Politics & Gender (2024), **20**: 2, 516–518

BOOK REVIEW

Women's Political Representation in Iran and Turkey: Demanding a Seat at the Table. By Mona Tajali. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022. 352 pp. $110.00 (cloth), ISBN: 9781474499460; also available as open access eBook.

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doi:10.1017/S1743923X2300048X

Turkey and Iran have witnessed some increase in women's political representation in recent years. Since both countries are characterized by authoritarian governance, this trend interrogates the dynamics behind women's inclusion in politics generally associated with democracy. Mona Tajali's most recent book, *Women's Political Representation in Iran and Turkey: Demanding a Seat at the Table*, takes this observation as its starting point. It is a highly relevant contribution to the literature given the ongoing political transformations throughout the Middle East and North Africa, many of which are opening up avenues for women's political activism (283).

Tajali's choice of two authoritarian states with Muslim-majority populations allows her to deal with two myths: first, that women, especially pious women, are apolitical and passive; second, that the reason underlying women's political exclusion is Islam. While the author recognizes that women simultaneously face masculinist party elites and undemocratic political structures, she sets out on a journey to scrutinize the activities and strategies of women's rights groups around female political representation (4).

The book is the first comparative study of Turkey and Iran dealing in great depth with the opportunity structures that impact women's political representation. After setting the scene, Tajali analyzes the strategic discursive interactions of mainly pious women with male political elites in both states. She shows that "women's groups [are] prepared to frame their demands in terms of the dominant discourse, even when that discourse ostensibly aims to disempower women" (275). This intriguing conclusion is substantiated in both contexts: in Turkey, pious women in the early 2000s mobilized the human rights discourse in their lobbying efforts to have the headscarf ban lifted; in Iran, both conservative and reformist women lobbied the Islamist political elite by offering less misogynist reinterpretations of Islam and by using the Islamic revolutionary discourse of the late 1970s.

Tajali deconstructs categories and conveys a significant level of nuance. To start with, she deconstructs the category of conservative women to show different groups' ideological affinities as well as individual positionality. The reader truly gets a sense of the richness of female actors involved. Then, Tajali observes the fluidity of cultural and political contexts, which impacts women's framing strategies (279). This is crucial for her core argument as it incorporates the shifts in women's discourse that happen over time. Besides Tajali's nonessentializing approach to Islam, she also offers plasticity in her understanding of the state, recognizing that "states may concurrently enact both repressive and reformist measures in attempts to keep or gain as much popular support as possible" (285). Finally, and related to the previous point, she shows that in nondemocratic contexts, any gains in the matter of women's representation and women's rights are reversible (287).

All of the aforementioned elements make Tajali's book a valuable contribution both to the gender and politics literature and to the empirical studies of Iran and Turkey. However, there is some confusion about which women are the main focus of the book. Most of the attention is directed to conservative/pious women, even though examples from other groups (such as reformist women in Iran) and nonideological women's associations (such as KA.DER in Turkey) are also provided. These examples are at the margin, and the overall argument would have been strengthened—not weakened—if the focus on pious women's activism were more explicit. Because without it, the book appears at times to be telling only part of the story. For instance, the pro-Kurdish party in Turkey is mentioned only in passing, even though it features the highest levels of women's representation. While the party's women-friendly stands are described, nothing is said analytically about the dynamics within the party that led to them.

In her ambition to provide a holistic overview of women's strategic interactions with political elites, Tajali includes all sorts of discursive acts and interventions, ranging from lobbying to advance one's individual career to group efforts and public campaigns that include forms of protest. However, even though the most recent references in the book go up to 2021, nothing is said about protests beyond Gezi (2013) or about the trajectories of the women whom Tajali features in the book under their real names. Thus, in Turkey, the case of Fatma Bostan, the conservative pioneer of the human-rights-based approach to lifting the headscarf ban, is striking. The reader learns nothing about her falling out of fame and being permanently excluded from any public office by governmental decree in 2017. In the chapters about Iran, significant attention is paid to the discrimination that women suffer during the vetting process by the Council of Guardians, not only prior to their candidacy but in some cases after their election, and how this exclusionary logic feeds on their clothing (mainly the refusal to wear the chador or the practice of bad-veil). Still, nothing is said about the gap between the dress of elected female politicians and the way that women actually seem to dress on the streets. (Tehran is indeed not representative of the whole country, but most women are elected from this constituency, so the gap is very telling.) Civil society campaigns regarding the mandatory headscarf are also not mentioned.

It can be argued that these issues are out of scope as the book's main goal is to disprove those who doubt pious women's political agency and lobbying capacities. Still, conceptually, the book would have benefited from a critical reflection on the price that is paid when bargaining with autocrats. What is the cost of being the first female minister nominated following the crackdown on Iran's Green movement? What is the cost of the silence of so many conservative female politicians about Turkey's retreat from the Istanbul Convention? That is why the reader deserves to read a more wholesome story about the pathways of cited women. Where are they today? Hint: not at the highest point of their political careers.

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