

# A SPRING ABORTED

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How Authoritarianism  
Violates Women's Rights in  
the Arab World

BY

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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.