



COMMENTARY

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Tawakul Karman, an Exemplary Leadership in the Cause for Peace

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The awarding the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize to three women, Yemeni human rights activist Tawakul Karman, Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, and Liberian peace activist Leymah Gbowee, conveys a resounding message against authoritarianism and tyranny. Including Tawakul Karman in particular sends an unequivocal vote of no confidence to Yemen's President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who, about twenty-four hours later announced that he intends to step down "in the coming days," although he has reneged on such promises several times before.

Ms. Karman, founder of the NGO Women Journalists without Chains (WJWC), is a source of tremendous pride for the people of Yemen. In an article in *Huffington Post* on 7 October, Sahar Taman describes Ms. Karman as follows:

She is extraordinary in her leadership. She holds a position on the central committee of Yemen's major political Islamist opposition party, the *Islah* (Reform) Party. Her brilliance is in her determination, her unceasing demand for the rights of citizens; all Yemenis, all Arabs and the entire world, to truly enjoy freedom of speech, freedom of press and freedom of association. The simplicity of her message is crystal clear, but her courage is to stand up and stand out so publicly in Yemeni society where she has transformed the image of a Muslim and Arab woman into an icon for change. She has

become the face of Yemen's pro-democracy revolution with photo placards and pink posters decorating the daily protests and sit-ins in the Change Square in Sana'a. Since the announcement of the Nobel Peace Prize, most of Yemen's citizens are ecstatic with pride and she has been further honoured as 'the Mother of Yemen's Revolution.'

... She did not just start on 3 February the Day of Rage, but throughout the year before she had led weekly protests at the Girl's College of Sana'a University demanding women's rights and freedoms. Since 2007, even before Tunisia and Egypt, Tawakul's was a non-violent movement.

As women have been in the frontlines of the Arab Spring revolutions and uprisings from the very beginning, the selection of Ms. Karman for the Nobel Peace Prize recognizes the persistence, courage, and power of women, in the face of brutality, torture, rape, and even death, throughout the Arab world. Arab men should take notice accordingly, as this decision supports women's empowerment, something that the *2002 Arab Human Development Report* acknowledged as a major deficiency in the Arab Middle East. It is time to balance the scale, especially concerning human rights and freedoms for women in the region.

Ms. Karman exhibits several realities that have for so long been denied or ignored: first, she embodies effective female leadership in non-violent activism. Second, by awarding her the peace prize, the Nobel Committee is sending an important message that a pious Muslim woman, who is a member of an Islamist political party, should not be reason to fear Islamist ideologies that espouse non-violence. Ms. Karman is deeply pious, and yet she embraces non-violence. Her leadership and beliefs in non-violent activism undermine and delegitimize the violent terrorism that Al Qaeda and other militant groups, along with secular dictators, routinely employ. That is yet another reason for the international community to rejoice in her selection.

Third, her activism and the Nobel award underscore the capabilities, unwavering will, and individual and collective power of women in the Middle East, especially in the cause for peace, social justice, and rights and freedoms. For too long, these capabilities and strong personal will of women have been neglected or repressed. Now, there is no turning back on the progress made from the events surrounding the Arab Spring in terms of fighting against authoritarianism, as well as pervasive, institutionalized misogyny and chauvinism. Just as the dictators are falling one by one, so will the pillars of anti-women laws, institutions, and attitudes, eventually. This has to be seen as a part and parcel of the Arab Spring; anything falling short of women's rights and empowerment would not be a complete victory for the cause of freedoms and rights in the region. It is not enough to overthrow dictators. As the 1998 Nobel laureate for economics Amartya Sen contends, society will never progress without freedoms being granted to *everyone*.

Fourth, Ms. Karman symbolizes the religious Muslim Arab woman who passionately believes in women's rights, as defined contextually within a given society and culture. The lesson for the

rest of the world is that secular Western or other models of feminism cannot be imposed on societies that have a distinctly different culture and perhaps religious persuasion. Ms. Karman's activism for women's rights clearly lends a voice to women throughout the region and worldwide, but the implementation of these rights will most likely be customized to Yemeni, Arab, and Islamic culture. That will require a delicate dance, but the process has already gained momentum.

Quoted in an article in *The Huffington Post*, Ms. Karman's response to the Nobel Peace Prize speaks volumes about her commitment to her people and to peace: "I give the prize to the Arab revolutions and to the peaceful youth revolution in Yemen and the Yemeni people. I also dedicate this prize to the martyrs and wounded people from all the peaceful revolutions."

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