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Islamist/Salafist Perceptions on the Status of Women in Egyptian Parliament and Media

Abstract

The Arab spring enabled the first Democratic elections in Egypt, leading to an absolute majority in the People's Assembly for the combined forces of Salafist and Islamist MP:s. Thus, with Political Islam in power, it was suddenly possible, more than before, to estimate their political visions for Egypt. This article focuses in particular on the positions, rights and duties of women according to these visions as they appeared in parliamentary debates and in Egyptian media.

Keywords: Gender-issues, Islamists, Salafists, Human Rights, Political Islam, Egypt, Arab Spring

Muslim opinions on the status and position of women do not necessarily have to be founded on Islamic jurisprudence. As an example, article 18 of the Palestinian authority penal code is rather considering popular traditions or habits than any an Islamic code.¹ In this case, the legislators intention is inclined towards accepting so called honorary killings in that the court is supposed to either give a total amnesty to this kind of crime or give but a minor penalty for, what elsewhere would be considered murder, i.e. killing another with intent (*dolus*).² When it comes to the Islamists and

¹ R. Saqr, *Honour Killings in the Palestinian Territories. Tradition not Islam*, "Near East Quarterly" 2010 (<http://www.neareastquarterly.com/index.php/2010/12/02/honour-killings-in-the-palestinian-territoriestradiation-not-islam/>).

² C. Warrick, *Dishonorable Passions: Law and Virtue in Muslim Communities*, in: F. Kashani-Sabet & B.S. Wenger (eds.), *Gender in Judaism and Islam. Common Lives, Uncommon Heritage*, New York University Press, New York 2015, pp. 181–199.

Salafists³ of today's Egypt, they consider such an approach inappropriate. Popular will or customs is thus irrelevant in the light of an already perfected law that has been revealed to man through Muhammad. Their opinions on the position of women constitute aspects of Religious law, as defined by Rémi Brague, in a sense as that the law to follow is actually the divine will.

The basic religious attitude is a relation to the law—that is, obedience. Every virtuous act is an act of obedience: conversely, evil in all its forms is disobedience, infraction of the law. To be more precise, what God imposes is less a “law” strictly speaking (*šarī'a*) than a process by which he assigns to human life a moral quality and a moral responsibility (*šar'*). The object of obedience is thus not the law, but God. It is only subsequently that the law became a thing, hence what must be applied. Such a law cannot be the invention of men. The veritable legislator (*hākim*) can only be God.⁴

In an Islamic context, *al-dīn al-ḥanīf*, the *natural religion*, as Islam is traditionally perceived by Muslims, has no real room for popular will or for *natural law*. Both the basic idea of democracy, as a rule of the people (of the free man) as well as nature itself is thus secondary to revelation. If there is contradiction, revelation must have precedence. The law is revealed to man through the Prophets, where the Prophet Muhammad is considered the last one. Still, what comes out in the end is not *one* law. The *Essentialism* of Islam, to use a suggested term by Torsten Hylén, is highly questionable.⁵ That is, we use a term like *Islam* in order to squeeze in a multitude of variations in the belief of those who refer to themselves as *Muslim*.⁶ It is indeed more appropriate to refer to *Islams* for the various creeds and to *Islamisms*, to borrow a term from Hjärpe,⁷ for the various opinions of modern political Islamic movements and individuals. By Political Islamic movements I intend those considering what we call Islam not as an issue only for the individual and the individuals' private relation to an imagined divine being, but indeed as the very base of all legislation and of every rule in society.⁸ What is at stake here for these movements is how to create a society with legislation that enables this

³ The basic difference between a Salafist and an Islamist lies perhaps in the view on the Prophet Muhammad. While the former tend to look back towards an age in the time of Muhammad and just after, seeing *that* society *then* as the model for *our* society *today* more than 1400 years later. The latter, on the other hand, seems to take a more modernist standpoint, trying to place the Prophet in a modern context. How would the Prophet, wisest of men, have interpreted the different context? These differences on the views on history and development also have an impact on how they perceive the role of women in society.

⁴ R. Brague, *Law of God. The Philosophical History of an Idea*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2007, pp. 1–8; 296; 160–161.

⁵ T. Hylén, *Essentialism i religionsundervisningen, ett religionsdidaktiskt problem*, “NORDIDACTICA – Journal of Humanities and Social Science Education”, 2012, Vol. 2, pp. 106–137.

⁶ As in other belief communities, we find among others also a *Feminist* approach among women Muslims, working for equal rights based on their understanding of the Islamic Law. S. Heschel, *Jewish and Muslim Feminist Theologies in Dialogue Discourses of Difference*, in: F. Kashani-Sabet & B.S. Wenger (eds.), op.cit., pp. 30–41.

⁷ Jan Hjärpe, *Islamismer*, Gleerups, Stockholm 2010.

⁸ This concept is totally incompatible with that of European Democracy from the Great French Revolution and onwards, where *the people*, and not God, is sovereign and the source of all legislation.

divine will to be realized and with punishments for those who deviate according to the guiding principle of *al-amr bi-al-ma'rūf wa-an-nahī 'an al-munkar*.⁹

The interpretations of what is revealed differ also when it comes to the status of women. While the Quran suggests a feminine origin of the Human race in that man and woman is created from *one (grammatically feminine) soul, min nafsin wāḥidatin*¹⁰, or probably intended as genderless or undefined as to gender as *'alaq* in Sura 96, opening up for the idea of gender equality, other interpretations and the focus on other versions may very well have it differently.¹¹

Thus in the context of Modern Egypt, the interpretation of a feminist like Nawāl as-Sa'dāwī¹² would be quite opposed to views that were presented in and outside the Egyptian parliament (before the coup) by two political parties, *Ḥizb al-Hurriyya wa-al-'Adāla*, of the Muslim Brotherhood (with an electoral support from the voters of 40%, 58%), from which the first democratically elected president in the country is coming, and, *Ḥizb an-Nūr*, of the Salafists (Islamic alliance 25%, 25%).

We do not know how Egyptian society would eventually evolve under the rule of Islamists (supported by Salafists) in Egypt. The democratically elected president of Egypt from the Brotherhood, Dr. Mursī, has been removed from power by the military coup. The new constitution, supported popularly in a referendum did just but come into effect. In this constitutions some very disturbing changes did appear, changes brought there by the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist majority. Among these changes were perhaps most importantly an absence of any obligation to guarantee the very Human Rights accords concerning not least women, Egyptian governments had signed.¹³ Furthermore, the insertion of article 219 that states that *Ṣarī'a* is the base for all legislation could have been a reason for concern. It was possibly even up to the judge to decide on the legitimacy or illegitimacy of crimes as well as on punishment according to article 76, a fact that would weaken the objective nature of law. The independence of the judicial

⁹ The obligation, mentioned in several verses of the Koran, of the Muslim righteous community *to do what is good and prevent evil*, is not based on any human ethics or what might be considered good deeds against your fellow man, but solely conformity with the Divine will. That is, evil is interpreted as *what contradicts the Divine will*. It is in this aspect, the actions of the religious police in Saudi Arabia or by their equivalent in IS-controlled territory, among Taliban, in Iran, and in many other places should be understood. The stoning of a fourteen-year old child might be interpreted as *good*. The intentional burning alive of girls in a dormitory in Saudi Arabia may also be considered *good*. Doing *good* is to adhere to the Law, i.e. the Divine will.

¹⁰ Soul is a feminine word in Arabic.

¹¹ Simone de Beauvoir writes in her book *Le deuxième sexe* that inequalities between the sexes are socially founded and constructed, as well as upheld, by unequal power relations.

¹² Dr. As-Sa'dāwī has devoted her writing, such as the novel, *The Fall of the Imam* (1987), to criticising clerical sexism and hypocrisy. As doctor she has worked against the practices of female circumcision in the Egyptian countryside. She faces threats against her life in Egypt. Muslim feminists claim their various interpretations of Islam are the truer ones. This is for example the case of F. Mernissi, *The Veil and the Mail elite. A Feminist Interpretation of Islam*, Albin Michel, New York 1991.

¹³ Modernisation may actually increase women traditional roles in conservative Muslim societies. S. Shami, L. Taminian & S.A. Morsy, *Women in Arab Society. Work Patterns and Gender Relations in Egypt, Jordan and Sudan*, Berg, Oxford 1990.

power was further hampered by increased powers of the president. Also, the alterations would have opened up for interpretations. Since the base of the law is *Šarī'a* interpretation lies not solely on the public judge of the state of Egypt but rather on clerics, experts on Islamic law. They would in the interpretation of the law have been able to overrule an interpretation contradicting *Šarī'a*. What guarantee was there that an interpretation opening up for *Hudūd* punishments would not take place?¹⁴ The Islamists of today are being persecuted and their assets confiscated. However, we were able to see some interesting suggestions and cultural changes during their brief rule over Egypt.

One concerns the symbolic women *hiğāb*, worn by women as a sign for religious affiliation according to those who wish to wear it and as a sign of oppression for those opposing the dress. Thus, but weeks after the electoral victory of Islamists and Salafists where secularists became a minority in the parliament, viewers on Egyptian TV witnessed an obvious change in the physical appearance of news presenters, as Fatimah Nabil appeared on the screen as perhaps the first news anchor to wear *hiğāb*. Reactions on *Facebook* and *Twitter* to this seemed to vary. One way of putting it is that this symbolized an “ikhwanization” (an influence from the Muslim Brotherhood) over the media. Others, viewed the acceptance from the Islamist controlled Ministry of information of the *hiğāb* instead as a sign of newly won freedom. Suddenly, an official female person may actually wear the *hiğāb* in TV, if she liked it. No longer was she forbidden or mocked at for doing so.

When studying the manifesto(s) of The Muslim Brotherhood on their Arabic site, the picture given is something of a paradox. On the one hand, for women quite liberating measures are proposed when reforming society. From the words of Dr. Maḥmūd Ḥasanī about *aṭ-tawra ba'd aṭ-tawra*, the revolution after the revolution:

- 1) Where anyone with ideas for *al-umma* may advance (even if *anyone* is in the masculine sic!).
- 2) And, where the Book of the Lord is the source of every change, and this change do not recognize differences between Muslims and non-Muslims as to their obligations or their rights, and not in their general obligations *wāğibātuhum al-'amma* between this gender and that.
- 3) Nevertheless, a government of the Brotherhood will forbid what God has forbidden. And, what this *will* mean in practice only a future, after all the political turmoil with American films and violent demonstrations, would have told us. Women of the Muslim Brotherhood also have a say on the function of women. Thus Faḍwa al-ʿAğūz writes at the beginning of July, just after the ousting of Mubārak against anyone critical of the movement that.
- 4) As many as 90% of women with *hiğāb* in Egypt wear it because they want to and not because they are forced to and they will not be, she insists, forced to.

¹⁴ Moushira Khattab, 2013, *Women's rights under Egypt's constitutional disarray*, <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/islamists/article/women%E2%80%99s-rights-under-egypt%E2%80%99s-constitutional-disarray>.

- 5) Women are thus (among other obligations and also basic rights) obliged to work if they are able to.
- 6) More women were on the lists of The party for Freedom and Justice than for any other party.
- 7) Women are to be encouraged to study and improve their skills for the benefit of family as well as of *al-umma* (the borderless nation of all Muslims worldwide).
- 8) And women should not listen to political lies from antagonists, claiming Brotherhood rule will lead to the oppression of women. Nay, no one will be forced to wear the *hiğāb* that does not wish to do so. Indeed, in other Arab states where force has been applied political freedom is non-existent, and, the result has been very negative as well as contra productive with individuals turning against the true faith.

But there are also examples from Brotherhood media on an obvious differentiation between the sexes. Thus, another woman from the Brotherhood, Iman Ismael seems to accept the terminology of Dr. Usāma Yaḥyā, who is the guide of the Brotherhood on questions on family and upbringing, in the article of the first of September. This man has an important function in the Brotherhood as he is appointed to guide the brothers and sisters in the right direction in life. In the home, one opinion has to prevail, says this expert. This means the woman (wife) has to step back and take less space. If the woman takes on herself the role of a man, he will not give her what she needs. “Women have got to behave well at home”, says the expert. This is in fact her inner essence to do just that. Any similar or comparable demand on the man is not expressed. And the expert gives examples as to what he suggests for a successful matrimonial relationship as to language, that is how the woman according to the Brotherhood should use a typical womanish way of talking, thus achieving everything she wants from her husband: “You are so much better than us, I hope you will be able to do this [...] without you we would not know what to do. We would need [...]”.

The Muslim Brotherhood is a political and social movement that traditionally bases their central ideology on modernizers such as Muḥammad ‘Abduh and Muḥammad Rašīd Riḍā. Their suggestions are modern versions of a religious society with modern and partly adjusted solutions to fit challenges of today. Their point of view seems to be that if the Prophet would have lived today, how then would he, the one blessed with the revelation of the will of God, have conducted *al-madīna al-fāḍila* the perfect state for humans according to divine instructions? That is what should be aimed at for the righteous community.

Certainly also referring to themselves as Muslims, but very critical to the Brotherhood, are the Salafists of the *Ḥizb an-Nūr*. The name Salafī comes from those who follow *al-salaf aṣ-ṣālih*, that is the righteous first generation of Muslims.¹⁵ This, the party of light, does not have any illusion on what the Prophet may have done had he lived today. He does not. However, he has lived. And the life he did live is what we today may

¹⁵ Q. Wiktorowicz, *Anatomy of the Salafī Movement*, “Studies in Conflict and Terrorism” 2006. Vol. 29/3, pp. 207–239.

try to imitate. Apart from this, we have also today the direct words of God in his holy book, the Quran. While the Brotherhood has been politically organized and active more or less since 1928, the formation of Salafī elements to a political party took place just before the Egyptian parliamentary elections. Salafīs' previous abstention from politics was not based on any monolithic ideological prohibition of political activity in general. Rather, parts of the Salafīs believed Egypt's political system under President Ḥusnī Mubārak was illegitimate and lacking in Islamic reference. As the Salafīs saw matters, participating in a non-Islamic system in which they had no opportunity to alter the rules of the game would have required them to make unacceptable compromises on basic Islamic principles, and thereby their Islamic identity. That they chose to participate in the first democratic elections of the country was reasonable due to that the members of the new party believed participating would not endanger their basic Islamic principles, and, also that they believed they had a chance to implement these principles on society.¹⁶ We do find those among Salafī elements that were in support of the now ousted Mubārak-government, as Mubārak himself was Muslim in practice as well as enabling Muslim living under his rule.¹⁷ This has also been their previous basic critic of the Brotherhood, that participating politically in Mubāraks Egypt, in any form, ultimately would endanger the Islamic character of any movement wanting society to be according to *Ṣarī'a*. Ironically, the same argument seems to be a reason for tensions also within the new party, as the Egyptian society does not live after Islamic principles according to the party, and the party faced an obvious risk of being contaminated in the participating process.

A central notion for the salafī is *at-tawḥīd*, the absolute unity of God. God's will is the Law. Only the Quran, the Sunna and the consensus of the followers of the Prophet may be used to find out the divine will. What may not be used is human logic and especially not ideas from the West. This is all *bid'a*, human inventions imposed on the divine will. Salafists in Egypt also reject the idea of independent reasoning, *al-iğtihād*. They also refuse to accept previous legal rulings as well as the four major legal schools. This all would make them focus on a textual imperative. The reason for Ṣayḥ Yāsir Burhāmī to support taking part in the election process was with reference to the Quranic term *šūra*, council. But this is still not uncontroversial among the party's own ranks, even when claiming that this notion is originally Islamic, because the representative democracy, with elected representatives to make legislation, is most certainly based on principles other than those found in the Quran.

The Salafī movement in Egypt consisted in the electoral process of three groups, *Anṣār as-Sunna al-Muḥammadiyya*, the Activist Salafīs of Cairo, and *Ad-Da'wa as-Salafīyya*. Egypt's oldest and perhaps largest Salafī organization is known as the *Anṣār as-Sunna al-Muḥammadiyya* Society. It was founded in 1926.

¹⁶ D.A. Boehmer & J.P. Murphy, 2012, *The Politicization of the Egyptian Salafīyya: Principled Participation and Islamist Competition in the Post-Mubarak Era*, The George Washington University, IMES Capstone paper series 2012.

¹⁷ N.J. Brown, *Islam and Politics in the New Egypt*, *Carnegie Papers*, 2013, p. 14. H. Mneimneh, *The Spring of a New Political Salafism?*, "Current Trends in Islamist Ideology" 2011, Vol. 12, pp. 21–23.

Salafi activists demand life according to *Šarī'a*, that is the law of God in their interpretation. Some have claimed that Egypt is in a state of *ğāhiliyya*¹⁸ as women do not wear *hiğāb* in the street. And their disagreements with the Brotherhood have from the 1980s onwards led to clashes between themselves and the Brotherhood. Salafi opinion is that the Brotherhood makes compromises that disregard Islamic positions.

While the Brotherhood considers women to have a place outside the home and in society, Salafists are of the opinion that women should be at home raising children. They did have women candidates in the recent elections, but at the bottom of their lists to the elections perhaps in order that no one would actually be elected. Interesting though is still the appearance of women on the list. Could it be that the party somehow adapted to expectations from society, and, for this reason included women? The basic position of the Salafists in Egypt was against gender equality. This, it is claimed, is unnatural. Any a proposal for gender equality in Egypt should be joined with the limiting formulation of “if not contradicting *Šarī'a*”.¹⁹

Three very controversial legal proposals originating in the Salafi camp was debated in the Egyptian parliament and caused debate also in Egyptian media. One was based on the legal ruling or recommendation, a *fatwā*, of Šayḥ 'Abd al-Bārī az-Zamzamī with regard to the married couple. His interpretation is that the married couple under Islam belongs together both in this life and in the next. He has also coined an expression of *muḏāğ'a'at al-wadā'*, the sexual intercourse of fare well. When I first read about this, in the Egyptian daily “Al-Wafd” (later also in “Al-Ahrām” and “Al-Ğumhūriyya”, at a later date also commented abroad for example in Turkish “Hürriyet”), I could hardly believe my eyes and the reactions from Muslim students in classes I lectured was exclamations like “This is not Islam!”. Well, according to this interpretation it is. Or perhaps, one may argue that even though the Salafi camp share a common creed, applying it to new issues may nevertheless lead to divergences.²⁰ Egyptian TV also discussed this amazing debate in the newly democratically elected parliament. The legal reasoning goes like this: since the married couple are together in life as in death, the husband (or the wife if it would be possible) should be entitled to a farewell sexual intercourse with the wife (or husband) in up till six hours from the moment of her (or his) death – All in accordance with the will of God. Perhaps, this should be considered an experiment of thought rather than a suggestion to actually practice it. Still, reactions both in Egypt and in other Muslim dominated countries were an outcry of condemnation. To quote the legal recommendation of this Moroccan mufti (translated from Arabic):

“Verily, the Islamic religion allows the practice of sex on corpses on the condition that the two parties were united under the contract of the Quran (i.e. married sic!) before death, and there is no objection if the husband wanted to have sexual intercourse with

¹⁸ This indicates ignorance or absence of knowledge about the revelation and is a term used traditionally to designate the period before the birth of Islam.

¹⁹ <http://aswatmasriya.com/news/view.aspx?id=aa00a81f-9152-4205-a0e5-9dec4b97e9bf>; H. Mneimneh, op. cit., p. 33.

²⁰ Q. Wiktorowicz, op. cit., p. 214.

the corpse of his wife hours after her death [...] Verily the Islamic religion does not forbid this to the married ones... with that the wife is permissible for her husband even after her being deceased and that death does not invalidate the bond of marriage [...].”

With this Šayḥ ‘Abd al-Bārī az-Zamzamī expressed that it comes in the Quran that the husband and wife may be together in Paradise, i.e. after death.

Another law discussed by the Salafī in the democratically elected parliament was the reduction of women’s age when marriageable to 14 years old (from 18). The Salafi position is founded on the interpretation of the life of the Prophet where he married his third wife and consumed the marriage at a very low age (not even a teenager) of the girl. The Muslim Brotherhood has not taken an active position on this matter, but they voiced opposition when the marriageable age was raised to 18 last time. In the words of a member of parliament (*Ḥizb an-Nūr*) who argued for a first amendment to the age of 16 as the law then, 2012, stipulated the age of 18 for girls to be married: “since the present law is not suitable for the traditions and customs of the Egyptian society...,” and “the revelation (the Islamic Law) does not define any age for marriage”.²¹

And finally, the Salafists in parliament did demand punishment in accordance with *Šarī‘a* for those deviating from this divine law. That is then to be interpreted as implementing e.g. punishment according to *Ḥudūd*. This point of view would possibly become practice with the amendments according to the adopted new constitution before the coup. This law would then, of course, not be restricted to women only, but be practiced for both men and women.

To conclude this brief article, both the Koran and the traditions of the Prophet as the main legal sources for *Šarī‘a* leave room for interpretations. It is not certain that one ruling is given. The attitudes of Salafists and Islamists regarding the Islamic jurisprudence and consequently the views on the position and status of women also differ. The Salafists take a more openly conservative standpoint than does the Brotherhood. Disregarding differences between them, legal aspirations from both camps have been considered threatening for women and raised concerns among feminists, secularists and Human Rights organizations alike.

²¹ Khayri, Aminah, 2012, *al-Hayah* 17th of June, <http://alhayat.com/Details/402567> Salafist preacher, Yassir Barhami, to mention one from this camp, claimed (according to the Women Centre for Human Rights) in an interview in September the same year that women of nine or ten years of age are eligible for marriage.