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Peace in Exchange for the Veil



In an interesting article describing what he considers a public sign of fanaticism and backwardness in Egypt, columnist *Ma'mun Fendi* in *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* today examines recent historical events which led to the spread of the practice of women wearing the veil in Egypt. He attributes the rise of that phenomenon to ill conceived actions taken by the late president *Anwar Sadat* thirty years ago. *Fendi* contends that by portraying himself as a religious president and flirting with the Islamic movements, *Sadat* used the Islamic popular front to gain the loyalty he needed to support his courageous undertakings and surmount any objections within the populous or attempts to sabotage his efforts.

The result of this policy, which *Fendi* calls "Peace in exchange for the Veil", is what has transformed the majority of women's attire by wearing the veil. He contends that the process has produced a corresponding intellectual veiling of the mind. The author adds that if it was not for the Christian Coptic minority in Egypt, the country would have looked like Iran or a nation controlled by the Taliban. While acknowledging his respect for traditional attire, including the wearing of the veil by some women as a customary manifestation of traditions, such as existed in Upper Egypt, the author argues that this new phenomenon of wearing the veil is a detrimental concept stemming from a desire to express political affiliation rather than traditional roots. Acknowledging the role that *Sadat* played in his peace overture, *Fendi* contends nevertheless that thirty years later the price Egypt has paid is the development of a religious rather than a secular society that brought to an end the country's cultural and social development. *Fendi* argues that the practice of *takfir* [declaring people unbelievers or heretics] was the end result. Having labeled *Sadat* an "unbeliever" for his peace initiative with Israel, the practice spread to engulf writers and authors who agreed with *Sadat* and later extended to all those who disagreed with the extremists as they radicalized a majority of the society.

Fendi laments the erosion of the civil society in Egypt asserting that the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel did not produce the political and sociological awareness and openness which was anticipated. He refers to the new political situation in Egypt as "The Sheikh and the General" because the streets belong to the sheikhs and the religious establishment and the government belongs to the generals. The writer equally expresses his grief for the disappearance of the liberal policies and institutions created during the era preceding these societal transformations and which produced a number of famous Egyptian personalities, whom he lists.

Fendi alleges that the collusion between these groups [the sheikhs and the generals] with the help of the media kept the single issue of the Arab-Israeli conflict as the main focus of the population's animosity and constituted the source of power necessary for these groups' survival. He calls for ending what he considers as empty political and religious slogans and concentrate on producing an internal peace among the population as well as one with other countries.

There is no doubt that *Fendi's* theory is simplistic. There is no single cause for the spreading of religious power in Egypt as manifested in its veiled women. The influence of *Wahabi* Saudi Arabia as well as the economic discontent of the people has also contributed to this phenomenon. Nevertheless, *Fendi's* assault on the majority of the population supportive of this trend, whom he labels as "backward" and "fanatic", will undoubtedly produce condemnation and resentment by many – reactions driven more by defensiveness than conviction.

Source: Al-Shar Al-Awsat & Al-Arabiya – author: Ma'mun Fendi – Date: 1/20/2008 http://www.asharqalawsat.com/leader.asp?section=3&article=455044&issue=10646 http://www.alarabiya.net/views/2008/01/21/44482.html

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