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Nawal El Saadawi

"Only the beginning of the revolution"

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What opportunities have opened up for women as a result of the democracy movement; what are the problems?

Nawal El Saadawi: The problems of the revolution in Egypt and the problems of women are connected...

US/UK/Israel don't want the revolution. They want the outcome of the revolution to be pragmatic capitalist. They want the free market.

The revolution may be hijacked by outside powers. The battle is going on. But the most important power is the power of the masses. Who removed Mubarak? The power of the masses. We want to keep this power on.

When we were in Tahrir Square and the military established a committee to change the constitution there was not a single woman on it. After that, we re-started the Egyptian Women's Union (EWU). We tried to do it several times [prior to this year]. Suzanne Mubarak banned it. Many of the women's NGOs in Egypt are pro-Mubarak.

The Arab Women's Solidarity Association and the Egyptian Women's Union however were banned, because we were against patriarchy and all oppression.

But the NGOs [backed by the Mubarak regime] are funded by the US and the EU: five women can start a NGO. They fragmented the feminist movement. The women's movement was suppressed by Suzanne Mubarak and the ministers around her. We couldn't have a NGO without the permission of government.

We started the EWU again from Tahrir Square.

The [Parliamentary] elections are now pushed back to October/November. Is this a good thing?

Nawal El Saadawi: It gives more time for all parties to organise — including pro-Mubarak forces.

We were calling for a broad committee to change the constitution. There must be a broad committee, with representation from women/men, Muslim/Christian, etc.

This committee of about 100-200 people to make a new constitution should be secular; we also need to change the family code.

But the army and Muslim Brotherhood want elections before constitutional change. They don't want to give us time to organise for a new constitution.

I am still censored by the media after the revolution; it's ridiculous. I can't talk to the television, the media... what's that about? We are the people who paved the way for the revolution for decades.

We are only at the beginning of the revolution. We can't change everything at once.

Were you present during the International Women's Day events this year?

Nawal El Saadawi: Yes, while we were in Tahrir Square, some young men had the idea for an International

"Only the beginning of the revolution"

Women's Day demonstration. We went back to my home (which is nearby). We started to form slogans and organise. Our slogans were quite benign: equality; we need to change the family code, etc.

The march went very well. There were thousands. (We had said it would be a Million Women March but, still, it was good.) Many finished the march and went home. But in the afternoon gangs of Mubarak supporters and gangs of police came and beat the men and harassed the women.

This was by order of the government and the military. After Mubarak left, the police opened the prisons to let people out. We organised committees to protect our streets against these gangs.

They put some of the women and men in prison after the IWD march. They said they will check the women's virginity!

We started to discuss the links between the Mubarak/high military and the gangs. People started to criticise the High Council after that.

Are many men aware of women's rights issues? Are women becoming more involved in politics?

Nawal El Saadawi: I have written 47 books. Many of the young people have come to my home; even young members of the Muslim Brotherhood. They tell me we might differ on some things but we agree with you on many things.

I have a lot of support. But the government don't want to acknowledge that. When I appear in Tahrir Square everybody comes to me. Even veiled women come to me. There is change.

My slogan is "unveiling of the mind". You can't have a revolution without unveiling of the mind. Even veiled women — their mind has changed.

The veil of the mind is more dangerous than the veil of the face.

The veil becomes a habit, like make-up. They are used to the veil. But when the mind is unveiled, that makes a change.

Can we talk more about young women... in Egypt and elsewhere...

Nawal El Saadawi: Among young women there is a concentration on rape, but rape is a product of patriarchy.

I was the first one in Egypt to condemn Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) as a doctor. I lost my job.

Suzanne Mubarak, etc, they encouraged NGOs to fight FGM without mentioning social/economic mutilation. So that people won't challenge that, they just fight against cutting girls.

I was censored by the *New York Times* because I linked sexual rape to capitalism and colonialism.

Sexual rape is not separate from war. From capitalism. The invasion of Iraq. They said the US was going to Iraq to save women.

They have no economic or social analysis of the position of women.

"Only the beginning of the revolution"

What's the most important thing to do in Egypt now?

Nawal El Saadawi: The most important thing now is to have a secular constitution. One that says all Egyptians, women/men, Christian/Muslim, poor/rich, are equal.

Our constitution is very backward. It creates conflict between Islam and Christianity. State/money/land have no religion.

We need to have more or less free elections (as far as possible under capitalist society). To work toward real democracy and freedom, against free market democracy, which is false democracy.

The family code also is horrible and must be changed.

Post-scriptum :

In July the Egyptian feminist and novelist Nawal El Saadawi visited London and spoke to Solidarity.

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