A SPRING ABORTED

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How Authoritarianism Violates Women's Rights in the Arab World

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To the Heroines of the Arab Spring

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PREFACE

The Arab Spring was not about women or their rights. When Bouazizi set himself on fire in protest, he was not campaigning for more rights for women. He was culminating a life full of suffering and economic shortages. First, and foremost, these were uprisings by the youth and the marginalized members of society looking for better economic opportunities. Yet, it was not all about economic wellbeing; the protesting young Arab people saw a connection between their dismal situation and the quality of governance in their countries. It is true that Arab countries are not the same, as diverse recent historical experiences have often out-powered the impact of geographic proximity and common language. Yet, differences on the outside among Arab countries hid a well-known reality. In most cases, Arab countries had been governed by tightly controlled authoritarian systems, embodied in the rule of a traditional leader, a tribe, or a deeply entrenched family. The common fabric among all those countries was that people had little to say in how they run their affairs.

The depth of authoritarianism had been striking. In some cases, rulers drew their legitimacy from a religious discourse that supports the ruler, even when he transgresses the rights of others. The rationale behind this is that an unjust authoritarian ruler who is able to bring order to society is better than a democratic ruler governing in a chaotic environment. Under such understanding, a revolution is looked upon as a

threat, as a danger that must be avoided. The authoritarian ruler becomes the lesser of the two evils whose powers are uncontested.

In other cases, authoritarianism was legitimized by the presence of a deeply rooted one-party system whose sustained rule was taken for granted, without a question or a second thought. In a country like Syria, in 2011, most Syrians had never lived under a different system other than the Baath Party rule. In other situations, deeply rooted societal divisions made the presence of a leader, *the qa'ed* or the *za'im*, an unquestioned necessity. Societal divisions occurred not only between the rich and the poor but also the religious and non-religious, the Islamists and seculars, *my tribe* and *your tribe*, *my family* and *your family*. Rulers become saviors, guardians, and protectors amid all of that chaos.

No wonder that most Arab newspapers bear the picture of the leader on their front pages every day. Daily news reports start, not with updates about the flood in a nearby city, nor by the grand fires that consumed a whole neighborhood, but with broadcasts about the leader's daily routine, who visited him and what did he do during his workday. The country becomes the country of the leader. His authority, his power and significance, and the need of the people to his "wisdom" and "compassion" are persistently reinforced.

All of this changed on that day when Bouazizi, and the people of Tunisia, had enough. People in Egypt, Syria, and Yemen followed suit, deciding that "enough is enough," and the Arab Spring was born. The "Spring" was viciously fought, and many of the initial accomplishments and successes were then backtracked. Years later, when many thought that the Arab Spring has – for all practical purposes – ended, people in Algeria and Sudan took down to the streets reviving the early days of the revolutions that happened elsewhere in the Arab world. The common fabric

among all those movements was economic deprivation, disempowerment, lack of opportunities, and a desire for a better future.

The uprisings were not about more opportunities specific for men or for women; these were uprisings demanding rights and opportunities for all. Yet, for women of the Arab Spring, the uprisings presented a rare moment in time to let themselves be heard. If one is to identify a marginalized substratum of society, women would be the first to be picked. It is true that many young men are unemployed, yet what is also true is that many more young women are unemployed. While it is true that many more women are getting educated, what is strikingly true is that education does not seem to make a difference in terms of giving them more access to economic opportunities. The more educated they become, the more frustrated they end up becoming. While most men are excluded from decision-making opportunities at higher levels in the political and economic scenes, women are basically excluded altogether from the political arena. Moreover, their presence in the upper echelon of economic institutions is rare, sporadic, and unexpected.

It was an opportunity of a lifetime. Millions of young men and women who took down to the streets aspired for a better future for all. They did not have a clear political agenda, and they came from various backgrounds. Some of them were deeply religious and some were not. Some were Muslims; others were Christians. Yet, they were unambiguous about one thing: things had to change. The slogan by which those uprisings went was "People want a regime change." The young were uninhibited by past stories of failed uprisings or unfulfilled hopes. There seemed to be one primary demand for those uprisings: a total and uncompromising change in current establishments. Women of the Arab Spring realized, without premeditated plots, without organizing, that their

new emancipation required, beforehand, the emancipation of everybody. Perhaps, if the rights of all marginalized classes of society are fulfilled, women will get their share.

In full force, women participated. One could not miss the young women, many of whom wore the veil, but many did not. They stood steadfast in Tahrir Square in Cairo before and after the January 25th revolution. It was easy to spot the deeply religious women of Damascus and Homs, together with their more liberal sisters, chanting songs of freedom and hope, raising their voices in totally unprecedented waves "People want a regime change." In Yemen, where women score the lowest in terms of several gender indicators, many young female activists were among the leaders of the early protests.

In almost all of these cases, the protesting women did not ask for rights specific to them. In some cases, like in Tunisia, they were asking for the right of the young to have decent living without extortions by the police. In other cases, like in Syria, they were asking for a democratic transition of power. In Yemen, they were asking for rights for certain communities who were driven out of their homes, people who were not protected by those who were supposed to be their guardians. It seemed that by their mere participation, women were making a point. Their message was: we shall not be silenced; we will not stay at home; we want our voices to be heard; we will shout, sing, and rejoice; we want our pain to be felt; and we want our happiness to spread. In all that, we want what is right for all.

It was not the case that women did not have the justification to ask for rights particular to them. Their situation had been far from ideal at the economic, political, and other societal fronts. Yet, perhaps they realized that within the grander schemes of things, more freedom to all meant more freedom

to them. More opportunities to all meant more opportunities to them.

The visibility of women during the Arab Spring caught the attention of the world media. Perhaps, more striking in a culture like the Arab culture, women added legitimacy to the uprisings. Early attempts by regimes to discredit the revolutions as "groups of bandits or terrorists" did not meet with success. The mere presence of women in large numbers in those protests meant that such an allegation could not hold water.

Regimes took note of this, and their priority was to get people off the streets. When people go home, a regime gets a free hand in doing whatever it wants. It would be practically impossible for people to reconvene back in the streets, now that the regime took note. The Mubarak regime worked hard to convince people that change is coming, so "just go home." Ben-Ali of Tunisia promised a long list of reforms in the early days of the uprising hoping to calm the angry masses. When people were not willing to go home, regimes looked for other ways to divide and rule.

One impactful way to smash a revolution is to hit it on its soft side, often represented by women. This takes particular importance in Arab culture where women are to be honored and protected. A family's honor is deeply tied to female honor. Dishonoring a female, be it a mother, wife, sister, daughter, or even a distant cousin, is dishonoring a whole family or a whole tribe. Authoritarian leaders know this:

> *if we are not able to persuade a revolutionary who does not fear for his own life or his own well-being, perhaps he might be persuaded if we target his mother, sister, wife, or daughter.*

From the early days of the Arab Spring, female activists were particularly targeted. The story was particularly vicious

in Egypt and Syria, but similar occurrences were reported in other countries as well. Early imprisonments of female protestors and subjecting them to abhorrent interrogation techniques were done hoping that people would just give up and quit. In Egypt, even after Mubarak resigned, elements of the deep state were still well in control. When the Tahrir Square sit-in was disbanded, many male and female activists were imprisoned. Unmarried female detainees were subjected to virginity tests to crush their spirit, and crush their spirit they did. That was the start of the fall of the Egyptian revolution. All of the events that followed now seem, in retrospect, as if they were a carefully scripted chain of events, culminating in the resurgence of a Mubarak-like regime. While targeting women was not the only tactic used by the deep state, it was one of its most effective instruments.

Authoritarian Arab regimes have often used women's issues as a mechanism to increase their legitimacy. Through a "modernization from above" approach, the state-controlled the gender agenda often intimidating genuine feminist movements when co-optation did not work. Despite some positive achievements for women in terms of better labor participation and better access to some economic and educational opportunities, changes were not deep enough to disrupt governance structures. In other words, the devastating impact of the authoritarian rule on the whole society eclipsed *some* developments for women. It did not take long for feminists to recognize the hypocrisy of authoritarian rule and join the protests in droves.

It was heartening to see people from various backgrounds, male and female, Muslims and Christians, religious and non-religious, joining together to disrupt the status quo expressing their rejection of authoritarianism with its dismal record on various fronts. Understandably, members of the ruling class would try their best to obstruct positive political change.

However, deep divisions among opposition groups meant that the ruling elites survived the storms, often unscathed, making just cosmetic changes. When the "Arab Spring" lost, Arab populations yearning for more economic and political freedoms lost. As usual, it is more likely the case that women would end up being the primary losers of a missed opportunity called "the Arab Spring."

The Arab Spring has been hijacked, and it is challenging to understand how this was done. For one, opposition groups have often fallen into disarray and got fragmented. Deep divisions among the allies who shaped the Arab Spring caused it to disintegrate. In other cases, the spring was aborted by sheer force and brutality. The ruling elites were very much involved in a counter-revolution in which they succeeded. The resilience of authoritarian rule is bad news for Arab women. It would be delusional to hope that women will get their rights from such leadership. What women would get is a façade of, often ceremonial, accomplishments; they would never get the real deal. Under such systems, some women may make it to positions of higher economic and political leadership. In those cases, instead of an all-male patriarchal elite structure, we may very well end by a mixed-gender repressive arrangement. The fact remains that this new structure would still be a despotic one, not qualified to meet the aspirations of hundreds of millions of Arabs, particularly the ambitions of Arab women who have been suffering for long.

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CHAPTER 1

WOMEN OF THE ARAB SPRING: VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AS A MEANS OF POLITICAL REPRESSION

"They break your spirit so that you would never – ever-say, 'I want what's right for my country'"

1.1. APRIL 10, 2019 | KHARTOUM, SUDAN

A Sudanese woman in a long white dress became the icon that the revolution needed.[1] Alaa Salah, a 22-year-old Sudanese student, stood on the roof of a car as she chanted a poem of resistance accompanied by a huge impromptu chorus. Protests had been going on for a few months prompted by growing frustrations over a long and persistent military rule that contributed to economic hardships and severe restrictions on free speech. As Salah chanted, she seemed to be smoothly moving in her place, as if she were partaking a solo slow dance. Her gentle but confident movements made

her face different sides of the crowds. Passionate protestors completely circled the car, her improvised podium, as they jubilantly joined her. Salah suddenly became a celebrated "Kandaka," a term used to describe a Nubian Queen in the ancient Sudanese culture.

The *thobe* (traditional dress) that Salah wore was the one customarily worn by Sudanese women in their day-to-day social and professional activities reflecting a "symbol of an identity of a working woman — a Sudanese woman that's capable of doing anything but still appreciates her culture."[2] The image showing her left side, with her finger rebelliously pointing upward, went viral, and was shared tens of thousands of times over Twitter and Facebook. That image would no doubt join a long list of iconic pictures firmly imprinted in memory. Activists juxtaposed her image with her right-hand finger confidently pointed upwards with the image of the statue of liberty reflecting a striking resemblance in posture.

Her golden moon earring attached additional symbolism as it shined, seemingly reflecting the sunlight that is about to rise on Sudan. This led a commentator, Hind Makki, to write:

> *Her entire outfit is also a callback to the clothing worn by our mothers & grandmothers in the 60s, 70s, & 80s who dressed like this while they marched the streets demonstrating against previous military dictatorships. (Harris, April 17, 2019)*

This "Kandaka" became the symbol of resistance representing thousands of like-minded Sudanese men and women.

The now-famous poem chanted by Salah and written by the Sudanese poet Azhari Muhammad Ali (Alaraby, April 9, 2019), was not a new song. It was chanted years ago in the protest movements of the 1980s. Yet, the poem gained

unparalleled popularity due to Salah's captivating performance. Scores of protestors, men and women, shouted *thawra* (revolution) after each line[3]:

O Mother, grant me your forgiveness
(for breaking) the promise that I gave you
That speaking is forbidden
against that group of rulers.

O Mother, my blood boils
When the country boils
When the Military,
-Who deformed Islam-
Bring in their vanities

They imprisoned us in the name of religion
They burned us in the name of religion
They humiliated us in the name of religion
They killed us in the name of religion

Religion is guiltless, O mother.
Religion says that one
Who gives up his right
Is befriending a devil.

Religion says that you
Stand up in opposition
And confront those rulers.

Religion says a person
Who sees something wrong
Should not shut his mouth
Otherwise the wrong would be strong.

Salah became the symbol of a revolution that seemed to be a latecomer in a series of mostly unsuccessful Arab Spring movements that started eight years ago. The revolution in

Sudan thus caught many by surprise. The Arab Spring was supposed to be long dead after a series of disappointments and failures. The military was back in control in Egypt, and Muhammad Morsi, the first democratically elected president in Egyptian history, was ousted and died later in prison.[4] The opposition almost lost all in Syria subjugated by a wide alliance of forces including Russian direct military intervention and a growing Iranian influence manifested in the presence of large numbers of Iranian revolutionary guards and Iran-controlled militias.[5] Most early activists were either killed or exiled, and what started as a peaceful revolution was overshadowed by the growing threat of ISIS. Yemen was in shambles, as the civil war turned into a regional war between Saudi Arabia supported by an Arab alliance, and the Houthi militias supported by Iran.[6] Perhaps only Tunisia, that witnessed the first spark of the Arab Spring, was still enjoying partial freedoms generated by the 2011 revolution.

The Arab Spring and dreams for a better future for Arab populations turned into a devastating nightmare. Rejuvenated traditional Arab autocracies were fighting back aided by internal divisions among opposition forces, and apathetic – to say the least – world powers. That the Sudanese people, in a mostly repressive Arab world, were still starting a new revolution has been bewildering to many.

Both in Sudan and the earlier protest movements across many Arab Spring countries, women marked their presence in more than one way as I will explain below. This took special significance in Sudan. Women have, for decades, been active political participants despite the fact they were not represented well in the political apparatus.[7] Women were often key drivers of, and contributors to, political opposition and resistance, but they often faced marginalization; their efforts largely went unrecognized.[8] Such was the story of the

Arab Spring, and many feared the same would happen in Sudan.

Beyond its symbolic impact, the poem that Salah chanted perfectly fit the 2019 Sudanese context. The military was still in control for several decades with no signs that they were going to waver. Omar el-Bashir who led a *coup d'etat* against another military dictator – Jaafar Nimiery – in 1989, was firmly in power for 30 years. A skilled demagogue, he manipulated the various, often opposing, factions within the Sudanese political scene. Together with a strong military ruling class, he coopted influential religious parties, sometimes turning them against each other.

The strange alliance between the military ruling class and some religious groups solidified el-Bashir's position. By referring to the role of the military in implementing *shari'a* (Islamic law), those religious parties legitimized an ongoing military grip over Sudan. The military was applauded as being the guardians of the sacred law. Salah's striking performance underscored this misuse of religion that had been going on for decades. The poem exposed many atrocities, killings, and humiliations against the Sudanese people that have been committed in the name of religion. Yet, religion should be blameless. Contrary to what the military and some sections of the religious class wanted to propagate, Islam, chanted Salah, is a force against oppression. In a country where religion is dearly valued, the message advocated by this poem and the understanding it provided to the masses were dangerous.

Such danger did not go unnoticed by the military. In an effort to end the sit-in and shut down the opposition, even after the Sudanese dictator Omar el-Bashir was overthrown, Sudan's security forces cracked down on the opposition. At the time of this writing, more than one hundred people were killed, reportedly by security forces and paramilitary groups.[9] Sudan's transitional military council referred to a "mistake"

that led to the killing of protestors while they were sleeping. This was considered by *Amnesty International* and other human rights organizations to be an outrageous admission of a premeditated attack which has been brushed-off as a mere mistake (*Amnesty International*, June 2019).

Beyond the killing of armless opposition members, there were reports of women being raped, beaten, and traumatized by the security forces (Walsh, June 15, 2019). This was very similar to a pattern implemented in several Arab countries when people in power wanted to control the opposition. For one reason or another, the female presence in protests was eyed with extreme suspicion and fear. The world media is often attracted by the symbolic message that female activism brings to resistance movements. In the Arab world, females are often pictured as passive and submissive to their male counterparts. To see women, not only participating in demonstrations, but actually leading some of them is too threatening to forces in power. Dictators hate the legitimacy that the female voice brings to political opposition. Moreover, they realize that in Arab culture, more than many other world cultures, women's societal role is deeply connected to familial and communal honor.

Perhaps, the brutal force that the Sudanese military used in containing the protests should not have been surprising. Although Omar el-Bashir was ousted by the military, many immediately understood that the instigators of this coup still represented the ruling military class. *The New York Times* perfectly explained the changing Sudanese scene noting that when "Sudan ousted a brutal dictator, his successor was his enforcer."[10] The new transitional leader Lt. Gen. Mohamed Hamdan did not send the message that any substantive change was about to happen. The pattern of replacing one old dictator to bring in a new one was strikingly similar to scenarios used in other parts of the Arab world.

In sum, and as far as women were concerned, they represented an integral component of the protest movements. Unfortunately, perhaps not totally unexpected, any new military order that would assume power, would not make significant changes to the status quo. Women have been particularly targeted by the security forces in Sudan, as they always represent – in the autocratic mindset – the soft side of the opposition. In a conservative country such as Sudan, pushing women to exit the resistance scene, would clear the road to finish all opposition. Violence against women during protest movements is not haphazard or random. It is premeditated, calculated, and done for the purpose of shaming the opposition activists and their families. El-Bashir, the autocrat who had ruled for 30 years, was not ruling alone. He was the ultimate representative of a powerful deep state reflected in a strong military structure that infiltrated the Sudanese society. The autocrat is the face by which a powerful internal apparatus operates. He represents its symbol, its external link, and interface with the world. Disposing of him, without the internal structure that he represents, would only create a temporary instability for the deep state.

Sudan's unfolding story has repeated itself in various forms in the Arab world. Autocracy has impacted Arab masses, whether male or female. Yet, to understand what has been happening in the particular case of women, one has to go back a few years earlier, and explore what happened in other major cities of the Arab Spring, Cairo (Egypt), Homs (Syria), Sana'a (Yemen), and of course Tunis (Tunisia).

1.2. MARCH 9, 2011 | CAIRO, EGYPT

It was a day that the 25-year-old Samira Ibrahim, a marketing manager in a private Egyptian firm, would never forget. Ibrahim was politically active since her youth, but – as she

realized later on – her earlier activism paled in comparison to what she was about to experience. Like many Egyptians, and millions of people who followed the news from all over the world, Ibrahim was part of what was supposed to be a deep change in Egyptian society, not paralleled in recent memory. The January 25 *thawra* (revolution), which received worldwide attention, seemed to be heading into the right direction. President Hosni Mubarak had already resigned in the aftermath of the revolution caving in to the massive demonstrations. The protestors were pushing for fair and impartial elections and an end to the military rule that governed Egypt for six decades.

The protestors continued their sit-in in *Tahrir Square* even after the resignation of Mubarak.[11] Wary about the intentions of the supreme military council, they wanted further assurances of a smooth transition of power to civilian forces.[12] Ibrahim was one proud participant in the early protests before Mubarak's resignation. She was imprisoned for a few days before going back to *Tahrir Square*. She thought that imprisonment was a small price to pay for freedom, not only hers, but for the Egyptian people as a whole. She was not aware that, in a few weeks, the price was going to be much higher, a price she was not prepared to pay.

The years before the Arab Spring were extremely tough on Egypt. Economic challenges were mounting, and the population had been steadily increasing to reach phenomenal levels, and the repressive political apparatus was making sure that opposition forces were contained (Transparency International, 2018).[13] Rates of unemployment for females had been significantly higher than males, and youth unemployment had always been staggering.[14] A growing sentiment of frustration with the president and the ruling class was not easy to keep under the lid for long. Mubarak, his two sons, and a group of oligarchs were gradually entrenching their economic