Nadje Al-Ali | Secular Women's Activism in Contemporary Egypt[1]

Introduction

The history of the Egyptian women's movement is characterised by a variety of competing and sometimes overlapping discourses, including secular-oriented and religious voices. However, during the past decades, both the state and women's activists had to take into account increasing fundamentalist activism, discourses and demands. These days the discursive and political spaces of secular activism are becoming smaller and smaller. But how do secular-oriented women struggling for women's and human rights as well as changing gender relations counter Islamist constituencies and fundamentalist tendencies?

From the outset, I should clarify that I am not using the term 'fundamentalist' synonymously with 'Islamist'. In my view, Islamist movements and political activists comprise a variety of political positions, ranging from radical militant to moderate. Some Islamist groups are exclusionary and fascist, as is characteristic of fundamentalist movements all over the world. However, there are Islamist individuals and groups who pursue their political goals of establishing an Islamic state and implementing the *shari'a* (Islamic law) while considering the rights of religious and ethnic minorities. Some Islamist women also advocate women's rights within the family as well as in the social, economic and political spheres. Although I am suspicious of the term 'Islamist feminism', I do believe that, at least in the Egyptian context, there are Islamist women whose political culture and goals cannot merely be subsumed under the category 'fundamentalist'.

Acknowledging that women's activism in present-day Egypt encompasses a broad range of political and ideological frameworks, in my own research I have specifically focused on secular-oriented activists. By 'secular-oriented', I mean those who advocate a separation between religion and politics, which does not necessarily denote anti-religious or anti-Islamic positions. Furthermore, I suggest that secular women activists do not endorse *shari'a* as the main or sole source of legislation, but refer to civil law and human rights conventions as frames of reference for their struggle. However, this only presents a very general working definition.

It became obvious in the course of my political involvement with the Egyptian women's movement, and also in the context of my research, that Egyptian women, just like women in western societies, are eclectic and selective in their frames of references. Values and politics are shaped through a variety of factors, including family, education, religious frameworks, political ideologies, personal experiences, literature and so forth. What is important to stress is that there exists a broad continuum of secular approaches and religious practices, which, to my mind, challenges simplistic dichotomous notions of secular vs. religious. Also important to mention is the fact that about 10 per cent of Egyptians are Christians, that is particularly Copts. Several of the women I interviewed in Egypt were of Coptic origin. For Coptic women, secularism is often perceived as the only framework that would allow them equal citizenship, both as women and as members of the minority religion.

Strategies of secular-oriented women activists

All secular-oriented women activists have experienced a whole range of legal, cultural and political restrictions that have seriously affected the way politics can be carried out. The question arises: What are their strategies in legitimising their ideas and activism in an environment where both the state and prevailing social and political movements are hostile to secular thinking? And how do they relate to western feminists who could be potential allies in struggling against fundamentalist constituencies? The short answer is that, unfortunately, many feminists reproduce the very same discourses as fundamentalist and conservative nationalist voices within Egypt. However, a small number of activists dares to challenge the points of reference and parameters of political discourse within the Egyptian national fabric. I am mainly referring to the culturalisation of political issues.

Rather than taking issue with specific political positions or concrete policies, fundamentalist forces tend to dichotomise the world into 'us' vs. 'them'. This dichotomy has become so natural in many parts of the world that it is very difficult to question its grounds. Egypt is a case in point. Many political debates are argued along the lines of 'our authentic culture' as opposed to 'Western culture'. Women activists constantly have to be on the defensive against charges ranging from being 'loose women' to 'aping the West'. The attempt to legitimise and justify their outlooks and activism is at the centre of many debates and can be detected in the various trends of the contemporary movement.

It is therefore not surprising that Egyptian women activists spend as much time asserting their authenticity, their Egyptianness, and sometimes Arabness, as they invest in the struggle for women's rights. My use of the term 'women's activism' rather than 'feminism' is related to the fact that many of the women I interviewed reject the label 'feminist' for pragmatic and ideological reasons. The English term 'feminism' evokes antagonism and animosity, and sometimes even anxiety. A great number of women seem to have internalised the way feminists are portrayed in prevailing Egyptian - but also European and North American - discourses, namely man-hating, aggressive, possibly obsessed with sex, and certainly westernised. The resistance of many Egyptian women to identify themselves with feminism is also related to the fact that feminism is often perceived to be a western concept that tends to distract from larger issues such as imperialism and Zionism.

But maybe more significantly than rejecting the term 'feminism', women activists engage in anti-western rhetoric in order to legitimise their politics and escape the accusations of being traitors. Several women activists I talked to referred to 'western culture' and its attempt to undermine local cultures as posing a threat to Egypt. Mass consumption, disrespect for the family, promiscuity, AIDS and drug addiction are presented as the characteristics of 'western civilization'.[2] Globalisation - understood as the spread of western (i.e. US) consumer goods and values - as well as western imperialism, are key concepts in the discourse of Egyptian women activists. In this context, culture becomes reified and essentialised.

Ironically, social class, which is generally of great concern within Egyptian political culture, becomes obliterated. So do political and cultural differences within the so-called West. In other words, many secular women activists use the same mechanism used by fundamentalists to construct an unbridgeable gap between 'East' and 'West'. It is difficult to assess whether the construction of 'our culture' vs. 'their culture' is more of a strategy than a deeply felt belief. What can be said with certainty is that these discourses seem to be ingrained in people's thinking and worldviews. However, there is also an obvious gap between people's anti-western rhetoric and their everyday lives as consumers.

Repeatedly the encounter with western feminists puts Egyptian women activists in a dilemma. While they might be arguing in the very same vein at home against a particular form of discrimination like Female Genital Mutilation, for example, abroad, in an international forum, when certain western feminists are outraged about 'the barbarism' practised in Egypt, activists often feel offended by their tone and its implicit racism.[3] So it could happen that a woman who is extremely outspoken against Female Genital Mutilation within Egypt, might find herself defending the practice during a confrontation with some western feminists. Most of the time, this is experienced as extremely unsettling and disturbing. For Reem M.,[4] this entails a Catch-22 situation, in which one is torn between arguing despite one's convictions and arguing in a way that confirms negative stereotypes:

> I feel that when a western feminist makes a negative statement about my own culture, I should make a positive statement to counter it. Living across two cultures is very difficult. There is the danger of playing up to western expectations. But sometimes it might just appear like it, because you might be really just saying what you feel and believe in. It's a real dilemma. You have to acquire two tongues.[5]

It is obvious here that the verdict of 'betrayal' weighs heavily on any woman who carries the burden of the colonial legacy while struggling against contemporary forms of patriarchal oppression.

Yet some Egyptian women activists say explicitly that the notion of cultural specificity is used as a tool by men to reinforce their power over women. Nadia F., a researcher and activist in her fifties, deeply despises this attitude:

> Amazingly they scream here about western theories concerning women's issues, but they have adopted other western theories, like Marxism. Or those concerning political structures. The problem with the Arab world is that we have been eclectic. We take some elements from western theory, which do not clash with our culture, but we disregard elements that clash with traditional beliefs and values, which, of course, are linked to specific political and economic interests. We scream: 'Our values!' when it clashes with power positions, but when it is beneficial to the same group, they adopt it, despite it being western.[6]

Nadia F.'s impassioned critique gives evidence to the fact that traditions are invoked in a politically selective manner: far from representing continuity with the past, traditions are actively constructed by political constituencies. Ideas and values of western thought are borrowed when it seems fit, and ferociously combated and perceived as western values when the struggle for women's rights is on the agenda.

Religious belief not antithetical to secular political outlook

Women activists find themselves in a dilemma: fundamentalist and conservative forces in Egypt accuse them of adopting western agendas at the same time as western organisations and governments are trying to establish an absolute authority over issues related to women's and human rights. Caught in the middle, many activists are cautious and defensive, and therefore fail to challenge the discursive parameters of fundamentalist forces. However, a small, yet increasing number of women rejects this way of arguing and refrains from reproducing a dichotomy of 'us' vs. 'them'. They point to differences not only within their own national and cultural spheres but also with respect to the so-called 'West'. And they point to a long history of creative encounters between western and Muslim thinkers and activists.

It is these women who are also at the forefront of challenging the common notion that being secular equates to being against religion. It should be stressed though that even amongst those women reproducing dichotomous notions of culture, many challenge the fundamentalist rhetoric about secular constituencies. They point to the fact that religious belief and observance are not antithetical to secular political outlooks and activism. The specific content given to secular political activism, as well as the specific strategies used to promote the rights of women, vary significantly. One factor which might account for variations in attitudes and practices among the women I interviewed is age and generational affiliation. Different entry points into the women's movement influence political convictions and the type of activism a woman engages in. Similarly, generational differences may be discerned concerning a woman's specific perspective on secularism.

This was apparent throughout my research, but became particularly noticeable with regard to *Markaz Dirasat Al-Mar'a Al-Gedida* (the New Woman Research Centre), since the membership consists of two generations of activists: those who were part of the student movement in the 1970s and are now in their forties, and the younger activists, in their late twenties and early thirties, who have joined the group in recent years. Overall it appeared that the younger members were more observant of their respective religion than their elder counterparts. In the case of some of the younger members, it became particularly obvious that personal religious observance in and of itself was not a marker of political orientation. Even among the older women of the group, I could detect differences concerning their approach to religion: their positions were far from unanimous. Some of the older members rejected the idea of engaging in the reinterpretation of religion in order to counter conservative male interpretations; others, however, advocated this approach.[7]

Coptic women activists have a particular stake in debates about secularism. Nadia M., one of the oldest activists I interviewed and a self-proclaimed believer, defines her secularism in terms of a divergence from religious dogma articulated by the church. She views her faith as an integral part of her life, but rejects the idea that faith equals official doctrines or rulings by religious authorities: 'Religions as institutions are always trying to close the door on others. I look beyond the confines of parochial religion, accepting humanism, accepting pluralism, basing my decisions on what is good for all'. Nadia M. avoids the subject of discrimination against Copts in her account of secularism, and only hints at the issue of national unity in terms of her value of pluralism. Raga N., on the other hand, is more vehement about the relation between secularism and her Coptic religious affiliation:

> Public figures in the Coptic community argue from a political religious context. It is not that I want to assert myself as a Copt, but if the whole society only sees you in this frame, you have two options: either you denounce it, or you say 'yes, so what'. But I never say, 'I am Copt first', I say, 'I am Egyptian'. When suddenly in the 70s a religious identity replaced the national identity, I still made the choice that I am Egyptian first and then a Copt. This is against the general trend though. I still feel that the only salvation of this country is to go back to the 1919 revolution slogan: 'Religion is for God, and the nation for its citizens'. I believe in a secular state where being Egyptian means to be a citizen. In an Islamic state, citizenship is based upon a particular religious denomination. That automatically discriminates against non-Muslims.[8]

Raga N. views herself as part of two minority groups: women and Copts, and feels that second-class citizenship is conferred on both groups. She despises the exclusionary nature and claim to truth of any religion, an aspect she compares to fascism: 'I do not even like the word "tolerance", because it means that you just bear with something. In the religious context, it means to bear the other's belief. It means that these people are really wrong, but you tolerate them. It is a condescending attitude. I do not want tolerance, I want respect!'.

Aside from her conviction that only a secular state could grant her equality, justice and respect, she also stresses that her secular orientation is an outcome of a conglomeration of value systems. Her religious upbringing was tied to an exposure to humanist values, mainly through her readings and her conversations with her father. Later on, she developed a socialist orientation, which, as she recalls, was inspired by specific readings, but originated in her profound sense of justice. Raga N., like Nadia M,. emphasises the need to recognize the mosaic nature of the backdrop against which values are shaped and decisions made. Religion, in her view, might play more significant roles in other people's lives, but for Raga N. there are other significant frameworks.

Often, like in my own assumptions prior to fieldwork, these other frameworks are presumed to derive from comprehensive world views and doctrines, like socialism, or specific documents, such as international conventions on human rights. Many of the leftist-nationalist activists explained to me that they would still take a Marxist approach in their analyses. However,

most emphasised that they had moved away from earlier certainties concerning the direct relationship between economic exploitation and women's liberation. Their own experiences within the political parties and with their 'progressive' husbands at home changed their outlook to such a degree that today they argue for the necessity of an independent women's struggle.

Other women, who mainly refer to international conventions of human and women's rights, emphasise that they do not believe in cultural specificity with regard to basic human rights in general and women's rights in particular. However, a number of the women I interviewed stressed that their values and concepts were not based on a specific doctrine or on the international declaration of human rights, but emerged out of their various experiences of collective and individual struggle. As Hania K. told me:

> Islamists solely use the text and this is their framework. Their judgement of the value system comes through the text. My frame of reference is based on certain abstract concepts, such as egalitarianism, humanism, human rights, pluralism, tolerance etc., which have come from my every- day experiences. Of course, these concepts did not come out of a void, but emerged from different schools of thought. However, I do not uphold a certain ideology, because it would reduce the forms of oppression and the complexity of reality. My values and concepts are as much part of my personal development as they grew out of collective struggle.[9]

The tendency to frame human agency mainly in terms of collective ideologies - whether secular or religious - is problematic as it does not give space to individual improvisation and resistance. The individual level is significant in connection with women's own frames of reference: their relation to religion, but also their concepts and values. Hania K. argues that one has to start building one's own framework based on specific realities: 'The reality I see today is characterized by the existence of different oppressed groups of people: women, Christians, low-income classes. My reality is filled with all kinds of inequalities. Solutions have to be found taking these inequalities into consideration.'

Conclusion

It becomes obvious that secularism in and of itself does not provide a remedy for these inequalities. Hania K., for example, recalls her own experience with socialism, which, as she thinks today, worked in many ways as a blinker limiting her ability to see other viewpoints and preventing her from considering new concepts. Secularism only provides a very broad umbrella under which a variety of discourses, practices and concepts may be accommodated, some reiterating old truths, others breaking with rigid paradigms. In the Egyptian context, secular women activists are engaged in the difficult task of subverting hegemonic discourses emanating from the state as well as from fundamentalist and conservative nationalist intellectuals. Trying to challenge fundamentalist political actors and thought, many women use a similar discourse, thereby unwittingly reproducing the very same categories initially coined by the colonisers and currently backed by the neo-liberal 'clash of civilization' advocates. Those women who challenge fundamentalists not only with

respect to their conceptualisation of secularism, but also with respect to their reification of 'authentic culture' as opposed to 'western culture', are simultaneously positioned at the margin of prevailing political culture and at the centre of the *avant-garde* which is attempting to challenge existing political structures and discourses.

Endnotes

[1] This paper is based on a wider study published as Nadje Al-Ali (2000) *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women's Movement*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[2] Al-Ali, ibid, p. 48.

[3] Al-Ali, ibid, p. 210.

[4] All names in this paper have been changed.

[5] Al-Ali, ibid, p. 210.

[6] Al-Ali, ibid, p. 213.

[7] Al-Ali, ibid, p. 147.

[8] Al-Ali, ibid, p. 145.

[9] Al-Ali, ibid, p. 146.