

Talking back: Masculinity and the right time for politics

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Have you watched the videos that circulated on social media following the sentencing in Egypt last Monday of 21 revolutionaries to three to five years in prison?

The cameras captured the parents of the defendants in court as they broke down upon hearing that their sons will, for the coming years, be hustled in a dark prison cell that's a few square meters wide, their agency appropriated by those who control the sequencing of their day and most likely overwhelmed by the lack of privacy and their absence from the lives of their families and loved ones. The mother of Mustafa Yousri, unable to walk steadily, roamed the streets around court screaming against Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's injustice, while Mohamed Sami's father went into a hysterical fit before collapsing on the floor struggling to breathe. A few hours later the headlines of an online newspaper quoted [Sisi telling his counterpart in France](#) that he cared for human rights, but now was not the right time for them. Human rights come later, he said.

Sisi's state relies upon the performativity of masculine ideas and practices that define what type of emotions, if any, are allowed in the public space. Masculinity functions therefore to exclude or deny particular expressions — and, by extension, people — from that very public space. This is not new and could be said to be an extension of Mubarak's sexist and patriarchal politics of government and of military institutions altogether. I want to contribute, however, to a discussion about how gendered politics of emotion have been translated into the discourses of those on "our side," those who are committed to fighting the regime's atrocities and lies and those who have sometimes spent their entire lives fighting for justice. My inquiry arises from the disappointment that, as revolutionaries and members of the opposition, we have failed to ask, as Judith Butler articulates it, "What, politically, might be made from grief besides a cry for war?"

My contention is that, willingly or not, by reproducing the state's patriarchal discourse we deny ourselves the possibility to talk back in a way that opens alternatives and builds alliances rather than silences our comrades and colleagues. By introducing the act of talking back, I'm quoting feminist African American writer Bell Hooks, who responds to the voices that silence various experiences of black women. Hooks explains the importance of talking back to patriarchal politics in general and their intersection with other forms of domination and oppression such as racism, classism, able-ism and cis- and hetro-normativity. I will use two instances: the recent airstrikes on Libya and the upcoming Egypt Economic Development Conference (EEDC) in mid-March to highlight why it is an urgent matter for us to reassess how gender plays into our discourses and practices of resistance.

It strikes me as I write these lines that the number 21 is deeply symbolic. 21 men in Cairo are being persecuted as a consequence of fighting to turn their country into a decent place, where the 21 beheaded men would have been able to live. Miles apart, between a draconian seashore and a dark prison cell, the connection between them, which seems so distant, cannot be any closer. The regime's patriarchal propaganda machine makes both groups seem as far away from each other as possible; the former is reactionary, amateurish, soft and only worthy of our scorn, while the latter is the breadwinner, tough, the one after material well-being and the group worthy of our empathy. Their struggle for a decent living, however, comes down to a very similar core, despite being articulated differently, with reference to different life histories and repertoires of resistance. But allowing the state's gendered politics of emotion to be mirrored in our discourses and practices of resistance can only make us myopic, if not also exclusivist and plain wrong.

Patriarchy and the emotional register of politics

In the battle for representation, Sisi attempts to embody a rational state, a state that feeds people, that protects citizens against invaders and one that does not have time for emotional politics as embodied by the politics of the “Shura Council” case. In other words, the state of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has no time for what is considered irrational, emotional and otherwise understood as feminine politics — feminine politics that make a state soft, attached to a utopian but impossible ideal of equality and justice and easily penetrable by others. As Sara Ahmed, author of the Cultural Politics of Emotion, suggests, in situations like this, the only emotions allowed are those of love and veneration for the nation, while other so-called unruly emotions have no space in politics.

By participating in a demonstration against provisions in Egypt's draft constitution that facilitated the court martialing of civilians, the 21 protestors are portrayed as soft for fighting for a liberal idealistic claim rather than a material one. Their class background, understood as educated middle class, is used to distinguish them from those worthy of the state's intervention. Their rage at the tyrannical (anti-)Protest Law they are tried for breaching and their parents' displayed expressions of anger and grief are considered too infantile and boisterous to be acted upon by a state busy fighting terrorism.

Speculations arise however, that with the Economic Development Conference at the door, Sisi might pardon them to send a positive message to investors that will boost confidence in Egypt's investment climate. The representation of the Shura Council defendants as feminine thus serves to entrench their public presence and suppress their expressions of rage, anger and grief. The latter are only tolerated when leveraged towards a more masculine goal around the investment domain. Using gender as the backdrop, the state decides which lives are grievable and how to use them, as it did in making the grief around the beheaded men a cry for war.

When patriarchy is the norm, the scapegoating of femininity reflects the actual slander of women. Since the question of women's contribution to social justice altogether is shoved to the side as secondary, the realm of the later, too complicated to be a priority in the current delicate moment, the same befits what is represented as feminine politics. Needless to say, feminists in Egypt and worldwide are still fighting for women's liberation to be a core component of the struggle against capitalism and for political liberation. Further, the tendency to undermine women appears across the board during critical events such as major elections — including of progressive forces like Syriza in Greece — in revolutionary times, in acts of warmongering, as well as in everyday neglect, silencing and violence. Femininity, the so-called domain of women, is thus treated like women themselves — as secondary, pejorative and always in the domain of later. The disturbing bit is that this reasoning applies often to both state and revolutionaries.

Nationalist propaganda, ungrievable lives and the gender of numbers

These acts of gendering are not new and are a legacy of both state and social politics over decades. What I find particularly alarming is the extent to which our discourses around the airstrike attacks on Libya and the economic development conference have been based on the same premises and rationales as those of the state. But, here is a brief account first of these two events.

The Egyptian army launched an airstrike attack on Islamic State forces in Libya in a swift response to the atrocious beheading of 21 Coptic men who were toiling there. This followed on from months of less overt attacks, aided by other Arab countries, to support the government in Tobruk against the General National

Congress in Tripoli — seen as a platform for various Islamic groups including the Muslim Brotherhood.

Meanwhile, Sisi and company have put immense hope on the upcoming economic development conference that is due to take place mid-March in Sharm el-Sheikh. The regime hopes the conference will generate credit facilities and investment that would extend its lifeline, which is otherwise threatened by the ongoing economic crisis since Mubarak. The state's discourses around both events have been loaded with gender queues and emotional politics that have served the rise of nationalist propaganda and encroachment of the public space.

Let me layout the official discourse of the state and then move on to reactions and analysis among the opposition and revolutionaries. Perhaps the official discourse is best encapsulated by the press statement of the military followed by a televised address by Sisi telling the citizens that "your military" has attacked Islamic State targets in Libya in revenge for the beheaded Copts. In associating the people with the military in the process of the airstrike, both the army and Sisi construct a nationhood and endow it with pride. To be part of the "our" and "your" is not just to engender emotions of pride by associating people with the powerful, tough military, but brings the very nation to life.

Various raw emotions emerged following the spreading of the vicious film featuring the beheading of the 21 men. From collective shock and disbelief to sadness, anger and empathy with the victims and their families, systematic injustice, as it appeared to many, continued to produce young men wanting to flee their homes in search of a better life, at no matter what cost. Others were also willing to acknowledge that Copts continue to pay some of the highest price for the lack of freedom and justice in Egypt.

These unruly emotions and ideas, which make of the collective a soft and penetrable one, become instances for constructing the nation altogether when the emotions are channeled into a question of pride and revenge for the collective injury. Not only that, but recognizing their grief only to be leveraged as justification for war, while for instance ignoring the grief over the deaths of Zamalek football fans a week earlier, the state thus decides not just what to make of grief, but which lives are grieve-able.

The Economic Development Conference, on the other hand, highlights the separation of the realm of economics and politics. This economic realm is mostly run by experts, here also understood as men of a certain class background, who suggest that all efforts, at any cost, be focused on enabling the conference to take place. Those who question the ability of a conference to solve long-term conundrums around liquidity, national debt, energy and overall balance of payment, are accused of offering no alternatives or none that are good enough compared to foreign lending and foreign direct investment. Alternatives that challenge the hegemony of the military generals and the national elites, such as demands for transparency in military and judiciary budgets and progressive taxation, are shed aside as naïve and impossible. Their impossibility is often tied to the gendering of numbers rather than the politics of government. Radical moves, we are told, will make capital flee and the stock exchange collapse. The masculinity of their numbers earns them claims to professionalism and domination over the material versus the emotional.

The numbers of the generals, elites and experts also try to frame what is possible within a neoliberal model dominant under Mubarak and every president since. But other numbers they obfuscate in the longer history of Egyptian financial crises and the continuous recycling of debt since other conferences — the Paris Club in early 1990s, for example — show a sharp increase in poverty despite the high borrowing over the 1990s and 2000s. Further, constructing the conference as a matter of life or death for Egypt ignores the accounts that have questioned the [real commitments to invest in Egypt](#) and their ability to bring about change.

But as the breadwinners, the hyper-masculine generals and their neoliberal puppets are out to get us money to survive, and like when they are out to defend us against aggressors, there is no space to question their rationale. Doing so, we are told, is not just immature and amateurish but rather immoral, as it jeopardizes people's chances of finding economic stability.

But, was it not with the sexual division of labor in Egypt that the language around men as breadwinners has been tied to a rise in female-headed households? As the generals, the experts and the elite embrace the patriarchal politics of the breadwinners, the concern is not just that the people will continue to suffer unemployment, endemic poverty and absence of a decent life, but that females will, once again, pay some of the highest prices for the patriarchal politics of those in power.

Revolutionary possibilities and the silencing of others

In the case of the airstrikes on Libya, more so than that of the Economic Development Conference, the response within the opposition and among revolutionaries, mostly dominated by men, activists, writers and academics, but also by women, has ranged from those who believed that this specific moment cannot afford amateur reactions, to others who openly disparaged those who question the possibility that the airstrikes are a start of a full-fledged war which they are not willing to support. Others considered people's inability to decipher the current moment and read the state's tactics and strategies as reason enough for them to simply shut up. More extreme reactions repeated the old adage of blaming the revolutionaries for being reactionaries who have nothing to offer and some went as far as accusing them of being unpatriotic and taking cheap shots at the regime.

Someone critical of all sorts of imperialism can never be ready for such events, whether airstrikes or land warfare, or other forms of assault by one's country. Granted, such developments demand that one be well-informed, historically sensitive and able to understand the complexity of the moment. But what critical commentators have tended to do is belittle attempts to inquire about the validity of the airstrikes, either by undermining those who question whether they are a legitimate response to the atrocious beheadings, or dismissing those who frame this within the wider picture of the strategic agendas of Egypt, other Arab states and even global powers. Those concerned about the effects of the attacks on civilian populations in Libya and others who wonder how the Islamic State would respond to such attacks were equally undermined.

The discourse around the Economic Development Conference is critical of the conference at most, and is less ferocious toward other colleagues and comrades, though often built on the distinction between the toughness of numbers and those who know them, and the soft and emotional character of the rest. Many continue to suggest that borrowing money and encouraging foreign direct investment, for instance is an inevitability. Resisting privatization, taxing the rich, or reforming the healthcare system are highly contested as rather amateur strategies, if not strategies that should just come later.

Of course with information being scarce and generals and experts not responsive to any democratic bodies, in both instances most people were left to throw in educated guesses about the strategies, the tactics, the numbers, the motives and the casualties.

But instead of encouraging attempts to access knowledge and spreading truth, many comrades and colleagues were repeating what was heard earlier by the state. Opposition and revolutionaries endorsed the distinction between hard facts and emotional reactions, exceptional and everyday moments, and whatever comes next about the reactionary nature of revolutionaries and opposition versus those able to provide real

alternatives.

To comrades and colleagues: Talking back

In writing this, my point is not to suggest that members of the opposition, activists or revolutionaries are faultless, always right, or that we do not need an open and ongoing debate around self-critique. The four years after the revolution have given people distance from events, enabling the revisiting of our strategies, and discussion about and learning from our mistakes. But my concern is that if our movements are tinted by the performance of patriarchal discourses and practices, there will be little space to create open platforms where we are critical of ourselves and open to that criticism.

Further, if masculinity means we become exclusivist, we also risk providing factually inaccurate information at a time when access to information is prime. In fact, providing information and spreading truths are some of the most urgent tasks a member of opposition or a revolutionary could do at times like this.

Many among the opposition and revolutionaries have, for example, spoken about the necessity of the military assault on Islamic State forces in Libya and the absence of alternative ways of fighting them. This made them seem oblivious to the fact that in our same plagued region, there are examples of alternative forms of fighting the Islamic State that, just a few weeks ago, have managed to defeat them altogether.

The [liberation of Rojova](#) from an Islamic State onslaught by Kurdish fighters — both women and men — is but one example that challenges the discourse of the necessity of states' military attacks. While my intention is not to de-historicize the conflict and the modes of resistance, nor to suggest that what the Kurdish struggle has built over years could be rebuilt in Egypt overnight, but I bring this example here to highlight that, as critics of the current regime, our role should not be to accept the premises of its arguments but to widen the possibilities of the debate.

If we cannot learn from Kurdish fighters overnight, we could learn from their resistance about our common enemy. Even better, we could learn from the Kurdish struggle whose inspirational force, Abdullah Öcalan, had been exceptionally outspoken about the impossibility of Kurdish liberation without women's liberation and where YPJ (Kurdish Female Forces) have played a leading role against the Islamic State in their recent struggle. Similarly, by treating the struggle of the prisoners' families as only emotional, secondary, and outside the realm of the political, we undermine instances in history where reactions of parents, such as in the case of the [mothers of the Plaza de Mayo](#), had actually become a major source of organized political opposition against dictatorships and contributed to the end of their oppression and domination.

I bring all these examples here, each in their socio-historical specificity, to suggest that what we miss by adopting exclusionary discourses is plenty. The current moment, as friends, comrades, revolutionaries and members of the opposition have rightly pointed out, is bleak. It is equally bleak because as many seem to forget, the spaces available for collective learning, discussion, and platform-building are evaporating to the point of non existence.

This suggests that, if anything, the last thing our movements need is patriarchal politics that reproduce the state's discourse, willingly or not. The message is simple: critics of the regime should not reproduce its same discourses and practices in fighting it. Gender tends to be the area where we aren't very good at doing so. Continuing to question the regime's motives, to resist its premises and to demand information is vital for our ability to breathe within that system and to bring it down.

Masculine discourses of softness versus toughness, amateur versus expert, material versus emotional only contribute to more exclusion within our movements. I think again of the 42 men, the 21 beheaded, the 21 imprisoned. I think how their fates are sad and their fights are similar, even when their lives cannot be any different. I think that we should never believe that their struggles were separate, no matter what patriarchal politics says.

