

NADINE NABER AND DALIA ABD EL-HAMEED

Attacks on Feminists in Egypt: The Militarization of Public Space and Accountable Solidarity

IN MARCH 2016, A SERIES OF STATEMENTS, news articles, and human rights reports circulated on social media in the global north, calling for an end to the crackdown on feminists in Egypt. These calls emerged in response to news that Mozn Hassan, director of the internationally renowned grassroots feminist organization Nazra for Feminist Studies, had become the focus of an investigation by Egyptian authorities.¹ While the headlines and calls for support kept firmly in place the longstanding Orientalist fixation — emanating from the global North — on attacks on women and feminists in Arab and Muslim majority countries, the fine print made it clear that the attack on Mozn Hassan and Nazra was part of a broader authoritarian attack on civil society and human rights activism in Egypt. The attack on Mozn Hassan and Nazra is not simply an isolated attack on feminism, women's movements, women's rights, sexual rights, women's bodies, and/or women's agency in Egypt. Rather, it is part of a systematic assault on any and all remnants of the Egyptian revolution, including groups and individuals critical of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and his authoritarian regime, as well as on people who

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1. On March 27, 2016, Mozn Hassan appeared before an investigative judge who informed her lawyers that her interrogation was postponed. For more information on the case of Mozn Hassan, see <http://nazra.org/en>.

don't conform to social and gender norms who can easily serve as the regime's scapegoats.

THE CRACKDOWN

When Egyptian authorities targeted Nazra in 2016, they added the organization to their NGO funding investigation, started in 2011, which has targeted many NGOs for receiving foreign funds for activities that the authorities allege are "a threat to national security."² Included in the government's crackdown on NGOs are the renowned El Nadim Center for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence, the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, the Cairo Institute for Human Rights, the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance, and the Arab Network for Human Rights Information. All of these groups are critical of Sisi's government, especially its violations of human rights and its intensified revival of ousted president Hosni Mubarak's authoritarianism and neoliberal economic agenda.

El Nadim Center not only provides psychological support to the victims of torture in Egypt, it also documents these violations perpetrated by state actors and scandalizes the state's infringements of human rights. The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights documents prison conditions, police crackdowns against LGBTQ people, and the state's violations of the constitutionally protected freedom of religion and belief. The Arab Network documents violations against freedom of expression, provides legal aid for public critics such as journalists and artists, and launches campaigns for prisoners of conscience. Nazra for Feminist Studies documents state and nonstate violence against women in public spaces and provides legal, medical, and psychological remedies to survivors of violence.

By targeting these and other NGOs that are included in the foreign funding case, the authorities are seeking to defame these organizations as agents of Western imperialism. The Egyptian corporate media and government rhetoric surrounding the case are replete with accusations of spying in Egypt on behalf of Western powers, a rhetoric that aligns seamlessly with longstanding reactionary Egyptian discourses that conflate social

2. "Court Verdict Eases Restrictions on Foreign Funding for Egyptian NGOs," *Mada Masr*, April 20, 2016, <http://www.madamasr.com/news/court-verdict-eases-restrictions-foreign-funding-egyptian-ngos>.

and political resistance and nonconformity with Westernization, colonization, and imperialism. Of course, this rhetoric obscures the Egyptian government's own complicity in US-led imperialism, from partnering with the Israeli colonization of Palestine to hosting CIA torture camps and participating in neoliberal economic agendas that harm the majority of Egyptians in return for military and financial aid.

In addition to defaming these and other NGOs, Sisi's government is also arresting NGO employees and other activists as well as crafting more and more laws that restrict NGO work. Consider, for instance, the case of Hesham Gaafar, the director of the Mada Foundation for Media Development, who was arrested in October 2015 and is facing charges alleging that he is a member of the Muslim Brotherhood and has received bribes from foreign entities.³ Or the current legal restrictions that allow the government to dissolve NGOs at their discretion, appoint their own board members, approve or disapprove NGOs' activities and grants, and curtail the freedom of assembly for Egyptian people based on a draconian protest law that bans unregistered gatherings of ten or more individuals in public and private spaces.⁴ The Egyptian authorities have banned activists from travel, used recordings of their phone calls to blackmail and defame them, threatened them with freezing their assets and calling them in for interrogation, and have even tortured and killed them.

In short, the Egyptian government's policies are resulting in minimizing, even perhaps shutting down entirely, the public sphere and, with it, all forms of and venues for freedom of expression. As demonstrated by the case of novelist Ahmed Nagy, who was sentenced to two years in prison for apparently using "obscene" sexual content in his novel, the government's crackdown extends beyond rights-based groups and targets people and groups for any kind of nonconformity—from gender and sexual nonconformity to critical art and journalism. The Egyptian authorities are using a variety of weapons to repress resistance and to

3. "Rights Groups, Public Figures Condemn Ongoing Detention of Journalist Hesham Gaafar," *Mada Masr*, January 30, 2016, <http://www.madamasr.com/news/rights-groups-public-figures-condemn-ongoing-detention-journalist-hesham-gaafar>.

4. Brian R. Braun, "Civil Society in Egypt Still Matters," *Atlantic Council*, April 22, 2016, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/civil-society-in-egypt-still-matters>.

disarm and detain journalists, protesters, and anyone challenging the status quo.

Historical context matters here. While Egypt's ousted dictator, Hosni Mubarak (president from 1981–2011), also cracked down on activists and factions threatening his rule, it is noteworthy that the current president, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, took power after the Egyptian uprising in 2011, which had radically opened up public political space in the country.⁵ Dismantling all of the successes of the revolution through excessively harsh crackdowns has been fundamental to Sisi's dictatorship. It is also noteworthy that Sisi became president in 2013 following a coup to remove Islamist president Mohamed Morsi from office and that his efforts to eradicate any perceived threats to his rule involve targeting both the former ruling party and Egypt's most organized political faction, the Islamists.

ON LIBERAL AND STATE FEMINISMS

The crackdown targets some, but not all, Egyptian feminists directly, which raises the question: What forms of feminism does the state sanction? The variety of feminisms at play in Egypt include various liberal feminisms, such as state, developmental, and equal rights-based feminisms, on the one hand, and revolutionary (anticapitalist/anti-authoritarian/anti-imperialist) feminisms on the other. State feminists seek to monopolize feminism and protect the image of the state as a supporter of women's rights. Some developmental feminists prioritize the integration of women into neoliberal economic projects. They are less threatening to the state because their work is not politicized when it comes to challenging state violence. Equal rights feminism isolates women's oppressions from other oppressions while working to end sexism and sexualized violence, overlooking violence committed by the state. Revolutionary feminisms assume that sexism and homophobia pervade the structures of state violence; they are working in relation to the demands

5. See Lila Abu-Lughod and Rabab El-Mahdi, "Beyond the 'Woman Question' in the Egyptian Revolution," *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 683–91; and Sahar Khamis, "The Arab 'Feminist' Spring?" *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 692–95.

of the 2011 uprising and remain accountable to its demands.⁶ Revolutionary feminisms consider feminist demands related to all forms of gender justice and also the revolutionary demands of freedom and justice, including reforming police actions, fighting corruption, and ensuring freedom of thought and expression as coconstituted and interconnected. The current crackdown is explicitly targeting revolutionary feminism and feminists, including Mozn Hassan and the work of Nazra for Feminist Studies, El Nadim Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence, and Hossam Bahgat, the founder of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights.

To be clear, the developmental and equal rights-based feminists are not escaping the negative repercussions of the Egyptian authorities' activities either. Although liberal-leaning groups that do not directly challenge the regime are often not targeted directly, because their work is centered in public spaces and on the streets, such as their efforts to end sexual harassment, which grew out of the 2011 uprising, the government's militarization of public space renders ineffective and obstructs their campaigns. In addition, many anti-sexual harassment groups are focused on efforts to raise public awareness, but working in the public space now requires obtaining permission from the Ministry of Interior, permission which is frequently denied. Other liberal leaning groups, if not directly impacted, have been influenced by the overall repressive climate, and grants have been turned down by the so-called Ministry of Social Solidarity without adequate explanation, which results in reducing the activities and public engagements planned by liberal groups.

ON MASCULINITIES AND SEXUALITIES

Looking at the gender politics of the current crackdown, it is noticeable that young men under forty are disproportionately impacted. Egyptian police habitually raid male activists' homes and arrest them before any expected protest or demonstration. Young men are especially harassed at checkpoints, and their cell phones are routinely searched for any signs of dissent. This unequal attack on young men is partially explained by the fact that they make up the majority of protesters, but also by the fact

6. "The National Council for Women: State Feminism Seeking to Contain Revolutionary Feminism," *Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights* (blog), October 2, 2013, <http://eipr.org/en/blog/post/2013/10/02/1832>.

that arresting women activists costs the regime a higher price both nationally and internationally. Nationally, outrage over public violence against women can be explained by the predominance of an idealized protective masculine subject, reinforcing a dominant viewpoint that women should not be humiliated, arrested, or beaten, especially in public. Internationally, outrage over state violence against Arab/Muslim women emerges out of the racist-normalization and lack of empathy related to the arrest or killing of Arab men compared to the racist-sensationalist outcry over the apparently “hyper-oppression” of Arab/Muslim women (coupled with the self-assigned Western role of “saving” Arab/Muslim women).

Gay men and trans women have also been systematically targeted by state-led attacks. Since October 2013, more than two hundred gay men and transgender women were arrested on charges related to debauchery.⁷ Some commentators are attributing this crackdown on LGBTQ people to the regime’s attempt to create moral panics about non-normative sexuality and thereby claim a role of saving national morality, ostensibly from LGBTQ people. Activists and journalists supporting LGBTQ struggles assert that President Sisi, like President Mubarak before him, create political scapegoats of LGBTQ people by arresting them and creating hysteria around nonnormative sexualities. The government’s goal, according to this perspective, is to gain public support and assert a kind of “moral” legitimacy while distracting Egyptians from more pressing political, social, and economic concerns.⁸ Without a doubt, the current regime is extremely sexist, homophobic, and misogynist.

ACCOUNTABLE SOLIDARITY WITH EGYPTIAN FEMINISTS AND THE EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION

Enactments of solidarity that call for ending the attacks on Egyptian feminists fall short if they do not specifically account for which feminists are under attack and why, including the root causes that make the attacks

7. “Outrageous prison terms for so-called ‘debauchery cases’: Orchestrated vice police campaign against gay and transgender people continues,” *Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights* (press release), April 30, 2016, <http://eipr.org/en/pressrelease/2016/04/30/2591>.

8. For example, see Thom Senzee, “Being a Gay Man in Egypt Is ‘Terrifying and Thrilling,’” *The Advocate*, January 21, 2015, <http://www.advocate.com/world/2015/01/21/being-gay-man-egypt-terrifying-and-thrilling>.

against them possible. As long as broad counterrevolutionary attacks in Egypt persist, so will the attacks on the groups that arose out of the revolution and are trying to implement demands, including some, but importantly not all, feminist groups. Although counterrevolutionary authoritarian forces are sexist, homophobic, and misogynist, there is much more significance to the crackdown on feminist groups. Feminist groups recognize that the state is not only attacking them for their efforts to end sexism, homophobia, and transphobia, but that the attacks are broadly authoritarian in nature and motivation. These groups recognize that they must therefore stand in solidarity with all efforts to end authoritarianism, even when gender justice is not at the forefront of a particular effort, movement, or struggle. They do not separate out the targeting of feminists as a separate or discrete cause. Accountable international feminists should not support Egyptian feminists only when sexism or homophobia is ultra-explicit or visible (i.e., to counter cases of sexual violence), as is often the case with either dominant forms of Orientalist, imperialist, and/or uninformed feminist solidarity emanating from the global North. They should recognize that organizations such as Nazra and individuals such as Mozn Hassan also struggle against authoritarianism and efforts to crush the larger demands of the revolution. Of course, standing with Egyptian feminists under attack also requires focusing on the specific ways sexism and homophobia play out and the ways feminist and LGBTQ people and groups have been targeted. But feminist solidarity, particularly in the case of Egyptian feminism, necessarily requires standing with all revolutionary groups against authoritarianism.

Moreover, Egyptian activists do not want to be saved or pitied by efforts emanating from the global North. Likewise, attempts at solidarity from US feminists that blame the Egyptian government for excessive violence and express outrage for the current attack on civil rights, while remaining silent or uninformed about the US support that helps sustain the government attacks, are not helpful. Such support, wittingly or unwittingly, reinforces colonialist feminism and existing global hierarchies. Solidarity from the global North requires greater self-reflexivity and a politics of positionality that asks what responsibilities and what kinds of accountability are necessary, given the social location from which one is standing. For example, the United States has been providing Egypt \$1.3 billion a year in aid since 1987 and has been supporting dictatorships and attacks on human rights for thirty years. The majority

of the aid goes to the military, police, and state security forces that are attacking and killing people who challenge government authority.⁹ The United States also directly participates in torture programs in Egypt, such as the CIA's extraordinary rendition program involving secret prisons and systemic sexualized torture. US-backed increased militarization in Egypt does not enhance women's rights; on the contrary, it leads to escalating levels of sexual violence against women that is committed by state actors who enjoy impunity for their crimes.¹⁰ Moreover, feminism, like other social movements, must function in a democratic climate where feminist groups can organize themselves and advocate for their rights. It is important to recognize that feminism would never flourish under dictatorship, even when feminists are not directly attacked; US-based solidarity with Egyptian feminists must begin from home by challenging US policies that contribute to antifeminist efforts abroad. Simply pointing the finger at the Egyptian government's attacks on feminists while ignoring the complicity of US imperialism in the very structures responsible for the attacks reinforces ahistorical racist and Orientalist paradigms. It also obscures the geopolitical realities wherein the United States and Israel depend on Egyptian authoritarianism to sustain their own imperialist and colonialist projects—from US-backed global corporate and military interests in the Middle East and North Africa to the Israeli colonization of Palestine. Accountable solidarity would do better to commit to ending US aid to Egypt while working in alliance with grassroots anti-authoritarian revolutionary movements in Egypt, including those that challenge sexism, homophobia, classism, and government repression, and supporting *all* groups targeted under the broad-based attacks.

9. Jessica Winegar, "The US Must Stop Supporting Human Rights Violations in Egypt," *Truthout*, March 12, 2016, <http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/35134-the-us-must-stop-supporting-human-rights-violations-in-egypt>.

10. "Exposing State Hypocrisy: Sexual Violence by Security Forces in Egypt," *International Federation for Human Rights*, report released May 19, 2015, https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/egypt_report.pdf.