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The Politics of Religion: Women, Islam and Politics in Saudi Arabia

Samantha Cotellessa

Introduction

Religion and politics: they are perhaps the two most complex topics known to human kind. Each is a form of belief about the world and each provides the believer with a template for how life should be lived. Politics is generally understood as being tasked with taking on the role of providing the economic framework as well as a legal system for a given society. Religion on the other hand typically been known to provides the believer with a framework for living a moral life, and often gives that morality a sense of purpose by promising those who live this way will be rewarded in both this life and the next. This is best understood through the common belief in an afterlife where one who follows the said moral code of a religion will be accepted into what is often referred to as heaven and one who breaks the same code then sent to hell. Now if these two matters were kept separate from one another then life would be a whole lot simpler but it is never that easy. Religion and politics have been connected since their very inception. In recent years we have seen this relationship being played out in the lives of Muslim women all over the world. Of course the relationship between women, Islam, and politics has existed for as long as the religion itself, and is perhaps one of the more complicated examples of this relationship. One country in particular where this relationship has taken center stage is Saudi Arabia.

In this essay I focus on women in Saudi Arabia, who live in perhaps one of the most socially conservative countries when it comes to women's rights. For example,

Nimrod Raphaeli describes the daily lives of Saudi women in the following way, “women can not work without the permission of a responsible man in the family, cannot drive a car, and cannot go to a restaurant alone,” he goes on to describe how these rules are enforced by the “Prevention of Vice and Promotion of Virtue Police,” commonly referred to as the “religious police” (Raphaeli 2005, 526). Nevertheless, in the following paragraphs I demonstrate that women have found a way to navigate a religious and political climate that attempts to control most aspects of their daily life; and now with a growing push for social reform women in Saudi Arabia have begun to fight back against the religious, political, and social norms that limit them and reclaim both politics and Islam for themselves. I contend that despite the existing assumptions and evidences that in Saudi Arabia women’s rights are circumscribed, Saudi Arabian women actively challenge these existing gender inequities, and are engaged in reclaiming their identity and defining their own lives on their own terms.

History of Saudi Arabia and Islam

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the largest country on the Arabian Peninsula; in 2013 its population was estimated at just over thirty million. The country has a long history spanning all the way back to the foundation of Islam and even before that, but the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was not officially a country until 1932. Saudi Arabia is home to both Mecca and Medina, the two most important holy cities in Islam. Ruled by a monarchy headed by a king, Saudi Arabia has never truly had a constitution but is governed by sharia, meaning Islamic law. Before 2011 women’s participation in politics was very limited but that year it was announced that in 2015 women would be permitted to not only vote but also run for office. This development is obviously a great

accomplishment for women when it is held up against the history of Saudi Arabia's national religion of Islam it seems to be a country reverting to the practice of its religious roots (Ochenwald, 2014).

Contrary to what some people may believe women have played a vital role in Islam since its inception. Islam is a monotheist religion founded by the Prophet Muhammad, a man highly revered by Muslims he claimed to be a messenger of God. But when one speaks about Muhammad one must also speak about his wives because without their influence Islam would be an entirely different religion from what it is today; or it would simply not exist at all. For instance, the first of Muhammad's wives was named Khadija, was a wealthy woman who was able to free Muhammad from a life of work. No longer having to work Muhammad began a life of contemplation and it was this life that led to his revelation from God that made him the Prophet of Islam. Of course, Khadija's work was not done. Not only was she the first of Muhammad's converts, it was she who encouraged him to begin preaching and spreading Islam to the masses; her social standing in the community as a wealthy businesswoman and respect she commanded helped the Prophet to share God's revelations with others (Ahmed 1992, 42). While she was living Khadija, remained Muhammad's only wife, but after her passing Muhammad married twelve women leading a polygamous life (Ahmed 1992, 42-43).

The youngest of these wives and Muhammad's favorite was Aisha. Married to Muhammad when she was very young, some believe as young as nine, Aisha became one of the most influential figures in early Islamic history (Ahmed 1992, 43). Aisha's father, one of the first converts to Islam and a close friend of the prophet, Abu Bakr, eventually became the first caliph after Muhammad's death and ruled for 10 years. Unlike most men

at this time, Abu Bakr, trusted his daughter with handling his estate after his death, despite the fact that she had multiple older brothers (Ahmed 1992, 74). Her father was not the only person who trusted Aisha with great power. After Abu Bakr's death, Aisha was left with out a husband or father. Yet she became active in politics, ultimately influencing the succession of the next caliph after her father. Therefore, women were vital to the foundation of Islam. Since the inception of the religion, women fought for what they believed, Aisha for example gave speeches in mosques and even wen as far as to lead troops in to battle all in the name of Islam (Ahmed 1992, 75). Given this history, seems natural to see women fighting for the social and political reform and improvement of their own country of Saudi Arabia.

Politics, Islam, and Women's Lives

The push for social reform in Saudi Arabia began for many different reasons but chief amongst them, Raphaeli (2005) argues, was the sizable number of Saudi citizens who took part in the terrorist attacks on September 11th 2001. According to Raphaeli, other catalyts included rising unemployment, a failing economy, and an increase in terrorist attacks on Saudi soil a result of an increase in terrorist organizations operating within the country. These trends, and the September 11th attacks in particular, have caused sweeping change and a huge push for reform in a multitude of countries. But Saudi Arabia's reform process has taken on a slow and rather arduous tenor.

In an attempt to illustrate the difficulties of reform in Saudi Arabia, in 2005 a Saudi journalist, Rashed Al-Fawzan, underlined many of the political and economic problems facing this country. These problems included: an over dependence on oil, which makes up eighty per cent of the countries revenue; a national debt of over one hundred

eighty billion US dollars; high unemployment rates; factories producing poor quality goods not viable for export; large sums of money spent on education with little to no reward; and extremely limited job opportunities for women (Raphaeli 2005, 517-518). Tackling these problems on their own is a complicated enough process, but Saudi Arabia is also home to one of the most conservative interpretations of Islam Wahhabism. It requires its followers to adhere to the teachings of the Qur'an with no room for interpretation. It is often argued Wahhabism is conducive to creating extremism and terrorism on a greater scale. Such religious precepts may also help explain why women's rights in Saudi Arabia are so curtailed. For instance, in Saudi Arabia women are, as a rule, prevented from driving, and traveling and leaving their homes without a male escort (Raphaeli 2005, 519).

Despite these political and economic instabilities and religious restrictions, the people of Saudi Arabia have still begun the push for what many believe have become vital social reforms. Saudi citizens advocate for these reforms in the form of petitions to the royal families based on what they believe needs to be done in order to divert their country from its path of perceived self-destruction (Raphaeli 2005, 517). Over three hundred Saudi intellectuals, including fifty-one women, signed one of the most significant of these petitions. Called 'In Defense of the Nation' this petition stated:

Being late in adopting radical reforms and ignoring popular participation in decision making have been the main reasons that lead our country to this dangerous point. Therefore we maintain that depriving the political, cultural and intellectual elements in society of their natural right to express their opinions, led in fact to the domination of one faction [the clerics] which is unable, due to its nature, to carry out a dialogue with others, and that this faction does not represent the magnanimity of Islam and its moderation nor its enlightened elements, and indeed helped in crystallizing the mentality and ideas of terrorism, which burned our country with fires (Raphaeli 2005, 525).

The language used in this and other petitions signals that the citizens of Saudi Arabia are serious about social reform. But no matter how powerful this movement is or becomes, the women of Saudi Arabia have their own unique needs and desires, which they addressed in their own petition. This petition was written and signed by 300 college educated Saudi women, who made eight demands all relating to women's issues. The demands included: the reform of laws surrounding divorce and alimony; mandatory education for boys and girls; opening up more opportunities for women to study a wider variety of subjects while in college; opening up more job opportunities for women in the government and other public agencies; giving women the opportunity to take on leadership roles; allowing women in to the business sector; eliminating the need for women to be accompanied by a male chaperone during financial transactions; allowing women to form civil society organizations; and equal treatment of Saudi women married to non-Saudi men and non-Saudi women married to Saudi men (Raphaeli 2005, 526). These demands are just a small sample of what women are fighting for in a country that has at least in more recent history has acted as their oppressor.

Fighting for these demands means women in Saudi Arabia have to navigate existing cultural traditions. One of these traditions is the practice of sex segregation of men and women in public places. This practice started out as a tradition of a religiously conservative country, but it became a way to talk about reform while keeping women confined to a separate category they occupy both legally and spatially. This separation has created a situation where women's rights, especially those of the financially elite, are expanding but they are doing so behind literal and cultural walls (Renard 2008, 610). The social and physical spaces occupied by women make up a variety of different places. In

addition to domestic spaces, they can be a university, a workplace, government offices, and in some cases even shops (Renard 2008, 612). Today, the practice of sex segregation by the government has given those in power the ability to control their movement both physically and socially (Renard 2008, 611). But in an act of defiance many women in Saudi Arabia have used sex segregation to create and preform their own discourse on their own rights by inverting intended outcomes of sex segregation, such as control of women's mobility.

On of the ways women are taking control of their own physical and social mobility is by protesting the de facto driving ban by getting behind the wheel (Jamjoom, 2013). This ban prohibits women from driving despite the fact that there is no actual law against it; this is because according to the interpretations of many different religious leaders the Quran says that women are not allowed to drive. For example in October 2013, many Saudi women, most of whom belong to the upper middle class and financially elite, protested this ban by participating in the Woman's Driving Campaign and getting behind the wheel to run the daily errands they are not able complete because they are restricted from driving. It is estimated that at least thirty-five women participated in the campaign, and though that may seem small these women in Saudi Arabia took a great personal risk to stand up for the right they not only want but also deserve (Jamjoom, 2013).

Conclusion

Saudi Arabian women's push for political reforms is a complex one defined by a devotion to their religious beliefs and influenced by the political restrictions that have defined their lives. They fight not just for social reform but also for the understanding and

acceptance of the lives they live. Through acts as bold as petitions to the royal family to something as subtle as creating your own ways to define your lives outside of the way society as a whole defines you, women have begun to reclaim their place of importance in Muslim society. Though these acts are important the process is still a long and highly complex one. Women in Saudi Arabia are up against years of conservative interpretations of Islam, promoted by modern day religious leadership, as well as numerous other issues in both politics and the economy. Yet they still push forward knowing that a solution to their ills could very well be the solution to many of the issues plaguing Saudi Arabia today.

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