

Do Foreign Funds Really Come with their own Political Agendas and Discourse? An Investigation of Women's Rights Organizations in Egypt

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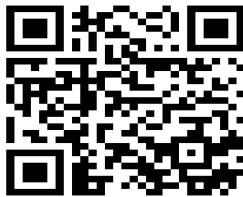
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Abstract:

As part of a crackdown on NGOs that receive foreign funds in Egypt, the Egyptian authorities accused 43 Egyptian and American NGO employees in Egypt of being foreign agents, and thereby advancing the political agenda of the US, by virtue of their employing NGOs' receiving funds from the Obama administration (Al-desoukie & Allam, 2012). The authorities' association of foreign funds with political agendas was what spurred the present study which set out to investigate women's rights organizations in Egypt and whether the foreign funds they receive necessarily come with their own imposed (political or social) agendas and feminist discourse, and if so, how such agendas are imposed, and how they influence women's rights organizations that receive such funds in terms of the decisions they make, their agenda and discourse, their mission, and the kinds of projects they oversee, by answering the following questions: 1) Do some women's rights organizations in Egypt receive foreign funds? 2) What foreign entities fund such organizations and in what capacity do they do so: Are they governmental or nongovernmental? 3) Do such entities impose their own (political or social) agenda and feminist discourse on the organizations they choose to fund? How so, and how do such agendas and discourse manifest themselves; do they ask them to start particular projects, for example, or do they enforce or dictate ideologies and rules they ask the funded organizations to stick to? 4) Where are the women's rights organizations that are funded by foreign entities mostly located: in the Delta, Upper Egypt, or Cairo; in the urban or rural communities? 5) What are the types of projects and feminist issues and discourse, if any, that such funding entities are interested in and start? 6) How involved are the fund givers in the decision-making process of women's rights organizations in Egypt? That is, are they involved in daily decisions or do they simply lay ground rules that have to be followed or do they simply supply them with the cash and leave the decisions and project assignments to the discretion of the managers to spend the money on what they deem more relevant or pressing? Is there anything off-limits to them? Do women's organizations, for example, not allow them to intervene in certain decisions or projects? If so, what are they? 7) How and why do they target such organizations to begin with? What kinds of questions do they ask such organizations in order to decide whether or not to fund them?

To answer the research questions, a desk research was conducted and the literature written on the subject of foreign-funded women's organizations in Egypt was reviewed; whether some NGOs in Egypt receive

foreign funds, and if so, what kind of organizations they are. Explored also was where such organizations are located in Egypt, how such organizations are chosen to be funded, how involved the funding entities are at the decision-making levels, and whether or not they impose their own agendas and discourse on the organizations they fund, and, if so, how. A qualitative analysis of the literature was conducted to answer the research questions, and the following was revealed: the US and the EU fund certain women's organizations in Egypt in an attempt to promote democracy, economic reform, and women and human rights in the Middle East (Durac, 2009). Foreign agencies choose to fund the organizations that represent their own ideologies to begin with; they do not necessarily impose their own agendas on the grantees (Badawi, 2007). If anything, it is the Egyptian authorities that restrict and inform--to put it mildly--the activities of women's organizations in Egypt (Abdelrahman, 2005). The present study, therefore, seconds Badawi's (2007) suggestion that women's organizations in Egypt not depend on foreign funds and instead self-fund by starting their own projects.

Introduction, Rationale, and Significance of the Present Study:

The conviction and imprisonment of high-profile activist Saad Eddin Ibrahim in 2000 for allegedly compromising the security of the Egyptian State and disseminating classified information about Egypt (Durac, 2009; Gubser, 2002; Newby, 2012) and a series of incidents that took place in 2011 and 2012 culminating in the Egyptian authorities' crackdown on NGOs that receive foreign funds in Egypt as well as accusing 43 Egyptian and American NGO employees in Egypt of being foreign agents, and thereby advancing the political agenda of the US, by virtue of their employing NGOs' receiving funds from the Obama administration were what spurred the present study (Al-desoukie & Allam, 2012). The incidents and the authorities' association of foreign funds with political agendas intrigued the present researcher about whether such accusations were founded and how such an imposition of foreign agendas might manifest itself; that is, did the funding entities explicitly impose their own ideologies and discourse on the organizations, and if so, how, or did they just stand as observers monitoring the NGOs' activities and decided to withdraw their funds if such organizations did not live up to their own expectations or agendas?

Dr. Hoda Elsadda-gender researcher, founding member of the Women and Memory Forum, and member of the National Council for Women, laments that foreign funding is used as a "political weapon" (Mehrez, 2007, p. 124) by the

State whose own institutions, as well as different Islamist and secularist political parties, also receive foreign funds from undisclosed donors (Mehrez, 2007). This is what led many NGOs in Egypt to distance themselves from foreign agencies, since the price some of their counterparts had to pay was being thrown in jail for treason and having their organizations shut down (Newby, 2012). The significance of the study, hence, stems from the fact that at such times of political and economic hardships and social distress, NGOs and women's organizations' contributions are needed to rebuild the country and instill values and rights into citizens (Mesbah, 2010). As long as they are stigmatized and their agendas are questioned, however, they will not be able to fulfill their mission.

The present study, therefore, sets out to investigate women's rights organizations in Egypt and whether the foreign funds they receive necessarily come with their own imposed (political or social) agendas and feminist discourse, and if so, how such agendas are imposed, and how they influence women's rights organizations that receive such funds in terms of the decisions they make, their agenda and discourse, their mission, and the kinds of projects they oversee.

Research Questions:

The study aimed to answer the following research questions: 1) Do some women's rights organizations in Egypt receive foreign funds? 2) What foreign entities fund such organizations and

in what capacity do they do so: Are they governmental or nongovernmental organizations? What, if any, is their political affiliation or mission? 3) Do such entities impose their own (political or social) agenda and feminist discourse on the organizations they choose to fund? How so, and how do such agendas and discourse manifest themselves; do they ask them to start particular projects, for example, or do they enforce or dictate ideologies and rules they ask the funded organizations to stick to? 4) Where are the women's rights organizations that are funded by foreign entities mostly located: in the Delta, Upper Egypt, or Cairo; in the urban or rural communities? 5) What are the types of projects and feminist issues and discourse, if any, that such funding entities are interested in and start? 6) How involved are the fund givers in the decision-making process of women's rights organizations in Egypt? That is, are they involved in daily decisions or do they simply lay ground rules that have to be followed or do they simply supply them with the cash and leave the decisions and project assignments to the discretion of the managers to spend the money on what they deem more relevant or pressing? Is there anything off-limits to them? Do women's organizations, for example, not allow them to intervene in certain decisions or projects? If so, what are they? 7) How and why do they target such organizations to begin with? What kinds of questions do they ask such organizations in order to decide whether or not to fund them?

Methodology:

To answer the research questions, the present researcher attempted a desk research in which the literature reviewed spanned ten years of studies written on the subject of foreign-funded women's organizations in Egypt, and whether or not and how their agendas are influenced by the funding agencies, and conducted a qualitative analysis of the yielded data. The rationale for doing a qualitative analysis was that the interest was more in the content and findings of the results of previous studies. Interviews with the management of Nazra organization—a women's

organization in Cairo, Egypt—had been planned by the researcher prior to the eruption of demonstrations in the organization's neighborhood to further shed light on the foreign agencies that fund the organization and how the latter's agendas and projects are influenced by them, but were eventually thwarted by the unrest in the downtown area.

Findings:

Throughout the nineties and until the present, NGOs and women's organizations in Egypt have received foreign funds (Abdelrahman, 2005; Badawi, 2007; Carapico, 2002; Daly, 2009; Durac, 2009; Gubser, 2002; Hatem, 2005; Mesbah, 2010; Newby, 2012; Stachowski, 2005; Tadros, 2011). In 2004 and 2005, for example, the USAID pledged a total of \$ 67 million “on support for independent human rights organizations, legal aids services for women, support for university education with a focus on comparative law, participation in local development, and improving the administration of justice and the rule of law” (as cited in Durac, 2009, p. 83) and 411.6 million dollars in 2008 for economic reform plans (Mesbah, 2010), while the EU pledged 558 million Euros for political reform in 2007 (as cited in Durac, 2009).

The examples given in the literature of foreign-funded NGOs, such as The Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (ECWR) and the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance (CEWLA), are located in Cairo, although the projects, activities, and assistance extended by such organizations cater to both urban and rural communities all over the country: in the capital, Delta, and Upper Egypt (Daly, 2009), the literature covered does not delve deep into the whereabouts of the projects and activities of foreign-funded organizations.

The studies reviewed showed that the foreign-funding agencies are governmental organizations that represent the administration of the USA, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the US Department of State's Middle East Partnership

Initiative (MEPI) and the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL), and the European Union, (Abdelrahman, 2005; Carapico, 2002; Durac, 2009; Hatem, 2005; Newby, 2012). Their main mission in funding women's organizations-and organizations in general-is to promote democracy in the region in which Egypt is one of the most influential countries by helping the governments with their economic and political reform and good governance plans, empowering women and Christians, and counterbalancing the Islamic orientation of several sprouting NGOs in order to fight terrorism and promote peace in the region and the world (Durac, 2009; Hatem, 2005).

Such interest in promoting democracy in Egypt was sparked by the Camp David Agreement and revived after September 11 (as cited in Mesbah, 2010). It was then that the US decided domestic turbulence could indirectly affect its homeland security, since it helped breed terroristic groups that targeted the First World whom they believed had oppressed their countries, especially when the regimes in their countries were just as oppressive and were believed to be implementing the US policies in the region (Mesbah, 2010). As a result, the US vowed to boost democracy in the region, starting with Egypt, their peace partner (Mesbah, 2010). To promote stability, peace, and democracy in Egypt, the US and the European Union pledge assistance to the Egyptian government and civil society (Mesbah, 2010). As a result, Egyptian NGOs and women's organizations receive foreign funds that boost the economic reform plan by training youth in language and soft skills, as well as helping organizations with human and women's rights orientation (Badawi, 2007).

Hatem (2005) further explains that foreign funds materialized as a reaction to Islamic NGOs. Christian and women's organizations were funded to counterbalance the Islamic orientation of several sprouting NGOs. The US has taken it upon itself to empower Muslim women, and it chose to do so by funding women's organizations in Egypt, the repercussions of which included splitting the society, alienating and patronizing the very

organizations they had set out to serve, and pointing fingers at the loyalties of women's organization and their national identity.

The literature reviewed did not explicitly refer to the types of projects the foreign agencies chose to fund, although Carapico (2002) indicated that the US was interested in women's organizations involved in gender-specific research or education projects. Women's organizations, she denoted, were the second largest grantees of foreign funds in the Middle East.

Egyptian NGOs and women's organizations are not blindly fed their agendas by the foreign agencies that fund them, however; they, in fact, are obligated to play by the rules of the State: Egypt, or they would be risking their own demise and persecution (Abdelrahman, 2005; Gubser, 2002; Pratt, 2005; Rahman, 2002; Stachowski, 2005; Tadros, 2011). NGOs, women's organizations included, are dictated the ground rules when they register by the government (Gubser, 2002; Pratt, 2005; Rahman, 2002; Stachowski, 2005; Tadros, 2011). They are given the "do's and don'ts" of the projects and ideologies they promote and are shut down should they deviate from such rules (Abdelrahman, 2005; Gubser, 2002; Pratt, 2005; Rahman, 2002; Tadros, 2011).

Under Law 153 of 1999 that later morphed into Law 84 of 2002, for example, NGOs were required to register with the Ministry of Social Affairs and succumb to the regulations imposed by it (Daly, 2009; Stachowski, 2005; Tadros, 2011). However, Tadros (2011) reveals that the Ministry of Social Affairs was only a front for the State Security that regulated the activities of the NGOs and women's organizations in Egypt. State Security employees sat in on organizations' meetings, dictated them the projects that were off-limits to them, required regular reports to be submitted by funded organizations, ordered them to turn down funds from certain foreign agencies they did not approve of, and threatened to imprison members for compromising homeland security if they were to attend conferences that

they did not believe helped promote stability (Daly, 2009).

This is a conclusion strongly affirmed by Durac (2009), who confirms that all foreign funding does is help the Egyptian regime tighten its grip on NGOs under the pretext of shielding the country from foreign influence. Foreign intervention is even a source of political humiliation and threat from which protection is considered a national honor: The Egyptian regime has explicitly condemned Western intervention as an extension of the Western hegemony on the region and undermined the country's sovereignty, asserting that "reform must come from within the Arab world" (p. 86; Newby, 2012). This is not made easier by the Egyptian public and civil society that have caved to pressure from the government to denounce affiliation with the West to affirm their national identity and in reaction to the US's bias towards Israel, 2003 invasion of Iraq, and persecution of Arabs post-9/11 (Durac, 2009; Newby, 2012).

Durac (2009) attributes that to the fact that the EU and the US's commitment to democracy and human rights in Egypt-and the region-is often overshadowed by their commitment to economic reform, combatting terrorism, and promoting peace and stability in the region. The West--represented by the US and the Europe--might not be as dedicated to democracy and human rights as they proclaim to be, therefore (Durac, 2009). In fact, in 2007, amidst stark violations of international human rights laws culminating in the persecution of the opposition and rigged Parliamentary elections, the US turned a blind eye to the promotion of democracy and commended Egypt for its support of US policies in the region, a fact confirmed by the monetary rewards secured Egypt despite the nondemocratic policies advanced by the regime (Durac, 2009).

Conclusion:

As one of the key political partners of the US in the Middle East, Egypt attracts millions of dollars' worth of foreign funds from the US State Department and the EU on an annual basis

(Abdelrahman, 2005; Badawi, 2007; Carapico, 2002; Daly, 2009; Durac, 2009; Gubser, 2002; Hatem, 2005; Mesbah, 2010; Stachowski, 2005; Tadros, 2011); donations are also received from Asian and Arab countries (Mehrez, 2007), but the literature focuses more on those from American and European agencies. The funds go to Egyptian NGOs involved in issues of women empowerment, human rights, education, health, and economic reform in an attempt to promote peace, stability, and democracy in a region where Egypt plays a crucial role (Carapico, 2002; Durac, 2009). Fear that funding agencies would influence the priorities of NGOs in Egypt turned out to be unsubstantiated, however.

It is, in fact, the Egyptian government that has the NGOs on a tight leash and has them reproducing the politics of the Egyptian State (Abdelrahman, 2005; Durac, 2009; Tadros, 2011). The authorities and State Security monitor the activities of NGOs, of which women's organizations are a part, closely (Abdelrahman, 2005; Durac, 2009; Tadros, 2011). They not only control where the funds go and the activities they are engaged in, but also keep tabs on their activities and daily decisions to make sure they comply with their requirements (Abdelrahman, 2005; Durac, 2009; Tadros, 2011). That is not to say that funding agencies have no impact on the recipient organizations' agendas; however, the agendas are not necessarily imposed by such entities (Badawi, 2007). Instead, they choose NGOs and women's organizations whose agendas and activities fit their own criteria, or specify the activities as a stipulation to funding the organizations before they start working together and leave it up to the recipients to decide whether or not they want to cooperate (Badawi, 2007). It is, therefore, the present researcher's guess that the National Democratic Party (NDP) used the foreign funds' empty threat to manipulate organizations in Egypt and target their management to force them to project the "democratic" image of the regime they wanted to the West and perhaps maybe accuse them of

breaching their pact later on in order to take the foreign funds for the Party as a punishment.

The present researcher, thus, recommends that NGOs and women's organizations approach local businessman who will not have a political agenda. If the ex-NDP and the Egyptian authorities in power targeted foreign agencies and funds for their anti-nationalist agendas, it would be difficult to pin such an accusation on an Egyptian businessman, an added bonus would be that a native of the country would be even more aware of the needs of the organizations s/he chooses to fund-as well as the cultural values and constraints of the target communities, as opposed to the foreign agencies whom Abdelrahman (2005) complained were detached from the real needs of the communities they catered to. Even better, Badawi (2007) proposes that such organizations self-fund, instead of waiting for donations, by "engagement in profit-generating activities" (p. 93). Being selective when accepting donations from foreign entities would also spare women's organizations the agony of being targeted by the Egyptian authorities. Perhaps such organizations should only accept funds from international agenda-free entities, such as the UN or the IMF, as opposed to countries who might be doing it for a political purpose.

Limitations of the Present Study:

One of the major limitations of the present paper is the narrow scope of the literature reviewed: The studies investigating foreign funds and how they might inform the agendas of NGOs mostly explored Arab NGOs, as opposed to organizations in Egypt. Also, even when the literature targeted organizations in Egypt, most of the studies reviewed did not discuss women's organizations in particular, but talked about NGOs in general, and more specifically politically oriented and development NGOs. Nor did the literature specify what kinds of projects, discourse, ideologies, or agendas-if any-foreign agencies tried to impose on the women's organizations they funded, only that such foreign agencies targeted women's organizations that

were aligned with their ideologies and that, in turn, urged the organizations to keep their activities in line with the foreign agencies' goals (Badawi, 2007), but they did not mention what these activities were. Also, Arab and Asian countries who chip in and fund projects and organizations in Egypt were neglected in the literature reviewed (Mehrez, 2007); it did not take a special interest in identifying these countries, their orientation, funds, or their agendas.

Also, due to the political unrest in the Tahrir vicinity as well as the involvement and the hectic schedules of the Nazra organization management as they scramble to cover and participate in the current political events and anti-Constitution demonstrations, the present researcher refrained from conducting the interviews with personnel and management in the women's organization in Egypt-represented by Nazra. Telephone interviews were another option, but then again it would have been difficult for the management to trust a caller they could not see and whose credentials they would not be able to verify, especially when she was asking sensitive questions about foreign funding and hidden agendas. The chances of transparency on the organizations' part would have been very slim then. That option was also ruled out, however, because the researcher was notified that the Nazra management and personnel had their hands full and could not partake in any kind of research or interviews.

However, even if the interviews with the Nazra management had been conducted, one organization to represent women's organizations in Egypt would not have rendered generalizable results. More subjects from different women's organizations--across the country perhaps, covering Cairo, the Delta, and Upper Egypt--would have been more representative and rendered more generalizable findings. The fact that the issue of foreign funds is sensitive would not have helped, either. Had the interviews been conducted, the subjects might have been reluctant to divulge too much information about foreign funds and how they influenced their loyalties and

agendas lest their national identity and patriotism be questioned.

Recommendations for Future Studies:

Women's organizations in general, and in Egypt in particular, need to be the focus of future research on the impact of foreign funds on the agendas, ideologies, and discourse of such organizations. Research has mostly studied NGOs and development organizations, but not enough studies have focused on women's organizations. It is the recommendation of the present researcher, therefore, that a future study explore the reasons for which governmental and nongovernmental foreign agencies choose to fund women's organizations in Egypt, whether there is any difference between the reasons for which each chooses to do so, how and why they choose the organizations and/or the projects they fund. Better yet, a comparative study might investigate whether the grantees are aware of the grantors' reasons for funding their organizations. Another study might investigate whether the agendas and politics and foreign-funding entities' grip on Egyptian NGOs have changed after the 2011 Revolution from how they were in the nineties and up until before the Revolution.

It would also be insightful to interview and/or investigate the Egyptian authorities in an attempt to shed light on the reasons for which they suspect and incriminate NGOs that receive foreign funds, especially when there are other organizations whose funding agencies are Islamic countries or even unknown and remain to be untouchable (Mehrez, 2007). Governmental organizations, Islamic organizations, as well as women's organizations owned by Islamists in Egypt could also use some focus in research. Who funds such organizations--Arab and Muslim countries, Islamist individuals, or First-World countries--what their agendas and goals are, and who dictates such agendas merits some attention in research, especially when Mehrez (2007) warned that when Arab and Islamists--as opposed to secular and foreign--countries fund NGOs in

Egypt, it is often kept clandestine and undisclosed, which could indicate hidden agendas.

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