

## *Book Reviews*

### **Women, the State, and Political Liberalization: Middle Eastern and North African Experiences**

*Laurie A. Brand. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. 320 pages.*

By late 1987 a wave of political changes appeared to be underway in the Middle East and North Africa. A number of Arab regimes, manifestly incapable of coping with growing problems of debt, unemployment, and corruption, took different measures towards more political participation. These countries witnessed political openings of various types, some more apparently significant than others but all promising changes that would lessen repression and open the way for greater political participation. In 1991 Laurie A. Brand started her project to study the effect of those changes on women in the region. She was also interested in studying the situation of women under the similar political and economic transformations that swept Eastern Europe in 1989-1990. While the latter continue to unfold, the openings that appeared in the Middle East and North Africa have in virtually all cases been closed.

Despite that, the author pursued her project on women and political liberalization to explore the significance of culture – Islam as the omnipresent independent variable in Middle East politics – as opposed to structure. She also investigated the assumption that vibrant women's organizations can be important precursors to more democratic development, to determine what such organizations do and how they relate to the state, other political actors, and each other during such periods.

Brand spotted some phenomena, such as the drop in the number of women legislators in local and national assemblies, changes in labor laws or their implementation at women's expense, and attempts to restrict women's personal or political rights – phenomena that have accompanied most of the "democratic" transitions unfolding in the Middle East & North Africa region (MENA).

Changes in regime basis or in the political system more broadly often call into question or threaten some of the political system's fundamental underlying structures. One common response to such threats that she noticed among national political actors has been to seek to secure the home front, the family, reinforcing a women's traditional role through different policies.

Women's issues, so defined by women or the state, may be among the first that the parties to the new political balance seek to use/exploit in political bargaining.

In the introduction Brand defines the analytical concepts used in the study, mainly political liberalization with its known liberal/democratic indicators.

As for the concept of women's status, she focused on the changes in women's rights to organize, as well as their formal legal status. It is their role in the so-called public sphere, whether in the labor market or in political life. Brand gave special attention to indicators such as: right and access to contraception and abortion; right and access to education; equality in labor, pension, and criminal legislation; protection against harassment and violence.

She raises the important point that the state remains a site of strategic importance to women as well as minority groups. It is here where these groups gain or lose crucial legal and political protections against other political communities, patriarchies, and religious and secular non-democratic forces. Often women have nowhere other than the state to turn for protection from domestic violence, familial coercion, and discriminatory practices. A paradox here is that a "women friendly" state or leadership is one that opens the way to women's participation in different circles on one hand, but is ultimate guardian of structures that oppress women or block reform on the other.

The methodology and structure of this research is based on studying the nature of the transition; the strength and role(s) of pre-existing women's organizations; women's role in pushing for the transition; the relationship between the previous regime and new regime (complete change or modifications of various elements), and the relationship between the regime and conservative forces, particularly the religious establishment. The book provides a structured examination of these interactions in three countries: Morocco, Jordan, and Tunisia.

Tunisia's was perhaps the shortest lived case, as renewed repression was clear certainly by 1990. Morocco's 1993 and 1997 elections were

disappointments to the opposition, although the associational life that has blossomed since the Gulf war continues to offer hopeful signs. And by mid-summer of 1994 fears of popular expressions of opposition to a peace accord with Israel had led the Jordanian government to narrow the margins of freedom of expression in the kingdom.

For each of the three case countries, there are three chapters: The first chapter in each case country section examines the domestic context, explores the impact of external factors on domestic politics, and details the unfolding of the liberalization.

In part one on Morocco the first chapter explores the liberalization process that unfolded in response to a number of developments on the domestic level. Economic hardship resulted in political instability that needed to be managed with democratic changes. Several external factors also contributed to the liberalization steps, mainly the increasing demands for greater respect for human rights.

In the case of Jordan, the primary theme of the period is that of the changing weight of the Islamists, as they emerged from the November 1989 elections with more than a third of the seats in parliament, only to lose nearly half of those seats by 1993, and by 1995 to have their presence in municipal councils seriously reduced as well. In their social program several directions were (or appeared) threatening to women. While they at no time attempted to organize real opposition to any aspect of the IMF agreement or structural adjustment, they seemed to prefer to invest their political capital in the social and educational realms.

The peace process offered other groups, which were smaller but eager to become or return to the role of central players by demonstrating their loyalty, a chance to (re)assert themselves. By 1996 the episode of regime transition and reconsolidation following the events of 1989 had clearly ended.

As for the case of Tunisia: Mazali – during the Bourgiba era – apparently sought to engage the Islamists in some sort of dialogue from the beginning, allowing them more freedom of action. Ben Ali's approach was a bit different as he was a man from the military/security apparatus. He needed to break with the Bourguibist legacy in order to consolidate his own power. Women were heavily invested and implicated.

By early fall 1992, the regime claimed that Al-Nahdah had been crushed, although efforts were still under way to silence its leaders in exile. In January, 1993, Ben Ali announced changes to the electoral code

to ensure that the secular opposition would be represented. Human rights abuses continue, if not at the same level as 1991-92, and the press is all but dead.

The second chapter in each section offers an overview of the development of organized women's activities and/or national women's movements, with special attention to the question of foreign/international influences and external funding, followed by an examination of the legal status of women and of changes in laws since the beginning of the liberalization.

In part one, the second chapter regarding the Moroccan case investigates how the actors on the two sides (Moroccan and foreign) see their relationship. It raises the concern that such foreign funding relieves the Moroccan state of some of its responsibilities by providing support to the types of activities that should receive government support. In the post-1990 period, when external funding began to flow, women's groups found their agenda shaped by the projects for which they could secure funding, as well as general infrastructural support and assistance in developing general administration and management skills.

The most important women's groups were founded during a period that predates external funders' programs focusing on women and democratization. Yet these organizations later helped to keep women's issues in the public eye in a way that they could not achieve without such support. This made them particularly vulnerable to charges of being agents of neo-imperialism or of betraying indigenous traditions and values and of collusion with the West. In the second part – on Jordan – there is no question that the combination of a liberalization process and the unfolding of the peace process have brought a great deal of attention and funding from external agencies. Some women believe that the extent of the government's interest in women is in fact explained by external NGOs' and other aid agencies' concern with women. A number of women interviewed noted that the availability of money for political programs has in fact led a number of women's and other groups to propose more politically oriented projects.

In the second chapter of the third part on Tunisia it was obvious that this society offered a very fertile climate for external support of women's activities. The issue here was that empowering women was a project that the Tunisian state has, with only brief intervals, appropriated to itself, though the second half of the 1990s the realm for the exercise of meaningful citizenship by men or women had perhaps never been smaller.

As the organization that has the structure and cadres in place is the UNFT (The National Union of Tunisian Women), like it or not, these are the women who count, the ones who will make a difference if, indeed, anyone can. The only way external funders can change anything in that atmosphere is by working with the government. By trying to work outside, one is doomed to marginality at best, suppression at worst.

The final chapter in each case section evaluates the possibilities and constraints that women as public or political actors may face during the liberalization; as well as the way women's organizations and concerns fit into the broader picture of the struggle or bargaining over power that unfolds during these periods.

The first part on Morocco examines the fact that women's initiatives have produced less than satisfactory results, from their point of view, largely because the changes they sought to one degree or another struck at the very bases of the socio/political system. More immediately, they also threatened to shake the wider fragile political coalitions.

Hassan II certainly saw some opportunities in the mobilization of women in the summer of 1992, as he hoped to co-opt them to support his proposed constitutional amendments. While the king was aware that making minor concessions to the feminists played well with his western supporters, he also knew that any changes that would challenge societal practices or Islamic law in Morocco would create resentment and opposition among the ulama and other conservatives as well as the Islamists.

Hence the regime feels most comfortable with women's NGO's work of an economic development or charitable nature. Such projects tend to ameliorate, but basically reinforce, the status quo.

In the Jordanian case what appears to have developed during the liberalization as well as during the period of "re-closing" is a gradual re-negotiation of the boundaries for dealing with issues related to women. While in the early period there were several clashes over the behavior of certain ministers and Islamist legislative initiatives related to sex segregation, since 1992 these clashes have all but disappeared. In the first place, the Islamists' presence in the 1993 parliament was only half that of the 1989 parliament. On the other hand, feminists got the message that any targeted change should be within Islamic boundaries. Legal changes that the JNWF (Jordanian National Women's Federation) sought, while significant, were quite modest (improved maternity leave policies are most prominent). In the social, health, and educational realm, all amendments are presented as

strengthening the family (the traditional family) as the basic unit of society. Islamists refrained from pushing for parts of their program that would, in light of Jordan's modernist image, constitute an embarrassment.

In Tunisia, Mzali offered the first real opportunity since independence for women to come together outside the framework of the UNFT monopoly. While the women's efforts were limited by their lack of experience, their small numbers, and the continuing pressures from an authoritarian state, they nonetheless carved out a certain space that they continued to develop and eventually built into an independent women's organization.

Under Ben 'Ali's regime, policy gradually shifted from one of compromise with or cooptation of the Islamists to one of treating women as the first line of defense against them. Ben 'Ali "rewarded" his female supporters with a variety of legislative amendments and high level promotions, so this leaves women dependent upon the state to defend their rights and makes them the most likely target of backlash should the regime change.

In the conclusion Brand notes that in none of these cases was there a women's movement or a mobilizing women's organization that either participated in the transition or was in a position to impose its will on the regime.

Finally, she finds that all of these cases raise serious questions about the suggestion in the civil society literature, noted in the introduction, that women's organizations may play a vanguard role in pushing for greater democratization. Women's organizations have to be able to impose themselves on the political scene as capable of mobilizing women to achieve their controversial demands.

A major bias that one can find in the book is Brand's bias against the Islamization process. The Islamists are always seen in the study as a major threat to women's rights.

Women's organizations chosen for careful study are mainly the secular ones – those considered being in struggle against the "fundamentalist" Islamists. Hence she failed to realize that quite a number of organizations and hundreds of thousands of Islamist women who saw in Islam a means of liberation and joined the Islamic movement to "participate politically".

Ask & Marit (1998) as well as Esposito and Haddad (1998) recently challenged the notions of Muslim women's subjugation, and demonstrated Islam as a religion undergoing interpretation and change, a change that Brand did not refer to. The different essays and papers in the collections of the above mentioned editors show the need for revising stereotypes of Muslim women as repressed and passive. Brand also did not attempt to

mention briefly the apparent differences regarding women's issues between the "Islamists" in the three cases she studied. The conservative Moroccans and the traditional Jordanians differ a lot from the Nahda Islamists with their discourse of reform and *Ijtihad* regarding issues of women.

On the other hand studies like Karam (1998) provided theoretical insight and analysis on the relation between women's activism, Islamist thought and praxis, and the state. Karam focused on the ideas and role of "Islamist feminists" in the Egyptian case.

The issue of foreign funders was raised in the book and needs further research to discover their long-term influence on women's issues – the discourse and the practice. Many of the funding went to activities and topics linked to the perspective of the dominant feminist agenda in the donor countries, and from a feminist perspective.

Chatty & Rabo (1997), in another study on the formal and informal Women's groups in the Middle East, share with Brand the observation that some organizations are established simply because funding is available. Many NGOs are not really grassroots organizations in the traditional sense, arising from local initiative and need, and therefore, may have only a short existence.

The major concern is that foreign funding relieves the state of some of its responsibilities by providing support to the types of activities that should receive government support. This situation threatens the women's situation in case the sponsors become reluctant to finance and withdraw their support in the future, leaving women struggling on their own after the state had refused to undertake these responsibilities on one hand, and the traditional social structure that historically provided support had faded away in the process of modernization on the other.

#### References used for Comparative Remarks

Dawn Chatty & Annika Rabo (ED.), *Organizing Women: Formal and Informal Women's groups in the Middle East*, Oxford: Berg, 1997

Azza Karam, *Women, Islamism and the State: Contemporary Feminisms in Egypt*, London: MacMillan, 1998.

Karin Ask and Marit Tjomsland (ED.), *Women and Islamization: Contemporary Dimensions of Discourse on Gender Relations*, Oxford: Berg, 1998.

Yvonne Y. Haddad and John Esposito, *Islam, Gender and Social Change*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.