Arab Revolutions and Political Participation: New Patterns, Divergent Trajectories, and Different Negotiation Abilities

→ Nadine Abdalla
Recent Arab revolutions have created new opportunities for political and social participation, and for the negotiation of rights. The revolutions themselves became factors in political and social development and engines for greater social change, even if such change was later curtailed. The forms of political and social involvement, as well as real-life outcomes, have varied, as did the methods used for negotiating rights. We have, therefore, seen different dynamics and outcomes emerge.

This paper presents a synopsis of a number of research papers published by the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI) as part of its Arab Research Support Programme (ARSP). These papers analyzed the various forms of new political participation in Egypt, the different paths and outcomes of political development in Egypt and Syria, and the negotiation of women’s rights and their conditions in Egypt, Tunisia, Syria and Palestine. This paper focuses on three major areas: the new patterns and dynamics of political participation during and after the Egyptian Revolution; the influence of personal factors in political development and engagement and the corresponding impact on individual trajectories during and after the Arab Revolutions; and the modes and limits of Arab women’s political participation in negotiating their rights.

**Political Engagement During and after the Egyptian Revolution: New Patterns and Dynamics**

Political and social mobilization accompanying the 2011 Egyptian Revolution opened new arenas for collective action and new patterns of interaction with the surrounding social and political context. It also enhanced engagement in the public interest and developed a new vocabulary for communication and organization. The ARSP papers that covered the new revolutionary movements and the student movements that emerged post-2011 Revolution, as well as those concerned with “political satire” as a tool for resistance and documentation in Egypt, made a particularly notable contribution.

Fouad Halbouni’s paper “Revolutionary Youth Movements, Religiosity and Identity...
Politics in Egypt shows that revolutionary politics in Egypt provided ways to express identity that were unknown under Hosni Mubarak. For instance, the Salafyo Costa movement (founded by Salafis, Copts, and liberals after the January 2011 Revolution) sought to revive the unified spirit that existed in Tahrir Square through new modes of action. The movement organized football matches between a Coptic team and a Salafi team in order to create a pattern of interaction radically different from traditional patterns of national unity. Halbouni also concentrates on theological politics, that is, the changing relationship between the political order and the religious order and emphasizes the appearance of similarities in the concept of martyrdom between suicide bombers and revolutionaries. This was so much so that martyrdom in the revolutionary context became connected to destroying the enemy and providing a “better” life for the generations to come. Thus, the term “martyrdom” became a new tool for collective mobilization by establishing a common future vision among the groups of protestors. It was in this context that the “martyrdom” of Mina Danial on 9 October 2011 led to the establishment of a revolutionary youth movement that carried his name and formed its identity upon his background and political viewpoints regardless of his religious background.

In his paper, “Against the Grain: Student Movements in Private Universities”, Ismail Fayed shows that the openness of the political scene after the January 2011 Revolution led to the participation of student groups which many previously considered absent from the political arena and public interest. The common belief was that private universities were non-politicized spaces. This was based on the premise that their students were isolated due to university campuses’ distance from central Cairo – lacking, therefore, the basic capabilities to integrate into the dominant social fabric – and that they were from wealthy families with some shared interests with the state. The reality, however, proved otherwise. Private university students were noticeably active after the revolution and rather influenced the social and political contexts with their mobilization. They participated in protests inside and outside their campuses, expressing their discontent with university mismanagement and poor planning. These universities provided a space for collective action by allowing the physical presence of the students in a relatively open political climate. This formed behavioural patterns that encouraged participation and mobilization for demanding rights and
protesting failure.

In “Political Satire after the Revolution of 25 January 2011: Rebuilding a Space for Resistance Expression”, Dina Mandour highlights the importance of the role of political satire in producing new ideas, and helping resistance become a tool for expressing dissatisfaction and documenting events and incidents through new narratives and a common dialect. Although humour as a tool of political satire had previously played an important historical role in Egypt, targeting the policies of senior officials and their aides, 2011 represented a radical turning point. Satire has become a supporting mechanism for the revolution and an integral part of it. The content of political humour changed after 25 January 2011, as satirists produced very concise works for use on social media. This is one way that satire and sarcastic slogans reflected the “digital spirit of the revolution”, especially as the Internet became a sanctuary and parallel space for younger generations to express themselves and present an alternative to traditional opposition.

Political Development and Engagement During and after the Arab Revolutions: The Influence on Personal Trajectories

There is a distinct relationship between socio-political involvement and development, and trajectories of personal activity, with analysis of the former proving sterile without a deep understanding of the latter. The different patterns, motives, and courses of political involvement cannot be understood in the light of structural factors alone. They also require an understanding of the personal context as a factor that defines the outcomes of political involvement and its influence on shaping political orientations and building new identities. The importance of in-depth research in this relationship increases in the context of the Arab revolutions because of the processes of participation and growth it generated. This attracts considerable attention in the papers concerned with Nubian rights activity in Egypt and jihadi activity around the Syrian Revolution.

Mayyada Majdi’s paper “Affiliation to an Ethnic Group in an Urban Context and its Repercussions on the Personal Trajectories of Individuals: The Case of Cairo
Nubians” illustrates how an individual is not simply born as a Nubian but rather becomes one when he or she starts exploring “Nubianism” through involvement in collective Nubian activity. From an early age, this involvement entails interaction with a series of biographical, cultural, and political markers that affect an individual’s orientation, sense of belonging, and identity. Nubianism – the cornerstone of Nubian identity – is based on Nubia being the individual’s birthplace alongside the experience of displacement. Thus, an individual’s upbringing, together with political and social involvement, creates interactions that lead to self-education as well as possible politicization (e.g. the rise of the Democratic Nubian Youth Union compared to the launch of the April 6th Youth Movement in 2008, or the involvement in other party activity before the January 2011 Revolution). It is this interaction that helps shape a form of presence and a sense of belonging within Nubian identity, namely the “youth identity”, as opposed to “the seniors”. This is manifest in the distinctions made between the Nubian Union and all other Nubian entities and between older and younger generations.

Ranime Al Sheltawi’s paper “Observing the Political Track of Five Lawyers Who Supported the Social Mobilization of Female Housemaids in Egypt: An Attempt to Understand the Craft of the Rights Lawyer”, studies those who supported female housemaids through union and legal activity. It emphasizes that the processes of political development can be better understood by looking at the personal background and level of activity of social actors. The research stresses the possibility of identifying social characteristics related to paths of political formation, by considering structural or personal events that radically changed the trajectories of the agents, entailing new identity formation and different profiles. The paper distinguishes between two patterns for growth among rights lawyers. The first is represented by those whose full-time participation in civil society was preceded by experiences of political or partisan involvement. Most were born in the 1970s and studied at law faculties in the 1990s, giving them a chance for political growth and practice. The second is represented by those whose work in civil society was not preceded by any political involvement and whose academic study did not give them a chance for proper political development and involvement. As a result, the January 2011 revolution was the primary landmark of the latter group’s experience and provided an intensive opportunity for political
development. It shaped their values, identity and worldview, and paved the way for partisan involvement and full-time rights activity.

Despite the differences in the Syrian case, where the revolutionary political activity combined with jihadi involvement, Marie Kortam’s paper “Tripoli’s Jihad in the Syrian Revolution: From Search for Reprisal to Search for Meaning” stresses the importance of personal trajectories and activist biographies to help analyze the motives behind Lebanese Tripolitan youth involvement in the Syrian revolution and its consequences. This involvement can only be analyzed as an “active career”, or a by-product of a personal choice and objective factors during social upbringing. Similarly, an individual’s involvement cannot be properly understood without considering their personal trajectory, especially because this involvement is incentivized as a source of fun, despite the costs, and generates physical and psychological subordination for those involved.

Despite the fact that political, structural, psychological, legal, and sectarian factors have pushed Sunni Lebanese youth to get involved in the Syrian revolution, those involved do not necessarily belong to a specific social class, have similar skills, nor belong to the same generation. Younger participants became acquainted with a certain career outlook and a unique position in the Syrian revolution as this experience marked their first involvement in public affairs. For some, the Syrian revolution was their only opportunity for political engagement. In this context, we find that Tripolitan youth involvement in the Syrian revolution – which they see as jihad – took three forms: retaliation or “qasas”, as military contractors or professional jihadism, and as a search for a meaningful life for those involved in jihad.

**Political Participation of Arab Women and the Negotiation of Their Rights: Means and Limitations**

The negotiation process over women’s rights must be seen as dynamic and as a product of the extended struggle by women and women’s organizations. Sometimes historical gains facilitate this negotiation process as is the case in
Tunisia. At other times a larger cumulative effort is required, as in Egypt. In general, the condition of women and their rights remains an ongoing issue subject to daily contextual influence, as is the case in the Syrian revolution, which turned into open war.

A number of ARSP research papers discuss issues related to women’s conditions, rights, and political participation in the context of the Egyptian, Tunisian, and Syrian revolutions, as well as the Palestinian context, despite the latter’s dissimilarities. Hind Ahmed Zaki’s paper “Negotiation Over Women’s Rights in Egypt and Tunisia: Reproduction of Past Narratives or an Opportunity for a New Kind of Mobility?” shows that the process of negotiation over women’s rights in Tunisia was part of an extended political process governed by cultural, historical, and institutional legacies and structures, contrary to the situation in Egypt. The negotiation of Tunisian women’s rights – whether over the principle of equality or the discussion of women’s rights in the new constitution – took a political turn in which political considerations and necessities of the transitional governance phase were prioritized at the expense of conflicts over identity, secularism and the legacy of modernity linked to the post-independence state.

In Egypt, several factors meant that the women’s movement failed to put women’s rights on the political agenda within the context of other major political claims of the January 2011 revolution. Primary among these was the weakness of Egyptian party structures. As a result, women in Egypt found themselves faced with the absence of historical presence in legal and legislative gains, as opposed to their peers in Tunisia. The Egyptian experience was also characterized by a lack of political channels enabling negotiation over women’s rights.

Araa Al Jarmani’s paper “Directions of the Women’s Movement Under the Arab Spring Revolutions: The Syrian Experience as a Model” shows how in Syria, where the revolutionary context became divided and militarized, the dynamics and methods of negotiation over women’s rights also differed. There, continued negotiation occurred within concepts of the masculinity of war and women’s position therein. In addition to women’s participation in peaceful protests, some became involved in combat alongside the Free Syrian Army. This was the case even though most of them belonged to conservative sections of Syrian society. Their involvement with the revolution and civil activities such as protests and relief
work, created realizations that war was not a solely masculine act. In war, bombing and hunger place everyone on the frontline, forcing questions of the masculinity of war itself. Through its apparatuses, regime policies have sought to destroy detained women psychologically, physically, and socially by defaming them in ways that confront conservative society with issues of female bodies and their connection to dishonour. Despite this, the dynamics and interactions of the Syrian revolution have progressively disturbed the masculine and patriarchal logic of society and made relative changes to the value systems of traditional Syrian society.

In Palestine, despite the absence of a revolutionary context under the harsh conditions of the occupation, women’s attempts to negotiate their rights have continued. In her paper “The Effectiveness of Palestinian Women’s Political Participation Under the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) and Its Effect on Women’s Rights in the West Bank and Gaza Strip”, Donia Ismail stresses that the legal provisions relevant to rights and civil liberties were created loosely, allowing broad interpretations of women’s rights. This is the case despite foundational Palestinian law having made relatively large gains in comparison to common legislation, as its articles consider women citizens with full rights and duties. Most of this, however, remains only a formality, despite official mechanisms offered by the PNA to consolidate political participation of Palestinian women, such as establishing a planning department for women’s participation and development, and a women’s unit in the Palestinian legislative council. Yet like Egypt, the practical policies and procedures necessary to improve the social and legal reality of the Palestinian woman remain absent. This is mainly due to civil and political weakness in the society and a failure to secure channels capable of exerting adequate influence on the PNA to activate the available mechanisms.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The discussed research papers show that political participation and involvement in the context of the 2011 Arab revolutions witnessed new patterns and interactions and resulted in diverse dynamics and outcomes. These can be summarized along three general lines:
1. Revolutionary activity in Egypt has presented previously unknown modes for documenting events and expressing identities. The openness of the political domain after the January revolution led to the participation of groups previously considered by many as outside the circle of public interest. However, the restriction of the political domain in Egypt after the revolution of 30 June 2013 and the military intervention that ensued on 3 July 2013 led to a decrease in the rates of political participation and a return to traditional tools. **Therefore, in order to capitalize on any upcoming political opportunities, political actors must now maintain the social networks built in the period of political openness and the patterns of interaction born within them.**

2. The revolutionary context in Egypt, as in Syria (despite differences), provides unique opportunities for political growth and involvement. These can only be analyzed by in-depth consideration of the profiles and activism of social actors and their personal trajectories. This helps to understand their motives for involvement and the outcomes of creating new orientations and possibly identities. **Thus, it is important to focus on the milestones along such personal trajectories to understand the drivers of political participation and work on activating them – in the Egyptian context – or pre-empting them – in the Syrian context – to avoid their transformation into jihadi activity.**

3. Revolutions have opened the door for negotiation of women’s rights in Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria. Institutionalizing the PNA in Palestine also provided an opportunity for legislation and mechanisms that would improve the social and legal status of women. The outcomes of these negotiation processes have differed according to the historical, institutional, and legislative gains, as well as the presence of political and civil channels that place women’s rights on the political agenda, which for example, were available in Tunisia but not in Egypt or Palestine. Negotiating concepts of the masculinity of war and patriarchal society in the extensively militarized Syrian context remains an ongoing process. **Consequently, it is important to work on strengthening the legislative structure around women’s rights and enhancing political organization to provide effective channels for pressure on women’s rights issues in relatively stable Arab contexts.**
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