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## Review of Alice Kang, *Bargaining for Women's Rights: Activism in an Aspiring Muslim Democracy*

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## Review

Alice Kang. *Bargaining for Women's Rights: Activism in an Aspiring Muslim Democracy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. ISBN 978-0-8166-9218-7.

In Alice Kang's *Bargaining for Women's Rights: Activism in an Aspiring Muslim Democracy*, readers are introduced to the contentious debates about the inclusion of women's rights policy in Niger. Based on fourteen months of fieldwork, the author provides a vivid exploration of domestic politics as the Muslim-majority state negotiates its transition to democracy. Kang shows that political actors adopt some women's rights policy, while simultaneously rejecting comparable legislation on women's rights. In Niger, the government repeatedly rejects attempts to revise its policy on marriage, divorce and inheritance law and does not ratify the African Union's regional treaty on women's rights. However, in the same time period, it ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and implemented a gender quota, which generated substantial gains in women's representation after Niger's transition to democracy. From 1970 to 2011, the number of women in parliament increased from 0 to 13 percent and the number of women in the cabinet increased from zero to a quarter of all presidential advisors (81). Why does the government adopt some pro-woman policies and reject others? What explains this variation?

Kang argues that the key lies in understanding how members of domestic civil society, including women's activists and conservative actors, mobilize within the domestic political context. She underscores the central role of women's activists in bringing women's rights policy to the attention of lawmakers and making these types of policies "thinkable" (22) within the local context. They draw on historical references to female pre-colonial leaders, employ the language of democracy and make appeals for rights and inclusion of Niger's wives, mothers and daughters. However, these advocacy groups do not operate in a vacuum (3). They face counter-mobilization by conservative groups that view these policies as inconsistent with local and Islamic traditions. These groups make similar appeals to local understandings of democracy and governance to make the proposed policies "unthinkable." In her description of the debates and deliberation over these issues, Kang highlights the diversity of actors in each camp and shows that sometimes their positions and strategies also vary.

Kang's book is refreshing because it puts domestic politics and domestic actors up front. Readers learn about serious programmatic debates in Niger's political establishment and public spheres. International actors are present in the book, and some of these actors enact serious efforts to pass women's rights legislation, but ultimately the success or failure of specific policy lies in the actions of domestic actors. It also moves an analysis of African politics out of the executive's office, to look at the many veto players and pro-reform advocates that populate other branches of government and civil society. Through a careful discussion of the intersection between formal and contentious politics,

we are introduced to an array of salient political actors other than the president or prime minister: the Niger Islamic Association (AIN); seasoned female politicians; an array of women's associations with conservative and feminist aims; influential voices in local media; and male women's rights advocates.

With a careful and detailed tracing of historical state formation, we see how groups seize political opportunities offered by transitions to (and from) democracy and the ways that they leverage the state's ambiguous relationship with religion. The women of Niger are a central part of this story. This book fills an important research void on determinants of women's rights policy making in Muslim-majority democracies, but also the policy-making process in new democracies.

The book raises many important questions, some of which are left unanswered. Why didn't Islamic actors mobilize against quotas, while they had so vehemently blocked Family Code Reform? Were they less concerned with formal electoral politics than the rule of law over which they had partial domain? These types of debates and the intersection between activism and policy making are relevant for many other countries in Africa and beyond. How do the struggles between women's rights advocates and conservative groups in Niger help to understand or predict outcomes from similar struggles in other countries? This book offers an important step forward for research trajectories that seriously consider domestic determinants of policy outcomes in sub-Saharan Africa, but also Muslim-majority democracies more broadly.

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#### **Notes on Contributor**

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