

Protests, democracy not always good for women's rights

March 25 2011, By Amy Patterson Neubert

Social movements, such as those currently gaining momentum in the Middle East and North Africa, can open the door for democracy, but that does not always benefit women's rights, says a Purdue University sociologist.

"We call this the democracy paradox because history shows that during some postprotest periods, women's [equality](#) can disappear or return to the status quo," says Valentine Moghadam, director of women's studies and a professor of sociology who is an expert in social change and movements in the Middle East and North Africa. "Unless women and women's groups are visible during the negotiations and invited to be part of the new leadership, a nation's new sense of freedom may not be shared by all."

Moghadam, who focuses on issues related to gender, is the author of "Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East" and "Globalizing Women: Transnational Feminist Networks." She says women's rights experienced a setback when the Communist era ended in Eastern Europe. Before the revolution, women were guaranteed seats in parliament. When the communist governments collapsed, women were not supported as candidates in the new democratic elections, and the proportion of female officials declined from an average of 30 percent to lows of 4 percent.

"This is a fear in Tunisia where women have strong rights, and they are fighting to keep those rights," she says.

Women may lose out in some cases of political transition, but not always, Moghadam says. Women's groups and rights emerged stronger after revolutions in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Morocco, South Africa and [Northern Ireland](#). Today the presidents of Brazil and Argentina are women, and there is a very high representation of Argentine women in the country's parliament. In Morocco, an 11-year campaign by women's rights groups for reform of the country's very discriminatory family law succeeded in 2003, resulting in greater rights for [women](#) within families.

Moghadam also says that women's issues played a role that led to the chain of events sparking the protests in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Jordan, Iran and Libya. The 2002 Arab Human Development report included gender inequality as among the region's greatest problems.

"In general, people's grievances and frustration have been bubbling for the past decade because of the widening of social inequality, unemployment, persistence of poverty, suppression of any dissent and lack of social and economic justice," she says.

This build-up of frustration is fueling demonstrations and helps explain why protests are erupting in multiple areas, she says.

Provided by Purdue University

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