Football fans for a secular Egypt

Bloggers and activists played a big role in mobilising people for the revolution. They rallied the youth to the Tahrir square and managed to keep them motivated. The Ultras are a good example of this. It is a well-organised group of football supporters affiliated to the 'Ahly' football club. The Ultras have their own corporate identity, with uniforms, logo’s etc. During the protests they used motorbikes to serve as an ambulance and they have great communication skills. They are appearing daily in talk shows, on the radio, in newspapers and internet magazines. The Ultras are very critical of the government and the people from the old regime that are still in power. They are always in the front line of demonstrations. Last February during a football match in Port Said dozens of Ultras died in violence that was incited by fans of the other club after the game. The government has never really tried to find the perpetrators and bring them to justice. Until the government will go after the perpetrators the Ultras will protest. The objectives of the Ultras is a secular Egypt. An alliance of football fans of different clubs has been established, the fans unite because of a common quest for freedom and dignity.

Ahmed Nassouf, Youth branch Free Egyptian party

We should not only be concerned about the position of women after the Arab revolutions, says writer Petra Stienen. A political revolution in the Arab world can only succeed if the relations between men and women change drastically as well. She gives her own personal reflections based on her recent encounters with men and women in Egypt.

By Petra Stienen
Zeinab is one of my closest friends in Cairo. We studied together at Cairo university in the late eighties. Zeinab is Muslim, in theory, in practice she is more secular than religious. Zeinab has been a single mother for a long time and wants a new relationship. But that is not easy, certainly not openly, because if the neighbours suspect she receives men overnight, they might complaint to the vice squad. Zeinab is quite desperate about the chances that she will meet a man, as she is past forty and meets only married men who want her as a mistress. She would love to go to a Gulf state to make more money, but the father of her son Hamid does not allow her to take him with her. Yet Zeinab is still in a pretty good position compared to many other Egyptian women. She has her own income, and her apartment is small and scanty, but in a reasonable neighbourhood. According to statistics, about 12 percent of Egypt’s households are headed by a single mother. Zeinab is upset by the attitude of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafists, ‘They keep complaining that women should be good mothers and stay at home, to prevent them from taking away the jobs of men. Have they ever looked around and seen how many women have no husband to take care of them?’

The revolution has not yet made a major impact in her daily life. ‘The changes at the top of the pyramid have contributed hardly anything to what should happen as well: a revolution in the minds of people, a total change in how we interact.’ There are still lots of small Mubaraks around, in the office, at home and on the street. Only if I can be free to do what I want as a single woman with child, the revolution is successful for me.’

I think of Zeinab at the opening of the Regional Conference for Women, organized by El-Karama. This organisation has invited women and a few men from the whole Arab region to speak about the opportunities and threats for women after the revolution. Having learned from previous experiences in Algeria and Iraq, it is clear that a backlash on women’s rights after the Arab revolutions might happen here as well. Especially since the former first ladies of many countries, such as Suzanne Mubarak of Egypt and Asma al-Assad of Syria had appropriated the subject of women’s rights, thus changing the subject into something associated with the old regime.

During the conference, the agenda focuses on three issues: how to increase political participation of women, how to achieve better legal guarantees of women’s rights and the role of women in the media. Tahany Gebaly, the first female judge in the Constitutional Court, explains why she does not wish to run for president. ‘In my present position I have more power, because ultimately the new president has to adhere to the constitution.’ Southain Camel, a former TV presenter tells why she wants to run for office anyway. ‘Although I stand no chance in this male-dominated society, I just want young girls to get used to the idea that a woman can hold the highest office.’ An Iraqi activist has a passionate story of an Iraqi activist about the struggle for women’s rights in Iraq, from her own experience as a lawyer under Saddam Hussein and during the American occupation.

Later that day, I find out that sometimes theory and practice for feminist activists are two different things. It turns out to be even difficult for some female activists to keep an open mind when meeting women who have a different vision on some issues: ‘How to increase political participation, how to achieve better legal guarantees, how to achieve better representation of women in the media.’ Two women in niqab and black gloves confront the group of female students. Without much discussion, they turn around to leave us and go back to the bus. The young Lebanese BBC producer looks desperate, not knowing how to deal with this situation. Two women in niqab and black gloves approach us. ‘Are you afraid of us?’ To be honest, I find it difficult to communicate with someone when I only see their eyes and there’s no way to read their body language to check if we understand each other. But I suppress my own reluctance and ask the girls what they think of us and the way we look. ‘You are like a rose,’ she replies with a glint in her eyes. It is almost as if she is flirting with me. ‘Therefore it is good that a woman is protected, so you will not fall prey to men who want to break your beauty. And it helps to cover yourself, so that men will not be tempted.’

I try a different approach:

‘You are studying medicine?’

‘Yes.’

‘So you want to be a doctor?’

‘Yes, very much.’

‘Do you like to get married? And have children?’

‘Absolutely, preferably immediately after my studies.’

‘So then you will be a doctor, wife and mother. And a friend, neighbour, daughter, sister and someone who loves to read.’

‘The eyes light up. ‘Yeah, sure.’

‘But habitually, my dearest, I speak to her sisterly, ‘then you are much more than only a body that needs to be protected...’

Suddenly I see something changing in her eyes, something of a new idea that there is another world out there, different from hers. Finally we stay with less than twenty women from the conference to continue the rather disorganised discussion.
bate. We even manage to create a cordial atmos-
phere and a sense of sisterhood among the women
themselves. And we team up against the five men
in the panel telling us what the role of women in
society should be.

The evening takes an unexpected joyful end,
resembling the end of a school trip when we have
to share the bus back home. A Dutch male
journalist is having the time of his life, being sur-
rounded by so many different women discussing
marriage, sexuality and division of labour be-
tween men and women at home. The laughter
and fun make me forget that I still can see only
the eyes of my new friends. At night I realise that
deeply the new insights, there are still many
unanswered questions in this conference on how
women raise their kids, especially their sons.

In many families it is the mother that tells the
girls to serve their brothers and father and put
themselves in second place. Where are the stories
of fathers encouraging their daughters to study
and use their talents, if they want to? And when
it comes to sexual harassment and violence in the
streets, where are the voices of political leaders
who say: ‘Our women can safely walk the streets
and travel safely in buses and trains?’

During a visit to Egypt in the spring of 2012,
the theme of sexualized violence against women
comes up in every conversation. A conspicuous
advertisement for viagra on the front page of
Almasri Ayoum, a popular Egyptian newspaper,
catches my attention. The price per pill has been
reduced from 27LE to 10LE (from € 3,50 to € 1,30),
a significant reduction, especially in a country
where the average income is often no more than
a hundred Euros per month. I ask an Egyptian
businessman whether this development is a pos-
itive outcome of the Arab Spring. He responds
seriously: ‘Do you realize that in this country,
young men have huge sexual problems? Many
women in Egypt, Muslims and Christians, have
undergone genital mutilation, nobody has had
decent sex education and fun in the bedroom is
unknown to many. You bet they like to use those
pills’. Other Egyptian friends are less outspoken
about the ad. According to them, sexual pleasure
is not really a priority in times of revolutions and
economic malaise.

The Egyptian-American Mena Eltahawy thinks
otherwise, according to her article ‘Why do they
hate us’, published at the end of April 2012 in the
American magazine Foreign Policy. She argues
that the political revolution in the Arab world can
only succeed if a social, cultural and sexual revo-
lution takes place as well. According to her, the
fear of female sexuality and the hatred of women
halts the progress of the whole society. I think she
is right that political freedoms will never take
root without personal freedoms. Fundamental
change requires an active strategy of politicians,
media and educators to ensure that men and
women can interact with each other as equal
partners in every field of life. This will certainly
take time, given the conservative nature of Arab
societies.

Zeinab and many other Arab friends have told
me that this is what they appreciate in the way
relationships are formed in Europe: the equality
between partners. As Samir, a Syrian friend, once
told me: ‘It is a dream to just fall in love with
each other, to be able to walk in the park and
build a future together. Without being controlled
by our parents, the state or a religious figure.’

Petra Stienen is a writer and Arabist.

Kleinpaste

Literature often mirrors current
events. In this column Stendhal’s
The Red and the Black will be
discussed: human dignity and
morality lie at the heart of every
revolution.

Europe has been careless with its democracy.
Ever since the Eurozone crisis broke out, democ-
ray has been the victim of severe neglect. When
Greek prime-minister Papandreou suggested
holding a referendum on his proposed austerity
measures, he was quickly put in place by his
European counterparts: they would have none
of Papandreou’s shenanigans. In 2011, when
Papandreou was replaced by the ‘technocrat’ Mario
Monti, many welcomed Monti as the one who
would finally take the necessary measures. The
tribute some Europeans paid to democracy seems
lip-service at most. Democracy doesn’t solve the
debt-crisis, hampers quick action and it really
only hides the black to tackling our worst problem!
Thank God for technocrats! It is as if some have
forgotten that the supreme value of democracy
lies not so much in its ability to manage effec-
tively, as in providing political decisions with
the highest authority, legitimacy and – most of
all – decency. Why this is the case, is most accu-
rately illustrated in The Red and the Black (1830) by
Stendhal [Marie-Henri Beyle], in which the dem-
cratic, egalitarian promises of the 19th-century
society, stemming from the values of the French
Revolution, are gradually lost through Stendhal’s novel,
and causes the agitation between the world Julien
wants to live in and the world in which he is forced
to live in: working in the service of the aristocracy.

In this sense the novel contains an acute perspec-
tive. It is never just about money, Stendhal says.
Democracy and democratic cultures are not so
much about the ‘best’ or most lucrative decisions,
but about human dignity. When it comes to such
dignity, Europe doesn’t provide a very hopeful
view for the future.

In The Red and the Black, the young, intelligent
but poor Julien Sorel dreams of making it in a
world that is still dominated by the aristocracy.
Stendhal published his novel just a few months
after the July Revolution of 1830, and it chronicles
the last years of the Bourbon Restauration. Julien
struggles to find his way up the social ladder,
always carrying around a portrait of Napoleon,
whom he admires. The days of Napoleon stand
in sharp contrast with the restored old order,
in which privilege dominated. Stendhal attacks
the materialism, shallowness and corruption of
the French aristocratic society. If there is to
be another Robespierre, the aristocratic elites
themselves first and foremost are to blame.

One scene between Julien and his employer,
monsieur de Rênal, mayor of the small town of
Verrières, is especially illustrative. One day Julien
feels humiliated after being publicly scolded by
monsieur de Rênal, after which Julien angrily
conflicts him. Monsieur de Rênal (involved in
a petty feud about status with some of the other
notables in town) is afraid Julien might quit his
job: the young man is quite popular in Verrières.
But instead of an apology, he offers Julien a raise.

However, Juliens dignity cannot be bought or
sold: ‘Mere money, how banal!’ he ponders. He
takes the raise because he considers it a moral
victory over monsieur de Rênal. The latter, being
rather tight, only worries about the extra money
he now has to spend on Julians salary.

Julian and monsieur de Rênal are living in
two worlds which are unable to understand each
other. Juliens highest aspiration is not just mat-
terial wealth. He simply hopes to be regarded as an
equal so that he can climb through the ranks, and
become an acknowledged member of the French
society. The promise of a democratic, egalitarian
society, stemming from the values of the French
Revolution, is lost through Stendhal’s novel,
and causes the agitation between the world Julien
wants to live in and the world in which he is forced
to live in: working in the service of the aristocracy.

Hans van Pinxteren.


The Red and the Black

Hans van Pinxteren.