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MUSLIM WOMEN AND THE **DEMAND FOR EQUALITY** IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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THE UNCOMPROMISING response of the Arab regimes to calls for transition to democracy lies in the political character, history and ideology of each country. Lumping them together in a monolithic idea of Islam is a mistake. Arab-socialist Syria is a political dynasty ruled by a Shi'a minority; monarchical Bahrain is ruled by a Sunni minority. Mubarak's Egypt and Gadhafi's Libya sought to become political dynasties until the rise of each country's popular Opposition. Sunni Saudi Arabia operates on a political ideology which involves a mixture of puritan Islam and tribalism. Yet they all share a similar deafness to the popular protests whose voices are ringing in these countries and, via the media, around the globe. Realistically, once people have stood up for change, it is difficult to satisfy them with half-hearted dialogue and reforms or bribes; they can only be repressed for a time. In this age, there is little option for authoritarian regimes but to open up to people's representation in state matters.

In the ongoing protests from Egypt to Iran, young women in their 20s have even sacrificed their lives for freedom and to express their resistence to autocrats.

The diversity in the Muslim world is also reflected in the situations of women in different political settings and social cultures. During the heyday of Arab nationalism, republican regimes like Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and Libya liberated their women from traditionalism only to re-cage them in the grinding wheels of economic hardship, political seclusion and authoritarianism. Meanwhile the Islamic monarchies enclosed women within the confines of the house in the name of religion – or more accurately tribalism.

Today, the social roles of Muslim females range from the convention-free lives of women of the upper economic classes posing as "liberated", to their middle-class counterparts battling to improve their economic condition through a struggle for education and employment, to those women of the lower class who struggle just to survive and are forced into poverty and even the sex industry.

Most of the problems of Muslim women are rooted in and shaped by local cultures into which Islam spread as a religion. For example, the continuing practice of female circumcision in Islamised Egypt goes back to the time of the Pharaohs; the custom of honour killing in Pakistan and Afghanistan is rooted in the social practice of clan and kinship loyalties; while the donning of the burqa – face veil – dates back to feudal Persian culture. All of these (plus other) practices have survived under Islam. Muslim scholars both female and male are unanimous that there is no injunction in the Quran to cover the face – it only recommends modest dressing and right demeanor for both men and women. In fact, each woman should have the freedom to wear or not wear the hijab – head scarf – according to her conscience. Benazir Bhutto once aptly remarked, "The time has come when we within the Muslim world need to realise that each of us has a right to interpret religion as we wish, and we do not need clerics or the state to tell us how to worship."

Islam came as a liberating force for the Arab women who, during pre-Islamic days, were subjugated to female infanticide and slavery.

The Quran describes the reaction of a pre-Islamic father upon hearing the news of the birth of daughter as follows: "When news is brought to one of them, of the birth of a female child, his face darkens, and he is

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filled with inward grief! With shame does he hide himself from his people, because of the bad news he has had! Shall he retain it or bury it in the dust? What an evil choice they decide on?" (Quran 16: 58-59). In such a context, the Quran emphasised gender equality (33: 35). Islam gave women dignity, status, the right to marry the man of their choice, rights to keep their earnings, inheritance, property, and rights to divorce.

Today, the Muslim women of Africa and Southeast Asia are more liberated than those in the Middle East and South Asia. But again, the condition of the former is not yet ideal – they, too, have their problems. There have emerged several women's groups in the Muslim world that seek to address women issues. Some call for a modern reinterpretation of Islamic jurisprudence pertaining to women's matters – asking for gender equality and challenging patriarchy. Such groups can be either connected to or independent of mosques. There are upper-class-based feminists groups that seek to model Muslim societies along secular-liberal lines.

On the other side of the divide there are also reactionary religious groups led by men who interpret Islam for women in such a way as to restrict their mobility and support patriarchy in the name of religion. Such reactionary groups obscure the important role models of woman. The wives and daughters of the Prophet Muhammad were teachers of men in religious, social, economic and political matters. For example, Ayesha, a wife of the Prophet who led a political rebellion against Caliph Ali has been removed from memory or concealed through fatwas – religious rulings – written by male religious scholars.

The Arab Spring brought Muslim women onto the streets to demand political representation and gender equality and interestingly, in the case of Saudi Arabia, the right to drive cars! This is not the case in the rest of the world's 56 Muslim countries. Making up about 50 per cent of the protest movements, Arab women are demanding freedom from the hegemony of Western and local cultural codes, poverty, illiteracy and injustice. Egyptian and other women factory workers seek freedom from debt, exploitation and sexual harassment. They seek representation, good governance and transparency in state matters. In post-revolution Egypt, women are continuing with their struggle to see to it that their protests and sacrifices were not in vain. Even the Muslim Brotherhood has become more inclusive of women. In the ongoing protests from Egypt to Iran, young women in their mid-20s have even sacrificed their lives for freedom and to express their resistence to autocrats.

Middle Eastern rulers and members of the international community who have not yet offered their full support for the Arab Spring cannot afford to ignore Muslim women's push for freedom and the right to political representation. Muslim women have been engaging in a long internal struggle for social, economic and political freedom and mobility amidst various cultural settings. They cannot be abandoned to fight alone, they deserve support from both within and without, and as human beings they have a right to freedom as members of a globalising and interdependent civilisation.

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