

Islam and Democracy: A Complex Dynamics in the Arab world

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ABSTRACT

In explaining the democracy deficit in the Arab world, some scholars hold that the majority religion of the region, Islam is incompatible with democracy. Islam fosters an essentially illiberal political culture either because of its more uncompromising dogmatic normative presence or because it prevents the emergence of fully functional civil society. Some would also argue that Islam and democracy are not singularly defined concepts, and the quest for reconciling the two must entail exploring the plurality of understandings of both. Anti and as well as pro-democratic versions of Islam exist and compete with each other and the task before the concerned believer today is to promote socially engaged visions of the faith that are grounded in the quest for human rights and social justice. In this context, it is worth mentioning the hotly debated issue of the relationship between Islam and democracy

Key Words : Democracy deficit, Neo-Orientalist, Primordialism, Majlis al- umma, Ahzab, Majlis shura al- madaris, Political liberalization

With the end of the Cold War and collapse of the monolithic Soviet Empire, scholarly attention was increasingly focus on issues related to democratization, democratic transition and political liberalization. Much of the transition literature holds that the democratic transition is the outcome of a domestic political process in which the international influences and pressures are marginal in their impact. It is attributed either to schism between the hardliners and soft liners within the regime or mass pressure caused by internal structural problems, such as state failure, financial crisis and the globalisation-induced economic reforms.¹ In other words, democratisation is seen first and foremost as an endogenous process involving social dynamics and the success of the process is linked to a specific set of structural pre-conditions. This argument has been advanced by such eminent scholars as Seymour Martin Lipset, Gabriel Almond and Sideny Verba, Robert Dahl and Barrington Moore.² The recent scholarship has, however, tended to focus on the role that political leader or strategic elites can play in effecting democratic transition.³ In short, “democracy is no longer treated as a particularly rare and delicate plant that cannot be transplanted in alien soil; it is treated as a product that can be manufactured wherever there is democratic craftsmanship and the proper zeitgeist”.⁴

Equally significant is the counter-argument provided by the international scholars who have highlighted the variety of ways in which external forces shape the incentives and opportunities for the adoption of democratic forms of governance. In explaining the significance and relevance of the international environment on democratic transition in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s, Pridham has strongly argued for “basic reconsideration of theories of regime transition, which have conventionally

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