

Can Islam and Democracy Coexist?

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Saudi Arabia recently announced that it would hold elections for municipal council positions. The Saudi embassy in Washington, D.C., heralded the news as part of the kingdom's reform agenda and echoed an address by King Fahd last May in which he vowed to "broaden popular participation in the political process."

The eventual scope of Saudi reform remains to be seen, and the reasons driving such a decision are debatable. Yet even a small step towards democracy in the conservative kingdom raises eyebrows as questions reemerge about the future of participatory government in the Islamic world. How compatible are Islam and democracy, and under what conditions do the two thrive together?

A Matter of Perspective

Louay Safi, a member of the board of directors of the Washington, D.C.-based Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID), has spent a lot of time thinking about the pairing of Islam and democratic forms of government. He sees a good fit.

"I think that Islam as a set of norms and ideals that emphasizes the equality of people, the accountability of leaders to community, and the respect of diversity and other faiths, is fully compatible with democracy. I don't see how it could be compatible with a government that would take away those values."

Yet throughout the Islamic world there are those who paint the two as at odds. Columbia University professor Richard Bulliet, who specializes in the history of the Middle East and other Islamic nations, feels that most of those presumptions are grounded in anti-U.S. and anti-West sentiment.

"Some of the people who say that democracy has no place in Islam, what they really express is a sense that the word 'democracy' as presented in international discourse appears to be wholly owned by the West," he said. "The word itself has, for some, a connotation of cultural imperialism. If you talk about representative government without the baggage of these institutions in the U.S., but on more idealistic grounds, then it makes perfectly good sense to a lot of Muslims. The idea of citizenry participating in government is, particularly within Sunni Islam, sort of a bedrock theory."

Bulliet adds, however, there is a minority that simply doesn't agree that democracy is right for Islam. "There are people who support the idea that Islam should be an emirate, that there should always be a ruler—the Taliban for example," he said. "You do have people who feel that autocracy is intrinsic to the Muslim system, and some of those people are on the violent side but some of them are not."

Self-government does have some roots in the Islamic world. Safi explains that historic Muslim societies were more representative than their modern counterparts because the central state was not as powerful. “I would argue that Muslim society was a society where communities had some control of their own affairs. There was more decentralization of power. The central government was mainly focusing on issues of law and order or security. There was a lot of liberty for individuals to negotiate many of the norms and rules within their own communities.”

Safi feels that a historic mistrust of central authority, bolstered by post-colonial experiences with oppressive central governments, could spark Muslim societies to seek more participatory governments with weaker national authority.

Self-Government

In modern times, however, the Islamic world has not been particularly fertile ground for the seeds of democracy. If it is to become such, Safi argues that changes must come from within Muslim societies.

“I don’t see democracy built without ordinary people working for that,” he said. “It can’t be imposed from the top down or from the outside. Definitely outsiders can help. They can apply pressure on dictatorial or authoritarian regimes as we did for example in South Africa, where outside help was essential in fostering a more democratic regime. But I think we have to keep in mind we can’t push democracy down the throat of anyone. If we do that it becomes a hated concept. Nobody wants to be forced to be a democrat—that’s a contradiction in terms.”

If such change is to begin, Safi believes that it can only happen through Islam, making the faith not only compatible but essential for the democratization of Muslim societies.

“Part of the problem in societies that have adopted a more hierarchical preference is a need for cultural reform, so that they can become more in line with the Islamic values of equality, freedom of religion, and respect for the individual,” he said. “A cultural change is required, and we know that can’t be undertaken without appealing to more fundamental values. That’s where religion comes in, where Islam comes in. It’s difficult to imagine the modern West without the Reformation in Europe and it’s difficult for me to see a more reformed Middle East without Islam being a big part of that.”

Democracies Differ

While the idea of religious fundamentalists gaining strength through self-government gives many in the West pause, Bulliet says that the problem is not unique.

“The idea of simply allowing parties of any sort to form and run has really been a problem in all democracies,” he said. “We had a time when people were expelled from the New York legislature because they were communists. It’s a difficult problem.”

In some Muslim governments, the problem has been dealt with by a combination of self-government and central authority. “In countries such as Yemen and Jordan where they’ve had a pluralist legislature, there has been a strong dictatorial figure on top to ensure that not too many changes are made,” Bulliet said. “Some argue that that’s a pretty good halfway house, a check to keep the current majority from going hog wild. I don’t think it’s impossible to imagine (Egypt President) Hosni Mubarak retiring and the generals putting someone in charge so that the president would have powers to suspend the legislature if he felt it was getting out of hand—but you’d have a broader range of people who could become involved.”

Across the world of Islam, governments have adopted varying degrees of self-representation in response to unique historical circumstances. Turkey is a parliamentary, secular democracy. Indonesia is one of the world’s largest republics, but an uncertain one as the nation still struggles to evolve a representative political system after decades of authoritarian rule. Iran is a theocratic republic with a growing democratic reform movement. Iraq is currently a case study in “nation-building” in the aftermath of the dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussein.

It’s proof there is no one-size-fits-all democracy any more than there is a single interpretation of Islam.

“Ultimately democracy could evolve a bit differently in different cultures,” Safi explained. “It doesn’t have to be a replica of the democracy we have in the U.S. You can’t compare what we’ve achieved here as a society over two centuries with an emerging democracy, where people are just trying to test the boundaries and find out what democracy means.”

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