

Islam, Democracy and the West: Ending the Cycle of Denial¹

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Pressed by increasing popular discontent and diminishing legitimacy, several Arab regimes under severe economic and political duress have set on a new course that combines restrictive democratization with systematic repression (Egypt 1979, Tunisia 1981, Algeria 1989, Jordan 1989). This democratization process is characterized, among other things, by a persistent denial by the incumbent elites of the right of the most organized and appealing opposition force, the Islamic movement, of political recognition or gaining power through free and fair elections.

This paper examines the democratization process in the Arab world and analyzes the attitudes of the major players in this process: the incumbent elites, the Islamic opposition and the West. It underlines the impediments that render the liberalization process little more than a cosmetic change by which the ruling elites could avoid popular unrest; the Islamic opposition could promote its ideology while preserving the survival of its constituency; and the West could maintain the status quo.

Democratization Form Above

Some analysts have correctly noted that the drive for democratization in the Arab world was motivated by several factors: the increasing prominence of the Islamic movements, the emergence of more autonomous associational and professional groups, the hardships associated with economic liberalization, and the fear of popular revolt. In face of public

¹This paper was presented at the 21st Annual Conference of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists, East Lansing, MI, October 30 to November 1, 1992.

discontent resulting from deteriorating living standards and unpopular economic measures, some Arab regimes, particularly in poor countries, opened up the system and allowed political contestation in order to defuse opposition to their policies and share the responsibility of chronic economic problems with other groups in society.²

So far, the democratization process in the Arab world remains limited in scope and is hampered by several factors. Firstly, some Arab countries are experiencing, in reality, what could be called a "democracy by decree." Political pluralism was granted from above and did not emerge as a result of the change in social structures or the evolution of independent institutions. Therefore, the process is still fragile and susceptible to reversals, and will probably remain so as long as it lacks the democratic institutions, values and social forces that are willing and capable of promoting and defending it.

Secondly, the current democratization process is heavily restricted by an arsenal of regulations and laws that preclude its evolution and render it a selective one. The constitutions, "national charters", or "party-formation laws" in a number of Arab countries now stipulate that no political party can be legalized if it is formed on religious or ethnic grounds, and, in some cases, unless it recognizes the achievements of the regime, the revolution, or simply the leader (Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco). Ironically, communist parties have been legalized in some Arab Muslim countries, whereas Islamic and Arab-Nationalist (Nasserite or Baathi) parties are automatically outlawed under these stipulations.

Regulations manipulating the voting process and the distribution of constituencies are frequently introduced by the government to tip the balance in favor of the ruling regime and its party and to prevent any opposition from achieving a decisive victory. If this gerrymandering process fails, other exceptional measures, such as suspending the electoral process, imposing

² "Democratization in the Middle East," Report, American Political Science Association, American-Arab Affairs, no. 36 (Summer 1991).

martial law, cracking down on the opposition and smearing its leadership, are taken to suppress any threat to the regime and ensure its continuity.

Thirdly, psychological impediments often undermine democratization in the Arab world. There is a prevalent and conscious feeling among the people that their leaders did not assume power through a democratic process and free elections. In many cases, the transitional or electoral process that brought some of these leaders to the helm is often viewed with suspicion. Without exception, Arab presidents are perceived as uncrowned kings. Yet, they lack the legitimacy and mystique of royalty and the need to bequeath a viable and stable kingdom to their successors. In addition, once democratization begins, most, if not all, of these leaders insist on being outside the equation. They refuse to be removed through the ballot box no matter how unpopular they are.

Finally, the entire process is closely monitored by a vigilant army, willing to step in if its privileges are challenged or to prevent any undesired forces from assuming power. The survival of the current Arab regimes hinges on maintaining good relations with the military establishment and on securing its confidence and satisfaction. The Arab heads of state realize that they are less likely to be unseated by political opposition or popular uprisings; these could be either manipulated or suppressed.

The Islamic Opposition

There is a growing recognition of the fact that the Islamic movement is not a monolithic one. The phenomenon of Islamic resurgence has passed through phases since the 1970s. The Islamic Revolution in Iran had the effect of radicalizing some Islamic groups hoping to induce change through revolutionary means. This revolutionary zeal has now subsided. With the exception of a few groups with limited following still endorsing radical and uncompromising views and advocating violence against the authority of the state, the majority of Muslim activists

and intellectuals have moderated their demands and demonstrated commitment to democratic practices and procedures.

Currently, there is an active dialogue among Muslim intellectuals seeking to build consensus over the issue of democratization in the Arab world. There seems to be an agreement over several points. Firstly, Muslim intellectuals hesitate to equate Islam with Western democracy. Islam is viewed as a comprehensive belief-system that regulates the spiritual, social, political and economic spheres of the individual's life, whereas democracy is a secular political philosophy and a system of governance. In addition, Western democracy did not produce a monolithic system. Democratic governments differ in orientation, structures and practices. The issue, therefore, is not to prove or disprove the compatibility of Islam and democracy, but whether Islamic principles could give rise to a representative, pluralistic, and just political system where the government is accountable to the people and the individual's fundamental rights are respected. Muslim intellectuals agree that there are common grounds between Islam and democracy, and that the Islamic principles of government are more consistent with the culture of the people of the region and more capable of regulating their political system than any alien political philosophy.

Secondly, mainstream Islamic movements accept political pluralism and view it as a natural and inevitable evolution in society. This pluralism, they suggest, must be regulated by commitment to a framework of values shared by the majority of the people, who is predominantly Muslim. Thirdly, secular parties, liberal or communist, can legally exist and freely express their political views, provided that they do not have the undermining of the Islamic system as an objective. In this respect, Muslim intellectuals make a distinction between secular parties that might have reservations about the Islamic policies or about the non-separation between temporal and spiritual authority, and those who are antagonistic to religion in general. The former should be legalized as political parties, while the latter would be

banned.³ Finally, there is a growing acceptance by Muslim political parties of the concept of transfer of power. Many of these parties do not perceive themselves as the sole representatives of Islam nor strip other forces in society of their Islamic identity.⁴

In several Arab countries which opened up their political systems and began a process of political liberalization, Islamic movements have demonstrated in practice a tendency to work within the system and accept the rules of the political game. Many have applied for recognition as legal political parties. With the exception of Algeria and Jordan, they were denied this request and were forced to work on the margins of the political system or to go underground, even in countries that have relatively gone a long way in democratization (Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia).

Thus far, despite this denial, many Islamic movements have acquired popularity and vigor. They built a strong base of support as they managed to draw following from various groups in society. Some also succeeded in becoming financially independent through elaborate organizational skills and the establishment of financial institutions that, unlike the case of the secular opposition parties, helped them to become more durable and less dependent on government's assistance. Moreover, through a network of mosques, extensive infrastructure and remarkable organizational skills, many Islamic movements were able to support less

³ This practice is not alien to several Western democracies that consider some norms or fundamentals as immutable and do not permit any force in society to change them.

⁴ The Islamic Tendency Movement, now al-Nahda, stated in a communique announcing the establishment of the movement in June 1981 that:

The people is the only power which can accept and support any political party. We do not oppose at all the existence of any political movement whose ideology may be radically against us, including the communist party. From the Islamic point of view, we have no right to interpose between the people and those whom the people choose and elect. *Le Maghreb* (June 13, 1981), quoted in Fathi Osman, The Muslim World: Issues and Challenges (California: Islamic Center of Southern California, 1989), p. 119.

See also Fahmy Huwaidy, "Fiqh Tadawwl al-Sultah," (The Jurisprudence of the Transfer of Power), Al-Ahram (September 8, 1992), p. 7.

privileged groups and dispense social services, rarely provided by the government.⁵ Some Muslim political parties have matured in the political game as they often enter into alliances and coalitions with rival political parties to achieve specific goals and advance the process of democratization or draw concessions from the regime.

Despite the fact that the Islamic movements and parties have not abandon their objective of establishing an Islamic state, they advocate gradualism and working through legal channels to achieve their objectives. They demonstrated adherence to the democratic process as they competed in local and legislative elections, yet, in most cases, as independents or in alliance with other political parties.

Democratization and The West

The United States and its allies have serious misperceptions about Islam and its potentials. Islam is increasingly viewed by some as a potential ideological enemy to the West replacing Communism.⁶ The Western experience with the Islamic Revolution in Iran and with radical groups in Lebanon still clouds the policies and responses of some Western governments to developments in the area. Unable, and perhaps unwilling, to grasp the diversity of the Islamic movement and the varying political orientations within it, there is a general tendency to equate Islam with terrorism and extremism and view it as inherently anti-western and incompatible with democracy. Some analysts, therefore, believe that the process of democratization, which is likely to enhance the Islamic activists and increase their chances to gain power, is counterproductive to western interests and the stability of the western allies in the Middle East.

⁵ Following the earthquakes that hit Algeria in 1989 and in Egypt in 1992, the Islamic Salvation Front and the Islamic movements, respectively, were the first to rush to the disaster sites and provide assistance and emergency relief supplies to the victims of the disaster.

⁶ Tom Heneghan, "Moslem Fundamentalists Seem to Replace Communists as NATO Enemy," Reuter (February 11, 1992). See also David Ignatius, "Islam in the West's Sights: The Wrong Crusade?," The Washington Post (March 8, 1992), P. C-1.

The lack of a western response to the military coup in Algeria attests to the fact that some western governments have not yet developed a coherent policy towards the process of democratization in developing countries nor a clear strategy to deal with Islam and the Islamic movement. While western countries, particularly the United States, claim to be promoting democracy in authoritarian states, they seem in practice to be supporting despotic and non-democratic regimes in the Arab world and to be more concerned about maintaining their autocratic allies in power, especially, if the democratization process produces winners not to their liking such as the Islamic parties.⁷

The silence of the United States and western democracies over the coup in Algeria gave the military-backed regime the message that their move was condoned by the West, and encouraged it to pursue repressive and brutal tactics against the Islamic opposition.⁸ This tacit approval was asserted by the massive financial and economic assistance which the military regime received from western governments and institutions after the coup. Eventually, the West is being seen as harboring anti-Islamic sentiments, or at best lacking sensitivity toward legitimate popular demands for change, even when these demands are channeled through legal processes.⁹

Conclusion:

⁷ While the U.S. government and financial institutions have provided the military-backed regime in Algeria with massive financial assistance, the USAID is sponsoring a \$2 billion project to promote democracy and pro-Western sentiments in the Arab world. See Jerrold D. Green and Augustus Richard Norton, "Time is Right for U.S. to Help Foster Democracy in West Bank and Gaza," Baltimore Sun (November 22, 1992), P. 5-H.

⁸ Robin Wright, "Islam, Democracy and the West," Foreign Affairs, vol. 71, no. 3 (Summer 1992), pp. 137-38.

⁹ Ibid., p. 139.

The democratization process in some Middle Eastern countries needs to be seen as a genuine transformation and not as a tactical move by the incumbent elites to allay the painful consequences of failing economic models and as a way to quiet popular dissatisfaction. Imposing unrealistic restrictions to political practices and denying moderate Islamic opposition recognition and the opportunity to interact and evolve in a pluralistic system is most likely to exacerbate the process than advance it.

To be part of the change and not swept away by it, the ruling elites need to consider allowing the political parties, secular or Islamic, to develop into independent and durable political institutions. One way for achieving this goal is through redefining the rules of the political game and building consensus over the values and institutions that should govern, promote and safeguard the democratization process.

It is most likely, however, that the Arab regimes will continue using repression against the Islamic groups or any other serious opposition to prevent any real change in the system, while allowing less threatening political forces more participation and freedom in order to maintain a democratic facade. However, the insistence on a controlled and selective democracy and the exclusion of a significant force, the Islamic parties, from participation in the political process will discredit the process, disgrace other political forces, and increase instability in society.

A western analyst correctly described the Islamic movement as "both historically inevitable and politically 'tamable'."¹⁰ The Islamic movements are the only force in society willing, if denied coexistence, to confront the repression of the regime. They have been challenging the legitimacy and performance of the incumbent secular elites and proposing more indigenous alternatives for national development. For sometime now, they have been exposed

¹⁰ Graham Fuller, "Islamic Fundamentalism: No Long-Term Threat," The Washington Post (January 13, 1992), p. A-17.

to systematic repression. However, due to the popular appeal of their message and organizational skills, they were able to withstand these measures, gain sympathy and prove their resilience. Though they have not yet won decisive battles in the Arab world, with the exception of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in the larger Islamic context, they have nonetheless managed to break the cycle of fear of the state's authority and its monopoly over religion. This achievement will eventually increase the vulnerability of many of the current regimes that lack an appealing ideological vision and suffer from widespread corruption and incompetence.

For the Islamic movements to advance their causes, however, they have to resist the temptation and pressures for resorting to violence and going underground. They also need to continue associating themselves with the problems and demands of the people, while linking their objectives with the promotion of democratic practices and the respect of individual freedom.

Despite the concerted efforts of several Arab regimes to weaken and in some cases eliminate the Islamic opposition movements, Islam is bound to gain strength in the future politics of the region. The West and the ruling secular elites in the Arab world have to come to terms with the fact that secular ideologies can not take roots in Muslim societies, no matter how repressive and coercive the measures that are taken to impose them. The inevitable reassertion of the Islamic identity is dictated by the current transformations in the international system and the emergence of a dominant superpower and a "new world order" where Islam is depicted by many Western circles as the new "ism" and the next enemy of the West. This is coupled by the perceived failure of the Arab ruling elites to meet the challenges of Israel, development, democracy and independence.

Will Islam necessarily be a threat to Western interests in the region? There is no inherent reason in Islam that renders it either anti-western or would even prevent a peaceful

coexistence between the two cultures. The difference is mainly over interests and policies.¹¹ It has become evident, particularly after the Gulf war, that the West's concern is about the flow of oil, security of Israel and sustaining their allies in the region. As the West pursues policies that are perceived to be threatening to the Muslims' interests, ignores their aspirations for change by supporting repressive and unpopular regimes, and thus continues to intervene in their internal affairs, the Muslims, like any other people, will resent this relationship and challenge it. But, by maintaining a coherent stance towards democratization and pressing the incumbent elites to abandon repression and accept the results of free and fair elections, the West will dispel the charges of betraying its own democratic values, especially when it comes to Islam.

¹¹ John Esposito and James Piscatori, "Democratization and Islam," Middle East Journal, vol. 45, no. 3 (Summer 1991), p. 440.