

# **The Fruits of “Arab Spring”**

**Islamism, Anarchism & Feminism**

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# Contents

<b>Action and reaction</b> . . . . .	3
<b>From “down with the regime” to “down with capitalism”</b> . . . . .	4
<b>The revolutionary Arab women</b> . . . . .	5
<b>In conclusion</b> . . . . .	6

According to Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan feminist writer, the confusion between Islam as a belief and Islam as a state religion contributed greatly on the failure of the Leftist-Secular movements in the Arab world<sup>1</sup>. The corruption and the authoritarianism of these movements, the regimes, lead to the explosion of popular movements, sometimes peaceful and others in form of violent uprisings, demanding the overthrow of these regimes. As the “Arab Spring” broke out many of the head of these states were ousted from power, though the “taste” of the regimes remained such as in Egypt and Tunisia, where democratically elected “Islamofascism”<sup>2</sup> emerged. These movements, whether the Muslim Brotherhood or al-Nahda tried to control the resources of the government and oppressed the secular leftists, ignored the rights of women and tried to sideline the secular revolutionaries by the use of force. As a result opposition groups influenced by the protest movements in Europe, tried to organize themselves thus new ideologies emerged in the Arab world; Anarchism and Feminism both tried to challenge the power of “Islamofascism” in the region.

## Action and reaction

Islamist movements such as Muslim Brotherhood and Salafists are not newcomers to our region. MB emerged in 1928 as Pan-Islamist movement, founded by Hassan al-Banna. Al-Banna described the Brotherhood as, “*a Salafiyya message, a Sunni way, a Sufi truth, a political organization, an athletic group, a cultural-educational union, an economic company, and a social idea*”<sup>3</sup>. During 1970-80s their members were persecuted by the Secular-Nationalist forces in Egypt, Syria and Tunisia. Meanwhile the roots of Salafist movements came from Saudi Arabia and are divided to several branches, the most dangerous one is the Wahabi-Jihadi branch. As uprisings exploded in Tunisia and Egypt, Islamist movements and parties re-emerged in the political arena and brought a majority in the parliament, in Egypt they also won the presidential elections. The unified, weak and disorganized secularist forces started to accuse Islamists of “Islamization” of their societies. The ideological clash reached its pick, between the secularists and Islamists, during the drafting of constitutions. The major conflict was around the image of the state and women rights, whether it was a civil or Islamist state and whether women were treated equally or subject to Islamic Shari’a.

During the Egyptian presidential elections a statement declared by the Egyptian branch of Muslim Brotherhood stated; “*Women have the right to occupy all positions except the office of presidency*” this was something which is not very different from the Salafist statements, these two parties had women candidates in their electoral blocs but always explain that women rights and duties should not contradict the Islamic law. The Egyptian branch of Muslim Brotherhood stated in its electoral program ; “*Ensuring women’s access to all their rights, consistent with the values of Islamic law, maintaining the balance between their duties and rights*”<sup>4</sup>. After the elections many Egyptian revolutionary movements accused the Freedom and Justice party (Egyptian party of MB) of shifting from the goals of Egyptian revolution. The problem is that the Islamic Law,

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<sup>1</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite, A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s rights in Islam*, p. 67

<sup>2</sup> The term of Islamofascism here I mean the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafist and other Islamic ultraconservative movements.

<sup>3</sup> Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of Muslim Brothers*, New York City: Oxford University Press, 1969, p.193–4

<sup>4</sup> The position of the Muslim Brotherhood on women and children –analysis and critique of the FJP’s parliamentary election program 2011, [www.copticliterature.wordpress.com](http://www.copticliterature.wordpress.com)

*Sharia* is not the same as with what the world knows as “women rights” in our modern age or the rights that form part of the International Bill of Human Rights. In addition, the “duties of women”, as claimed by the Muslim Brotherhood, is clear that it does not see women rights as natural and inalienable. It claims that their rights must be restricted by *Sharia* and their duties in society; duties which are in themselves dictated by *Sharia*. Moreover the marginalization of the Egyptian opposition and the assassination of the head of the Tunisian leftist opposition raised serious questions about the “democratization” of these societies. Like the pre-uprising periods, the security forces, controlled by the government, opened fire on protestors and imprisoned many of them; as a result disobedience spread in many towns, recently in a small area in Port Saïd in Egypt, a town in under control of Anarchists which are defending the protesters from the government forces even by using counter-violence against violence. Such actions from the Islamists gave to the rise of strong Arab Feminist and Anarchist movements Egypt, Tunisia and even in Lebanon which months ago experienced a strong “Labor Spring”.

## From “down with the regime” to “down with capitalism”

*“Liberty, morality, and the human dignity of man consist precisely in this, that he does good, not because it is commanded, but because he conceives it, wills it, and loves it.”*  
Bakunin.

It is clear that the current wave of Arab uprisings, unlike the 1950s “uprisings” have no intellectual, political or even ideological authority thus within its nature it’s anarchic. As Islamist parties took power through democratic elections, the leftists were marginalized and took the role of opposition. Some of these leftist movements proved to be incapable to mobilize people and unable to put an end to the violations that continued even under these Islamists rule. Therefore, it was necessary to defend the rights of the oppressed and counter any oppressive measures taken by the government. Thus Anarchism was remerged. Historically, Anarchism hasn’t played a major role in Middle East and Arab politics, but nowadays in Egypt and Tunisia it’s on rise due to violence which led to the rejection of political and religious authorities. Thus as Islamists tried to narrow the gap between state and religion, Arab Anarchists declared “war” both on the oppressive civil and religious authorities which tried to strip the rights of women and minorities. According to Eric Hobsbawm, the main appeal of anarchism was emotional and not intellectual, thus anarchists were deeply mobilized by idealism, heroism and sacrifice.<sup>5</sup> Like traditional Marxism they are against class exploitation but they are committed to the overthrow of the present society by rejecting state or religious institutions.

Recently everyone is talking about a new radical anarchist movement that emerged in Egypt the “Black Bloc”. This new black masked opponents of Muslim Brotherhood’s regime, are set to defend street protesters by force if necessary. Inspired by the Western anti-establishment and anti-capitalist movements of the 1980s, the mysterious new “Black Bloc” began appearing at demonstrations making the second anniversary of the January 25 revolution. The organization declared that its mission is to fight “against the fascist regime (the Muslim Brotherhood) and their armed wing.”<sup>6</sup> The organization has taken responsibility for a number of acts of civil disobedience, such as stopping public transport and setting fire to some MB headquarters.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries*, 2007, pp. 112–113

<sup>6</sup> ‘Black Bloc’ revolutionaries baffle Egyptians, [www.france24.com](http://www.france24.com)

Meanwhile, the MB and the pro-Islamist media have been quick to denounce the group as everything from violent anarchists to Israeli stooges. While the army ordered “the arrest of anyone suspected of belonging” to Black Bloc, and described it as “an organized group that carries out terrorist actions”.<sup>7</sup>

In the beginning of February as the leader of Tunisian Leftist opposition leader Chokri Belaid was assassinated violent clashes took place in the streets between Islamist government supporters and that of the Leftist members. As a result some of Tunisian ruling Islamist al-Nahda party’s headquarters were burned by some angry protestors. The responsibility of these actions fell on the Tunisian Anarchists, the “Tunisian Disobedience movement” (Haraket A’ssyann), who declared they are committed to defend the revolution from Islamist counter-revolution. The movement also made declaration calling for the establishment of Libertarian Socialism in Tunisia.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore the movement organized anti-capitalist protests during the World Social Forum which was held in Tunisia and issued a Manifesto regarding this issue.<sup>9</sup>

## **The revolutionary Arab women**

An “Arab Spring” is useless without granting the Arab woman her total rights, thus a “women spring”. Due to religious and cultural taboos, Arab women have been oppressed, sexually harassed and discriminated in public affairs. But the latest revolutions in the region gave Arab women a chance to raise her voice, thus in Egypt, Tunisia and even Lebanon Arab women were revolutionized. A strong call for Feminism was remerged in these countries calling for equality between men and women and an end to gender discrimination in public affairs.

On February 24, for the first time in my life I have participated in a protest organized by KAFA, a Lebanese NGO endorsing women’s rights, the protesters were demanding to put an end to gender based violence, and change the shameful article of the constitution which forces a raped woman to marry the rapist. Hundreds of activists from all over Lebanon gathered and demanded an end for gender violence and discrimination. Among the protesters there were women and teenage girls whom were victim of such kind of violence. Though some MP introduced a drafted law but religious authorities maintain a final say in domestic abuse cases and women are not able to protect themselves in courts due to the Lebanese society’s patriarchal and sectarian structure.

While in Egypt, during the revolution and in the current anti-government protests, sexual harassment has been used as a tool of intimidation and repression by the authorities against women activists. According to Egyptian Human Rights NGOs, practice of sexual harassment originated from authorities themselves, where the police recruited paid gangs to sexually harass women that were taking part in Tahrir square protests. Meanwhile, a data from the National Center for Criminal and Social Research in 2006 indicates that about 20,000 cases of rape and sexual harassment are perpetrated in Egypt every year, with two cases of rape or harassment taking place almost every hour, on average.<sup>10</sup>

In the middle of March 2013, as UN made a declaration of women’s rights, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt criticized the anticipated document claiming that it is “deceitful,” and clashes

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<sup>7</sup> Black Bloc: New opposition group in Egypt calls for violence, street fighting, rt.com

<sup>8</sup> To read the full declaration: “A declaration of Principles of Haraket A’ssyann” tahriricn.wordpress.com

<sup>9</sup> To read the full Manifesto: “Tunisian Anarchists against World Capitalism” robertgraham.wordpress.com

<sup>10</sup> The widespread plague of sexual harassment in Egypt, english.al-akhbar.com

with Islamic principles and undermined family values. The MB statement claimed that the UN declaration “*eliminates Islamic values, and seeks to destroy the family ... which would lead to social disintegration*”<sup>11</sup>. Though MB insisted that women rights have been protected in the Egyptian post-revolutionary charter, Egyptian human rights activists declared that the charter undermines women’s rights and denies them equality while ignoring their political rights.

Meanwhile in Tunisia, while the country was celebrating the 56<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its Personal Status Law in, August 13 2013, the Islamist al-Nahda ruling party proposed a constitutional clause which will stop women from being considered as equal to men by law; instead it says that they “complement” the role of men within the family. This clause was based on several theoretical principles of Rashed Ghannoushi, the head of the al-Nahda party. He had presented his theories in his book; “*Women: Between the Quran and Muslim Reality*” and concluded that “*a woman’s unique features revolve around her sexual functions.*” Thus every “*feature that a woman has is related to her sexual function and are a result of this function*”.<sup>12</sup>

This regressive theory was simply evident in al-Nahda’s proposal for Chapter 28 of the constitution regarding women’s rights. Unfortunately it managed to pass in the “Rights and Freedoms Committee”. In a joint statement, many women’s and human rights organizations insisted on adherence to the principle of equality between men and women and thus rejected the suggestion of the “Rights and Freedoms committee” that claimed women merely complement the role of men inside the family.

Though some conservative Islamists use violence against their women and daughters but in reality this has no religious justification. Islamist and Salafi parties always block International organizations protecting women from violence under the excuse that some details oppose Islam.

In her article Saudi columnist Badria al-Bishr reminds us that the declaration of freeing slaves was also rejected when some viewed that enslaving people was a right granted by religion. But no one dares to claim such a “defense” anymore.<sup>13</sup>

## **In conclusion**

Therefore, it is wrong to say that the current uprisings or the so called Arab Spring have only regenerated Islamism. Today Anarchism and Feminism is on rise, just go to a cafeteria in any Arab country and try to engage with few intellectuals about the current political crisis in the region, you will realize how much rejection there is towards traditionalism and patriarchal authorities and frustration from fake promises. During protests you see youth covered with masks, wearing black jackets, women shouting and mobilizing people. All these are signs that the region is changing, and the authorities must realize this change, today’s ruling Islamists will not be tomorrow’s rulers. Governments should vision this otherwise, as Karl Marx said history will repeat itself, and society always structures itself thus a second revolution will be inevitable.

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<sup>11</sup> Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood blasts anticipated UN women’s document, english.alarabiya.net

<sup>12</sup> Tunisian Women stand to lose their status, english.al-akhbar.com

<sup>13</sup> Violence against women has no religious justification english.alarabiya.net

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