

Egyptian Female Cartoonist Pokes Fun at Fundamentalists

Medea Benjamin

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One of the women who spoke at the Women's Assembly during the World Social Forum in Tunisia was not a political activist, but a cartoonist. Dooa Eladl is 34-year-old Egyptian woman who calls herself a Muslim anarchist. Her work appears in the prominent newspaper *Al-Masry Al-Youm*. She has become one of Egypt's best-known political cartoonists, in a field completely dominated by men. (One of her humorous drawings is a portrait of herself marching to work, her hair tied to the mustaches of four of her male colleagues.)

During the Egyptian uprising, Eladl and her colleagues supported the revolution by printing up some of their fiercest political satire, the kind that would not have been published, and handing them out in Tahrir Square. "I don't think artists like myself should be members of political parties or organizers, but we should certainly use our art to speak out against injustice and oppression."

Eladl's blistering caricatures have landed her in hot water with some of Egypt's powerful fundamentalists. She now has the distinction of being the first cartoonist in Egypt to face blasphemy charges. In 2012 Salafi lawyer Khaled El-Masry, Secretary General of a group called National Center for Defense of Freedoms, filed a complaint against her for defaming religious prophets. The cartoon he objected to shows an Egyptian man with angel wings lecturing Adam and Eve. The man is telling Adam and Eve that they would never have been expelled from heaven if they had simply voted in favor of the Brotherhood's draft constitution in the recent Egyptian referendum. The court has not yet heard the case.

If the fundamentalists are upset about her irreverent depictions of religious figures, one has to wonder if they have seen her searing drawings about women's rights—and wrongs. One cartoon against child marriage shows a lecherous, old man with a cane peering greedily up the skirt of a little girl holding a teddy bear.

Another has the streaming beard of a fundamentalist flowing across a woman's mouth to silence her.

Eladli uses her art to bring attention to domestic violence, underage marriage, sexual harassment, violence against women, and the new phenomenon of attacks against female demonstrators. Some accuse of her being sacrilegious, claiming that her work is too shocking. The accusations don't seem to phase her, and they certainly haven't influenced her style.

Most disturbing, yet thought-provoking, is one cartoon against female genital mutilation, in which a man is standing on a ladder between a woman's legs, reaching up to cut her with a pair of scissors.

I criticize habits that I think are wrong and should be totally reconsidered, like female circumcision, which doesn't stem from the Muslim religion at all. There are Muslim scholars who say female circumcision is a crime against humanity and is not related to Islam. Yet it is still being practiced in Egypt's countryside and unfortunately, in the name of religion."

While Eladl was delighted to see Mubarak ousted, she says that in many ways, the situation for women is worse because now those in power use religion to dominate women. A Muslim who covers her head out of choice, Eladl is vehemently opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood. "They interpret religion in their own way but I don't think it is the real way of Islam. Since the revolution, I feel compelled to draw cartoons about women in order to defend my own personal freedoms, which are threatened under the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood."

Eladl complains that the new constitution does not guarantee women's rights or respect the international treaties that protect women. It does not give rights to divorced women or guarantee equal rights for women workers. If the constitution is implemented, she fears women's right will be turned back.

One of her cartoons shows a professional-looking woman walking up to the door of Parliament, only to be told by a bearded man "Sorry, this is only for men."

Eladl's critique of the post-Mubarak era goes way beyond the treatment of women. She says there has been little change in general because the new government is similar to the old, more concerned about holding onto power than making life better for the poor. One drawing depicts the "new ruler" as a bull, fighting the military matador to get onto the king's throne.

Another shows the head of Mubarak severed from his body, but his suit plastered with the faces of many more Mubaraks.

Eladl is also disappointed in U.S. policy. Like millions in the Arab world, she had high hopes when Obama was first elected. "We were so hopeful when Obama came to Cairo with his beautiful speech, but then we saw that he continued to support repressive regimes, including here in Egypt, and that his words were hollow." That's why she drew a cartoon of Obama surrounded by a huge empty speech bubble. Another sketch shows Qaddafi's army shooting at civilians, while a big arm of America reaches out to grab a giant barrel of oil. The caption says: "America lends a hand to Libyan revolutionaries." "I see the hypocrisy of U.S. policy, intervening in places like Iraq and Libya that have a lot of oil, but not in the case of Syria," says Eladl.

If Eladl is worried about the blasphemy case and the enemies she is making with her scornful brushstrokes, she doesn't show it. "The extremists don't scare me," she insists. "Whatever they do, I will continue to use my skills to poke fun at them. They must understand that we Egyptians have changed with the revolution, and we will not go backwards."

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