
THE "DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT" IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

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The Question of Democracy

The debate we will engage in here is central to understanding the process of democratisation as it pertains to the Muslim world. From the perspective of democratic theory, the case of the Muslim world presents an apparently insoluble puzzle. Observers keep wondering why, at a time when the whole world appears to be experiencing precipitate democratisation, most Muslim countries either remain staunchly autocratic, even despotic, or seem to be moving the other way. But the theses put forth to explain this perplexing phenomenon remain far from satisfactory. Theoreticians of democratic transition started to pay attention to the specificity of Muslim regions only very recently, and treatment remains sketchy. The Muslim World thus presents both a front-line for democratisation and a new frontier for democratic theory to explore and come to terms with.

The term "democracy" has been rightly referred to as the epitome of a contested term. (Garnham and Tessler, 1995, Parry and Moran, 1994, Held, 1987) Any attempt to select a preferred definition would automatically entail the subscription to a particular theory of democracy. Part of the brief of this project is to tackle this issue from the perspective exacted by our subject of research, which will put the utility of the concept to even more challenging tests. However, for our purposes here, the use of the term is dictated by what we believe is absent from political practice in our area of concern. In this context, a good starting point for a working definition could be the parameters emphasised by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) which holds that:

democracy involves the right of the people freely to determine their own destiny... that the exercise of this right requires a system that guarantees freedom of expression, belief and association, free and competitive elections, respect for the inalienable rights of individuals and minorities, free communications media, and the rule of law... that a democratic system may take a variety of forms suited to local needs and traditions... [and] that the existence of autonomous economic, political, social, and cultural institutions is the foundation of the democratic process and the best guarantor of individual rights and freedoms.

These parameters could in turn be looked in the light of Sartori's conception of democracy as referring to the presence of elected representative governments based on limited majority rule, (Sartori, 1987) and Held's assertion that democracy "has been conceived as a way of containing the powers of the state and of mediating among competing political projects." It can achieve this because "it holds out the possibility of the entrenchment of a principle of legitimacy based on the one hand, on the political involvement of each and all and, on the other, on a process of decision-making which can mediate differences and distill (by virtue of its adherence to this process) acceptable outcomes." (Held, 1995) In this regard, democracy can be viewed both as incorporating constitutionalism and the self-imposed limits on the will of the majority, (Elster, 1988) and also as a mechanism of peaceful conflict-resolution between competing interests and vision, a point emphasised by Przeworski (1988).

As noted by Held, the term democracy is often used as a short for "liberal representative democracy," which is centered, in its contemporary manifestations, around "a cluster of rules and institutions permitting the broadest participation of the majority of citizens in the selection of representatives who alone can make political decisions, that is, decisions affecting the whole community." (Held, 1995)

This cluster includes elected government; free and fair elections in which every citizen's vote has an equal weight; a suffrage which embraces all citizens irrespective of distinctions of race, religion, class, sex and so on; freedom of conscience, information and expression on all public matters broadly defined; the right of all adults to oppose their government and stand for office; and associational autonomy - the right to form independent associations including social movements, interest groups and political parties. (Held, 1995)

Democratisation is a term used to depict a complex process, the end result of which is the creation of democratic systems. Esposito and Voll define democratisation as "the demand for empowerment in government and politics made by a growing portion of populations around the world." The term also defines, one could add, also the response of the incumbent regimes and political elites to such demands.

Democratisation comprises in fact a number of interconnected processes: the decay, weakening or collapse of authoritarian regimes; global processes and currents of thought impacting all societies and favouring democracy; the struggle of disadvantaged groups for recognition and political participation; and the impact of the activity of a variety of agents seeking to reform the political system. The latter may include reformist governments and political elites, but usually comprises various coalitions of civil society actors: intellectuals, human rights activists, women groups, political dissidents of various sorts, spokesmen for ethnic minorities, religious leaders, etc.

It is our view that, even if employ a more limited conception of democracy based on minimalist interpretation of the concept of the "rule of people," (as the existence of stable and self-sustaining systems of governance within a given society, through institutions that permit the peaceful management and resolution of conflicts on a broadly acceptable basis) the Muslim world registers very low marks. This is an indication of how serious the problem is. And this is not just a question of image and western "misperceptions," as some have argued (Shwedler, 1995), but a very real problem.

The Current Debate

The fact that the current global wave of democratisation, which appeared to have gained an unstoppable momentum since the end of the Cold War, has tended to pass large tracts of the Muslim World by, did not escape the attention of those concerned with area studies or with political theory. The Middle East, the heartland of the Muslim world, has been described by one commentator as "one of the least democratic regions of the world and, many believe, the one with the bleakest prospects for the future." (Dorr, 1993)

One active politician may have overstated the point when he claimed that even though "the winds of democratization have been blowing all over the world... Yet not a leaf has been stirred with these winds in the Middle East." (Ecevit, 1993) But the fact is that, with authoritarianism apparently so deeply entrenched in this region, "often the only debate is over explanations as to why democracy is unlikely to develop [there] in the near future." (Dorr, 1993)

Of the explanations offered, Elie Kedourie's claim that "the idea of democracy is quite alien to the mind-set of Islam," was among the most audacious, even though it did gain currency in certain circles. Kedourie argued democracy has already been tried in the Middle East in the first

half of this century, and had failed. It is unlikely to succeed in the near future because of the cultural heritage of Muslim communities which have been accustomed to "autocracy and passive obedience." It is in fact the remarkable flourishing of democracy in Europe that stands in need of explanation, not the persistence of authoritarianism elsewhere. (Kedourie, 1994) Similar arguments about the incompatibility of democracy with Islam and general, and Arab culture in particular, have also been made by Lewis (1994) and Ajami (1998).

However, a number of much more sophisticated treatments of the question have also been attempted, most notably by Esposito and Voll (1996), Salamé and his collaborators (Salamé, 1994), Goldberg and his (Goldberg et. al., 1993), Norton and his (1994, 1995) and Garnham and Tassler (1995), among others. In these discussions, a more sustained effort had been made to understand and explain the problem, adopting a multidisciplinary approach more fitting to this multi-faceted question. However, what is striking in some of these interventions is that they are sometimes more revealing of the theory and theoreticians than about their object of theorisation.

This is most notably apparent in the unwarranted pessimism and anti-democratic prescriptions which emerge from some of these works. More often than not, the habitual ground of democratic theory is being abandoned in favour of essentialist analyses of the Orientalist type, which are clearly at variance with the theoretical and normative presuppositions of democratic theory, while no helpful formulas are offered which could help the process of democratisation. Rather, with few notable exceptions, the self-serving arguments of entrenched authoritarian elites are sometimes reproduced in a sophisticated form, and the responsibility for the mess the region is in is shifted from the real culprits to mythical and ill-defined entities, such as "cultural traditions," or even to the victims of authoritarian regimes.

At the heart of the issue is what had come to be known as the "Islamism debate," (Kramer, 1997) which was described by one writer as "one of the few remaining intellectual debates on US foreign policy," (now that Vietnam and the Cold War are ancient history). (Satloff, 1997) This debate, and the broader one on democracy in the Muslim World, appear to have pushed democratic and political theory to its limits. Described briefly, the "Islamism debate" refers to the controversy over whether or not Islamist groups, which happen to be the largest active political groups in many Muslim countries, should or should not be admitted into the political process.

The fate of democratisation in the Muslim world is, needless to say, closely linked to answers to this question. If Islamist groups are seen as anti-democratic, and if they appear likely to gain majority support in any genuine political process, then an apparently insoluble dilemma presents itself. On the other hand, there are those who entertain the thesis that, far from being antithetical, the rising demand for democratisation and the resurgence of Islamic reassertion, in particular where moderate groups are involved, are closely related and could even be mutually supportive. (Esposito and Voll 1996). Others are less sure (Kramer, 1997, Salame, 1994)

The "Civil Society" Debate

Closely related to the Islamism debate, and incorporating it in a sense, is the "civil society" debate. In line with a broader trend influenced by developments in eastern Europe, interest in the question of civil society and its role has witnessed a revival (or more accurately, this interest has been generated anew, for there was nothing here to revive) in the early 1980's, and the term started to be used widely by academics, writers and even politicians. (Kazziha, 1997, Schwedler, 1995) Two major projects were launched in the early 1990's to look at the question of civil society in the Middle East.

The first, an academic project based at New York University and led by Augustus Richard Norton lasted for three years and produced two volumes of papers which represented a valuable contribution to the debate. (Norton, 1994, 1995) The second, a more activist one, is based at the Ibn-Khadoun Centre in Cairo, and headed by Dr Saad El-Din Ibrahim, is still going on. Other significant contributions to the debate were also made by Kawtharani (1988), Centre for Arab Unity Studies (1992) and the Swedish Institute in Istanbul (Ozdalga and Persson 1997).

A question of relevance to the civil society debate and the debate on democratisation is that of the status of the media and press freedoms in the Muslim world. Recent studies continue to show that freedom of expression in many parts of the Muslim world is either completely non-existent or severely limited. Draconian measures have been put in place to control press freedoms, and the governments enforce these with increasing strictness. Fourteen out of the top twenty-five "enemies of press freedom" listed by the French rights group, "Reporters without Borders", are leaders of predominantly Muslim countries. Moreover, freedom of expression is also under threat from non-governmental actors and civil society, sometimes acting through courts. In the absence of freedom of expression, any discussion of the existence or efficacy of civil society may be largely irrelevant. (El-Affendi, 1994, Article 19, 1991, Rogan, 1996).

The "civil society" debate could not in turn, escape the ideological conflicts which tore the region apart, and as a matter of fact has been used by a weapon in the raging battles of mutual exclusion. But more importantly, the debate had revealed the limits of current theoretical paradigms and their clear inadequacy to capture all aspects of the problem. Questions regarding the nature and role of civil society in a democratic set-up, the relations between, and demarcation lines separating, state and civil society also stretched current theories and paradigms to the limit when attempts were made to apply these to the Muslim context. A lot of work needs to be done to resolve the theoretical and practical problems which these studies have revealed.

The Policy Dimension

Due to these varied factors and the complex interaction between them, most of the explanations offered to the absence of democracy (and its bleak prospects) are either unsatisfactory, incomplete or both. Most of the prescriptions are also either muddled, hesitant, or else horrifying. The distinction between theory and policy recommendations has also been blurred, since this is no mere "academic" debate. Some theorists, like Kedourie or Ajami, dispense high theory from a given *parti pris* stance, but one that is nevertheless explicitly spelt out. Such authors find no difficulty in subscribing to the assertion made by Lord Balfour some eighty years ago that, unlike western nations which display "capacities for self-government," one can "never find traces of self-government," among "Orientals" nor any capacity for it. (Kazziha, 1997)

But many analysts do not make their policy inclinations so explicit. Policy is also part of the explanation of the problem, and may be at its root. Commenting on the Middle East being the "notable exception" in the world-wide surge of democratisation, William Quandt asks: "Is this because the United States is throwing its weight behind the status quo, a status quo built around authoritarian political regimes of various sorts? Or is the reason that something in the Middle East political culture is hostile to democratic politics? Or is the answer some combination of the two?"

And the answer Quandt selects is in the question. The US concerns in the region, he argues, have been three: Israel, oil and rivalry with the Soviet Union. Pursuing interests in these areas had invariably meant support for non-democratic regimes. Fatima Mernissi has no doubt as to the

central role messages from the West have played in subverting democratisation in the Arab World.

Between the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the "bombing of Baghdad back to the stone age" thirteen months later, the Arab masses have been sent on a roller coaster of conflicting emotions, being lifted to untold highs of hope and admiration for Europe and its insuppressible will to freedom and compassion, and then plunged into depth of despair to encounter vivid reminders of recent memories of colonialism as western generals appeared again on their television screens to dispense the justice of the powerful. Violence triumphed; democracy was buried. (Mernissi, 1993). But policy cannot explain the whole problem, unless we take the policies of national governments in the countries concerned into account.

For a region "accustomed to passive obedience," the Muslim World also appears to be a region where violence and turmoil are endemic. This would suggest that the virtues of obedience are not as widely acclaimed here as some people would like. The recent mass revolt in Indonesia also punctured some myths of this sort, including some about "Asian values," thrown in for extra measure. In any case, the uniqueness of the Muslim world in this regard is remarkable and worthy of a closer examination.

Whatever the explanation may be, a vast region like this exhibiting such an overwhelming resistance to democratisation is something worthy of some reflection. While it is undeniable that a clash of values (originating in the powerful hold the Islamic cultural tradition still maintains over the masses and sections of the elite) is a factor in the democratic deficit characteristic of the Muslim world, it is nevertheless a matter for empirical investigation whether this feature has been a determinant factor, and in what form. For example, while Islamic forces played a leading role in the recent anti-Suharto protests in Indonesia, this did not appear to have been a source of conflict within the pro-democracy camp.

Similarly, the Islamists in Tunisia appear to be working in harmony with human rights groups and a number of secular opposition movements in that country. Even in Algeria, which came to symbolise the implacable character of the conflict between secularists and Islamists, the major secular and Islamist groups are in broad agreement about the support for democracy, as evident in the Rome Accord signed by the three largest parties in the country in 1995. In Algeria again, not all Islamist parties are banned, but only those which appear to have enough mass support to win elections.

Secularist parties with mass support in authoritarian Muslim countries complain of similar systematic exclusion. On the other hand, strongly Islamist regimes, such as those in Iran, Sudan, Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia, seem to face Islamist challenges from both the left (pushing for more democratic freedoms and liberalisation) and right (criticising laxity in implementing Islamic norms.) The issue is thus much more complex than meets the eye.

The Islamic tradition possesses resources that could be used equally to support authoritarianism or mobilise protest. Among the number of recent studies which attempted to tackle the issues involved, (about half a dozen works with the title "Islam and Democracy" are in circulation), some have tried to look at the matter from the angle of the rise of new Islamist movements and ideologies, and how these impact on possible or actual democratisation attempts (Sisk, 1994). Yet others adopted a broader perspective, trying to examine how the Islamic cultural heritage could hinder to advance democratisation in the Muslim world. (Esposito and Voll, 1996).

A number of studies tried to examine the historical, economic and political factors involved, as well as the doctrinal and ideological questions. (Goldberg et al., 1993, Dorr, 1993, Salame, 1987, 1994, Garnham and Tassler, 1995, Degan, 1993). Other analysts attempted to look at the doctrinal and conceptual problems involved, in particular with regards to how Islamic doctrine

viewed the issues of human rights, civil liberties, and basic freedoms. (Mayer, 1991, An-Na'im, 1991, Lindholm and Vogt, 1993).

And yet others attempted to examine the deeper issues relating to the structure of Muslim societies and the legitimation behind these structures, and what form civil society could and did take in the Muslim context. (Kazziha et. al, 1997, Gellner, 1996, Binder, 1988, Kawtharani, 1992, Norton, 1994, 1995 and Schwedler, 1995, Ozdalga an Persson, 1998).

The Internal Debate

As expected, the current situation has also generated a heated debate within the Muslim world itself. The ongoing debate primarily takes the form of polemics between Islamists and their various political rivals. But there are also intensive debates taking place within each camp, as well as a mounting contribution from civil society groups, in particular human rights and women groups.

This has created a dynamic process which is continuously evolving and changing. Thus while the problem concerned defies any mono-causal explanation, the more important aspect of it is that it also defies static characterisations. The proliferation of works on democratisation in the Muslim world may thus not be, by itself, adequate for a proper understanding of the situation. In particular, works like Kedourie's and Gellner's, which not only treat the current fast moving situation as static, but want to fit into the straitjacket of unchanging cultural norms, may be wide of the mark.

In order to achieve a proper grasp of the issues involved, a very complex task, indeed a number of interrelated tasks, need to be performed. First, it is essential to attempt to comprehend the actual situation in all its complexity and dynamism.

The intensive and continuously evolving debates need to be followed in order to find out how the issues are seen from the perspectives of the parties involved: what are the aspirations of different (and often conflicting) Islamist groups? What ideas and norms guide their action? Also: what are the fears and misgivings of liberals, secularists, women groups and non-Muslim minorities? What solutions are they proposing? And how are ruling elites reacting to all these demands? Last but not least, how are the influential external actors (Israel, Europe, the US, Japan etc.) reacting to the situation? Are these reactions helping or hindering democratisation? How does the processes of globalisation and the information revolution impact the situation in its various dimensions: cultural, political, economic and social?

Secondly, the conceptual and ideological presuppositions at work in and behind these debates also need to be captured and evaluated. Again, this is a complex task, since the way ideas are advanced and expressed is also part of the contest. Rival parties are not only continuously contesting the theses of each other, but they even contest the veracity and commitment of rivals to the values they profess.

Secularists claim that Islamists are not sincere in their commitment to democracy, and point to perceived contradictions in their political discourse, while Islamists hurl the accusation back at their rivals, and point to the authoritarian actions and omissions of liberals and secularists (e.g. failure to condemn human rights abuses directed against Islamists).

In view of these multiple conflicts, there is a need for a thorough examination of the discourse being generated, in particular the dominant strands of political thought, rival interpretations of Islamic doctrine and history, rival conceptions of democracy, various alternative democratic formulas proposed, and various prescriptions for transition to democracy being offered by elites

and challengers alike. As a result, it could be possible to evaluate the compatibility and incompatibility of various proposals, and the viability (or lack of it) of rival projects. Here also we must not restrict the problem to a focus on the Islamist-secularist dichotomy, important though it is.

The prevalent "democratic deficit" predates the rise of active Islamism, and persists in states which remained predominantly Islamic (like Saudi Arabia), in newly Islamised ones (Iran and Sudan) and many others where the Islamist threat could not be taken seriously (Tunisia, Libya, Syria, Central Asia, etc.). The scope of the investigation must thus be widened and deepened.

Thirdly, in the light of the examination of the conditions that led to the current impasse in the Muslim world, one may need to re-examine and re-evaluate some of the basic theses and presuppositions of democratic and political theory, in so far as they apply to the specific Muslim situation. If the particular Muslim situation has posed such a problem to democratic theory, there is a case to argue to the effect that the whole problem could not have originated in the situation itself.

Some of the key presuppositions of democratic theory must be critically examined, not least because it had failed to predict the current problems. Terms such as "Islam", "democracy", "human rights", "pluralism", "secularism", "modernisation," etc. are contested terms and concepts that are usually heavily loaded with normative content, and often employed differently by different players and in accordance with the context.

Theoretical concepts such as "civil society", "citizen", "state", "power", "authority", "violence", "governance," "legitimacy," etc., also pose their own set of problems, especially when employed in cross-cultural contexts, and could acquire different meanings and uses in accordance with the theoretical framework in which they are being employed.

The task is therefore to adopt a doubly critical attitude: towards democratic theory and its theoretical, philosophical and normative presuppositions, and equally towards Islamic self-perceptions and interpretations of the world and of doctrine. This critical attitude is to be deployed at three levels: at the level of the conceptual and theoretical tools being employed; at the level of the empirical investigation of the phenomena in question; and at the level of evaluating the normative and conceptual presuppositions that are operative in the context under study.

Conclusions

The debate on democracy in the Middle East (and by extension the whole Muslim World) has thrown up more questions than it has answered, and had answered few satisfactorily. We contend that this is no coincidence, and that it raises some fundamental questions about the adequacy of democratic theory as it stands today.

The problem on the ground also remains as acute as ever. Far from espousing the present anomaly as the expression of some "cultural authenticity," the status quo is the target of increasingly vociferous, and often violent, protests. The issue is so important and serious that it needs to be tackled in a sustained way, bringing together all possible resources and talents, and engaging minds from within and outside the Muslim world in a continuing dialogue that may yield some satisfactory answers.

We need generate, sustain and enrich such a dialogue. We have no objection to the Islamist project in the end being itself shaped by and in the course of this dialogue. In fact, we would welcome this very much. Success in this will not only stimulate the debate on political

developments in the Muslim World and help explain them, but could also contribute positively towards a deeper understanding of the democratic process, and a sharpening, or possibly a radical rethinking, of the concepts and theoretical constructs underpinning democratic theory.

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