

Disentangling Religion and Politics: Whither Gender Equality?

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Abstract This article explores the ways in which both religion and gender equality are instrumentalised in the service of diverse political agendas. Building on illustrations from Turkey and Afghanistan, the argument is made that a moratorium should be declared on focusing on the binaries of religious vs secular, Western vs non-Western or global vs local in favour of more rigorous institutional analysis that will give a better understanding of the politics of gender. This will require detailed attention to fluid networks of influence at the global, national and local levels and engagement with a multiplicity of actors, interests and practices.

1 Introduction

The entanglements between religion and politics have undoubtedly become an important arena for contestations over issues of gender equality and women's rights.¹ This article argues that both discourses on gender equality and religious rhetoric have become instrumentalised in the service of a variety of political agendas. These agendas reflect, among other things, the complex interactions between the political economy of neoliberalism and the new geopolitics of the so-called 'war on terror'. I would, therefore, like to propose that we adopt more rigorous forms of institutional analysis that transcend the categories of religious versus secular, Western vs non-Western, global vs local and modern vs traditional (or 'alternative' modern) to better come to grips with fluid networks of influence that shape struggles for gender equality in different contexts.

2 Instrumentalisation

Let me start with a vignette from Turkey, which clearly illustrates the theme of 'instrumentalisation'. On 18 July 2010, the Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, held a meeting with women's non-government organisations (NGOs) in the context of the 'Democratic Initiative and National Unity and Brotherhood Project', also dubbed 'the Kurdish Initiative' in the popular press. This project aims to address and remedy the conflict that has plagued the South-east of the country, pitting the

Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) against the Turkish military. Erdogan interpellated the women present as mothers saying that 'their voices would drown out the sounds of bullets' since no pain equals that of a woman whose son has fallen victim to war. It is important to note that a number of the 80-odd attendees were members of NGOs with known feminist credentials. This explains why a participant took issue with the Prime Minister for addressing them only as mothers, overlooking the fact that they were fully fledged economic, political and juridical personae. At this point, Erdogan apparently said: 'I do not believe in the equality of men and women. I believe in equal opportunities. Men and women are different and complementary (*mutemimim*)'.

The equality vs difference debate has a long pedigree in feminist theory. It was presumably not, however, Joan Scott's (1990) incisive interventions on this question that Erdogan had in mind but rather the Islamic concept of *fitrat*, a version of the 'biology is destiny' argument. The reactions of the participants at the meeting were widely reported in the press as, of 'utter shock', 'having the effect of a cold shower', 'total astonishment' and 'deep disappointment'. The only interesting question to pose here is: *Why* did this comment cause so much consternation coming from a Prime Minister who had never made a secret of his conservative Islamist leanings?

The answer goes to the very heart of the question of instrumentalisation of gender issues – in Turkey as elsewhere. It speaks of a history of mutual entanglement and collaboration between very differently positioned state and non-state actors. To understand this particular dynamic, one must go back to the early 2000s and to the first period of the Justice and Development Party's rule, a period when European Union accession and meeting the Copenhagen criteria were high on the political agenda. It was also a period of the unprecedented legal change – the most ambitious since the Kemalist reforms of the 1920s and 1930s. The new Turkish Civil Code, passed in November 2001, abolished the supremacy of men in marriage and established the full equality of men and women in the family (with respect to rights over the family abode, marital property, divorce, child custody, inheritance and rights to work and travel). The changes to the Turkish Penal Code, passed in September 2004, were also extensive: new measures were put in place to prevent sentence reduction for 'killings in the name of customary law' (so-called honour killings), now defined as aggravated homicide; marital rape is criminalised, the article foreseeing a reduction or suspension of the sentence of rapists; abductors marrying their victims is abolished; sexual offences such as harassment at the workplace are criminalised; regarding the regulation of sexual crimes, the discrimination between virgins and non-virgins, married and unmarried women was abolished. This is the closest Turkey has ever come to comply, at least on paper, with the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

Of course, the Turkish women's movement, women's professional associations and women's NGOs had played an important role in securing these outcomes. Turkish women's rights activists also sat on high profile international bodies (participating in CEDAW and working as United Nations special rapporteur on Violence against Women, for example). Previous successful collaboration with international and governmental bodies may, therefore, go some way towards explaining the consternation at the Prime Minister's comments. They undoubtedly brought latent anxieties to the surface. How secure was state legislation in guaranteeing women equal inheritance, divorce and child custody rights? Turkish women, whether secular or Muslim, would have a great deal to lose. If we are to believe survey

results, women who identify themselves as Muslim believers do not seem to condone polygamy any more than their secular sisters.

In short, the Prime Minister's comment must be situated in the complicated political choreography between women's NGOs co-opted to play the European card and active in dealings with the international community, and the political constituencies the Prime Minister belongs to. The Justice and Development Party represents the neoliberal and 'liberal democratic' splinter of the former Welfare Party that overtly promoted changing the constitution and state laws in favour of Sharia-based legislation. Accommodating internal pressures and external demands, thus, resulted in conjunctural and context-specific dispositions and utterances on matters of gender equality.

3 The politics of gender

I would like to suggest that the habitual lenses we have trained on issues of religion in relation to women's rights may have been of limited use. The debates in Turkey, as in many parts of the Muslim world, have become imprisoned within the narrow paradigms of secularism vs Islamism, post-colonialism, modernisation and modernity. These debates have created sterile demonologies with proponents of modernisation relegating religion to a sphere of tradition and obscurantism, while critics of secularism have pointed to its Western genealogies and authoritarian and colonial precedents.

I would also like to suggest that these parameters no longer adequately reflect (if they ever did) what I define as *the politics of gender*, namely processes of appropriation, contestation and reinterpretation of positions on gender relations and women's rights by state, non-state and global actors. These categories are intentionally left blank, since they involve players with very different orientations and fluid agendas. Thus, state actors, as in Saudi Arabia, may have a religio-political agenda based on the export of the Wahhabi² doctrine and creation of well-funded networks to that effect. Non-state actors (such as NGOs) may, likewise, have religious agendas and act with both state backing and funding from international donors, while others may stake out more secular aims. Global actors, including the United Nations system and transnational Islamic organisations, contribute to

a complex ideational infrastructure that frames debates on gender equality. I would therefore like to propose that a focus on networks might provide greater mileage in understanding how the politics of gender plays out.

4 Focus on networks

I would like to develop this argument primarily with reference to Afghanistan – a prototypical case of the instrumentalisation of women’s rights discourse that makes the position of women fighting for an expansion of their rights practically untenable. There are different layers of influence to this instrumentalisation process (Kandiyoti 2009). First, there is the geopolitical context of the post-9/11, ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’ in Afghanistan. The interventions of Laura Bush and Cherie Blair on behalf of oppressed Muslim women, far from inspiring an unqualified response of international feminist solidarity, provoked sharp critical reactions from many feminists in the North. However, the presentation of these interventions as ‘cultural imperialism’ had the unfortunate side-effect of locking the women of Afghanistan into an essentialised concept of cultural indigeneity that hid from view the social and political effects of successive interventions establishing the ascendancy of Islamist parties backed by a variety of foreign patrons during the Cold War.

Second, the workings of global governance institutions (United Nations agencies in particular) in the service of a gender equality agenda in Afghanistan instituted a form of donor-driven gender activism that could not reach beyond the ministries in Kabul in a country where the writ of the government barely extended outside the capital. This made the technocratic formula of ‘gender mainstreaming’ politically hollow and ushered in another layer of instrumentalism – this time in the service of development and post-conflict reconstruction.

It is, however, in the nature of internal political settlements between different political factions that we see the most graphic deployment of religion as a means of deal-making, with significant consequences for women’s rights. For example, the passage of the Shiite Personal Status Law in Afghanistan (signed by President Karzai in March 2009 and passed with revisions in July 2009) is one such instance. Ostensibly giving recognition to the persecuted Shia minorities by

according them separate legislation, this law introduced significant restrictions on the rights of Shia women. It was spearheaded by a group of Afghan Shia clerics with ties to Iran, and by the Shia scholar Sheikh Asif Mohseni in particular, who was making a bid for the leadership of the Shia population (although he was not a member of the ethnic Hazara community, who account for most Shias in Afghanistan and many of whom resented his initiative). However, a cross-factional alliance of religious interests was able to assert authority over law-making, sidelining due legislative process and attempting to intimidate the women’s and human rights activists who protested (Oates 2009). Most significantly, the acceptance of the law by a hard-line Sunni leader, Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, who had initially opposed it, signalled an arrangement whereby Sunni and Shia actors would recognise each other’s exclusive authority over their respective jurisprudence. This move was designed to delegitimise any other source of authority, notwithstanding the fact that Afghanistan became a party to CEDAW in 2003 and that the 2004 constitution stipulates that the government must abide by the international treaties and conventions to which it is a signatory. The passage of this law was, at least initially, met with total passivity by members of the international community wary of standing in the way of expanding minority rights and making a gesture towards pluralism, even if that implied a raw deal for Shia women.

There is, therefore, an arena – we might loosely label as the arena of clerical interests – which also manifests itself globally (Kandiyoti 2010). These interests famously came into focus during the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994 when the representatives of the Holy See entered into an alliance with Islamic conservatives to resist adopting the conference programme of action. Above and beyond the details of their substantive objections, this transnational alliance aimed to establish the principle that matters relating to sexuality, to the control of female bodies and to reproductive choice do not belong to the realm of civic deliberation, public choice or human rights, but to the domain of morality defined by doctrinal imperatives (and conceptions of sin and virtue).

The Pope’s recent visit to the UK highlighted, yet again, that he had no compunction denouncing the laws of a sovereign state – more

specifically the Equality Bill – laws that were duly passed through a democratically elected parliament. However critical we might be of the global human rights discourse and the bureaucratisation of human rights monitoring, we must recognise the widespread use of rights language – for instance the Pope condemning the Equality Bill in the name of the human rights of believing Catholics who want to retain their right to discriminate against gay people – and the fact that human rights instruments are part of a global struggle led by powerful clerical interests, sometimes backed by states, to eliminate secular spaces in favour of a religious monopoly over issues concerning women’s rights.

Even more troubling than the bids by institutionalised religions for a higher profile in public life, is the fact that mainstream donors and actors are themselves involved in the business of promoting faith-based organisations as conduits for aid and welfare services. The facile cliché that Western donor agencies are, through their efforts at gender mainstreaming, ‘imposing’ a Western (and presumably secular) model of rights proves, upon inspection, to be quite shallow. There is little doubt that there has been widespread dissemination and circulation of various technocratic tools and approaches (critiqued in Cornwall *et al.* 2007) and the promotion of an NGO sector that could deliver these technologies. However, our analyses should not stop there.

We now need to go beyond these clichés and take stock of the effects of the post-9/11 conjuncture and the deepening of neoliberal policies. The retreat of the state and cuts in public sector provision which initially led to a proliferation of NGOs working in advocacy and service delivery is now turning into a search for more ‘organic’ institutions with better access into society. These are, more often than not, organised around church and mosque. When the state wants to shift its focus from social welfare to charity, the comparative advantage of these institutions is abundantly clear. In post-conflict countries like Afghanistan, where donors often give up any realistic prospect of delivering public goods (such as justice) through state institutions, they also target local, so-called traditional bodies of governance. The fact that these ‘traditional’ bodies (like the *shuras* or *jirgas* in Afghanistan) are often heavily engineered and sometimes re-invented and re-fashioned by donors does not

seem to detract from the discourse of ‘bottom-up’ participation that lends them legitimacy.

There is, therefore, a contradictory movement within the donor community: on the one hand a drive to expand the reach of conventions, which are based on universal principles of human rights and, on the other, an attempt to ‘reach’ local communities better by utilising already existing mechanisms of local governance and giving them a more formal existence (and thus, presumably, the means to avoid the most egregious breaches of human rights of these highly patriarchal and legally unaccountable bodies). In other words, we now witness a form of double-speak, whereby the international community appears to insist on conforming with standard setting human rights instruments *and* on accommodating local custom and law in an admission that the states they assist have little hope of making any inroads into their societies, least of all in providing justice as a social good. This inevitably ushers in a new area of debate regarding what constitutes ‘custom’ and what defines ‘religion’ and whether religion can be used as a progressive tool to bring custom in line with universal human rights. This, in turn, opens up a completely new field of social engineering consisting in finding a ‘moderate’ voice for Islam (or any other religion for that matter). The net impact of the convergence of these diverse influences is the marginalisation – if not total elimination – of secular spaces as legitimate arenas for a discussion of gender equality. I define secular spaces as spaces where justifications for pluralism and equality can be based on sources other than religious doctrine (though they do not exclude religion as a possible source). Those wishing to use religious arguments to achieve a more progressive reading of women’s rights are *de facto* members of secular spaces since feminists – of whatever persuasion – have little to gain from a closure of public deliberation.

5 Conclusion

To conclude, achieving a better understanding on the politics of gender requires detailed attention to fluid networks of influence at the global, national and local levels and engagement with a multiplicity of international, state and non-state actors. The task of disentangling religion and politics in discussions on gender equality must therefore impose a moratorium on using terms such as ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ and focus instead on actors, interests and practices.

Notes

1 A cross-national project carried out under the auspices of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development on *Religion, Politics and Gender Equality* deals with this question extensively. See www.opendemocracy.net/5050/religion-gender-politics

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