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WMS 400

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April 3, 2012

Women Making Democracy: A Seminar at the Radcliff Institute for Advanced Study

Introduction:

Standing before a panel of PhD's, looking up at them from my place on the floor, I suddenly felt very small and insignificant. As my eyes met theirs and I parted my lips to speak, I felt very much like Charles Dickens' Oliver Twist as he worked up his courage to ask for more – for in a way, that was what I sought; but instead of gruel, as the young orphan was requesting, I sought knowledge on the topic being presented...and I did feel a small bit greedy, for there was so much I had already learned on this day at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study's *Women Making Democracy* seminar; and yet I craved further explanation.

Just what did I learn? Some of it is difficult to put into precise wording, so suffice to say that I learned that women the world over are stronger than the American media tends to portray them. I learned that two of the fastest moving modern revolutions – the Arab Spring and the Polish Revolution – were both started by women who sought to end oppression of the people by a government that willingly granted women rights that had been hard fought over to receive here in America. I learned that although governments granted rights to their female citizens with one hand, they took away basic human rights with the other and pressed insult into injury by believing their citizens too blind to notice this slight of hand; mistaking silence for acceptance and support of a dictator and his regime. I learned that the struggle for women's rights in America is not so very different than the struggles women face around the world.

10 New Things Learned at the Conference:

1. The “Arab Spring” is not the first time that Egyptian women have revolted against their own government; that in 1919, the Egyptian feminist movement started as a smaller part of a larger protest movement for civil rights in Egypt.
2. The Arab Spring was started by a woman who cried out for justice against government brutality; a revolutionary cry that was supported not just by other women, but by men as well.
3. Under the post-revolutionary governments that are forming throughout North Africa and the Middle East, any and all reforms made under their former dictators are being thrown out in an attempt to cleanse the country of all traces of the dictatorial regime. This method of throwing the baby out with the bathwater (so to speak) is turning back the clock on women's rights that I did not realize even existed in Muslim countries.

4. Similar to American women, Tunisian women have many different “solidarities” – kin/family; associative (business, social); religious; and street, or acquaintances. It was a combination of these solidarities that came together to fight for justice and started the Arab Spring.
5. Social media was not used as a means to identify revolutionaries; rather, the government saw it as an innocent play-thing (*Question originated by Kaisha Thompson, Carleton Univ.; answered by Dr. P.N. Howard*). The government tried to quash the uprising by shutting down the Internet, but by that point it was too little, too late – the world had already heard the news and the revolution had spread too far to be contained.
6. Under dictatorships, Arab countries had parliamentary quotas for women – minimum number of seats that must be held by women. I am not certain how I feel about this; I am not certain that quotas have a place in a free electoral process, regardless of the fact that they open political doors for women.
7. The feelings of the revolutionaries are that of impatience. Now that government has fallen, the revolution has slowed as the rebuilding process has begun. New, equally oppressive (towards women) factions are sculpting the new governments as the “old ways” are being thrown to the wayside. The peace appears to be tougher to maintain than the war.
8. Public attitude towards women is questionable. One argument I have always heard from citizens of Middle Eastern countries is the level of respect they have for women and female sexuality; yet the attitude of many is that the woman in the blue bra was “asking for” a beating for “taunting” the soldiers. I have to ask, if a man had taunted soldiers (called them names, mooned them, etc.) and was beaten for it, would these same people consider it a human rights violation?
9. I never realized Middle Eastern women felt they could speak so strongly against their government. For example, the *Women Making Democracy* poster woman, Malalai Joya, told her own parliament that they were corrupt! However, coupled with my intrigue was the nagging upset that in spite of her courage she remained anonymous. As the leaders of the Radcliffe Institute said, “All we knew is that her image conveys the power, fears, hopes, and potential of women making democracy”. Also a curiosity was a comment from the audience. An Arabic man (possibly Egyptian, from the sound of his accent) implied that the women in the Middle East are doing fine and have always been able to hold their own in society and in government. Is this the truth? Or simply his perception?
10. I never knew how deep the U.S. role in restructuring the Iraqi government ran, or how deeply counter-structural it ran to the U.S. Congress. Whereas the U.S. has a separation of church and state, American negotiators pushed for quotas for representatives of each religious faction. However, they did not push for equal representation of women – shocking, considering the U.S. government censures the Middle East for its treatment of women. This left me questioning the U.S. role overseas. Is my government a bully? Are

we attempting to Westernize the Middle East? On some level, is the backlash against America from Al Qaida warranted? Knowledge gained leads to further, deeper questions for which there may not be any one answer.

Sessions Summaries

The aforementioned facts – and the questions they raised – were the result of listening to several panel discussions over the course of the day. The two discussions that impacted me the most were *Public Places, Alternative Spaces* and *Women, Rights, and Power*. Here in America, we take so many of our rights for granted – especially our rights to free speech, free assembly, and freedom of religion; with the added right of freedom from religious bias by our government. These two panels shone a light on how speech, assembly, and religion must operate under a different set of rules, and presented this contrast as its main message.

The panel on *Public Places, Alternative Spaces* made the point that although there are quotas for women's seats guaranteed in the Parliaments of various Middle Eastern countries, the question remains – are these quotas about women's honor, or state's honor? Are they striving to offer equality to women through seats in government; or are they merely trying to make it look that way? It was said that women's presence in government democratizes space; but what is the driving force behind their presence? Is it the desire to make change or the assigned task of supporting the government, rubber-stamping the legislation that women leaders – and leaders of other women – are encouraged to sign?

Shahira Amin, the keynote speaker and an Egyptian journalist, stated that "laws on divorce, criminalized genital mutilation are not at risk" under the newly formed government, but is she certain about that? Or will female legislators be willing to soften their stance on these issues in order to get re-elected? Just how much has the Western world influenced the Middle East? Will they, in their efforts to run from a Westernized culture actually circle back into it in the form of political promises that are ignored as quickly as they are made? As one speaker on the panel pointed out, "Women's bodies have become the new terrain in which old political battles get fought." (Radcliffe Institute 3/30/12).

These questions buzzed through my head during the panel presentation, and made me realize the importance of the "hidden activism" that were being presented as the panel discussion got further underway; however, it also made the panel more difficult to follow as I was hoping to hear the answers to questions that were could not be formally asked.

Hidden activism – especially among women – is a necessity in Egypt and other countries in the Middle East. What gathering of women has ever been considered innocent or innocuous? Coupled with religious beliefs that see women as the root of all evil, it becomes doubly important for women to gather in alternative meeting spaces. These spaces include places where the four solidarities can meet without arousing suspicion; as do blogs and other social media sites. Furthering the influence of these alternative spaces on how society views the world around them, according to panelist Philip N. Howard, "bloggers use nightly state newscast footage to provide alternative narratives". Without the anonymity and reach of the Internet, the truth would

be quashed as soon as it was spoken; its speaker most certainly thrown in jail, regardless of whether or not she was taken seriously by the people.

By hiding in plain sight, the activism of women – and activist women – is allowed to take place without arousing suspicion. To link this idea to our WMS 400 readings, *A Jury of Her Peers* is what first comes to mind – women in a kitchen arouse no suspicion; but oh, what could those women be discussing? Being able to relate concrete actions to amorphous, alternative spaces made it easier to understand and follow what the panel was trying to say.

In the panel discussion *Women, Rights, and Power* the key points of the presentation were to show the connections between the three and the contrasting ideas formed during the revolution. While the idea of a feminist government is appealing to women who follow a feminist dogma, it is not of concern to those who already live in a more egalitarian region – albeit the fact that this construct is one of necessity, not respect. An example would be the information imparted by panelist Shireen Hassim, who in the prior panel (*Public Places, Alternative Spaces*) expounded on the issues faced by South Africa's more rural residents who were concerned more about proper representation of their concerns (economic and otherwise) than of the rights of women living in more widely populated areas. We must remember that the revolution occurred in the cities, where the seats of government meet, and be careful not to form a government that excludes people based not upon sex but upon physical locale.

Of further concern to the panel were issues so eloquently raised and discussed by Dr. Heba Raouf Ezzat, who discussed the dangers of so-called “state feminism” – i.e. a feminist government, which she called the “feminization of authoritarianism”. An authoritarian government will always be exclusionary of the rights of the factions that do not represent its own desires. Women who gain power but choose to abuse that power through the strict enforcement of a feminist rule would be no better, theoretically speaking, than the male dictators who recently fell to the revolution.

It is easy to bandy about the word revolution, but it is hard to spread the changes for which the revolution stands. As Dr. Rima Khalef pointed out, once you are in power it is “easy to change laws”; but “harder to change customs and traditions” of the people that the law would rule. Furthermore, if women held the power of seats in a governing Parliament, it is not certain that women's rights would be furthered; only certain that the desire of the majority would be passed into law. As journalist and keynote speaker Shahira Amin pointed out, Egyptians are “moderate by nature”; but the superior organization of the Muslim Brotherhood allowed these extremists to sweep the elections and impose their own beliefs as law. This revelation sent a chill down my spine as I thought of the American Tea Party and their gains in the 2010 Congressional elections.

Analysis of Representing Women: Culture, Religion, and Revolution

I will admit to a bias due to the common culture that I share with Dr. Elzbieta Matynia – although I am an American, my elders immigrated to America from Poland; and I was brought up in the dual cultures of Poland and America. To hear a woman whose voice sounded so much like that of my grandparents discuss that which I watched from afar was captivating beyond words. For this reason – among others – I feel that this particular grouping of speakers was an

excellent choice. While Dr. Beth Baron offered the powerful question, “A year later, who has the right to define the Egyptian revolution?” and the enticing idea that revolution “creates a new present”, Dr. Matynia presented the views of one who has witnessed the revolution in its entirety; seeing the “new present” become the past as the years dragged on and progress did not.

The third member of the panel, Dr. Dalenda Larguèche, offered her thoughts on previous speakers; acquiescing that the Arab Spring has created “new solidarities” and opportunities for women, but questioned how likely these are to remain in the face of old oppositions that still exist, buttressed by religion and a culture enrobed in it. In spite of Dr. Dalia Mogahed’s comments that women’s rights and religion are not exclusive of each other, Dr. Larguèche seemed to espouse the idea voiced by Dr. Khalef that it is easier to change laws than an ingrained culture. The grouping of these three women resulted in an overlap of the concern that religion and government have a way of coming together, since religion is a large part of culture; but differing opinions of how much culture (and religion, via that culture) influences the government. These various viewpoints presented contrasting viewpoints to be absorbed and processed; had one of them been missing from the panel the resulting effect would be a lack of understanding of the actual connections between the culture/religion/government triage, leaving only stereotype and presumption from which to infer truth.

As Dr. Matynia pointed out, religion is a large part of culture, and religious beliefs – or a lack thereof – often underlay the rights that a country’s laws grant women. From reproductive and freedom of choice, to rights of education, suffrage, and participation in government; religious beliefs often trump personal desire and the free will out of fear that a higher power will harshly judge. Whereas a government may guarantee a separation of Church and State – as the Constitutions of many countries do – the question remains: can the two ever truly be separated? The answer to this question, according to Dr. Matynia, is a moot point; trumped by the fact that the two *must* be separated in order to guarantee a government that is fair to all. Personal bias aside, I agree with every point that she made; mostly because I could relate what she was saying to what is occurring in the United States today – an attempted take-over of government by those who propose legislation based upon their extreme religious views and claiming the moral high ground and patriotism in the process.

The irony on the table was the fact that the Arab Spring has fought to end government run by religious extremists whereas the Polish Revolution sought to topple a government that did not allow for religion at all. Under a dictatorship, the beliefs (read: religion) of a people may or may not have been observed; but the end result, either way, was a guarantee of certain rights for women. For me – and others to whom I spoke – this concept was mind-blowing, for we were left to question if a dictatorship was equally bad for all; or if women somehow benefited from the rights bestowed upon them – from personal freedoms to Parliamentary quotas that guaranteed them a voice in government. ‘Tis a puzzle...

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04.10.12