



Rape and the Arab Spring

The Dark Side of the Popular Uprisings in the Middle East

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Introduction

The Middle East is undergoing a profound and dramatic political transformation. But the analysis of the scope, pace, and quality of this change has focused largely on the quality and results of initial elections in countries such as Tunisia and Egypt. Unfortunately, this sort of analysis overlooks how these transitions are affecting women and minorities—key indicators of the robustness of democracies around the world.

Despite the prominent role played by women in organizing the popular movements that have overthrown and challenged authoritarian regimes across the region, the early results on the treatment of women in three key countries—Egypt, Yemen, and Libya—raise serious concerns about the future of democracy and human rights in the Middle East as the region experiences tectonic political change.

As momentous as these changes are, they are occurring within a social context that has made sexual violence against women a powerful instrument of political repression. In many cases sexual violence against women is a desperate reaction of the powerful elite groups linked to authoritarian leaders and dictators who are rapidly losing power and relevance.

Like other forms of violence and repression, sexual violence against women has been used as a tool to punish or intimidate those advocating for political change. The most horrific of these tools being used to control women is rape. Using rape as a weapon of war is not new, but in the context of patriarchal religious societies, it holds unique potential as a horrific tool of political repression.

This issue brief outlines the role women have played in three countries that experienced changes in leadership—Egypt, Yemen, and Libya. It analyzes the use of sexual violence as a tool of continued repression and a means to hold back political change, and

attempts to offer recommendations to U.S. policymakers and others in the international community to help protect women in the Middle East. At the same time, the limitations in influence foreign powers like the United States have in shaping the social and political realities of these countries must be acknowledged.

Sexual violence as a political tool during the Arab Spring

While women have played a vital role in all Middle East countries undergoing political transformations, women's role in Libya, Egypt, and Yemen has been exceptionally prominent. Yemen is unique largely because the internationally perceived leader of this revolution, Nobel laureate Tawakkul Karman, is a woman. The systematic use of sexual violence by both the state and nonstate actors to quell opposition in Egypt and Libya makes these countries distinctive as well.

Women in Libya and Egypt have faced brutal and consistent abuse that sets these cases apart from other regional countries undergoing political change such as Tunisia, Syria, and Bahrain. As a result, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen provide a window into the complicated and challenging circumstances facing women as they seek to participate in the wave of political change currently sweeping the region.

Women agitating for political change in these countries face the ever-present threat of sexual abuse and the societal stigma that results from sexual violence in highly patriarchal societies. In each of these societies there is a stark difference between being physically beaten and being raped.

Unlike physical violence, rape and other forms of sexual violence can permanently damage a woman's reputation and status within her community. Not only is she considered unfit for marriage but rape causes profound humiliation to the male members of her family and potentially her community. In the current context of popular demands for reform and democratization against unresponsive authoritarian regimes, these acts of violence are more than a horrific form of male domination and patriarchy: They are a political tool being used to systematically silence opposition.

From prehistory to the ongoing conflict in the Congo, rape has historically been used as a weapon of war. Rape is appalling no matter where it takes place, but it is especially damaging within conservative Islamic communities because women who have been raped are deemed unfit for marriage (their primary social value) and often murdered to remedy a perceived "dishonor" to their families. Women who have been raped are viewed as having brought the crime upon themselves by transgressing conservative social and sexual norms. Consequently, there is a deeply rooted cultural taboo associated with being a rape victim.

Religious and cultural implications in regards to women complicate the issue; in the Middle East, rape is more a tool of social repression than of warfare. In these instances rape can be almost ceremonial, and has deep meaning and consequences in Islamic culture. Rape was used excessively during Moammar Qaddafi's attempt to remain in power in Libya. The case of Iman Al-Obeidi—a woman who burst into a Tripoli hotel filled with foreign journalists who then told the world she was raped by government authorities—brought the Qaddafi regime's use of rape as a tool of political repression into the international spotlight.

Throughout Qaddafi's fight to remain in power, his regime ordered soldiers to go into villages and rape the female adults and children, some as young as 8 years old, in front of family members. Condoms and Viagra were found in pockets of dead Qaddafi soldiers. Children described being forced to watch as their fathers were murdered and their mothers raped. Benghazi journalists reported seeing the ground littered with Viagra after troops had been through. In one case mothers claimed a group of girls were kidnapped, held hostage for four days, and raped, all under government order.

Besides the elements of shame, ostracism, and physical injury, survivors of sexual assault are often burdened with a dependent child as a result of the rape. According to Libyan law, abortion is illegal under the penal code; getting an abortion makes one liable to imprisonment. As a concession to rape victims, if it is determined that the reason behind the act was to preserve the family "honor," the penalty is halved. If a woman performs her own abortion, the punishment is imprisonment for at least six months.

This leaves the woman with virtually no choice but to birth and raise the child. Rhetoric related to women and sexual violence always comes back to ideas of honor, which is held in the highest regard within Islamic societies. Raping a woman strips the woman, her family, and her community of "honor." Qaddafi understood this dynamic and used it as a tool to prevent women from organizing opposition to their regimes.

Despite Egypt's notorious reputation for sexual harassment and violence against women, as well as former first lady Suzanne Mubarak's prominent role in advocating for women's rights, female activists have been at the forefront of efforts to change Egypt's political system from the very beginning. Perhaps predictably, Egyptian women have also faced sexual violence as they seek to effect political change.

On March 9, 2011, just under a month after President Hosni Mubarak's ouster, protesters returned to Tahrir Square to express frustration with the slow pace of reforms. The Egyptian military broke up the demonstration and arrested demonstrators, including at least 18 women. These women were beaten, charged with prostitution, and forced to submit to "virginity checks." When confronted, a senior general stated, "The girls who were detained were not like your daughter or mine. ... these were girls who had camped out in tents with male protesters in Tahrir Square." In a patriarchal religious society in

which female sexuality is heavily policed, accusations of promiscuity serve to damage the reputations of female protesters.

Similar incidents have continued during Egypt's transition. When Egyptian security forces arrested Egyptian-American journalist Mona Eltahawy during a November 2011 protest against the military in Tahrir Square, they severely beat (breaking multiple bones) and sexually assaulted her. While Eltahawy's prominence as an American journalist secured her prompt release, her ordeal shows the continued prevalence of sexual assault as a means to intimidate female activists in Egypt.

Sexual violence against female protesters by Egyptian security services reflects a prevailing attitude among judges and police that rape is not a matter of public justice, despite reforms intended to prevent rapists from escaping punishment. Public places where rape victims look for legal remedy, such as courts and police stations, are "no place for respectable women." By casting protesting women as "not like your daughter or mine" and subjecting them to sexual violence, Egyptian authorities delegitimize these women's political voices in a social context that does not consider women attempting to access the public-justice system to be "respectable."

Unlike Egypt, Yemen lacks a robust civil society and therefore possesses few legitimate organizations to monitor and assess the scale of violence against women. Due to these limitations, no comprehensive statistics on violence against women currently exist. Nonetheless, the limited information available shows that violence against women is a major problem that is not being tackled by government authorities.

Yemeni laws have not served to protect women, and have left them vulnerable to grave abuses. Article 32 of Yemen's Constitution describes women as "sisters of men," implying that Yemeni women are subsidiary to, or even property of, men rather than persons in their own right. An Amnesty International report in 2009 found that violence against women is extremely common and is perpetrated by the state, the community, and the family, and there exists no provision in Yemeni law explicitly covering domestic violence.

Rafat Al Akhali—Yemeni activist and founder of Resonate!Yemen, a Yemeni youth group—recounted that before the uprising began in February 2011, violence against women was not a public issue. This silence changed when women joined men on the street in protest; people became uneasy.¹ Akhali feels that violence against women has never been condoned, but also not discussed publically. Most protests in Yemen are clean, organized, and relatively safe, with a separate area for women. Akhali stressed, "The culture of Yemen does not support attacks." Yet when the uprising began, underlying issues of gender-based oppression were forced to the surface.

The Norwegian Nobel Committee in October announced it would award a Nobel Peace Prize to Tawakkul Karman, a female Yemeni activist involved in ongoing protests against

the regime of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. In Yemen women celebrated Karman's peace prize—but were caught off guard when they were systematically sought out and brutally attacked by regime supporters. Forty women were attacked in Taz as they marched and celebrated in support of Karman. “We were attacked by regime thugs with empty bottles and stones,” an organizer said on condition of anonymity. Karman's Nobel prize has made her the face of the revolt against President Saleh. Yemeni women have, in her words, transformed “from their traditional role as victims, into leaders playing a major role in the revolution.”²

The role of the United States

In the face of the use of rape and sexual violence as a tool of repression against female activists in the Middle East, the United States should lead the international community to stand firm against sexual violence being used against women by both emerging and authoritarian regimes as well as nonstate political actors.

Of course, the responsibility for protecting these rights should first and foremost lie with the governments and governing authorities of these countries. The United States and other international actors can shape and influence the choices these countries make from the outside, but ultimately their citizens are going to have to fight for positive change themselves.

The United States can assist women in countries undergoing rapid political and social change by supporting education, awareness, and empowering civil-society groups within these countries. These organizations can help foster respect for women's human rights, and communicate closely with other activists, government officials, and international partners. In short, the United States and its international partners can help women in countries facing political change help themselves.

With the help of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the Obama administration has made the international empowerment of women a top priority. In a session chaired by Secretary Clinton, the U.N. Security Council adopted Resolution 1888, which established a special representative of the secretary general for sexual violence in conflict and created a rapid-response team of experts to help provide accountability for sexual violence during conflict in “situations of particular concern.” Similar international tools should be made available to combat sexual violence as a tool of political repression as well.

Finally, Secretary Clinton can leverage her considerable prestige as a leading advocate for international women's rights and publicly incorporate women's status as a measure of democratic transition. Clinton has already stated that inclusion of women and respect for women's rights will be a key metric in measuring transitions to democracy.

During a speech delivered at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in November 2011, Clinton reiterated:

Speaking as the Secretary of State of the United States, we're going to continue to strongly advocate that you cannot be a democracy if you do not fully enfranchise all of your population. We're going to hold up both publicly and privately any actions that we think are undermining the rights of women.

This logic should be explicitly applied to countries in the Middle East undergoing political transition.

These uprisings will require unique action from the Obama administration. While the United States and other international actors can give them assistance, it is ultimately up to local advocates of women's rights to seize the opportunities provided by current and upcoming reform.

Encouraging a strong civil society in rhetoric and aid will help citizens help themselves. The Arab Spring is a golden opportunity to change attitudes toward gender and end sexual violence as a tool of political repression in the Middle East. The citizens of these nations have the rare opportunity to rewrite their countries' social contract.

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Endnotes

1 NDI. Women and the Arab Spring. (2011, November 8).