political bodies. The country has set itself a tight timetable for the adopted a draft of constitutional charter in August 2011. However, in the constitutional charter contains no provision prohibiting discrimination against women; the 28-member cabinet appointed by the NTC in November 2011 includes only 2 women; and the electoral law adopted in January 2012 does not contain a quota or other measures to ensure the representation of women in the new parliament.⁷

In January 2011, the students from Sana'a University were led the first protests in Yemen. After that, numerous peoples gathered in Al-Huriya Square (Freedom Square) to express their solidarity with the Tunisian people. These demonstrations sparked off a broader protest movement in several cities across the country, calling for political and social reforms. However, after the departure of President Saleh, there are no measures to ensure the representation of women in political bodies; discriminatory laws and customs are major obstacles to the participation of women in political life in the country. There is one woman in the 301-seat parliament. In December 2011, the National Unity Government established, out of 35 members 3 are women.⁸

From the outset of protests in Bahrain, women were at the forefront of demonstrations calling for political and social reforms. Women doctors, nurses and fellow protesters provided treatment to the injured. Women teachers joined in calling for national strikes. Women journalists and activists alerted the international community to ongoing repression of peaceful protests. Though, the country woman continues to struggle to enter the political sphere. In 2011, partial election there was only 4 women in the 40-seat parliament. Profoundly discriminatory laws and practices persist, preventing women from participating in public life and no measures have been taken to increase women's representation in political bodies.⁹

Like to other Arab nations, the condition of Syria is very different. In early 2011, protests began demanding democratic reforms, including the withdrawal of the 48-year state of emergency, the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad and an end to Ba'ath Party rule. Protests were suppressed by military and security forces with aggregate violence. Civilians, women and men, were killed, arbitrarily arrested, detained and tortured by the military and security forces. However, in Syria for the past five decades, the political involvement of all citizens has been obstructed by the repressive general climate. Discriminatory laws and practices present further obstacles to the participation of women. There are no measures to ensure the representation of women in parliament. There are 3 women in the 33-member government.¹⁰

Women in Algeria are one such group of people who despite making enormous contributions to state building, have been forced to the margins of Algerian society. At the end of January 2011, the nation's civil society groups, including women's rights and human rights organizations, established a coalition to call for political and social reforms: the National Coordination for Change and Democracy (NCCD). In a challenge to ease tensions, President Bouteflika proposed a series of reforms, including a law on the representation of women in elected bodies.¹¹

As early as February 2011 and following the popular upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt, Morocco experienced a social protest called the 20 February Movement (M20). This movement did not bring about radical change in the political system or in the very nature of the regime, but had several socio-political effects, some perceptible and others more diffuse. In the face of mounting pressure,

King Mohamed VI announced a series of measures, including the adoption of a new constitution and early parliamentary elections.¹²

Nevertheless, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia split with its own Arab Spring-inspired protests in a categorical manner, defending its territory from the revolutionary contagion at all costs. The political uprisings swept through the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has not left Saudi Arabia fully immune to changes. The different social activities in the region transformed the zeal of the Saudi grassroots online activism. They also adopted further government spending and cautious reforms. In this framework, the question of Saudi women's rights is particularly interesting. According to the various world reports, the social and cultural rights of the Saudi women's were repeatedly rated the lowest in the Middle East; even though the government led by King Abdullah ibn Abd al-Aziz Al Sa'ud (2005–2015) recognized the need to expand opportunities for women. However, in the new post-Arab spring context, King Abdullah enacted reforms to varying degrees, such as to grant women the right to vote and to stand for municipal elections as well as to include women in the Shura revive the fundamental debate on women in Saudi society, where women's faces are discreetly airbrushed or blurred in pictures on public display.¹³

Conclusion:

Women, alongside men, participated in the protest movements that shook the Arab world in 2011, demanding freedom, equality, justice and democracy. Generally speaking, they all call upon Arab women in particular to take advantage of the atmosphere associated with the revolutions sweeping the Arab world to expand their rights and the scope of their participation in the affairs of the region. All along, Arab women have been partners in the process of liberation, especially since World War II, partners in the process of state and nation building, and partners in the current process for change sweeping the region. However, despite their sacrifices and active contributions, their gains have been marginal. In most countries, the Arab Spring's slogans of equality, social justice and democratization have not materialized into quantifiable gains or social policies. Therefore, the struggle of Arab women to expand their rights and roles in their homeland goes on undeterred.

REFERENCES

Internat. J. Appl. Soc. Sci. | Jan. & Feb., 2023 | **10** (1 & 2)

1. Ben Fishman, eds, *North Africa in Transition: the Struggle for Democracies and Institutions* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 10-12
2. Kareem Fahim, “Slap to a fruit vendor’s pride set off tumult in Tunisia”, *The Indian Express*, January 23, 2011, p.21
3. Soumaya Ghannoushi, “Exposing the real Tunisia”, *the Hindu*, January 5, 2011, p.11
4. Nicole Rowsell, “Tunisia: Foundations of Democratic Compromise”, in *North Africa in Transition: the Struggle for Democracies and Institutions*, ed. Ben Fishman (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 19-36
5. *Ibid*
6. Nadine Sika, “An Egyptian Spring for women”, in *Handbook of Arab Women and Arab Spring Challenges and opportunities*, ed. Muhamad S. Olimat (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 61-69
7. *Wafa Bugaighis*, “Prospects for women in the new Libya”, in *Handbook of Arab Women and Arab Spring Challenges and opportunities*, ed. Muhamad S. Olimat (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 106-120
8. Elham Manea, “The Arab Popular Uprisings from a Gender Perspective”, *Zeitschrift für Politik*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (2014), pp. 81-100 , url: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24229172>
9. Magdalena Karolak, “Bahraini women and the Arab Spring”, in *Handbook of Arab Women and Arab Spring Challenges and opportunities*, ed. Muhamad S. Olimat (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 48-61
10. Lorraine Charles and Kate Denman, “The status of women in Syria before and during the Arab Spring”, in *Handbook of Arab Women and Arab Spring Challenges and opportunities*, ed. Muhamad S. Olimat (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 136-151
11. Andrea Khalil, Gender, eds, *Women and the Arab Spring* ((London: Routledge, 2015), pp.36-42
12. *Ibid*, pp. 142-146
13. Magdalena Karolak, “Saudi Arabian women’s rights and the Arab Spring uprisings”, in *Handbook of Arab Women and Arab Spring Challenges and opportunities*, ed. Muhamad S. Olimat (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 122-135.
