

Have We Forgotten the Women of Yemen?

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Nov 27, 2017

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Brief Analysis

November 27, 2017

Women's rights take a backseat during conflict, along with freedoms and civil rights. And if women are discussed at all in situations such as that of Yemen, they are often seen only as victims and not also as stakeholders in the political process. But on March 18, 2013, Yemeni women were beside themselves with joy.

It was the last day of the National Dialogue Conference, which lasted around ten months and in which around 30 percent of its 565 members were women. The NDC was aimed at creating the legal foundation of a new Yemen where women's rights and political power were enshrined in law. This political process concluded with a document on which the new constitution would be based, ending the political transition for a country that has been in turmoil since 2011. The new constitution, unlike the previous one, was worded in a way that recognized women as equal citizens and independent persons. It also provided them with a 30 percent quota in decision-making positions, making Yemen second only to Tunisia as the Arab country with the largest legal representation of women in positions of power.

Our next victory was four women—including myself—appointed to the cabinet in 2014, and four women participating in a seventeen-member committee responsible for drafting the new constitution. Both of these achievements were totally unprecedented.

I was there throughout this process, and in the many processes that lead to this point in our political history. I saw how remarkable of a victory this was for Yemeni feminism, and I was already imagining the books that would be written about Yemen showing other women in the world how it is done.

Then there was a coup, and everything went downhill.

Women and women's empowerment were never really priorities in Yemen, even in times of peace. Needless to say, most Yemeni women have been highly disadvantaged in such a conservative, patriarchal society that looks upon women as inferior. Since 2006, Yemen has consistently ranked last in the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index. This is an aggregated calculation that compares the reality of women's to men's rights in education,

healthcare, economic participation, and political empowerment. For example, only one in two women in Yemen can read and right above the age of fifteen. When it comes to health care, 65 percent of women lack access to reproductive health care services. Every day, at least eight women die in childbirth. Women make up less than 7 percent of the workforce, mostly working in the education and healthcare sectors—and earning wages less than men for the same job. And the list goes on.

However, up until 2014, there was a thriving civil society movement and a strong feminist community in Yemen. Women made themselves visible in public arenas, demanding equality and breaking stereotypes. I know this because I was one of them, and I was out there recording and documenting the women's movement as a journalist and an activist. Since 2011, Yemeni women have made significant strides in their struggle to be taken seriously as leaders and decision makers who are on equal footing with men.

The achievements Yemeni women reached between 2011 and 2014 are due to the strong and brave women who would not take no for an answer. It helped that Yemen occupied the world's attention and that the UN Department of Political Affairs, which was overseeing the political transition, and the international community at large were supportive of women's rights. Indeed, the achievements Yemeni women made were in spite of the male-dominated, mainstream political narrative.

We always knew, as members of the Yemeni women's movement, that if we wanted reality to reflect written achievements these rights would have to be cemented in the constitution and detailed in the law. This is why, when the draft constitution was finalized, we insisted that it reflect our demands.

Unfortunately, when men with guns came storming through the doors, the women's agenda was thrown out the window. When I speak to high-level politicians on all sides within Yemen and those representing the diplomatic missions of so-called established democracies—almost all of whom are men—about the need to involve women in peace negotiations and the reconciliation process, they say: it's not the time for women. As if women's involvement is a luxury that cannot be attended to in times of conflict—a conflict that was started by men and escalated by men for the sake of other men.

Ironically, Yemeni history and heritage has numerous examples of women playing instrumental roles in peacemaking. For example, in some tribal areas, if a woman cuts off a lock of her hair and places it in front of the tribal sheikh, tradition obliges the sheikh and the entire tribe to answer her demand—so long as it is legal—and smart women have used this tradition in the past to stop wars or put an end to an armed conflict between tribes. Similarly, the act of burning a veil has the same impact and could lift an injustice. In the urban communities, women have often played the roles of peace builders in local communities, bringing families together and patching estranged relatives after years of bad blood. Traditionally, women are the nurturers, builders, and creators of life. After more than half of a century of armed conflict in Colombia, the value of women's roles there are finally recognized in establishing sustainable peace, hence their involvement at the highest levels today in the reconciliation process. Why can't Yemeni women also be part of the peace building and reconstruction process? Why should women from any part of the world not be part of their country's political processes, very much including conflict resolution?

To make matters worse, the de facto regime that took power in Yemen is made up of deeply conservative, uneducated, often illiterate men with macho attitudes who believe in violence and oppression. Under Houthi rule, democracy, freedom, and civil rights are the enemy. Journalists and activists are disappearing either into unmarked graves or behind prison bars without cause or legal process.

For female activists the story is even worse, because they suffer from double the discrimination by the conservative Houthis as both women and activists. At the end of 2014, when I was still Minister of Information, I worried about the

journalists and employees of state media, but especially about the women working in media. I was right to worry. The minute the Houthis seized Yemeni TV, they berated the women working there and told them to go home, be good wives, and submit to their duties as women to their husbands. Media, they said, is not a place for women.

This sentiment extends even further to any position outside the home. A friend of mine was driving in Sana'a earlier this year when she was stopped at a random Houthi checkpoint by a young man with a Kalashnikov. He asked her who gave her the right to drive a car; being a woman, she should know her place, and sent her back home. At first she felt anger, and wanted to ask who gave him the right to order her about like this. She is an established woman who has made strides for herself and women in Yemeni society and yet, she knew better than to argue in the face of a man with a gun.

The problem with violent coups led by intolerant groups, such as this one in Yemen, is that there is no place for logic or reason. The conflict in Yemen undid years of progressive work in women's rights and civil liberties in general. This demolishing of civilization is not being done only by ignorant men who patrol the streets, killing all signs of democracy and progressive civilization, but also the systematic destruction of future generations through changing the educational curricula and installing a culture of fear in public communication. What is being done now cannot be easily reversed. And it will take decades for basic civil liberties—but especially those for women—to get back to where we were just three years ago, and even longer for greater women's rights and empowerment.

I console myself that least my struggle with my feminist sisters is documented for those who want to know. I myself am doing my PhD on the politics of gender in Yemen, and there are many others who have written and will write down our achievements before we forget them as Yemen is thrown back to the dark ages. One way or the other, we will continue the fight for women's rights and Yemeni women's empowerment. The fire in our hearts can never be extinguished. ❖

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