

Women of the new Iraq

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Women's rights in Iraq have not been destroyed by Islam but by the destruction of state and society brought on by foreign military aggression,

In an effort to pressure politicians framing Iraq's new constitution not to limit women's rights, a forefront group of Iraqi women recently met the US ambassador. Many Western feminist groups and some Iraqi women activists fear Islamic law, if enshrined as a main source of legislation, will be used to restrict their rights, specifically in matters relating to marriage, divorce and inheritance. The US shares this concern. Iraqi women more generally do not. Why?

Most Iraqi women recognise and try to sensitively cope with the predicament of dealing with occupation and the rise of reactionary practices affecting their rights and way of life. This applies across the political and social class spectrum, to the secular left as much as to moderate Islamists and nationalists. They also feel that writing the constitution is not their priority for the time being. They believe that to write such a crucial document it is important for people concerned to be able to think clearly, to think of tomorrow. To do that one must be liberated from today's fears and able to enjoy basic human rights, such as walking safely in the streets of one's city. Iraqi women are not.

Despite all the rhetoric about "building a new democracy", Iraqis are buckled under the burdens of abuse and plunder committed by the US-led occupation and its local Iraqi sub-contractors. Daily life for most Iraqis is still a struggle for survival, with tragedies and atrocities engulfing them. Human rights under occupation have proved to be a mirage similar to weapons of mass destruction. Torture and ill treatment of members of political and armed groups, even the torture of children held in adult facilities, is widespread. Depleted uranium and other banned weapons have been used against various Iraqi cities by US-UK troops, including the MK-77 incendiary bomb, a modern form of napalm.

Iraqi women were long the most liberated in the Middle East. Occupation has confined them to their homes. A typical Iraqi woman's day begins with the struggle to get the basics: electricity, petrol or a cylinder of gas, fresh water, food and medication. It ends with a sigh of relief for surviving death threats and violent attacks. For a majority of Iraqi women, simply venturing into the streets harbours the possibility of attack or kidnapping for profit or revenge. Young girls are sold to neighbouring countries for prostitution.

In the land of oil, 16 million Iraqis rely on monthly food rations for survival. They have not received any since May. Privatisation threatens all free public services. Acute malnutrition has doubled among children. Unemployment at 70 per cent is exacerbating poverty, prostitution, backstreet abortions and honour killings. Corruption and nepotism are rampant

in the interim government. Gender is no obstacle. Layla Abdul-Latif, minister of transport under Iyad Allawi's regime, is under investigation for corruption. Her male colleague Ayham Al-Sammarai, minister of electricity, managed to flee the country.

Women's political participation in the interim government, national assembly and even the committee appointed to write the constitution, follows a quota system imposed by Paul Bremer, ex-US-imposed de facto ruler of Iraq, who engineered a process for reproducing the US-appointed Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), to prolong the occupation and incite sectarian and ethnic conflicts. Iraqi women's historical struggle against colonial occupation, for national unity, social justice and legal equality, has been reduced to sheer bickering among a handful of "women leaders" over nominal political posts. The quota system has widened the gap between women members of interim governments and the majority of Iraqi women.

Powerless, holed up in guarded areas or the US-fortified Green Zone, venturing out only in daylight with armed escorts, and with no credibility among Iraqi women, the failure of these "leaders" is catastrophic. Like their male colleagues, they have adopted a selective approach to human rights, principally US-oriented. The suffering of their sisters in cities showered with napalm, phosphorus and cluster bombs by US jet fighters, the death of about 100,000 Iraqis, half of them women and children, is met with rhetoric about training women for leadership and democracy.

Documents released 7 March 2005 by the American Civil Liberties Union show 13 cases of rape and abuse of female detainees. The documents revealed that no action was taken against any soldier or civilian official as a result. The documents also provide further evidence that US troops have destroyed evidence of abuse and torture in order to avoid a repetition of last year's Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal. The silence of women members of the National Assembly, interim government and all USAID-financed women NGOs, is deafening. "Women's rights" in Iraq has become an absurd discourse chewing on meaningless words.

No wonder that US-financed women NGOs, who publicly preach women's rights and democracy, are suspected of being vehicles for foreign manipulation and are despised and boycotted, however much they manage to recruit liberal or left personalities.

Iraqi women know that the enemy is not Islam. There is a strong antipathy to anyone trying to recruit women's issues to the racist "war on terror" set up against the world of Islam. Women also know that traditional society, exemplified by the neighbourhood and extended family, however restrictive at times, is not the enemy. In fact, it has been the mainstay and protector of women and children in both physical safety and welfare, despite lowest common denominator demands on dress and personal conduct. The enemy is the collapse of the state and civil society. And the culprit for that is the foreign military invasion and occupation.

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