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Research Paper

Can Islamic societies be democratic?

What prevents Islamic societies from being democratic?

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Introduction

This paper will examine the religious, cultural, state and leadership factors and external factors that impede the development of democracy in Islamic societies. The development depends on many different factors in Muslim countries. Scholars on the study of democratization had often argued that many different factors contribute to the development of democratic regimes. Domestic and international forces can all help shape the political development in a country.

There is not a single attribute which is entirely responsible for the slow democratic progress in Islamic societies. The religion is not necessary the factor that inhibits democratization. Other domestic factors, such as the history and the culture of the societies, and external factors, such as the exploitation of other states or the pressure for increased democracy in the region, can all promote or impede democratization. Domestic factors, such as popular mobilization is a very important factor that contributes to the success of democracy in the Muslim world. However, popular mobilization is not the only attribute that foster development of democracy. . Many governments in the Muslim societies have taken great steps in reforming the government. Political leaders need to implement true and genuine regimes.

Obstacles

Islam and Democracy

Many scholars had examined the relationship between Islam and democracy. Some claimed that the religion is incompatible with democracy and is the main factor that inhibited the development of democracies in most Muslim countries. It is understood that democracy requires openness, competition, and tolerance of diversity. These scholars claimed that Islam encourages intellectual conformity and an uncritical acceptance of established authority. They argued that some societies will never achieve democracy comparable to the West since their religion is simply incompatible with the Western ideas of a democratic society. (1991) However, many had also indicated that Islam is a religion that is open to a wide array of interpretations. The meaning of the religious doctrine varies depending on how Muslim communities and their leaders judge and interpret it. The founder and president of Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID), Radwan Masmoud defined "Ijtihad" as re-interpretation of Islamic text and teachings according to the changing needs of the society. According to Masmoud, it is possible for Islam to coexist with democracy because the religion contains many elements compatible with democracy. For example, there is diversity within Islam with respect to the theory and practice of political leadership. Mark Tessler suggested that "civic values and institutional arrangements antithetical to democracy are no more, although also no less, an integral part of Islam than are norms and structures that are fully consistent with democratic governance." (1999) Thus, it is inappropriate to claim that Islam contributed to the development or underdevelopment of democracy in Muslim societies. Ascribing the lack of democracy to the incongruence between Islam and

democracy is a groundless argument. It is because those who resist democratization so far in the Arab world are the secular authoritarian regimes that use the threat of Islamic fundamentalism as an excuse for the lack of democracy and political freedom under their rule. And there is not a broad empirical record about how an elected Islamic regime would behave. Therefore a large deal of uncertainty still prevails on the issue.

Nonetheless, it is evident that religious concepts can impede as well as promote democratization in the region but is not sufficient to stand alone as a factor constraining democratization movement.

Historical and Cultural Factors

Historical and cultural factors can be carried from the past to influence the attitude and practice of a society. They may be of more importance in influencing the establishment of democracy in Muslim countries. Many believed that a participatory and pluralist democracy cannot be established in a majority of the Muslim countries. Their beliefs are not based on the incongruity of Islam and democracy. Rather their beliefs are based on the history and experiences in these countries. Islamic countries have always been ruled under authoritarian regimes or colonialism. Although Islam is said to contain elements which support democracy, there has always been violation of the principles of democracy. These include forbidding a Muslim woman to marry a non-Muslim, prohibiting a Muslim from changing his religion, forbidding the organization of labor union. These examples demonstrate conflict between Islamic law and Universal Human Rights Act. Although there is evidence of discontent from the society, there is a lack of experiences and organizations that teach ordinary citizens habits of the “democratic heart.” (Hefner,

2000:5) European colonial rule and post independence national governments headed by military officers, monarchs, and ex-military rulers have contributed to a legacy that has had little concern for political participation and building strong democratic institutions. The legacy thus helped contribute to the lack of democracy in Muslim societies.

Popular Mobilization

Public desire for change is an important ingredient for democracy. History indicates that democracy is rarely established without widespread popular struggle and mobilization, sometimes over a lengthy period and at considerable personal cost. Ordinary people have to be convinced of the necessity of democratic government to the realization of their basic aspirations, and must organize to demand it because rulers would never give up power voluntarily. Rulers would only be willing to change their regimes when they become widely discredited and popular mobilization has convinced them that their continuation in power can only provoke deepening disorder. The Algerian case had proven this valid. After violent street riots in October 1988, President Chadli Bendjedid responded to popular anger by proposing a broad series of political reforms. The constitution was amended by popular referendum to allow political parties, ending the National Liberation Front's 30-year political monopoly. The amendment led to the government's controversial 1989 decision to legalize the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), an umbrella organization of Islamist opposition groups with significant grassroots support. By 1991, nearly sixty registered political parties existed in Algeria. In addition, the government granted broad freedoms of expression, making Algeria's press one of the liveliest in the Arab world. The human rights situation improved markedly; torture

practically disappeared. Important progress was made toward removing the Algerian army from daily politics.

The State and its Leaders

The Algerian democratic regime collapsed in 1992 when the government forcibly canceled the election in the fear of losing control of the National Assembly. A process of administrative corruption hijacks numerous religious tenets conferring human rights. It showed that popular mobilization is an important attribute in pushing for democratic regimes. However, the failure illustrated that political leaders can contribute to the setbacks during the process. The government and the behavior of state leader play a major role in Muslim societies. Very often, leaders in these countries would promise a dedication to reforms towards democracy to gain support with the goal to gain power. Only to take it back in fear of losing their power. The Algerian government, who had dedicated itself to political reform towards a more democratic society was reluctant to implement the privatization measures that the IMF deems critical for a sustained economic recovery and thus in achieving democracy.

Furthermore, the authoritarian regimes in Islamic states are usually fostered by the fact that many of these states are rentier states. This allows its leader to become increasingly autonomous from society and unaccountable to its citizens. Since most revenue comes from external sources and not from domestic economic activity or taxation, the state can usually resist much of the pressure for reform and political accountability.

Other States

Democratization not only troubles autocratic rulers in the Muslim world but also many Western governments. The former fear any opposition. For leaders in the West, democracy raises the prospect of old and reliable friends or client states being transformed into more independent and less predictable nations that might make Western access to oil less secure. Thus stability in the Middle East has often been defined in terms of preservation of the status quo. United States have always held a double standard in its promotion of democracy. United States supports free elections only as long as the right political party or desirable leader wins. United States' support of authoritarian regimes continued to focus mainly on the Muslim Middle Eastern states such as Jordan and Egypt. The American intervention in these countries indicates not only a lack of support for democracy, but also an active American involvement in the obstruction of its evolution. Moreover, the American isolation via containment of what it called rogue states strengthens radicals and impedes democratization in these states as well. The American reluctance to promote democracy in the Middle East is based on their cultural cognition that assumes that democratization will bring to power Islamic fundamentalist groups that will undermine the American interests and might even unite the Arab Islamic world under one united Islamic empire that would emerge as the main challenger in the world against the American hegemony and the West. Dependency theorists claimed that "global capitalism was the cause of underdevelopment in the Third World and implicitly, of the lack of democracy in the Third World. (Wallerstein, 1993) Again, of course

external influence can on one hand impede, and on the other help foster the process of democratization.

The interpretation is in line with dependency theory, which explains the relationship between industrialized countries and Third World countries. The former tries to maintain the status quo in the Third World because it is in their best interest to do so. And in turn the state elites within these Third World countries exploit the lower sector of the society.

The Road towards Democracy

Democratization is a long and difficult process. It requires more than one element to achieve democracy in any country. In *Polyarchy* (1971), Robert Dahl argued that the democratization cannot be explained by one single factor, that several different conditions should be taken into account. Like Dahl, other social scientists such as Larry Diamond and Juan J. Linz also accepted the idea that different factors help foster or impede the establishment of democracy. (1990) Dahl suggested that five desirable conditions relates to the probability of establishing democracy. The first is that the means of violent coercion are to be dispersed. The second condition is that power should not be concentrated but should be dispersed among the society. The third condition is that there needs to be cultural homogeneity which favor polyarchy. And fourth, he argued that the need to possess a political culture and beliefs that believe in and are willing to facilitate the institutions of polyarchy. Finally, external influences can work to prevent or foster the emergence of democracy. Modernizing autocracies which include Jordan, Egypt and Morocco have roots in traditional autocracy but are taking significant steps toward modernization and democracy.

Internal Factors

Political culture plays an important role in process of democratization. However democratic political culture of the people is not sufficient for the initiation of democratic movements. Changes will not come from above in any authoritarian regimes. Demands for changes must come from the society which needs to assert enough pressure on the government. Earlier this year, approximately 300 Saudi men and women signed a

petition urging the speeding up of reforms promised by the government. And in October, the government had finally decided to expand the participation of citizens in running local affairs through elections, by empowering the roles of municipal councils. Although only half of the members are being elected, this is a great step towards democracy. King Fahd had justified his authoritarian regime in the past by suggesting that democratic systems and free elections are not suitable for the people of his region. The change in attitude indicated that the ruler of the conservative kingdom is no longer able to ignore he calls for political reforms. The 1989 riots in Algeria led the government to accelerate its attempts at social and economic reforms. Reforms since have included the dismantling of a one-party system with guarantees of freedom of association and freedom of expression.

The success of democratization will depend on the real and genuine dedication of the government to more open and free society. The fall of the Algerian democratic movement during the 1989-1991 was attributed by the canceling of the second round of balloting by the government, in fear of losing control of the National Assembly. It led to military control and then to the civil war.

External Factors

As mentioned earlier, many factors need to be considered in identifying for possible characteristics of a successful democracy process. Outside pressure can also assist in fostering the development of more democratic regimes. For many years, the United States have promised to protect the Saudi Arabia regime against threats of coup attempts in exchange to safe and steady supply of petroleum at an affordable price. Only after September 11 had the deal ended when United States realized that the support they

gave to these regimes would threaten their own national security. The United States could play a leading role in reforming the Islamic world by spreading understanding among Muslims and their leaders in particular, of the values and merits of democracy.

Furthermore, pressure from international non-governmental associations is important in forcing governments of Muslim countries to move closer to democracy. In the year 2003, a Nigerian woman, Amina Lawal was charged and was given a sentence for having extra-marital sex. She was acquitted in September 2003. Non-governmental organizations and local human-rights groups played a major role in helping her. The Lawyers Without Borders had worked with her Nigerian lawyers to assist them by incorporating international into her defence. (*Calgary Herald* [Hanes], 26 September 2003). This case indicated not only that external pressure can play a major role in more democratic practice in the country, but also that Islam is not necessarily incompatible with laws set out in the West.

Conclusion

In recent years, many Muslims have come to accept the notion of democracy but differ as to its precise meaning. They have sought to delineate Islamic forms of democracy, or popular political participation, seeking to provide an Islamic rationale and legitimacy rooted in tradition. The Islamization of democracy has been based on a modern process of reinterpretation of traditional Islamic concepts of political deliberation or consultation, community consensus, and personal interpretation or reinterpretation to support notions of parliamentary democracy, representative elections, and religious reform. Islamic organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhoods in Egypt and Jordan, Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front, Indonesia's Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama have advocated the principle of democratic elections and, have participated in parliamentary elections. Many Islamic states had moved closer to the democracy.

As with the interpretation of Islam, democracy would take different forms in different Muslim countries with different experience. 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 is difficult to foresee how Islamic societies can realize its tremendous potential without genuine political reform. Evidently, it is not Islam that is the greatest obstacles to serious democratization. On the contrary, the most important impediment is the continuing resistance of established political regimes, whose leaders espouse the

language of democracy but rarely permit political liberalization beyond that which they can orchestrate and control. Mona Yacoubian makes a persuasive case for greater U.S. involvement in urging the Algerian government toward greater reform. The key to the success of democratization in Islamic societies is imposition of more freedom, expanding freedom of the press, freedom of religion, freedom of thought, and freedom to form independent organization. The process may be long and slow but it must be real, sustainable, and measures should be taken to prevent the reversal of it. History shows that many governments in the Muslim world have become adept at promising democratic reforms only to deliver more oppression. The international community needs to exert sustained pressure on the existing government to allow more freedom. Real and genuine reforms are needed; liberal and moderate voices cannot be heard in an environment of fear and repression. United States and European countries should stop supporting dictator in the name of stability to promote peace and strengthen the voices of liberal Islam. Muslim countries must also gain experience with democratic institutions and practices. Nonetheless, the success to the development of democracy depends on the citizens to resolve their inner crisis ultimately.