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## Women's Rights: Iran's Bitter Lessons for Iraq

By Swanee Hunt and Isobel Coleman

**NEW YORK** Before the recent elections, leading Iraqi politicians did their best to assuage concerns of their more secular compatriots by promising moderation and inclusion. But election rhetoric is not reality. An important test will be how these leaders address women's rights in the face of pressure from religious extremists.

While political leaders may profess moderation on many issues, if they do not adhere to basic principles of human rights - including the equal rights of women - their moderation is an illusion. We need look no further than across the border to Iran to see how compromising women's rights compromises democracy and freedom.

Despite promises of equality in the run-up to the 1979 revolution, women were systematically stripped of their rights as Iran's clerics consolidated power. They lost rights to divorce and child custody. They were dismissed from official positions. Day care services were terminated, forcing women out of jobs. The hijab, or Islamic covering, was imposed, and violators punished severely.

For the past 25 years, Iranian women have been fighting to regain ground. It is not surprising that many of Iran's leading human rights activists are women who have devoted their lives to fighting for greater liberty and equality for all citizens. At a broad societal level, Iranian women's demands for freedom, education and employment are inexorably changing society; up to 70 percent of university students are now women. Female lawyers, journalists and, more recently, members of Parliament have been key proponents of political and legal reform.

Perhaps most significant, Iranian women have consistently pushed for alternative interpretations of religious texts. They have found important partners in Iran's reformist clergy, vocal proponents of an Islamic Renaissance of sorts. This trend toward finding solutions within an Islamic framework has provided the reformist movement with theologically sophisticated arguments that are better able to combat conservative viewpoints.

Unfortunately, the gains made are under threat from conservatives. In the past six months, more than half a dozen journalists and civil society activists, many of them women, have been arrested for allegedly engaging in propaganda against the regime, endangering national security, inciting public unrest and insulting sacred beliefs. The judiciary's attempts to stifle dissent include the arrests of the editors of leading women's rights journals who have been charged with "moral crimes." The Revolutionary Public Prosecutor's office in Tehran even threatened to arrest Shirin Ebadi, the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize winner. Freedom of the press and civil society in Iran continue to wane.

If the United States is serious about promoting democracy in the Middle East, it must put women's rights at the center of any dialogue. In the case of Iran, more than ever, pressure should be on creating space for human rights and democracy activists. Concern that external criticism undermines reformers is largely misplaced since the movement is already on life support, crushed by the all-powerful Guardian Council, which disqualified 80 percent of reformists from the last parliamentary elections. Today, many Iranians believe that only international diplomatic pressure will force the regime to move

on human rights and reform.

Instead of threatening military intervention, America must put the onus on Iran's leadership by making human rights a priority alongside nuclear discussions. The Bush administration should also ease sanctions that prevent American nongovernment organizations from engaging with Iran's fragile but determined civil society groups. Cutting off people-to-people contacts serves the hard-liners' interests in Tehran more than America's.

In the case of Iraq, America should not underestimate the potential of civil society groups, and particularly women's groups, working from within to fight extremism. Elevating the voices of women is a positive way to undermine those who misuse scriptures to justify the narrowest patriarchy. And civil society is a pillar of democracy that holds government accountable.

Neither Iranians nor Iraqis have given up the fight for freedom. But in both countries, democracy remains fragile. In Iran, if America does not adopt a policy that pressures the government instead of its people, then hard-liners will complete their dismantling of pro-democracy forces. In Iraq, if America fails to support civil society groups, and women's groups in particular, extremism will win.

A failure by the United States in either country will leave America's children and their children with even greater difficulties to wrestle with in the future.

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