

Introduction: A Dramaturgy of Women, Egypt, and the 2011 Egyptian Uprising

Women will secure their rights only through actively defending and demanding democracy, human rights, and good governance. Through promoting and advocating these fundamental demands for the whole society, women will find a space for their specific rights as well. It is true that our societies are largely patriarchal, but following the Arab Spring these patriarchal systems are en route to decline as the society has begun to understand and appreciate the role of women in the public space, and as women have begun to assert their voices and lead the process of regime change and democratic transition. (Tawakkol Karman)¹

Powerfully eloquent, Tawakkol Karman described in great pride and with an almost baroque sensuality the sense of empowerment, equality, and agency that characterized women's engagement in the episodes of protests that swept the Middle East and North Africa in 2010–2011. These episodes of contentions have led to the toppling of despotic regimes of long standing in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya. In Yemen, as well as across the Middle East and North African (MENA) region, Karman became known as the “mother of the revolution” (Khamis 2011). In a nod to her influential and inspirational role in the political upheavals across the region, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011.

Beyond national and international commemoration, Karman also became a symbol for thousands of women who participated in the mass protests in defense of dignity, freedom, liberty, and democracy in a number of Arab countries. In Egypt, women's engagement in this new moment of unity, solidarity, and cohesion mirrored the egalitarian movements that came out in support of liberating their nations. Little was said about women's specific rights in the early days of the

¹ Author's interview, Tawakkol Karman – the Yemeni activist and 2011 Nobel laureate, Canada: Edmonton, November, 2012. Original in Arabic, my translation.

uprising. It was believed that women would enjoy their full rights only when every citizen, regardless of gender, was guaranteed these rights.

In the years separating the statement that heads this chapter from the current political reality, a lot happened that fundamentally challenged this aura of equality, the aura that had been the defining ideological infrastructure of these uprisings. To all intents and purposes, the unity and solidarity that prevailed among protestors were similar to the critical anthropologist Victor Turner's "liminal moments" (1969, 1974). They, too, were difficult to sustain and soon came to an end following the fall of Ḥusnī Mubarak's regime in Egypt.

Since the end of Mubarak's presidency, female activists – among other political activists – in the country have faced the hurdle of confronting all contentious politics. That is, how to transform the egalitarian spirit of a brief uprising into a long-lasting reform of the political and social landscape (Amanat 2012; Anderson 2011; Brown 2013; Hampson and Momani 2015; Lynch and Dodge 2015; Masoud 2015). In light of the emerging backlash against the uprising,² it is easy to look back on women's engagement in this episode of contention with disappointment. I argue instead that when studying women's engagement in the 2011 Egyptian uprising, we need to take into account the overall picture in this rapidly changing region. This requires analyzing women's engagement with an eye to the political, economic, and social challenges and uncertainties that mark Middle Eastern and North African societies (Charrad and Zarrugh 2014; Johansson-Nogues 2013; Moghadam 2011, 2014; Morsy 2014).

The book focuses specifically and primarily on women's engagement in this liminal phase in the 2011 Egyptian uprising that led to the ousting of President Mubarak. The overarching objective igniting this study is to understand how gender issues featured in women's collective action frame in the 2011 Egyptian uprising and the impact of this framing on their experience and activism. The study thus offers an oral history of women's engagement in this initial episode of contention. By closely analyzing women's engagement in the uprising, women are

² Political scientists and Middle Eastern experts Marc Lynch and Toby Dodge (2015) eloquently describe the current backlash against the uprisings across the Arab world as the rise of an "Arab Thermidor." Thermidor was the month in which the French politician Maximilien Robespierre was overthrown and beheaded. The term is generally used to indicate the beginning of the backlash following the revolution.

brought to the center of analysis and their agency is reclaimed. Writing *herstory*, feminist scholars contend, is important as women tend to be neglected and undervalued in history (Agah, Mehr, and Parsi 2007; Åhäll and Linda 2012; Amrouche 1988; Elsadda 1998, 1999, 2001, 2004, 2006). A detailed analysis of women's framing strategies will also result in a "thick description" (Geertz 1973) of women's engagement. It will contribute to restoring women's voices and portraying them as active agents. This, in turn, promises to complicate and expand debates on women's participation in national struggles beyond reductionist accounts that view them as misguided or passive.

Cognizant that across the history of Egypt, as well as in many developing and developed countries, genuine advances in women's rights were achieved only after pressures from organized groups of women (Fraser and Gordon 1994; Joseph 2000; Seidman 1999), I place women at the center of my analysis. Specifically, I examine the significance and limitations of women's collective action frame in the 2011 uprising.

Studies on women's collective action frame examine the strategic interpretations of issues offered by frames that are intended to mobilize women. Neil J. Smelser (1971) argues that while grievances are significant elements in originating collective action, they will not lead to participation until they are perceived. Societies are far from perfect and do not meet all of their members' needs; however, there are differences in the degree to which society's different groups perceive them as problematic and seek to change them.

Smelser's perspective corresponds to David A. Snow and Robert Benford's viewpoint that participants in collective actions are not "structurally guaranteed" but rather cluster around master collective action frames (Benford 1993, 1997; Snow and Benford 1988, 1992; Snow, Soule, and Kriesi 2004; Snow, Worden, and Benford 1986). At the most basic, a frame identifies a problem – that is social or political in nature – the parties responsible for causing it, and the possible solutions they offer (Johnston and Noakes 2005: 2; see also Gamson 1975; Snow and Benford 1988, 1992). Frames of collective action, in this sense, redefine a status quo that was perceived as "unfortunate but perhaps tolerable" to "unjust and immoral" and thus mobilize participants to join in repertoires of contention (Tarrow 1998: 91).

This synthetic model is apt to understand the experiences of women in its entirety. As I shall demonstrate in the book, the political process paradigm contributes to elucidating the opportunities

and constraints surrounding female activism in Egypt. Framing analysis explicates how opportunities and constraints were perceived by female participants, and how they influenced the women's framing. Together, the two theories highlight female protestors' experience while being sensitive to the contexts surrounding women's activism in Egypt.

The book's dynamic framework is situated within the interdisciplinary field of contentious politics, specifically, under the rubric of the political process approach. Scholars working within the tradition of political process examine the structural, organizational, and behavioral facets of movements (Croizat, Meyer, and Tarrow 1997; McAdam 1982; Porta and Tarrow 2012; Snow and Benford 2005; Snow and Trom 2002; Snow et al. 1986; Soule 1997; Tilly 1995; Tarrow 1998). They, unlike earlier generations of social movement theorists, consider the mechanisms and processes that link the movements' different elements and actors (Croizat et al. 1997; McAdam 1985; Porta and Tarrow 2012; Snow and Benford 2005; Snow and Trom 2002; Snow et al. 1986; Soule 1997; Tilly 1995; Tarrow 1998). In the last decade, the political process model has gained ground in the field of contentious politics and in the social sciences generally. This move, scholars note, is part of a broader shift in the field of comparative politics toward the systemic study of processes and mechanisms (Della Porta 2014; Della Porta and Mosca 2005; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; Tarrow 2012; Tilly 1995). My book builds upon and contributes to this dynamic opening in the field.

To illuminate women's experience and their collective action frame, the research adopted an emergent approach to theorizing; that is, theorizing about women's engagement took the form of a conversation between theory and women's lived experiences. Data was gathered from personal interviews with the following five sets of actors: female protestors who participated in the 18-day uprising, female activists, leaders of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), state officials, and public figures who are actively engaged in the area of women's rights in Egypt. Data was also gathered from public transcripts as well as secondary literature published in English and Arabic on the topic. I analyzed data using critical discourse analysis (Richardson 2007; see also Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000). This entailed a close and multilayered reading of particular words of participants (i.e. choice of words or diction) and a focus on not only what is being said, but what is occluded

from discussion in the attempt to examine the place of gender in women's collective action frames.

In so doing, the research tackled one of the empirical paradoxes of democratization identified by scholars in relation to gender equalities and regime transitions. It also provided an oral history of women's experience in the uprising; the focus was on not only documenting their accounts but also situating their experience within the contentious and conventional politics of Egypt. The research thus offers an emergent knowledge that is actively formed from the standpoint of female protestors and that is situated within the particular social and historical context of Egypt.

The January 25 Episode of Contention

I view the January 25 uprising as an episode of contention within Egypt's contentious politics. The notion "episodes of contention" is conceived by Sidney Tarrow (1993) to explain the phases of heightened conflict across the social system. These phases, social movement theorists explain, are characterized by: rapid diffusion of collective action frames; innovations in collective action; and cumulative effect regardless of the cycle's immediate outcome (Tarrow 1998: 142–144; see also McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; 2007: 10).

In the 2011 episode of contention, protestors were the first to engage in innovative collective actions, salient among which is virtual dissidence, as they sensed an opportunity to advance their position through novel means.³ Like many other protest cycles, however, the uprising did not ostensibly bring major transformation in the traditional

³ In *Blesses and Curses: Virtual Dissidence as a Contentious Performance* (Allam 2014a), I introduce the term *virtual dissidence* to account for the constraints imposed by the macro structure and the array of innovative responses ignited by activists' determination in the uprising. I conceptualize virtual dissidence as a political performance in the repertoire of contention between authoritative regimes and the latter's contenders. The significance of understanding virtual dissidence as emerging from repertoire is that it frames a meso level explanation of collective action and political change. Repertoires of contention tell a story about how contentious claim-making is situated in prior societal experience and interaction with the regime. At the same time, however, repertoires are closely linked with innovation in political action, when understood in the musical and theatrical sense of the word espoused by Charles Tilly, as resembling that of *commedia dell'arte* or jazz.

power structures of Egyptian society or its social schisms – including those that are gender-based. Nonetheless, the uprising left its mark on the protestors' agency and activism. In line with earlier social movement literature, Tarrow observes that episodes of contention, “even defeated or suppressed,” leave “some kind of residue” behind them and their effect, “successful or failed,” is cumulative in the long term (1998: 146; see also McAdam et al. 2001; Tilly 2008). This is because actions, Pam Oliver writes, “can affect the likelihood of other actions by creating occasions for actions, by altering material conditions, by changing a group's social organization, by altering beliefs, or by adding knowledge” (1989: 2).

The social movement approach to contention is thus premised on a view of political change as a relational and dynamic process. This process can be often constrained by ideational and structural residuals from the former regime, by the structure of contention, and the elites' response to it (McAdam 1995, 1999; Tarrow 1998; Tilly 1995, 1997). In the words of Antonio Gramsci, they operate within “the trenches and fortification” of existing society (1971, cited in Tarrow 2012: 2). Episodes of contention, however, have “indirect and long-term effects” that emerge when the cycle and “its initial excitement” is over (Tarrow 1998: 164; see also McAdam et al. 2001; Tilly 2008). Conceptualizing the 2011 uprising as an episode of contention, thus, entails viewing it as a process instead of an event. It denotes that the period of the eighteen days leading to the ousting of Ḥusnī Mubarak – which is the locus of this study – is part of a cycle of resistance, not the end point of it. This approach is significant for my research; utilizing it, I offer a dynamic explanation of women's engagement in the uprising. In articulating this explanation, I move beyond the time of the uprising or the “moments of madness” – borrowing Aristide Zolberg's term (1972) – and consider how the landscape of gender during and before contention had an influence on women's experience.

Viewing the uprising as part of a cycle of resistance and not the end point of it encourages a more optimistic approach to studying the recent uprisings and their mixed outcomes.⁴ Like Tawakkol Karman,

⁴ Several writers and revolutionary figures express the same concern. *Hal Akhīa't Al-Thawra Al-Maṣrya?* [Did the Egyptian Revolution Go Wrong?] by activist writer Alaa Al-Aswany (2012), *Thawrat Miṣr* [Egypt's Revolution] by the Egyptian prominent Marxist Samir Amin (2012), and *Paradox of Arab Refo-lutions* by the social movement and Middle Eastern scholar Asef Bayat

I believe, that the Arab uprisings “are the starting point for change,” not the “end point.”⁵ Political economist and social scientist Bessma Momani takes a similarly optimistic stance in her recent book, *Arab Dawn: Arab Youth and the Demographic Dividend They Will Bring*, holding that change is on its way in the Middle East. Building upon extensive grounded research on the region, Momani emphasizes the transformative power of youth in the Arab region.⁶ She highlights the demographic shift in the Arab countries, where today one in five Arabs is between the ages of 15 and 24. This demographic shift is significant, Momani explains, given that young people are key agents for development and democratic change. The shift is particularly significant for the Arab region, given the cosmopolitan character of its young generation, she emphasizes. Momani’s approach is important for understanding the limits and challenges facing Arab youth in their quest for democratic change. In contrast to a detached and analytically oriented approach to Middle East studies, Momani’s research places the diversity of youth experience and the different institutions that frame their experiences at the center of our analysis. By focusing on participants’ perspectives and providing them with opportunities to articulate their thoughts, researchers are able to gain understanding and acquire new insights into the prospect for democratic change in the Middle East and North Africa.

While this optimistic perspective animates my research, I also admit the incisiveness of Astride Zolberg’s description of the

(2011c) exemplify this observation. In *Hal Akhta’t Al-Thawra Al-Maṣrya?* Alaa Al-Aswany refers to the January 25 uprising as the unfinished revolution. Samir Amin also commences his analysis by theorizing “the movement” that took place in January 2011 as something “less than a revolution but more than a protest” (2012: 15). In the same vein, the term “Refo-lutions,” Bayat suggests, describes the recent uprisings in the Arab world. Bayat (2011c) describes the Arab Spring as a combination of revolutions and reforms, but not a full revolution. According to him, since the uprisings did not result in a completely new system, they cannot be called revolutions; they should be called “Refo-lutions.”

⁵ Author’s interview with Tawakkol Karman, November 2012.

⁶ While I use the term “Arab” youth, I acknowledge that the region and its youth are ethnically diverse in ways that are not captured by this term. Consider, for instance, Assyrians, Armenians, Mandeans, and Berbers, to name a few. The term Arab youth and/or Arab region is, also, mainstream expression and – arguably – the most dominant self-identification term used by inhabitants and observers inside and outside the region.

salient institutional outcomes of cycles – or more often the resulting institutional setbacks. These outcomes are evident in historical and modern episodes of contentions including that of the 2011 uprising. Moments of “madness” or “political enthusiasm,” Zolberg writes, “are followed by bourgeois repression or by charismatic authoritarianism, sometimes by horror but always by the restoration of boredom” (1972: 205).

Unlike repression and authoritarianism, boredom, I hold in line with earlier literature, is a less common outcome in social movements (Tarrow 1998; see also McAdam et al. 2001; Tilly 2008;). Scholars within the tradition of resource mobilization, for instance, describe the birth of “cognitive liberation” among the older members of the civil rights and anti-war movements (McAdam 1999; Piven and Cloward 1972, 1979). In fact, Zolberg (1972) concludes his articles by acknowledging the effects of protest cycles in inducing subtle social changes and disturbing the status quo. He notes that movements sometimes “drastically shorten the distance” between the present and the future, they are thus, he adds, “successful miracles” (1972: 206).

This is because, as Tarrow explains in his writing on the outcomes in episodes of contention:

Through skills learned in struggle, the extension of their beliefs to new sectors of activity, and the survival of friendship networks formed in the movement, activism begets future activism, more polarized attitudes toward politics, and greater readiness to join other movements. (1998: 165)

The focus in this book is, however, not on elucidating the outcomes of the 2011 uprising. The discussion of the cycles’ mediated and indirect effects gives way to my primary objective: understanding the experience of women in the uprising with a view to reclaiming their agency. My occasional reference to the participants’ current activism is not to be understood as an attempt to trivialize the scope and severity of gender inequalities in the post-uprising period. My objective is to encourage the reader to approach women’s experience with an eye to locating their agency, not their plight. I, thus, position my interviewees as active subjects, not victims, and, espousing Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s contention, assign them a position of “enunciation” (1988: 129). This positioning, Spivak holds, offers a detailed picture, rather than a simplified rhetoric of women’s activism and political participation.

The January 25 Episode of Contention

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Situating the Egyptian uprising within contentious politics literature and viewing it as an episode of contention yield several advantages for my study. The literature's broad and relational definition of politics is apt to interrogate women's engagement in the uprising and to accommodate the diversity of their experiences. In line with social movement scholarship, I analyze women's experience with an eye to revealing the limits and potentials of their participation. I follow Tilly's (1978) connotation and thus avoid interpreting "gains" and "losses," "narrowly" or "materially." Furthermore, by situating the study within the contentious politics literature, I have utilized the rich theoretical tools provided by this literature and extend its analytical approach to new cases.⁷

In my research, I examine the absence of gender in women's collective action frame, since in the absence of a detailed analysis the omission of gender from women's frame can be misunderstood as a sign of their passivity, and/or false consciousness. To avoid the risk of "Orientalising Egyptian women all over again," borrowing Saba Mahmood's word of warning (2005: 119), my theoretical framework is a synthesis between collective action frame theory and political opportunities. This "synthetic model" has been commonly utilized in the study of contentious politics and social movements because of its dynamic framework (Tarrow 2012).

The premises of this model are that the members of social movements are not independent from the polity they are challenging and that they operate on the boundaries of constituted politics, culture, and institutions (Tarrow 2012: 1). They are "strangers at the gates," writes Tarrow; they demand changes but also accommodate inherited understandings and ways of doing things (2012: 13). Activists, as such, choose their repertoires and frame their participation in light of their relations to a broader map of routine and contentious politics (Tarrow 2012: 13).

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⁷ In fact, the features of the Egyptian uprising challenge the wisdom of the earlier generations of revolutionary studies. Earlier theories define revolutions as mostly European violent state versus people (see Foran 1993; Gustave Le Bon 1897) or class conflicts (see Paige 1975; Skocpol 1979).

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Whose Rights?

My understanding of women's rights and agency is informed by insights from postcolonial feminism. The theory of post-colonial feminism considers the influence of race, ethnicity, and class in its gender analysis. Feminists within this tradition take a critical stance toward meta-narratives, specifically, the notion of "the women" as a universal subject of feminism, which they hold is essentialist. The image, according to this important body of scholarship, demarcates the cultural differences between the West and the other and thus serves Orientalist discourses (Abu-Lughod 2001; Ahmed 2012; Jiwani 2005a, 2005b, 2006; Mohanty, Riley, and Minnie Bruce 2008; Saliba, Allen, and Howard 2002: 52). This image and the discourse surrounding it, as I continued to observe during my research and throughout my interviews, fail to reflect and capture the diverse experiences of women and their different priorities.

In line with postcolonial feminists' literature, I hold that women's rights are marked by social and cultural fluidity and tremendous diversity. In Egypt, they are situated within and shaped by colonial and nationalist legacies as well as by present religious, class, geographical, and racial dynamics. As Judith Tucker rightly argues, "women's lives – their access to power and economic resources as well as their social and legal standing – surely vary from one community or class to another" (1993: vii). In Egypt, the very term "women's rights" glosses over different conceptions and perceptions of claims that often generate debates among different groups, including women's groups. Most of the claims and the priorities range from the alleviation of poverty, violence against women and illiteracy, to raising legal awareness, spreading feminist consciousness, and increasing women's access to education, work, health care, and political participation (Al-Ali 2000: 16). The status and priority of these claims and demands constantly shift and reshuffle given the experiences of different women in