

Mediterranean Politics

ISSN: 1362-9395 (Print) 1743-9418 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fmed20

A Gender View of the Arab Uprisings

Ali Bilgic

To cite this article: Ali Bilgic (2016) A Gender View of the Arab Uprisings, Mediterranean Politics, 21:3, 461-466, DOI: 10.1080/13629395.2015.1128671

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2015.1128671

Published online: 04 Jan 2016.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 194

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=fmed20

Download by: [Bilkent University] **Date:** 30 March 2017, At: 05:33

MEDITERRANEAN POLITICS, 2016
VOL. 21, NO. 3, 461–466
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2015.1128671

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

REVIEW ARTICLE

Arab spring and arab women: challenges and opportunities, Muhamad S. Olimat, London, Routledge, 2014, ISBN 978-1-857-43712-6

Gender, women and the arab spring, Andrea Khalil, London, Routledge, 2015, ISBN 978-1-138-81522-3

Rethinking gender in revolutions and resistance: lessons from the arab world, Maha El Said, Lena Meari and Nicola Pratt (Eds) London, Zed, 2015, ISBN 978-1-7836-0282-7

The process often articulated as 'the Arab Spring' raised expectations in the West for a 'liberal summer' to come to the Arab world. While these expectations were quickly dashed by the developments in Egypt, Bahrain, Libya and Syria, what was engraved in the mind was the image of a protesting Arab woman. Orientalized and passivized as 'docile bodies' for centuries by the West-centric politics and scholarship, Arab women presented a 'different' reality to the non-Arab world. With this context in mind, the three edited collections under review are vital and most necessary interventions into the growing literature on the 'Arab Spring'. While they have differences and advantages that will be discussed below, they are united in shedding light on three main points.

Firstly, the books collectively show that women and feminist movements in the Arab world have a history, which directly affected women's resistance during the Arab uprisings in 2011 and has been shaping post-revolutionary political struggles. Experiences from 'state feminism' through which authoritarian governments appropriated women's issues for the consolidation of their regimes, relations with political power and with wider society, interactions between secular and Islamist feminists, and inventing new methods of resistance are the primary areas where women's participation in politics in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are crystallized through the historical legacy of activism. Consequently, the books present fundamental challenges to the orientalized image of 'docile' Arab women waiting for the 'white man' to 'emancipate' her. Especially in Khalil and in El Said et al., the political agency of women as resisting bodies to the pre- and post-revolutionary authoritarian politics are successfully discussed.

Secondly, the books show that the struggles over gender and sexuality norms and bodies are highly political in MENA as well as in other parts of the world. The main issues at stake revolve around what types of regimes and political communities are to be constructed, and how the social and material capital is to be allocated.

Discussed in various chapters, 'state feminism' of former authoritarian regimes in North Africa, royal patronage over women's rights in several Middle Eastern states and contention over who defines 'the ideal woman' in post-revolutionary contexts show that gender and sexuality cannot be sidelined. The three books therefore contend well that analysts and practitioners who neglect gender dynamics in the MENA risk missing the political complexities in the Arab world. Finally, the books provide some guidance as to how gender can be approached in the MENA region without universalizing the 'white woman' experience as 'the' experience of women, essentializing Arab women through docility, and compartmentalizing and homogenizing them. Some chapters bring the reader's attention to the diversity of Arab women's experiences and how innovative they have been in creating alternative spaces for politics of resistance. In particular, art and social media are two of these alternative spaces where women have come forward to scrutinize MENA politics. I will now turn to discuss the books individually.

Arab Spring and Arab Women: Challenges and Opportunities' main argument is that in spite of their participation in the uprisings in their respective countries, Arab women's gains remain marginal. Worse, in some cases, such as Egypt, Kuwait and Libya, the gains obtained through decades-long struggles are in peril. In order to substantiate the argument, the chapters are designed as country case studies, which result in a broad geographical coverage of MENA. Almost all chapters in the volume are organized in three main sections. The first section introduces the women's movement in the country in question before the recent uprisings. This is followed by a discussion regarding the roles that women played during the uprisings and how their participation was received by the wider community. Finally, the contributors examine the contemporary situation of women's rights and freedoms after the uprisings and make sense of the conditions that hinder these rights and freedoms. Among them, cultural and social conditions are prioritized.

One of the most important contributions of the book is to reveal the relations between the women's movements and the modernizing, nationalist and developmentalist states in the MENA region since the early postcolonial period. The chapters on Egypt (Sika), Syria (Charles and Denman) and Libya (Bugaighis) show that the appropriation of feminist causes by state-centric political objectives and social engineering projects provided women with certain political and economic advantages. Yet, according to contributors such as Karolak on Bahrain and Sika on Egypt, this relationship rendered women passively dependent on the state. This resulted in an uneasy relationship with the authoritarian regimes and progressive feminist movements which is also discussed in the chapters about contemporary Saudi Arabia and Bahrain (both written by Karolak), Morocco (Touati) and Kuwait (Olimat). However, from a feminist perspective, this relationship is problematic. Firstly, as women's causes were and have been appropriated by the political and economic objectives of authoritarian states, various chapters effectively show that in many MENA countries the state elite keeps control over what types of rights and freedoms can be guaranteed to women. These strategies aim at ensuring the survival of the regime. To put it differently, the chapters in the collection enable the readers to see how the women's movements face predicaments between the allegedly progressive and moderate, yet authoritarian regimes and anti-regime forces that potentially

threaten the women's cause. Another advantage of the book is that apart from a few exceptions, the chapters avoid the highly criticized liberal feminist approach that reduces 'women's emancipation' to the number of women taking part in formal political structures. Instead, they explore multiple spheres of politics from civil society to digital space in order to understand the roles of women in the uprisings.

One criticism of the book, however, is that neither the collection nor the individual chapters – except chapters by Natour and Charles and Denman – adopt a clear theoretical position. Although this absence does not completely negate the academic value of the book, it certainly hinders the potential to develop a dialogue between the case studies in the book and the broader feminist literature.

However, the collection entitled *Gender, Women and the Arab Spring*, edited by Khalil, addresses this problem. Similarly to Olimat's edited volume, this book is organized around a fine balance between academics' and practitioners' contributions, whose expertise on North African politics have turned the volume into a strong academic endeavour. It is also motivated by the question of why women's issues have been sidelined by the 'bigger' political issues and why women's rights have regressed in the post-Arab Spring political contexts, given the roles that women played during the revolutions in their respective countries. The common theme that binds all case study chapters is the 'gender paradox', which refers to the discrepancies regarding women's rights and freedoms in the post-revolutionary political contexts. In the chapters covering Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia and Egypt, the authors powerfully show that the underlying reasons for most of these paradoxes can be found within the legacy of post-independence nationalist regimes. 'State feminism', which was politically designed by the post-independence regimes, not only resulted in a problematic association with authoritarian practices and feminism, which enabled post-revolution governments to attack women rights already won under the general umbrella of dispensing with practices of former authoritarian regimes. It also raised tensions between secular and Islamist feminist movements. Furthermore, in Algeria, Egypt and Morocco, for example, 'state feminism' widened the gaps between urban and middle class women on the one hand and those in rural areas on the other.

Gender, Women and the Arab Spring is thus a powerful collection of articles that engage with in-depth case studies. The contributors, including – albeit not exclusively – Cheriet on Algeria, Khalil on Tunisia and Langhi on Libya, discuss the countries in the way that diverse political positions in relation to socio-economic conditions are presented to the readers by examining how these positions are historically formed, transformed or carried into contemporary politics. As a result, it is not only possible to understand the steps leading to the revolutions, but also why some problems such as women's issues have reappeared in the post-revolutionary contexts.

Another strength of the volume is the contributors' engagement with the theory. The chapters in the book are organized so as to reveal interactive dynamics between citizenship and women's issues. Cheriet's chapter on Algeria, Khalil's on Tunisia from a political perspective, Charrad and Zarrugh's study on the Tunisian constitution, Morsy's discussion of Egyptian law from a legal perspective and Errazzaouki's chapter on Morocco from a political economy perspective examine different dimensions

of citizenship in North African countries with respect to the political, legal and economic status of women. The discussions enlighten the reader about how laws and regulations regarding the status and rights of women have become a battleground among opposing political positions, which have contending notions about the model citizen. Although more engagement with feminist citizenship theories would have made the contributions stronger, the current version is eye-opening. Similar theoretical engagement can be observed in relation to Labidi and Hafez's respective chapters on 'bodies'. In both chapters, the contributors show how the female bodies are constructed through and constitutive to political relations and processes. As a result, in North African contexts, it is possible to see that 'bodies' do not pre-exist outside discursive constructs, but are momentarily produced and reproduced through politics.

The theoretical engagement paves the way for another strength of the collection – that is, going beyond 'women's issues' in a liberal sense (e.g. how many female MPs are represented in parliaments) towards exploring 'gender regimes' of pre- and post-revolutionary North African politics and discussing women's issues within these regimes. By gender regime, I mean the relations, processes and structures through which power hierarchies are constructed by gendering political actors. The gender regime of citizenship is one of the dimensions of this discussion. The post-independence nationalist regimes of Ben Ali, Qaddafi or Sadat, to name a few, constructed and consolidated their regimes through producing certain male and female subjectivities and bodies as model citizens. 'State feminism' not only enabled policy makers to construct themselves paternalistically as 'fathers' to protect modern citizens against 'non-modern' forces; in different chapters of the collection, the contributors (e.g. Cheriet and Hafez) also examine how these paternal roles have been reproduced in the post-revolutionary political contexts.

The collection's final strength is the analytical light shed on the resistance of women against subordination, violence and oppression. Whether in more conventional platforms of politics, such as parliaments, or in new political spaces, such as social media or through art, women invent methods of resistance to patriarchy and nationalist, Islamist and neoliberal projects. Studying their resistance provides the collection with certain advantages. Primarily, from a theoretical point of view, the chapters offer insight about Arab female bodies in resistance to feminist theories in general, and performativity approaches in particular. Furthermore, the methodological preference (or necessity) to bring individual women in order to examine their resistance gives a face to women's political activities in North Africa. Therefore, the abstract 'women's issues' can be substantiated through women's experiences from the field. Finally, from a political-normative point of view, the collection is a powerful challenge to the West-centric fatalism about 'lack of women's activism' in the MENA region.

Rethinking Gender in Revolutions and Resistance, edited by Maha El Said, Lena Meari and Nicola Pratt, differs from the previous two works in important aspects. The principal difference is the abandonment of the geographical case study approach in favour of a thematic organization. This collection is divided into three themes. The first, entitled 'The Malleability of Gender and Sexuality in Revolutions and Resistance', is a case against an approach that considers gender and sex as fixed, universalizable and ahistorical. The chapters show the contention regarding how different political

actors define gender and sexual norms in line with their political projects, which in turn opens a space for the resistance to destabilize oppressive and dominating political ideologies. The second section, 'The Body and Resistance', sheds some light on one of the most important growing dimensions of feminist literature about 'the body' from empirical insights from the Arab world. The final section problematizes the West-centric binary between 'Islamic' and 'secular' feminist groups by approaching the issue from a gender perspective that reveals commonalities between them and rejects homogenization. In addition to the thematic approach, the contributors of the collection are predominantly scholars. Although this could have been a disadvantage in relation to the previous collections' inclusion of practitioners, this risk is successfully averted by the contributors' rigorous dealings with the empirics without giving up theoretical sophistication.

The effective theoretical engagement in the chapters is probably the strongest dimension of the book. The chapters are bound by a theoretical thread that both explores gender and sex as unfixable historical, social and political constructs and engages with 'the body', especially the female body, as a site for political struggles. Similarly to the previous two works, this collection also underlines women's activism in pre-revolutionary contexts in the MENA region, the problems of 'state feminism' and the impasse in or even regression of women's freedoms in the post-revolution North African countries. However, this book discusses these issues in different chapters cemented by the theoretical thread, which deepens the analytical power of the book. In fact, the subtitle of the collection, which is '*Lessons from the Arab World*', is a very conscious and sound pointer. Answers to the question of 'Lessons for whom?' will show why this book is invaluable for scholarship on MENA politics and on feminist political analysis.

The collection offers lessons for those who neglect and marginalize gender and sex in their political analyses of understanding politics in the MENA region. Like Khalil's volume, this work reveals the gender regimes operating in mainly southern Mediterranean states. However, it performs this by prioritizing gender and sexuality politics rather than citizenship. Instead of discussing citizenship from a gender perspective, the current chapters perform gender and sexuality analyses in the pre- and post-revolutionary Arab world. As a result, the discussions go beyond citizenship and towards an analysis of how gender and sexuality politics work in revolutionary processes and/or through resistance. The struggle to define 'the' gender norms and to monopolize the potential capacity to discipline the bodies (both female and male) concerns what kind of a political community will be built; a question that involves citizenship, but also goes beyond and involves matters of political representation, individual and collective freedoms, politics of resistance, communication techniques and daily lives. Gender and sexuality lie at the centre of politics in the Arab world, as chapters in El Said et al. explore this centrality. Furthermore, because the book adopts the idea that revolution is not a one-off moment, but concerns a continuous resistance, the chapters provide a detailed discussion of contemporary politics in countries under scrutiny *after* the moment of revolution.

Secondly, there are also lessons for feminist analysts outside the Arab world. Unlike many theoretical strands in the discipline of international relations (IR), thanks to the scholarship of Third World feminism, subaltern feminism and postcolonial feminism, feminist IR has effectively addressed its West-centrism, that is, an

epistemological tendency and political leaning to become the voice of a white, western, secular and middle-class woman, explicitly or implicitly. However, the danger of West-centrism is always present and feminist IR should be on alert. This collection is a novel and informative intervention into the process of feminist self-reflection. By employing two contemporary theoretical discussions in feminist IR about the malleability of gender and sexuality and the reproduction of the body, the chapters discuss how gender and sexuality operate in the Arab world. While doing this, they do not become a simple footnote to the theories from the West from an 'authentic area', but a challenge to them for their improvement.

Moreover, the contingency of gender and sex is supported by the focus on the resistance of women to authoritarian and disciplinary political practices. This focus on resistance can be seen to some extent in Olimat's and to a greater extent in Khalil's edited volumes. However, in this work, resistance of women is the core of the analysis. In all chapters, whether they are prisoners under torture (Meari), artists and politicians under attack (Sami and Alnass and Pratt's respective chapters), protesters under custody or bloggers who simply upload videos (El Said), Arab women are discussed not as 'docile bodies', but as active political agents who consciously challenge patriarchy, nationalism, political Islamism or, in general, the combination of all three. Therefore, the collection surpasses the pessimism that colours most of the chapters in the previous works (especially in Olimat's collection), but enables the readers to discover the novelty of Arab women's resistance methods, whether they belong to 'secular' or 'Islamist' groups, as the chapters of Abou Bakr and Muhanna show. If understanding and prioritizing resistance is one of the objectives of feminist IR, El Said et al. point out how this can be done, and without becoming West-centric.

A common problem shared by all three books is that the women's movements in different MENA countries are taken as isolated cases, not only from each other, but also from the rest of the world. The discussion begs the question whether women's movements in different MENA countries interacted with and learned from each other's experiences. In addition, it is generally neglected how the legacy of the colonial period and the European Union's pre- and post-Arab Spring approaches to the women's movements influence the latter. This external dimension can have an explanatory potential for why, for example, Islamists considered women's emancipation as a 'western imposition', or how the funding from the European Union empowered certain women's movements while neglecting others.

To conclude, if one is a reader who aims to adopt a different way of looking at Arab politics in general and 'the Arab Spring' in particular, these three excellent collections will show a picture where the main actors are not Mubarak, Ben Ali, Morsi or Assad, but Samira Ibrahim, Amina Sboui and Sama El-Masry. This will be a picture of complex political struggles shaping the Arab world today and in the future.

Ali Bilgic
Department of International Relations, Bilkent University, Turkey
abilgic@bilkent.edu.tr

© 2016 Ali Bilgic
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2015.1128671