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Review of *Bargaining for Women's Rights: Activism in an Aspiring Muslim Democracy* by Alice J. Kang

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REVIEW

**Bargaining for Women's Rights: Activism in an Aspiring Muslim Democracy** by Alice J. Kang

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. Pp 241. \$27.00 (pbk).  
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Many people consider women's rights and Muslim democracy as antithetical to each other. Conventional wisdom would have us believe that a Muslim majority country would be an unlikely place to see the adoption of women-friendly policies. In her terrific book, *Bargaining for Women's Rights*, Alice Kang dispels this idea through her thoughtful research and richly nuanced analysis of negotiation over women's rights reforms in Niger. She explains the variation in policy-making in Niger over time and argues that Islam per se is not the fundamental constraint to the adoption of women-friendly policies. Instead, mobilisation for or against policies, and the overall political environment are critical factors in determining policy outcomes.

Niger is a natural experiment because it offers the opportunity to analyse the process of adoption, or rejection, over time, of different legal instruments across different political landscapes (authoritarian, transitional, democratic). This wonderfully comprehensive analysis of women's rights and activism draws on extensive fieldwork in Niger. Kang explains the importance of bargaining and the complexity in the positions of various actors who negotiate women-friendly policies. While activists supporting CEDAW and a gender quota law were successful, counter-mobilisation of conservative religious activists (both male and female) prevented the passage of a family code and the ratification of the Maputo protocol. Kang effectively underscores the agency and diversity of Nigerien actors while acknowledging the role that Niger's international reputation played in negotiations. The author's insights convey a deep knowledge both of Nigerien politics and history and also of legal bargaining and women's rights in the broader African context. In each policy discussion, Kang situates her argument not only in the political science literature but in comparative cases across the continent, making this book not only an excellent teaching tool but an important text for anyone interested in women's rights in Africa.

International actors are often believed to have significant influence on the outcome of pro-women policies in countries like Niger. Kang shows that the international reputation of Niger played a significant role in the passage of CEDAW, but international actors did not always

get their way. Political context also influences policy outcomes. CEDAW's ratification took place under a transitional government led by President Wanké when there was no national assembly responsible for approving its ratification. Unlike Wanké, President Tandja was required to seek national assembly approval for the ratification of the Maputo Protocol that he signed in 2004. Despite the fact that Tandja's party and allies controlled a majority of seats in the national assembly, the Maputo Protocol did not pass. This story of malfeasance or clumsy handling of the process sheds light on the importance of the autonomy of legislators in policy outcomes. In this case, legislators suspected the Tandja administration of switching bills from one with reservations to one without, changes that infuriated legislators who then used their power to reject the bill.

Finally, successful policy implementation is never inevitable. Kang acknowledges that her book is about policy adoption, not policy implementation. Though her book does not, therefore, tell the whole story, Kang's fine work prepares the ground for future research on the implementation of women's rights policies in Niger and beyond.

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