

The Pink Hijab

The Arab revolts of 2011 have transformed the image of the Islamic world. One young Egyptian woman's struggle reflects the scope of change—and shows how long it has been in coming.

BY ROBIN WRIGHT



Dalia Ziada, shown here in March at the Women in the World Summit in New York City, has been a leading activist among the rising pink hijab generation.

THE GREATEST WAVE OF EMPOWERMENT in the early 21st century has produced a new political chic. It has been shaped by conditions conspicuously ripe for unrest. A youth bulge altered the generational balance of power. Rising literacy spurred aspirations beyond daily survival, especially among women. And new technology tools—cheap cell phones with video capabilities, Internet access, social media, and some 500 independent satellite channels launched since 1996—gave ordinary Arabs a larger sense of the world and then allowed them to connect at a crucial juncture.

The new chic has been fashioned by a yearning for change that is at once democratic and indigenous. The restless young chafe at old ways and old leaders, but many who turned out in Cairo's Tahrir ("Liberation") Square this year do not aspire merely to imitate the West. They reject militant jihad and the rigid formulas of the Salafis, yet they fervently embrace their faith as a defining force in their future. They want new systems that are both fully representative and true to their religious values. Their quest, which began quietly long before the so-called Arab Spring, also helps illuminate what lies ahead.

The 21st-century believers are establishing

their voice in hip-hop lyrics and bold comedy, subversive poetry and satirical plays. The cultural uprising is as critical as the political upheaval. The young in particular have been encouraged by a new generation of popular televangelists who preach a softer and more flexible form of Islam. The militant Muslim Brotherhood and its allies may play a powerful role in the new Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world, but they will face strong countercurrents among young Muslims who have their own ideas. They will encounter people like Dalia Ziada.

Dalia Ziada was 29 when she joined the revolt against President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. She had a particularly long journey to Liberation Square. It started when she was a little girl.

“I am a survivor of female genital mutilation,” Ziada told me as she stirred a steamy espresso in a Cairo café. “In 1990, when I was eight years old, my mother told me to put on my best party dress. It was supposed to be some kind of surprise, a celebration. I found myself instead in a doctor’s office. I shouted and refused, but the doctor gave me a shot. I woke up in terrible physical pain.”

Ziada’s first protest was within her family. As a teenager, she tried to prevent the genital mutilation of her sister and cousins. No female in her family had ever fought back. “And mostly,” she conceded, looking up from her coffee, “I failed.”

In Egypt, the practice of female genital mutilation spans millennia, dating back to the pharaohs. In 2005, a United Nations report found that 97 percent of Egyptian females between the ages of 15 and 49 had undergone one of four types of genital mutilation—clitoridectomy, excision, infibulations, or the miscellaneous pricking, piercing, incising, scraping, or cauterizing of the genital area. The practice is cultural rather than religious in origin, more African than Middle Eastern. Many Christian girls in Egypt have also been genitally mutilated.

In 2006, when she was 24, Ziada had a long debate with an uncle about her seven-year-old cousin Shaimaa, the family’s youngest female child.

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“We talked most of the night. He was shocked at the blunt discussion,” she recalled. “I told him that he had no right to circumcise her. I said I’d cut off Shaimaa’s finger if he went through with it. He looked at me with surprise and said that would ruin her life—and I said, ‘Now you get it.’ I thought I’d lost. But he called me the next day and said I’d convinced him. That’s when I realized I could do things, because I had been able to save someone,” she said. “I decided to see what else I could do.”

Ziada, who comes from a traditional family, does not look the part of sex educator. She is doe eyed and wears no makeup, so her pale, chubby cheeks and colorless lips make her appear younger than she is. In public, she wears hijab coverings in bright florals, rich patterns, or fake designer prints; she changes her scarf daily. She is an observant Muslim, so not a wisp of hair shows. Judging from her eyebrows, her hair must be dark brown.

“Hijab is part of my life,” she told me. “I would feel naked without it.” She often jokes, with a robust laugh at herself, that her scarves are the most interesting part of her wardrobe. Yet her religious commitment defines her life.

Her goal, she wrote when she began her new blog in 2006, “is derived from the ultimate goal that any Muslim seeks; which is to please Almighty Allah.”

Ziada soon became a leading activist among the pink hijab generation, young women committed to their faith, firm in their femininity, and resolute about their rights. With three college classmates, she launched a campaign to educate women about genital mutilation and domestic violence. Then she moved on to human rights. And she ended up at Liberation Square.

“When I grew up,” she explained on her blog, “my personal interest in having more equal rights as a woman expanded to my country.”

Her first big project was translating a comic book called *The Montgomery Story*, which recounts Martin Luther King Jr.’s civil disobedience campaign against racial segregation in 1955. King famously mobilized a bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, after Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white man. Dozens of the boycott’s leaders were arrested; a bomb was thrown into King’s home, narrowly missing his wife and child. Yet the movement remained nonviolent. The Supreme Court ultimately ruled that bus segregation was illegal.

“When I read this story, I learned that someone must

take the risk for others to follow,” Ziada told me. “I wanted to be the Martin Luther King of Egypt!”

The Montgomery Story, originally an educational tool to promote civil rights among the young or mildly literate, ends with tips on nonviolent activism. One of several groups Ziada worked with distributed copies of her Arabic version across the Middle East.

“Finding a way to explain civil disobedience was very exciting. It was something new for ordinary people,” she said. “Then I started looking for other ways to use nonviolence and civil disobedience for my own campaigns.”

Her next major project was organizing the first human rights film festival in the Arab world. The Mubarak regime tried to block her. “The government reacted as if we were planning a terrorist attack,” she said.

The authorities imposed a stiff fee for showing each film, which Ziada and her backers could not afford. So she cut back from dozens of films to seven. Then government censors denied approval of the films, even though she had avoided movies about Egypt. Undeterred, Ziada went to the censorship board’s offices, waited by the elevator for its director, then rode up with him to plead her case.

“I think he was shocked that I would dare stop and question him,” she told me with a chuckle. “We talked all the way up the elevator. In the end, he was laughing and he gave me approval. Security didn’t believe it.”

The harassment was not over, however. The authorities shut down the theater that had agreed to show the films. Ziada then hastily arranged for various nongovernmental organizations to host a different film and panel discussion every night for a week. “We stopped letting them always tell us no. We started making decisions for ourselves,” she said.

In 2009, facing the same obstacles, Ziada managed to sneak in 20 movies for the second Cairo human rights film festival. To get around official obstacles, she provided the wrong schedule and imaginary venues. In a country with one of the region’s most autocratic regimes, Ziada showed films such as *Orange Revolution*, about the 2004 uprising in Ukraine, and, most daringly, four Egyptian films. One dramatized a well-known incident in which police used a broomstick to sodomize a young man who had intervened when his cousin refused to pay the police a bribe. Another was a Romeo-and-Juliet tale about a young Christian boy who falls in love with a Muslim girl he can never marry. The most potent movie, however, was also the shortest. *Please Spare Our Flowers* is a one-minute film about female gen-

ital mutilation that shows ragged pinking shears slowly snipping off the tops of dozens of beautiful flowers, one by one, just as they’re blooming—each producing a piercing scream from an unseen girl child or baby.

As the pink hijab generation gradually chisels away at centuries of restrictions, the young women are also redefining what it means to wear hijab—as a declaration of activist intent rather than a symbol of being sequestered. The change is visible in virtually every Muslim country. The young are shedding black and gray garb for clothing more colorful and even shape-revealing, albeit still modest. Pink is the most popular hue. Women in their teens, twenties, and thirties also flavor their faith with shades of pastel blue, bright yellow, and rustic orange, occasionally trimmed with sparkles, tassels, or even feathers. Hijab stores from Gaza to Jakarta now carry everything from long denim dresses with rhinestone designs to frilly frocks with matching scarves. *Hijab Fashion*, an Egyptian monthly magazine, was launched in 2004 for the pink hijab generation. It has nothing to do with religiosity. But it is also not just about fashion or vanity.

The Veiled—or al-Motahajiba—is one of Cairo’s new fashion centers combining Islamic feminism and cool. When I visited the shop in 2009, hijab ware was as elegantly displayed on the glass shelves as designer scarves at Neiman Marcus. Shaimaa Hassan, a 20-year-old salesclerk, told me that her favorite color was turquoise. She handed me a booklet of fashionable new hijab styles. The latest fad was the Spanish wrap, so called because the scarf is tied with a large knot at the back, in an allusion to the hairstyles worn by flamenco dancers. As she demonstrated how to wrap it, Hassan explained that she had just finished vocational school in commerce and intended to open her own business someday.

Sabaya, which means “young girls” in Arabic, is a salon, boutique, and café in Cairo’s trendy Heliopolis district. It was launched in 2008 by Hanan Turk, a famous Egyptian ballerina who was recruited for the cinema in 1991. The glamorous young actress appeared in more than 20 major films, both comedies and dramas, in which she often wore racy dresses or exposed ample décolletage. In 2005 she starred in the controversial film *Dunia* (“World”), about a young dancer who

explores her sexual identity and resists pressures to hide her femininity. The director struggled to get it past Egypt's censorship board.

Shortly after finishing the film, however, Turk opted to don hijab. The reaction in Egypt's arts world was electric. "She must have gone crazy," said Yusef Chahine, the director who gave Turk her early break in cinema.

FOR MANY YOUNG WOMEN, hijab is now about liberation, not confinement.

Turk was unfazed. "I had intended to take this step a long time ago," she declared, "but I never had the guts before." A year later, she announced plans to launch a religious magazine with a noted singer. They called it *Hajj*, after the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. Two years later, she opened Sabaya for fashionable hijabis. A sign in neon lights outside called it a place of "veiled beauty."

Turk remained a fashion plate, devising ways to dramatically drape her curves in stunning colors—and replicate them for other women. In many pictures, she looked even more exotic than she did before hijab. The wares in her store reflected her style.

"There's a tendency among people who don't know Islam to think of the veil as a sign of conservatism, ignorance, or backwardness," Nagwa Abbas, the store manager, told me over lattes at Sabaya's café. "It's just identification. Underneath, we wear what everyone else wears. We're all for women having every opportunity. Our aspirations don't change just because our clothing is different."

For many young women, hijab is now about liberation, not confinement. It's about new possibilities, not the past. It provides a kind of social armor that enables Muslim women to chart their own course, personally or professionally. For Ziada, hijab provides protective cover and legitimacy for campaigns she considers to be the essence of her faith—human rights and justice.

"Families feel much more comfortable allowing their girls to be active, to get higher education, or jobs, or even to go out alone at night when they are wearing hijab," she

told me. "It's a deal between a Muslim girl and society. I agree that I will wear hijab in order to have more space and freedom in return."

In its many forms, hijab is no longer assumed to signal acquiescence. It has instead become an equalizer. It is an instrument that makes a female untouchable as she makes her own decisions in the macho Arab world. It is

a stamp of authenticity as well as a symbolic demand for change. And it is a weapon to help a woman resist extremism's pull into the past. Militants cannot criticize or target her for being corrupted by West-

ern influence.

"The veil is the mask of Egyptian women in a power struggle against the dictatorship of men," explained Nabil Abdel Fattah, author of *The Politics of Religion* (2003), when I stopped to see him at Cairo's al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies. "The veil gives women more power in a man's world."

And Muslim women are increasingly assuming those powers as basic rights.

Education has been a key to the transformation. A 2008 Gallup poll not only found that literacy is the rule rather than the exception among Muslim women, but that they are a growing proportion of university students even in countries with strong religious sentiment. In Iran, 52 percent of women told Gallup they had at least some postsecondary education, while in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon about one-third did. Surprisingly, Gallup also reported that more women had postsecondary educations in Pakistan (13 percent) and Morocco (eight percent) than in Brazil (four percent).

"Now, it's hardly something worth noting that in Egypt, universities are filled with women, in some cases more than men, and they are excelling," one highly educated Egyptian woman told the Gallup researchers. "The valedictorians of Cairo's elite medical school are famously known to almost always be female."

Attitudes about female education have shifted markedly across the Muslim world, according to a 2009 Pew Global Attitudes survey, apart from obvious exceptions such as Afghanistan. In Egypt, 71 percent

of those surveyed said it is as important to educate girls as it is boys (and to educate both sexes equally). In Lebanon, 96 percent agreed. One result of this broad change in attitudes is that young women entering universities across the Islamic world are no longer necessarily English-speakers or the children of Westernized families. Young women in their pastel hijabs are highly visible on every Egyptian campus, including the prestigious American University of Cairo.

Like many of the pink hijabis, Ziada has little taste for Islamist politics. She rejects the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic movement founded in Egypt in 1928 that now has more than 80 offshoots around the world. She considers the group hypocritical for promising to improve life for all Egyptians while also issuing a draft manifesto that said women and Christians should not be allowed to seek the presidency.

“So the only person who can run is a Muslim man,” she told me angrily. “What the hell is this? They talk about democracy all the time, but look at the party’s own structure. They don’t have elections for leaders. There are no women, except in a women-only branch. And when people make petitions to challenge them on something, they don’t get answers.

“You know, ordinary people are not stupid,” she said. “We discovered that they’re working for their own goals, not our interests. They don’t understand the duality of young people who want to be faithful to their religion *and* live a modern life.”

Last year, Ziada started organizing workshops for young Egyptians to encourage civil disobedience rather than confrontation. “Debate, don’t hate,” the promotion poster advised. Working with a Muslim civil society group, she coached activists from other Arab countries on moving from online activism to on-the-street action. Among the trainees were two Tunisian bloggers who, only months later, played critical roles in flashing the story of Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation in Tunisia across the Internet and beginning the Arab Spring.

“You can see,” she told me in a phone call later, with great excitement, “it’s paying off!” Ziada continued her campaign at Liberation Square earlier this year. After protesters set up a permanent camp there, she walked

around the vast plaza distributing copies of *The Montgomery Story*.

“It was a good time,” she told me, “to remind people of the techniques—and to remind them that there were people who did it before us, and we can do it too.”

In every country, the message of the Arab street movements has been the same. “We want democracy. We want freedom,” said a Libyan protester shortly after the uprising began against Moammar Qaddafi. “I want to go on the street feeling like nobody is looking after me, not looking over my shoulder.”

But in Arab countries where rebellion has succeeded in ousting leaders (or will), painful makeovers still lie ahead. None will get through the change quickly. Most will stumble over daunting political and economic challenges. Some may fail. All will grapple to find the right blend of freedom and faith. Globalization—or the traumatic transition to it—may also intensify personal affiliations with faith, and backward-looking groups may profit from the change. Yet the uprisings are among the many signals that the Islamic world is no longer an exception to history’s forces. A new generation is taking the helm. And the vast majority of Muslims are not attracted to the three major models that until recently defined political Islam’s spectrum: Al Qaeda’s purist Salafism, Iran’s Shiite theocracy, and Saudi Arabia’s rigid Wahhabism. All three have a singular vision. All three have no room for anything else.

The new movements are about pluralism and tolerance. The alternatives they create over time—perhaps a great deal of time—may not be liberal in the Western mode. Alcohol and pornography, for example, are not on the list of freedoms endorsed even by liberal Muslims (though hypocrisy is hardly unknown). But most of those who swept away the old order do want to end political monopolies and open up space—to play whatever music they want as well as to have a genuine choice of political parties.

“I’m worried about our future. There are not enough signs that tell you liberalism will be achieved or freedom is guaranteed,” Ziada said shortly after she returned from a “protect the revolution” rally at Liberation Square six weeks after Mubarak’s ouster.

“But I’m not afraid. I know now that I have power,” she told me. “And I know what to do with it.” ■