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Book Review

Between Feminism and Islam: Human Rights and Sharia Law in Morocco

By

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University of Minnesota Press

In *Between Feminism and Islam: Human Rights and Sharia Law in Morocco*, Zakia Salime explores the interconnected and entangled histories, politics, and genealogies of the Islamist and feminist movements in contemporary Morocco. Salime’s work reveals that the relationship between the two movements, while often fraught, was also interdependent and dialectical. Through careful ethnographic and sociopolitical research of the Islamist and feminist movements in Morocco between 1980 and 2007, the work demonstrates how these two social movements shaped women’s lives and delimited their roles in Moroccan political arenas. Salime’s study maps the various discursive, material, and political strategies used by the Islamist and feminist movements and in so doing reveals the mutually contingent character of their organizational ambitions, powers, and struggles. Importantly, her study shows how feminist and Islamist mobilization was determined through the overarching discourses of modernity and democracy as articulated by dominant and hegemonic powers.

Zakia Salime’s study takes the 2000 feminist and Islamist rallies in Rabat and Morocco as departure points for her historical account of feminist and Islamist political struggles in Morocco. The author does not overemphasize the importance of one rally over another or reproduce the modern versus traditional frameworks often used to script these rallies in national and international press. Instead, she provides a more nuanced, intricate, and complex version of these events. In this work, the author reveals how national and political contestations are intricately connected to gender dynamics. Salime theorizes gender as a complex interplay of social arrangements and...
power between men and women. This study, however, centers predominantly on Moroccan women and their roles in social movements and struggles. This focus can be explained perhaps by the fact that the bodies of women are political sites on which ideas of authenticity and modernity hinge. Women’s rights, by extension, become bargaining tools used to buttress national borders and secure the power of ruling elites.

In Morocco, these gendered powers were reified through the promulgation in 1958 of the Code of Personal Status, *mudawanna*, and later through its reissuance under the reformed title of Code of the Family in 2003. The *mudawanna* not only inscribed national unity between the Arab and Amazigh (Berber) peoples of Morocco, but also affirmed the King’s role as the “Commander of the Faithful” and the supreme legislator of the land. The document also secured for the King the powers to arbitrate the authority of the religious scholars or ‘*ulama*. Grounded in a conservative reading of the *maliki* Islamic school of jurisprudence, the *mudawanna* conceptualized women’s rights within the context of the family and thus structured relationships between the sexes in accordance with *sharia* laws and regulations. With this background in mind, it is not surprising that the struggles over the *mudawanna* were central to feminist and Islamist movements. Salime’s work delves into the histories of these struggles only after sufficiently addressing the politics of the *mudawanna* and the essential role it occupies in Moroccan life. Because of this, the reader becomes quickly attuned to the complexities and significance of the One Million Signature Campaign against the *mudawanna*.

Launched by the feminist group Union de l’Action Feminine (Union of Women’s Action) in 1992, the campaign aimed to procure at least one million signatures to contest gender inequalities built into the *mudawanna*. In addition to the signatures, the campaign circulated a petition that called, among other things, for the following amendments: asserting women’s indispensable right to education and work; suspension of ‘marital guardianship’; equality between men and women in marriage; the extension of the right of women to obtain divorce through the court; securing guardianship rights for men and women. These demands, as Salime shows, were informed by human rights regimes and international agreements, such as the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)
that Morocco ratified without reservation only in 2008. The campaign sought to demonstrate that *sharia* is a system of male interpretation and not a divine construct. Through its secular approach to gender dynamics and women's rights, its organizers risked alienating the state, the powerful 'ulama, and society at large. While other studies have highlighted the importance of this campaign, Salime's work does more than show its significance on the gendered dynamics of social relations in modern day Moroccan society. Her work considers the campaign’s intended and unintended consequences, focusing on how it simultaneously reinvigorated and reshaped both the feminist and Islamist movements in Morocco.

In studying the histories of these two movements, *Between Feminism and Islam* reveals that the strategies used by Islamists and feminists were not always oppositional. In fact, the two movements appear to replicate the same mobilizational tactics, learning from each other's trials and errors. If, for example, feminist organizers had approached their reforms from a secular perspective that alienated their constituents, their new strategies lead to the *Islamization* of their activities and struggles. Feminists reached out to the rural and religious communities they had ignored in the past, speaking in accessible Arabic, and reframing their demands in a way that is complimentary with religious doctrine and Islamic view of gender relations. Their work from within and outside state structures paved the way for the government’s release of the National Plan of Action for Integrating Women in Development (NPA) in 1999. Islamists too learned from feminist organizing tools. While shunning traditional liberal feminist terminology of gender, women’s equality and rights, Muslim women *feminized* their discourses by referencing Islam’s inherent respect for men and women and upholding its arrangements of the differential roles of men and women in society. Islamist women negotiated and secured leadership positions in their movement, mosques, and schools by appealing to their “natural” roles as mothers, nurturers, and caregivers. In response to the thorny issues of polygamy, marital guardianship (*wilaya*), and men’s duty to provide (*qiwama*), Islamist women reframed these practices as responsibilities rather than exclusive privileges for men. Such examples reveal the constitutive and relational dynamics of social movements. In Salime’s work, social and political movements are not isolated or static. Rather,
they are in flux, responding to changing social and political configurations in creative and strategic ways.

While situating herself as an insider/outsider to the feminist movement in Morocco, Salime is attuned to the multiplicities and contradictions of feminist and Islamist political organizing. She does not allow her past involvement in the feminist movement to prevent her from understanding Islamist women’s politics and strategies on their own terms and she refuses to posit Islamist women as pawns of androcentric ideologies and politics. Her critical lens is cast widely and pays attention to the gendered power dynamics simultaneously shaping the Islamist and feminist mobilizations for and on behalf of Moroccan women. In her analysis of the feminist movement, she is aware of feminism’s tendency to subsume social, political, and national debates under the category of “gender.” Salime evenhandedly portrays Islamist critiques of the term “feminism” and their rejection of its colonial and western antecedents, origins, and connections. Instead of making such critiques the exclusive purview of Islamist women, Salime shows that women within the feminist movement itself adopted these ideas. At different historical conjunctures, they too distanced themselves from feminism’s purported assault on the Muslim heterosexual family unit and Islam’s gendered arrangements and dynamics. In order to demonstrate these parallels, Salime’s work demonstrates that these movements are not undivided or singular. While the author alludes to the internal fragmentations in each movement, her work sometimes glosses over some of these rifts in order to demonstrate the convergent trajectories of Islamism and feminism. In this study, both Islamism and feminism are overarching categories containing within them a variety of political parties and organizations that neither articulate themselves in homogeneous ways, nor always work in tandem with one another.

How political movements respond to altered national configurations is central to this study. The passing of King Hassan II in 1999 and the ascension of his son Mohammed VI to the throne meant that the Islamist and feminist movements had to deal with new constellations of power and authority. The new king, while attuned to his father’s mixed legacy of state reforms, sought to create a modern and liberal image for the country. Caught between the pressures of Islamist groups and mounting demands from feminist organizations,
the king created the Royal Advisory Council for Arbitrage, a body endowed with the power to address and articulate “profound reform” in the areas of family law. Created in 2003, the council was composed of thirteen national ‘ulama scholars and members of the judiciary, including three women. Islamist and feminist groups were invited to present their demands to the council. This encounter with state representatives led both groups to broaden their networks and form new alliances with various political parties. For the Islamists, this meant reaching out to their male counterparts, while the feminists renegotiated their ambivalent relationships with leftist parties and organizations. In order to ensure their survival and realize their goals, both the Islamists and feminists extended themselves into previously untapped political and social domains. Independence and isolation were too costly during times of impending political change.

Throughout this work, Salime historicizes the shifting Moroccan political terrain. The King’s announcement of the Code of the Family reforms are informed by national events such as the 2003 terror attacks on Casablanca and the global War on Terror. Among other things, the reforms included the setting of 18 as a minimum age for marriage for both men and women in Morocco and the extension of the right of divorce through the courts to women. Though celebrated by various feminists and international observers as positioning Morocco at the forefront of Arab women's liberation struggles and gender reforms, the author takes a more critical stance. Salime shows that these reforms were framed in response to global pressures to present a modernized Moroccan citizenry and leadership. Women’s gains were secured by extending the grip of the neoliberal state and deepening its market-driven logic into the lives of Moroccan men, women, and children. The introduction of gender reforms placed severe restrictions on civil liberties and siphoned citizen freedoms and protections. In this context, both Islamist and feminist organizations articulated their demands within the state’s anti-terror framework and the concomitant clash of civilization discourses fueling the U.S. led War on Terror. While the effects of these strategies are manifold and still unfolding, both groups adopted and adapted to hegemonic and exclusionary definitions of gender discourses, practices, and spaces.
Between Feminism and Islam is an important work that contributes to the fields of gender studies, feminist theory, sociology, history, religion, and politics. It offers readers insights into contemporary Moroccan history and society, while situating the emerging political and social scenes within broader historical shifts in the Middle East. With the current mass mobilization movements underway in Arab countries and the world at large, this book animates the complex ways in which gender continues to inform social and political dynamics and struggles across shifting national and international landscapes.