

# Muslim Woman Seeks Egyptian Presidency

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CAIRO — On May 25, 2005, in a nearly empty polling station, Bothaina Kamel cast her vote on the referendum to amend the Egyptian Constitution to allow for the country's first contested presidential elections. That evening she faced a studio camera, presenting the news on state television, declaring that the referendum witnessed a record turnout.



Abdalla Hassan for The International Herald Tribune.

Bothaina Kamel at a Coptic demonstration in Minya, Egypt, in May.

The vote that day had been marred by violence by security forces against protesters denouncing the facade of greater political participation — something that was not mentioned in the broadcast. The constitutional amendment, detractors said, outlined standards so stringent that the ruling party would choose its opposition in presidential elections.

That got Ms. Kamel to thinking: Is she telling viewers the news or is she conveying government newspeak?

Six years and a revolution later, Ms. Kamel, a television anchor and activist, now has the distinction of being the first woman to run for president in Egypt. Her campaign motto is simply, “My agenda is Egypt.”

Ms. Kamel's foray into politics is nothing new for her. Just after the referendum vote, in the summer of 2005, she and two other women formed [Shayfeen.com](http://Shayfeen.com) — “We Are Watching You” in colloquial Arabic — a group to monitor the parliamentary elections. In 2006, Ms. Kamel chose not to read newscasts on state television she did not believe to be true, opting to take a leave of absence.

“My chosen career has been to listen to people,” she said, a role she believes makes her suited for a life in politics.

For six years, she hosted a popular weekly radio program called “Nighttime Confessions.” Broadcast past midnight, listeners called the program to talk about personal dilemmas and seek advice, bringing up such sensitive topics as sexual abuse, and premarital and extramarital sex. The program was abruptly taken off the airwaves in 1998, accused by a state committee on religion of damaging the reputation of Egypt and its youth.

She later made a move to satellite television and the Saudi-owned Orbit network. There, she was a presenter for a decade, hosting an interview and talk show called “Please Understand Me.” But when she chose to do a program, following the revolution, on Hosni Mubarak’s hidden billions, station executives, expecting Saudi Arabia’s alleged role in transferring the fortune would come up, informed her a half hour before airtime that the show was not going to be broadcast. Her program has been in reruns ever since.

Ms. Kamel has come to be known as “the woman who is like a hundred men.” For years a recognized face at pro-democracy rallies, she often acted as a human shield to prevent the arrest of youth demonstrators. A “girl of the revolution,” as she likes to call herself, she was on the streets from day one of the uprising.

Because of recent sectarian violence, Ms. Kamel, who is Muslim, wears a crescent and cross necklace. A silver pin on her dress is inscribed with the words “I am Egyptian” in Arabic calligraphy. A button declares, “Against Corruption.” Among an assortment of beads and bracelets on her wrist is a band emblazoned with the legend, “Make poverty history.” Her campaign for the presidency focuses on fighting the dual evils of poverty and corruption.

“There is no democracy with poverty,” the self-described social democrat said.

A supporter of youth, Ms. Kamel advocates reducing the minimum age for holding elected office in the country’s legislature from 30 to 22. It was mainly the youth who made the ultimate sacrifices during the revolution, she said: “We did not say no, stay on the side because you are less than 30.”

Ms. Kamel first announced her intention to run for the presidency in April on Twitter, using social media as her main publicity and advocacy tool. She expressed reservations on whether presidential elections would take place by the end of the year, as promised by the ruling military council.

On May 8, Ms. Kamel stood in front of the Church of the Virgin Mary, set ablaze a day earlier, in the impoverished working-class district of Imbaba as young and old chanted, “Down With Mubarak!” But it was not behind-the-scenes machinations of former regime

elements that were the only source of rage over sectarian violence that has engulfed this community.

The day before witnessed violent confrontations in Imbaba, where it was rumored that a Coptic woman was being held in a church because she wed a Muslim man and converted to his faith. The clashes left a dozen people dead and two churches up in flames.

Amid the tensions, Ms. Kamel talked with residents, both Christians and Muslims, listening to their accounts and testimonials. Explanations abound on the reasons for the surge in the violence: sectarian conflicts are being engineered by counterrevolutionary forces to halt the gains of the revolution in their tracks; the military rulers are slow to react because they want to remain in charge of the country; the wider margin for expression has laid bare animosities cultivated by extremists, who thrive on the hopelessness and anger that poverty breeds.

Ms. Kamel walked away from the encounter faulting the military rulers who are managing Egypt's transition government. "I entered Imbaba saying the police and the army were slow to react," she said. "I left Imbaba saying the police and army were complicit."

Those were strong words for a military establishment known for being intolerant of criticism.

"I accuse the Supreme Council of dereliction and with helping to aggravate sectarian violence, of failing our revolution," she added. "I am saying you should return to your barracks. You have failed miserably in protecting Egypt. Your place is not security, it is war. We want a civilian presidential council."

She has a sense that her outspokenness may put her in danger but is not fearful: "If I get killed, hundreds will come after me. I am not afraid."

In her presidential bid, Ms. Kamel has traveled across Egypt meeting and talking with residents, visiting homes and noting down their frustrations and demands. "When I am there," she said, "I try to solve problems with phone calls, connections and so on."

She understands how the problems can be overwhelming. "If you go to the Bedouin of Sinai, they feel like they are the only ones that are reviled and discriminated against," she said. "You go to slums in Fayoum and people there feel like they are the only ones living below the poverty line. You go to the Copts and they feel that they are the ones who paid the price of revolution. And sometimes you sit with the revolutionists and they see nothing but themselves and their sacrifices."

By engaging on a personal level, she expects to gain an intimate understanding of Egyptians and their concerns. “When we took to the streets we said, ‘Peaceful, peaceful.’ We did not say, Revolutionary, revolutionary,” Ms. Kamel said, pointing to Egyptians’ innate sense of patience.

On a May afternoon, in a suite in central Cairo’s landmark Marriott Hotel, Ms. Kamel met with Andrew S. Karsch, a producer and writer who has also worked in politics. He acknowledged the bewildering difficulties in building the institutions of democracy from scratch. “I don’t think there is anything as difficult — having to compose a constitution and to have an election,” he said.

Mr. Karsch talked with Ms. Kamel about voter awareness strategies that have worked in the United States with the nonprofit organization Rock the Vote, including a bus project he directed that engaged youth in politics during an election year that propelled Barack Obama into the White House.

He suggested having Egyptian artists design a campaign bus. “It is a celebration of all things Egyptian culturally,” he said. “The bus is going to places, incorporating music, incorporating art.”

The two discussed strategy. “In terms of the process, what we are talking about doing is using a lot of film,” Mr. Karsch said. “And we are going to use it in different ways to approach not just your candidacy, it is going to be about the fact, you are very young, you have the ability.”

“I’m not young,” Ms. Kamel interrupted. “I am 49.”

“You can run five times,” said Mr. Karsch. “You are not Golda Meir!”

Running as an independent, Ms. Kamel sees her main challenge being the lack of an organization. She also knows she has a file with the state’s security apparatus under Mr. Mubarak.

“I am concerned with a social revolution in Egypt more than a political revolution,” she said. “If you don’t have a social revolution in Egypt, all these gains will be lost.”

Mr. Karsch approved of Ms. Kamel’s strategy to make Egypt and not herself the focus of her campaign. “By doing that, it makes you almost impossible to attack. Because you are not playing to win, you are playing to dignify.”

Traveling four hours by train to Minya, 240 kilometers, or 150 miles, south of Cairo, Ms. Kamel arrived late at night for a workshop and conference the following day on political awareness organized by medical students at Minya University.

A protest rally organized by Coptic Christians was taking place outside the offices of the governor. She joined women protesters, listening to their frustrations, embracing them in emotional moments mixed with tears, and exchanging phone numbers. She contacted a journalist she knows at a leading Egyptian newspaper so that one of the women could tell him her story.

She arranged to meet with a group of Coptic representatives the next day to hear their concerns, a meeting that took place on a boat restaurant on the Nile.

She endorses a proposal that grants equal rights to Muslims and Christians in building houses of worship and in trying those who incite sectarianism and the assault on churches.

Listening, asking questions and taking notes, Ms. Kamel brought up the question of international protection for the Coptic Christian minority.

“International protections could be the weapon that we threaten with, a means of pressure,” she said. “The threat of using the weapon is more important than using it.”

Around the table, opinions varied on the most contentious issue that has come up in the wake of sectarian strife. Ashraf Badie, a middle-aged man who Ms. Kamel met the day before, said: “When sectarian issues happened, the Copts came out of their silence. They want solutions. There is more than one answer and more than one solution.” He considered the call for international protection a last resort.

On returning to Cairo that night, Ms. Kamel headed from the train station directly to a Coptic rally in front of the state television and radio building, where she once worked.

Tens of thousands of Christians raised crosses, shouting: “The people want the downfall of the field marshal!” and “Why is your voice low? Are they not your martyrs?” — a reference to those killed in sectarian clashes.

The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, led by Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, governs Egypt with presidential authority, pending elections for a head of state.

Ms. Kamel addressed the crowd. “Raise your head up high, you are Copts!” she said as the crowd roared back the phrase. She repeated it twice, then modified the refrain. “Raise your head up high, you are Egyptian!”

“Coptic means Egyptian. We are all one,” she said. “I am wearing the crescent and the cross, and I just came back from Minya in front of the governor’s office. And they told me there that the Virgin Mary appeared the day before yesterday.”

“When I was in Minya, I received a call from the military prosecutor. They said they want to meet me tomorrow. I want your prayers so that God grants us victory. During the revolution, we said, civilian, civilian, not sectarian or military. We all want the same rights of citizenship.”

For five hours on May 14, the military prosecutor questioned Ms. Kamel, centering on Twitter messages she wrote following a conversation she had with General Ismail Etman, head of the Moral Affairs Directorate of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, where she challenged him on the arrest and abuse of demonstrators by the military police and forced virginity tests for female detainees. The meeting with the military prosecutor was cordial and no charges were pressed, but being summoned was enough reason for worry.

The night before, as she stood before a crowd in front of the television and radio building, Ms. Kamel struck a bold and defiant tone. “When I stand with Christians, I am standing with Egypt, with citizenship and the January 25 revolution,” she said. “And I am standing with the blood of the martyrs. God will make us victorious. Egypt will be free.”