

Interview with Farida al-Naqqash,

literary critic, writer and member of the National Progressive Unionist Party (Tagammu party), born in 1940 in the governorate of Daqhaliyya.

At her home, Sahafayeen, Cairo, 28 March 2013

Interviewer (Nicola Pratt, NP): We don't have to start off by creating a timeline. We can just talk about some of your memories and have...

Interviewee (Farida Naqqash, FN): Sort of a conversation.

NP. Yes, a conversation. Personally, I would like to know, not only about the political atmosphere, but also about the social atmosphere and the civilian movements...

FN. Uh-huh.

NP. I would like to know what changes occurred...

FN. After the revolution?

NP. Well, no, starting with way back...

FN. You mean since 1967?

NP. Yes and up until today. From the days of Abdel Nasser through Sadat and Mubarak, and now the Muslim Brotherhood, I would like to know about how the social mood and civil movements changed throughout these times. Also, if there's a difference on the international level...

FN. Uh-huh. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, you mean?

NP. Correct.

FN. Well, during Abdel Nasser's reign things were better on the social and economic levels. People were, to certain extent, living a secure life. People had government health insurance, free schools, pensions, public transport. So, the essential needs of the people were available and accessible. It all started to change when Sadat rose to power in 1970 and ushered in the *Infitah* or the 'openness' policy. The Egyptian society was quickly split into [a poor class and] a very wealthy class, which included many nouveau riche, or what is referred to in economic circles as fat cats, who made their money through corrupt practices and with the help of the new *Infitah* policy. The privatization of public establishments began. Private universities and private educational institutions were

founded. The society became clearly divided into different economic classes, which wasn't the case during the reign of Gamal Abdel Nasser. Not that it didn't exist, there were poor people and rich people, but Abdel Nasser had a well-known slogan, which was "melting away the differences between the classes" and so...

NP. During the days of Abdel Nasser you were a member of the Socialist Union, correct?

FN. Yes, I was in the Arab Socialist Union. I was voted to the committee of twenty, which is what the main committee was called. I was also a journalist for the Middle East News Agency. Early on, I found out that the Socialist Union was not the organization that was going to represent the people, because I could see how it was starting to be plagued by bureaucracy and the old hierarchies. People with old money began controlling it and it transformed into a bureaucratic institution rather than an active political party.

NP. Did others agree with you about this?

FN. Yes. I had many colleagues that felt that things were bad, but they also felt helpless about changing it, because what brought us together was our support for Abdel Nasser's policies. We believed, and I still believe, that Abdel Nasser's policies were, to a large extent, representative of the people's wants and aspirations, especially those of the middle class. So we were trying to bring about change within the Socialist Union.

NP. Can you give me an example of a certain issue that you were trying to change during that time?

FN. During the days of Abdel Nasser?

NP. Yes.

FN. Of course. We were always clashing with the high ranking member of the Socialist Union. The committee to which I was elected, represented the Middle East News Agency and a publishing house, because, at that time, all newspapers were state-owned. Then there was a decision to transfer us, a group of journalists, from the Agency to different ministries, such as the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Supply Commodities and so on. So, we drew up petitions and organized sit-ins at the head office, and we really struggled to overturn the decision in order to be able to go back to our previous posts. When we returned, however, things weren't easy. Things had

deteriorated greatly. This was in 1963 and then soon after that the war started in 1967. In 1963, when I was fighting with my colleagues against the decision of transfer, I was written up by security and intelligence services for being a communist, and it was said that communists were trying to take over the Socialist Union, which is Abdel Nasser's organization. This battle went on for a very long time. The communists or the Arab Nationalists were always being accused of one thing or another. In 1966, a group of members of the Socialist Union was arrested and accused of trying to establish an Arab Nationalist order within the Union. The Socialist Union wasn't really a party; it was more of a movement that millions of people related to and joined. People could take part or leave as they pleased. There weren't any strict regulations. Both the Communists and the Nationalists were accused of trying to start organizations outside the Socialist Union and then the war started in 1967. I remember when I was first elected to the committee, I published a long article, in which I talked about the rise of a new class. In his speeches, Gamal Abdel Nasser always talked about a 'new class' emerging in Egypt, that would not only have an economic influence in Egypt, but a political one as well. So I started writing about this 'new class', its manifestations in Egyptian society and on the political scene and what dangers it could pose to the progress of the revolution. At that time, I was completely convinced that the revolution was on the right track, but that it had a couple of obstacles ahead of it. Then came 1967 and that defeat changed everything. I guess you could say that after 1967 we stopped thinking in terms of reform, but more in the direction of radical change. We lost hope in the idea that the system could be reformed. I was reading a lot about Marxism during that time and I converted from Nasserism into Marxism.

NP. Were there others like you?

FN. Yes, there were many, because there were many communist organizations that existed, but Gamal Abdel Nasser dissolved them and arrested some of their members. They were released later on in 1964 after reconciliation between Abdel Nasser and the Soviet Union, but he forbade them from founding a party. He told them that if they still wanted to be politically active, they would have to join the Socialist Union. That's why

many secret organizations started being active after 1967. After the great disappointment and the defeat, and after the corruption within the army and public institutions was exposed, people lost all trust in Nasserism. It's no coincidence that Abdel Nasser himself died three years later. The period that followed was the period of the war of attrition, which lasted from 1967 till about 1972. This was an integral period in the process of rebuilding the Egyptian army and training it on a much wider scale. The Egyptian army even placed a large order for Soviet fighter jets, that soldiers were trained to fly. All of this paved the way for the war in 1973. The war of attrition paved the way for the war of 1973. There weren't any independent women's movements at that time. Everything was done through the Socialist Union and individual women.

NP. Was addressing the women's cause part of the policies of the Socialist Union in the days of Abdel Nasser?

FN. Yes, but it was being addressed as part of the liberalist policies or as part of development policies. It was always part of another cause and not an independent cause that needed to be addressed individually. There was a women's organization within the Socialist Union, in which all the women interested in the field of women activism worked. I'll just go fetch the tea and I'll be right back

NP. All right.

[general conversation about family]

FN. They're well. So, let's get back to what we were talking about.

NP. Yes.

FN. As I said, there weren't any independent women's movements. There were ideas and articles in the newspapers, and demands to amend the Civil Affairs Law, but Abdel Nasser thought that when women get educated and join the workforce, they would change the law themselves at that point.

NP. Was there a feminist movement at that time?

FN. No. There was a good deal written about it, but I don't think you could call it a movement. And if we were to, then it was all within the Socialist Union and as part of Nasserism, which believed that the cause of women was a cause inseparable from that

of other social causes. The belief was that when society changes, the cause of women would be automatically solved.

NP. Were you working in this women's committee at that time?

FN. No. I was in the political committee.

NP. But did you take an interest in the work of this committee?

FN. Oh yes, of course. I was very interested in it, but I believed in the Nasserist idea; that women's issues could only be solved within the framework of social reform. [answers telephone]

FN: I was interested in the progress of women's rights within the framework of Nasserism; that all the issues facing women would be solved as part of the progress made in social and economic reforms. In those days there was a lot of talk about communism and social justice and so on.

NP: In those days, did people see Nasserism as being a positive contributor to the question of women's rights and that with regards to this, Egypt was doing much better than other Arab countries?

FN. Yes, of course. When it comes to women's rights, things were much better back then. Now it's worse. It was better in terms of education or work, but when it came to political life, because the right to vote and run for office was only granted to Egyptian women in the 1956 constitution, women only became part of legislative bodies after the elections in 1957.

NP. After the 1967 war, you were still working at the...

FN. The Middle East News Agency

NP. Till when did you continue to work there?

FN. Until 1968 and after that I joined the Al-Gomhuria Newspaper. Those were all government-owned establishments. There weren't any private newspapers at that time.

NP. Were there many female journalists at that time?

FN. Yes, many. When women began to get university education on a broader scale, they began to enter into all sorts of professions very actively.

NP. Were there any voices that said women should stay at home?

FN. Yes, from time to time, there would be that sort of talk and it was usually started by the religious groups. These religious groups would say that a woman's natural place is in her home and that raising the children was her most important job, but the society in general was accepting of women entering the workforce.

NP. Did you graduate from Cairo University?

FN. Yes. Class of 1962.

NP. 1962?

FN. Yes

NP. From the Faculty of Arts?

FN. Yes.

NP. After...

FN. 1973 or 1967?

NP. I'm still at 1967. Did you think that Egypt should go into war with Israel again?

FN. Yes, of course. There was a great student movement that started at that time that was demanding that the occupied lands be liberated and demanding war with Israel. Then after the verdicts against some of the high ranking officers of the air force were issued, because as you know the air force planes were destroyed on the ground in the 1967 war, so the generals and high ranking officers of the air force were on trial, but they got lax sentences of five or ten years in prison, the students and the workers organized huge demonstration against the sentences. So, Gamal Abdel Nasser created a new court to retry the air force generals. The social, student and worker movements shared one point of focus, which was the liberation of the lost lands in Sinai. Then came the war of 1973, in which the Egyptian army triumphed and crossed the Suez Canal, and was able to partly avenge the defeat of 1967. Directly after that, Sadat came out with a new slogan that said, "99.9% of solution is in the hands of the USA". *[inaudible]* Because, as you know, the Egyptian Army crossed the Suez Canal and liberated a very small part of Sinai and the rest remained under occupation, such as the cities of Al-Arish and Sharm Al-Shaikh. In the beginning, Sadat said that this is going to be the last war, in reference to the 1973 war, and then that 99.9% of the solution is in the hands of the

USA. After that, Egyptian politics started shifting towards the USA, in terms of cooperation. I can't even call it cooperation, it was more subordination to the USA. Then the *Infitah* or 'economic openness' policy was introduced and the process of privatization started in 1974, right after the war. Have some of your tea before it gets cold.

NP. During those days, were you happy that the Egyptian Army...

FN. Crossed the Suez Canal? Of course I was. All Egyptians were experiencing a sense of satisfaction, because it was a very bitter and humiliating defeat in 1967. We were defeated in 5 days and on the sixth day the Egyptian Army was retreating from Sinai, so of course I, like all other Egyptians, was happy that the Army was able to take back parts of Sinai and show its ability and competence once more.

1. After that there were negotiations between Sadat, Israel and the USA...

FN. You mean 'Camp David'?

1. Yes. Camp David.

FN. The Camp David Accords took place in 1978 and the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty in 1979.

NP. Were you still happy at that time?

FN. Actually, I wasn't happy at all. There is a famous book called "The peace that was lost in Camp David" by the former Minister of Foreign Affairs in Egypt under Sadat, Ibrahim Kamel, until he resigned. He resigned in Camp David in protest of the unjust conditions in the accords. The most important thing that the Camp David Accords achieved was that it divided the Arab cause. The Palestinian Cause, the occupied Egyptian lands and the occupied Syrian lands all became separate causes, which is why we referred to it as the 'isolated peace' and we were against it, because we wanted a peace that would benefit all affected parties, in which the Arabs would get back what is rightfully theirs and we would recognize the State of Israel as part of the region, but with fair conditions. I was always supportive of the recognition of the State of Israel, but under just and fair conditions, that would ensure the rights of both the Palestinians and the Israelis. But this never happened, neither in Camp David nor after the Peace Treaty.

NP. What was your opinion of the PLO at that time?

FN. The PLO? I think the PLO was founded in 1965.

NP. In 1969, Yasser Arafat was elected as the chairman of the PLO executive committee.

FN. I considered the PLO as one of the tools of the Palestinian struggle for the rights of the Palestinian people: The right of statehood and that the rights of the Palestinians are recognized. But, of course, the PLO made many mistakes. Like all other Arab organizations it ran into many pitfalls.

NP. During the 70s, there wasn't any committee or solidarity with the Palestinians?

FN. Actually, we worked intensively and constantly with the Palestinians for the rights of the people of Palestine. I remember when Sadat signed the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty in 1979, the women's' movements organized a demonstration, in which they went all dressed in black in protest of the treaty.

NP. Regarding the women's rights movements, was there any difference during the days of Abdel Nasser and the days of Sadat?

FN. In terms of the women's rights movements, Sadat's policies in the political arena remained, to a large degree, the same as they were during the days of Abdel Nasser. Jehan Sadat, the wife of Anwar Sadat, even played an important role in political life in Egypt and in the advancement of women's rights. She even fought to amend the Personal Status Code and some items concerning women's rights, giving women more rights. At the time it was even referred to as 'Jehan's Law'.

Afterwards in 1981, I was arrested and was put in prison, where I spent about 10 months to a year. After I was released, I began thinking of women's rights as an individual matter, separate from other social issues.

NP. Was this change because of something that happened in prison?

FN. In prison, my eyes were opened to the reality of the situation concerning women and how poor girls are forced into prostitution. I saw the painful reality that Egyptian women face when I was in the women's prison. There I saw the reality of the situation that I hadn't seen before. When I was working in the political arena, rubbing shoulders

with the elite, I was detached from the reality, but when I saw it up close; I realized that it was imperative for women to work harder to better the reality of other women.

NP. Were you a member of the National Progressive Unionist Party (Tagammu party) when you went to prison?

FN. Yes. I was one of the founding members when the party was first founded in 1976.

NP. Did you work in the political bureau?

FN. I was part of the central committee and later on I worked in the political bureau.

NP. Was your membership in the National Progressive Unionist Party the reason you were put in prison?

FN. Yes, because we had fought against the Camp David Accords and we were against the *Infitah* policy, which was based on privatization.

NP. Were you part of the elections?

FN. Which elections?

NP. The parliamentary elections.

FN. Yes. I ran for parliament in 1984 in my hometown of Mansoura. It was quite a battle and we emerged with 18% of the votes in some areas, but that wasn't enough since we didn't achieve the 8% of votes on the national level, which we needed to get into parliament. In my district, though, we had 18% of the vote. It was an election by list.

NP. Who was the candidate for the National Democratic Party at the time? Did the NDP exist by then?

FN. Yes, of course. Mubarak was already there. Sadat was assassinated in 1981 while we were in prison, and then Mubarak came to power and the NDP was controlling the elections.

NP. You said that after being released from prison you began campaigning for women's rights...

FN. And after the elections as well. During my electoral campaign in my district, we did a survey about the different social classes in the district and found that the women were living under very bad circumstances, especially divorced women who were supporting

their families and children. I even started a program for women in Mansoura and gained many of their votes.

NP. What kind of program?

FN. A program geared towards women's rights; regarding personal status issues, the extreme shortage in bakeries and day care centers. All these services that should be available to women, especially women who work outside the house, weren't available.

NP. Were the people in Mansoura shocked to see a woman running for parliament?

FN. On the contrary, they were quite supportive. Women were a large part of public life in Egypt. Although they might not have been fairly represented in parliament and councils and so on, but they were involved. I felt very supported and welcomed by the people of Mansoura in general, and by the women specifically, which is what brought to my attention the need for founding women's organizations. Then in 1985, one year after the elections, we founded the Committee for the Protection of Family and Women, with the help of partisan and non-partisan women activists. This committee issued a number of documents and worked on amending the nationality and family laws. At that time, the Egyptian nationality law didn't give women the right to pass their Egyptian nationality onto their children from a non-Egyptian father, so we worked to change that for a long time, until we were finally successful in 2004.

NP. Was Suzanne Mubarak already politically active at that time?

FN. Yes, she was already making a name for herself in public life and supporting women's rights movements. She supported several projects aimed at helping women who support their families. She also started some one-room schools, so that women who weren't able to attend regular schools could get an education. She really made a difference in that respect, but on a political level, she was part of the circle of corruption in the country. This led people to doubt the motives behind such efforts, but it must be said that she, like Jehan Sadat before her, had a large contribution to the women's movement in Egypt. I think it's also important to mention that Jehan Sadat was a very strong supporter of Law 21 of the year 1979, which states that there should be a quota

for women in parliament and in the 1979 elections women held 10% of the seats in parliament, according to the quota.

NP. What do you think of the women's quota?

FN. I support the quota.

NP. When was the quota cancelled?

FN. The Muslim Brotherhood cancelled it.

NP. I mean, after 1979?

FN. It was cancelled after 1979 till 1987 [by the government]. Then it was brought back in 2010 and then cancelled by the Muslim Brotherhood in 2011. That's why the percentage of women in parliament sank from 13% in 2010 to 2% in 2011.

NP. Who were the women that that ran in the elections?

FN. [*inaudible*] All NDP. There wasn't a single woman from another party. Suzanne Mubarak was supporting this system, of course, because of her son. Her plan, at that time, was... you didn't drink your tea?

NP. I did.

FN. And you didn't eat.

NP. No, I ate.

FN. So, her plan was for her son to inherit the presidency. His father was getting old and he had to step down, so it was time for Gamal Mubarak to take over.

NP. So the whole thing wasn't really about women's rights?

FN. No, not at all. What mattered was that there were women supporting Suzanne Mubarak. We used to call them Suzanne Mubarak's women, because that's all they knew how to do.

NP. Let's go back to 1985. During that time, all of the committee...

FN. The Committee for the Protection of Family and Women? During those days, all the political parties – it was the beginning of new era of political parties- had a women's organization. The Tagammu party had the Women's Progressive Union, The Nasserist party had the Women's Committee and every other party had some sort of women's organization. During that time, an inter-partisan coordination committee for women

was formed, so that there would be one committee that brought women from all the different parties together.

NP. Only from the opposition parties.

FN. Yes, only from the opposition parties.

NP. Were there ideological differences between the different women's organizations?

FN. Yes, naturally. There was one main ideological, if I can call it that, difference, which was the question whether we represented Arab women or women in general. So, for example, for the Nasserites and the Nationalists it was important that the issues of Arab women were addressed and that our efforts and our goals were meant to help Arab women and not women in general.

That was the main point of dispute, but we were able to move past it by focusing on the pragmatic issues, such as the Personal Status code, nationality law, child visitation laws and laws regarding custody rights of the divorced mother in choosing a school for her children.

NP. Do you think that there's anything similar to the work you did back then today?

FN. We issued documents, organized conferences, demonstrations and sit-ins and used any tools we had under an oppressive regime. We did everything we could do under the limiting circumstances.

NP. In the 80s, Egypt wasn't as much of a dictatorship as it later became in the 90s and the 2000s, correct?

FN. Yes, the grip on everything wasn't as tight, yet. When the economic crisis worsened and unemployment increased, the grip got tighter.

NP. When was this?

FN. It started in the 90s.

NP. At the beginning of the 90s, Mubarak announced the new economic policy; the economic liberalization policy.

FN. That was in 1991 and we witnessed the largest privatization process of public institutions. What number is the law of year 1991, Hussein?

Hussein Abdel-Razek (HAR): Of year 1991?

FN. The privatization law. Was it 203? It doesn't matter, but it was in 1991. It was the largest privatization process we'd seen, where the public institutions were privatized and workers given early retirement. Can you imagine a worker at the age of 40 being already retired? This damages the workforce, because a forty year old worker has amassed a lot of experience, which goes to waste when he starts working as a taxi driver or a grocer after his retirement. This was disruptive for the working class, because in the factories, at the large institutions or at the unions, they were part of a whole, but after their early retirement, they were left on their own. We even talked a lot about this 'individual solution', that early retirement is a confirmation of what we called the 'individual solution'. The worker would need to leave his job and go look for another job on his own, without his colleagues or a union. [coughing]

NP. I hope you feel better soon.

FN. Thank you. It's just a nasty cough. So, as I was saying, this forcing of hundreds of thousands of workers into early retirement was one of the turning points in the political and economic development in Egypt.

NP. As a member of the National Progressive Unionist Party, you were against the economic liberalization policy, correct?

FN. Of course. The National Progressive Unionist Party was against early retirement and privatization. We had a whole program for the development of the public sector. We weren't saying that the public sector was perfect, but that it could be developed and reformed.

NP. Did you notice any effect of early retirement on women?

FN. Yes, of course. When we held the conference for the advancement of women, we published a book about women in the spinning and textile industry, which I can show you later, to study the effect of early retirement on these women and we found that it was a very negative one.

NP. Regarding the women's committee in the National Progressive Unionist Party...

FN. The Women's Progressive Union was the women's organization within the National Progressive Unionist Party.

NP. Did it add new goals and objectives to its program after the privatization process?

FN. Of course. There was a study about the effects of privatization on working women and on the standard of living for workers' families.

NP. Today, twenty years after the privatization policy and neoliberalism has been introduced, do you see bigger effects on Egyptian society?

FN. Naturally. The first thing that neoliberalism affected was to widen the gap between economic classes and resulted in a wealthy few, who amassed their fortunes through corrupt practices. There's a specific phenomenon in Egyptian society that wealth is not accumulated through hard work of generation after generation, as is the case in other capitalist societies in the world. The case here is a case of sudden wealth that was obtained through corruption. This led to the society becoming extremely divided and unemployment increased, because of the continuously decreasing jobs in production sectors. This rise in unemployment had an even stronger effect of the female workforce, because out of four unemployed citizens, three were women. I would say that the most drastic effects of neoliberalism in Egypt was the rise in unemployment, deterioration in the situation of the poor and the shrinking of the middle class. Only a small fraction of the middle class rose up in the classes, also by corrupt means, whereas the majority suffered from a deteriorating quality of life. So, there was a disruption of the economic classes in Egypt as a result of neoliberalism.

NP. During the days of Abdel Nasser, women's rights were important because they were part of social reform.

FN. Precisely.

NP. And during Mubarak's reign, they said – or Suzanne Mubarak said – that the advancement of women's rights was important as a part of social reform.

FN. Those are just empty slogans. In this case, there is a difference in the definition of reform. There's a difference between nationalist developmental goals based on the public ownership and nationalist development goals based on individual ownership.

NP. Do you think there's a relation between the neoliberal policies and the revolution?

FN. Yes, of course. The revolution is the culmination of the protests and the social, economic and political pains that occurred during the neoliberal era. From 1991 when the programs by the IMF and the World Bank were being implemented aggressively in Egypt, the society began fighting these policies with different forms of resistance and the situation kept escalating to a point that in 2010 alone there were 2700 protests, whether strikes, demonstrations, sit-ins or by forming unions. This idea of independent unions only started spreading in Egypt in 2009, because the public unions were all being controlled by the government. So, the idea of founding independent unions became popular and the employees of the Real Estate Tax Authority were the first to found an independent union. After that it spread among teachers and other professionals. There's a move towards independent unions among the workers. All of this accumulated to a point that for the first time since 1919 government employees – the employees of the Real Estate Tax Authority - went on strike and they formed their own independent union. So, the revolution was really no surprise. It was the culmination of all these protest and demonstrations, and the social suffering that resulted from the neoliberal policies.

NP. Can we say that now there's a real women's movement?

FN. Yes, we can say that there's a real women's movement. In 1985, many women's organizations were founded, which were separate from those within the political parties, and a new women's movement started to grow, which distinguished itself by basing its platform on the universal declaration of human rights. These movements rejected the concept of identity, because when talking about women in Egypt the religious component comes into play and women end up having less rights and being controlled. So the new women's movements rejected the idea of the national identity and based its platform solely on the universal declaration of human rights and on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

NP. CEDAW?

FN. Yes, CEDAW.

NP. What do you think of CEDAW as an Egyptian woman?

FN. CEDAW was a historical turning point, yet the situation in the world has worsened to the extent that we need a new convention. Nevertheless, CEDAW remains a very important reference point, because its central concern – which the Egyptian government has its reservations about – was equality. The Egyptian government has its reservations about the second article of the treaty, which enshrines gender equality, which basically means that it has reservations about the core of the treaty. The women's movement in Egypt demands that the reservation be lifted. The Muslim Brotherhood currently wants Egypt to back down from any international treaty it has signed in the past, as it considers them to be against Shari'a.

NP. Do you think it was dangerous for the women's movement in Egypt to reject the national reference?

FN. They didn't reject the national identity per se. They refused to have the national identity be used against women. They also refused that identity be identified only religion or by conservative readings of the holy text.

NP. And this was the opposite of how things were during the days of Abdel Nasser...

FN. During the days of Abdel Nasser, the issue wasn't even on the table, because Abdel Nasser had transformed the whole country into a huge construction site; building factories, women entering the workforce and getting educated. Such issues were considered secondary issues and weren't addressed. What was addressed were issues such as development, expanding the production sector, building the Aswan High Dam, expanding the electric grid to support the factories, securing more water resources for the agricultural sector. On the national scale, economic and social projects took precedence over cultural ones.

NP. Were you part of this women's movement [that emerged in the 1980s]?

FN. Yes. We in the women's movement realized in the course of the public struggle within the society that there contradictions within the progressive parties; extreme contradiction when it came to the subject of women. For example, Khaled Mohieddin, the president of our party, stood in parliament in the year 2000 and defended a man's right to forbid his wife to travel. He said it was impossible to allow a woman to travel

without her husband's consent, and this is coming from the president of a progressive party, which defends equality. So, we realized that we've been tricked and we felt like our existence within this organization was just for show, because when it came down to the sensitive issues, the president of our party took a very backward stance on a women's rights matter. It was such contradictions that I was telling you about. That was an example of a progressive party, you can only imagine what it was like with nationalist and liberal parties; they also have many contradictions when it comes to women's rights.

NP. And this is why you think it was very important to have an independent women's movement, away from the parties?

FN. Of course.

NP. Did the women's movement play a role in all the protests and demonstrations?

FN. The women's movement took part in all forms of protest that led up to the revolution of January 25th, but it didn't let go of the women's rights cause and it refused to let it melt away into the other issues. We had learned our lesson: From the days of Huda Shaarawi in 1919 and the first Egyptian Women's Union in 1923, which gave precedence to national matters over those of women, to the extent that sometimes women's interests were coming in last. That is why in the constitution of 1923, although women played a huge part in the revolution in 1919, demonstrating, sometimes risking and losing their lives, fighting the British forces, there was no mention of women's rights. First, because of the general masculine mentality in society and second, because the women's movement at that time allowed women's interests to take a back seat to national interests, development issues and fighting the occupation. So, we learned our lesson and decided that women's interests should be in the forefront of our agenda.

NP. Some say that many people feel that women's rights is Suzanne Mubarak's cause.

FN. Of course, they'd say that. The Muslim Brotherhood says that, too. They claim that all the laws passed in favor of women during Mubarak's rule are Suzanne Mubarak's laws. Naturally, we reject this logic, because these laws were the fruit of labor of women

activists. Suzanne Mubarak was in a powerful position and she supported this movement, but she did not create it.

NP. For the USA and European countries, women's rights were also a reason, or it was said that is was one of the reasons, for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. So, how do you feel about the idea that some use the violation of women's right as an excuse for war and imperialist interests?

FN. First of all, I have to say that I make a distinction between imperialism and between capitalist American and European civilization. American and European civilization has many positive values; Freedom, equality, fraternity, justice, human dignity and respect for women's rights. These have become universal values that should not be associated with imperialism. Imperialism is a process of political, economic and social occupation. Its connection to women's rights was accidental. We must not – and this is my personal opinion - connect the two, because the concept of women's rights is universal. They're part of a universal system.

HAR. [inaudible] You asked me about a law.

FN. Oh, yes, the privatization law. It's Law 203 of the year 1991.

NP. Thank you.

FN. This was the most important law in the privatization process. It was the beginning of neoliberalism in Egypt. I'll give you an example, Nicola. In 1798, at the end of the 18th century, Napoleon invaded Egypt. That was the French campaign in Egypt. Egyptian women took part in the revolution against the French: The first and the second Cairo revolutions against the French occupation. Then a group of women came together and organized a women's demonstration and demanded that Egyptian men treat their wives with respect, the way the French men treat their wives. What I'm trying to explain is that very early on there was an awareness that Western civilization and imperialism are not the same thing. Western civilization is a humanitarian civilization that was built on a set of values, ideas, philosophies and religions, the same as the Arab civilizations in Andalusia and Arab and Muslim civilizations' golden age. These civilizations produced a lot of noble values that the UN later used to shape its charters. So this is one thing and

resisting imperialism is another. For example, on March 20th 2003, when the USA invaded Iraq, a large number of the thousands of Egyptians that went out to Tahrir Square were members of women's movements. They went out to Tahrir Square to protest the invasion of Iraq and the imperialist interests in Iraq, but this doesn't mean that the values of western culture are imperialist values. That's nonsense. So, I speak for myself and the women's movements in Egypt when I say that we know the difference between the two.

NP. Do you think the revolution strengthened or weakened the women's movement in Egypt?

FN. Weakened it? On the contrary, it strengthened it, because women were a big part of the revolution. They camped in the squares, got beaten up in demonstrations and some even died in demonstrations. I consider the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood is an objection to the revolution and not an extension of it. It's a manifestation of weak leadership of the revolution and not a manifestation of the revolution.

NP. So even if the situation is difficult for women at the moment...

FN. There are contradicting circumstances. The situation is difficult, but there's a movement gaining strength.

NP. When you think of situation in other Arab countries, whether the situation in Lebanon or the revolutions in Syria and Bahrain, do you think that in the end this will lead to something better?

FN. Revolutions don't move in a straight line. Revolutions have highs and lows. We're on a low now, but I'm sure that revolution will go on, whether in Syria, Bahrain, Yemen or Egypt. Each nation will do things their way.

NP. Is there anything that I didn't ask about, that you would perhaps like to say?

FN. No, I don't think so. You asked about everything.