ISLAM AND LIBERAL DEMOCRACY: TWO VISIONS OF REFORMATION

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Of all the challenges facing democracy in the 1990s, one of the greatest lies in the Islamic world. Only a handful of the more than four dozen predominantly Muslim countries have made significant strides toward establishing democratic systems. Among this handful--including Albania, Bangladesh, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Mali, Pakistan, and Turkey--not one has yet achieved full, stable, or secure democracy. And the largest single regional bloc holding out against the global trend toward political pluralism comprises the Muslim countries of the Middle East and North Africa.

Yet the resistance to political change associated with the Islamic bloc is not necessarily a function of the Muslim faith. Indeed, the evidence indicates quite the reverse. Rulers in some of the most antidemocratic regimes in the Islamic world--such as Brunei, Indonesia, Iraq, Oman, Qatar, Syria, and Turkmenistan--are secular autocrats who refuse to share power with their brethren.

Overall, the obstacles to political pluralism in Islamic countries are not unlike the problems earlier faced in other parts of the world: secular ideologies such as Ba'athism in Iraq and Syria, Pancasila in Indonesia, or lingering communism in some former Soviet Central Asian states brook no real opposition. Ironically, many of these ideologies were adapted from the West; Ba'athism, for instance, was inspired by the European socialism of the 1930s and 1940s. Rigid government controls over everything from communications in Saudi Arabia and Brunei to foreign visitors in Uzbekistan and Indonesia also isolate their people from democratic ideas and debate on popular empowerment. In the largest and poorest Muslim countries, moreover, problems common to [End Page 64] developing states, from illiteracy and disease to poverty, make simple survival a priority and render democratic politics a seeming luxury. Finally, like their non-Muslim neighbors in Asia and Africa, most Muslim societies have no local history of democracy on which to draw. As democracy has blossomed in Western states over the past three centuries, Muslim societies have usually lived under colonial rulers, kings, or tribal and clan leaders.

In other words, neither Islam nor its culture is the major obstacle to political modernity, even if undemocratic rulers sometimes use Islam as their excuse. 1 In Saudi Arabia, for instance, the ruling House of Saud relied on Wahhabism, a puritanical brand of Sunni Islam, first to unite the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula and then to justify dynastic rule. Like other monotheistic religions, Islam offers wide-ranging and sometimes contradictory instruction. In Saudi Arabia, Islam's tenets have been selectively shaped to sustain an authoritarian monarchy.

In Iran, the revolution that overthrew the Shah in 1979 put a new spin on Shi'ite traditions. The Iranian Shi'ite community had tradition-ally avoided direct participation by religious leaders in government as demeaning to spiritual authority. The upheaval led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini thus represented not only a revolution in Iran, but also a revolution within the Shi'ite

branch of Islam. The constitution of the Islamic Republic, the first of its kind, created structures and positions unknown to Islam in the past.

Yet Islam, which acknowledges Judaism and Christianity as its forerunners in a single religious tradition of revelation-based monotheism, also preaches equality, justice, and human dignity--ideals that played a role in developments as diverse as the Christian Reformation of the sixteenth century, the American and French revolutions of the eighteenth century, and even the "liberation theology" of the twentieth century. Islam is not lacking in tenets and practices that are compatible with pluralism. Among these are the traditions of ijtihad (interpretation), ijma (consensus), and shura (consultation).

Diversity and Reform

Politicized Islam is not a monolith; its spectrum is broad. Only a few groups, such as the Wahhabi in Saudi Arabia, are in fact fundamentalist. This term, coined in the early twentieth century to describe a movement among Protestant Christians in the United States, denotes passive adherence to a literal reading of sacred scripture. By contrast, many of today's Islamic movements are trying to adapt the tenets of the faith to changing times and circumstances. In their own way, some even resemble Catholic "liberation theology" movements in their attempts to use religious doctrines to transform temporal life in the modern world. The more accurate word for such Muslim groups is "Islamist." The term [End Page 65] is growing in popularity in Western academic and policy-making circles, since it better allows for the forward-looking, interpretive, and often innovative stances that such groups assume as they seek to bring about a reconstruction of the social order.

The common denominator of most Islamist movements, then, is a desire for change. The quest for something different is manifested in a range of activities, from committing acts of violence to running for political office. Reactive groups--motivated by political or economic insecurity, questions of identity, or territorial disputes--are most visible because of their aggressiveness. Extremists have manipulated, misconstrued, and even hijacked Muslim tenets. Similar trends have emerged in religions other than Islam: the words "zealot" and "thug" were coined long ago to refer, respectively, to Jewish and Hindu extremists. Contemporary Islamic extremists have committed acts of terrorism as far afield as Buenos Aires, Paris, and New York, and they have threatened the lives of writers whom they regard as blasphemous from Britain to Bangladesh.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are proactive individuals and groups working for constructive change. In Egypt, Islamists have pro-vided health-care and educational facilities as alternatives to expensive private outlets and inadequate government institutions. In Turkey, they have helped to build housing for the poor and have generally strengthened civil society. In Lebanon, they have established farm cooperatives and provided systematically for the welfare of children, widows, and the poor. In Jordan, Yemen, Kuwait, and elsewhere, they have run for parliament. The specific motives vary from religiously grounded altruism to creating political power bases by winning hearts and minds. But in diverse ways, they are trying to create alternatives to ideas and systems that they believe no longer work.

Less visible but arguably more important--to both Muslims and the world at large--is a growing group of Islamic reformers. While reactive and proactive groups address the immediate problems of Islam's diverse and disparate communities, the reformers are shaping thought about long-term issues. At the center of their reflections is the question of how to modernize and democratize political and economic systems in an Islamic context. The reformers' impact is not merely academic; by stimulating some of the most profound debate since Islam's emergence in the seventh century, they are laying the foundations for an Islamic Reformation.

The stirrings of reform within Islam today should not be compared too closely with the Christian Reformation of almost five hundred years ago. The historical and institutional differences between the two faiths are vast. Nonetheless, many of the issues ultimately addressed by the respective movements are similar, particularly the inherent rights of the individual and the relationship between religious and political authority. [End Page 66]

The seeds of an Islamic Reformation were actually planted a century ago, but only among tiny circles of clerics and intellectuals whose ideas were never widely communicated to ordinary believers. At the end of the twentieth century, however, instant mass communications, improved education, and intercontinental movements of both people and ideas mean that tens of millions of Muslims are exposed to the debate. In the 1980s, interest in reform gained momentum as the secular ideologies that succeeded colonialism--mostly variants or hybrids of nationalism and socialism--failed to provide freedom and security to many people in the Muslim world. This sense of ferment has only grown more intense amid the global political upheaval of the post-Cold War world. Muslims now want political, economic, and social systems that better their lives, and in which they have some say.

The reformers contend that human understanding of Islam is flexible, and that Islam's tenets can be interpreted to accommodate and even encourage pluralism. They are actively challenging those who argue that Islam has a single, definitive essence that admits of no change in the face of time, space, or experience--and that democracy is therefore incompatible or alien. The central drama of reform is the attempt to reconcile Islam and modernity by creating a worldview that is compatible with both. 2

Two Middle Eastern philosophers symbolize the diverse origins of Islamist reformers and the breadth of their thought. Abdul Karim Soroush is a Shi'ite Muslim and a Persian from Iran. He is a media-shy academic who has experienced almost a generation of life inside an Islamic republic. Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi is a Sunni Muslim and a Tunisian Arab. He is the exiled leader of Hezb al-Nahda (Party of the Renaissance), a movement intent on creating an Islamic republic in Tunisia. Over the past three years, Soroush and Ghannouchi have produced some of the most far-reaching work on the question of Islam and democracy.

Abdul Karim Soroush

Soroush supported Iran's 1979 revolution and took an active role in revising university curricula during its early years. Since then, however, he has articulated ideas that the regime considers highly controversial. Ranking officials such as Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the successor to Ayatollah Khomeini, now Iran's Supreme Guide, have increasingly framed public remarks as implicit but unmistakeable responses to Soroush's articles and speeches. Some of Soroush's ideas amount to heresy in the regime's eyes, and the tenor of Khamenei's statements has become increasingly hostile. In a November 1995 address commemorating the 1979 U.S. Embassy takeover, Khamenei spent more time condemning Soroush's ideas than lambasting the United States or Israel.

The degree to which Soroush now frames the debate in Iran was revealed by two unusual events that took place in the autumn of 1995. At Tehran University, more than a hundred young members of Ansar (Helpers of the Party of God) physically attacked and injured Soroush as he attempted to give a special address that the Muslim Students' Association had invited him to deliver. Some among the two thousand students who had assembled to hear him were also injured. The attack then sparked a pro-Soroush demonstration on campus. A new law imposing severe penalties on anyone associating with critics and enemies of the Islamic Republic was widely thought to be aimed at undermining Soroush's growing support.

Educated in London and Tehran in both philosophy and the physical sciences, Soroush has recently taught at the Institute for Human Research and at Tehran University's School of Theology. His columns have been the centerpiece of Kiyan (a Farsi word that can mean "foundation" or "universe"), a bimonthly magazine founded in 1991 primarily to air his views and the debate that they have sparked. For years he also gave informal talks at Tehran mosques that were usually packed by followers ranging from young clerics to regime opponents, intellectuals, political independents, and government technocrats. But in the fall of 1995, the government banned him from giving public lectures or instruction and from publishing. He has been effectively forced from public view, and his academic career in Iran has been ended.

Soroush's writings on three subjects are particularly relevant. At the top of the list is democracy. Although Islam literally means "submission," Soroush argues that 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," he said in one of several interviews in Tehran and Washington, D.C., in 1994 and 1995.

His advocacy of democracy for the Islamic world rests on two pillars. First, to be a true believer, one must be free. Belief attested under threat or coercion is not true belief. And if a believer freely submits, this does not mean that he has sacrificed freedom. He must also remain free to leave his faith. The only real contradiction is to be free in order to believe, and then afterward to abolish that freedom. This freedom is the basis of democracy. Soroush goes further: the beliefs and will of the majority must shape the ideal Islamic state. An Islamic democracy cannot be imposed from the top; it is only legitimate if it has been chosen by the majority, including nonbelievers as well as believers.

Second, says Soroush, our understanding of religion is evolving. [End Page 68] [Begin Page 70] Sacred texts do not change, but interpretation of them is always in flux because understanding is influenced by the age and the changing conditions in which believers live. So no interpretation is absolute or fixed for all time and all places. 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 understandings may be more learned than others, but no version is automatically more authoritative than another.

Islam is also a religion that can still grow, Soroush argues. It should not be used as a modern ideology, for it is too likely to become totalitarian. Yet he believes in shari`a, or Islamic law, as a basis for modern legislation. And shari`a, too, can grow. "Shari`a is something expandable. You cannot imagine the extent of its flexibility," he has said, adding that "in an Islamic democracy, you can actualize all its potential flexibilities."

The next broad subject that Soroush addresses is the clergy. The rights of the clergy are no greater than the privileges of anyone else, he argues. Thus in the ideal Islamic democracy, the clergy also have no a priori right to rule. The state should be run by whoever is popularly elected on the basis of equal rights under law.

Soroush advocates an even more fundamental change in the relationship between religion and both the people and the state. Religious leaders have traditionally received financial support from either the state (in most Sunni countries) or the people (in Shi'ite communities). In both cases, Soroush argues, the clergy should be "freed" so that they are not "captives" forced to propagate official or popular views rather than the faith of the Koran.

A religious calling is only for authentic lovers of religion and those who will work for it, Soroush says. No one should be able to be guaranteed a living, gain social status, or claim political power on the basis of religion. Clerics should work like everyone else, he says, making

independent incomes through scholarship, teaching, or other jobs. Only such independence can prevent them--and Islam--from becoming compromised.

Finally, Soroush deals with the subject of secularism. Arabic, the language of Islam, does not have a literal translation for this word. But the nineteenth-century Arabic word elmaniyya--meaning "that which is rational or scientific"--comes close. In this context, Soroush views secularism not as the enemy or rival of religion, but as its complement: "It means to look at things scientifically and behave scientifically--which has nothing to do with hostility to religion. Secularism is nothing more than that."

Modernism, according to Soroush, represented a successful attempt to challenge the "dictatorship of religion" by increasing the emphasis placed upon unaided reason in the conduct of human affairs. He maintains that [End Page 70] the tension between reason and religion since the sixteenth century has been "welcome and beneficial for both" and has opened the way for an eventual postmodern reconciliation between the two.

Soroush's thought has wide-ranging implications. His work often echoes themes that lay behind the Christian Reformation. He shows how to empower Muslims by establishing a role for the individual--as a believer and as a citizen. Soroush refines, even downgrades, the role of the clergy--a particularly sensitive topic in Iran, for Shi'ite Islam stresses the doctrinal and interpretive authority of clerics far more than does Sunni Islam. Soroush also redefines, and to some degree separates, the relative roles and powers of the mosque--religious jurisprudence--and the state. The adoption of his ideas would signify a stunning shift for the only major monotheistic religion that provides a highly specific set of rules by which to govern society as well as a set of spiritual beliefs.

In a spirit similar to the one that characterized the Christian Reformation, he argues against rigid thinking and elitism. Soroush is a believing Muslim and has no wish to abandon the values of his faith; rather, he wants to convince his fellow Muslims of the need to face modernity with what he calls a spirit of "active accommodation . . . imbued or informed with criticism." By pointing the way to innovative interpretations of the Koran and the shari`a, he provides a foundation for a pluralist and tolerant society.

Rachid al-Ghannouchi

While Soroush prefers the cosmic overview, Rachid al-Ghannouchi's thinking is rooted in his experiences in Tunisia, and then applied to other Muslim societies. He has also been heavily influenced by Third World nationalism and the views of intellectuals from the global South who see their region as locked in a struggle against Northern "neocolonialism." A popular philosophy teacher and speaker educated in Damascus and Paris, Ghannouchi founded the Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique (MTI) in 1981 during a brief interlude of Tunisian political liberalization. Tunisia's government refused to legalize the MTI, however, citing laws that excluded religious parties from politics. Ghannouchi persisted in calls on the regime to share power by introducing political pluralism and economic justice. He was jailed from 1981 to 1984; after his release, the authorities forbade him to teach, speak in public, publish, or travel.

In 1987, Ghannouchi was again arrested and charged with plotting to overthrow the government. He was released after a bloodless coup in November 1987, which led to another brief political thaw. The MTI, renamed al-Nahda in early 1989 to remove religious overtones, was promised a place at the political table. But by the time of the April [End Page 71] [Begin Page 73] 1989 legislative elections, the thaw was over. Reforms were stalled and confrontations mounted. Ghannouchi went into voluntary exile. The government charged al-Nahda with plotting a coup; the party was outlawed and Ghannouchi was sentenced in absentia to life imprisonment. Britain

granted him political asylum in 1993, and he is now the most prominent Islamist leader living in the West.

Ghannouchi is controversial. In speeches and interviews, he often declares himself to be "against fundamentalism that believes it is the only truth and must be imposed on all others," yet he has visited Tehran, has traveled briefly on a Sudanese passport when he went into exile, and has condemned Zionism and Westernization. His 1993 book Civil Liberties in the Islamic State is dedicated to dozens of people, including "the forerunners of Islamic liberalism in the women's movement" and prisoners of conscience of every creed. But it is also dedicated to an imprisoned Hamas leader, to the late Ayatollah Khomeini, and to Malcolm X.

Of all the major Islamist leaders, however, Ghannouchi seems to have expanded his thinking the most in recent years. In Tunisia, his understanding of democracy was a matter of theory only. He used to say that, as an Islamist, he was not afraid of ideas and wanted a free dialogue with believers in different faiths and political systems. Since the beginning of his exile in 1989, he has traveled in Europe and the United States, come into contact with a wide range of policy makers and opinion leaders, and experienced the workings of different demo-cratic systems firsthand. His years of exile have tempered some of the well-worn jingo common in Islamist parlance. Although the field of comparison is small, Ghannouchi now ranks among Islamism's most accessible and mature thinkers on the issue of democracy. Whatever happens in Tunisia or to al-Nahda, his contributions will remain important to Islamic thought.

Ghannouchi advocates an Islamic system that features majority rule, free elections, a free press, protection of minorities, equality of all secular and religious parties, and full women's rights in everything from polling booths, dress codes, and divorce courts to the top job at the presidential palace. Islam's role is to provide the system with moral values.

Islamic democracy is first the product of scriptural interpretation. "Islam did not come with a specific program concerning our life," Ghannouchi said in one of several interviews between 1990 and 1995. "It brought general principles. It is our duty to formulate this program through interaction between Islamic principles and modernity." Believers are guaranteed the right of ijtihad in interpreting the Koranic text. Their empowerment is complete since Islam does not have an institution or person as a sole authority to represent the faith--or contradict their interpretations. The process of shura, moreover, means that decision [End Page 73] making belongs to the community as a whole. "The democratic values of political pluralism and tolerance are perfectly compatible with Islam," he maintains.

Second, Islamic democracy is also a product of recent human experience. The legitimacy of contemporary Muslim states is based on liberation from modern European colonialism, a liberation in which religious and secular, Muslim and Christian, participated together. "There is no room to make distinctions between citizens, and complete equality is the base of any new Muslim society. The only legitimacy is the legitimacy of elections," he said. "Freedom comes before Islam and is the step leading to Islam."

Ghannouchi concedes that Islam's record in the areas of equality and participation has blemishes. Previous Muslim societies were built on conquest. But he contends that the faith has also traditionally recognized pluralism internally, noting the lack of religious wars among Muslims as proof of Islam's accommodation of the Muslim world's wide diversity. Citing the Koran, he explains that Islam condemns the use of religion for material or hegemonic purposes: "O mankind! We created you from a single [pair] of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other, not that ye may despise [each other]" (Sura 49:13).

Ghannouchi calls the act of striking a balance between holy texts and human reality aqlanah, which translates as "realism" or "logical reasoning." Aqlanah is dynamic and constantly evolving.

As a result Ghannouchi, like Soroush, believes that Islam and democracy are an inevitable mix. In a wide-ranging address given in May 1995 at the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London, he said: "Once the Islamists are given a chance to comprehend the values of Western modernity, such as democracy and human rights, they will search within Islam for a place for these values where they will implant them, nurse them, and cherish them just as the Westerners did before, when they implanted such values in a much less fertile soil." He pledged al-Nahda's adherence to democracy and the alternation of power through the ballot box, and called on all other Islamist movements to follow suit in unequivocal language and even in formal pacts signed with other parties.

Ghannouchi's acceptance of pluralism is not limited to the Islamic world. Responding to Samuel P. Huntington's widely discussed essay on the "clash of civilizations," 3 Ghannouchi contends that cultural or religious differences do not justify conflict, but instead can provide ground for cooperation rooted in a mutual recognition of complementarity. "We appeal for and work to establish dialogue between Islam and the West, for the world now is but a small village and there is no reason to deny the other's existence. Otherwise we are all doomed to annihilation and the destruction of the world," he said in a 1994 interview. 4 [End Page 74] In his 1995 London address, he added: "Islam recognizes as a fact of life the diversity and pluralism of peoples and cultures, and calls for mutual recognition and coexistence. . . . Outside its own society, Islam recognizes civilizational and religious pluralism and opposes the use of force to transfer a civilization or impose a religion."

A Long Way To Go

Christianity's Reformation took at least two centuries to work itself out. The Islamic Reformation is probably only somewhere in early midcourse. And the two movements offer only the roughest of parallels. The Christian Reformation, for example, was launched in reaction to the papacy and specific practices of the Catholic Church. In contrast, Islam has no central authority; even the chief ayatollah in the Islamic Republic of Iran is the supreme religious authority in one country only.

But the motives and goals of both reformations are similar. The Islamic reformers want to strip the faith of corrupt, irrelevant, or unjust practices that have been tacked on over the centuries. They are looking to make the faith relevant to changing times and conditions. They want to make the faith more accessible to the faithful, so that believers utilize the faith rather than have it used against them. And they want to draw on Islam as both a justification and a tool for political, social, and economic empowerment.

The Islamic reformist movement has a very long way to go. Although there are a handful of others besides Soroush and Ghannouchi making serious or original contributions to the debate, they still represent a distinct minority. The changes that they seek to promote will experience bumps, false starts, and failures, and may take a long time. Yet the Islamic Reformation represents the best hope for reconciliation both within Islam and between Islam and the outside world.

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Notes

1. Olivier Roy, The Failure of Political Islam, trans. Carol Volk (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), esp. 1-27.

2. See John Voll, Islam: Continuity and Change in the Modern World (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995).

3. Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" Foreign Affairs 72 (Summer 1993): 22-49.

4. "Dr. Rachid Gannouchi: Tunisia's Islamists Are Different from Those in Algeria," interview by Zainab Farran in Ash-Shiraa (Beirut), October 1994, 28-32.