



Women's Issues Take Center Stage



Zeinab Radwan
AlJazeera

Two religious/political controversies that occurred over the past two days are about to ignite a heated debate over the position of women in Islam.

PI Online analyzes the emerging dynamics.

Zeinab Radwan, Deputy Speaker of the People's assembly in the Egyptian Parliament and member of the powerful National Democratic Party political bureau, suddenly created a storm in Islamic circles this week. She announced during a conference on



Gamal Qutb
AlJazeera net (archive)

"Citizenship" that "the testimony of a woman is legally equal in weight with a man's testimony." That statement takes dead aim at an established interpretation of Islamic law which holds that a man's testimony in most judicial cases carries twice as much weight as the testimony of a woman. This interpretation has always been based on a controversial *Quranic* verse dealing with transactional obligations between parties [...]"and get two witnesses out of your own men and if two men are not available, then chose a man and two women for witnesses, so that if one errs, the other can refresh her memory"...-*Al-Baarah* 282]. *Radwan* explained that "[t]he *Quranic* verses on the issue of the testimony of women were related to specific and limited [historical] occurrences and the changes in [today's] situations impose changes on that ruling."

Clerics were swift to condemn *Radwan's* statement, as expected. *Gamal Qutb*, former head of the *Fatwa* council in *Al-Azhar*, impugned *Radwan's* credibility on Islamic Jurisprudence and warned against tampering with the *Shari'a*. In his view, it would be insane to continuously alter interpretations of the *Quran* every time conditions in society human behavior changed. *Qutb* was seconded by *Sayyid 'Askar*, a parliamentarian who is a member of the religious committee in the People's assembly.

While being interviewed by *Al-Jazeera* yesterday, *Qutb* lashed out at the Western world for "having molded such speakers to serve their interests and who are being guided by the West. Those who live in our midst while representing another culture and regardless of their elevated worldly status are unqualified to speak on religious matters." *Qutb's* statement is peculiar to say the least. Given *Dr. Radwan's* background it is virtually certain that she is articulating her own beliefs. She obtained her PhD in Islamic Philosophy and has done work on Political Islam. She is not known to shy away from debate and has been quoted as explaining to her students at Cairo University that political opposition and dissent have always been characteristic of Islam. There is no doubt, however, that on the streets of Egypt there is much speculation over whether *Dr. Radwan* got the green light from the presidential palace to come out publicly on such a controversial subject and, if so, why. *Dr. Radwan* rejects use of the veil and is therefore considered a liberal by Muslim standards. Her views are, most likely, closely aligned with those of President Mubarak's wife, Suzanne, who has been increasing her visibility on the world stage. No doubt this connection between *Dr. Radwan* and Mrs. Mubarak will be explored and exploited. *Dr. Radwan's* battle is not likely to be easily fought or won. Much will depend upon how the leaders of *Al-Azhar* react, despite the fact that *Al-Azhar* has been described lately as a religious rubber stamp for the government. As Napoleon quickly learned after invading Egypt, ignoring the Muslim clerics is perilous. The clerics will not, in all likelihood, regard this confrontation as solely an issue of women's rights. The critical core of the debate is whether the *Quran* will continue to be very strictly interpreted (literally verbatim), as fundamentalists would like, or be seen as a source of inspiration for Muslims within a historical context and therefore adaptable to modern times.

In another important pronouncement pertaining to women, *Al-Arabiyya* reported on the fatwa by the respected Shi'a religious leader Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah regarding women's right to combat domestic violence. [See PI 525 for our report].

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