Islam and democracy, an oxymoron?

Whether Islam and democracy can coexist within the same socio-political space has been much debated in the post 9-11 world. Islam has come to enjoy a somewhat uneasy relationship with the West and the Islamic resurgence has been stereotyped in negative and confrontational terms. While the winds of democratic change are sweeping across the Middle East, much mistrust still has to be overcome.

Carole Reckinger

Liberal democracy and secularism

A tendency has gained ground that takes for granted that there is only one basic model of democracy: a liberal model with certain institutions and rules that have developed in Western Europe and the United States. In the broadest sense democracy has come to mean a form of government that has regular and free elections with at least one opposition party. Defining democracy strictly in terms of regular and fair elections however, is a narrow and technocratic definition where the concept degenerates from the ethical ideal of the 'rule of the people' to the procedural technicalities of multi-party competition.

The Western democratic model is based on the principle of separation between religion and politics and is therefore only concerned with the worldly welfare of the people. Islamic scholars have pointed out that the absence of universal values and a firm moral anchor has led to a series of failures where the standards of right and wrong are subject to the whims of the people, who have come to change their ethical values as they change their fashion. Secularism, in fact, is in direct contradiction to the predominant Islamic world view in that it negates the role of religion in shaping the public order of society. By demanding that religion be silent and neutral on social and political concerns, secularism deprives religion of its ethical foundation, its essential concern with moral questions relating to peace, injustice or poverty. What seems to be often forgotten is that Islam is not a religion in the limited sense, but a complete code of conduct and an all-embracing way of life that covers all aspects of human existence.

Interpretations of Islam

The question of whether Islamic beliefs are compatible with a democratic culture differs widely and ultimately depends on how Islam is interpreted. The articulation of religion is framed by the interests and worldviews of the interpretive communities in question. If we define Islam in the radically exclusivist vision of Sayyid Qutb, which posits a sharply polarized world pitting the party of God (Qutb's ideological followers) against the party of Satan (everyone else), then Islam and Democracy can not be compatible. More recently however, a growing number of both lay and clerical Islamic intellectuals have articulated an Islam and a democracy that are mutually harmonious. Longstanding Islamic concepts of consultation (Shura), consensus (Ijma) and independent interpretive judgment (Ijtihad) are highlighted as affirming the compatibility between Islam and democracy.

Islam and the clash of civilization

The Middle East suffers from entrenched authoritarianism and observers often blame Islam for the lack of democracy. If one looks at politics of the region more closely, however, one realizes

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that none of the regional authoritarian regimes in power claim Islam as their *raison d'être* or are even perceived to be Islamic by their population. This fact notwithstanding, a significant number of Western scholars keep arguing that Islam as a religion and culture poses serious obstacles to the consolidation of democracy. Francis Fukuyama, an American philosopher and political economist, recently declared that "Islam is the only cultural system that regularly seems to produce people like Osama bin Laden or the Taliban who reject modernity lock, stock and barrel"[1]. On a similar line the controversial clash of civilization theory identifies people's cultural and religious identity as the primary source of conflict in the post cold war era. This theory became more prominent after the 9-11 terrorist attack on the United States, and gained notoriety in Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations?*, where Islam more generally is seen as a barrier to the successful consolidation of democracy. Huntington argues that some of the 'undemocratic' nations will develop interests that are deeply contrary to the West, and Islam is identified as the most likely trouble spot. Writing on the prospects of the spread of democratic regimes, Huntington argues that it depends on a number of factors such as economic wealth and equality, social structure, external environment and the cultural context. In terms of cultural context, differences in the receptivity of states to democracy exist among societies with different cultural traditions. For instance, Huntington points out that a strong correlation exists between Protestantism and democracy on the one hand, and the inhospitability of Islam towards democracy on the other hand[2].

Sayyid Qutb

Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), by many regarded as the father of modern fundamentalism, was the leading intellectual of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s and 1960s. He was the most influential advocate in modern times of Jihad (Islamic holy war) as well as the chief developer of doctrines that legitimise violent Muslim resistance to regimes that claim to be Muslim, but whose implementation of Islamic precepts is judged to be imperfect.

After studying on a scholarship the educational system in the United States (1948-1950), he became extremely critical of many things the United States stood for. He came to consider individual freedom, the economic system, and even the poor haircuts as primitive and shocking. Upon his return to Egypt he joined the Muslim Brotherhood and a few years later, he and many other Muslim Brothers were rounded up by Nasser's regime. Under very harsh conditions he was to spend 10 years in prison, but was not prevented from writing. One year after his release he was rearrested and executed after members of the Muslim Brotherhood had attempted to assassinate Nasser.

One of Qutb's students and ardent follower was Dr Ayman Zawahiri, who is best known as the mentor of Osama bin Laden.

However, it was once thought that the 'protestant ethic' was more closely adapted than Roman Catholicism to liberal democracy, yet history has shown this claim to be wrong. Furthermore, the perceived incompatibility of Western democratic ideas with other cultural contexts is not peculiar to Islam. Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew's idea of specifically 'Asian Values' contests the individualist presupposition of Western liberal democracy, implying that the more collectivist consciousness found in some East Asian societies demands a different kind of political regime.

The spread of political Islam

Since the 1970s, Islam has become a major force in politics in the Muslim world. It was feared that groups like the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria or Nahda in Tunisia might be able through the democratic process to win the support of a majority and gain control of governments. Furthermore, the events in Sudan, Afghanistan or Iran, indicated that several Muslim countries have sought to build confessional polities. For the secular West, this is an unacceptable and incomprehensible development that contradicts the idea of modernity and progress. With a closer look however it becomes clear that today's Islamic movements are different from the movements of the 1970s and 1980s in the sense that instead of striving to replace the secular state with an Islamic state they now fight against authoritarian rule through participation in the existing political system. A better way of looking at it might be to see it as a form of a social movement instead of seeing it as the *End of History* of the Muslim world today; it is but a social movement like any other – communism, nationalism, liberalism, fascism, socialism – which is subject to internal contradictions, ebbing and flowing and has to compete fiercely with other social movements in order to attract and mobilize followers. In fact, the tumult of the recent decades has led many people in Muslim countries to aspire to a just and egalitarian public order and Muslims have turned to their religious beliefs to make sense of the world around them.

Islamic movements have resurrected across the Islamic world where the state's response in dealing with acute socio-economic and political problems has been slow or ineffective. The new found attraction of Islamic values for political leadership in Muslim countries furthermore manifests the utility of Islam for social mobilization. The bulk of the support for Islamic movements still comes from the poorer strata of society that comprise by far the vast majority of the people in Muslim countries. The widespread Islamic awakening can be seen in relation to its domestic capacity to oppose what are perceived as oppressive governments and it is primarily in civil society

that one sees Islam at work. It is often observed that Islamic groups have wide access to the larger population through grassroots movements. By making reference to socio-economic grievances which affect the majority of the people in Muslim countries, they can mobilize a large platform of support.

It is not Islam that is restricting the development of democratic freedoms in Muslim countries. Rather, the reasons are purely political and relate directly to the desire of any authoritarian regime to remain in power. Religious leader face the same dilemmas than secular leaders when pursuing the interests of their followers and become susceptible to the 'corrupting elements' of *Realpolitik*. Once they take state power, as in Iran, and are faced with tremendous socio-economic and political problems, religious leaders in control of the state tend to behave like any other state leader. The capacity to deliver economic goods and basic political rights then becomes more important than the politics of ideology and rhetoric – Islamic or not.

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Islam and democracy are both contested concepts and they are subject to a diversity of interpretations and definitions. Therefore to ask if Islam and democracy are compatible one has to first ask which democracy and which Islam. Political systems that have claimed to be democratic have ranged very broadly but all attempts of democratization outside the Western world are measured and judged against the western liberal model. What is important to keep in mind is that democratic values might not necessarily be defined in the same way all over the world and the imposition of Western ideals on other cultures might be counterproductive in the long term. Democratic ideals have to grow out of the society in question, and only then is it productive in the long term. Imposing 'our' ideals will only lead to frustration and rejection.

Muslim countries share many of their socio-economic difficulties with other developing nations, and barriers to the successful consolidation of democracy might be found in other areas than religion and culture. Poverty, high social and economic disparities, patrimonialism and authoritarian leaders that hide behind the façade of democracy are more important factors.

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[1] The Guardian, *Francis Fukuyama, "The West has won", Thursday October 11, 2001, www.guardian.co.uk/waronterror/story/0,,567333,00.html, accessed 18.12.2006*

[2] *Samuel Huntington, "Will More Countries Become Democratic?",* Political Science Quarterly *Vol. 99, No. 2 (Summer, 1984), pp. 193-218*