

# **Feminism as Imperialism. George Bush is Not the First Empire-Builder to Wage War in the Name of Women**

## **by Katharine Viner**

"Respect for women... can triumph in the Middle East and beyond!" trilled the leader of the free world to the UN last week. "The repression of women [is] everywhere and always wrong!" he told the New York Times, warming to his theme that the west should attack Iraq for the sake of its women.

Just as he bombed Afghanistan to liberate the women from their burkas (or, as he would have it, to free the "women of cover"), and sent out his wife Laura to tell how Afghans are tortured for wearing nail varnish, so now Bush has taken on the previously-unknown cause of Iraqi women - actually, look at the quotes, it's women everywhere! - to justify another war. Where next? China because of its anti-girl one-child policy? India because of widow-burning outrages? Britain because of its criminally low rape conviction rate?

At home, Bush is no feminist. On his very first day in the Oval office, he cut off funding to any international family-planning organizations which offer abortion services or counseling (likely to cost the lives of thousands of women and children); this year he renamed January 22 - the anniversary of Roe vs Wade which permitted abortion on demand - as National Sanctity of Human Life Day and compared abortion to terrorism: "On September 11, we saw clearly that evil exists in this world, and that it does not value life... Now we are engaged in a fight against evil and tyranny to preserve and protect life."

However, this theft of feminist rhetoric is not new, particularly if its function is national expansion; in fact, it has a startling parallel with another generation of men who similarly cared little for the liberation of women. The Victorian male establishment, which led the great imperialistic ventures of the 19th century, fought bitterly against women's increasingly vocal feminist demands and occasional successes (a handful going to university; new laws permitting married women to own property); but at the same time, across the globe, they used the language of feminism to acquire the booty of the colonies.

The classic example of such a colonizer was Lord Cromer, British consul general in Egypt from 1883 to 1907, as described in Leila Ahmed's seminal *Women and Gender in Islam*. Cromer was convinced of the inferiority of Islamic religion and society, and had many critical things to say on the "mind of the Oriental". But his condemnation was most thunderous on the subject of how Islam treated women. It was Islam's degradation of women, its insistence on veiling and seclusion, which was the "fatal obstacle" to the Egyptian's "attainment of that elevation of thought and character which should accompany the introduction of Western civilization," he said. The Egyptians should be "persuaded or forced" to become "civilized" by disposing of the veil.

And what did this forward-thinking, feminist-sounding veil-burner do when he got home to Britain? He founded and presided over the Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage, which tried, by any means possible, to stop women getting the vote.

Colonial patriarchs like Cromer believed that middle-class Victorian mores represented the pinnacle of civilization, and set about implementing this model wherever they went - with women in their rightful, subservient place, of course. They wanted merely to replace eastern misogyny with western misogyny. But, like Bush, they stole feminist language in order to denounce the indigenous culture; and, says Ahmed, feminism thus served as a "handmaid to colonialism". "Whether in the hands of patriarchal men or feminists," she writes, "the ideas of western feminism essentially functioned to morally justify the attack on native societies and to support the notion of comprehensive superiority of Europe."

The thieves of feminist language couldn't (and can't) even be bothered to pretend that they actually care about women in the colonized or bombed countries: in Egypt, Cromer actively ensured that women's status was not improved: he raised school fees (so preventing girls' education) and discouraged the training of women doctors. And "feminist" George Bush has abandoned the women of Afghanistan: where is his concern (or Laura's, or Tony Blair's, or Cherie Blair's, who was also wheeled out by her husband) for the very many Afghan women who live in fear of the marauding mujahedin who now run the country and are in many ways as repressive as the Taliban? Where were their protests when Sima Samar, Afghanistan's women's affairs minister and one of only two women ministers in Hamid Karzai's western-installed government, was forced from her job this summer because of death threats?

This cooption of feminism without a care for the women on the ground is not without consequences -

although, predictably, it is not the colonizers who suffer them. Ahmed writes: "Colonialism's use of feminism to promote the culture of the colonizers and undermine native culture has... imparted to feminism in non-western societies the taint of having served as an instrument of colonial domination, rendering it suspect in Arab eyes and vulnerable to the charge of being an ally of colonial interests."

Indeed, many Muslim women are suspicious of western-style feminism for this very reason, a fact which it is crucial for feminists in the west to understand, before they do a Cromer and insist that the removal of veils is the route to all liberation. The growing Islamicization of Arab societies and the neo-colonial impact of the war on terror has meant that, according to academic Sherin Saadallah, "secular feminism and feminism which mimics that of the west is in trouble in the Arab world".

But just because Arab women are rejecting western-style feminism, it doesn't mean they are embracing the subjugation of their sex. Muslim women deplore misogyny just as western women do, and they know that Islamic societies also oppress them; why wouldn't they? But liberation for them does not encompass destroying their identity, religion or culture, and many of them want to retain the veil.

Reflecting this, a particular brand of Muslim feminism has developed in recent years which is neither westernized and secular nor Islamist and ultra-traditional, but instead is trying to dismantle the things which enforce women's subjugation within the Islamic framework. Increasingly relevant and influential, Leila Ahmed and Fatima Mernissi are the most significant theoretical voices.

And in the west, feminists are left with the fact that their own beliefs are being trotted out by world leaders in the name of a cause which does nothing for the women it pretends to protect. This is nothing less than an abuse of feminism, one which will further discredit the cause of western feminism in the Arab world, as well as here. When George Bush mouths feminist slogans, it is feminism which loses its power.

But such a theft is in the spirit of the times. Feminism is used for everything these days, except the fight for true equality - to sell trainers, to justify body mutilations, to make women make porn, to help men get off rape charges, to ensure women feel they have self-respect because they use a self-esteem-enhancing brand of shampoo. No wonder it's being used as a reason for bombing women and children too.

## **As long as the fundamentalists are in power, there will be no end to the oppressions and crimes against Afghan women**

**By the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA)**

The world came into motion in the name of "liberating Afghan woman" and our country was invaded, but the sorrows and deprivations of Afghan women has not just failed to reduce, but actually increased the level of oppression and brutality day by day on this most ruined population of our society.

The corrupt and mafia government of Mr. Karzai and its international guardians, are playing shamelessly with the intolerable suffering of Afghan women and misuse it as their propaganda tool for deceiving the people of the world. They have placed some women into official posts in the government who are favored by the warlords and then proclaim it as symbol of "women's liberation" in the country. But the presence of a number of women in high posts is not important unless they touch the depth of our people's adversities and sufferings, like the parliamentarian Malalai Joya, and uncompromisingly struggle against the bloody enemies of woman's rights and democracy and consider women's emancipation as an integral part of the liberation of our whole country from the filthy shackles of the fundamentalists and their foreign masters.

The government and Western media trumpet the presence of 68 women in the parliament as a huge achievement for Afghanistan and a sign of democracy and women's rights. But almost all of these women themselves are the most horrible enemies of woman's rights and democracy and are acting as little crank dolls in the hand of the warlords. In this odious reactionary parliament, with the exception of the glorious and suffocated voice of Joya, no voice from the remaining 68 has been raised against the Khalqi, Parchami, Jehadi or Talibi vultures. A number of these women members of parliament like Safora Niazi, Noorzia Atmar, Parveen Durani, Shakeela Hashmi, Malalai Isaqzai etc. are so shameless that they clearly overtook blood suckers like Sayyaf, Rabbani, Alam Seya, Farooqi and others in physically attacking Malalai Joya inside the parliament.

In reality the heart-rendering pain and cry of Saimas, Rahimas, Gul Shaha, Sanoobers, Gul Bibis,

Aminas and hundreds of awful stories of suicide and self-immolations as a result of injustice and disappointment in every corner of the county, is an stigma on the face of the institutions and all of those who, out of their political interests, try to paint a brilliant picture of the women's rights situation in Afghanistan. One shouldn't expect drastic changes in the terrible situation of the women, in a land where the drug-lords and champions of destruction, corruption, crime and a handful of treacherous intellectuals are in power.

The main cause of the catastrophe in our country is the fact that traitors like Rabbani, Sayyaf, Qanoni, Muhaqiq, Dostum, Khalili, Ismail, Fahim and the like are in power, who have a dark history full of tyranny and barbarism. These men have their regional and international protectors wrapped around their fingers and have a number of dishonorable intellectuals in their pockets. Recently these religious fascists passed a bill called "National Conciliation" in the parliament and senate house, in order to escape justice and enjoy immunity before any court, for the killing of hundreds of thousands of defenseless people of our country.

Once again these betrayers of our motherland, by organizing a march in Kabul, tried to show their power and intimidate our mournful people into conciliation. But they must think we are blind to assume they will not be prosecuted. If their march was to show their power to Mr. Karzai, they must know that for a long time Karzai has accepted the historical and disgraceful collaboration by conspiring with the murderers of his father and hundreds of thousands compatriot fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers.

Fahim and his partners warned that the next time the Jehadi leaders are accused for war crimes, they will react with seriousness. If Karzai was not involved in their guilt and crimes, he would have responded to such shameful threats and taken back the title of Marshal from the criminal named Fahim. This act would have at least removed one of the shames from Karzai's record and not allow the presence of unreasonable traitors as his ministers. These felon robbers, by their cheap threats, prove themselves to be untamed blood-suckers and war-mongers who still have the lust and facilities of endless crimes against our people – they are capable of repeating the treacherous years of 1992 to 1996.

It is not important whether Mr. Karzai puts a stamp of endorsement on this deceitful immunity bill or not. His anti-patriotic dealings with, and installation of, the most hateful enemies of people in the legislative, executive and judicial bodies, has shown him to have dipped his head into the black pot of Jehadi, Parchami, Khalqi and Talibi assassins. But they must know that one day our people will bind the hands of all these criminals and take them to justice without fail, and on that day Mr. Karzai must also be questioned as their guilty partner.

The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), empowered by the blood of its martyred leader and the pain and misery of its nation, is vowing in front of the oppressed but freedom-loving women and men, to continue its uncompromising struggle against murderers, fundamentalists, their lackey intellectuals and their foreign masters, without any compromise or diplomacy. And on behalf of our currently silenced majority, we will continue the claim against these oppressors. By relying on our people and the justice-loving people of the world, we will push them into a court of justice like we did to their religious brother Zardad.

The US government and its allies have committed an unforgivable betrayal to our people by mounting the Jehadi mafias in the power. They have left no doubt for our people and the world that they are after their own global and regional interests and that they have no use for stability, freedom and democracy in Afghanistan.

The women and men of Afghanistan should know that freedom and democracy are those values, which are not possible to be donated to us via the power of B52 bombers and by a foreign country and spies from Iran, Pakistan, the USA and Russia. Achieving these values is only possible through their conscious, stable, and constant courage and combat.

In addition to sending its warmest greetings to all of our supporters and friends around the world on this International Women's Day, RAWA is asking all of them and all people supporting justice, freedom and human rights, to help us prosecute these war criminals of last thirty years.

**Down with fundamentalists and all of the religious and non-religious criminals and their foreign protectors!\_Long live the struggle of women and men of Afghanistan for independence, democracy and social justice!**