

Democracy in Islamic Setting

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to study the present state of democracy in the Islamic world, to discuss factors establishing satisfactory democratic regimes and to speculate on future developments. Countries with at least % 50 of their population belonging to Islam religion may be called Islamic states. This definition does not necessarily refer to the type of the existing political regime. Muslim countries constitute the world's second largest religious group. It is estimated that there are 1.6 billion adherents making up over 22 % of the world population. Islamic countries are geographically located in northern Africa, the entire Middle East except Israel, partly in Central Asia and in the Far East ; Indonesia and Malaysia. There are important Muslim minorities in India, Russia and in major European countries. In the present era Middle East is the most problematic region of the world causing human disaster and presenting serious threat to peace and stability. Establishment of constitutional governments elected by free choice of the people will serve not only to the region but also to the world peace.

Keywords: Constitution, Democracy, Islam, Muslim, Political regime.

1. History

Historically Muslim societies had no experience with democratic forms of governments. Neither has there been any serious, widespread and grass-roots struggles to achieve democracy, nor have they ever experienced the minimum norms associated with vigorous and established democracies. There are some concepts in Islamic culture like Shura (Literally meaning consultation and discussion of problems and affairs, exchanging ideas and search for solutions), Ijma (principle of consensus) and Ijtihad (spending efforts or endeavor to perform a certain activity). Today in the Turkish judiciary system, this term is interpreted as validating decisions upon previously well established and respected rules, regulations and trends. These concepts may reflect some element of democratic approach although the extent to which they have political implications is questionable.

Bernard Lewis (1) mentions the first written constitution in a Muslim country by the Bey of Tunis, then under Ottoman rule , in 1861. He adds the convention following the elected assembly held by the khedive of Egypt in 1866. This fact is also regarded as the first of its kind. The assembly held its three prescribed terms and was followed by other similar assemblies elected. Ottoman constitutional movement resulted in the announcement of a constitution on December 23, 1876. After the election-the first in the Islamic history-parliament convened in Istanbul in March 1877. This attempt failed as the Sultan dissolved the parliament. The Persian constitutional revolution of 1906 and the Young Turks' revolution of 1908 were two important milestones in the early twentieth century (1).

2. Discussion

The discussion should start with the simple question of how to define democracy. Is it a matter of "all" or "none" phenomenon or can we grade democracy, define it with some preceding adjectives like deficient, poor and acceptable.

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The latter approach reminds us of the French "bonne pour l'Orient" mentality. For instance Islamic democracy is described as a political system with religious rules and principles forming the basis of governing bodies and community life. Election of leaders by the people and the aforementioned shura may be regarded as some element of democratic understanding. The changing of governments by secret polls in competitive and fair elections that are regularly held in a multi-party, multi-candidate political system is a prerequisite of democracy and an initial step to a full-fledged one. Samuel Huntington (2) claims that governments should be changed by elections at least twice before a democracy can be regarded as consolidated.

The minimums, though the sine-qua-nons of vigorous and established democracies are only characteristics lying on the surface. Deeper still is another set of sine-qua-nons: Human rights, freedom of press and speech, non-discrimination of any kind; a truly independent judiciary and a judicial system, labors' right to unionize and strike, free medical care and equal and free access to education, fair play in markets and a tax system that helps alleviating the gross inequalities in the pre-tax income distribution and usage of national resources for the welfare of people are some other important characteristics associated with advanced democratic regimes.

Barro has also discussed the features of democracy and he has defined some additional determinants of democracy (3). Among these are health, upper level schooling, inequality of income and schooling, ethnolinguistic fractionalization, the rule of law, colonial history and religion are other determinants of democracy. He believes that a higher standard of living, a rising middle class share of income and a smaller gap between male and female are factors having positive influence on democracy. He states that countries with low levels of economic development can not sustain democracy. He refers to the political freedoms installed in most of the newly independent African states in the early 1960's which did not tend to last.

According to the above described criteria a vast majority of Muslim countries are ruled by antidemocratic regimes with a very few exceptions, namely Malaysia, Turkey and Indonesia, the latter, only for the last two decades. Even these three countries have some deficiencies and experienced interludes of antidemocratic periods in the past.

3. Present Questions

The second question to be answered is the possible effect of religion on the existence of antidemocratic regimes in most of the Islamic countries. If religion is not the cause of deficiencies, then what is it? The reasons as to why vigorous and uninterrupted democratic regimes have rarely been observed in the Islamic World may be listed as follows:

a) During the glory years of the Ottoman Empire the religious leadership has been added to political leadership thus combining both titles in the personality of one individual, the Sultan. The sultans were also caliphs. This traditional culture inevitably dominated the society until the establishment of a secular Turkish state in 1923. The Ottoman Sultan served as the caliph of the Islamic world for centuries and the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire resulted in the formation of 20 countries in the geography once ruled by Ottoman Empire. This practice of having deep roots in the society brought its natural problems in the process of transformation of an Empire into at least a few new secular nations.

b) While some Muslim countries are willing to accept democracy and enjoy its virtues, reluctance still exists for some inseparable aspects of the Western life and values that are viewed as incompatible with Islam.

c) The neglect of women in a vast majority of Islam states is a reality, the classical expectation of being a good wife and mother with minimum or no social and professional functions. The World Economic Forum analyzed the status of female gender in 145 countries using four subindexes, namely; economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment. They have combined these subindexes into a final score (4). According to these results, some of the Islamic countries ranked in the following order among the 145 countries studied: Malaysia (111), United Arab Emirates (119), Tunisia (127), Algeria (128), Turkey (130), Saudi Arabia (134), Egypt (136), Morocco (139), Jordan (140) Iran (141), Syria (143), Pakistan (144) and Yemen (145).

c) The religiously based dynasties and military-rooted despotic, autocratic and oppressive leaders that seized power generally following coup d'états deliberately suppressed and stifled efforts aiming at establishing democratic societies.

d) Following the demise of the Ottoman Empire, the Arab people in the Middle East and in North-Western Africa lived under colonial or semi-colonial status until late 1940's or the early 1950's, when they gained independence.

This colonial period intensified Arab nationalism which was aggravated by the foundation of the Israeli State in 1948. For many decades following 1948, the concerns and apprehensions of the Arab people were directed to a common enemy-Israel- and the ensuing psycho-social milieu outweighed the virtues of democracy. The anti-Israel feelings went so far as to establish a Pan-Arabic State, symbolized by the Egyptian President Cemal Abdel Nasser.

e) Is economic growth and level of welfare associated with democratic insufficiency? It is not easy to give an affirmative answer to this question considering the countries like Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia which are in the high income group of nations.

f) The nongovernmental organizations in the Western bloc always favored democracy and human rights with a strong struggle against violations. On the other hand, for many of the Western administrations, the regime of the country did mean too much as long as it did not interfere with the interests of West. This approach had a share in some long-lasting authoritarian regimes in the Middle East.

It is quite debatable whether the Arab spring will pave the way to true democracy. The unfortunate progress in many Arabic countries, especially in Egypt, has been the distinct division of the people into two main groups; secular and democratic minded against political Islam, while the latter is supporting completely religious based political administration and social life. This conflict seems to escalate to the point of threatening national integrity.

4. Future Speculations

If democracy is going to be established in the Middle East and in the Muslim world, some aspects would be as follows:

- a) The course of human history has been towards the better and progress. Based on this fact, it is expected that democracy will eventually be realized in the Muslim world, although most probably it will not be in the foreseeable future. Iran sets a contradictory example to this assumption. The common belief and expectation was that the Shah's regime would be replaced by a more liberal and democratic system, but the fundamental religious revolution of 1979 proved the expectations to be wrong.
- b) Democratization should and will be a self-initiated process with no foreign support. The theory of exporting democracy from Western countries to non-democratic regions has failed with the newest example of the US and coalition forces invading Iraq. The road to democracy lies in the power of each particular nation and its people. Whether this process will be from top to bottom or reversely is open to debate. Additionally the method of democratization is also controversial. Whether it will be a slow, time consuming process or will come as an aftermath of a revolutionary event, maybe with bloodshed, is hard to answer.
- c) The main motivation for democracy will stem from economic needs and claim for human rights of the middle class. The university youth is a dynamic element of each country and will most probably play an essential role in the democratization process facilitated and accelerated by the contemporary means of communication.
- d) It is generally argued that secularism is a prerequisite for democracy. Arab intellectuals also favor a secular state; the need for secularism is emphasized more than ever. Turkey is regarded as the only true democracy in the Islamic world establishing a secular state by formal adoption of the separation of religion and state as a law (5).

On the other hand Kuru (6) proposes that secularism is neither sufficient nor necessary condition for democracy. He substantiates his idea by dividing 46 countries with Islam majority into three main categories; a) Islamic states (11 countries), b) states with Islam as the established religion (15 countries) and secular states (20 countries). He further quotes that "Muslim majority countries have sharply diverse political regimes in which Islam does not have a monolithic impact". He favors the concept of "Twin toleration" previously introduced by Alfred Stepan (7) which simply requires natural respect between religion and the state to each other's autonomous sphere. Kuru is against a rigid secular understanding. He admits that Islam may play an important role in the formation of Moslem world's attitude toward democracy.

- e) The impact of religion on the democratization process will vary from nation to nation. In states characterized by relatively secular heritage and having closer relations with the Western world, difficulties are likely to be overcome more easily. In a country like Saudi Arabia where the legislative, jurisdiction and executive systems are religiously oriented, the transition will face hardship.
- f) Resistance to transformation by the present central rulers and traditional local tribal communities is easily observed. States' rulers are not inclined either to share or completely turn over their economic and administrative power.
- g) History is full of surprises and unanticipated events. This is also valid for the future and an incident or some charismatic leader may cause very unusual changes.

Viewing the Islamic world as a homogeneous community would be a mistake in solving the problem of democracy. There are very basic divisions like Shiites and Sunnis, Arab and non-Arab nations. Furthermore each country has a different historical background, culture and geography and varying levels of economic growth. Pryor (8) shares this idea and quotes that "The causes of underlying deficits in political freedom in most Islamic nations can only be disintegrated by a detailed analysis of the special features of each nation".

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