

Domestic Democracy: The Road to National and International Democracy

Nimat Hafez Barazangi
Research Fellow
Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies
391 Uris Hall, Cornell University
Ithaca, NY 14853 USA
nhb2@cornell.edu

Introduction:

I hope to summarize 20-years of collaborative research projects with Syrian and North American Muslim women who self-identify with the Qur'anic gender revolution. In this work, I am emphasizing trends affecting (1) the structure of domestic life including conflicts between market democracy and current interpretations of Islamic individual liberty, (2) declines in social and political self-governance, and (3) the gradual erasure of mutual consultation, or *Shura*, as an intellectual project.

What is at stake here?

If one goal of bridging Islamic and Western perceptions of democracy is social and political justice, another goal would be to create an approach to knowledge generation, wherein both women and men define transformation for a more just, participatory society respectful of individual autonomy, as well as of divine, civic, and natural laws. To *achieve these goals, Muslim women need direct access and conscientious knowledge of Islam and the law of the land, as well as autonomous action void of the intermediary of institutionalized paradigms. Be they the paradigms of authoritative or hegemonic governments guarding the "values" of tribal or conservative right-wing, or the Ulema or Orientalists guarding the old, prevailing interpretations of Islamic heritage, all must be*

secondary to the Muslim woman's self-identification with Islam as a worldview. Thus, the only solution is to re-examine and re-interpret the Islamic texts, primarily the Qur'an.

Why and How?

The need to re-interpret the Qur'an becomes obvious when we realize that centuries-old reform attempts brought only temporary and partial solutions. By either emphasizing or neglecting the religious, both so-called "Islamists" and "secularists" created more problems rather than solving the existing ones. I will narrate some of these solutions, analyze them in the context of the different meanings of democracy, and compare them with empirical results from the two grassroots Muslim women groups in Syria and North America who are re-interpreting the Qur'an. I conclude with implications for self-identity and self-determination.

Drawing an analogy between active participation within the Qur'anic concepts of Tawhid, trusteeship, and justice vis-à-vis the majority-minority and electoral democracy as practiced in the West, I address the tensions between Western generated conceptions of democracy vis-à-vis self-identified Muslim women's agency. These tensions are manifested on four levels: (1) value claims - the ontological, (2) knowledge claims- the epistemological, (3) cultural or historical claims, and (4) praxis or socialization claims, which I collectively call "worldview claims." My focus will, therefore, be on the relation between the power of knowledge and social and political constructs.

A Muslim who consciously chooses the Islamic worldview as a reference, cannot fully identify with Islamic goals unless she frees the ideal from the hidden discourses and worldviews of those who believe in the social construction of gender and the Islamicity of equal but separate. Moving, instead, into the view of human moral and cognitive autonomy will shed new light on understanding the Muslim woman and her self-liberation by means of the interactive rationality of Islam.

To achieve transformation in democratic theory and practice, we must go beyond reform, or retrofitting—fixing a faulty structure with new parts not available at the time of construction. Going beyond retrofitting means **not** simply incorporating ‘new’ ideas into existing theories and democratic practice, but fundamentally changing the very practices and theories themselves. In discussing the pedagogy of Islamic democracy, I argue against a retrofitted democratization that sets up parallel historical tracks of different groups, leaving intact a fundamentally pseudo, weak Euro-American-centered democratization structure. Instead, I advocate re-examining existing heritage and re-writing the new interpretation to integrate the constituent groups’ histories and conversations. In other words, theory and practice of Islamic democracy are not only means for achieving social and political justice. They are the goal of transformation for theory, practice, and the new world policy-making process.

II. Temporary, Partial Solutions vs. Self-identification

To elaborate, Montgomery Watt wrote: For the Occidental, there are grave difficulties in attaining a balanced understanding of the historical role of Muhammad. The most serious

of these is that the dominant conception of religion as a private and individual matter leads Occidentals to expect that a religious leader will be a certain kind of man; and it is disconcerting to find that Muhammad does not conform to this expectation. For Muhammad, religion was the total response of his personality to the total situation in which he found himself. (“Muhammad.” in the Cambridge History of Islam, Volume I, 1970: 30)

Watt’s description of the Prophet of Islam also represents the relation of the political to the religious and the intellectual in Muslim thought and governance. When, at his deathbed, Muhammad chose Abu Bakr, his companion, to lead the collective prayer, Muslims ignored the dynamics of the Qur’an that instates all humans as trustees and interpreted this choice as favoring male over female in political and religious leadership. They did not realize that the Prophet’s choice between Abu Bakr and Abu Bakr’s daughter, A’isha, who was also the Prophet’s wife and intellectual authority of Islam, was merely in response to **the social and political situation in contemporary Makkah.**

Such misinterpretations continue to haunt Muslims, to the point of separating the political and the religious from the intellectual in interpreting the governing principle of mutual consultation. As this latter principle applies to both domestic and community relations, by limiting the consultative power to males in communal leadership, Muslims created another rift within, and between the domestic and the communal. I submit that this misinterpretation still dominates Muslims’ behavior, resulting in partial solutions to domestic issues and inviting the interference of Occidentals and Western government bureaucrats who think that democratization of the Muslim world is the one that separates the religious and the secular. For example,

in October 2001 President Bush notified Congress of US military campaign in **Afghanistan**. In November, 2001, in her Radio Address to the Nation, First Lady Laura Bush stated: "Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women."

(Retrieved, 4/27/ 2003 from: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011117.html>).

Despite this claimed liberation, in November 2, 2002, Reuters reported that The Afghan Supreme Court has dismissed a female judge, Marzeya Basil, for not wearing an Islamic headscarf during a meeting with President Bush and his wife in October 2002.

Another example, as a result of the harassment that some Muslim women encountered after September 2001, The American Muslim Women League asked a male Imam if it is acceptable for women to remove their head-cover under such extreme conditions (MWL newsletter, 2001), which degrading because it suggests that a woman needs permission from males to wear or remove a piece of cloth. It is also perplexing because the Muslim Women League itself was in the late 1990's leading a US delegation to investigate and defend human rights of Bosnian women.

Whether they are interpreting the Qur'an or the ideals of Western democracy, the underlying assumption of the above solutions remains that women have proxy morality, and still being treated as a minority group and as secondary to men in the religious, intellectual, social and political structures. Some of the above instances also show how the American experiment in democracy has not been able to protect its own citizens from discrimination and, to the contrary, has retracted back in times of crisis to oppressing minority groups, exactly as Alexis de Tocqueville feared would happen (*Democracy in America*. Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Pub, 2000). Lately, the ruling majority bureaucrats have even shown the desire to "liberate Islam" itself.

Although I like this idea of liberating Islam from its current interpreters, be they Orientals or Occidentals, one question still begs the answer: “Who has the authority to re-interpret Islam?”

Islam, as *Deen* (worldview), is basically textual, not based on an event (as for example, with Christ’s resurrection in Christianity), or on a law (as with the law of the Torah in Judaism). The content of the text, i.e., the Qur’an is what defines all Islamic beliefs, from the divine authorship to the relation of God with humanity. The Qur’an itself reminds us that it is not because of the Prophet Muhammad that Muslims accept the Qur’an, but it is because of the Qur’an that they accept the authority of the Prophet. What happened is that Muslims have, to a large extent, reversed the order when, as present in other major religions of the time, idealized the Prophet, his male companions, and his reported extrapolation on the Qur’an, his *Sunnah*. Most contemporary Muslims even forget that the Prophet’s extrapolation (resulting in external text to the Qur’an, i.e., the Hadith) does not supersede the Qur’anic text. Therefore, it is not merely the participation of women in the reading and the interpretation of the text that is of issue here, but it is their self-identification with Islam as the Deen of Tawhid that is of utmost concern. Tawhid means that the authority lies only with God, whose guidance is in the text of the Qur’an, and hence, each individual Muslim has the right and the responsibility of interpreting the Qur’an.

III. Meanings of Democracy

The first verse of Chapter four in the Qur'an sets the framework for the Islamic gender revolution in the intellectual, social and political structures; wherein the woman is viewed as the core of human well-being, where human conscientious agency determines liberty, and where human rights are achieved by one's rational, constructive efforts, or *Taqwa*.

Contrary to the Qur'anic principles stand the argument of Orientalists, such as Bernard Lewis to reform, liberate, or democratize Islam through changes in the status of women after the Western model. (*What Went Wrong* Western impact and middle eastern response [video recording] West Lafayette, IN : C-SPAN Archives 2001) First, Lewis seems to apply his understanding of the Hebrew meaning of 'Herut,' (freedom, meaning submission to the law) to the understanding of the meaning of free will in Islam. In Islam, however, the order is exactly the opposite. Free will is a pre-requisite to accepting, understanding, and employing the moral guidance of the message of the Qur'an, and this acceptance becomes legal and binding only after the individual makes the conscious choice to accept or reject the message, not because it represents the law. Second, Western discourses, particularly feminism that relies on the politics of difference as in the case in the nation-state civic democracy, often dismiss Muslim women's self-identity as "religious". Third, as we saw above, despite minor changes, the attitudes of the majority traditional male Ulamas and policy-makers have not changed. They still consider preserving customary traditions tantamount to preserving the Qur'an or the constitution. This is why some Muslim women, including some of my collaborators, resist the feminist- and the nation-state-informed democracy, as well as Muslim male elite conception and practice of the

consultative process (*shura*)—wherein participation is limited to the selected few, and women’s participation is an “add-on” or only to address “women” issues.

IV. Empirical Research Results

The way out, therefore, is by allowing space for Muslim women to assert their moral autonomy and to participate in the re-interpretation of both the Qur’anic guidelines and other legislations. My evidence lies in the findings with Syrian and American Muslim women reclaiming their primary self-identity with Islam through deeper understanding of the Qur’an, but with different transformation processes. The Americans were relying mainly on scholarship, while the Syrians began with grassroots activism moving toward scholarship. I present only the main findings and their implications for national and international relations.

The pedagogical assumption--that once a woman changes what is in herself she will be able to work with others to question and change social and political structures (Qur’an, 13:11)--gave different results for the two groups. While it was confirmed among the Syrian group, it was not confirmed with the American. I believe that the latter group overlooked the power of the largely unquestioned Western approach of separating theory and practice which results not only in the marginalization of the worldview of Muslim women, but also viewed them as the “oppressed dependent other” who needed to be given the road map to salvation by the White Western male.

While the Syrian group realized early on that a Muslim may not fulfill the Islamic pedagogy of a trustee without being able to autonomously choose, understand, and act on her choice of Islam as a worldview, the American group were slow at realizing such autonomy. The request from a male Imam to have a decree for women's removal of head-cover is only one example. Despite living under a one-party government, the Syrian group has reached a level of self-learning and self-governing that could represent a form of participatory democratization because it affirms Muslim woman's agency. It is the ability to authenticate one's own knowledge, and not someone's imposed knowledge and views, that drives the individual to act towards a progressive egalitarian attitude!

V. Conclusions

Non-Muslims, particularly feminists and policy-makers, need to become more aware of Muslim women's worldview and not only look at them through the veil issues, the politics of difference, or corporate globalization. Muslim women scholar-activists also need to unveil their conscious process in order to make their worldview claims accessible.

The first pre-requisite to Muslim woman's identification with Islam--as a moral choice--is her participation in reading and interpreting the text of the Qur'an (Barazangi, 2000). The second pre-requisite is that Muslim women's self-identity must be acknowledged by both Muslims and non-Muslims before one can expect those women to be agents of change instead of receivers of change. Thirdly, Muslim women need to formulate their own choice before one can claim that a free identification with Islam is actualized

(Barazangi, 1997: 44). Fourthly, Muslim women must actualize the pedagogical dynamics of the Qur'an. That is, their involvement (or lack thereof) in formulating policies within Muslim communities and societies, as well as between them and other societies, will be the measuring stick in validating both the dynamics of the Qur'an and the success of its gender revolution. Despite their faith in Islam, and historical achievement, Muslims of different ages and regions have not been able to modify their prior conception of woman's proxy morality, nor of her so-called complementary role to that of the man. That is the very reason why contemporary Muslims and those who study Muslims, despite the many so-called reform movements, are still confused as to what went wrong in Islamic history. Until these changes are made from within, the West's view of, and behavior toward the Muslim people will not change.