



Plain Talk

By Mursi Saad El-Din

I have just finished reading a newly-published book which seems to be remarkably timely, Moataz Abdel-Fattah's *Democratic Values in the Muslim World*, published by the American University in Cairo Press. The book is based on a survey covering 31,380 literate Muslims in 32 Muslim countries across the Middle East, North Africa and Central and South East Asia, as well as minority Muslim communities in the US, Europe and India.

In addition to the introduction and conclusion, the book lies in five chapters, and comprises a number of tables and charts. In spite of the academic nature of the volume, it should appeal to the general reader, Muslim and non-Muslim alike.

The author recognises three main schools of thought on Islam and democracy. First, the traditionalist Islamists who are divided into violent and pacifist. "All violent Islamists are traditionalists," writes Abdel-Fattah, "but not all traditionalists are violent; some of them are pacifists. They believe that democracy defies the Islamic creed." He quotes a Sudanese Imam as saying, "Islam is beautiful and complete. Attaching words such as democracy or socialism or the like to it takes away from its beauty." Modern Islamists constitute the second category. They seek a modern, democratic government that is compatible with Islam. The third category is that of the pluralistic secularists who perceive democracy as a political necessity to achieve their liberal goal.

It is important to note that both traditionalists and modernists are Islamists and have similar assumptions and doctrines regarding the role of Islam in politics. For both schools of thought, Islam is both religion and state. When encountering the slogan "political Islam", their response is that Islam cannot be anything but political.

The researcher then goes on to analyse the ideology of the three categories. The traditionalists believe that democracy is sinful because of its association with non-Muslims. To them, democracy is un-Islamic not only in origin but by association as well. It comes from the Judeo-Christian West, "with all its covetousness, lack of respect for religion, and devotion to personal liberties". He quotes Ayman Al-Zawahiri as saying that the label "Muslim democrat" is self-contradictory. Whoever "labels himself as a Muslim democrat", claims Al-Zawahiri, is like a Muslim who says he is a Jewish-Muslim or a Christian-Muslim.

Turning to the modernists' position, the author claims that this group has no reservations about borrowing notions from other societies and civilisations, if these are to the benefit of Muslims. Thus, they see no ethical or religious reason why they should not adopt democratic mechanisms "as long as they are within an Islamic context."

Secularists, unlike traditionalists and modernists, start from two different but compatible assumptions. The first is that Islam does not offer a concrete guide for governance. According to a secular Pakistani government official, "Holy texts do not tell Muslims much about how to run their societies. Holy texts are excellent sources of *aqida* [creed] and ethics but not politics or economics."

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The other assumption is that Muslims need to follow the paths of the most successful societies in order to outdo them. This is exactly what the West did by learning from ancient Muslims and others. Then, there is a group that the author calls statist secularists. These are against "premature democracy since Muslims are not ready for it". According to them, democracy requires time and "is not necessarily an immediate task of the moment". One of them argues that "Democracy is an evolving being; it is born and grows up. It is never created at once."

This is an insightful, well-researched and intelligently argued book, that devotes equal space to all points of view on the controversial issues it tackles.

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I return to Moataz Abdel-Fattah's *Democratic Values in the Muslim World* (published by the American University in Cairo Press) that I had discussed here last week. After five chapters of material collection and wide survey, the researcher sums up his findings in a comprehensive conclusion.

The first observation he makes in the conclusion is that there is a range of attitudes among contemporary Muslims regarding the concept of democracy. There are representative of each of the four main schools of thought: traditionalists, modernists, pluralists and static.

The traditionalist narrative is in the minority in most Muslim societies. Saudi, Yemeni, Sudanese, Pakistani and Nigerian societies are, in the author's words, "the most plagued by this inherently antidemocratic belief system. Their political cultures are definite obstacles to democratisation".

On the other hand, it is clear that Muslim societies can achieve high degrees of receptivity to democracy, as in the case of Egypt. In these countries, there is an intellectual elite "who have injected debates about democratic norms into the public arena." Following the recent debates and writings in Egypt does lend credence to this finding. The author is of the opinion that some societies, including Egypt, "are moving toward greater acceptance of democratic norms. But accepting democracy does not mean marginalising religion". Where democracy does emerge in the Muslim world "it is likely to have a strong religious components."

Abdel-Fattah adds that his survey resulted in an important lesson, namely that free and fair elections in most Muslim countries would give Islamists political power. In other words, Islamists will be among the beneficiaries of democratisation.

The author then goes on to summarise some of his findings. The first is that the more educated Muslims are, the more they support democracy. Second, that women are more supportive of democracy than men in all Muslim societies. Third, that Muslims who have resided in a democratic country for a year or longer endorse democracy more than those who did not have this experience. An important finding is that both pro- and anti-democratic Muslims blame the West for the continuation and spread of dictatorships in the Muslim world, and thus refuse it as a credible agent of democracy.

Modernist Islamists, Abdel-Fattah claims, treat democracy, insofar as it does not contradict the clear-cut taboos of Islam, as a weapon with which to fight dictatorship and ensure pluralism in society. They argue that democracy is the core component of modernity and should be adopted on secular grounds. Democracy must become a dominant culture, and Muslims, they offer, must widely and unambiguously accept that Islam and democracy are compatible.

Supporters of democracy in the Muslim world should make more effort to "Islamise democracy rather than democratise Islam". Islamising democracy is a philosophical, theological and juristic endeavour that aims "at finding Islamic roots for democratic norms and praxis". Many sayings and actions of the Prophet can be

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endorsed "as Islamic roots of majority rule, and moral and political equality of men and women and non-Muslims". Islam, the author asserts, is widely known to be more pluralistic than many other religions.

Abdel-Fattah quotes an Algerian Muslim leader who believes that "when Islamists are given the chance to comprehend the values of Western modernity, such as democracy and human rights, they will search in Islam for a place for these values, implant them, nurse them, and cherish them just as the Westerners did before when they implanted such values in a much lesser fertile soil".

The researcher concludes that democratic norms and praxis are not entirely western. They are mankind's shared effort to fight despots and tyrants anywhere and anytime. This book presents the kind of rational argument Islam needs today.

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