

# **Citizenship and Political Reform in Egypt: Which Role for Women?**

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*In the construction of citizenship in the Arab region, the fully inclusive and effective political participation of women represents a crucial variable for debate. Citizenship has been defined as a social status which secures equal rights and opportunities for all individuals, regarding not only gender, included in a given political entity (the citizens), vis-à-vis the state. It also implies full membership in a political community, guaranteeing equal civil, political and social rights or responsibilities. In this perspective, the advancement of women's rights is to be considered as the enhancement of the rights of all citizens, regarded in most comprehensive definition. In the last few decades, Arab states have not been able to build a real political system based on equality and justice, and thus to assure full citizenship, despite of pressures coming from either minority movements or the process of globalization, including social initiatives undertaken by the international community. Nevertheless, states have been recently involved in formal political changes as demonstrated by the current "free and fair" elections trend in the region. Although the latter are often criticized as being merely formal, currently Arab governments seek a deeper involvement of "free voters" to reinforce their political authority. Can citizens' votes and parliamentary representation, commonly recognized as consisting in a good practice in the direction of democracy, be regarded as an evaluation key for an explanatory study of citizenship? Moreover, will state initiatives be able to support citizenship and, in particular, to grant full and effective respect for all of society's fragmented groups?*

*This paper will attempt to investigate the question, analysing the case of Egypt. In particular, it will focus on the recognition of women as active citizens, able to provide an important contribution to the national political process towards democracy. In the end, the paper will try to draw up a comprehensive answer to the question: in this context of political and constitutional reforms, will such new formal efforts of the Egyptian government to include citizens and, in particular, women in the political process, favour an effective implementation of women's active citizenship?*

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## ***1. Introduction***

Over the last decades, the study of citizenship in Arab countries has been challenged as a pioneering approach for observing the state and evaluating its performance in the path toward democracy (Kandiyoti, 2000).

Citizenship has been generally defined as a social status which secures equal rights and opportunities for all individuals, regarding not only gender, included in a given political entity (the citizens), vis-à-vis the state. It also implies full membership in a political community, guaranteeing equal civil, political and social rights or responsibilities. It implies a legal and direct relationship between the individuals and the state where the latter is expected to play a leading role for the construction of the concept. Such contractual perspective has contributed to the debate on politics in the Arab World and capacities of the single Arab states to allow or enable their members to participate actively in the political process (Joseph, 1996). It appears even more appealing when considering recent years. The concept of citizenship, in fact, has been increasingly invoked, in its political dimension, by states in their official propaganda in order to reinforce their political authority by a renewed and vigorous approval of political reforms from the constituency. While reforms do not really go beyond the level of propaganda, visibly no real and substantial results have occurred in the direction of a political system based on equality and justice and, hence, citizenship. This failure has happened despite a vital rise in pressures coming from either minority movements or initiatives undertaken by the international community.

As explained in details later, the present paper will attempt to analyse the Egyptian case. The Egyptian Government has launched fundamental political reforms characterised by a rhetoric focused on the importance of a decision-making process able to involve an increasing level of direct participation for citizens, through referenda, elections and a broader representation in the parliament.

The main question underlying the analysis is that similar actions, although often limited to the façade, might be regarded as representing a first and binding step for strengthening the so-called “political citizenship”, to be granted to all the various segments of society, which include women, traditionally marginalised from the political process.

Originally conceptualized as the third dimension in the definition of T. H. Marshall (1950), political citizenship has been widely studied in literature in strict connection with the

criteria of inclusion/exclusion of a group within a political community (Turner, 2000), although only a tiny number of scholars grappled with women in particular. Nevertheless, major studies produced in the past may be useful for this analysis on women since they are based on two main components: primary political rights and fair and free elections (O'Donnell, 2001).

A “highly inclusive” level of political participation has to be guaranteed, at least through regular and fair elections, “such that no major adult social group is excluded” along with a level of civil and political liberties (Diamond, Linz, and Lipset, 1990) in order to reach a political system based on equality and justice.

Basically, political citizenship brings to mind two level of comprehension, which may be summed up in: the legal level (theory) and the participation level (practice). First, citizens are granted a set of political rights (to vote and run for election) and political freedom (mainly freedom of expression, association and press). Second, citizens are entitled by virtue of this status to actively take part in public affairs of their political community by exercising their political rights directly or through their representatives.

In short, political citizenship means more than a formal definition of political membership since it reminds the active involvement of the actors. It faces not only a merely legal development of women's status of citizenship. It is not only concerned with a formal guarantee by virtue of a constitution and a law but also with the practice developed in daily life by the governance capacity of formal and informal institutions (Government, public institutions, political parties and NGOs) and the ability of citizens (both men and women) to involve themselves in the political arena. In the context of the current trend of change in the region, Egypt, where citizenship has been recently recognized as the main pillar by the Constitution, the analysis on political citizenship make it possible to maintain a focus on the apparently renewed political reform and its impact on female citizens.

Arguments about whether women should be considered as people and whether women are capable of making autonomous electoral decisions and even run for a public office start to be increasingly considered due to the greater awareness of the condition of women and their “capabilities” in political affairs (Nussbaum, 2000) and the peculiar contradiction developed around such topic.

In this context, the article will consider the recognition of women as citizens exercising actively their political rights and, consequently, able to provide an important contribution

to the national political process towards democracy.

Will such new formal efforts of the Egyptian government to include female citizens in the political process, favour an effective implementation of women's citizenship? Has rhetorical political change produced only ambiguity or has it given the first forceful push in the direction of giving women more rights?

Methodologically and conceptually two explanation stand out.

First, elections have been chosen as the main study reference because of the importance they have acquired as a common feature of the political landscape (Ehteshami, 1999) and, ultimately, because they represent a point of maximal exposure both for the State and its workings and for the citizens in the attainment of political citizenship. Parliamentary elections, referenda and multi-candidate presidential elections have been the cornerstone of Mubarak's "march to democracy". Voting up to the present time (June Elections) has been used as a benchmark to assess the reform period officially opened in the twenty-first century.

Second, a wide representation of formal and informal institutions involved in the process has been taken into account. For political citizenship to be practically accomplished, within the political system a network of different actors has been engaged, especially at the implementation level. While government is the most authoritative actor responsible for constitutional reforms, legal procedures and public policies, political parties, NGOs and activists are to be seriously considered for their contribution to the success of the process.

## ***2. Political reforms in the Arab World***

In recent years, picking up on a general trend of political change which actually originated in the mid-twentieth century, Arab countries have launched a new series of reforms. Almost every government has by now formally committed itself to the concept of reform, undertaking constitutional re-engineering and policies intended to create democratic institutions. So far, however, Arab political systems have not made a convincing demonstration of their ability to build a genuine relationship with their citizens. Certainly, they have succeeded in building and developing some democratic institutions (elections, national assemblies and independence of the judiciary, to mention the most relevant), but they have also ensured that the status quo would guarantee their hold on power. In that context, citizens have not achieved any decisive role in public affairs, a basic requirement

of democracy where power is legitimized by the constituency.

The process of reform is not new to the region, several attempts have been made in the past. Where the current period probably stands out, however, is in the new consideration given to the constituency. Governments seek popular consensus, in a probable effort to reinforce their authority and, in order to reach their goal, say to show citizens' participation in public affairs.

As far as women are concerned, several States have made advances in the area of political rights laws: recognition of women's political rights (the latest country to do so was Kuwait in 2006) in the constitution and/or via laws which enshrine their right to participate in politics and public affairs on an equal footing; training to enable women to exercise those rights; quota systems and, in some cases, affirmative action mechanisms in national assemblies.

Yet if in theory progress has been made, things on the ground appear rather different, with unexpected results quite distinct from the public announcements. Women are still not fully involved in political reform, and even if by chance they are, having reached positions of power or attempted to participate in politics more actively, they are left to face an unsafe political environment dominated by corruption, intimidation and violence, of which, being traditionally considered a weak group in society, they are a main target.

In a country like Egypt, for example, Nasser had already stressed, in his strategy, the importance of a more inclusive role of citizens by encouraging, for instance, women to become involved in political life. At the implementation and enforcement step in women's participation, however, he obscured the benefits of an active citizenry and complicated the process of turning passive women into civic participants (Botman, 1999).

Such an attitude emerges as well in the recent political life with more vigour from presidential initiatives and public speeches characterising Mubarak's "march to democracy". They announce the reform of State institutions with the aim of shaping a more democratic country through constitutional means, and public politics, along with the growing importance of the "voice of the citizens" at the core of the agenda. Recently, during its first annual conference, the National Democratic Party, the ruling party, approved a Citizenship and Democracy Paper as a political document committing the

Government<sup>1</sup> on citizenship as having a tangible impact on the sense of belonging, national unity and citizen's participation in political activities<sup>2</sup>.

A leading scholar, Suad Joseph, has argued that “despite the fact that constitutions have been written in the language of the universal citizen in the Middle East, State institutions and political processes have presumed the citizen to be male and females to be dependent second-class members of the political community” (Joseph, 1986). Does that still hold true in Egypt?

### ***3. The Egyptian political agenda for change and its new attention to: citizenship, political participation and women***

In theory, the last seven years have taken on the appearance of progress, with a certain reactivation of Egyptian political life triggered by both international and domestic factors. At first glance, the Government has embarked on a new wave of political reform with the electoral process, women’s rights and political parties as the main focus of attention. The agenda for change has emphasized three main goals: promoting free and fair elections as defined by the so-called good practices established by the international community; enforcing women’s rights in order to reduce the inequalities and lack of social justice resulting from gender-based discrimination; strengthening the role of political parties by allowing them to compete in elections and participate in a real and inclusive political debate (IDEA, 2005).

Despite the government’s formal commitment to change, the political system still appears reluctant to enforce its general principles in a real and substantial way. On the contrary, the State’s recent actions, reflecting the ambiguity at the core of the current process of political reform, stand as evidence of the contrast, like the gap, between the official rhetoric claiming citizenship and the concrete undertakings to reform political life. Elections are often unfair and marred by a growing level of violence, both direct and indirect. Political parties have no real chance to compete in the electoral game, either due to a lack of resources (human, financial and managerial) or because of the thinness of their mass political base (Ottaway, 2004).

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<sup>1</sup> The distinction between the Government and ruling party remains often unclear.

<sup>2</sup> Quoting the document, “The NDP’s government is committed to translating these rights into a tangible reality”, <http://www.ndp.org/en/Policies/CitizenshipRights.aspx>

International events (namely the rise of the second Intifada and the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq) have contributed to an increase in popular mobilisation, street demonstrations and the birth of political movements opposed to the West's actions and to President Mubarak's foreign policy<sup>3</sup>. Citizens have apparently gained more space to express themselves in the political debate and a certain amount of freely voiced opposition to the ruling government has been heard, too tiny still, however, to have led to an official government response or to measures addressing the criticism. In addition, the influence of the international community has grown through aid projects and greater awareness of Egyptian political life. For instance, since the publication of the United Nations Development Program's 2002 Arab Human Development Report, which among other things exposes the deficit in women's empowerment in the whole Arab region compared to other developing parts of the world, the role of women has become a crucial issue in the debate on justice and equality in Arab countries.

On the domestic front, President Mubarak has launched reforms intended to re-chart the country's political life<sup>4</sup>. What distinguishes these initiatives from others taken in past periods of change, as stated in political rhetoric<sup>5</sup>, is the search for the constituency's support of the process and for its active inclusion in decision-making. Since 2000, Egypt has been celebrating regular parliamentary elections along with referenda and elections for the consultative body (*Majlis al Shura*)<sup>6</sup> and the local council (*Majlis al Magallia*)<sup>7</sup>. Beginning in 2000, these elections have in theory become freer and fairer since the Egyptian government, adopting certain good practices established by the international

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<sup>3</sup> For a general overview of citizens' initiatives, *A Chronology of Dissent: September – November 2000*. *Weekly al-Ahram*, 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2005.

<sup>4</sup> In particular, on 27th February 2005, President Mubarak held a speech for the citizenry in which he outlined his vision for a new era in Egypt's political history. Practically, Mubarak announced his intention to seek a change in the electoral system whereby the presidency would be decided by direct multi-candidate elections. In the following months Parliament passed a number of laws to initiate the political reform process, including the presidential election law and amendments to the regulation of the law on the exercise of political rights, to the political parties law and to the laws pertaining to the People's Assembly and Shura Council. The government launched a new initiative to promote Egyptian citizens' awareness of the political appointment process. See, for example, the brochure, "Parliamentary Elections 2005", published by the Ministry of Information.

<sup>5</sup> The manifesto explaining political reforms in Egypt presents democracy, liberties and human rights as the main foundations supporting the path towards "a new phase of political work" in the country.

<sup>6</sup> However, the consultative body (*Majlis al Shura*) is not completely elective. Of its 264 members, 176 are elected by popular vote and 88 appointed by the President.

<sup>7</sup> In 2006, municipal elections were delayed for another two years and ultimately, were celebrated in June 2007.

community<sup>8</sup>, placed the election process under the supervision of the judiciary rather than the Ministry of Interior, as used to be the case. Parliamentary elections held in November 2000 were the first in the Arab World since the signing of the Warsaw Declaration of the Community of Democracies Summit (of which Egypt is a signatory State) which pledged its members to uphold a comprehensive list of “core democratic principles and practices”<sup>9</sup>. In addition, monitoring by NGOs under the coordination of the National Council for Human Rights<sup>10</sup> and the use of transparent ballot boxes were allowed.

As far as electoral figures are concerned, a significant rise in the number of candidates has been recorded and candidates from the banned Muslim Brotherhood have gradually been accepted, although as independents.

In general, electoral campaigns have been characterised by increased media coverage and by a large number of advertisements and brief informational spots stressing the importance of every single citizen casting his/her vote and explaining how to do so. In particular, the 2000 election campaign promoted the participation of women to an unprecedented degree, along with that of “youth” groups, Copts and others usually under-represented groups in formal politics. Television spots invited citizens to go to the polls, with an emphasis on women voters (Boutaleb, 2004). The advertisement sponsored by the National Council for Women supported women’s national duty to vote. During the last campaign, informational spots targeting women rose<sup>11</sup>.

In 2005, the referendum on art. 76 of the Egyptian constitution allowed citizens to elect their President directly for the first time, rather than by a 2/3 majority of parliament.

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<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that Egypt had already signed in 1982 pursuant to Republican Decree No. 345 of 1981, the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights claiming the right to participate in political and public affairs. As far as women are concerned, Egypt ratified in the same year another important declaration, the Convention on the Political Rights of women which was introduced in 1954. Such an instrument focuses on the political participation rights of women on the basis of non-discrimination (art. 1, 2 and 3) as well as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, also ratified in 1981 (Republican Decree No. 434 of 1981).

<sup>9</sup> The text is available online on the site [http://www.demcoalition.org/pdf/warsaw\\_english.pdf](http://www.demcoalition.org/pdf/warsaw_english.pdf). M. Makram-Ebeid, former Member of the Parliament, in her public statement, works and press articles outlines International Convention. See for example, M. Makram-Ebeid, *Elections in Egypt: rumblings for change, in Elections in the Middle East, Elections in the Middle East: what do they mean?*, Cairo Papers in Social Science, vol. 23 no. 1-2, Cairo-New York, The American University in Cairo Press, 2002, 26-37.

<sup>10</sup> For the first time, monitoring activities were permitted in the electoral process. The rules enacted by the legislation and government policies allowed three levels of election monitoring: by the Presidential Elections Committees, independent judges and representatives of all the candidates. Moreover, the National Council for Human Rights and a number of civil society organizations were allowed to monitor the electoral process.

<sup>11</sup> See for example, the informational website of the country, <http://shura.sis.gov.eg/html/video.htm> as well as the voter’s handbook published for the 2005 parliamentary elections.

More signs of this new emphasis on citizens' inclusion in the political process can be found in the recent constitutional reform approved by popular referendum on 26 March 2007 most importantly in the amended art. 1 which now states that "*The Arab Republic of Egypt is a democratic State based on citizenship*" (while the former art. 1 defined Egypt as "*a socialist democratic State based on the working forces of the people*")<sup>12</sup>. These recent constitutional amendments also reinstate a quota system in favour of women. The engagement of the government goes even further: citizenship has become the basis of the ten-point programme for national work unveiled by President Mubarak, in which it appears as a substantive concept and the ways of enforcing it are defined in concrete terms. Even at the time of the latest elections, held in June, governmental sources stressed the search for enlarging the constituency participation in the process of decision making (Al Ahram, 2007)<sup>13</sup>.

Finally, the political parties have started to grapple with the issue of women's role in politics and included it in their campaign agenda, pledging for example a certain number of female candidates. Even the Muslim Brotherhood, which traditionally upholds a conservative viewpoint, has changed its attitude towards citizenship and women, at least in public statements<sup>14</sup>. In 2000, the Brotherhood sponsored its first female candidate<sup>15</sup>, and in 2005, a second woman ran for parliament under its banner<sup>16</sup>.

Broadly speaking, the political actors have all officially pursued policies aimed at the promotion of voter registration and at the participation of citizens both as voters and as candidates, with new and special attention paid to the role of women.

The reasons for building a constituency are multiple: the need to legitimise the role of politicians and to reinforce political authority in front of a demanding international public opinion which is increasingly well-acquainted with Egyptian domestic politics, or simply to secure a high number of voters in the search for electoral victory. Although restricted to the formal level, a similar effort to include citizens in the political reform agenda is likely to favour the construction of the first basic status of citizen so that women can also benefit

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<sup>12</sup> The full text is available on the web, <http://constitution.sis.gov.eg/en/enconst1.htm>

<sup>13</sup> To show a few examples, *Shura Elections: the citizens make the future*. Al Ahram 11 June, 2007, *Citizenship and Taking Part in the Shura Council Elections*. Al-Ahram. 11 June 2007.

<sup>14</sup> The Muslim Brotherhood launched their programme in a press conference held on 4 March 2004 at the Journalist Syndicate in Cairo. The Initiative included in the agenda, among other points, an empowerment of Egyptian citizenship through personal development, instituting political and electoral reforms.

Muslim Brotherhood, Initiative for Reform in Egypt

<sup>15</sup> Jihan al-Halafawi ran as a candidate in Alexandria.

<sup>16</sup> Makarem Al Deiri was the second female candidate.

from it. Indeed, political reform oriented towards a deeper consensus among citizens, as will be analysed, had a connection with the legalisation process of the status of women. This being said, when the government argues about the concept of citizenship and political rights through greater citizen participation in the political process, what exactly does it mean? Are women really targeted? What concrete actions have been taken to support these announcements? And while the political parties, Muslim Brotherhood included, talk about women's rights, what steps have they actually taken to back that up?

#### ***4. Women's political citizenship: the legal and historical framework***

Egypt ought to be familiar with such democratic institutions as parliament, elections and constituency. Since 1882, Egyptian political life has been placed under the official umbrella of a constitution<sup>17</sup>. In addition, Egypt enjoys the longest parliamentary tradition in the Arab world, along with elections which have been held since 1923. But despite its pioneering role in constitutional engineering, the country is still experimenting with new constitutional mechanisms to encourage its citizens' participation, since the political system *per se* has failed to do so by means of the constitutional texts promulgated so far.

Before focusing on the recent years, it is worth offering a historical excursus of political rights in favour of women in Egypt since the performance of the present political life seems to have strict connections with decisions pursued in the past.

Women's right to vote goes back to 1956, third in the region after Lebanon (1952) and Syria (1953). The 1971 constitution theoretically granted them equal political rights; it reaffirmed the equality of all citizens before the law (art. 40 Const.) and the State's commitment to guarantee the balance between a woman's duties towards her family and her work in society (art. 11 Const.)<sup>18</sup>. It also stressed the importance of participation as a "national duty" (art. 62 Const.)<sup>19</sup>.

According to Law No. 73 of 1956 on the exercise of political rights<sup>20</sup>, any Egyptian, male or female, on attaining the age of eighteen solar years, may express his or her independent

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<sup>17</sup> The first constitution was termed the "fundamental ordinance" (*al-la'iha al-asasiyya*).

<sup>18</sup> Art. 11 reconfirms the concept of equality, stating that "the State shall guarantee coordination between woman's duties towards her family and her work in the society, considering her equal to man in the political, social, cultural and economic spheres without detriment to the rules of Islamic jurisprudence (*Sharia*)".

<sup>19</sup> Art. 62: "Citizens shall have the right to vote, nominate and express their opinions in referenda according to the provisions of the law. Their participation in public life is a national duty".

<sup>20</sup> Art. 1, Law 73 of 1956 on the Exercising of Political Rights. The Law was substituted by a new one with the same provision, Law No. 173 of 2005 regulating the practice of political rights.

opinion by voting in referenda and electing members of the People's Assembly (*Majlis al Shaab*)<sup>21</sup>, the Consultative Council (*Majlis al Shura*)<sup>22</sup> and the local popular councils (*Majlis al Magallat*)<sup>23</sup>. This law codified the culture of popular participation developed during the Nasser period. It has been amended eleven times, most recently by Law No. 167 of 2000. A new text was discussed in May 2007 by the People's Assembly and the Consultative Council.

By law, voting is mandatory (since 1979 for women), but not all qualified adults are registered to vote and the obligation only applies to citizens included in the election roster<sup>24</sup>. In fact, since the 1952 Revolution, Egypt has established a set method for registering the names of eligible voters. Current Law No. 73 requires voters to satisfy certain conditions, first of all that they hold citizen status. That obviously implies that men and women be recognised by the State as legal entities. As we will see later in greater detail, this continues to represent a serious obstacle to the guarantee of women's enforcement of their political rights.

In the past, Egyptian women have received special consideration through the adoption of laws promoting their greater participation as a group. Law No. 114 of 1983 stated that "each list in the 31 districts must have a female member," thereby ensuring that women would hold at least one seat in addition to any they might secure by defeating male candidates. However, the quota system was abolished by Law No. 188 (1986), the Supreme Constitutional Court having declared it unconstitutional: it conflicted with the principle of equality between men and women.

The disappearance of quotas did not have a strong impact on female representation, which the use of a party list system helped keep high. When Resolution 201 (1990) was passed, the party lists were abolished and replaced by individual elections, restricting women's access to parliament by giving them no other option than to compete directly with men for

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<sup>21</sup> In the Egyptian separation of powers, the People's Assembly holds legislative power, approves the general policy of the State, the general plan of economic and social development and the general budget of the State. Furthermore, it exercises control over the work of the executive authority in the manner prescribed by the Constitution. See 1971 Constitution, Chapter V.

<sup>22</sup> According to the Chapter V of the Constitution, the *Majlis al Shura* is an advisory council. In particular, it is in charge of undertaking research and submitting proposals to preserve the principles of the 23 July 1952 Revolution and the 15 May 1971 Revolution, consolidating national unity and social peace, protecting the alliance of the working forces of the people and the socialist gains as well as the basic constituents of society, its supreme values, its rights and liberties and its public duties, and deepening the democratic socialist system. (Art. 194 Egyptian Const.).

<sup>23</sup> The Arab Republic of Egypt is made up of administrative units, governorates, cities and villages.

<sup>24</sup> The law in fact stipulates that any person whose name is listed on the election rosters but fails without excuse to cast his/her vote in the election or referendum shall be penalised with a fine not exceeding L.E. 100.

seats. President Mubarak justified his early policy of withdrawing any specific electoral support for women by claiming that women were capable of challenging men on their own right and no longer needed special legal mechanisms to guarantee their participation in politics<sup>25</sup>. He was soon proven wrong. During the last three parliamentary elections, female representation has been rather low and President Mubarak had to re-address the issue at the time of drafting a new reform.

At present, by virtue of amended art. 62 of the 2007 Constitution, women must be guaranteed a minimum number of seats in both houses of parliament. That number, however, has yet to be established by law.

It should be pointed out that women's political rights cannot be examined out of context: they are tightly connected with the general legal framework, as a central topic of analysis in political citizenship studies (Diamond, Linz, and Lipset, 1990). I will revisit this point, but it is already worth stressing that political life has been ruled by an Emergency Law since 1981<sup>26</sup>. In the presence of an extraordinary situation, namely terrorism (which one would expect to be considered temporary), it has restrained the real and effective exercise in daily life, by both men and women, of political rights and freedom of expression and association. Indeed, the Emergency Law has instituted powers of censorship and arbitrary arrest and detention, and authorises the use of special security courts whose verdicts cannot be appealed. In addition, a law targeting freedom of expression and association, and consequently political parties, has been enacted<sup>27</sup>. All of which begs the following question: what are the consequences of formal political claiming democratic slogans and adopting this restricted legal attitude in practice?

## 5. *Women's political citizenship: in practice*

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<sup>25</sup> In figures, this participation translates as follows: from 1957 to 2000 women's representation in Parliament only rose from 0.5% to 2.4%. The only exception came in 1979 and 1984 when the figures jumped to 8.9 and 7.86 percent respectively thanks to a law instituted in 1979 which guaranteed that women would get at least 31 seats or no less than 7% of the members of Parliaments.

<sup>26</sup> Actually, the Emergency Law was enacted in 1958. Originally intended for wars, catastrophes and dangerous diseases, it was later extended to situations of terrorism and internal violence. In 1981, following Sadat's assassination, a new law re-established a state of emergency, allowing the government to restrict liberties and undertake any action for the sake of national security.

<sup>27</sup> It is the case of police preventing women exercising their right to protest, see, *Egypt: Security Forces Attack Opposition Demonstrators Eyewitness Testimony of Plainclothes Police Beating Protestors*. Human Rights Watch. Press Released. Published on 2nd August 2006; *Egyptian police arrest eight activists at protest against sexual harassment of women*. International Herald Tribune. 14<sup>th</sup> November 2006.

In order to vote, citizens need to be proactive and register on the voting list. Until very recently, a large number of eligible female voters were missing from that list. This was due not only to the perceived low importance of elections but also to women's lack of legal recognition through Identification Cards (ID Cards).

In 1994, for the first time, the International Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo, shed light on the question of voter turnout and voter registration. Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) already active in the field reported that women were not recognised as citizens, therefore unable to benefit from any formal rights. An NGO survey revealed that 92.6% of Egyptian women<sup>28</sup> were not registered on voting lists although at that time the government had already established the National Council for Motherhood and Childhood (it was created in 1989).

It was only in 2000 that a real drive to distribute ID and voting cards to women was launched via government and NGO programmes. At that time, a Presidential Decree (No. 90 of 2000) created the National Council for Women (NCW) with the purpose of enhancing the status of Egyptian women and, in the political field, encouraging them not only to vote but also to stand as candidates in elections. According to its mandate, the NCW was expected to work towards raising women's awareness of their rights and abilities and, eventually, guaranteeing their active participation in the political life of the country. As of November 30, 2005, the Council's "National Digital Identification Card Programme" had helped 1,504,617 women obtain their documents (NCW survey)<sup>29</sup>.

Since 2000, NGOs as well have started to become seriously involved in the implementation of projects to raise women's awareness and their active participation in political life, starting with the distribution of voting cards (mostly to women living in the poorest suburbs).

As a result of the governmental and NGO efforts, unofficial data suggest that currently around 38% of registered voters are women<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> In the 1957 Elections, when Egyptian women voter for the first time, the percentage of women voters was no more than 2.6% of the electorate, stated the National Council for Women Secretary. Farkounda H. 2004. *In depth study on women's participation in politics*. National Council for Women, Cairo, 5-6.

<sup>29</sup> The latest census conducted in November 2006, the percentage of women out of the whole Egyptian population was 48.88%, Egypt State Information Service.

<sup>30</sup> During field research, I privileged the search for primary sources. However, official data which can be considered reliable and exhaustive is hardly available. In this specific case, figures come from interviews with staff from the National Council itself. The more recent official data have been published in 2001 the percentage of women voters increased to 35.12% of the total number of registered voters throughout the country where the maximum has been reached in the Governorate of Marsa Matruh (46.11%) and the minimum in the

Apart from these legal documents, NGOs have done more than any other political actor to foster a political culture at the grassroots level, by informing citizens of political changes, while at the political level they have promoted dialogue and shared agendas among political parties. The Association for Development and Enhancement of women and Egyptian Centre for Women's rights, just to mention a few of the major examples, have been carrying out programmes in the poorest areas of Cairo and in the countryside to make women aware of their rights<sup>31</sup>. Afterwards, during the 2005 electoral period, a few NGOs active in Cairo started a series of conferences, seminars and roundtables to facilitate the debate on the issue of women in politics by inviting all the actors involved, and drafted suggestions for legal amendments addressed to the government<sup>32</sup>. Before the approval of the constitutional amendments, the Egyptian Centre for Women Rights, drafted a list of recommendations and at the time of the debate on the new Law on Exercising Political Rights<sup>33</sup>, they gathered representatives from all the main political parties and activist movements to discuss the restricted provisions which the government intended to put into force. Although not being acknowledged, they have demonstrated a growing willingness to come from the bottom and their ability to turn themselves into a strong and organised voice. Predictably, in the near future, the government is expected to take into account suggestions from such new voices.

Their involvement, indeed, has often exceeded the traditional domain of NGO action. Despite being formally outside the political arena, NGOs have in the last few years become substitutes for political parties by promoting awareness through dialogue and shared initiatives between citizens, experts, politicians and, as they are commonly referred to in the field, activists. The main factor behind this necessary political involvement has been the parties' own lack of concern, as we will see below.

As far as women candidates are concerned, their percentage has not significantly

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Governorate of Suez (21.66%). A complete table of data distinguished for year and Governorate can be found in: Farkounda H. *Ibid.* 5-6.

<sup>31</sup> It has been proved that, for example, at the time of the referendum campaign, some women did not know the meaning of the constitution.

<sup>32</sup> A few examples of such initiatives is available on the web, at the archive news of the Egyptian Centre for Women Rights, <http://www.ecwronline.org/English/News/2005/index.htm>.

<sup>33</sup> As widely explained in the document submitted to the Government by the Egyptian Centre for Women rights, *Ahlaqa naqaascia haul uadah almarrah fi qanun mbasciarat alhachiq assiasiah algiadid*. Paper distributed at the Meeting, May 2007.

changed<sup>34</sup>. In 2000, 121 female independent candidates ran for election (independents totalled 3036). In 2005 the overall number of female independents had fallen to 111, out of 4279 candidates; 1 ran for the Muslim Brotherhood and 3 for El Ghad Party and El Karama Party<sup>35</sup>. As a consequence, the percentage of participants has dropped to 2.4% in 2000/2005 legislature and 1% in the Consultative Council<sup>36</sup>.

Three observations emerge from these numbers.

Firstly, while the number of female candidates has been slowly increasing, women remain a very small percentage of candidates running in 2005 -- despite the fact that the NCW was already actively involved in the field, training and supporting hundreds of female participants (according to the NCW data, almost 1,000 women were involved in the two main programmes).

Secondly, nearly all of them ran as independents, a fact which, regardless of past promises, clearly results from the lack of support from the main parties. The NDP only presented 6 women out of 444 candidates. The political programmes of all the Egyptian parties, however different their ideological orientation, advocated a suitable climate for women to exercise their rights and duties. In reality, however, the political parties have continued to back away from giving women strong support. While some did create formal committees for women's issues, or at least gave some consideration to women in their overall agenda, women were not seriously included at election time.

Finally, even if women do run, their chances of winning are very slim. In 2005 only 4 of them earned their seats through election. If more have joined Parliament, it is thanks to the President's constitutional prerogative (art. 87 Const.) to appoint 10 members. Remarkably, since 1995, President Mubarak has increasingly used that prerogative to nominate women. The recent amendments provide new guarantees for women, artificially achieving a minimum of balance that natural political competition is not yet able to produce by itself (art. 62 Const.).

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<sup>34</sup> Data from NCW, *Al-marrah fi al-intihabat maglis alscliaab 2005*, produced in collaboration with UNIFEM and UNDP, Cairo, 2005; Report on the Fourth Training Workshop – women political empowerment project”, NCW in cooperation with Netherlands Embassy- Cairo 26-29 June 2006.

<sup>35</sup> Out of the three, only El Ghad Party has been legally recognised as a party from the Committee of the Political Party headed by the Speaker of the Consultative Council.

<sup>36</sup> With the exception of years characterized by the adoption of a quota system, the average of women's representation in the legislature has ranged from 0.5% to 2.4% since 1956 until 2000 legislative elections. Indeed, out of approximately 200 women, who presented themselves as candidates for the 1979 Elections, thirty won the seats reserved for women. Furthermore, women won 3 other seats and the President of the Republic appointed 2 women as Members of Parliament.

As far as the Consultative Council is concerned, it is worth point out that Egypt held mid-term Elections in June and, since no women has been elected, Mubarak who had to appoint 44 members, has opted for 9 women.

#### ***6. Citizenship: a rhetorical or a substantial concept?***

In this context of political and constitutional reforms, will such new formal efforts of the Egyptian government to include citizens and, in particular, women in the political process, favour an effective implementation of women's political citizenship? What has political change produced for female citizens? Has political change produced only a contrast between public announcement (rhetoric) and results in practice (reality)? What is the role of the government and of the other political actors involved?

The steps taken so far all go in the right direction, by enforcing the principles established as far back as 1956 and reducing the gap between theory and practice, between the official and legal commitment and the reality of political life.

Since 2000, Egypt has been witnessing a new period of revitalisation in political life, as well as by new grassroots movements which have gained a foothold in the domestic level. In this period, the Egyptian government has launched fundamental political reforms characterized by a decision-making process involving an increasing level of direct participation for citizens, through referenda, elections and a broader representation in the parliament. Similar events might be regarded as representing an important moment for strengthening the so-called "political citizenship", to be granted to all the various segments of society, which include women, traditionally marginalized from the political process. For political citizenship to be exercised, it is to be legally recognised. In such perspective, it is worth noting that, the governmental attitude seeking voters to reinforce their political authority has strongly contributed to the distribution of Identification Cards, required for voting. Thanks to such documents, government and, in general, the whole society, recognised women as legal persons. Before 2000, such recognition was not so obvious since most of the female population had not documents and, consequently, was not legitimate to enjoy public services.

Besides the legal improvements, the government, along with the political parties and the NGOs, gives the impression of having undertaken substantial actions for the enforcement of political rights. Apparently, the top-down reform has been accompanied by initiatives coming from the bottom (civil society). The whole system seems to be devoted to the

cause of women.

Helping women get voting cards is a good step since obtaining legal documents implies their recognition as citizens, at long last. However, does holding a voting card mean using it (and complying with one's "national duty" to do so)? Are women fully aware of the importance of exercising their right of vote? And even if they are, is their choice of candidate a fully independent decision?

The numbers clearly demonstrate that the distribution of ID cards is not sufficient since women are not fully involved in the political process. A glance at past Egyptian political life, for example during the Nasser period (when women were first allowed to vote and encouraged to become involved in politics), makes it quite obvious that women's participation in politics has suffered a reversal of fortune under Mubarak's presidency. Many female activists have used the comparison with the past when debating the position of women in politics (Makram Ebeid, 2005).

Several respected associations assigned with monitoring the elections have extensively recorded the repeated manipulation of women's votes, even through intimidation and violence. The Egyptian Centre for Women's Rights (2005) argued about "using women for their votes" and described in its several reports the cases of women prevented from entering polling stations for voting or, at the time of the presidential election, women's votes being used to collect more consensus<sup>37</sup>.

Certainly, similar matters results in part from the social and cultural environment, which so far has not favoured trust in politics, portraying electoral events in particular as corrupt and unfair. Traditional social attitudes as well still tend to prevent women from joining the public sphere. Furthermore, most citizens are more concerned with their personal financial problems in these painful economic times than with the "dirty political game" which they cannot influence anyway. The declining level of voter participation in elections demonstrates the current scepticism about the very value of voting, from 50% in the 1995 parliamentary elections to 25% in 2005 (Soliman, 2005).

Nevertheless, these factors alone do not explain the obstacles women usually encounter

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<sup>37</sup> Several cases of violence and sexual harassment were also reported. The chain of violence which started with the 1995 elections continued in 2000 and 2005 when a woman, Soa'ad Tea'alp was run over by a car. A report by the Independent Committee for Elections Monitoring (ICEM, 2005), which was allowed to monitor the referendum amending art. 76 of the Constitution, as well as presidential and parliamentary elections, describes an escalation of violence with 15 fatalities and more than 500 injured. Finally, according to another report from the Centre for Women's Rights on the recent referendum on amending thirty-four articles of the Constitution, some women allowed to enter polling stations were forced to vote "Yes."

when they enter politics. Why has the last decade been characterized by a drastic decrease in the number of women present in formal political life?

The government officially claims higher participation of all citizens and promises concrete actions in favour of under-represented groups, such as women, but it is in fact reluctant to turn passive citizens into vigorous, active participants. Despite the legal guarantees, female citizens' ability to exercise their political and other important rights has not really improved because the practical attitude adopted by authority still appears contradictory. In addition, the recent political shifts, namely the normalization of the Emergency Law and the recent amendment to the constitution, let analysts question the real purpose of Egyptian Government.

For instance, the recent restriction on freedom of expression and association, which was justified on security grounds, has not encouraged an atmosphere of trust and openness. On the contrary, it has created a political environment in which citizens do not feel free to speak for themselves. As stated before, an atmosphere of violence permeates all aspects of political life (affecting demonstrations, gatherings, meetings and press releases), particularly the electoral process. As far as women are concerned, "old mechanisms", such as the quota system, has been re-established in order to guarantee a minimum of representation in Parliament that the political competition naturally is not yet able to produce by itself. However, a few number of candidates have received support from parties, especially from the ruling party and, no women have been called to play substantive role in politics, such as the case of the High Committee of Elections<sup>38</sup>, a new body provided for by the 2007 Constitution. It does not include women in its composition. Outside the formal sphere, some women are increasingly involved in political affairs: they are the so-called activists, who do not necessarily operate from within political parties or others formal institutions. These women are active in NGOs, in the press and on such new fora as political blogs. Most female activists today prefer to leave the official, institutional roles to men and work behind the scene. This is the result of too many cases of violence against women, for instance during street demonstrations protesting the corruption

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<sup>38</sup> The Committee membership will include: the head of Cairo Court of Appeals (Chair), the Chair of the Alexandria Court of Appeals, one representative of the Court of Cassation, one representative of the State Council, three chairs from Appeals Courts, representatives from the previous Cassation Court and four of public persons. (art. 76 and 88 Const).

prevalent in the electoral process or the NDP-led revision of the Press Law<sup>39</sup>. These episodes of violence, intimidation and bribery have characterized elections all over Egypt since the mid-nineties. They are not sporadic or accidental occurrences. As a result, they have fed the popular view of politics as an extremely corrupt and dangerous field. Hence, women refuse to expose themselves by exercising political rights (both the right to vote and run for election)<sup>40</sup>. In this perspective, practice makes the recent formal step undertaken fruitless. Can the fear of getting involved in an unsafe game be considered an obstacle preventing women from exercising their rights? Can the enforcing strategy produce mechanisms preventing the engagement of official promises?

An increase in women's participation requires the political will to substantiate the full "right of citizenship" which the legal framework officially provides for both men and women. It is also conditional upon the existence of active political parties capable of attracting women and seriously supporting their political participation. To a deeper analysis, it seems that the government is still contradictory in its politics and in its wake that of the political parties, is far too ambiguous to effectively facilitate the substantial exercise of women's political rights.

Until this changes, the opening-up of Egyptian political life to women is likely to remain a slow and tentative process in a male-dominated political system which purports to achieve justice and equality but operates from the wrong premises.

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<sup>39</sup> For example the demonstration organized for the so called Black Referendum. In such occasion, female journalists and activists have been assaulted and sexually harassed. Furthermore, three of them have been arrested. See, Jailan Halawi, *Women in Black*, *Weekly Al-Ahram*, 2-8 June 2005. As well, the anniversary demonstration organized the next year, in 2006, *One year and the confrontation continues*, Amira Howdewy, *Weekly Al-Ahram*, 1-7 June 2006.

<sup>40</sup> The qualitative research was conducted through a series of interviews with women involved in politics, either in political parties (Al Ghad Party, Al Tagamoa Party and Nasserist Party) or in politically relevant movements (Kifaya), and with journalists close to the political field. Female interviewees were selected to cover the broad spectrum of sometimes conflicting ideologies. Some of them, although activists, opted for the non-registration in the voter's list.

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