

The Rise of Institutional Islamists and the Prospects of Democracy with Special Reference to the Middle East

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Abstract: The Middle East presents a democratic dilemma for the West as they have to choose between what the world calls the ruling autocrats and religious theocrats opposing them. There are some in the Western world who believe that Institutional Islamists can be made partners in the democratization process. They believe that they are more moderate democrats in their approach as they take part in elections and are willing to be part of the democratic institutions. As democracy is more than just contesting elections, the big question is if institutional Islamists can be a viable alternative to the ruling autocrats in the ME. This article will discuss this question in more detail to reach an informed and holistic conclusion.

Keywords: Institutional Islamist, Democracy, Middle East, Western World, Election

Introduction

The growing global legitimacy of democracy as a political system has been challenged and resisted most vehemently by the Islamic world in general and by those in the Middle East in particular. Why is it so? Writing about this, Francis Fukuyama thinks that there seems to be something about Islam that makes Muslim societies, in particular, resistant to democracy and modernity. He argues that of all the contemporary cultural systems, the Muslim world has the least number of democracies, with Turkey alone meeting the liberal standards of Western democracy (Braizat, 2002). Fuku's argument is supported by a report from Freedom House, a credible non-governmental organization, which suggests that in comparison to Muslim countries, non-Muslim societies are three times more likely to be democratic. The picture in the Middle East is even much bleaker, where democracy faces the greatest challenge. Data suggests that no single country in the region qualifies to be a true democracy (Rowley & Smith, 2009).

One of the stark realities of the Middle Eastern political structure is authoritarian regimes, who, in most cases, have taken over power through illegitimate methods and maintain their power through coercive policies and oppressive governmental measures. No doubt, Arab monarchs in the Middle East may be more authoritarian and oppressive in dealing with their political opponents, while their rule is characterized by undemocratic attitudes and unconstitutional methods of running the affairs of the state and settling political conflicts. But tragically, they are more tolerant, accommodative and pluralistic than those who would replace them in free and fair elections, the Islamists (Tibi, 2009). Ironically, it is for this reason that even those who espouse democratic ideals and strive for democratization of the region stand behind these autocratic-undemocratic regimes, for they think that alternatives to these regimes may be even more problematic. No doubt, if the West at any point makes up its mind to withdraw its support,

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these autocrats would crumble under the heavy weight of mismanagement and bad governance and the way they have risen to power.

On the other hand, given the important role religion plays in the lives of common people in the Middle East, combined with the excessive religionisation of politics in the region over the years, the result is a significant rise in the popularity index of the Islamist political parties. In such a background, it is most expected that elections will produce political leadership who cherish political ideals closer to fundamentalists like Osama Bin Laden (Zakaria, [2004](#)). For people in the Middle East, this situation presents a 'situational dilemma'. Professor Saad Ibrahim has identified this dilemma in these words: 'Middle Eastern people are sandwiched between the autocrats who rule them and religious theocrats who oppose them' (Ibrahim, [1996](#)). In such a situation, the big question is, what are the prospects of democratization in the region? And whom should the West choose as partners in the process of democratization in the Middle East?

Digging the matter a bit further, more complications come to the surface. Professor Basim Tibbi, an expert on political Islam, convincingly divides Islamism into Jihadist Islamism and Institutional Islamism (Tibi, [2009](#)). There is an assumption, though short of empirical proof, in the West that allowing these institutional Islamists to participate in the democratic process, run for parliamentary elections, and form governments would moderate them and so must be preferred over others to be made partners in the process for democratization. For example, the Ex-Prime Minister of Sweden Karl Bildt and former Spanish Foreign Minister Anna Palacio and many other scholars and political scientists approved of and accepted the electoral victory of Hamas in the parliamentary elections in 2006 as they thought them to be more pro-democracy who can be made partners in the process for democratization (Tibi, [2009](#)).

The Middle East presents a democratization dilemma for the West. The self-installed rulers no doubt better serve the political and economic interests of the Western democracies, but as these Middle Eastern rulers are frequently questioned by their own people whose legitimacy to hold and continue in office often comes under heavy criticism, their Western mentors know that these authoritarian rulers in crown palace enjoy very little popular support in the masses. Things further have worsened to the disadvantage of these rulers and military dictators, whose poor performance in terms of governance indicators has raised questions over their credibility. Such hypothetical assumptions and factual indicators have not only discredited the West in the minds of common people but have also damaged the prospects of democracy as a viable solution to the problems faced by the state and society at large in the Middle East. On the other hand, given the ever-growing popularity of the Islamists in the society, if the West allows for political openness and free and fair elections, the possibility that Islamists would emerge as the ultimate replacement for these self-styled rulers seems too strong. In such a situation, how do the world in general and champions of democracy, i.e. the West, see the prospects of democratization in the Middle East?

As democracy demands opening up new political spaces, such a process involves high stakes and risks in the Middle Eastern region of the world. For example, in Egypt, one can safely assume if elections were ever to happen without fraud or foreign interference, the result would be handing over power to Islamists, as has been seen in the recent past. In such a situation, something that comes into mind is that the long-awaited process of democratization in the Middle East is nothing but opening up political space for the Islamists. If so, the question is is institutional Islamism a viable alternative to the despotic rulers of the Middle East? Furthermore, once elected, could these Islamists deliver democracy by launching a real democratization process in their respective countries? This is something very important to research empirically as Islamists are more committed to Shari'atization rather than democratization of state and society, and this raises serious challenges for Western efforts to democratize the Middle East.

Democracy caught between autocrats and theocrats in the Middle East.

As stated earlier, people in the Middle East are sandwiched between ruling autocrats and the theocrats who oppose them. For years, Arab intellectuals and political commentators have emphasised the need for a deeper understanding of the underlying causes for not allowing political freedom in the Arabian Peninsula. For example, back in 1980, prominent Arab intellectuals had gathered in Tunis to discuss the future of the Middle East with special reference to democratization prospects. Almost all in the conference room agreed

that most of the countries in the Arab world didn't have any political freedom. All this hampered the chances for democracy to take root. In one of the reports from UNDP in 2002, this point was reaffirmed less rhetorically. The Arab intellectuals who were debating the issue of shrinking political freedom opined to show greater commitment to the movement for liberty and freedom. Their issue was that they were unable to, and still are unable to, engage freely in an effort to build a solid foundation for democracy in their own societies. The reason is that they worry about being imprisoned if they demonstrate their political support for any movement launched for democracy, and even if they are not, they are denied access to the tools of cultural and political expression. These tools, like the majority of other facilities for swaying public opinion, are totally controlled by the government. In fact, all of the means of articulation are controlled by state institutions and are typically only available to mercenary intellectuals who are ready to submit to the current neo-patriarchal regimes.

Given that Islamism is currently the only practical and plausible alternative to this form of oppression, which is all too widespread in Arab nations, one must ask if an Islamist option inspired by shari'a rule for the future of Muslims actually offers that hoped-for democratization.

An Analysis of the Existing Literature

The majority of Muslims around the world, according to a recent Pew Research Center survey, are profoundly devoted to their religion and want its teachings to influence not only their personal lives but also their societies and governments. Most Muslims agree that Islam is the only true religion that would grant them eternal life in heaven and that having trust in God is vital for being a moral person in all but a small number of the 39 nations examined. Many people also believe that their religious leaders ought to have some say in political decisions. Many express a wish for sharia, or conventional Islamic law, to be acknowledged as the country's formal law. Around the world, the proportion of Muslims who say they want sharia to be "the official law of the land" varies greatly, from less than one in ten in Azerbaijan (8%) to nearly universal support in Afghanistan (99 percent). But significant majorities in the Middle East and North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia — including 71 percent of Muslims in Nigeria, 72 percent in Indonesia, 74 percent in Egypt, and 89 percent in the Palestinian territories — advocate the installation of sharia. The study also reveals that even in many nations where Sharia is strongly supported, the majority of Muslims support religious freedom for adherents of other faiths. For instance, in Pakistan, 75% of Muslims believe that non-Muslims have great freedom to practise their religion, and 96% of those who agree with this opinion consider it to be "a good thing." However, 84 percent of Muslims in Pakistan support making sharia law. These seemingly opposing viewpoints are feasible in part because the majority of Sharia supporters in Pakistan, like in many other nations, believe that Islamic law should exclusively be applicable to Muslims. Furthermore, different Muslims around the world have different perspectives on what the actual meaning of sharia is (Bell, [2013](#)).

Transcendental religion has been viewed by contemporary culture as a barrier to democracy ever since the Enlightenment. It has implemented two techniques to get beyond this challenge. As a result of the first, religion has been compelled to conform to the "European model" of democratization's political symbolic code. By the second, it has separated religion from politics and granted it autonomy while simultaneously relegating it to a totally private domain (the "American model"). In both situations, religion has lost relevance in the public realm. These historical trends and the corresponding social structures have entered a fundamental crisis towards the end of the 20th century: (political) democracy has lost its conceptual underpinnings, and (established) religion has lost its identity. How can religion and democracy coexist? The range of potential outcomes is fairly broad from a sociological vantage point. This essay examines the social structures of the past and the circumstances of the present whether or not religion is a "third entity" in relation to democratic civic society state (or political system) (or political system) (Donati, [2001](#)).

The legislature "shall make no legislation respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free practice thereof," Thomas Jefferson clearly stated in his well-known letter on "creating a wall of separation between church and state" on January 1, 1802. He made it clear that he was against the idea of a national church, the head of which would be the president, in a passage that was there in his first draught

but was marked for deletion. Even though there may be some cracks in the "wall of separation", in actuality, this fundamental conviction that religion and politics shouldn't be combined too closely is still strong in America in the twenty-first century. However, Americans are prone to believe that the paucity of democracies and the predominance of politics with a religious undertone in an area like the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) because of this belief that the state should be both secular and impartial in matters of religion. This viewpoint has a flaw in that it is frequently inaccurate and, at best, misleading. In fact, historical records show that nations have typically controlled and dictated how religion should be observed, which is almost the exact reverse of the notion that religion supersedes politics in the Middle East. It would be incorrect to view the opposition groups that have emerged in recent years as largely or solely religious expressions as a result of states being weaker. These movements heavily utilize religious symbols. They are primarily concerned with politics and power, and if they are successful in gaining control, they will almost certainly act as other states have in the past: they will believe that the state has the right to determine how religion should be taught and practised, not pious Muslims and religious scholars. In the Middle East and North Africa, there is no physical barrier separating politics from religion, yet politics and politicians typically have sway in these regions (Quandt, 2009).

How much of the diversity in views on democracy in the Arab world can be attributed to religious inclinations? The results of the present study may add to two quite distinct bodies of scholarly literature that might be reviewed for potential insights. The first inquiry focuses, for the most part, on the relationship between Islam and democracy, primarily on matters of doctrine and political philosophy. The second includes empirical research studies that examine how religion and religiosity affect different political opinions in Western nations. When it comes to the link between democracy and Islam, there is a great deal of discussion and controversy. Even if prejudices can be established, inquiries about Islam's influence are appropriate. Since Islam is a religion of laws governing both societal organization and personal morality, there has historically been a close relationship between religion and politics in the Muslim world. As a result, and as noted in a recent study, Islam has a significant influence on political culture, with no Muslim nation in the Middle East being able to totally escape from it. According to this analysis, the interaction of culture and politics may be more pronounced than in other [non-Islamic] environments. In addition, over the past 25 years, Islam has had a growing impact on Arab political and cultural life. On the one hand, there had been a growth in new Muslim societies, study groups, charity organizations, and financial institutions, as well as personal piety displays like going to the mosque and praying in public. On the other hand, discussions on the best way to run the Arab world have increasingly turned to Islam as a point of reference. Muslim political organizations have had success recruiting new supporters, including younger people, women, and many well-educated people, by running campaigns around the slogan "Islam is the solution (Hasan, [2020](#))."

Conclusion

In the United States, a Washington-based organization, the Washington Initiative, suggests that Institutional Islamists can be made partners in the process of democratization in the Middle East. For them, democracy is a box, ballot box, and as Islamists adopt the ballot box against the Jihadists who believe in bullets and forge violence in the process, they are more reliable to be made partners in the democratization process. However, the question is: Is democracy all about only giving up violence and participating in the process of elections? Democracy, of course, is more than that. The first value of this thesis is to reflect on what democracy and democratization mean in a particular regional context where politics is heavily religionized and monopolized by one particular school of thought. As democratization doesn't have any universal, agreed-upon definition, whose operational features differ from context to context in order to accommodate competing interests and ideologies, it is very important to ascertain what kind of democratization the West prefers to promote in the Middle East that so far seems not to have been as successful as in other parts of the world.

As said earlier, there is a group of influential political leaders and political scientists who think that Institutional Islamists can be made partners in the process of democratization. These people argue that such people are moderate Muslims, accept democracy, participate in democratic institutions, don't get

involved in violence for political purposes, and so can be made partners in democratization. For a democratic Middle East, they suggest, we must cooperate with them to encourage them to be more democratic. However, such a political conviction is based on mere assumptions, and no empirical study has been conducted to support it. In other words, any vision for the democratization of the world of Islam, including the Middle East, would certainly confront Islamism and its ideology. In such a background, it's vital to look into whether the ideological contents of these Islamists are compatible with the principles of democracy or not.

The pendulum of political power swings between autocrats and theocrats, the latter most expected to replace the former if there are ever free and fair elections. One thing is certain: these autocrats and authoritarian military dictators can't be long-term partners for democratization as they don't enjoy a popular support base while their self-centered policies and governance incompetence have further weakened their foundational grounds. So, Islamists present a serious threat to challenge and replace them as a more popular opposition current in the Middle East.

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