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Women and Revolution -- What Now?

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Is the new boss the same as the old boss?

As protest rolls through the public squares of the Middle East one of more unusual sights is women standing shoulder to shoulder with men, risking their freedom and their lives.

They were there from Tunisia to Egypt to Iran to Libya. Said Egyptian author and activist Nawal El Saadaw of her days making history in Tahrir Square: "I felt for the first time that women were equal to men."

Somewhere between hope and belief, this season of freedom could also be a new day for the Middle East's women. There are good arguments that the revolutions would have never happened without women -- they were the slogan makers, the march organizers, the activists.

Revolutions, however, are unpredictable by nature -- especially when they collide with centuries of misogyny in a country that ranks 125th in the World Economic Forum's global gender gap rankings, where large majorities of women report being harassed and molested, where genital mutilation is still common, and where not one woman was named to the committee that is reforming the constitution.

Will the women who risked all to bring down a government find that all they got for their bravery and sacrifice was a shuffling of oppressors?

The early signs are not encouraging.

Even as 1,000 women marked the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day -- chanting "Egyptians for Egyptians" -- male hecklers were shouting at them to go home -- "where you belong." Some 200 hundred of the men eventually attacked the women, with police largely standing by. It was the same square where men celebrated their newfound freedom by repeatedly sexually assaulting a reporter.

A necessary step to oppression is exclusion. In Iraq, women had high hopes that last year's election would elevate their political power, given a new constitution that mandates that a quarter of the country's parliament seats go to women. But the women filling those seats are largely relatives of male party members. Six years after the constitution -- and despite promises from Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki -- there is only one female minister, and she heads a barely funded and powerless backwater focused on women's affairs.

In a *New York Times* article, Michael S. Schmidt reported that the fear of many Iraqi women is that the loss of parliamentary power was a step toward a loss of rights in general.

Women in Tunisia have similar fears. They helped bring down the Ben-Ali regime, but are already seeing conservative elements fill the vacuum, with the possibility they will replace some of the region's more progressive family law with more restrictive laws based on religion.

It's a threat in any country where the collapsed regimes tend to have been secular, and the governments that take their place likely to be influenced by the religious factions that will be part of new coalitions.

There is also the barrier thrown up by women themselves. They have lived under a centuries-old bargain: inferiority in society in return for protection of relatives. Many women fear the loss of that protection because they have no idea what would replace it.

Still, there is hope in the determination of many women that, having helped liberate their countries, they will not be pushed back into the shadows, without rights, and subject the restrictions of strict family law and sometimes violent whims of men. For the first time they have a powerful leveler on their side -- Web sites that allow them to organize and spread their ideas and, as in the recent revolutions, their outrage.

Activist Nawaal el Saadawi, who felt the stirrings of equality in Tahrir Square also added: "Women's rights cannot be given." They can only be taken "by the political power..."

In Tunisia and Egypt, and possibly more countries to come, women helped win freedom from autocracy. But the next battle may be just beginning.