A Troubled Revolution in Egypt
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CAIRO — A decade ago, as a bookish schoolgirl in the southern Egyptian city of Sohag, Samira Ibrahim Mohamed was fascinated by Egyptology and yearned to see the antiquities at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo one day.

But when she finally set foot on the grounds of the landmark pink stone building, on March 9, the museum had been turned into a makeshift torture center. Ms. Mohamed, who had just been arrested by the army during a protest on nearby Tahrir Square, was given electric shocks that she said made her body twitch spasmodically for days afterward.

The worst was yet to come. The next day, Ms. Mohamed said, she was transferred to a military detention center and subjected to a forced virginity test so humiliating that “I wished to die 600 times.”

For many Egyptian women, the revolution this year was their first chance to take part in public life in Egypt, and they say they were treated as equals by their fellow male protesters. But human rights activists and local women’s groups say that there has been a backlash against female political participation on the part of the military junta that now governs Egypt, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, as well as some of the Islamist groups that are vying for power in parliamentary elections that are set to begin on Nov. 28.

Young women like Ms. Mohamed have become a symbol both of how far Egypt has come in terms of respecting women’s right to a political voice and a role in public life — and how far it still has to go.

THE POLITICS OF PROTEST Ms. Mohamed, a soft-spoken 25-year-old in a pale blue head scarf, sipped grape juice in her lawyer’s office recently as she described her March trauma, speaking to the foreign news media for the first time. In an open room, she said, she and other young female demonstrators were held down on tables, stripped and probed. They were surrounded by jeering soldiers, several of whom filmed the proceedings with their mobile phones.

For the women, who had been raised in a society where female modesty is paramount, the test was psychologically agonizing, Ms. Mohamed said, “like a kind of rape.”

According to Ahmed Hossam, a human rights lawyer with the Hisham Mubarak Law Center, 17 women were subjected to virginity testing, all of them from poor families and selected from among the female protesters, he suggested, because they were seen as easy to intimidate.
Amnesty International conducted an investigation and condemned the virginity tests, calling them "nothing less than torture."

"Forcing women to have 'virginity tests' is utterly unacceptable. Its purpose is to degrade women because they are women," the human rights group said in a statement issued in late March. "Women and girls must be able to express their views on the future of Egypt and protest against the government without being detained, tortured, or subjected to profoundly degrading and discriminatory treatment."

According to Dr. Barry D. Shaktman, an associate professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Weill Cornell Medical College in New York, the idea of a medical test for virginity is itself spurious.

"It's not a verifiable test, because not every woman who hasn’t had sexual intercourse will also have an intact hymen," Dr. Shaktman said in an interview. Even in the United States, he said, doctors are often asked, for cultural reasons, to make a judgment about a woman’s virginity, but he said these tests are not medically valid, and are illegal in many U.S. states and in many countries.

“As a physician, you should not only not do this exam, but you can never make a statement of medical fact based on it,” Dr. Shaktman said.

In response to Amnesty’s charges, the Egyptian military has been tight-lipped. In a rare interview, an Egyptian general told CNN that the army had carried out the tests in order to protect itself against possible allegations of rape.

“The girls who were detained were not like your daughter or mine,” CNN reported the unidentified general as saying in late May. “We didn’t want them to say we had sexually assaulted or raped them, so we wanted to prove that they weren’t virgins in the first place.”

Forced virginity tests are not uncommon in many countries, according to human rights groups, and neither is the assumption that a woman who is not a virgin cannot make an accusation of rape. But Egyptian activists say that these practices had been almost unknown in Egypt, at least at the hands of the authorities, before the popular uprising that brought down the government of President Hosni Mubarak.

Widney Brown, the senior director for international law and policy at Amnesty International, said the virginity tests were both highly political, and "about women as property and their marketability and sexual value." She added: “They wanted to mark them as bad girls so they could dismiss them.”

In late June, in a meeting with Amnesty International, Egypt’s head of military intelligence, Maj. Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, promised to stop the forced virginity testing of female detainees. There have been no public reports of the testing since, although it is possible that women simply remain silent.
FINALLY, A VOICE Young Egyptian women like Esraa Abdel Fattah, an early online supporter of workers’ strikes, and the prominent activist Asmaa Mahfouz were initially some of the most public faces of Egypt’s uprising, known in Arabic as the Jan. 25 Revolution. They still describe the early anti-government demonstrations on Tahrir Square with great emotion and amazement, as their first taste of what real gender equality could feel like.

“For 18 days, no one looked at us in a bad way,” said Hadeer Ahmad Ali, 20, a volunteer at the Alliance for Arab Women, adding that protesters treated her as an equal. Her family are Salafists, followers of a fundamentalist strain of Islam, and her mother wears the niqab, a type of veil that covers the entire face. But Ms. Ahmad Ali said her experiences of the uprising inspired her to take off her own head scarf in March.

“I realized that I believe in complete equality with men,” she said. “I used to think that I could get married and stay at home, and now I think that I belong to this society and that I want to contribute to it. A number of my female friends decided after the revolution that they wanted to leave their homes, to live independently from their families. The revolution gave us energy and power.”

But more experienced local women’s activists caution that, months after the heady days that brought about the fall of Mubarak, Egyptian women’s role in public life is very much in contention, perhaps more so than it has been in years.

“It’s not the revolutionary men who are against women,” said Nawal el-Saadawi, the prominent Egyptian feminist, physician and novelist, in a telephone interview. “In fact, we were together in Tahrir Square. We were living together, men and women, under the same tent. Nobody harassed the women, and they were agreeing that we must have a secular government, a secular Parliament, that men and women should be equal.”

The temporary government and the Islamic fundamentalist groups, she said, are the ones intent on limiting women’s freedoms.

“Whenever any external or internal power wants to abort a revolution, they control women,” Ms. Saadawi said. “If women revolt, that’s the end. And it’s easy to control women by religion.”

A MUBARAK LEGACY Ms. Saadawi and other local feminists have been working to reorganize the Egyptian Women’s Union, which was founded in the 1920s by the pioneering Egyptian feminist Huda Shaarawi and eventually banned in the 1980s as Suzanne Mubarak, Egypt’s former first lady, brought women’s and children’s issues under her personal authority.

Though they resented Mrs. Mubarak’s almost total control of the terms of the debate over women’s rights, Egyptian feminists acknowledge that she did bring about certain
freedoms. They now fear that some of the progress on women’s issues in recent decades may be erased in the push to sweep away the legacy of the Mubarak era.

For as long as most Egyptians can remember, all laws pertaining to women’s rights have been carried out in the name of Mrs. Mubarak, said Omar Ahmed, who is a member, along with Ms. Saadawi, of the coordinating committee for the reformed Egyptian Women’s Union.

“After the revolution, people are trying to remove the name of Mubarak’s family from everything,” Mr. Ahmed said. “So the Islamic movements have been trying to stop the women’s laws from being active, to have a new law where a woman cannot have the right to divorce herself, for example, to have a law where illegitimate children don’t have the right to go to school.”

Isobel Coleman, director of the Women and Foreign Policy Program at the Council on Foreign Relations and author of “Paradise Beneath Her Feet: How Women Are Transforming the Middle East,” said that she was also concerned about what she called “the dismissive, derogatory, aggressive talk about ‘Suzanne’s laws.’”

“What has people so angry is that women got better divorce and custody deals through ‘Suzanne’s laws,’ and you see a lot of people wanting to throw the baby out with the bath water. They want to say that because Suzanne Mubarak co-opted the whole women’s agenda, anything to do with women and women’s rights is bad, or they’re not culturally legitimate, politically legitimate.”

‘TOO SOCIALIST TO BE A FEMINIST’ Many of Egypt’s most prominent young female activists resist the feminist label, preferring to concentrate their energies on organizing Egypt’s labor movement, for example.

Ola Shahba, 33, a socialist who, during the uprising, joined the Coalition of Revolutionary Youth, took a break from organizing a protest of teachers’ unions to describe her frustrations with feminism.

“I think I am too socialist to be a feminist,” Ms. Shahba said. Though she believes in women’s empowerment, she said, she feels that in present-day Egypt, an explicit focus on women’s rights just serves to isolate women further. The Egyptian labor movement, she pointed out, has long had powerful female leaders.

A day later, Ms. Shahba strode outside the cabinet building in a bright yellow T-shirt, distributing revolutionary fliers and gathering men decades older than herself around her. She explained, forcefully, the need for national teachers’ unions to direct demands to the ruling military council itself, an idea that the striking teachers had shied away from.

Asmaa Mahfouz, the 26-year-old activist whose viral YouTube video calling Egyptians to the streets on Jan. 25 is widely credited with helping to set off the uprising, also
prefers mobilizing Egypt’s labor movement to discussing women’s rights. But she acknowledges that Egyptian women must often fight their own families first in order to become activists.

As a child, Ms. Mahfouz said, she adored American animated movies in which the theme seemed to be characters from humble backgrounds triumphing over adversity, standing up to cruel or corrupt power structures. “I loved ‘The Lion King,’ ‘Finding Nemo’ and ‘Antz,’” she said. “I was always wondering why we weren’t doing this in Egypt.”

Her own conservative family — one brother is a police officer and another an army officer — was initially dismayed by her interest in politics.

“They would turn off the Internet, so I went to the street,” she said. “They forbade me to go to the street, so I used the phone. Women in Egypt have more spirit to persevere. They’re more manly than men. People always ask me, ‘Why don’t you work on women’s rights?’ I say, ‘Men should be looking to protect their rights, because we’re doing better than they are now.’”

**TRYING FOR JUSTICE** With the help of lawyers from the Nadeem Center, a Cairo-based nongovernmental group that assists victims of torture and political violence, and the Hisham Mubarak Law Center, Samira Ibrahim Mohamed is pursuing a case against the military council that governs Egypt. The case includes a criminal complaint about the torture she underwent, and a challenge to the council’s decision to conduct the virginity tests. She is, according to Mr. Hossam, one of her lawyers, the only one of the 17 girls to pursue her legal rights. The case is scheduled to go to trial on Nov. 29, and a Facebook page, “We are all Samira Ibrahim,” has been created to draw attention to the case.

“The military thought they would break their will,” Mr. Hossam said. “They think a poor Egyptian girl is not going to go out and say, ‘I was forced to take off my clothes, and they did a virginity test,’ because she’s going to be so humiliated.

“But with Samira, I saw, even during the investigation, when we were first talking to her about the incident, that she had the willpower to get her rights,” Mr. Hossam said. “She was disillusioned. She was a girl who left her village in Upper Egypt to come here and be part of the revolution, and she was convinced of its dream.”