

Forcing Women's Rights by Andrew Henchen

Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. Newton's Third Law is particularly interesting in that it seems to apply to history as much as physics. Throughout history, there is a constant struggle between old and new, and often periods of rapid change are followed by an era of renewed conservatism and religious fundamentalism. Such a shift can be seen in the United States as the conservative Christian right gained power during the 1980s after the not-so-Christian-or-conservative '60s and '70s. The same phenomenon may occur as the U.S. works to establish new, Western-style democracies in Iraq and Afghanistan; the U.S. should expect that there will be pushback from Islamic fundamentalists. It is important, then, that the U.S. and the international community not force Western ideas and beliefs, such as women's suffrage and representation, onto these governments. Not only is the forcing of women's rights against the very basis of democracy, which allows a people to decide for themselves how they should be ruled, it risks creating a backlash against the West and other democratic principles.

While many disagree with the U.S.-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, both have resulted in the formation of democratic governments. A good thing? Probably, considering that they were previously ruled by violent and discriminatory regimes. However, in the international community's rush to form these democracies, the true meaning of democracy has been lost. Pressure from the U.S. led to provisions mandating that 25 percent of the representative bodies in Iraq and Afghanistan consist of women (Coleman 91). Instead of allowing the people of these countries to freely determine their own rules for representation, outside forces made the decision for them.

From a Western perspective, these mandated quotas for women's representation may seem like a good thing; women make up half of the population and should therefore have a right to be heard. Many argue that guaranteeing a voice for women in these new democracies is a strong positive step. Interestingly enough, many in the women's rights community do not think these quotas do enough to protect women. In "The Payoff from Women's Rights," Isobel Coleman referred to them merely as a "fragile first step," called "insufficient" the plan to spend over \$100 million in funding education for Afghan women, and berated the U.S. for allowing the Iraqi Constitutional Commission to exclude women (91-2). However, those who take this position fail to see that their actions are counter to the spirit of democracy and may even backfire by stirring up greater fundamentalism.



("Wilson Supports Suffrage")

To understand how not allowing these countries to choose their own representation is contrary to democratic ideals, it may be useful to turn to the United States' own history. The U.S. Constitution, which was ratified in 1787, originally made no direct reference to women. Interestingly, the U.S. Constitutional Convention, like the Iraqi Constitutional Convention, excluded women. It took nearly 133 years for the 19th Amendment to be added, insuring women the right to vote. And it did not come easily.

It took many years of national organization and protest movements like the one pictured above (“Wilson Supports”). But many people, of both sexes, were against women’s suffrage. The Christian theologian Horace Bushnell wrote over 180 pages on why women’s suffrage was against the natural order established by God, explaining that “man is to govern; all government belongs to men” (52). Helen Kendrick Johnson wrote on how “the dogma of Woman Suffrage is fundamentally at war with true democratic principles” (321). And plenty of other Anti-Suffragists believed the same things. They feared women’s suffrage would result in higher divorce rates, the break-up of the family, and the final death knell of chivalry. Whether their fears have been vindicated or not is debatable, but it cannot be denied that they believed in their cause as much as the suffragists believed in their own and they zealously defended it. It is important to note that these anti-suffragists were not anti-women; rather, they viewed traditional gender roles as positive societal structures. Eventually, though, the U.S. decided (through a democratic process) to allow women’s suffrage. The United States deciding to give its women the right to vote does not mean it can or should make this decision for any other country.

The American anti-suffragists’ value of conservative gender roles is shared by many Muslim women today. For her book *Feminine Voice of Islam*, Najwa Raouda interviewed SJordan, an Islamic graduate student living in America. According to SJordan, “Islam has laws, rules [about] how women are treated[;] they have the right to work and study with limits, because their husbands and families are [a] priority” (qtd. in Raouda 94). Of course, many Muslim women disagree and support more Western ideas. In their book *Women in the Middle East: Tradition and Change*, Ramsay Harik and Elsa Marston explain that “while many [Muslim/Arab women] gladly seek out what the West has to offer, others prefer an identity distinct and separate from the West...[S]ome welcome the freedoms and rights taken for granted by women in the West, while others strive to preserve the roles assigned them by traditional society” (qtd. in Raouda 35). Both sides of the women’s suffrage and representation issue have valid arguments. If democracy is going to exist in these countries, they need to be allowed to make their own decisions.

Instead of being allowed to go through the process of democratic debate, as occurred in the U.S., the constitutional committees of Afghanistan and Iraq were pressured into not only giving women the right to vote but into establishing quotas for the number of female parliament members. In Iraq, 25% of parliament must be female, while in Afghanistan, 25% of the House of the People and 17% of the House of Elders must be women (Moghadam, “Peacebuilding” 332, 335). When compared with the record high 17% in both houses of the U.S. Congress in 2009 (“Record-Breaking”), U.S. interests in support of quotas are a bit hypocritical.

Insisting upon quotas does not automatically change hundreds of years of established culture. The Afghani constitution begins with the declaration “Believing firmly in Almighty God, relying on His divine will and adhering to the Holy religion of Islam” (Preamble), and the Iraqi constitution uses similar phrasing (Preamble). Islamic law makes a clear distinction between men and women, such as giving only men the unilateral right to divorce, requiring women to obtain consent from their husbands to work and travel (Moghadam, “Modernizing” 4), and requiring women to wear the hijab while in public (Raouda 37). Many Muslims in the Middle East contend that these laws and others are to protect the modesty of women (Raouda 35). And it is not hard for most Westerners to understand why they may not want the public bra burnings of the 1960s or the scantily clad pop stars of today. Notice the previous image of the women suffragists and notice that they, too, wear modest clothing that covers their entire bodies. Even if some in the West see Islamic law as oppressive to women, it seems unlikely that strong-arming them into adopting progressive representation of women will change their minds.

If the West truly wishes to spread the ideas of democracy to the Middle East, it must trust the people of the Middle East to make their own decisions. The history of the United States shows that a true representative democracy will face challenges and struggles and will oftentimes be divided on the issues. Yet ultimately these issues were decided by the American people; the people of Iraq and Afghanistan deserve that right, too. To force women’s suffrage or any other Western ideals does not promote democracy, and it may fail to achieve anything other than increased distrust of the West.

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