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Women, Politics and Islam in Kuwait

Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris have recently revised Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis¹ arguing that the core clash between the Islamic world and the West is not over whether or not democracy is the best political system, but over issues concerning gender equality and sexual liberalization. Using the World Values Survey, they found that citizens of Muslim societies are significantly less supportive of equal rights and opportunities for women than those living in Western democratic countries. In another study they found that "in virtually every authoritarian society, a majority of the public believes that men make better political leaders than women; in virtually every stable democracy a clear majority of the public rejects this belief..."² The implication is that until citizens, particularly women, of Muslim populations believe that women and men are equal in all aspects of life, this will be the main cultural barrier to democratization in the Muslim world.

Islam and women's rights

There is also growing evidence that Islamic values can be compatible with women's empowerment and participation in society. Women themselves (secular, religious, and Islamist) in Iran, Egypt, and Kuwait, for example, are using Islamic principles to justify women's equality, access to resources, and participation in the public sphere in order to increase democratization. My research on Kuwait builds upon this evidence and investigates the effect of women's organizations and their interpretations of Islam on the political participation and attitudes toward extending the citizenship rights of their members.

In general, there has been little research on Gulf women because of the difficulties in gaining access to that population. To address the lack of representation, my research examined women's voluntary associations, which are an important base for women's social participation and involvement. The research included a range of women's associations—ten in all. The leaders of the ten associations were interviewed extensively and a sample of 125 members was surveyed between January—March 1998. Leaders were identified through a snowball technique that began with colleagues and key informants at Kuwait University; these leaders distributed the surveys to their active members. The leaders provided information about the background, goals, structure, and activities of their organizations, especially on the topic of women's political rights. Both leaders and members were asked about their perceptions of women's problems, descriptions of their activism and routine political participation, and their attitudes toward including women more fully into Kuwaiti society and politics.

A divide between the more numerous service organizations and the professional women's groups prevails. The leaders of the professional associations support the notion that achieving women's formal political rights is an important goal. The leaders of the service organizations are more concerned with religious and social service activities than obtaining political rights for women. A few, especially among the Islamist service associations, are even opposed to granting such political rights based on religious interpretations that claim that Islam forbids women to govern or rule.

Secularization and women's rights

Despite certain points of contention between the service organizations and women's groups, the research indicated that Islam was not inherently incompatible with democratization or gender equality. Religious beliefs and practices did not serve as barriers for members of

Impediments to the global trend of democratization, particularly in Islamic nations, have been widely debated in the past fifteen years. Scholars disagree as to whether Islam is compatible with democracy; part of the controversy stems from questions pertaining to the extension of citizenship rights, particularly when it comes to women. Debates over the compatibility of women's empowerment and public participation with Islamic values have intensified, specifically in the Middle East.

or for supporting women's rights, as the growth of religious feminism around the world attests.

Even though the leaders of the religious service organizations in Kuwait interpreted Islam in ways that were not supportive of some aspects of women's empowerment and public participation, most of the members of the service groups surveyed saw the necessity for women's education, wanted more rights for women in divorce, and recognized that women had problems balancing work and family re-

both types of groups in either their political participation or in their support for women's citizenship rights. Instead, holding strong Islamic beliefs (adhering to the theology; orthodoxy) was compatible with support for extending political rights to women even after controlling for other factors. Thus, my findings support the thesis that secularization at the individual level is not a necessary condition for the processes of modernization and democratization

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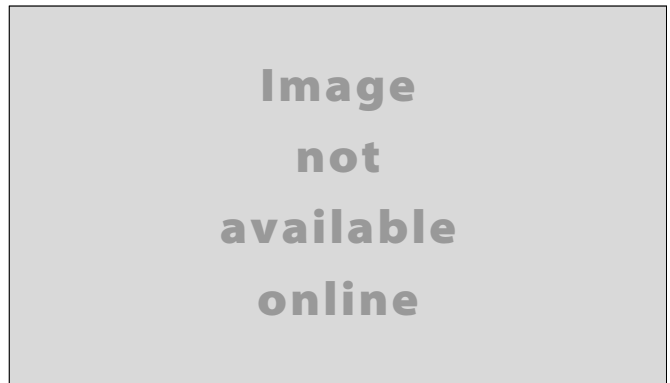


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sponsibilities. Moreover, some members of the service organizations also agreed with the professional members that the lack of political rights for women was a problem, and that women needed at least the right to vote to be full citizens in order to tackle the problems women face. Given that most of these women are also very religious, this provides further evidence that secularization, at least at the individual level, is not necessary for supporting women's rights and the democratization process.

Activists, then, have an additional resource to help them in obtaining political rights—Islam. In a country where the overwhelming majority of the citizens are Muslim, activists working for women's rights need not only demonstrate that they identify strongly with Islamic tenets, but also need to justify to Kuwaiti society that women having a voice in political life is also Islamic.

Kuwaiti women hold mock elections for new parliament, 5 July 2003

Notes

1. Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, "The True Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Policy* (March/April 2003): 63-70; Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, "Islamic Culture and Democracy: Testing the 'Clash of Civilizations' Thesis," *Comparative Sociology* 1 (2002): 235-263; Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72 (1993): 22-49.
2. Ronald Inglehart, Pippa Norris and Christian Welzel, "Gender Equality and Democracy," *Comparative Sociology* 1 (2002): 321-343.

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