POLITICAL ISLAM, GOVERNANCE AND DEMOCRACY

Islam remains a central cultural and sociopolitical force throughout the Islamic world. The success of political Islam, though varying in different Muslim countries, depends largely on its advocates’ abilities to provide pragmatic solutions to real problems facing developing Muslim countries. Islam and democracy can coexist if democratic principles, procedures, and organization are accepted as tools necessary for the resolution of differences in values, beliefs and methods among the elites and between the state and society. Islamic leaders must organize themselves and provide the institutional basis for Islam to participate in competitive and orderly politics.

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Islam remains a controversial religion since there are persistent disagreements among religious and political leaders, as well as Muslim intellectuals and thinkers, over the “proper” Islam and its role in society and polity. In the end, many Western commentators and politicians have observed that, perhaps with the exception of Turkey, there are no democracies among the 57 Muslim countries in the world. This, some claim, is attributed to Islam itself. Turkey’s closer status to democracy is due only to the secularization of its society and polity that have been underway since Kemal Atatürk’s modernization initiatives launched in the early 1920s. A closer scrutiny of both Islam and democracy reveals, however, that they can coexist, but certain conditions must prevail for this to occur.

The relationship between Islam, modernity and democracy is still greatly misunderstood. There is, for example, the view held by some of the Orientalists who have argued that Islam as a religion is not hospitable to democracy, for Islam refuses to legitimize political authority and encourages militancy. Daniel Pipes argues that Muslims’ difficulties in modernizing their societies stem from the medieval failure to develop stable politics. That is, “Islam alone of the universalist religions makes detailed political ideals part of its code, the Shari’a.” Thus, “by establishing ideals that are impossible to fulfill, Islam ensures that Muslims will view any form of government, sooner or later, as illegitimate.”1 Others have expressed pessimism about prospects for democratization in the Muslim world due to the inherent weakness of societies in Muslim countries. Thus, lower levels of socioeconomic and political development in Muslim countries, as measured by the United Nations’ human development index and weaker presence of agents of civil societies, are a supposed by-product of Islam.2 As one observer of Islam has postulated, “the image that Islamic doctrine presented of the pious believer—fatalistic, prostrate before God, obeying his every whim—served as a trope for discussing not only religious but also political behavior in societies where rulers acted as the shadow of God upon earth.”3 The cultural, essentialist approach to Islam, secularism, and modernization by Bernard Lewis is yet another example of a well-known analyst’s distorted view of Islam and development.4 Lewis’ essentialist view and analysis of Islam and its history readily blame the mosque-state relations for the absence of secularism and thus underdevelopment in Muslim societies. Lewis, at best ignores, if not distort, the socioeconomic, cultural and political diversity within Muslim countries, as well as the diversity within Islam itself.

Most Western analysts have mistakenly presumed Islam as a monolithic and hostile religion, while the diversity within Islam, and Islamic movements in particular, is generally ignored.

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Daniel Lerner in his seminal work, for example, popularized the notion that the road to modernization in the Middle East is only through emancipation from Islam. The recent studies on “militant Islam reinforce the conclusion that it is only through emancipation from Islam (passing through the stages of enlightenment and secularization) that Muslims can hope to advance on the road to liberty and democracy.” This is not to forget the serious scholars of Islam in the West who have contributed to accurate representation of Islam.

It is often ignored that Islamic movements, like Muslim states, are constrained by their own ideological leanings and internal organizations, making generalizations about them not very useful. While Islamic movements may share a common primary founder, such as Hasan al-Banna of the Muslim Brotherhood or Mawlana Mawdudi of the Jamat e-Islami, differing national contexts account for different agenda and methods in new Islamic movements. State reaction to Islamic groups has also varied widely in Muslim countries, ranging from subordination (Iran) to political accommodation (the Sudan, Saudi Arabia) to political inclusion (Turkey, Jordan) to toleration (Morocco, Egypt, Pakistan) to ignoring (Mauritania, Tunisia, Libya, Kuwait, Iraq, Bangladesh, Malaysia) to direct confrontation (Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Syria, Algeria), explained by the varying social, economic, political, and international context within which each country operates. It is often overlooked that “differences between Western and Muslim societies usually can be explained by competing political, socioeconomic, and cultural interests.” Richard Augustus Norton reminded us once again in 2002 “largely missing from American discussions about Islam is any appreciation of the debates within Islam and the widely variant interpretations by Muslims of their own religion. Beyond the core belief shared by all Muslims that there is only one god and Muhammad was the messenger of God, there are many “Islams,” depending on locale, education, custom, politics, and personal attitudes.”

**The Question of Democracy**

Today, it is difficult to conceive of a true political democracy without constitutional and practical guarantees for not only political rights but also civil liberties of the citizens. For popular sovereignty to mean anything, people must be empowered to take their destinies into their own hands through active political participation in electoral politics and other modes of conventional and unconventional political participation. Ultimately, active citizen participation through associations, clubs, and interest groups can give rise to a vibrant civil society through which the power of the state is constantly checked and

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7 For example see studies on Islam by John Esposito, including The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality (1992). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
political leadership is held accountable for its actions in pursuit of public service. Most serious political observers in the West equate political democracy with freedom. Therefore, the United States, Canada, Western European countries and Japan are examples of highly developed industrialized political democracies where citizens enjoy high degrees of political rights and civil liberties. However, these and other successful polyarchies are the product of decades of experimentations with political democracy through gradual expansion of opportunity for political participation and competition. It was not very long ago, for example, that females achieved their right to vote in most of today’s polyarchies. That is, the road to a full democracy is arduous and is full of pitfalls and it demands a long process of trials and errors. More importantly, the road to freedom is not easy and it requires pressure from social forces on the state to positively respond to demands for wider popular participation and the eventual development of true democracy. After all, freedom is not free.

Democracy need not contradict religion or religious values. The Western world’s experience has drawn a wall between church and the state, but not religion and the state. So, in the industrialized democracies of the West, religion continues to shape social, legal, and political behavior in varying degrees and in different ways but within legal and institutional framework, and with respect for democratic values and procedures, that at its heart guarantees the right of the minorities while abiding with the wishes of the majority. The controversy over abortion in the United States or in Ireland, or whether the French Muslims have the right to wear their Islamic hijab in state schools without undermining the French tradition of secularism, or the controversy in the U.S. over the status of gays and lesbians as “minorities,” or the ongoing debate in the U.S. over gay marriage, or the plethora of moral and religious questions in the field of genetics, and most notably the controversy over human cloning, are a few examples.

In developing countries, including Muslim states, challenges to democracy are manifold. The establishment of political democracy requires certain socioeconomic and political requisites in place; otherwise newly inaugurated democracies often experience a breakdown in democracy. In other words, the maintenance of political democracy in the long run depends on the conditions under which political democracy is inaugurated in the first place. So, countries suffering from economic underdevelopment, high rate of illiteracy, low level of institutionalization, elite fragmentation and rivalry, social fragmentation along ethnic, religious, linguistic or other divisions face greater challenges in establishing and maintaining political democracy. Therefore, prospects today for a true

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11 The term Polyarchy was coined by Robert Dahl. See Dahl (1971). Polyarchies are political systems that historically have developed into today’s Western democracies through gradual expansion of competitive politics among ruling elites and wider popular political participation. The experiences of the United States and Western European democracies are examples.

democracy in Afghanistan and the Sudan, for example, are much weaker than those with more developed economies and societies like Turkey, Iran, Tunisia, or Jordan or other developing countries elsewhere suffering from lower levels of socioeconomic development.

The debate among Islamists and among some progressive traditionalists, be it in Iran, the Sudan, Egypt, Algeria, or elsewhere, is over the old question: how to reconcile the tenets of Islam with the modern notions of democracy—equality, liberty, justice, and gender equality. In terms of democracy, the traditional meaning of the concept of shurah (consultation) is outdated, according to Islamists. After years of debate, according to the Iranian reformist Ibrahim Yazdi, “Many [Islamists] have come to the conclusion that general elections and a parliament properly serve that concept of consultation.” It is the extent of popular sovereignty, and not its existence, that is debated. Because of economic, technological, and environmental changes, further development of Shari’a seems inevitable to the Islamists. The development of Shari’a, they argue, need not be looked upon as a move away from Islamic principles, but, on the contrary, as a necessary stepping-stone towards reaching an ideal Islamic society—a materially and spiritually developed utopia. An indispensable element in building such a society is freedom of thought and expression, including freedom from government control and suppression. What is needed is an open dialogue between the state, the religious establishment, and individual citizens in Muslim countries. That is, accepting the sovereignty of Allah does not necessarily contradict popular sovereignty.

An “Islamic” democracy will not embrace all the secular values adopted in the West. However, the initial steps taken toward such an end will need to include a process of institutionalization in Islam. The incorporation of an institutionalized Islam in the process of development will help the cause of democracy should Islamists successfully challenge the hegemony of the traditionalists in both the religious and political arenas. However, to play the democratic game, religious leaders will have to better organize themselves, to propose alternative plans for socioeconomic and political issues facing the country. This in turn can help them maintain legitimacy and popular support, facilitating their struggle for political power. Organization is the key to the success of any group seeking to achieve its goals.

13 Islamists are Muslim reformers whose moderate views see Islam as more compatible with modernization, civil society and democracy. I have used the term Islamist to denote the above designation, although there are disagreements over the precise definition of the term.
14 “Traditionalists” is used here instead of “fundamentalists” to more accurately signify the views of more conservative and orthodox Islamic religious leadership like Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran. Traditionalists are conservative and unbending on their orthodox views of Islam and its tenets, while fundamentalists’ views on Islam and modernity vary from conservative to moderate to progressive.
Although there are similarities shared by many developing countries, each is unique in its own way. Every country must carefully weigh its own chances for political democracy in light of its own national characteristics. Democratic institutions do not appear overnight and during the transition from authoritarian to democratic rule they often coexist with authoritarian institutions. In Iran, for example, the democratically elected institutions, such as president and parliament must share power with equally powerful, if not more powerful, authoritarian and unelected elements of the government. The question is what the appropriate institutional arrangements ought to be where religious and secular forces can openly compete for political power, without undermining the rules of democracy and democratic bargaining. Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri, the most prominent critic of Ayatollah Khamene’i with millions of supporters, for example, has called for changes to the Iranian constitution so that the concentration of powers in the hands of a single person does not occur. Montazeri also has suggested that “either the post of president and spiritual leader should be combined to create a powerful elected leader or the president should be given more powers and the spiritual leader should just fill an advisory role.”

The religious debate on Islam and democracy must then deal with not only the question of justice and freedom, but also with developing mechanisms necessary to remedy the structural problem of resource mal-distribution. Muslim countries, like other developing countries, though in varying degrees, suffer from acute socioeconomic and political problems (e.g., strong and dominant states; weak associational opposition to the state, and an overall mal-distribution of socioeconomic resources and political power that need to be addressed). Inauguration of democratic elections in Muslim countries without addressing the fundamental problem of uneven distribution of socioeconomic and political resources in these countries will not succeed. Islam does not inherently oppose democracy but for democracy and Islam to coexist, certain conditions must prevail. As the Iranian Islamic reformist Abdul Karim Soroush has argued, there is no contradiction between Islam and the freedoms inherent in democracy. “Islam and democracy are not only compatible, their association is inevitable. In a Muslim society, one without the other is not perfect.” Soroush believes that the will and beliefs of the majority must shape the ideal Islamic state, and that Islam itself is evolving as a religion, which leaves it open to reinterpretation: Sacred texts do not change, but interpretation of them is always in flux because the age and the changing conditions in which believers live influence understanding. Furthermore, everyone is entitled to his or her own understanding. No one group of people, including the clergy, has the exclusive right to interpret or reinterpret tenets of the faith. Some understanding may be more learned than others, but no version is automatically more authoritative than another.

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Conclusion

The present state of political authoritarianism prevalent throughout Muslim world has little to do with Islam itself. Islam has had a definite impact on politics in the Muslim world, but Islam is only one variable among many others, determining the nature of political systems in these countries. The failure of political Islam is not the failure of Islam and is not for the supposed incompatibility of Islam with democracy. All religions in their doctrinal framework are incompatible with political democracy, but this is not to suggest that religion and politics cannot coexist. The question therefore is not whether Islam is or is not compatible with democracy; instead the question ought to be if Islam and democracy can coexist. As Christianity coexists with politics in the West so can Islam. The challenge today before political and religious leaders in Muslim countries is either to secularize and to totally separate religion from politics or attempt to “tame” religion through political institutions to play democratic politics through democratic rules. As in the case of Israel, religious parties do compete for political power through democratic avenues. Ultimately, it is up to the political leadership of individual Muslim states to formulate the best approach to separate political Islam from cultural Islam and to help institutionalize political Islam to allow its orderly participation in the political process. Amitai Etzioni, a Sociologist and Professor at George Washington University, reminds us “liberal Islam is spiritual and social rather than political. Indeed, it differs from the rigid authoritarian version much as liberal Protestants differ from Southern Baptists, and Reform Jews differ from ultra-Orthodox ones, although by a higher order of magnitude.”

Democracy is not about religion per se, it is about the management of competition over socioeconomic resources and political power within agreed-upon normative principles and values and institutional arrangements, whereby individual citizens through elections and other forms of political participation determine their own future through elected representatives. Iran, for example, remains a primary example of a Muslim country where the struggle for redistribution of socioeconomic resources and political power (e.g., Islamic theocracy dominated by elite clerics or political democracy based on open competition by all contenders of power) in the past twenty five years is forging the country toward ultimately a resolution of the relationship between Islam and democracy. What is needed in the studies of Muslim countries is close attention to the structure of power within and outside each state and the power relations of the state with its society, including its Islamic aspects. The diversity within Islam, Islamic movements, and Muslim countries will determine the shape and the pace of socioeconomic and political change, within or without an Islamic context.