

COMMENT

No 'Spring' for Women

EUPHORIA OVER ARAB SPRING IS vanishing very fast. After every mass revolt reactionaries get quickly re-grouped by attacking women first. It happened in Algeria, it happened in Iran. And the same history is being repeated in the recent turmoil in the Arab world.

In the Algerian revolution, 1954- 1962, hundreds of thousands of women resisted the French, and many died in the process. Algerian women were the backbone of the movement: acting as spies, helping with communications and food, caring for the wounded- every aspect of revolutionary life. Yet to this day Algerian women are treated as less than human. And when an Islamist insurgency plunged the country into a brutal civil war lasting through the 1990s, Islamists targeted women first.

In Iran, too, women were equal partners in the revolution, yet the first act of counter-revolution was Khomeini's demand for women to wear the veil. When thousands marched in the streets on International Women's Day 1979 chanting, "At the dawn of freedom we have no freedom!" most of the Left did not support them, but joined in throwing stones at them. They didn't see that the women were sounding the alarm that the Iranian revolution that overthrew the US-backed Shah of Iran was being transformed into its opposite.

Be it Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen or Syria, women made sure they are speakers and leaders. They transformed human relationships by creating new ones on the spot: in Egypt's Tahrir Square; in Yemen's Change Square and by coming out in the thousands when President Saleh accused women protesters of being against Islam. In Syria, despite Bashar al-Assad's willingness to murder thousands in the street, 2,000 women and children blocked roads, shouting, "We will not be humiliated."

The boldness of the women, the depth of the change they desire, can be measured in their militancy and eagerness to be part of history-changing movements. Unfortunately, it can also be measured in how the first moves of counter-revolution, as in Iran and Algeria, are a direct attack against them. In Egypt, women who came out to celebrate International Women's Day on March 8 were met by a huge crowd of men who screamed at them, grabbed and groped them, tore their clothes and made the women, literally, run for their lives.

Not satisfied with locking women out of decision-making bodies, on the next day the military arbitrarily cleared the Square of protesters, arresting 18 women. The women were beaten and given electric shocks. All but one were strip-searched, forced to submit to a "virginity test" and told they would be "charged with prostitution. "

The Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI) reported that pro-democracy activists demonstrating in Baghdad's Tahrir Square in June were brutally attacked by armed men in plain clothes, who arrived by the thousands on chartered buses. It was obvious that they had been sent by the Al-Maliki regime, which had broken its promise to the demonstrators to enact reforms. They targeted the women for brutal sexual assaults.

Regime change doesn't bring in new hope for women's liberation movement. And without women's liberation and women's participation in large numbers no revolution can be successful. After the fall of every corrupt Arab regime what doesn't change much is the status of women in the society, no matter whether it is conservative or not so conservative.