Gender and Fundamentalism in the new Iraq: a view from Cyberspace

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Abstract:
In 2003 George W. Bush launched a military and political campaign to invade and democratise Iraq. During the three years of the United States’ occupation, the Iraqi people have democratically elected representatives to oversee the physical and political rebuilding of their country. Political and academic debate regarding the pros and cons of the democratisation process has been represented in mainstream media and in official discourse. Additional commentaries on democratisation in Iraq have been located in Cyberspace. These commentaries are known as “blogspots” and offer a rare insight into the everyday life of Iraqi people as they face not only political change but also the social chaos of occupation. This paper will outline the research potential of data from “cyberspace” and the “blogosphere” as contributing to an understanding of the social ramifications of democratisation via invasion and war for the women of Iraq. I will present a preliminary analysis of the blog “Baghdad Burning” and propose that it provides data which has the potential to significantly contribute to understanding how the cultural and behavioral values and norms of Iraq are affected by the United States military and political presence. Specifically, I will discuss the implications of rising fundamentalism for women’s rights.

Introduction

Rights and freedoms have become minor concerns compared to the possibility of civil war, the reality of ethnic displacement and cleansing, and the daily certainty
of bloodshed and death. (Riverbend Monday October 03: 2005)

What happened to the dream of a democratic Iraq? (Riverbend Sunday November 06: 2005)

The September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and other American landmarks created the conditions for an invasion of Iraq. George Bush’s military and political campaign in Iraq involved a democratisation program; under these new democratic conditions the Bush administration claimed that terrorist attacks would decrease. In 2006, three years after the U.S. lead invasion, Iraq has found itself in a state of chaos, with a lack of security and basic needs such as electricity (Riverbend Tuesday May 02: 2006). This environment has provoked discussion amongst the academic, journalistic and political population. Some of the most pertinent and detailed responses to the current social atmosphere in Iraq have come from Iraq’s population. Many responses indicate that any expectation of increased freedom and equality for women under the banner of democracy, have not been realised. Women in Iraq may have enjoyed more freedom under the military dictatorship of Saddam Hussein than they do under the Bush administrations emerging democracy – a democracy that empowers women to vote and little else. Due to the volatile social and political circumstances in Iraq, the response of Iraqi citizens to the process of democratisation is a largely unaddressed area. Using the data available from ‘cyberspace’ and the ‘blogosphere’ including ‘blogspots’ my research in this area will analyse an Iraqi citizen’s perception of the democratic process in Iraq, contribute to understanding the social ramifications of democratisation via invasion and war.

In this paper I will present a preliminary analysis of the blog ‘Baghdad Burning’ written by a female living in Iraq and propose that this blog provides data which has the potential to significantly contribute to our understanding of how the cultural and behavioral values and norms of Iraqi women are affected by the democratisation process and United States military and political presence.

Sources such as Abdela (2005), Efrati (2005), Human Rights Watch (2006) and
Moghadam (2005) argue that the present challenge to women’s rights comes from three main forces: firstly, the incorporation of Shari’ah into the previously secular laws of Iraq’s constitution; secondly, the role of religious politicians in the new Iraqi government; and thirdly, the rise of fundamental religious groups across Iraq. This paper will discuss the emergence of fundamentalist groups in Iraq; their effect upon the everyday life of women and how life in the ‘new-Iraq’ may differ from the social experience of women under the military dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. Initially I will summarise the historical and contemporary circumstances that have impacted upon decisions to ‘democratise’ Iraq taking into consideration the circumstances in which the democratization process is taking place. The historical role of women in Islamic texts and in Iraqi society will be summarised. The phenomenon and implications of ‘blogging’ as a new rhetorical space and alternative source of information to mainstream media and official government discourse will then be addressed. Finally I will discuss how investigating responses encountered in cyberspace informs analysis of the unfolding role of women in Iraqi society today, with specific reference to Riverbend’s blogspot ‘Baghdad Burning’.

Iraq: History, Invasion and Democratisation

The specific purpose of this paper is not to discuss the justifications for the U.S. invasion of Iraq. However, the question of ‘why’ the Bush administration invaded Iraq is pivotal if we are to understand the activities of the occupying forces in Iraq and the variety of individual responses to the occupation and democratisation process. Chomsky and Barsamian (2005), Everest (2004), Ismael & Ismael (2004: 128) and O’Reilly (2004) argue that the most fundamental reason for the invasion of Iraq was the development of a complicated relationship between the international political economy of oil and national political economy of Iraq. Petroleum resources were (and are) a central concern, but the 2003 invasion and occupation were also designed to solidify American political and military domination of the ‘energy heart of the world’ the Middle East and Central Asian region (Everest 2003). Control and use of global
energy sources – such as Iraq’s – are intended to ensure the smooth functioning of U.S. capitalism and strengthen its competitive position in international economic markets. Furthermore, Chomsky and Barsamian (2005) argue that democracy has little to do with the US military and political presence in Iraq, and that if Iraq were to become an independent democracy the repercussions for the economy of oil and the U.S. would be costly.

In order to understand the conditions for democratisation and the role of women in Iraq, various historical events that have effected the political and social development of the region must be outlined. Iraq’s complex culture is a product of a history that is variously marked by paganism, Islam, the Ottoman Empire and European colonialism (Shadid 2005: 10). The creation of ‘Iraq’ in 1914 and other geographical boundaries has created border conflicts that remain intensive to this day (Lewis 1998: 76).

The role of geographical boundaries and disputes is further complicated by the numerous religious sects and ethnic groups in Iraq. Three main groups, with their own internal divisions, prevail in Iraq: Shia, Sunni and Kurds; the most numerous being the Shiite Muslims concentrated in the underdeveloped South of Iraq. Religious belief and ethnic grouping potently interacts with everyday life, determining ideas of gender, ethnicity, social structures and organisational hierarchies from households to tribes to political affiliation (Geddes 2004: 48). Traditionally, social custom and household structure in Iraq was patriarchal and marriage oriented, based upon the specifically Islamic view of women as having a dangerous power that must be contained (Hourani 1991: 442). The structure of gender relations within Iraqi society was challenged after the secular Ba'ath party seized power in 1968. Ba’ath party leader Saddam Hussein embarked on a program to achieve rapid economic growth by placating labor shortages with the mass inclusion of women into the work force. Women in Iraq benefited from laws specifically aimed at improving the status of women and one of the most modern and permissive societies in the Middle East (Ismael & Ismael 2004: 151). Since the Gulf war of 1991 women's mobility and access to the formal
sector has been restricted in an effort to ensure jobs for men and to appease conservative religious and tribal groups (Human Rights Watch 2006).

Just as Iraqi women were anticipating a new era of democracy and freedom, following the 2003 U.S. led invasion, a wave of intimidation by extremist groups has arisen to crush their hopes (Judd 2006; Abdela 2005). Reports from a personal perspective of this new era in Iraq’s history have been severely limited due to the dangers of war and traditionally restricted role of women. A resource that consistently documents life in Baghdad during this chaotic period of invasion and democratisation are the online journals and blogspots of individuals living in Iraq. These blogspots provide insight into the everyday lives of Iraqi people and the effects of the occupation and democratisation upon religion and the dynamic role of women in Iraq.

Mapping the Blogosphere: Women’s rights in Cyberspace

Following the invasion of Iraq numerous war blogs appeared in cyberspace (Redden 2003: 153). Bloggers fill the gaps left by mainstream mediation of the war, often critiquing the latter (Redden 2003: 162). Weblogs (blogs and blogspots) may be defined as web sites that are updated frequently; many contain links to other sites and commentary on the other sites’ content. Blogs reflect what the author/s are interested in conveying at any given time (Gurak et al 2006).

Blogs allow anyone’s voice to be heard outside hierarchical models of information distribution and communication. Luke (2000: 521) suggests that this may pose a challenge to modernity’s grand narratives. Harcourt (1999: 21) believes the challenge is greater than this and that online communication poses a challenge to the way in which we understand the world and ourselves. For example, the place of gender in cyberspace is ambiguous and androgynous (Harcourt 1999: 22). In the physical world gender is “a process of social construction, a system of social stratification, and an institution that structures every aspect of our lives because of its embeddedness in the family, the
workplace, and the state, as well as in sexuality, language, and culture” (Moghadam 2003: 15). The cost of one’s voice existing outside the mainstream realms of communication is the loss of the body as a social construction (Stratton 1997: 721). The implication of this ‘bodilessness’ for bloggers is that people who are usually restricted by social conditions are relatively free to write about any topic. For example, a female in today’s Iraq could be assaulted for speaking against a particular politician, religious figure or Hadith (religious tradition), but in cyberspace she can write relatively freely. As a result of this personal insight into human thought and interactions weblogs offer, they have emerged as an essential channel for social science research (Castells 2004: 3).

Research into the availability of blogspots commenting on the war in Iraq has located 213 blogs by Iraq’s, with fewer written by women than men (Iraq blog Count 2006). Riverbend’s ‘Baghdad Burning’ was identified as a primary source. Methodological problems encountered through internet based research include the risk of deception, for example: credibility of information and the true location and identity of the blogger. Riverbend’s weblog is not immune to these problems, however its credibility is increased as a result of publication by the reputable Feminist Press and Marion Boyars. It is also the third prize winner of the Letter Ulysses Award for the Art of Reportage and was longlisted for the 2006 Samuel Johnson Prize for Non-Fiction.

The Baghdad Burning weblog was monitored from June 21, 2005 to August 05, 2006. This selection of entries addresses a variety of issues pivotal to the democratisation process. The most frequently discussed issues or themes in this section are: the new government; the constitutional referendum and election; the lack of infrastructure; ethnic and religious conflict and the militias and fundamentalists. The following preliminary analysis will address how fundamentalism is a growing problem for Riverbend. Recognising and locating Riverbend within the culture of religious and ethnic groups in Iraq creates a foundation for analysis of the responses encountered.
Riverbend: Gender, Islam and Iraq

The Weblog ‘Baghdad Burning’ a ‘Girl Blog from Iraq... let's talk war, politics and occupation’ is written by an Iraqi woman whose pseudonym is ‘Riverbend’. ‘Baghdad Burning’ commences on August 17, 2003 – five months after Iraq is invaded on the 20th of March, 2003 – and offers one citizen’s perspective on everyday life in Baghdad. Although she does not reveal her identity, Riverbend tells a story of war, occupation and democratisation from a female perspective, intermingling commentary on politics and culture with personal stories and public life. The impact of Riverbend comes from her criticism of the U.S. led invasion and democratisation process, as illegitimate. Riverbend highlights an important outcome of the occupation and democratic processes in Iraq: the rise in Islamic fundamentalism and the effect this had had upon her and the everyday life of women around her (Riverbend Saturday September 17: 2005).

So this is democracy… Women weren’t allowed in the marketplace and shop owners were complaining that their businesses were suffering… It’s darkly funny to see what we’ve turned into, and its also anguishing. Muqtada Al-Sadr is a measure of how much we’ve regressed these last three years (Riverbend Wednesday, May 31: 2006).

The word fundamentalism has come to imply ‘an orientation to the world that is anti-intellectual, bigoted, and intolerant… it is reserved for those who have the temerity to attempt to project their world-view onto others’ (Ruthven 2004: 7). Fundamentalism often occurs when an established community recognises problems to be the direct result of foreign intervention. The answer is seen to lie in determination to ‘reform’ their communities, to reaffirm and recommit themselves to the most important fundamental understandings of life (Ruthven 2004: 103; Geddes 2004: 48).

Historically, Islamic fundamentalism has affected the role of Iraqi women for three interrelated reasons: firstly, historical readings of the Qur’an developed in a patriarchal realm of sexual politics where the needs and rights women were subordinated to the needs and wants of men for power and authority; secondly, women are symbolic of the sanctity and honor of the Muslim home; and finally,
the integration of women into the public sphere is viewed by fundamentalists as a process of ‘Westernisation’ (Lewis 1998: 207). Fundamentalists view the relative liberty and freedom women enjoyed prior to the U.S. led occupation as a threat to personal male authority in the home and male communal primacy in the Muslim state (Ruthven 2004: 103). This culturally specific ideology when combined with the pressure of ongoing presence of foreign occupation in Iraq has led to increased focus upon the role of women, as a symbol of stability and Islamic honor in a time of uncertainty (Moghadam 2003: 4). Finally, Hourani (1991: 443) and Riverbend note that women’s rights and participation in the public sphere are considered by Islamic fundamentalists to be ‘Western’, that is, capitalist, individualist and a gateway to the derogation of moral society and therefore at odds with the traditional Islamic religion. However, Mernissi (1991: 5) argues that the Qur’an and Shari’ah do not forbid women’s participation in public life. Riverbend states it is only extreme interpretations of these Islamic texts such as that of Muqtada al-Sadr, that challenges the role of women in public life. Riverbend’s argument is supported by Mernissi (1991: 5), who suggests that fundamentalists are a minority within Iraq and do not represent the opinions or desires of Sunni or Shia Muslims.

Riverbend has felt the impact of fundamentalism upon her own life. Prior to the invasion of Iraq Riverbend worked as an Information Technology consultant at a company in Baghdad and would travel to work unaccompanied each day. Riverbend describes how this life does not exist for her in the ‘new’ Iraq after she was told that it was not safe or acceptable for her to maintain her position in the workforce (Riverbend Sunday August 24: 2003). Today she cannot leave her house without a male chaperone or hijab:

For me, June marked the first month I don’t dare leave the house without a hijab, or headscarf… Going around bare-headed in a car or in the street also puts the family members with you in danger… you risk being attacked (Riverbend Saturday August 05: 2006).
Shadid (2003: 36) describes the development of increasing numbers of women veiling at the beginning of the invasion, as a turn to faith in a time of war. However, Riverbend’s experience with veiling has not been voluntary. Judd (2006) maintains there is now a ‘bloody and relentless oppression of women’ across Iraq. Judd (2006) notes that many women have had their heads shaved for refusing to wear a scarf; others have been stoned in the street for wearing make-up or kidnapped and murdered for behavior deemed inappropriate. These attacks have now expanded from certain geographic locations to the whole country, also affecting non-Muslim women with the threat, ‘wear the veil or face death’ (Human Rights Watch: 2006). Thousands of Christian and Muslim women in Iraq now wear the veil to avoid these attacks. However, by complying with fundamentalists demands, the rights of Iraqi women and future stability of democracy in Iraq are challenged (Abdela 2005; Stanski 2005: 206).

Judd (2006) argues that despite the severity of this situation, it has received a lack of attention. Riverbend also notes that discussion of women’s rights has been pushed to the periphery of local concern:

> Women’s rights aren’t a primary concern for anyone, anymore. People actually laugh when someone brings up the topic. “Let’s keep Iraq united first…” is often the response when I comment about the prospect of Iranian-style Sharia (Riverbend Monday October 03: 2005).

Stanski (2005: 217) and Al-Janabi (2006) argue that for the once progressive capital Baghdad, fundamentalism and a lack of women’s rights means a step back in history for women and setbacks for the democratic process.

**Conclusion**

This review offers a critical, historical perspective on the effects of democratisation on the women of Iraq by bringing together the literature on Iraqi history, religion and culture prior to and after the U.S. lead invasion and democratisation process. The information and responses to the democratisation process in Iraq encountered in weblogs often disagree with the official
commentaries of the Bush administration on the progress of the democratic process. The contrast in information between official and unofficial sources has been addressed by investigating the responses of Riverbend to democratisation in Iraq. Analysis of Riverbend’s blog “Baghdad Burning” illustrates that ideas of gender in Iraq have been placed under severe pressure due to the rise in Islamic fundamentalism. Ultimately, this research highlights two findings; that women in Iraq both Muslim and non-Muslim experience fewer rights and freedoms under the Bush Administration’s Democratic Iraq than they did under Saddam Hussein’s military dictatorship. Furthermore, Iraqi women not conforming to strict Islamic codes of dress and behavior are now subject to the psychological and physical threat of fundamentalist/extremist violence. The violence against women taking place in Iraq is not a so-called ‘women’s issue’ and Iraqi women like Riverbend want the world to know what is happening from their personal perspective.

References


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