

## Islamising democracy

There is no fundamental incompatibility between Islam and democracy, writes **Moataz Abdel Fattah\***

One way to depict the cultural map of Muslim societies regarding the issue of democracy and autocracy is to say that there are two broad types of subculture in the Muslim world: the culture of "dictatorship, but ..." and the culture of "democracy-as-a-must." The former is the subculture of two groups of Muslims: traditionalist Islamists who argue that a just autocratic ruler who abides by Sharia law and defends its tenets is the most legitimate ruler of all; and statist secularists who argue in favour of an autocratic ruler who maintains the state's stability and defends it against foreign and internal enemies. In both cases, Muslims behave as rational actors who find that the advantages of having an autocratic ruler outweigh those of having a democratically elected one.

The "democracy-as-a-must" subculture is the one that is adopted by modernist Islamists and pluralist secularists. Modernist Islamists treat democracy, insofar as it does not contradict the principals of Islam, as a means to fight dictatorship and ensure pluralism in society. Pluralist secularists argue that democracy is the core component of modernity and should be adopted on secular grounds. Democracy has no future in Muslim societies unless the "democracy-as-a-must" subculture becomes the dominant culture. Democracy must triumph in theory before it can be realised in practice. Muslims must widely and clearly accept that Islam and democracy are compatible and that meaningful faith requires freedom.

For those who wish to help make the "democracy-as-a-must" subculture prevail, there are some practical steps to be taken. First, advocates of democracy in the Muslim world should try harder to Islamise democracy rather than democratising Islam. Islamising democracy is a philosophical, theological and juristic attempt that aims at finding Islamic roots for democratic norms and practices. Many sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad can be considered as the Islamic roots of majority rule, the moral and political equality of women and non-Muslims, obligatory *shura* (consultation) and the eradication of apathy and the "dictatorship, but ..." culture. This is one of the main conditions for pluralist democracies to surely grow.

Islam is widely known to be more pluralistic than many other religions. Muslim democrats need to rediscover their religion and know where the problems lie. Modernists and pluralists should talk to each other, learn from each other, and teach each other. Secularists, for their part, need to re-examine their self-defeating strategy to democratise/secularise Islam through distorting Islamists' image, debunking the role of the *ulema* (educated class), copying Western experiences, implanting secular solutions, and heightening the intellectual civil war. This approach has been perceived by many Muslims as a Western attack on their legacy and identity. Using Islamic teachings to reform Muslims' culture seems the most feasible strategy in most Muslim societies.

The process of Islamisation of democracy is based on three assumptions. First, democratic norms and practices are not entirely Western. They are humankind's shared efforts to fight dictators and tyrants anywhere and anytime. Muslims have made significant contributions to democratic philosophy by emphasising the values of unity, respect for order, equality, peaceful coexistence and pluralism, and have also worked for the abolition of slavery and the emancipation of humanity throughout Islam's history.

Second, "wisdom is the goal of the believer -- wherever he or she finds it, he or she should learn it," as most Muslims believe Prophet Muhammad said. Early Muslims did not find it anti-Islamic to learn systems of administration from the Persians, irrigation from the Egyptians, and philosophy from the Greeks. They can learn from others what they lack without necessarily finding it against Islam.

Third, many Muslims' setbacks in the form of poor governance have their roots in the Ottoman Empire and European colonialism. Democratic impulses began to escalate in Europe in the early 18th century onward, but this was also the period during which most Muslim countries began to fall under the colonial control of the Europeans who distorted the class structures and cultural priorities of Muslim societies. Thus, the best way to correct this historical fall is to catch up and learn what Muslims would likely have invented or developed if left to their own devices.

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Up to this point, I have focused on changing the public mindset to create fertile soil for democracy. Another important component of democratisation is getting the backing of political elites. As much as the public and institutions matter for democratisation, one should not underestimate the importance of elites who have the commitment and skills to redistribute power in society without endangering the unity of the nation or the sustainability of democracy.

The effort of 80-year old Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi of Egypt is one of the most successful attempts to Islamise democracy. His book *On the Fiqh of the Islamic State* (2001) is a notable attempt to demonstrate the Islamic underpinnings of democracy in the Sunni Muslim world and is often quoted by other modernist *ulema* in their books, booklets and sermons. It has given informal permission to many *ulema* to use the originally alien word "democracy" .

Al-Qaradawi's attempt, along with those of others, has made democracy acceptable to many Muslims, but it is still not perceived as a must. Muslims still have a long road to travel until this happens.

*\* The writer is Professor of political science at Cairo University and Central Michigan University and the author of Democratic Values in the Muslim World (Lynne Rienner Publications, 2006).*

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