

How did Egyptian feminism develop between the Egyptian Revolution and the Arab Spring?

Emily Tran: From the University of Wisconsin—Madison, this is *Ask a Historian*. I'm Emily Tran.

Today on the show: How did Egyptian feminism develop between the Egyptian Revolution of 1919 and the Arab Spring of 2011?

Professor Aaron Rock-Singer will take us through the 20th- and 21st-century history of Egypt, when British colonists, secular nationalists, and Islamist revivalists sought to shape the role of women in Egyptian society. He'll tell us about the contradictions and characteristics of feminism in an authoritarian political environment. And he'll reflect on the conditions and possibilities of the protest and activism in Egypt that have continued in the wake of the Arab Spring.

[MUSIC FADES]

Emily Tran: In January 2011, Egyptians rose up in massive protests against the regime of President Hosni Mubarak. Tens of thousands of protesters flooded Tahrir Square in Cairo, and after 18 days of demonstrations, Mubarak stepped down. Democratic elections followed in 2012. But the next year, a military coup brought the authoritarian regime of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to power.

Today, we're listening to Professor April Haynes's interview with Professor Aaron Rock-Singer on the history behind the role of women—as players and as symbols—in the Tahrir Square protests of 2011. Aaron Rock-Singer is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. His first book was published last year and is called *Practicing Islam in Egypt: Print Media and Islamic Revival*. April and Aaron recorded this conversation in December 2019.

April Haynes: Hi, Aaron.

Aaron Rock-Singer: Hi, thanks for having me. It's great to talk with you today.

April Haynes: So, we have a crowd sourced question from our historical community. And that question is: We know that Egyptian women played a visible role in the Tahrir Square demonstrations of 2011, and that they remained important players and symbols after the Arab Spring. So, can you tell us about how Egyptian feminism had developed since the revolution in 1919 to the one in 2011? In other words, what were some of the historical conditions that made possible the specific style of activism that they used?

Aaron Rock-Singer: So, this is a great historical question, because it brings us back 100 years, but really, it should bring us back a little bit further than 100 years, specifically to 1882 when we see the British occupation of Egypt. And essentially, if we're going to think about Egyptian history during this period, we have two basic phases: one from 1882 to 1922, when Egypt is formally under British rule; and the second from 1922 to 1952, when it is under soft colonial rule or informal colonial rule.

Now 1919 as a date matters because it is this moment when Egyptians engage in a nationalist rebellion to try to throw off British rule. And in this context, women are really important parts of the public mobilization. They're not simply backroom players preparing men to go out to battle in public space but are very much making a claim to public space themselves, with their bodies, with their political slogans. And they're very much part of the leadership of these demonstrations.

Now, I don't want to overstate the point and suggest there is some level of gender equality at this moment that everything after that was simply a decline from this egalitarian state. But I am simply making the point that at this moment, women are key players not fully represented, but nonetheless key players in the nationalist revolution.

Now, what happens after 1952, which is really the tail end of our colonial period, is that there is a successful nationalist revolution in Egypt called the Free Officers Revolution. And it's led by a group of junior army officers, most notably Gamal Abdel Nasser, who is often known simply as Nasser.

Now, what's so striking about this story in Egypt's history is that, if you read how the nationalists themselves understood this period, it was one of the empowerment of women, that this was a secular nationalist project that aimed to bring women up to the level of men that aim to empower women by expanding opportunities for education, expanding opportunities for employment.

And the Nasser period, which stretched from 1952 to 1970, really did this in many respects. If we're simply looking at the empirics of it, we see an expansion of female education, we see an expansion of female employment. It's important to also note that these expansions are part and parcel of a broader broadening of education to the masses in Egypt during this period, and of the increasing growth of the government as a work option for graduates of Egyptian universities. And in the mid-1950s, Abdel Nasser actually introduces a new policy, which is essentially ad hoc at first, that any graduate of an Egyptian university would be guaranteed government employment and women very much take advantage of this.

But if we are to understand the history of feminism in the Abdel Nasser period, we also need to attend to the fact that this is an authoritarian feminism; it's often been called state feminism. And we can look at the empirical measures of female employment and female education and note real progress.

But we also need to pay attention to the fact that first, women are not involved in making these decisions. So, women have essentially been left out of this and instead, in the nationalist project, are very much considered to be objects of communal purity as symbols for communal purity.

And the second point to be made is that we have to ask this question of what does feminism look like in an authoritarian political environment, insofar as feminism is a project of seeking freedom for women that men already enjoy? What should we make of this project of freedom seeking when there are all sorts of political, economic and social freedoms that aren't available to the population at large?

And so, one of the results of this is that alongside a project of state feminism, we very much have a decimation of feminist organizations, because we have a decimation of all social organizations during this period that don't toe the government line.

Now there are, of course, women who make the decision, including feminists in Egypt during this period, to cooperate with the military regime. And there are good reasons to do this: that, notwithstanding the fact that it's authoritarian, it is committed to expanding women's education and employment; that it is not particularly politically threatened by these feminist organizations. So, if they accept the reality of authoritarianism, there's a series of policy prescriptions that they can actually realistically pursue. But it also is to simply say there are real tensions in this project as they develop.

April Haynes: I've heard modern social scientists examining other parts of the world use this word 'femocrat,' a kind of contraction of 'feminist' and 'bureaucrat.' Is that the kind of position you're describing as women moved out of organizations that had an explicitly feminist purpose and into the state through education? Or are we talking about whole different populations?

Aaron Rock-Singer: So, the 'femocrat' is a great term. My sense of Egyptian bureaucratic history for this period, of what it meant to be a woman working in the Egyptian state, what it meant to be a symbol of secular nationalist progress, is that it was essentially a double-edged sword that on the one hand, it was a story of expanded opportunity. But on the other hand, it was a story in which many of the old binds of sexuality being disproportionately centered on women persisted.

And so, in this story, there are two key points to be made. One is that women are both objects and agents of national progress. They're objects of national progress, because they remain the repositories of communal purity, and they're agents because they're expected to go out and work and only if women are out there working, only if they're out there studying, can Egypt reach its goal of secular nationalist modernity. Yet as it does so, the old distinctions and anxieties about female sexuality persist.

And by way of example, usually we create a binary where there are women who veil, and this this represents a particular understanding of female sexuality. And there are women who don't veil, and this represents a modern liberal understanding of female sexuality.

April Haynes: Can you explain what you mean by women who veil and don't veil?

Aaron Rock-Singer: So in the Egyptian case, this really—up to the 1970s—meant to cover your hair, to wear the hijab. Now after the 1970s a second form of veiling known as the niqab, which also involves covering the face and only leaving the eyes visible, becomes increasingly popular. But in the 1950s and 60s, we're really talking about covering the hair.

Now, what's so striking about this move away from veiling these secular women in the government bureaucracy working alongside men, is that gendered expectations of public contact don't simply slide away. It's not as though suddenly male and female sexuality are equally problematic or unproblematic. Instead there are these very clear expectations of how the historian of Egypt Laura Bier describes women being required to performatively veil. This idea that while one might not need to wear a headscarf, one does need to act in a way that doesn't disproportionately or unnecessarily arouse the interest of the men around you.

And so here we have, on one hand, a very striking visual contrast between covering one's hair and not covering one's hair. But on the other hand, in terms of behavioral expectations, it doesn't appear

that the secular nationalist project is all that different from a traditional or neo-traditional order that it contrast itself against. This liberal understanding of society is really reproducing many of the same binaries of female sexuality and male sexuality that were longstanding.

April Haynes: So that double standard persists. Can you talk a little bit about what the difference between the British colonial government meant for women and the early national period? Because you began the conversation by saying we should really take this all the way back to the 1880s? Can you tell us why?

Aaron Rock-Singer: Part of what is so important to understanding the history of feminism in its broader cultural context is that the British project wasn't particularly a liberating one for Egyptian women. And this is partially because the British project was so deeply elitist.

And so, what we have in Egypt is actually a limitation of education to a pretty narrow subset of the population under British rule. And so, we don't have this kind of massive expansion of women's employment. Now, there are women in Egypt, Egyptian women, during this period, who are able to find education and to a lesser extent employment, but those are disproportionately elite women. We're not talking about a broad social shift.

But ultimately, the British had a pretty traditional sense of how Egyptian society worked, one that didn't really take seriously the capacity of women to be major national actors. And not only did it not take seriously the capacity to be major national actors, but it didn't create the political conditions under which women could organize as women. And so here in this context, we really have, in some sense, an age old story of how women gain access to institutions, namely, through brothers and husbands and fathers, which should remind us both of the creativity of these women in gaining access to the institutions and also the very real structural impediments to any kind of broad enfranchisement within them.

April Haynes: Were British feminists as involved in the colonial project, as they were in, say, India?

Aaron Rock-Singer: The British project in Egypt was, in many respects, much less invasive than its Indian counterpart, it had much less infrastructure. The dividends of Egypt beyond the Suez Canal were not nearly as great.

So, I think that the main site where we see gender potentially coming up is really the educational system. But here again, this is a) primarily an elitist, and b) a politically quietest endeavor.

The basic premise of British educational reform in colonial Egypt was to create a politically quiescent population. The goal was to use education to essentially clamp down on political dissidents. And it's important to note here—and here I'm really drawing on the work of an anthropologist by the name of Greg Starrett—that this effort was fundamentally premised on using Islamic education to achieve colonial goals. That the idea was that if you teach them, to be a little bit glib about it, if you teach a man to read the Quran, you could teach him not to overthrow colonial rulers.

And so here was this idea of trying to turn these schools of Quranic recitation that were popular throughout Egypt into these more formalized and in the British language, sanitized spaces. And ultimately, here, we have really just a reproduction of the old gender order. We don't have anything

particularly progressive. The goal here was not to empower the Egyptian population generally or any segment of it. In particular, it was fundamentally premised on how to clamp down on political dissent to create a self-reproducing politically acquiescent population.

April Haynes: So that would make sense in terms of its historical tracking into an authoritarian but independent regime.

Aaron Rock-Singer: So, I think the first point is that we have this intense continuity between colonial and postcolonial periods. And that's true in the realm of education. That's true in the realm of gender dynamics, that just as the British viewed women as symbols of Egyptian national purity, so too did post-colonial Egyptian rulers view women in this way.

Now, I don't want to take the agency away from these post-colonial elites, because this was also a choice. But it was a choice that had a) historical precedence, and b) a kind of local resonance. And the fact that it was being claimed as post-colonial and this project of secular nationalist modernity shouldn't blind us to the fact that it reproduced old anxieties about female sexuality, and that it was an essentially quietist project of education and of ostensible liberation.

April Haynes: So how did all of that lead up to Tahrir Square? I'm thinking about the role of symbolism and how important it was: women as street artists, and also the ways in which female bodies were treated and public spectacle.

Aaron Rock-Singer: So, the period we haven't talked about between Abdel Nasser's rule—which ends in 1970—and the outbreak of protests in Tahrir Square in 2011, is the period of first Anwar Sadat rule from 1970 to 1981, and then of Hosni Mubarak's rule from 1981 to 2011. And I'll take them one by one.

Now, the 1970s in Egypt under Sadat saw what has been called an Islamic revival, a period in which Egyptians have widely varying political allegiances turned to religion in often very different ways. Some who adhered to Islamism, really challenged the current government, called for an Islamic state. Others were very happy to adhere to a particular vision of revival popularized by state institutions.

Now, the way it relates to feminism and to the broader public presence of women during this period is that women were, like in the secular nationalist project, objects and agents of Islamic revival, that having women on the street protesting was important for various political factions.

And so here, if we focus a little bit more on two of the Islamic groups of most prominence during this period: one, the leading Islamist group the Muslim Brotherhood, and the other the leading Salafi group Ansar Al-Sunna Al-Muhammadiyah.

Now, for those of you who don't know what Salafism is, it is a movement that seeks to model itself after the conduct of the early Islamic community in Medina, under the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century. This is, of course, though, a distinctly 20th century movement. And in doing so they seek, among other things, to embrace highly restrictive understandings of gender relations, particularly vis-a-vis men and women inhabiting the same space, which they call gender mixing.

So, during this period, in the '70s, Muslim Brothers and Salafis have a particular anxiety, which is that in terms of a popular project of mobilization, they have considerable incentive to have women out in the streets. And the reason for that is not simply numbers, but also symbolism, that there is a power to having a vision and a symbolic image of a sea of women—particularly a sea of black for the Salafis, because the Salafi women are disproportionately wearing the niqab, the face veil during this period, along with a black robe.

But what's so interesting that happens after the 1970s—so this period of Hosni Mubarak's rule from '81 to 2011—is that women's public presence goes from being a concession to being a necessity. And by that I mean, in the 1970s, Muslim Brothers and Salafis justified women being in public, essentially, along the lines of necessity, that this was something that was required to meet the needs of the movement at this period. But this was emphatically not a good unto itself, this was not an end unto itself.

Now what happens, and it's so striking in the '80s, and '90s, is that a) women continue to go to work at increasing rates continue to be educated at increasing rates. This includes women who are part of this movement. The second thing that's striking though, is that leaders of this movement disproportionately male elites, though also some women seek to reckon with this and to make a case for how women can inhabit public space in a manner that both protects their ostensible chastity as well as meeting the goals of the movement.

It's in that context that we see a claim that gender segregation is not simply a barrier between men and women, but that the form of a woman's dress and how a woman conducts herself can be a form of segregating herself from the social environment around her. And this is not gender segregation as any of us understand that it's not gender segregation, for example, as it's practiced in Saudi Arabia today. But it points us to the fact that women are in public to stay at this point. And that instead of trying to return women to the home, which is something that Salafi elites in particular tried to do in the 1970s, they have essentially accepted women's public presence.

Now I'll add a final note, and this is a product of my spending some time reading Egyptian marriage manuals from the 1980s and 1990s and asking about this question of what these changing understandings of public presence mean for domestic responsibilities.

And I don't want to overstate this point, because I don't think that men suddenly started engaging in these movements and significantly more domestic labor than they previously had. But there is a conversation as to what men's domestic roles should be. And it's a conversation that is both practical and also deeply religious. And by the practical, I'm in their conversations about what are the domestic roles that men could carry out, such as keeping the house tidy, cleaning up taking the trash out, and so forth, that we might laugh about, and say, 'Oh, isn't that the most mundane thing in the world.' But this is a conversation that's being had within these movements in terms of articulating a set of gender domestic expectations.

But the key thing to realize in this context is it's not just a practical matter, because the conversation is specifically about what the Prophet Muhammad did, and what his relationship was, and his understanding of domestic responsibilities was with his wives. And so, it's a conversation that is at once anchored in the particular political and social and economic needs of the 1980s and 90s in Egypt, and also in this long-term engagement with what it means to emulate the model of Muhammad.

April Haynes: I understand that there are a lot of different interpretations of what that early Muslim community must have looked like. The relationship between Muhammad and his wives is debated. So, can you tell us a few different iterations of those stories and how they play out in modern politics?

Aaron Rock-Singer: I think the question of how they play out in modern politics is probably the best one to start with. Because in terms of internal Islamic debates, this is the essentially key domain of authenticity debates, which is to say, it's the period that, if you want to make an argument in the 21st century for a particular project, that you do so with reference to the seventh century.

Now, the problem with all of these arguments—whether they're arguing for highly liberal or highly conservative understandings of gender relations—is that they're more frequently than not utterly ahistorical. And so, in one narrative, seventh-century Medina is this paradise of gender equality. In another narrative, it's a highly patriarchal system. In both cases, the claim to this period is a legitimating device for a project that is fundamentally about the 21st or 20th century, not about the seventh century.

But to give you an example of how these efforts essentially fall down, I'll tell a story of how one of the groups that we've talked about, Salafis, adopted gender segregation, specifically how they tried to make the case for gender segregation.

Now, Salafis have both a particular advantage and a particular burden in making a socially persuasive claim to particular religious interpretations, which is that they seek to ground everything that they do in proof texts from the Prophet Muhammad's life. So, this is either Quranic verses, or reports of the Prophet saying, and doings which are known as hadith. And so, for Salafis, the way to justify a particular project is to say, 'Well, here are the hadith reports, here are the Quranic verses, which speak very explicitly about what we are saying you should be doing.'

Now, this is a really powerful message because it's so concrete. You can simply point to the reports. It is also a message that has a certain high bar to it, because you need to have the proof texts. If you don't have the proof texts, then you end up with what for Salafis are far more subjective, interpretive approaches.

Now I don't find that particular claim that citing proof texts is an objective interpretive approach to be terribly persuasive, because those proof texts are being used in a very specific context and very consciously at that, but in the particular case of gender segregation, Salafis had what's for historians is really fascinating problem. They wanted to justify a project of gender segregation in the 1970s, and they needed to base it in the seventh century. But they had very limited precedents for gender segregation in the seventh century.

And as a result, they engage in a few different interpretive moves. One is to argue that a variety of proof texts that had never before been understood to refer to gender segregation. Now, you know, for example, the Prophet Muhammad, when women in the community were pledging allegiance to him, he didn't shake their hand, he simply acknowledged their presence. And this was an argument for Salafis, not only why men and women shouldn't be allowed to touch each other physically in any case, but that really, there was a separation between men and women.

Another argument they make is that this is simply a generalization of the basic separation of men and women in ritual space. And this is the only instance we really have from this period where there is any kind of formalized gender segregation that men and women pray separately in mosques. And this is something that has broadly been observed throughout Islamic history. The problem, though, for Salafis, is that throughout Islamic history, no one else adhered to this beyond the mosque, that they had a real historical problem in terms of normative Muslim practice, which accepted the continued existence of spaces in which men and women mixed. And this problem was, in some sense, more urgent in the 20th century because in the context of expanding cities, in the context of expanded education and employment, there were more and more places for unrelated men and women to meet.

The third move they could make, essentially striking out on these first two, was to argue that there was a Quranic text that prohibits men and women from mixing. The problem was that the word 'mixing' doesn't appear in the Quran. And neither does 'gender separation' or 'segregation.'

And so, what we see in 1978, is we have a leading Saudi Salafi named Abdul Aziz ibn Baz writing in an Egyptian Salafi magazine. And he brings to the table an interpretation that is utterly radical, but he doesn't acknowledge it at the time, which is that a Quranic injunction against women flaunting themselves—which has been understood, literally for hundreds of years, as a call to female modesty as being about behavior as being about clothing, but not as being about anything beyond that—that the meaning of 'flaunting' is really a prohibition against gender mixing. And he does this for about a year, he holds this interpretation steady for about a year. Because again, this is his proof text. This is his magic bullet.

But the problem then becomes that no one takes him very seriously. He's one of the leading Salafi scholars of this time, he's got state funding behind him, he has access to material resources. But this interpretation just doesn't hold water. And so as a result, he retreats to a distinctly non-Salafi interpretive claim, which is that essentially, this is damning the pretexts of sin, which is a legal tool in the Islamic scholarly tradition, to say that, while one action might not be forbidden on its surface, it's because of what it leads to. It's, in essence, a slippery slope argument. But it's not an argument that Salafis had previously embraced.

So, here we have this story of this active interpretive project to try to justify up a practice that had little basis historically, and in the course of trying to do so we actually get a real sense of what these contestations over women's public presence are really about: that they aren't about the seventh century, that they aren't about adhering to what the Islamic tradition says or doesn't say about gender relations, that these are people living in the 20th century. And they are shaped more by the legacies of the secular nationalist project of state feminism than they are by the legacies of Islamic history generally, and the seventh century in particular.

April Haynes: As a historian, do you think that continuity, just in a general sense, tends to matter more than change? Or are there specific changes in Egyptian women's political history that you would point to and say, 'Well, here was at least a pivot point or the potential, maybe a road not taken?'

Aaron Rock-Singer: So, I would say that in the Egyptian story, the expansion of women's education and employment is hugely significant. And partially it's significant because it transcends political divides at this point. That whether one is an Islamist or a secularist, there's no debate as to

whether women should have access to education, there's no debate for the most part except for a small subset of Salafis as to whether they should have access to employment. Now, abstaining from employment might be an ideal, but it's very much understood as a privilege, and rightfully so because Egypt is a country where it's hard enough to make ends meet on two salaries, let alone on one.

Ultimately, the challenge and the question is the same one of the post '52 period, which is what does a project of feminism look like in authoritarian political conditions? It seems in many respects, like we've reached the end point of the progress that can be made. But the question of feminism isn't simply one of women having access to education or employment. It's also a question of women being in a position to move freely within society, to associate freely, to engage in political projects that advance visions of society and state that are not reflective of those of the ruling regime. And there, as long as we are talking about an authoritarian political system, there's very little hope of those progressing.

April Haynes: So, thinking about modern political history and recent developments, how does Egyptian women's political history compare to that of women elsewhere in the Middle East?

Aaron Rock-Singer: So, in many respects, Egyptian women were at the forefront of increasing opportunities in the 20th century. And here, they went alongside Tunisian women in particular, and Tunisia, too, had a project of state feminism from after receiving independence in 1956. We really see, in many respects, very similar story to the one that we see in Egypt. We also have non-Arab examples, most notably in Iran, of women's enfranchisement and broader access to society.

So, in this respect, the Egyptian case is not exceptional, that in the case of the Middle East, the best predictor of women's access to these opportunities is really, to my mind, urbanization. And that what we have here, in terms of restrictions to that kind of access, have a lot more to do with this urban-rural divide in this old rural political order than they do with any particular playbook of 'this is the role that women must have,' that in the 20th century, we see the expansion of Middle East cities, we see the expansion of government bureaucracies, we see the broadening of education to the populace. And this is true beyond Egypt.

I think what makes it so hard to tell these stories is, essentially, our desire to look back into the past to excavate a nugget that can be used to justify projects in the present. And again, these are projects that, broadly speaking, I'm very normatively sympathetic to. But we do risk reading too much in the past and in ways that, were we to look at our own history, we might be uncomfortable with that. There were restrictions on women's access to voting, to education, to employment in the early 20th century here, too.

And I'll conclude this answer with a funny story of transmission from early 20th-century America and Britain to 1970s Salafis. Because when I was reading the Salafi magazine, in the 1970s, there were a series of Western writers that they cited. And I figured out that these Western writers were largely British and American anti-suffrage activists, many of whom were female.

So, my first question was, well, how did we get from the early 20th-century United States and UK to 1970s Egypt and Saudi Arabia? And the answer was that, in the 1940s, the founder of the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, a guy named Mustafa al-Siba'i, had translated the writings of these authors into Arabic. And then from there, they made their way into these Salafi magazines.

And what's most striking about this is that the logic is basically similar: that the reason you can't trust women to vote is because nations that are guided by their women go to political ruin. The reason you can't trust them to work is because they will corrupt their femininity and corrupt the societies around them that this will disrupt the basic hierarchy between men and women and social order will never be regained. And the point being here is that we can look the Middle East as somehow a different story to the one that we have in the United States or in the UK. But really, we're talking about a difference of 50 years. This is, in the broader historical timeframe, this is not very much time.

April Haynes: And indeed, Phyllis Schlafly was active at the very time. So, there could have been another American text or English language texts that could have been transmitted, right.?

Aaron Rock-Singer: Yeah. And, you know, that reminds me of the fact that one of the ways that projects of gender segregation are justified in the 70s is by citing British and American authors, in particular women disproportionately, as to the social ills of men and women being educated or working together to say, 'You see, even in the West, they think that this is terribly harmful.' So, this is part of a global conversation that is hardly distinct to the Middle East.

April Haynes: So, thinking a little bit beyond women, their political history, the politics of feminism in the modern Middle East, how do you interpret as a historian some of the renewed protests that we've seen in the past two years?

Aaron Rock-Singer: Well, I think these renewed protests that we've seen in the last few months in Egypt, that we see in Lebanon right now, that we've seen in Iraq recently, they suggest to us that the Arab Spring and its aftermath haven't concluded, and that we can see this story not as one of rupture in 2011, but rather of essentially a series of tremors.

And the tremors are really coming from the fact that, at this point, the social contract in many of these countries is broken. And if we see the Egyptian iteration of the Arab Spring as an attempt to reckon with the breaking of that social contract, and kind of a spinning back and forth between democracy and then authoritarianism, again, we might look at more recent protests as essentially a more minor but nonetheless similar event that seeks to respond to the fact that there is still fundamentally a disjuncture between the expectations that Egyptians, particularly middle class Egyptians—and here I'm using that as a cultural category of how people understand themselves, not as a marker of class because if you know, being middle class in Egypt today, which means being able to buy an apartment and get married, is largely unattainable to most people who would identify themselves as part of this middle class.

I think that contemporary activism has a real problem that the authoritarian reach of the Sisi regime is significantly greater than it was under Abdel Nasser from 1950 to '70. That this is a regime which not only polices public expressions of dissent but seeks to monitor private expressions of dissent. And in that context, there are sites where people gather, namely labor unions tend to be key sites of activism. But for the most part, those sites are few and far between.

And as a result, there's this question of what does one do? And the answer of the Islamist movement broadly has been to flee. Muslim Brothers have largely left, particularly leadership. Salafis, some stuck around, some have fled either to Turkey or to Kuwait.

But there's fundamentally a real challenge. Unlike under Mubarak, when there was essentially a space that was circumscribed but very defined of where one could be active, there are no longer spaces where it's permissible to be politically active. And so as a result, my prediction if I have one is that to extent that we have outbursts of violence, efforts to overthrow the regime, they'll be sporadic, they'll be poorly organized, and perhaps most concertedly, there'll be a product of the environment in which they arose.

If we think of one of the challenges of Egyptian politics post-2011 as being a story of reckoning with, for lack of a better word, the PTSD of living under a dictatorship—of the ways in which living under a dictatorship makes you inclined to go to the army to try to solve your problems instead of tolerating serious disagreement with your fellow citizens—so too, will the political convulsions that Egypt will at some point face in the future be a product of the mass repression of this period.

And in that sense, part of our challenge is that the Mubarak period saw conversation within Egypt among ideologically very diverse groups about what democracy looks like. This is something leftists were talking about, this was something Islamists were talking about. They were having a serious conversation. Now they might not always have had that conversation with each other, but there was a broad conversation that was an intellectually serious and politically engaged one.

In this period, the question isn't really how to have a conversation about democracy; it's what to do about the fact that the ruler is not merely someone who has authoritarian tendencies but has the state apparatus to match that.

And here, what's so striking—and I'll come back to example of the Muslim Brotherhood—is that, after the Abdel Nasser period, the Brotherhood had to reckon with a serious problem, which is that a splinter of the group had arose, and saw it as legitimate to declare other Muslims to not be Muslim because they followed a secular state. Now this was originally an effort to justify killing Abdel Nasser. They essentially settled this disagreement in the 1970s, and for forty years, the consensus essentially held.

What has been most concerning to see in the post-2013 period, or in the Sisi period, is that this has become an issue again for the Brotherhood, that a splinter has come off again, arguing that these practices really need to be revived because, 'Look at how terrible the ruler is.'

And this is a classic case where we have an Islamist movement which has worked very hard to put a particularly destructive religious interpretation to bed, and the way in which extremely repressive political conditions produce radicalization. And they claim—you know, the Sisi regime's claim is that they're committed to religious moderation. But, like in the case of feminism, I'm not convinced that one can produce religious moderation out of extreme oppression.

April Haynes: Thanks for that reality check, Aaron. It's great to have a historian explain it to us.

Aaron Rock-Singer: My pleasure.

[MUSICAL INTERLUDE]

Emily Tran: Listeners, do you have an idea for an episode? Send your question for a historian to outreach@history.wisc.edu.

Today's episode of *Ask a Historian* was produced by April Haynes and edited by me, Emily Tran, with editorial consulting from Leonora Neville. Special thanks to David Macasaet, Jonathan Klein, Christina Matta, and Sophie Olson.

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Thanks for listening.