

# Activisms in Egypt

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In spite of rhetoric about an incipient citizen's democracy in Egypt, civil conditions are such that they militate against organized change. There is a sustained (23-year) state of emergency which limits public protest, political parties and civil organizations. Depressed economic conditions tend to draw people away from social and political concerns in favor of basic survival. In spite of this, a growing minority of citizens do engage in numerous diverse forms of activism. Women form a large part of this cadre. Contrary to the stereotypical depiction of them as passive victims of patriarchal oppression, women have organized themselves for over a century around various feminist, nationalist and religious causes. They have challenged both state authority, and prevailing gender ideologies and practices that shape their everyday lives (Al-Ali 2003).

In the context of Middle Eastern women's movements, the term "activism" glosses a variety of involvements and activities. Activists of different philosophical and strategic persuasions employ diverse approaches to effecting change. Some attempt to work within the existing social and legal system and political institutions. They work to alter or enforce particular laws or agitate for change through voting and other legal political strategies such as marches, boycotts and sit-ins (in the vein of the women's,

civil, and disability rights movements in the US, all of which pushed legislation before majority public opinion swayed towards their goals). Others want to change the embedded structures of society – not just specific laws and policies, but the very assumptions and institutions upon which the existing system is based. These activists are generally more radical, wanting not just a personnel change within the government, but a different sociopolitical or economic system entirely (as in a shift to a government which embodies the principles of a new political ideology, such as Marxism, socialist democracy, or political Islam).

Women's activism in present-day Egypt encompasses a range of political and ideological frameworks, including numerous Islamic and secular-oriented<sup>1</sup> approaches. Not all activism is political in their goals or philosophy; some activism is characterized by charity and welfare work. This is kind of "direct action activism" which implies hands-on work with women. It is a direct means of addressing the practical, socioeconomic, legal and political problems that individuals face. Asef Bayat (2000) has noted that there has been a move away from demand-making movements towards a direct action model, whether individual, informal or institutional.



The motivations for engaging in “direct action activism” vary. Some activists are spurred by a desire, typically following their own “awakening” to the realities of theirs and other women’s lives, to raise consciousness within society in hopes of fostering positive change in all women’s lives. Typically, they work simultaneously to change policies and laws that unfairly affect women. Other groups are moved by what they consider to be a higher calling. These activists engage in acts of charity and service to others, not for the sake of women as a class of people per se, although they care about individuals and their plight. Rather, they engage in their activities for the sake of God. They devote vast amounts of time and energy to their undertakings by, for example, providing financial support to widows and their children, teaching literacy and through the Qur’an and sunna, and offering care and succor to cancer victims. Given the gradual retreat of the government from social responsibilities over the preceding decades, the poor in Egypt rely considerably on the actions of these charitable groups.

While the grassroots level efforts of all of these activists make a practical difference in individual women’s lives, the different “groups” have distinctive ultimate goals for their activities. This diversity arises out of different explanatory frameworks for why suffering exists. Secular-oriented activists tend to see human misery as resulting from systems, norms and events in particular sociopolitical and historical circumstances. They also see women as disproportionately ill-affected by these circumstances. Consequently, they are interested in interrogating the underlying structural and institutional factors that underlie inequalities in the first place. They want to transform society or at least to expand the field of resources and opportunities for women as a remunerative to present ills and limitations.

The Islamically-oriented activists with whom I work tend not to be interested in social, economic and political root causes. They attribute the suffering they witness (and what they consider to be the negative and failing aspects of society) to a population that has lost its way from a truer and purer Islamic state of being. They believe that by transforming their own lives through prayer, study and particular expressions of piety, they can both become nearer to God and act as models for others. In this way, they might encourage broad spiritual reflection and change. They have the dual goals of fostering correct Islamic practice within themselves and others, and pleasing God by their actions. Social change is a positive effect rather than a driving goal.

### A Tale of Two Activists

#### Heba

Heba<sup>2</sup> is a writer, a professor and an activist. She has a secular orientation to her activism, although she personally identifies as a Muslim. She is warm and solicitous and has

a wide circle of friends and associates. She is a member of two independent women’s organizations, one that advocates for women’s sexual, reproductive, political and civil rights, and another that focuses on literacy for women. Thus, her work spans both advocacy (“demand-making”) and direct-action. One of the organizations to which she belongs has had some success in its efforts against female ritual cutting (female genital mutilation, FGM), thanks to some international pressure and the (resultant) cooperation on the part of the government.

“On this issue,” she says, “we have to tread lightly. It is controversial. There are religious forces that contend that FGM is Islamic and should not be banned. Our strategy is to be patient and to maintain calm, steady pressure on the government without complicating or escalating the situation by pushing any more incendiary topics right now, like abortion.”

Heba and other secular-oriented activists note that it is critical that they not construct an image of themselves as contrary to Islam. “We try not to use words like ‘secularism’ or ‘feminism’ because these are too associated with the Western world.”

Secular-oriented activists face a constant challenge of accusations of unauthenticity and importation of Western projects and values. According to Al Ali (2003), despite the historical link between the women’s and the nationalist movements, the charge of emulating “Western thought” and thereby betraying “authentic culture” has constituted a continuous challenge to Middle Eastern feminists (221). The accusation of importing Western ideas and concepts weighs heavily on those activists who break social taboos. The denunciation of playing up to Western expectations and being alienated from their own culture is a very powerful weapon in the hands of conservative Islamist and secular nationalist forces. Their accusations work to discredit women’s organizations and to limit their discursive spaces and actual activities.

Heba finds her work around literacy to be stealthy and ultimately the most radical of all of her activities. “Women’s literacy is important because once women can read, they can read about new ideas. We are planting seeds which may later bear fruit.”

Aside from organizing and teaching literacy classes for women, Heba and her cohorts rewrite classical stories from a woman’s perspective and then perform them for groups of women. This never fails to excite and generate discussion among audience members who can relate the narrative to their own lives. It provides a starting point from which to discuss their own difficulties and experiences.

Some of the barriers Heba observes in her activism include rising conservatism in Egyptian society and a hegemonic Islamist discourse.<sup>3</sup> It is critical to accommodate to political realities, she finds, as well as public and social currents. Garnering public support depends as much on strategies used as on what the group is trying to achieve. For example, secular-oriented activists know that goals and programs that are not justifiable within an Islamic framework are likely to be rejected by the rest of society, and are therefore self-defeating.

Religious and nationalist rhetorics both tend to heavily dichotomize the world into “us” vs. “them” categories. This very human tendency can be seen across the world among people espousing a range of religious, ethnic and nationalistic ideologies. In Egypt, the division generally takes one of two forms, though they are frequently conflated. In one case, it is “authentic, traditional culture” pitted against “Western culture” and practices. In the second, “correct” Islamic practice and morality is championed. Its nemesis is anything that is perceived to threaten its expression, whether it be a foreign, secularizing influence or corruption from within (often understood as a succumbing to the immoral, secular influence). The West in both formulations is consistently represented as the evil, corrupting force against which the good (authentic, morally upstanding) society is defined and compared. The West is synonymous with moral corruption, hyper individualism, materialism, and hypocrisy, defensible accusations that nonetheless oversimplify the picture and reinforce dichotomist, categorical thinking. A struggle between opposing forces is generated and fueled through verbal and written discourse. This discourse serves to mute individuals (and secular-oriented activists specifically) who critique any practices associated with either tradition or Islam.

Negative constructions of “the West” are often used to discredit secular-oriented women activists. Typically they are accused of being indoctrinated by Western thinking, adopting Western agendas, and threatening the integrity of Egyptian culture or worse, Islam. This creates a dilemma: If groups want to achieve any kind of success in their activism on behalf of women, they have to be circumspect and extremely careful about their strategic and discursive approach. Heba notes that the need to constantly defend against attack and accusations of unauthenticity and an assault on religion or culture, often causes activists to lose sight of common goals. They succumb to polarization, in-fighting, and sometimes duplicate efforts rather than collaborate and build a stronger front. All of this paralyzes progress, opening the activists up to further attack by Islamists, who now feel vindicated in their claim about the inefficiency of “Western-styled” feminism in the Egyptian (and all Arab-Muslim) contexts.

### Hind

Hind is a woman whose level of religiosity has risen over the previous ten years, inspired by her daughters’ *sahwaa* or “awakening” to the need to practice Islam more correctly and piously. The family is firmly middle class, educated and well-traveled. Hind raised her five children and now devotes herself full-time to prayer, *dawa’* (proselytizing), charity and other good works. She and her informal group of friends visit orphanages and cancer wards, providing succor, and gifts of toys and money. They travel up to two hours away to poor neighborhoods to deliver food, clothing, medicine, money, and their Islamic message. They aid individuals in getting free medical care, housing and schooling for their children.

Hind and her friends work tirelessly, day after day, collecting money and goods, preparing *durus* or religious lessons and delivering these offerings to people in desperate need. They focus on acts of charity, *dawa’* and aid. Islamic women’s activism, such as Hind’s, is distinctive in that it works within the structures and limitations of the state to achieve its goals. It does not challenge the political and economic status quo, nor does it lay the blame at the feet of the government. For them, activism as a service to others lies at the heart of the process of perfecting the self for the sake of God and salvation. Women hope that through their efforts they will improve as human beings and that their actions will be “accepted” by God.

Karam (1998) found that the Islamist women in her sample considered public activism to be *de rigueur*. Although they confirmed the sanctity and importance of women’s primary duties as wives and mothers, they contended that once women’s primary obligations are fulfilled (i.e. the children are old enough to take care of themselves, and housewifely duties are manageable), women have a religious duty to become publicly active in promoting and spreading their faith. Many believed that it was incumbent on women to be active participants in building a true and strong Islamic society.

There is a diversity of opinion on this topic, as well as practical (economic) factors that preclude many poorer women from devoting their time and energy to its expression. Women who don’t work outside the home and/or can afford to hire help in taking care of domestic responsibilities are more able to partake in this “religious duty.” In my own research I found groups of women who, while they were certainly “active” in spreading *dawa’* through their words, examples and deeds, their conception of women’s public role was more constrained. The women in the Cairo mosque movement<sup>4</sup> tended to demure from politics and public activism, arguing that according to Islamic jurisprudence, such displays are inappropriate for women (whose bodies and voices are an enticement and distraction to



men). Additionally, rulers, regardless of their stripes or the extent of their corruption, ought not to be toppled since any overthrow of the government is potentially bloody and might end in an even worse situation. Rulers should be advised by Islamic scholars (at least in the ideal, and in Egypt there is the appearance of such a relationship since President Mubarak appoints and ostensibly takes advice from the religious leader of the nation, a sheikh from Al Azhar University). Otherwise the most that ordinary citizens should do is to pray that the president be guided towards a more Islamically-principled path.

Whereas the battle cry of much social activism is “resistance” with the ultimate goal of social change, Islamic activists champion such qualities as perseverance and submission toward achieving higher levels of religious attainment. In academic and advocacy circles, the term empowerment typically evokes images of new-found strength and confidence based on autonomy, self-reliance and liberation from social and institutional constraints. In contrast to this, Islamic activist women defined empowerment as an improved state of being based on perfecting the self to gain closeness to God (Hafez 2003).

“Everything we do, we do for God. We pray that He will accept our actions,” Hind tells me one day. This is an oft-repeated statement. When I ask her about whether she hopes to change society by her actions she says, “It is not for us to try to forcibly change society. We focus on ourselves, and we hope that our actions and words will encourage others to do the same. Little by little people will begin to see the truth; they will be convinced. Leaders come from the people. When the people improve, society will improve, *insha’Allah*.”

Most activism operates on the assumption that norms and public attitudes will follow policy or structural change. Hind’s approach makes the reverse assumption: that it is necessary to first alter public thinking and behavior, and that new thinkers, leaders and policies will follow from this positively altered social milieu. This last approach, taken by many Islamic women activists, can be likened to a Gramscian “passive revolution.” Such an endeavor focuses on the gradual capture and possession of the society by exerting moral and intellectual leadership over civil institutions and processes. According to Gramsci (1994), true revolution wins not just state power but society itself by institutional, intellectual and moral hegemony. Through *dawa*, charity and “good works,” and the spread of increasingly conservative dress styles and modes of interaction between women and men, women who are part of Islamic Service Institutions (ISIs) and the more informal mosque or piety movement have exerted a steady and gradual Islamicizing influence on society.

Some authors (e.g. Zubaida 1989) have proposed that Islamic activism through various forms of charity is a strategy used to reach broad audiences and build a base of political support across the lower socioeconomic spectrum. Janine Clark (2004) challenges this view. She assesses the work of ISIs such as hospitals and clinics in Egypt and claims that, despite the theory that ISIs build a power base by challenging the authority of the state and luring away potential voters, there was little proof that such institutions had the effect of cross-class mobilization.

Clark found that Islamic activists (e.g. doctors, nurses or managers of the ISIs) might claim to serve the needy but their clientele tended to be other members of the middle or even upper middle classes. Her finding supports the assertion of social movement theory that networks are woven by activists from the same social background rather than from across different classes.

This may be true for the organizations studied. Clark seems to have focused on workers within ISIs, finding that they are not much motivated by an Islamic agenda, nor do they necessarily act with its dictates in mind. My work with (typically middle class) women in the current Cairo mosque movement provides a picture of individuals genuinely forging connections across class boundaries. These are not reciprocal relations to be sure; interclass norms and formality define, color and delimit interactions and relations. However, these women do go to where the poorer people are: to their neighborhoods, public hospitals and clinics, and they spend significant amounts of time (upwards of 30-50 hours/week) and money (collected from friends, family and mosque attendees) in order to provide comfort, medicine, food, clothing, and cash to people in need. The aid is typically accompanied by either formal religious lessons or informal guidance. There are often heavy class overtones to the advice and admonitions given to the aid recipients, however there is also kindness and care and relationships of a limited degree are genuinely formed.

Ironically, as indicated above, these women do not have a specifically political agenda (in the way that ISIs are presumed to be part of a larger strategy to Islamicize the government and society). Rather, they are motivated personally to connect with and aid people less fortunate than themselves, as a way of pleasing, and coming closer to God. Still, their actions have succeeded in effecting some of the cross-class influence that Clark argues ISIs have failed to achieve. Whether this connection and appreciation would translate to a political base is another question. My guess is that some aid recipients genuinely embrace the brand of Islam espoused by the activists, reasoning that Islam is indeed “the answer” to their woes, since its champions are consistently providing support where other channels have dried up. Others might, if called upon by specific individuals through

whom they have received help, vote for or advocate a particular political vision, even though they might not be drawn personally by the specific discourse. At any rate, although as Clark succinctly states, “the poor reach out for any help they can receive” (39), this pragmatism does not preclude that they will be affected or influenced (either negatively or positively) by the acts of groups or individuals. In fact it is such personal connections and influences that often have the strongest effect on people’s thinking and world conception.

### Conclusion

The success, and the manner in which these different types of activism are received by the government and by the public alike, depends on a number of factors. Conformity to current social, cultural and political norms positively influences the acceptance of the activism in which women engage. Public opinion is heavily influenced by religious beliefs and institutions. Those strategies and end goals that run contrary to current norms face significantly more roadblocks because they challenge established notions about the world, the “nature” of women and men, and the ways things *should* be, i.e., the correct ordering of society, as ordained by God. They also threaten existing power structures both within families and institutions, which derive their legitimacy from these traditional notions of the roles, structures and morals of society.

Activisms which can be seen as an extension of acceptable

female roles, (e.g. ministering to the sick and the needy) are generally accepted and lauded by broader society. On the other hand, activists who champion issues that problematize gendered power dynamics in society, and who seek to expand women’s political, social, economic, and even religious freedoms and opportunities are seen as radical and threatening. They erode the very center of both traditional and Islamic beliefs about the appropriate roles of men and women.

The patriarchal family model in Egypt represents the building block of broader hierarchical structures of power and control in civic life, business and industry, religion, and politics. Many men and women resist change because they rightly perceive that it will upset the rights and authority of individual men within families (their choices and freedoms, their impunity in making decisions and undertaking actions), and threatens women’s role and identity as sacrificing mothers and dutiful wives. Many women cling tenaciously to this identity because it is their primary source of a sense of security and worth.

Right now in Egypt there is tension between opposing agendas over the direction that the country should take, its political structure, civic life and guiding moralities. Although there are significant differences in the visions of various activists, they do have one important thing in common: a desire to improve society and the plight of ordinary Egyptians.

### Endnotes

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1. Secular-oriented here refers to a framework that advocates a separation between religion and politics. Secular activists typically refer to civil law and human rights conventions as frames of reference for their struggle, though they are not necessarily anti-religious or anti-Islamic, either personally in their own lives, or strategically in their activism.

2. All names in this article are pseudonyms and represent composites of many individuals.

3. Aside from the political work of Islamist parties, Islamic groups and NGOs provide comprehensive health care, education, finance, and emergency relief services. This creates a growing popularity and social base. By efficiently providing alternative and timely services to the poorest of the poor, these “liberal” Islamists are actually highlighting their ability and viability as an alternative Islamic force to the existing state. As such their activism lends credibility to their discourse, which in turn becomes more popular. The end result is that their Islamist discourse becomes attractive enough to be emulated by other groups in society, which are also competing for popularity. Effectively, other competing political ideologies (including those of the state) Islamize their own discourses in order to gain legitimacy for their own ideas and programs. In such a manner, Islamism becomes the trend setter, and the dominant ideological backdrop for much political activism – both for and against it.

4. See related article, this volume.

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