

Egyptians Must Stop Seeing Each Other as Enemies

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Some way to go to make democratic attitudes take root, particularly when it comes to women's rights.

I have been involved in advocating for civil liberties and human rights since I was a child. From the age of eight, I was determined to change my family's attitudes towards women's rights and violence against women.

As I got older, my personal interest in equality as a woman expanded to a broader concern about human rights and civil liberties in Egypt, the Middle East and North Africa generally.

In early 2006, I started blogging about these issues, and growing an extensive network of followers and fellow activists. In June 2009, I was invited to attend President Barack Obama's speech in Cairo, and afterwards I met privately with White House senior advisor Valerie Jarrett.

My personal activism and my work for the American Islamic Congress have centred on promoting a new narrative for women in the Muslim world, as well as advising Egyptian and foreign policymakers on how to address human rights, women's rights, and freedom of expression in the Middle East.

In many ways, I think much of the work I have been involved in with fellow bloggers and campaigners helped pave the way for the Egyptian revolution, since we worked on promoting non-violent strategies and training activists in resistance techniques.

As human rights campaigners, we enjoy much better status now than in President Hosni Mubarak's time. There is a sense that we can interact without fear, carry out actions and lobby nationwide on issues around liberty and civil rights – there is no way we would have been able to do so freely under Mubarak. Generally, we have the feeling we are winning back our freedom and dignity.

At the level of women's rights, however, there are still big problems. It seems that almost nothing has changed since before the revolution. Women continue to face marginalisation and discrimination, they are not getting fully involved in the movement for democracy and they are barred from any serious decision-making opportunities.

We have so many talented female experts who could contribute to rebuilding Egypt, but they are not participating at a political level. They are hesitant about it either because they don't think they have the knowledge or financial mobility to get involved, or because they are suppressed by the widespread view that women are simply made for domesticity.

I see this largely as a cultural problem in Egypt. It started out from patriarchal attitudes, but it has also become a religious view, aided by the growing influence of extremism.

Prior to the revolution, I experienced regular threats and enormous hostility for my work on women's rights, and unfortunately this is still the case. Particularly when I speak about issues like female genital mutilation or violence against women, I am met with accusations that what I am doing is against Islam.

The younger generation of Egyptians is slightly more tolerant, partly as a result of what they have seen in Tahrir Square, but they are still not nearly as open-minded as they need to be.

On March 19, when a referendum on constitutional reforms was held, I conducted a survey at polling stations in three different regions, asking voters to answer the question, "Would you like to see a woman as president of Egypt?" The response was 100 per cent negative. That was shocking.

Although we have the Egyptian people now choosing democracy, they still don't see the empowerment of women as key to achieving that aim.

Instead, they see it as irrelevant. Yet I absolutely believe that without women in power, democracy can never happen in our country.

Educating people about politics, and in particular about the rights of women in democratic governance, forms part of a national drive we are conducting to reach out to people at grassroots level. Through a campaign called "I Know My Rights", we are teaching people in rural areas about civil rights, elections and how to vote.

We are also targeting young people who are politically and socially-minded, training them with the skills they need to engage in political debate, with the aim of empowering those who would like to run for

parliament in future. As a central part of this, we are trying to support female candidates who have political goals and aspirations. But this is a huge awareness-raising project, and it is difficult to gain wide support and funding.

However, the overall reaction to the campaign has been amazing – every day we have so many new people asking us to join, from volunteers to professors of political science. People genuinely want to learn.

For the first time, we have an opportunity to practice democracy. It is a big challenge and everyone wants to live up to it.

Among Egyptians there is now both happiness and optimism, as well as a lot of fear and confusion. The situation is extremely tense, because we have finally got what we wanted, but we still have no idea where it will lead.

Serious conflicts and divisions remain, and these are often blamed on extremist Salafis and counter-revolutionaries, but I think those factors are exaggerated. There is certainly a backlash, but more than anything, I think the problem lies inside each of us – we have to stop seeing one another as enemies.

To me, the revolution has been like planting a flower – you have to dig very deep down into the soil. The process is messy, dirty and unpredictable, but in the end, you hope it will result in a beautiful flower.

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