Adapting Religious Rhetoric To Political Reality

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The focus of this paper is to explore and analyze the evolution of the rhetoric of religious parties on gender equality, as they move from political opposition to positions of power. We consider in particular the case studies of Tunisia and Egypt.

In Tunisia, the religious party was born in 1972 under the name Al Ittijah Al Islamy (The Islamic Orientation), and was later re-named EnNahdha (The Renaissance). The platform of this party provides that Tunisia is an Islamic country, and Sharia is the main source of its constitutional law. On this basis, they dismiss the revolutionary gender legislation enacted by Bourguiba in 1956, on the grounds that it is in contradiction with Sharia. Paradoxically, the Tunisian constitution that was enacted in January 2014 by the national constitutional assembly, at a time when EnNahdha dominated the legislative and executive branches of government, includes provisions that promote gender equality and protect the gender gains of the 1956 legislation. Specifically,

- Article 21 provides that male and female citizens have the same rights and duties; they are equal before the law and are free from any discrimination. The state guarantees each citizen’s freedoms and individual and collective rights; it provides them conditions for a decent life.

- Article 46 is even more explicit: The state commits to protect rights gained by women, to sustain them and to improve them. The state ensures equal opportunity between men and women in assuming different responsibilities in all domains. The state seeks to achieve parity between men and women in all elected bodies. The state takes the necessary steps to eradicate violence against women.

In Egypt, the religious party Al Ikhwan Al Muslinoon (The Muslim Brotherhood) was created in the early part of the XXth Century, and has survived under very repressive autocratic regimes with very little prospects of ever acceding to power, until the Egyptian revolution of 2011. The 2012 constitution ratified under the government of Mohamed Morsi by a constitutional assembly dominated by the Brotherhood includes, paradoxically, clear provisions in favor of women’s rights and gender equality:

- Article 4 provides for equality before the law and equal opportunity for all male and female citizens without discrimination nor favoritism nor interference. This applies for all considerations, including matters of education, employment,
practice of political rights, exercise of economic and social rights. It also provides for giving priority to achieving social justice.

The purpose of this talk is to discuss the paradox of religious conservative parties in Tunisia and Egypt, which have long opposed secular principles of gender equality on the grounds that they are incompatible with the teachings of Islam and the tenets of national identity, only to produce constitutions that match or exceed the rhetoric of gender equality of secular parties.