Faith in Civil Society
Religious Actors as Drivers of Change
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The massive popular uprisings that began in 2011 across the Middle East and Northern Africa have come to be known as ‘the Arab Spring.’ Arab women from different class-backgrounds, generations and religions across the region were – and still are – on the frontlines of protest marches, fighting against the oppressive and corrupt rule of dictators, chanting “bread, freedom and social justice.”

Images of women in the Arab world taking to the streets to oust governments are hardly something ‘new.’ During national revolutions in the region between the 1930s and 1950s, women participated extensively in the same way that they are now partaking in the Arab spring. But as the revolutionary dust cleared and constitutions were decided upon after achieving independence from colonial rulers, women were by and large side-lined. The protests, which are still very much on-going in the region, are therefore critical moments to assess and follow closely the developments that will shape the position and rights of women in the states rocked by the Arab spring. It is therefore not encouraging to see that the women’s quota in the Egyptian parliament was removed by the interim military rulers, and that only two percent women were elected into the Egyptian parliament. On a more positive note, though, an early move to assuage doubts about the extent of Tunisians’ devotion to women’s rights was a gender parity law, which required equal numbers of women and men as candidates on every political party’s electoral list in the parliamentary elections. Tunisian women won 27 percent of the seats in the parliamentary elections in October 2011; the overwhelming majority of them come from the Islamist al-Nahda party.

While the uprisings against Bashar al-Assad are still very much on-going in Syria, in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen elections have been held, and constitutional reforms are being fiercely debated in the newly elected parliaments, dominated by Islamists and Salafists. These religious
groups, in which women are active participants, have been operating at the grassroots level and in civil society at large for a long time. Their electoral victory, therefore, did not come as a surprise. But although there is no doubt that they will play an important role in the political transformations taking place before our eyes, how those roles evolve will be shaped by each country’s unique social and cultural landscape as well as political and economic history. They share a commitment to Islamisation and Islamic law, but vary widely on their position on a range of political, economic and social issues, including the ‘woman question.’

During the election campaign and in its aftermath, women’s rights have been at the forefront of public debate, activism, violence and deep-rooted fear. ‘Virginity tests’ performed on female demonstrators by the armed forces in Egypt is one example. Another example is the intense debates about family law. Family law is central to the rights and position of Arab women. There is a striking similarity across both Islamic and secular Arab states as regards the system of family law; a system which was supported by colonial rulers and later reinforced by autocratic regimes. All Arab states are ruled by religiously anchored family laws (both Christian and Muslim), which follow the same pattern of inequality between men and women. It is thus difficult to debate women’s rights within the law without reference to religion. There are differences in rights in these family laws – across religions and across countries – but the laws have historically been gendered in the sense that men are legally and financially more empowered than women. Although women are regarded as equal to men in most new and old Arab state constitutions, constitutional rights are rendered obsolete when women’s rights under family laws are systematically unequal and discriminatory. Discrimination in family laws “mirror the political projects of regimes and are a reminder that law is not a neutral agent but reflects dominant power relations in society” (Karam 1998, p 235). This is related, as Suad Joseph argues, to the fact that family law is “a benchmark of feminist struggle” in the Arab world (Joseph 2000, p 20). While Islamists in Tunisia swore in the election campaign to uphold the most progressive family law in the Arab world, which prohibits polygamy, parliamentary debates dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafist al-Nour party in Egypt have so far revolved around retracting a
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reform from 2000 in Muslim women’s rights to divorce. Meanwhile, women activists from various ideological and political backgrounds are contemplating ways to reform the laws in a gender equitable direction, often employing religious frames.

References

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