



Critical review

Of the statements of Manal Abul Hassan About the Women's March and Her Perspective on Women's Rights Issues

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Executive Summary

This paper provides an analysis, from a gender and Islamic feminist perspectives, of the statements of Dr. Manal Abul Hassan, secretary of Women's Committee in Cairo of the Freedom and the Justice party, hereinafter the FJP, the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood. Abul Hassan criticized the December women's march against violations committed by army personnel against female protestors during the protests in front of the Cabinet of Ministers building, which took place in December 2011. This paper focuses on the views of the FJP on women's rights issues.

Dr. Manal Abul Hassan spoke to the Saudi Newspaper, the Middle East, on 14 January 2012¹, criticizing the women's march², organized to denounce the violations committed by army personnel against the women protesters on December 2011.

FJP is the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood, succeeding in gaining and 127 seats out of 503 seats in the parliamentary elections, the first phase of which took place on 28th November 2011 and ending on 19th January 2012. Given the number of seats the FJP succeeded to win, it is important to track FJP policy orientations, as it will play an important role in shaping the policies and legislations which will be adopted by the parliament. The FJP was established after the January 25 revolution to end decades of political suppression and illegal political existence of the Muslim Brotherhood. The party fulfills the political roles of the Brotherhood, following its path and committed to its principles. And within the party structure, a division for women was established, Dr. Manal Abul Hassan heading its Cairo n division. Dr. Manal was a candidate of MB in the parliamentary elections in 2010, for Heliopolis and Nasser City, and was a candidate on FJP list in the parliamentary elections 2011-2012, in the second constituency.

The debated women march, which was called in the media outlets "the march of free women", was called for by several political movements and feminists activists to denounce the violations committed by army personnel against female protesters, which varied from physical abuse to sexual violence. The violations reached their peak when the protestor known as "Set el Banat" was dragged, kicked, and stripped to her bra on the streets³, the photograph of her naked torso making the frontpage of newspapers around the world and igniting wide scale rage. The women march aimed to articulate a clear point of view to the public opinion, namely the refusal of the violation of the rights and integrity of Egyptian women, their absolute refusal of the brutality of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), and their refusal of the continuation of military rule in Egypt.

In the first encounter with the statement of Dr. Manl Abul Hassan, which she denied shortly after its release⁴, one can notice that Abul Hassan delivered the following points:

¹ The statements in the Middle East newspaper (AR) <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=12100&article=658885>

² A video giving a background about the cabinet incidents <http://youtu.be/D-DjKZTxP78>

³ Photo of Set el Banat when she was dragged and kicked <http://ammancity.net/wp-content/uploads/%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9.jpg>

⁴ Abul Hassan denial to her statements <http://www.fjponline.com/article.php?id=340>

The first point is the political disagreement with the organizers of the march, whom she asserted were a foreign funded group that corrupted the political scene in many occasions and negated their participation in the revolution.

Furthermore, Abul Hassan also weighed in on women's issues, women's endeavor for their rights, and their participation in the public sphere, opining that women's issues are societal issues, asking "so why should only women defend them?". Abul Hassan also denounced the fact that women marched to defend themselves, asking "don't they have a husband, brother, or son to defend them?"

The statements of Abul Hassan raise questions about the FJP's vision of women's issues and raises question about the consistency of the declarations made by the FJP and the MB in their electoral programs, which purportedly support women's participation in public life. Abul Hassan's statements also raise questions with regards to the role of women in the FJP and the MB, and the latter's understanding of concepts such as that of *Ahelia* "legal agency" and *Wilayah* "political agency" and how they interpret these concepts in the living reality. In addition, , one also wonders about the discourse the FJP will adopt in parliament and its effect on laws, , legislations, and even the societal stances for a wide range of Egyptians, due to the FJP's influence, media outlets, and visibility on the streets.

The debate erupted because of the women's march, the controversy it caused part of the dilemma the Muslim Brotherhood is facing as a party and a movement with regards to how they deal with women's issues. The latter is considered a gray zone of MB and FJP thought, as they did not adopt a clear vision about women's roles, responsibilities, and their obligations in the political and social contexts.

It is noteworthy that the program of the FJP does not contain a chapter that illustrates the party's vision on women's issues, including only some articles under the sub title of 'family' in the fifth chapter, concerned with the economic aspects of their program. One of the clauses in the aforementioned chapter stresses the criminalization of **"all forms of harm against women and the harshening of punishments on harassing them, ruining their reputation, or attacking them directly"**. The FJP also expressed, in the same electoral program, its support to the political participation of women on one condition, namely that this participation is in accordance with the social traditions and customs. And in this regards, the statements of Abul Hassan contradict what was stated in the FJP program and with the statements of leaders of the party which support women's participation in the public sphere. In addition, the reality showed that the Muslim Brotherhood and the FJP nominated women in the parliamentary elections in 2005, 2010 and 2011-2012, Manal Abul Hassan being one of these candidates.

Although Abul Hassan disagreed with the perspective of the women's march and with the political movements which organized the march, following the path of the MB, what she stated must be analyzed and responded to nonetheless. Firstly, concerning her disagreement with the organizers of the march, Abul Hassan leveled many accusations against them, negated their participation in the revolution, and asserted that they are foreign funded. abul Hassan thus discredited political opponents due to mere disagreement in points of view.

And in regards to the second aspect of Abul Hassan's statements, in which she was astonished that women defended themselves, one wonders as to who will fight for women's rights, if women did not claim their rights themselves in a country that respects their humanity.

Manal Abul Hassan's statements are absurd, given that she was a parliamentary candidate, and is still pursuing a political career as a person with full political and legal agency, representing herself her political affiliation, and attempting to be one of the people representatives, if she had made it to the office. It is bizarre that she denounced women who are claiming their rights, demanding that their male "guardians" fight for the rights of their female relatives on the latter's behalf. This argument raises a question, namely does Abul Hassan perceive women as minors who need the rationality of a guardian? If the answer is yes, she is contradicting herself by pursuing a political career, a male dominated space, according to her! The MB has also been nominating female candidates in various representative bodies, even if women's presentation in the MB lists is symbolic and does not reflect the extensive female cadres of the MB s.

MB nomination of female candidates and the simultaneous publishing of statements that diminish women's rights in participation raise many questions. Firstly, is nominating women merely a tool of beautification of the MB profile in order to counter the attack they face because of their vision of the women's cause? Also, how consistent are the MB with what they state? That's why Manal Abul Hassan is not that different from the attitude of the movement she belongs to.

This is not the first time that Abul Hassan excludes women's issues from her sphere of interests, women not mentioned at all in her electoral program of 2010, no attempt made to solve women's problems. Abul Hassan only suggested holding seminars for soon-to-be-married women which would also discuss the problems of newly born babies, a reduction of women's various roles. Abul Hassan's statements added to the tendency of the MB to doubt the role of women, obvious in the difference between the political upbringing of women compared to that of their male counterparts, which makes women "second class" members. The absence of the sisters from decision making positions is another manifestation of women's second-class position in the MB, problems that were reflected on in the writings of ex sisters like Rasha Ahmed ⁵ and Insater Abd el Moniem ⁶

It is worth noting that the MB is oft criticized for their vision of the women's cause by several political fictions. However, it was absurd that the FJP was concerned to highlight Abul Hassan's denial that she indeed made the controversial statements about the women's march in the English version of the website. In the meantime, the Arabic version of the website was covering the internal developments of the country. The Katter discrepancy implies that the FJP is promoting a certain discourse for the western audience that doubts the Islamists' position on women's rights issue. However, they do not care to convey the same message to the local public opinion, as if it is not a matter of concern. The FJP is systematically producing a discourse to alleviate the doubts of the western observer with regards to certain topics, such as issues concerning religious minorities and women. It is for the latter reason that one can notice that the English version of the website features

⁵ News coverage for Intsar Abdel Moniem book http://2mwag.blogspot.com/2007/11/blog-post_19.html

⁶ <http://www.baladnews.com/article.php?cat=16&article=23654>

news about the visit of the MB sisters to the Nahda party in Tunisia⁷, for example, such news implying that women have an importance role on the local and regional level. At the same time, however, it still promotes a conservative discourse which diminishes women's space in the public sphere and subjecting women to societal supervision rooted in religious and cultural conceptions.

And in midst of the political momentum in Egypt, we have to remind all the political powers that women played, and are playing, a crucial role in shaping the destiny of Egypt and they are citizens, enjoying equal rights and have equal obligations and no one should underestimate the role of women or try to hinder their existence in the public sphere. Egypt is for all its citizens, women and men, regardless their political, religious, and ethnic affiliations.

Manal Abul Hassan assumed that women went alone to claim their rights, totally disregarding the fact of the participation of men in this march, who formed human shields to protect the march. Such is a clear confirmation that women's cause is a national cause. A country where women's rights are not respected is one in which the humanity of its citizens will not be treasured.

Lastly, the fundamental point in Manal Abul Hassans' discourse is that she was committed to her party's discourse and its stance from the ongoing political events and she guarded her political affiliations at the expense of the women's cause. Abul Hassan's statements are typical political statements of a senior member of the MB, not a women's rights defender. Abul Hassan's statements are mere political statements that she formulated so as to appear as if aimed at defending women.

Finally, I have to highlight that this paper is the beginning of a long research project undertaken by Nazra for Feminist Studies to analyze the political powers discourse regarding women rights and to raise a fundamental question, namely will the political powers be consistent with their commitments to safeguard women rights as equal partners in this nation?

⁷ Visited in 19 January 2012 <http://www.fjponline.com/article.php?id=356>