



ITAC *Presents*

Trends in Terrorism Series

Islam and Democracy

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"Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except for those other forms that have been tried from time to time."
Winston S. Churchill

The purpose of this paper is to address two major questions:

"Is Islam compatible with democracy?", and

"If democracy and democratic institutions were to be introduced into the Muslim world, would religious extremism be reduced?"

The simple answer to both questions is "yes", because democracy would provide avenues other than those of extremism and violence for those who take issue with the policies and practices of the government in power. But the explanation of this answer is less simple and, even though they are linked, each question must be approached separately.

What do we mean by democracy?

It may be best to start with the meaning of the word itself, because there is no consensus on the definition of democracy as a political system. The *Oxford English Dictionary* describes democracy as:

Government by the people; that form of government in which the sovereign power resides in the people as a whole, and is exercised either directly by them (as in the small republics of antiquity) or by officers elected by them. In mod. use often more vaguely denoting a social state in which all have equal rights, without hereditary or arbitrary differences of rank or stature. A state or community in which government is vested in the people as a whole.

Others try to approach the matter by setting out the elements that make up democracy. The three essential elements of a democracy are said to be:

- responsible government
- the rule of law
- freedom of political dissent

Robert Dahl says that there are institutional guarantees that must be present before the citizenry can be said to be living in a democracy. They are:

- freedom to form and join organizations
- freedom of expression
- the right to vote
- eligibility for public office
- the right of political leaders to compete for support and votes
- alternative sources of information
- free and fair elections
- institutions for making government policies depend on votes and other expressions of preference

Many commentators equate 'freedom(s)' with 'democracy' and tend to use the words interchangeably. For example, President George W. Bush, speaking to the National Endowment for Democracy, said: "We've witnessed, in a little over a generation, the swiftest advance of freedom in the 2,500-year story of democracy".

Is Islam compatible with democracy?

If one reads the press or listens to commentators on international affairs, it is often said – and even more often implied but not said – that Islam is not compatible with democracy. In the nineties, Samuel Huntington set off an intellectual firestorm when he published *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, in which he presents his forecasts for the world – writ large. In the political realm, he notes that while Turkey and Pakistan might have some small claim to "democratic legitimacy" all other "... Muslim countries were overwhelmingly non-democratic: monarchies, one-party systems, military regimes, personal dictatorships or some combination of these, usually resting on a limited family, clan, or tribal base". The premise on which his argument is founded is that they are not only 'not like us', they are actually opposed to our essential democratic values. He believes, as do others, that while the idea of Western democratization is being resisted in other parts of the world, the confrontation is most notable in those regions where Islam is the dominant faith.

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The argument has also been made from the other side as well. An Iranian religious scholar, reflecting on an early twentieth-century constitutional crisis in his country, declared that Islam and democracy are not compatible because people are not equal and a legislative body is unnecessary because of the inclusive nature of Islamic religious law. A similar position was taken more recently by Ali Belhadj, an Algerian high school teacher, preacher and (in this context) leader of the FIS, when he declared "democracy was not an Islamic concept". Perhaps the most dramatic statement to this effect was that of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, leader of the Sunni insurgents in Iraq who, when faced with the prospect of an election, denounced democracy as "an evil principle".

But according to some Muslim scholars, democracy remains an important ideal in Islam, with the caveat that it is always subject to the religious law. The emphasis on the paramount place of the *shari'a* is an element of almost every Islamic comment on governance, moderate or extremist. Only if the ruler, who receives his authority from God, limits his actions to the "supervision of the administration of the *shari'a*" is he to be obeyed. If he does other than this, he is a non-believer and committed Muslims are to rebel against him. Herein lies the justification for much of the violence that has plagued the Muslim world in such struggles as that prevailing in Algeria during the 90s.

It is generally agreed (although there are dissenters) that there are three necessary components to an Islamic state: the community of Muslims, the rule of Islamic law (*shari'a*), and a person to lead the community and implement the law – often termed the caliph. But there are significant differences between the understanding of an Islamic state on the part of the Islamic thinkers and the standard western perception of a democratic state.

The sovereignty and final authority are ultimately held by God, not by 'the people' or 'the nation'.

A legislative process is not part of the system because all law that can possibly be required has already been created by God and passed to man through the Prophet in the form of the Koran.

The idea of 'electing' the person or persons who are to exercise the power is said to be subsumed or adequately dealt with by *shura* – usually translated as 'consultation' – a concept with the most impeccable credentials. The idea of 'consultation' is derived from the Koran itself:

... who (conduct) their affairs by mutual consultation - 42:38

... consult them in affairs (of moment). Then, when thou hast taken a decision, put thy trust in God. For God loves those who put their trust (in Him). - 3:159

Nor did the example of the actions of the Prophet, the second major source for the understanding of the implementation of the law, give any clear direction as to the system of government he preferred. It really wasn't an issue. As a man of his time, Muhammad governed as an autocrat. Some commentators have, however, argued that the Charter of Medina – a treaty he entered into with fourteen non-Muslim groups living in Medina – contains "all the aspects of pluralism" and laid down the principle of "equality in worldly matters". Others question both the veracity of the Charter and the use to which it was put.

But from these rather sketchy principles has been derived perhaps the most rigorous, modern concept of an Islamic state; Sayyid Qutb declared his objections to the idea of popular sovereignty – God is sovereign. While he held that the Muslims must be involved in managing their own affairs, he did not advocate any particular method for the implementation of the principle. He believed that an Islamic nation would be inherently democratic because of the *shura* principle. With regard to consultation, how it should be undertaken and with whom, he left it very vague. Qutb and other thinkers like him rejected the idea of the application of a general franchise because it would imply that God's sovereignty is not absolute – that the people are supreme.

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Qutb's interpretation of Islamic rule is echoed, albeit with their own individual characterizations, by other scholars, including his contemporary al-Maududi. The latter placed great emphasis on the concept of God's sovereignty, going so far as to say that the state itself is the caliph or, as he terms it, "vice-regent" of God. He believed that Islam would triumph incrementally. An Islamic state would be built upon the efforts of pious individuals who would transform the regime from within. They would create communities of faith that would generate an ideological movement that would become influential enough to bring about social change peacefully.

However, while all extremists would accept the principles as outlined above, there are those among them who interpret their implementation in terms that are closer to our understanding and do not deny out of hand the merits of a democratic system.

The Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran, while certainly not a fan of Western liberal democracy, did not see fit to abandon the institution of the legislature and the election, including the right of both genders to vote.

The Grand Ayatollah Sistani, the most influential Shi'a cleric in Iraq, has called repeatedly for free and fair democratic elections - in terms that reflect one man, one vote; and a constitution written by elected representatives and approved by a popular referendum, as the first step to expelling the Western coalition from his country.

Both the Muslim Brotherhood (in Egypt and Jordan) and its derivative Hamas in Palestine have, despite a demonstrated willingness to use violence in the past, utilized democratic processes as well. The degree of the sincerity of their attachment to democracy remains to be determined. There are fears that this may be a ruse intended to allow them to gain power and that it may not signify a fundamental shift in policy. The latter would indicate that there has been a re-thinking of the Koran and a more moderate interpretation of its directives.

Even Osama bin Laden, too often portrayed as the most rigid of the lot, has – in an open letter to the American people – by referring to the events in Algeria when a 'free and fair' election was stolen from the Islamic party, implied that democracy and elections are acceptable. He did not attack the effort to practice democracy, but rather the reaction of those who opposed them.

If then it is a matter of interpretation, why do we not have any Muslim democracies? Well, we do! Turkey elected an Islam-oriented party, the AKP, into power in 2002. The AKP portrays itself as moderate, rightwing and conservative and intends to combine elements of Islam with Turkey's traditional democratic secular values. Iran is, in terms of its implementation of democracy, ahead of all of its neighbours except Turkey; even though it is still

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in the throes of a struggle between conservatives and reformers, imposes limits on who may run for office, is tainted by corruption and human rights abuses, and curtails many of the freedoms that delineate democratic society.

It is not Islam that is restricting the development of democratic freedoms in Muslim majority countries. Rather, the reasons are purely political and relate directly to the desire of any authoritarian regime to remain in power and to fear the consequences of losing power.

In most Muslim countries, politics are personal - "I am in power and I must stay in power to protect myself, my family, my clan, my tribe, my ethnic group, my party, my peer group, my personal fortune, my ability to garner more". This is a "zero-sum game": "If you win, I lose everything! Therefore you cannot be permitted to win even a little, because I will be diminished thereby and you might be able to exploit this weakness."

The concept of a 'loyal' opposition does not exist and is not understood. This single failing is why, in most cases, repression is the regime's answer to opposing ideas and dramatic changes of regime are only possible when a leader dies or there is a coup.

It is not the strictures of Islam that limit the practice of democracy in the Muslim world. Consider the essential elements as set out above and Dahl's essential institutional guarantees:

1. Responsible government

Theoretically, while the Islamic system does not need to include a legislature, it does include a ruler and those with whom he consults. Since the task of the ruler is to oversee the application of religious law and because all sovereignty is held by God, he is responsible to God. Practically, legislatures do exist in Islam-oriented states such as Iran, Turkey and Pakistan, and the legislators accept that they are responsible to the people, because they subject themselves to re-election at set intervals.

2. The rule of law

Given that the application of the religious law is the task of an Islamic government, this element is self-evident.

3. Freedom of political dissent

This element is rather more difficult. But resistance is demanded of the community, if the ruler does not fulfill his task of doing nothing more than administering the religious law. There is also a *hadith* – a report of a saying of the Prophet Muhammad – to the effect that speaking the truth to an unjust ruler is the greatest *jihad*. Although possibly spurious, this *hadith* has been given wide circulation. Given these points, it could be argued that this element is present.

While one can argue that the above three elements of a democracy are present, it is another case with regard to the points – the crucial institutional guarantees – set out by Robert Dahl: the freedom to form and join organizations, freedom of expression, the right to vote, etc.

One would be hard put to find any of these freedoms existing in any Muslim-majority country. Even in those Muslim-majority countries declared “free”, some or all of them are constrained in their application or have been until very recently. In none of them are they now so engrained that they could not again be limited by the present or a future regime, if it was felt that the circumstances – usually defined in terms of regime survival – so dictated.

These critical elements, however, have nothing to do with Islam; they are specific freedoms – the attributes of a democratic society – and they lie within the control of the ruler. If a political leader or a regime wishes to permit these freedoms to exist “in fact”, in contrast to “on paper”, it could be so. But their own position of authority is placed at risk thereby. The ruler or the regime would themselves become subject to processes that might require them to step aside, and there are few political leaders in Muslim-majority countries that have ever been prepared to do so.

“If democracy and democratic institutions were to be introduced into the Muslim world, would religious extremism be reduced?”

This certainly is the view of many Western political leaders and it underpins much of their policy with regard to the Muslim world. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the promotion of democracy became a major foreign policy theme/mission of both the first President Bush and President Clinton. But this was in the context of the emerging republics in Eastern Europe. Under President G. W. Bush and following the events of 9/11, the promotion of democracy and human rights – *a forward strategy of freedom* – have been declared a central pillar of US policy in the Middle East. Speaking in Egypt in mid-2005, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice noted that:

For 60 years, my country, the United States pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region here in the Middle East – and we achieved neither. Now, we are taking a different course. We are supporting the democratic aspiration of all people.

Even in Canada, it was declared in 2005’s International Policy Statement that the best weapon in our arsenal with which to combat terrorism is the promotion of democracy and respect for human rights.

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If one can accept this, what's the problem?

As was noted above, most Muslim regimes are not democracies, even with the most liberal interpretation of the term. And, no matter what positive 'spin' is applied, it is most unlikely that any Muslim nation will begin to move toward a democratic system of government at any time in the immediate to near to middle future. Even those described by Freedom House as "free" (Indonesia, Senegal, Mali) lack some of the attributes we in the West would expect to see in a democratic state.

One must emphasize that the citizens of the Muslim-majority countries believe that they enjoy considerable freedom, at least with regard to individual or personal matters such as the freedoms of movement, marriage and ownership of property, and the freedom of 'minority' groups to practice their culture.

At the same time, poll after poll declares that people across the Muslim world want democracy. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press reports considerable support for greater democratic freedoms – specified as freedom of speech, freedom of the press, fair elections and a fair judiciary. In the fourteen countries polled (they ranged from Muslim majority to Muslim minority), those responding also sought a greater role for their religion in the political life of the country. (In Pakistan this response went so far as to confirm that 75% believed that Islam should play a very large role.)

A World Values Survey conducted between 1999 and 2002 in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan and Morocco (thereby including the three most populous Arab countries, and two monarchies and two republics) reported that between 93% (Algeria) and 98% (Egypt) of the respondents agreed "democracy is a "very good" or "fairly good" way to govern their country. In each case there was a significantly larger number who opined that democracy would be "very" rather than "fairly" good. When the survey was broadened out to compare the data collected between those with a Muslim majority and the others among the 75 nations included, it was discovered that "whether or not a country is predominantly Muslim was among the strongest predictors of its aggregate level of support for democracy" and that support for democracy was not a factor of gender, education or age. Simply: Muslims want democracy and, possibly because of a sense of frustration, they want it more than others do!

But across the Muslim world, too many people are faced with a repressive political environment and then Islam is their refuge. They were raised in a culture that is infused with the values of Islam. In many cases their earliest (and often their only) education was provided by a religious instructor in the local mosque or *madrassa*. Islam is a 'given' in their life – a 'motherhood issue' that cannot be denied or set aside. Even if they are not observant, they don't pray, observe the fast, etc., they are probably more consciously influenced by their religion in their day-to-day activities than has been the case in Western Europe or North America for the past two hundred years.

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Because of the place that Islam holds in the psyche of the population and because most Muslim-majority nations have officially declared Islam to be the 'state religion', it is very difficult for any regime to deal with Islam as a political force. Therefore, when opposition is centred upon the mosque, the *madrassa* or the prayer group, the security forces of the regime are placed in a quandary. Do they attack the visible manifestations of the religion? Do they make use of the more intrusive powers of the security forces and infiltrate the allegedly disloyal groups? Do they stand back and wait for developments? In our terminology, regimes are placed in a "lose-lose" situation.

Whatever the reaction is, the Muslim opposition is provided either: a) with evidence that the regime is persecuting a fundamental element of society – and hence with more recruits, or b) with time to organize and gather strength. Usually, especially at the beginning, the Muslim opposition finds that they have the time and space they need.

Certainly Muslim groups are dealt with harshly, but usually when they have crossed over a line that has been, until then, understood by both sides. For example in the 70s and 80s in Egypt, small groups of what were then described as 'fundamentalists' began to gather strength. But to outside observers it appeared as if there was an understanding between the 'fundamentalists' and the security authorities. While the former would be watched (and probably infiltrated and to some extent harassed) by the latter, they would not be attacked until they were publicly critical of the President or began to call for the use of violence to press their case for reform. In these cases the government response was authoritarian - swift and unpleasant. And, while it worked, it had unpleasant side effects: the extreme elements of the Islamic movement went underground or left the country. The problem was not alleviated.

In the modern political environment, Islam provides a simple and understandable solution to the problems faced by Muslims. The average person too often perceives himself as being oppressed or repressed or is aghast at the corruption perceived to be prevailing among those who are in power. (The corruption may, from our perspective, be little more than a modernizing or westernizing of the culture, but many elements of it fly in the face of traditional Islamic values.)

Islam provides an answer. Indeed, "Islam is the solution" has been the political catch-phrase for organized Muslim activists across the Islamic world ever since it was coined by the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt in the mid-twentieth century. In some circumstances it is the political platform of the party and is repeated, without expansion, when asked for clarity with regard to fiscal or social policy. From a more politically savvy perspective it appears simplistic, the slogan offers little. But it has a resonance among many who believe that if the strictures of the faith were obeyed and its values honoured, then taxes would be lowered, bounds placed on their personal activities would be lifted and the temptations that corrupt the youth and weak among them would be banned.

Islam does not provide instruction or detailed plans on how to build and maintain a modern, effective and democratic state. But it does set out, through the interpretation of scholars and the lessons of history, principles that would bring into being and maintain the elements of good governance – those that we describe as going toward making up a democratic system. Included in them are: the rule of law, freedom of speech and the need for those in authority to be accountable to those over whom they have that authority.

These would be understood and welcomed by all. They provide the necessary elements of good governance that would provide relief from the frustration and fear that too often are the lot of the average person in the Muslim world. While a system built on these values might not resemble that of a Western liberal democracy, it would limit the popular need to have recourse to Islam. Muslim activists and even extremists would not have to take up arms, but could be co-opted into the governing system. Islam could be contained as a positive element in society, rather than remaining 'outside the tent' with no other option than to turn to violence.

What about the 'only one free election' trap?

It is widely believed that, at the present time, in most Muslim-majority countries it is the Islamic parties that seek to capitalize on the freedoms or, as Dahl called them: "institutional guarantees". Nor is it a stretch to say that in every country where there is a Muslim majority, religiously-oriented parties form the only credible opposition to the governing regime. They are usually active, well-organized and popular.

But it is also often alleged – or there is a persistent fear – that a victory by one of these parties would signal the end of these freedoms – the so-called 'free elections trap'. Once in power, the Muslims would so change the rules that no other party or faction would be able to oust them democratically. In Egypt, Muslim Brotherhood literature and sermons preach against democracy as being western and corrupt as an electoral system, but – in some cases – they go on to say that it can be "temporarily tolerated as a means to an end". This despite the Brotherhood running candidates for parliament and succeeding. This contradiction does nothing to dispel the concerns that the Brotherhood and their like are not sincere when they claim to have accepted the need 'to play by the rules'.

The evidence is slim, but what there is would seem to indicate that the Muslim activists may be serious when they protest that they will follow the legal processes of their country in their efforts to gain power. In Turkey, where an Islam-oriented party was freely elected in 2002, no moves have been made to change the Constitution. In Iran, where an autocratic monarch

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was overthrown in 1979 by a popular coup, stimulated and led by religious officials, and where a regime dominated by theocrats has been in power ever since, the populace enjoys political freedoms and privileges surpassed only by those permitted to the citizens of Indonesia and Turkey among Muslim-majority countries. Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood have achieved striking successes, despite often almost desperate obstructionism on the part of the regime. Only Hamas has actually been victorious and is set to form a government, but at the date of writing, they have both remained faithful to the principles of democracy. ♦

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Further reading

Over the past few decades, writing about the relationship between Islam and democracy has almost become a cottage industry. A Google search on the phrase "Islam and democracy" produces some 234,000 hits. Enter "Islamic democracy" and the total reaches 76,000. Many, if not most, of these sites claim to provide the 'truth', but one must be wary. Certainly the internet can provide access to literature, statements, speeches, publications and broad-sheets that are otherwise only available with considerable difficulty. Yet the usual caveats must be kept uppermost in one's mind. A topic as sensitive and emotional as this one can generate plausible and articulate arguments that don't hold up under scrutiny.

Equally in the printed media, there is a broad panoply of material espousing one side of the issue or the other. For a much deeper study of the Muslim perspective on democracy, one might begin with Larbi Sadiki, *The Search for Arab Democracy: Discourses and Counter-discourses*, 2004. For an understanding of the thinking of a variety of Muslim political thinkers, John L. Esposito's *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, 1983, while somewhat dated, still provides a first class introduction. Academic journals such as *The Middle East Journal* and *the Journal of Democracy* and high-standards periodicals such as *Foreign Affairs* often have articles touching on these issues.

One might note that the *Journal of Democracy* has published two books of particular interest, both edited by Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner and Daniel Brumberg. The first, *Islam and Democracy in the Middle East*, 2003, is an excellent collection of writings and is to be recommended. The second, *World Religions and Democracy*, 2005, replicates in its section on Islam articles that appeared in the earlier tome. The opening article, however, "Religion, Democracy, and the 'Twin Tolerations'", by Alfred Stepan, is worth reading, if one is only just coming to the question of religion and democracy.