

# Egypt election: no revolution for women

While female voters are turning out in huge numbers for the elections, some feminists are boycotting them

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Women shopping in a Cairo market. Photograph: Ofelia de Pablo & Javier Zurita

Women have been turning out in force in the early days of Egypt's parliamentary elections this week, some queuing for as long as seven or eight hours to cast their vote. But there are mounting concerns that the first election since the fall of President Hosni Mubarak will not provide the longed-for improvement in women's lives.

Writer and feminist Nawal El Saadawi says she will not participate in the "comedy" of a "fake" election that she believes will lead to a backlash against women and undermine "all efforts for justice, freedom and dignity". Campaigners are concerned at what they see as links with the old regime as well as the women standing on pro-Islamist and, in some cases, anti-feminist tickets.

"Some people say we should take part and not leave it for the Islamists, but I think it's a trick; the Mubarak people who are still there with the military, they want to abort the revolution and finish it with the election. It will bring us the Mubarak people again with different names, different faces and bring the pro-military, pro dictatorship people and this will be against women, of course."

El Saadawi points to the relaunch of the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) after a decades-long ban as a sign that the military regime is employing the same methods as Mubarak – giving the appearance of supporting women's rights. Although it was banned in 1952 when all political parties and independent organisations were dissolved, the EFU, along with its founder Hoda Shaarawy, has been criticised for its ties to the government and for representing the interests of a narrow elite.

The EFU's announcement that the it would find "powerful Egyptian women and convince them to run for election" suggested that its purpose was as much to do with shoring up the regime as it was to do with advancing women's rights. The fact that Mervat el-Telawi was a member further fuelled suspicions: as minister of social affairs she was responsible for the ban on women's associations as part of Egypt's former first lady Suzanne Mubarak's attempt to consolidate control over the women's movement. One of those banned was the Egyptian Women's Union (EWU), which relaunched in February with El Saadawi as its "godmother". The group was set up in March after it became clear that women had been excluded from the committee to change the constitution, and remains an underground movement because it cannot afford the fees for legal recognition.

"When they heard that we had reestablished the Egyptian Women's Union, they hurriedly declared that they are going to have the Egyptian Feminist Union," says El Saadawi.

It was the EWU who organised a Million Women's March in Tahrir Square on International Women's Day that came under attack by men who told them they should "go back home where they belong". El Saadawi insists that this was the work of the same hired thugs who attacked protesters in Tahrir Square in February and that, along with the virginity tests carried out on women who were arrested, it is evidence that the military has been against the revolution all along: "Now the army is using women's



NGOs like the EFU to encourage women to take part in the election," she said. "But if they work with the army and the high council of the military, I do not expect anything from them except some very superficial progress."

Younger activists are also suspicious of NGOs and groups such as the EFU, says Rebecca Chiao, co-founder and director of Harassmap, a project that challenges sexual harassment. "These old established NGOs and feminist activists are part of the old system as well," she says. "There are corruption problems, a lot of internal competition, and me and my friends don't seek to be part of their network."

Some high-profile women such as Salma Said and [Ahdaf Soueif](#) have criticised the western media's preoccupation with women's involvement in the revolution, arguing that it belittles those women who fought and died as men's equals. Raising questions about women's issues "is really difficult" in the current climate, says filmmaker Cressida Trew, who is making a documentary about women and the elections.

She visited Cairo's hospitals and saw women and girls who had been shot during the violence leading up to the election. "A lot of women who fought in the revolution are bored with the media interest in women's issues, particularly the western media, which they see as being culturally imperialist," she says. "Also, a lot of work with women in Egypt was hijacked by Mubarak and the concentration on women's issues is associated very much with the old regime."

With so much focus on the military, its treatment of civilians, and its unwillingness to hand over power, women's rights are understandably a "less pressing" issue, says feminist writer [Sahar Elmougy](#). "Women's equality will not be achieved by the revolution alone – it requires social and cultural change to take place," she says. "This will take a long time and in order for the status of women to improve in Egypt, we need to build a country, we need to have a proper country."

In contrast, Chiao believes that, in the early days of the revolution, "women really missed out in the political process and on ensuring that women's rights were considered as important as those of anyone else".

A total of 376 women are running for parliament – about 31% of all candidates – but because so many of them are independent, they make up only 6% of party and coalition lists.

Chiao worries there is little prospect of candidates who reflect the aspirations of the majority of men or women being elected, however. "We have election corruption issues and already there have been a lot of bribes," she says. "The most important thing right now would be that representatives get elected who are not corrupt and are good at government. Whether or not they are women or men is not such an issue."

Besides, says Chiao, when the [Nazra Feminist Studies Centre](#) tried to meet candidates to talk to them about women's issues, many simply did not show up: "That speaks volumes about how interested they are in women's rights."

Some have raised concerns that Islamist groups are including women on their party's list because they are forced to under the terms of the new constitution. When the Salafist party al-Nour distributed a poster with the image of a rose instead of the face of female candidate Marwa Ibrahim al-Qamash, on the basis that she wears the niqab (or full-face veil) many poked fun on social media sites such as Facebook.

Many of the women who are standing as independent candidates are also Islamists. Overall, however, they represent a wide spectrum of opinion, and include Gameela Ismail, a well-known liberal. It remains to be seen how many of them will promote women's issues, though. The fact that young women's rights activists aren't standing is often both a reflection of their concerns about lending legitimacy to the elections, and a reluctance to get involved in mainstream politics. "It's a dirty scene," says Chiao. "It's not pleasant, it's full of attacking and competition and you can go in with high ideals and just get railroaded by people who are corrupt and have a lot of money to spend on buying votes."

Women's rights activists will have to find a new way of framing the discussion that doesn't fall into the old frameworks, argues Trew. "The biggest issues are to do with class and a fundamentally patriarchal society and there is a great divide between the experience of those women who really came through in the revolution and the majority. The challenge is for women's rights activists to frame the debate in a way that women and men in Egypt can really own."