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Feminism in Egypt's Modern History: From Colonialism to Revolution

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Abstract

This study traces the development of feminism in Egypt, with a focus on change and discourse alongside state regimes. Beginning in 1798, Egypt's transition from Mamluk rule to modern state centralization and reform under Muḥammad ʿAlī marked the introduction of state-sponsored education for women, simultaneously increasing female visibility in public spaces, while intensifying conflict between the state, traditional family structures, and religious authorities. Furthermore, British colonialism, the feminist movement, and the political regimes of the 20th century shaped perceptions of female bodies, reinforcing gendered control over women's autonomy. Through a critical analysis of key historical events including the 1919 Revolution, Nāṣīr's state feminism, and the rise of Islamist conservatism under Sādāt and Mubārak, the study highlights the persistent intersection of nationalism, feminism, and patriarchal values in the regulation of women's autonomy is discussed. The 2011 Arab Spring and the political landscape of its aftermath reveal further insights into the changing nature of Egyptian feminism. The Islamisation of cabinet and state policy under Morsi and subsequent Arab Spring shaped Islamic feminist thought during this time, while simultaneously influencing the trajectory of the uprising. Despite claims from Sīsī's current government that a significant amount of advancement for women's equality has been made in Egypt (announced during the human rights review of Egypt at the UN Human Rights Council in November 2019), Egyptian women continue to report insufficient progress in their social and political conditions, and the ongoing need to understand how state regimes, nationalism, and gender intersect to shape the contours of feminist discourse in Egypt.

Keywords: islamism; patriarchy; arab spring; nationalism; state regimes