



## Journalist and Cleric Clash over the Role of Women in Government [PI 529]



The controversy in Egypt last year over whether women are allowed to lead a Muslim country has re-emerged, this time in Saudi Arabia. The recent confrontation took place between the journalist, *Jamal Khashoggi*,<sup>1</sup> who manages the Saudi daily newspaper *Al-Watan* ("The Nation") and a well known cleric, *Sa'd Al-'Utaybi*, who heads the Institute for Legal Studies in Saudi Arabia.

The idea that a woman like *Benazir Bhutto* could lead a Muslim country is considered preposterous by the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia, a country that does not allow women to drive. *Khashoggi* himself was relatively conservative in the past and is known for having conducted interviews with Osama Bin Ladin prior to 9/11. In recent years, however, he has been advocating more liberal views and is therefore looked upon with suspicion by the Saudi clerics. In fact, *Khashoggi's* last major encounter with the religious establishment cost him his job in 2004. He is under attack again, this time for stating that he had an encounter with the respected Saudi sheikh *Bin Baz*,<sup>2</sup> now deceased, in which the sheikh refused to consider *Benazir Bhutto's* 1988 election as prime minister of Pakistan illegitimate and rejected a request to proclaim a *Fatwa* in support of her removal. *Khashoggi* appears to be raising this event now in an effort to make the role of women in Islamic governments more palatable to Muslims in general and to the Saudi population in particular.

The response from the religious establishment was quick. It came from the highly visible Sheikh *Al-'Utaybi* who challenged *Khashoggi's* assertion that *Al-Baz* ever considered *Bhutto* exempt from what *Al-'Utaybi* considers clear Islamic jurisprudence banning women from leading the country. According to *Al-'Utaybi*, the absence of a *fatwa* by *Al-Baz* against *Bhutto* was not inconsistent with what *Al-'Utaybi* claims was *Al-Baz's* total rejection of the theory that a woman could be president or prime minister, and he demanded that *Khashoggi* produce witnesses or evidence of his encounter with *Al-Baz*. What is most interesting, however, is *Al-'Utaybi's* explanation for why *Al-Baz* declined to issue a *fatwa*. *Al-'Utaybi* claims that under Islamic Jurisprudence, if confronted with a *fait accompli* that is against the *Shari'a*, "political considerations" require balancing the benefits of the *fatwa* against any harm it might cause. He then suggests that *Al-Baz* abstained from calling for the overthrow of an elected official because of the harm that would have resulted.

The current controversy lends credence to the assertion by some analysts that the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia was unhappy over *Benazir Bhutto's* return to Pakistan. They have always favored former Prime Minister *Nawaz Sharif*, the leader of the "Muslim League" party who spent the past eight years in exile in Saudi Arabia, to lead Pakistan because of his conservative religious views. The Saudi religious establishment may now get their wish.

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<sup>1</sup> *Gamal Khashoggi* was born in 1958 and studied at Indiana University in the United States. He was later a news correspondent in Afghanistan, Kuwait and the Sudan. *Khashoggi* assumed the leadership of the newspaper *Al-Watan* in 2004, but was fired in less than two months as the result of pressure from the religious establishment with whom he clashed. After spending three years in London working for the Saudi ambassador *Turki Al-Faysal*, he was reappointed as Chief Editor of *al-Watan* in April 2007.

<sup>2</sup> *'Abdel Aziz Bin Baz* (1910-1999), the late *Mufti* for Saudi Arabia, was a prolific and highly respected religious scholar with 23 known publications and hundreds of *fatwas*.

Source: Jamal Khashoggi 12/29/2007 – Sa'd Al-'Utaybi 1/3/2008  
<http://alsaha.fares.net/sahaf?128@3.Kj7ZjtpnfNR.1@.3baa98c6>

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