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Subject: We need our strategy

Egyptian women feel excluded, despite the promise of the revolution

Leila Fadel and Ingy Hassieb
Monday, May 21, 2012

CAIRO — After Egyptian women stood shoulder to shoulder with men in the protests that toppled Hosni Mubarak, many looked forward to a role in the revolution's next steps. But 15 months later, as Egyptians prepare to vote for a new president this week, rights activists complain that women are being excluded from key decisions.

"At the time of the revolution, women were needed to fill out the numbers," said Hoda Badran, head of the Egyptian Feminist Union, which was banned under Mubarak but reinstated last year. "Now, the decision-makers don't need women, and we're back to this idea that femininity is inferior and masculinity superior."

Women hold just over 2 percent of the seats in Egypt's new parliament, down from about 12 percent in the last elections held under Mubarak. The sharp decline followed the elimination of a quota to ensure women's representation, which had been seen by many as a way to stack the body with members of Mubarak's political party.

Military rulers did not include any women in the committee that wrote constitutional amendments adopted in a nationwide referendum last year. And there are no women among the 13 candidates who will be on the ballot Wednesday, when voting begins in the country's first post-Mubarak presidential election.

Badran and other women's rights activists are particularly worried that the well-organized Muslim Brotherhood will use its religious and charitable groups to encourage uneducated and poor women to vote for its candidate, Mohammed Morsi. Morsi opposes women being allowed to serve in the presidency. He has called for the implementation of Islamic law and, at campaign rallies, referred to Islam's holy book, the Koran, as the constitution.

To counter the Brotherhood, Badran's group has hired hundreds of buses to take women to the polls. It is also distributing pamphlets that encourage women to vote for a candidate who respects women, who doesn't use religion to campaign and who doesn't lie, Badran said. The group has not endorsed a candidate.

Among its Arab neighbors, Egypt boasts some of the strongest legal protections for women. Women here can sue for divorce. They are a significant part of the workforce, and they are not subject to an Islamic dress code. Egyptian women who are married to foreign men can pass on citizenship to their children, unlike in more socially liberal countries such as Lebanon, where they cannot.

But the Islamist-dominated parliament is discussing several proposals that could change women's status here. They include lowering the legal age of marriage for girls from 18 to 13 and revoking divorced mothers' custody of their boys at age 7 and girls at 9, rather than at 15, a move that would be in accordance with a strict interpretation of Islamic law.

The existing rules were projects of Suzanne Mubarak, the former first lady, a strong advocate of laws to protect women and children's rights. But she was also accused of monopolizing the issue and putting laws on the books that were never implemented, while independent women's groups were not allowed to flourish.

Of all of Egypt's political blocs the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party has the most female lawmakers in parliament, though many women's rights activists see them as part of a religious organization that traditionally has not allowed women full-fledged membership.

Azza el-Garf, a mother of seven and a member of parliament, has come under intense criticism from liberals and women's right groups for advocating the revisiting of hard-won laws that women had thought were irreversible, such as the right for women to divorce their husbands and the age of marriage.

"When creating laws that concern the families, they need to be in line with Islamic law," Garf said. But she insisted that the nine women elected to Egypt's new parliament "gave a big push for the image of women in politics." (Two other women were appointed to parliament, bringing the total to 11.)

At a weekend conference in Cairo, presidential hopefuls were invited to speak to thousands of female voters about their agendas and how they related to women's rights. Only five candidates attended, with most of the leading candidates absent.

Ashraf Rasheed, a representative of Amr Moussa, the former Arab League chief and the liberal front-runner, said that if Moussa wins, he will appoint a female vice president. The audience burst into applause, though Rasheed was then asked to explain why Moussa himself had not attended.

Ghada Kamal, a young activist who said she was severely beaten and detained by military police during clashes outside the cabinet building this past winter, is more concerned about the loss of the revolution's focus on dismantling Mubarak's regime than about women's rights. And she's not sure whether she will vote.

"The Egyptian woman discovered she is strong, not weak or oppressed as she had imagined, and that she has a very important role to play, just like a man," Kamal said. "I don't think anything has changed for women or men in terms of human or social rights. If this had happened, we would have said that the revolution succeeded."

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