

Egypt's new first lady is veiled, but not silent

Written by Ahmed Tharwat
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Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood Freedom and Justice Party, was named the winner of the Egyptian presidential elections held Jun. 24.

Morsi is the first civilian elected president in Egyptian history. This is not the only first that Morsi brought to Egyptian political landscape.

Pictured: Najla Mahmoud

He is the first, Islamist to get to the presidential palace and the first Egyptian president with the name Mohamed as an actual first name. Also he is the first Egyptian president to earn doctoral degree, and the first president to win an election with less than 90 percent of the vote (51.7 percent).

He is the first president to win a competitive election, where Egyptians had for the first time the opportunity to choose between more than one candidate – 13 in the first primary and two in the general election. He is the first Egyptian president studied and taught at a U.S. university. And, in the world of religious symbolism, for the first time, Morsi brought the beard into the presidential palace.

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But the one first that Morsi brings that will get the West; and specially Americans attention, is Moris's wife, Najla Mahmoud, is the first Egyptian first lady to wear traditional Islamic dress, abaya; full coverage hijab.

Allow me introduce to the readers the Egyptian new first lady. Najla Mahmoud, was born in Cairo in 1962. She is also Mohammad Morsi's first cousin and married the new president in 1979. The couple has four sons and a daughter together. As a young woman, she joined the Muslim Brotherhood in the U.S. (there is always an American connection to everything).

Egypt's new first lady lived in the United States with her husband while he studied at the University of Southern California. She has been an active member of the Brotherhood for many years alongside running multiple charity projects, particularly in the field of education. She is a very different first lady even in Egyptian standard.

The new first lady of Egypt got a fair amount of ridiculous coverage from Egyptian liberal media and so called secular Egyptians. Some even questioned if she is really fit to represent Egypt. Her image has become the subject of a rancorous debate on Websites and in newspapers. A column in the newspaper El Fagr asked sarcastically how could she receive world leaders and still adhere to her traditional Islamic standards of modesty.

“Don't look at her. Don't shake hands with her,” the paper suggested, calling it a “comic scenario.”

Prior Egyptian first lady, Suzanne Mubarak, lived in the shadow of her projected strong leader; running charity organizations, and meeting dignitaries, until the ex-dictator lost interest and the first lady took over and ran the country's domestic affairs. According to a recent interview in one of the Egyptian papers, the new first lady does not even like the title of first lady saying, “Islam taught us that the next president is the first servant of Egypt. This means that his wife is also the servant of Egypt. Any title that has been forced upon us must be gone with. It should disappear from my political and social dictionary.”

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Najla Mahmoud sees herself first, in “women traditional” roles and foremost as a mother. In an interview with the Egyptian press Najla Mahmoud admitted that she preferred to be called “Em Ahmed” (mother of her son Ahmed) above any other title. And as the former first ladies were spending a great deal of money on their own appearances and making many Western fashion statements, the new first lady will have none of it. The only one fashion statement she will make is the hijab – the full Islamic dress.

The West has a fixation on Muslim dress, and its view of hijab. Its view is mostly a colonial one; a symbol of oppressing women (as if the billions of dollars spent by the fashion industry to tell Western women what to wear is not oppressing).

Liberating Muslim women has been used by the West to invade Muslims countries and take down their so-called oppressive leaders. This racist attitude toward Muslim women's traditional dress still prevails in parts of the West but is often hidden behind the veil of secularism.

So having a hijabi first lady in Egypt may bring a new attitude towards Muslims women, and a new look toward Muslim dress fashion.

Ahmed Tharwat is a freelance writer, public speaker and host of Arab American TV show, “BelAhdan.”