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March Roundtable: Introduction

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Abstract
An annotation of:

"Prisoners of Sex" by Negar Azimi. New York Times Magazine. December 3, 2006.

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Publication Statement

"Prisoners of Sex" by Negar Azimi. *New York Times Magazine*. **December 3, 2006.**

An Annotation:

Through conversations and story-telling, Negar Azimi details the plight of homosexuals in Egypt, while placing this struggle in the larger context of human rights in the Muslim world. With horrific description of the infamous Queen Boat raid of 2001 (detailed here in a Human Rights Watch report), and its patrons' subsequent detention and torture, the issue is presented very clearly: an anti-Western attitude toward homosexuality set against the rising tide of individualism. So, while gay rights are brought to the fore in this article, these issues are emblematic of larger tensions as traditional societies are confronted with the encroachment of modernity.

"It's a luxury to talk about gay rights in Egypt."

How do human rights advocates prioritize their efforts? Are democratic rights or women's rights more important than gay rights in a country like Egypt, replete with repression of all kinds? It is one thing to be able to point to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, enumerate its catalogue and assert the indivisibility and interdependence of these rights; it is quite another to make decisions of primacy when resources and, more importantly, tolerance are limited. To be sure, human rights progress is incremental and is not made with one broad stroke. However, having to make conscious choices in activism entails the knowledge that some vulnerable populations will continue to suffer.

"The problem is not the punishment, it's the scandal."

While homosexual acts are not illegal in Egypt, as they are in other countries (such as the recently notorious laws passed in Nigeria—detailed here in an article from Advocate.com), the image and perception of the homosexual lifestyle is as offensive to their detractors as the acts themselves. Fueling this repulsion is the link drawn between homosexuality and the secular, decadent cultural imperialism of the United States and the West. Complemented by the military misadventures of the U.S. in Iraq and Afghanistan and its uncritical support for Israel, Western values and principles are discarded wholesale and written-off as yet another manifestation of this paternalism. As traditional societies become increasingly hostile to foreign elements within their borders, the project of universal human rights may continue to be dealt severe setbacks because of its Western origins.

All these questions and many more are thoughtfully raised in this month's Roundtable.

~ The Editors