

Creating a Productive Discourse on Democracy in the Muslim World

by Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad, Minaret of Freedom Institute

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Abstract

We examine the state of the discourses on the establishment of democracy in the Muslim world and conclude that three obstacles require special attention if progress towards democracy is to be facilitated. (1) There must be a change in American foreign policy so that American actions do not contradict American professions of a desire for democracy in the Middle East; (2) the discourse must be modified to directly address the concerns and objections of Islamists; and (3) a new strategy must be formulated that aims not at immediate results, but at changing long-term attitudes.

The hypocrisy with which America attacks authoritarian and discriminatory regimes that oppose its geopolitical objectives while supporting authoritarian and apartheid regimes that comply with them delegitimizes actions taken by the American government in pursuit of democracy and undermines the concept of democratic reform itself, making it seem like nothing more than a banner for interventionism.

Advocates of democracy should address the Islamist critique in its strongest form. This will necessitate conceding certain points, such as the fact that the definition of democracy is a notion with a contested definition (e.g., is it the defense of minority and individual rights or a rule of the majority?). Aspects of democracy that inhere in Islamic law (such as the rule of law) should be emphasized as Islamic rather than secular, while those aspects that are not inherent (such as the election of leaders) should be promoted as pragmatically beneficial. Certain aspects of Western democracy (such as the concept that positive law may rescind natural or Divine law) need to be abandoned. On the other side, Muslims must abandon some long-cherished interpretations that conflict not only with Western notions of individual rights, but with the fundamental notion of the individual's direct responsibility to God.

Seeds for a future democracy must be planted by an intellectual engagement with the youth of the Muslim world. That such an approach may take two generations to bear fruit is not an argument against it, since it is well established that paradigm shifts take a generation or two to establish themselves.

Introduction

From the era of the Cold War until relatively recently, the major strategy of American foreign policy was the preservation of stability. While progress towards democracy was considered a desirable development, there was concern that such development not come at the price of negative consequences in terms of the alignments of the nations unnumbered among the great powers. This strategy played itself out in the support of dictatorial or autocratic regimes in the Muslim world—and elsewhere.

While this obsession with stability could be objected to on idealistic grounds,¹ the sacrifice of long-term progress for the benefit of a short-term stability, in the long term, produced no stability either. There has been a sea change in recent decades. With the perception of a clash of cultures, there has arisen a school of thought that the institution of democracy around the world, especially in the Muslim world, would be an effective, if not the most effective, strategy for defusing the nascent cultural warfare.

The primary obstacle to the advancement of democratic reform in the Muslim world has been the fact that few in the Muslim world correctly understand what democracy is. This obstacle has not been helped by the fact that the conversation around the issue of promoting democracy has resulted in multiple discourses with many sometimes-conflicting threads: orientalist, neo-orientalist, cultural, consumerist, etc.

In this paper we shall examine the state of the discourses on the establishment of democracy in the Muslim world and conclude that there are three obstacles that require special attention if progress towards democracy is to be facilitated. (1) There must be a change in American foreign policy so that American actions do not contradict American professions of a desire for democracy in the Middle East; (2) the discourse must be modified to directly address the concerns and objections of Islamists; and (3) a new strategy must be formulated that aims not at immediate results, but at changing long-term attitudes.

A Review of the Discourses

A discourse about discourses is a meta-discourse. The discourses have been beset with various problems. There is, for example, the tendency of utilitarianism to motivate, dominate, and ultimately subvert a discourse. This is most clearly seen in the Orientalist discourse. Orientalism addresses the Other as an object to be studied, analyzed, and ultimately exploited. Other discourses may suffer from a similar problem in more subtle ways.

¹ “Stability cannot be obtained at the expense of liberty.”—Peter F. Mulrean, “MEPUI and Democracy Promotion: What Did We Learn?” 7th Annual Conference of the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (Washington, DC, May 6, 2006).

There are also problems of translation. By this I mean that there is baggage carried by the terms of discussion due to the historical development of the discussion. This is clearly seen in the Western discussion of the relationship between religion and politics in which polarities rooted in Western history (e.g., Church vs. state) are foisted upon the discussion of Muslim democratic reform even though the analogs are poor. In Islam, there is no “Church” in the Western sense and thus a reasonable Western antipathy for the conflict between what in the West are competing institutions is twisted into a highly inappropriate demand for the removal of religiously motivated ethics from political action.

Our concern is with the discourse about Islamic democracy in the West, the discourse about democracy in the Muslim world, and the discourse about democratization between the West and the Muslim world.

Existing discourses in the West are utilitarian. They seek to advance the West’s interests through the spread of democracy. The discussants have differences, but those differences focus on disputes over how to best serve the West’s interests. The goal of stability has not changed, only the means to achieve it. An example is the statement by President Bill Clinton's National Security Adviser, Anthony Lake, that the U.S. should “adopt a strategy of ‘enlargement,’ promoting global stability by increasing the numbers, strength and cohesiveness of free-market democracies.”²

Henry Kissinger advances a conservative realism: “Domination is now beyond the reach of the US resources. They must therefore redirect towards the art of balancing. The problem is that the US has no theory for that and has always rejected the notion of balance of power. We need only look at how the Gulf War has been justified: the appeal to international law. [...] Europeans are concerned with the balance of power, Americans emphasize collective security. Europeans care for shifting conditions. Americans want to find peace through the universal spread of democracy.”³

Robert Kagan supports a benevolent hegemony (a nicer word than empire). Noah Feldman, among the most sophisticated of those associated with the Project for the New American Century, understands the ways in which Islamic law and Muslim culture can be democratic without doing violence to its essence. Yet, he also touts the benefits of Islamic democracy for its utility to the West including an, in my opinion, naïve conviction that a democratic Iraq will be less threatening to Israel.

² *Time International*, October 4, 1993, p. 51.

³ Henry Kissinger, 1991 April, cited in Joxe, Alain (1992) *L'Amérique mercenaire*. Paris: Éditions Stock. Kissinger, Henry (1990, November 28) *Deposition in Crisis in the Persian Gulf: US Policy Options and Implications*, hearings before the Committee on Armed Service, 101st Congress, 2nd Session, 11, 13 September; 27, 28, 29, 30 November; 3 December 1990, US GPO, Washington, 1990 [S. Hrg. 101-1071], p. 119.

A Review of the Facts

The problem is the tendency to evaluate nations not on some objective evaluation of democratic principles, but on the alignment with America's geopolitical objectives. After Saddam jumped ship on supporting American geopolitical interests by attacking Kuwait, his regime's atrocities against the nation's Shi'a majority were abruptly discovered in retrospect. The Islamic Republic of Iran has more than its share of problems, but throughout the war with Iraq it was painted as the villain despite the fact that Saddam was the aggressor.

When we look at the actual progress made we find there is no simple correlation between secularity and progress towards democracy. Indonesia, frequently cited as a success story was a dictatorship under the secular Suharto. Of the cases often touted as a relative success stories, Indonesia, Turkey, and Malaysia, I shall focus on Turkey as the one I know best. However, let us note in passing that the most liberal of Malaysia's politicians is Islamist Anwar Ibrahim and the most despotic of Indonesian prime ministers was the very secular Suharto.

As to Turkey, we can note that although the intensely secular Ataturk described the state he founded as a republic, he was in effect its dictator. Of the many secular prime ministers who followed him, the most liberal was also the most religious, Turgut Ozal. It is only with the rise of the Justice and Development Party, rooted in the Islamist movement, that Turkey has reformed to the point where European prejudice has become a bigger obstacle to European Union membership than Turkish departure from international standards of human rights.

The means by which this came to pass is an object lesson in what works in inspiring Islamic movements to support meaningful democratic reform. The Turkish Islamist movement began with neo-Ottoman and nationalist phases. Both those incarnations were successfully crushed by the military that has the actual power in Turkey. After the suppression of the Virtue Party (the Islamists previous attempt at a political party) the Association for Liberal Thinking (a Turkish free-market think tank) invited the Minaret of Freedom Institute to help outline the relationship between Islam and human rights. The Islamists, already concerned with the issue of the rights of Islamists, began to understand why that question should not and cannot be divorced from the issue of human rights in general. The third political incarnation became a party concerned with human rights and economic freedom as is suggested in its name the "Justice and Development" Party. When a reporter asked a prominent secular economist why he joined the party, he replied with the story of how he found himself seated next to a party central committee member on an airplane flight. Learning that his seatmate was an economist, the party member showed him their pamphlet on economic issues. The economist was so impressed with the pamphlet that he felt he could have written it himself and felt he must join the party.

When we look at the problematic cases like Algeria, Palestine, and Egypt, we find it is the Islamists that have been most effective in the mastery of democratic enterprise.

FIS and Hamas have engaged in the democratic process with remarkable electoral success. Even the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, to the degree that it has been allowed to participate has been successful. FIS was crushed with the consequence of horrible civil strife. There is now an attempt to crush Hamas as well. The argument that democracy is just a convenient tool for these movements is premature. Rather than make a pre-emptory strike against the Islamists on the grounds that they might not let go of power when they lose an election, instead make the current incumbents let go of power and hold the Islamists to the same standard later.

Anti-democratic forces still exist. Clearly the ruling elites of a number of countries remain opposed to democratic reform for obvious reasons. (Although the emir of Kuwait has advocated reforms that his people have been slow to permit.) Extremists among the Islamists are also opposed to democracy. Hisb-at-Tahrir is open about its opposition to democracy, for example. The experience of CSID and of the Muslim democrats has supported the view that increased discussion of these issues can reduce the opposition to democratic reform. Some of that opposition has been predicated on the fact that certain aspects of democracy are incompatible with Islam. The notion that the Qur'an can be amended by popular will is clearly unacceptable—but it is also pointless. The fact that the Qur'an is and always has been interpreted by human beings means that its interpretation is subject to the popular will, and for a believing Muslim, no more than that is required.

What has fed the anti-democratic forces has been Western intervention. In some cases that intervention has directly propped up undemocratic regimes, as for example the overthrow of the Mossadeq government in Iran. In other cases unpopular Western interventions into the Muslim world have inflamed a prejudice against western ideas and institutions in much the same way that the Sept. 11 attacks inflamed anti-Muslim sentiment in America.

Policy Prescriptions

Three obstacles require special attention if progress towards democracy is to be facilitated. (1) There must be a change in American foreign policy so that American actions do not contradict American professions of a desire for democracy in the Middle East; (2) the discourse must be modified to directly address the concerns and objections of Islamists; and (3) a new strategy must be formulated that aims not at immediate results, but at changing long-term attitudes.

American foreign policy must be changed if the United States is to play any role in the democratization process. The hypocrisy with which America attacks authoritarian and discriminatory regimes that oppose its geopolitical objectives while supporting authoritarian and apartheid regimes that comply with them delegitimizes actions taken by the American government in pursuit of democracy and undermines the concept of democratic reform itself, making it seem like nothing more than a banner for interventionism. Consider the following example: Why is that the Arab states have made

Neutralize the disruptive effects of symbolism, as some Arab news outlets have done by having, for example, on-air female staff, some of whom cover and some of whom do not.

Surely maintaining support for democracy when the side you dislike wins is a challenge, but isn't that the whole point of democracy? "Would Islamists give up power if they lost an election" is a fair question only when asked by those who would let them assume power when they win an election. When Islamist parties attain power, give constructive engagement a chance. Consider Hamas today. Deal with Hamas on the basis of what they actually do in their official capacity rather than on their party platform. If other nations of the world ceased to deal with—or worse yet attempted to cut off the United States because of unimplemented planks in the Republican or Democratic platforms we would have a serious problem. Hamas has offered a long-term cease-fire with Israel. Surely this is a positive step from the viewpoint of America's official foreign policy position.

As important as accepting the outcome of an election when the side you favor loses is to maintain the support for free expression of opposition when the side you like wins.

One right often neglected by Western democrats is the right to keep and bear arms. Most Western democracies don't seem to think this part of democracy. The United States is a major exception as far as its own constitution is concerned, yet American foreign policy seem bent on denying this right to the Palestinians and the Iraqis and has demanded the disarming of militias. Yet the Bill of Rights correctly notes "a well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed." Contrary to the common perception that the second amendment is about duck hunting, the wording of the amendment makes it clear that it is about forbidding the disarming of militias, that is to say it recognizes that a monopoly of weapons by the central state is dangerous to the liberty of the republic.

Conclusions

As the talks at this conference demonstrate, the discourse is shifting for the better. Obviously more needs to be done. The only way to avoid misunderstanding the Islamist critique is to engage the Islamists. Some would say the "moderate" Islamists. Obviously you cannot engage those who, like Hisb at Tahrir, reject your position on general principles. Yet the definition of who is "moderate" must not be drawn too narrowly, lest we engage in a kind of democratic "*takfir*" in which we define anyone who dissents from our conception of democracy in any way as being heretical. Rather let us define as moderate any who are willing to engage in a civil dialogue. In that dialogue, let advocates of democracy not misrepresent the other side, but rather address the critique not only directly and accurately, but in its strongest form. Let us avoid clearly unjustified claims, such as the claim that the majority is always right. As Ibsen dramatized in "An Enemy of the People," the majority is always wrong until the wise minority persuades it of its errors. Aspects of democracy that inhere in Islamic law (such as the rule of law itself) should be emphasized as Islamic rather than secular, while those aspects that are not inherent should be promoted as pragmatically beneficial—e.g., the fact that election of leaders avoids the violence of alternative methods of regime change. Certain aspects of

Western democracy (such as the concept that positive law may rescind natural or Divine law) need to be abandoned. On the other side, Muslims must abandon some long-cherished interpretations that conflict not only with Western notions of individual rights, but with the fundamental notion of the individual's direct responsibility to God.

Seeds for a future democracy must be planted by an intellectual engagement with the youth of the Muslim world. That such an approach may take two generations to bear fruit is not an argument against it, since it is well established that paradigm shifts take a generation or two to establish themselves. A successful long-term strategy concerns itself less with those who hold power today than with those who may influence the powerful tomorrow. For this same reason women must also be engaged. In American history the role of Abigail Adams in influencing her husband John (influence she wielded despite the fact that women then had no vote) is much celebrated. Less noted, but probably more influential, was the role of the mothers of the founding fathers. Even in those societies where women do not have the vote, they still raise the children and that makes them the most effective means of reaching the young, who are the drivers of change. Democracy, like paradise, lies at the feet of our mothers.