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# Modernising women and democratisation after the Arab Spring

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What has the Arab Spring meant to women, and women's rights, in the region? Three years after the mass social protests of January and February 2011, when and where can we expect the promises of democracy and equality, and the revolutionary spirit of unity and purpose, to be realised? This Foreword offers a stock-taking of events and possible future directions, with a focus on prospects for a women-friendly democratisation.

**Keywords:** Arab Spring; democratisation; women; women's rights; women's movements

What has the Arab Spring meant to women in the region? The euphoria of Spring 2011 may have dissipated, but can we expect the promises of democracy and equality, and the revolutionary spirit of unity and purpose, to be realised? Three years after the mass social protests of January and February 2011, a stock-taking of what has occurred and where countries are headed is in order.

First, it is helpful to recall the different *types* of Arab Spring that occurred in that momentous year. Tunisia, Egypt, and Morocco – in that order – initially underwent relatively non-violent changes. Mass protests in Tunisia and Egypt led to the downfall of long-standing authoritarian regimes and to procedures for the establishment of democratic polities based on new constitutions legitimated by the citizenry. In Morocco, the monarch responded to the protests by calling for constitutional amendments that would limit his vast powers, bestow recognition, representation, and rights to the Berbers, and continue to open up Morocco to the outside world. Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, and Syria took different routes. In Bahrain, protesters – largely from the politically excluded 'Shia population – were faced with police and military repression. Mass protests against Yemen's President Saleh turned to an assault on the president himself, forcing him to flee to Saudi Arabia for medical treatment. What ensued was the apparent division of the country into diverse power bases led by rival groups. Libya's violent conflict between anti- and pro-Qaddafi forces, the NATO-led military intervention, and the gruesome murder of Qaddafi portended subsequent developments: the killing of Americans in Benghazi, the absence of a central government, and the growing power of armed militia groups. Finally, Syria descended into civil conflict and terrorism, resulting in countless dislocations and displacement of citizens, the destruction of heritage sites, and spillover effects in Lebanon and Iraq.

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Returning to our first group of non-violent uprisings, Egypt's Arab Spring turned decidedly less bright when women protesters and activists were brazenly assaulted in public, by police, soldiers, and ordinary men (see also Sherine Hafez 2014 and Maya Morsy 2014). The country then became mired in contentious politics after President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood tried to assume vast powers for himself, pushed through a constitution steeped in religious language and devoid of attention to women's rights, and proved incapable of carrying out his campaign promise of restoring public services, creating jobs, and representing all Egyptians. Mass public protests broke out again, calling for his resignation, and the military responded by forcing him out. At the time of writing (November 2013), Egypt was still rocked by protests by pro-Morsi Muslim Brotherhood supporters and by secularists opposed to the power of the military.

In Tunisia, the advancement of a relatively stable electoral and constitutional process was put to the test in 2013 by the disruptive actions of Salafists and the assassinations of two left-wing political leaders. Protests broke out calling on the ruling Ennahdha-dominated government to be held accountable for the lack of security as well as inaction on the economic front. But Tunisia avoided the Egyptian path, partly because of the absence of a powerful military and partly because its main political actors – the Left and other secular parties, the large trade union, feminist groups, human rights groups, and even Ennahdha – seemed to prefer negotiations, compromise, and concessions rather than violent confrontation. And so Ennahdha agreed in the Fall of 2013 to resign from government and make way for a caretaker government that would organise new elections while the constitution was being finalised.

Among all the countries that experienced the Arab Spring, Morocco has been spared violence and disruption, but Tunisia seems poised to complete its constitutional process. Next door, Algeria did not experience an Arab Spring per se, but it stands out for at least two reasons. First, among the countries that held elections in 2011–12, only Algeria did not elect an Islamic government. (The Islamic Green Alliance, which expected to win the elections, called the elections fraudulent.) Second, elections and a gender quota brought in a remarkable 31% female share of members of the National Assembly. This is not the first time that Algeria has advanced a surprisingly gender-egalitarian agenda. In the summer of 2002, partly as a reward to women's rights groups for their valiant stance against the Islamist terror of the 1990s, President Bouteflika appointed five prominent Algerian women to his cabinet, comprising a 25% share of cabinet seats. (One of those cabinet members, Boutheina Cheriet, who was appointed Minister of Education, is a contributor to this volume.) This unprecedented move did not last long, as the government fell after one year, but it is an important backdrop to the high rate of female parliamentary representation today. In late 2013, the Interparliamentary Union's ranking of women in national parliaments placed Algeria at number 26 out of 142 countries that were counted.

Elsewhere, women's parliamentary share in 2013 was 27% in Tunisia, 17% in Morocco, and a mere 2% in Egypt. Women's parliamentary representation is an important indicator of women's rights and their access to political power, and the 'quota revolution' has served to increase women's political participation in many parts of the world. The UN has long called for a female parliamentary share of at least 30%, as that is the threshold at which women can make a difference in policy and political decisions. But parliamentary representation is not the only significant indicator of women's empowerment; others are the presence or absence of legal reforms and constitutional guarantees of equality, the number and visibility of women's rights organisations and well-resourced policy agencies, and the female share of the paid labour force and women's earnings relative to men's earnings. On these measures, other countries with relatively high female parliamentary representation, such as Afghanistan (27%) and Iraq (25%), fall short. Surely the same can be said of Libya, which reported a 16.5% female share after its 2011 election.

This is not to say that Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia would score high on all empowerment measures (for example, not on labour force and earnings). But what is distinctive about the three Maghreb countries is the extent of women's rights activism, whether in nationally based organisations or within the *Collectif 95 Maghreb-Egalité*, the deference paid to women's rights and recognition afforded to the women's organisations by government officials, and the legal and policy reforms that have been achieved over the years as a result of women's rights activism (see Moghadam 2013a, chap. 8).

This latter point leads me to suggest the following proposition: Those countries that have seen advances in women's participation and rights are the ones most likely to experience a successful democratic transition and consolidation.

### Democracy with women

During the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, much ink was spilled over the question of whether countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) could overcome authoritarian rule to develop democratic political systems. It was claimed that the region was unique among developing regions in not experiencing the 'third wave' of democratic transitions that began in the 1970s, with many studies reinforcing the notion of a kind of 'MENA exceptionalism' to democratisation. One strand posited the power of authoritarian culture and religion as obstacles, the idea being that Arab culture or Islam or both are incompatible with democracy, and that the region lacked the prerequisites for democracy and suffered from a defective political culture that favoured autocracy and repression (see, e.g. Fish 2002). Another strand explained the endurance of authoritarianism in terms of the weakness and nature of the opposition vis-à-vis the regimes, or in conditions and institutions that fostered robust authoritarianism, including politically tenacious coercive apparatuses (see, e.g. Bellin 2004; Lust-Okar 2005).

In a different line of inquiry, scholars of the MENA put the spotlight on civil society and trends within the popular classes (Bayat 2010; Beinín 2010; Korany 2010). They pointed to surveys showing strong support for democracy as a political system, to worker dissatisfaction and labour actions, and to the potential of young people as an engine of change (see also Loubna Skalli 2014). And since the early 1990s I have examined a certain segment of the region's female population and their feminist organisations, concluding that 'modernising women' are the main advocates and agents of democratisation. In particular, I have discerned distinctive patterns and trends in women's participation and rights, and in democratisation, in the North African countries of Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia (see Moghadam 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2013a; Moghadam and Gheytañchi 2010).

For example, in 2012, two political parties in the MENA region were led by women. In Algeria, the Workers' Party was founded in the 1990s by Louisa Hanoune, a long-time socialist and feminist activist, and in 2005 she was elected the party's Secretary General. In Tunisia, Maya Jribi, another long-time socialist activist, was elected Secretary General of the Progressive Democratic Party in 2006. After being elected to the Constituent Assembly in 2011, Jribi helped form the *Parti Républicain*, and as of March 2013 had joined a new coalition of progressive parties in preparation for the subsequent national elections.

The Algerian women's movement has endured – but stood against – patriarchal laws and norms and Islamist terrorism, and it helped to build the remarkable *Collectif 95 Maghreb-Egalité*, constituted by women's rights advocates from Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. In previous work I have examined three waves of Algerian women's collective action since the 1980s: against the conservative family code in the immediate post-Boumediène period, against the Islamist

movement and the terrorism of the 1990s, and for gender justice in the new century. Algerian feminist groups have worked with each other, with human rights groups and the country's main trade union, and with partners in the Maghreb region to achieve policy and legal reforms, including amendments to the family law in 2005, and a law against sexual harassment. Most recently, as mentioned above, they have achieved one of the highest rates of female parliamentary participation in the world. What can also be significant is the constitutional revision process, led by a commission appointed by the president, which has been ongoing since April 2011. At the time of writing, the outcome or details of amendments have not been public, but the women's rights groups are certainly monitoring the process.

The reform of Morocco's highly patriarchal family law and its replacement in 2004 with a more egalitarian set of laws and norms for marital life and family affairs was the end result of more than a decade of women's rights coalition-building, advocacy, and lobbying, and it paralleled a period of political liberalisation in the late 1990s. Introduction of the new family code was part of a broader wave of reforms within the country, including changes to the labour code to introduce the concept of sexual harassment in the workplace (2004), to the penal code to criminalise spousal violence, to the nationality code (2007) to give women and men equal rights to transmit nationality to their children as required by Article 9 of the UN's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and to the electoral code, which introduced a 'national list' that reserved 30 parliamentary seats for women (2002). Women's rights – and women's rights activism – played a key role in the trend towards democratic social change.

In Tunisia, the women's rights organisations – long active in civil society even under authoritarian rule – mobilised immediately after the collapse of the Ben Ali government to ensure a democratic transition *with* women. Fearing that the 'Dignity Revolution' in which they had taken part would come to favour Ennahdha – the Islamic party that had been banned since the early 1990s – and recalling Ennahdha's regressive stance on women's issues in the past, Tunisian feminists staged a protest on the eve of leader Ghannouchi's return from exile in January 2011. Several other rallies followed throughout the year, with participation also by several members of the provisional government, which was preparing for elections for a constituent assembly. (Lilia Labidi 2014, member of the provisional government as Minister for Women's Affairs, is a contributor to this volume.) After Ennahdha won a plurality of seats and formed a coalition government, feminists remained vigilant. When Islamists within the constituent assembly sought to replace the term 'equality' with words akin to *complementarity* or *partnership*, women's rights activists and their male supporters in the secular and left-wing parties took to the streets and the domestic and international media in protest. The constituent assembly retained the term *equality*. In this example, Tunisian women were adamant that the fledgling democracy would not be reduced to a male-dominated political system, and that women's full and equal rights of citizenship had to be at the core of the new polity (for details, see papers by Mounira Charrad and Amina Zarrugh 2014; Andrea Khalil 2014; Lilia Labidi 2014).

Contrary to the proponents of MENA exceptionalism, therefore, the Arab Spring revealed the democratic aspirations of ordinary citizens, most notably among the region's women's rights associations, human rights groups, trade unions, and left-wing parties. But these aspirations were, in certain cases in the region, undermined by the military or militia groups, or by international intervention that upset the fragile balance of power, or by the legacy of weak institutions and norms. Thus Egypt's democratisation stalled, because of the power of the military and its intervention in the political process, because the secular opposition lacked unity and a programme of action (certainly when compared with the Muslim Brotherhood), and because concepts of the rights of women and religious minorities never took hold in Egypt. Libya cannot be said to have

embarked on democratisation, as it lacks a centralised government with control over the military and the capacity to carry out citizen expectations of security, human rights, and public services. In a political environment notable for its rival armed militias, Libyan women's participation and rights cannot be realised, much less form the basis of a democratising process.

The record of the countries that embarked on the so-called third wave of democratisation – from Portugal in 1974 to South Africa in 1990 – shows that democratisation can be launched and proceed in a variety of ways. It can occur through abrupt regime change caused by mass social protests followed by a constitution-writing process, political party formation and participation, and regular elections, or through a more incremental process of legal and policy reform brought about by significant social changes, including advocacy and activism for women's equality, ethnic rights, or labour rights; or through militant or non-violent collective action leading to negotiations and 'pacts' among political parties and movement leaders that represent diverse constituencies among the citizenry. In all cases, women have a stake in the type of democracy that ensues. Because they tend to be major contributors to, and participants in, the formation of civil society and the new democracy movements, women see a democratic polity as both a desirable alternative to authoritarianism and a pathway to their own equality and rights. Whether or not a women-friendly democracy takes hold depends on a number of factors: the institutional and normative legacy of the past, the role, visibility, and influence of women's rights organisations before and during the transition, and the nature of the new government and its capacity for a rights-based economic and political system.

In recent work I have drawn attention to the democratic and modernising nature of women's movements and to the positive relationship between women's movements, participation and rights, and the building of democratic cultures and polities (Moghadam 2013b). Evidence from Latin America, South Africa, the Philippines, and Northern Ireland shows that women's participation was a key element in the successful transitions, that outcomes could be advantageous to women's interests, and that women's political participation reflects and reinforces democracy-building. But democracy has risks and perils, too. Feminist scholars have discussed what they call the 'democracy paradox' or the gender-based democracy deficit. Here, marginalisation of women from the political process and dangers to the objective of sex equality can occur when the opening up of political space leads to the prominence of conservative forces, or when the new political environment is one that rejects everything from the past, including policies for gender or social equality. Examples are Eastern Europe in the early 1990s, Algeria and the elections that brought about an Islamist party (Front Islamique du Salut, or FIS) in 1990/91, and Iraq and the Palestine Authority, where elections in early 2006 did not bring to power governments committed to citizens' or women's rights. Democracy is assumed by many scholars and political commentators to be a superior form of polity, but the quality of democracy depends on its capacity for inclusion and its ability to adopt policies for substantive equality as well as constitutional guarantees of formal equality.

In the Arab region, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia appear to be the most promising of the countries that launched or were affected by the Arab Spring. The women's rights groups have the requisite mobilising power to influence the political elites. Along with a number of other civil society organisations and political parties, they have the civic skills necessary to build and sustain a democratic culture, and they have demonstrated a determination to defend and expand the scope of women's rights towards the acquisition of full and equal citizenship. However, as I have discussed elsewhere, the type of democracy that appears to be preferred in the region is, at the very least, a social democracy, premised on notions of social rights and economic citizenship. This calls for more analysis and advocacy work on the part of the feminist organisations, and of course more governmental investments in health, education, decent jobs

and wages, and social provisioning (see also Errazzouki's 2014 forceful defence of Morocco's working class women in this volume).

If the long-standing exclusion of women from political processes and decision-making in the Arab region is a key factor in explaining why the region was a laggard, compared with other regions, in democratisation's third wave, then women's participation and rights could not only speed up the democratic transition in the region but also enhance its quality. At the same time, the region's 'modernising women' need to be mindful of the problems, needs, and aspirations of working-class and low-income women, given that the mass social protests in MENA were as much a call for social justice as for civil and political rights. The future of democracy in North Africa in particular – where prospects are strongest – will depend in great measure on the institutionalisation of social rights and gender equality across class, ethnic, and religious divides.

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