Islam and Democracy: A Complex Dynamics in the Arab world

AJAY KR. UPADHYAY

Department of Political Science, S.D. (P.G.) College, Ghaziabad (U.P.) India
(Email : drajayupadhyay@gmail.com)

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

assumed that international factors are at best a secondary consideration."[5] In fact, several Arab states have in the past decade embarked on the so-called democratization process largely due to external pressures unleashed by the pro-democracy campaign of the US in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks.[6] Likewise, significance of post-Cold War global changes, notably the ideological hegemony of the West in the initiation of political reforms in Africa during the early 1990s is difficult to ignore. After all, democratization for them meant some form of identification with the West.[7] In the case of Africa, for example, the significance of changes in international environment for the process of democratization is difficult to ignore.[8]

Theoretical understanding :

In explaining the democracy deficit in the Arab world, some scholars hold that the majority religion of the region, Islam is incompatible with democracy. For Islam, according to Martin Kramer, 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.[9] Terming such views as cultural reductionist explanation, others attribute this phenomenon to such factors as colonialism, international economic and trading systems.[10] As argued by Khaled Abou El Fadl, 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.[11] He asserts that democracy is being increasingly recognised as a universal value. The third wave of democratisation is the illustrative example of this trend.[12] In this context, it is worth mentioning the hotly debated issue of the relationship between Islam and democracy.

Some would also argue that the Arabo-Islamic tradition is not conventionally familiar with the concept of 'liberty', nor did it develop a concept of individualism. The word '*Ahzab',* currently used for political parties, certainly has pejorative connotations in Islam. On the contrary, the Arabo- Islamic culture has remained communal, collectivist and 'organic'.[13] There are indeed those who argue that democracy is culturally specific to a certain geographic zone encompassing the English Channel and the North Sea, with some extension in central Europe (and with offshoots of this zone in the New World). These are the regions that historically had experienced feudalism, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, and liberalism/individualism, whereas the rest of Europe had been subject to the Czarist or Ottoman empires and to the influences of Islam or Orthodox Christianity.[14] Others maintain that democracy is potentially Universalist, but with some cultures being especially averse to it.

Samuel Huntington,had conclusion that "among Islamic countries, particularly those in the Middle East, the prospects for democratic development seem low."[15] Huntington later argued that each region of the globe has its own individual religio-cultural essence that plays a large part in determining receptivity to democratic systems.[16] He isolated two examples, Islam and Confucianism, and labeled them "profoundly anti-democratic," claiming that they would "impede the spread of democratic norms in society, deny legitimacy to democratic institutions, and thus greatly complicate if not prevent the emergence and effectiveness of those institutions."[17] Huntington's argument has certainly garnered wide support from neoconservative foreign-policy pundits and neo-orientalist academics alike. Kamrava stated that "it is the forces of primordialism, informality and autocracy that have shaped and continue to shape the parameters of life in Middle Eastern societies."[18] It is this fundamental lack of a democratic history, Kamrava argues, that has left West Asia without the necessary social and cultural dynamics to foster various democratic movements, institutions and classes that make up a thriving civil society and give rise to democratic governance.[19] Bernard Lewis has, for example, argued that Islam is inclined towards totalitarianism/authoritarianism, which, he maintains, is

why several Muslim countries were attracted to the Communist model in the 1950s and 1960s.[20]

Several Muslim authors have contributed to the debate and some of them agree that the dominant tradition of the Islamic heritage as it has reached us today is not liberal or 'democratic' even though many contemporary writers would like to see it in this light for their own contemporary purposes. The contemporary Islamic philosopher Hasan Hanafi[21] has argued along similar lines in some of his writings, and so has the Tunisian sociologist Al-Tahir Labib, who asks rhetorically: "Is democracy really a social demand in the Arab World?"[22] The Moroccan historian 'Ali Umil (1991) has argued that although difference and disagreement were known in the historical Arabo-Islamic state, they were never accepted on the ideological level by the jurists and the thinkers who always believed that it was only one idea and one group holding to that idea who were right.

As a result of the Iranian Islamic revolution in 1979 and the consequent resurgence of Islam as a political movement much attention has been focused on the nature of a theocratic state.[23] Although Islamic "fundamentalism" was a term coined in the West, it was quite clear that the sh'ia Islamic directives of Iran were both radical and formidable. Indeed, according to James Piscatori, a new dynamism embraced Islam since the late 1960s, a time when Muslims began to reaffirm the importance of their faith to their social and political lives.[24] Inevitably, the renewed importance of religion in the polities of numerous states in the GCC and elsewhere has led to an examination of the relationship between Islam and democracy. Whilst some writers point to a basic incompatibility between what might be regarded as secular democracy and the rule of God, others suggest that in traditional Islamic discourse "tolerance, justice, fair play and universal brotherhood" were prominent features.If Islam is regarded as opposed to the main elements of Western democratic tradition and is based on "violence and intolerance" it is a view founded on misunderstanding and misinterpretation. It is possible to be both a Muslim and a democrat.[25] In this interpretation the institution of the "Shura" is a central component of the Islamic political system. A "Shura" is a consultative council, elected by the people. As Choudhury elaborates:

The "Shura" will assist and guide the Amir [leader]. It is obligatory for the Amir to administer the country with the advice of his Shura. The Amir can retain office only so long as he enjoys the confidence of the people, and must resign when he loses thisconfidence. Every citizen has the right to criticize the Amir and his government, and all reasonable means expression of public opinion should be available.[26]

If Islamic states appear not to construct their political structures in precisely this manner, G.M.Choudhury maintains that this is not the fault of Islam and its ideals in much the same way that the limitations and shortcomings which may be found in some democratic states 'should not be attributed to democracy and its ideals.'[27] Esposito and Voll have asserted that Islam and democracy are incompatible "only if 'democracy' is defined in a highly restricted way, or if important Islamic principles are defined in a rigid and traditional manner."[28]

The notion of consultation, then, is an important component within islam, but Ami Ayalon cautions against distinguishing a "Shura" within a "Majlis" [Council] as a parliament. He argues that it would be misleading to mistake fully sovereign western parliaments for councils with limited advisory power. Whilst the term "*Majlis*" is used in the West Asia to denote a national assembly, Ayalon asserts it is a word with no traditional political connotations' and must be qualified, as in *almajlis al-ali* a cabinet or senate; '*Majlis al- umma*' a national assembly; *majlis shura al- madaris*, council of education; and so on.[29]

Yet it is as well to remember thatMajlis has bacame "talking shop" with little authority but to deliberate and advise recalcitrant leaders. The central issue here is accountability and the extent to which deputies in the *Majlis al-umma* represent the interests of a particular constituency or the extent to which Islam instructs their role. According to Akbar Ahmed, the central difference between the West and Islam is rooted in their two "opposed philosophies: one based in secular materialism, the

other in faith."[30] Also, Norton has pointed out that there is no reason Western models of democracy should be adaptable to other regions and that the Middle East is more likely to "evolve its own characteristic style of democracy, no doubt with an Islamic idiom in some instances."[31]

Question of democratization :

The debate is a complex one and if the question of democratization in the Arab Countries is not considered to be so important it might not have begun. In other words, if 'democracy' was considered to be so trivial a concept, associated with western imperialism and holding little meaning in Islamic society, there would exist no imperative to attempt to connect the two "opposing philosophies". It is precisely because democracy is attractive to the peoples of the Arab Countries, peoples who wish to form political parties, vote in elections for a variety of different candidates, hold their representatives accountable, in short to avail themselves of political rights and responsibilities, that democracy is being discussed at this time.

The Arab Gulf countries witnessed phenomenal socio-economic growth in the three decades following World War II, the birth period of most independent Arab state. But the growth was erratic or sluggish-resulting, among other things, in a distorted stratification. The 1950s and 1960s, many of the newly independent Arab states embarked on ambitious educational and industrial expansions. As a result, two sprouting classes grew steadily: the new middle class and the modern working class. Central planning and command socio-economic policies were the order of the day in most Arab countries. The initial oil boom of the 1970s tempted many of the poorer and larger countries to introduce what came to be known as liberal "open-door" policies, without successfully phasing out the command socio-economic policies of the previous decades.[32]

A few years after independence, several Arab states witnessed a wave of radical politics, mostly through populist military coups (Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Sudan, Yemen, Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, and Somalia). These "radical" regimes ended the liberal experiments that some of their societies had engaged in briefly before and immediately after independence. One-party rule, or rule by a junta, became the dominant pattern of governance. The new populist regimes gave the state an expansionist socio-economic role. An explicit or implicit "social contract" was forged under the terms of which the state was to effect development, ensure social justice, satisfy the basic needs of its citizens, consolidate political independence, and achieve other national aspiration (e.g. Arab unity, the liberation of Palestine).[33]

The expansionist role of the Arab state to have reached its zenith in the 1970s, in rich and poor countries alike. Since then, the course of socio-political events internally, regionally, and internationally has forced the state to retreat from several socio-economic functions. In most cases that retreat has been disorderly, leaving in its aftermath structural and situational misery that could have been avoided or reduced, had civil society been in better shape. Instead, some of the public space vacated by the state had been filled either by extremist Islamic tendencies (as in Egypt and Algeria), or by separatist primordial tendencies (as in Sudan, Somalia and Iraq). In the years of the Arab state's retreat (in the 1970s and 1980s), some of the prepopulist civil formation revitalized themselves, while new ones were created. In the aftermath of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, one of the most severe reversals since the 1967 defeat, such organizations sprang up on a Pan-Arab or national scale.

Since 1980, Saddam Hussain's regime in Iraq has followed both these tacks, which reached their peak on 2 August 1990 with the invasion of Kuwait, triggering what came to be known as the "Gulf Crisis." In the years immediately preceding the Gulf crisis, several Arab regimes were already sensing their deepening loss of internal legitimacy. This was expressed in increasingly frequent violent confrontations between regimes and one or more of the major socio-economic formations. The upper rungs of the new middle class engaged regime in nonviolent battles over basic freedoms, human rights organizations and more autonomous professional associations, thus revitalizing stunted civil

societies. There were varying levels of popular demands *vis-à-vis* Arab regimes. On one level, the demands were for greater "liberalization," such as freedom of the press and association, as well as the right to travel abroad. Nearly all regimes made some concessions in response to these demands. On a more elevated level, the demand was for serious and explicit democratization, such as legalized political parties, equal access to the mass media, and free and honest elections. None of the regimes fully responded to these demands in the 1980s.[34]

Since the Gulf War, political liberalization has unfolded in a number of Arab Gulf countries only slowly and reluctantly. In the countries directly involved in, or close to the heart of, the crisis- Iraq, Syria, and the six states bordering the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman- ruling elites claimed a "legitimate" excuse to delay moves toward democratization, and one must wonder if any such moves were ever seriously intended. It was a full year after the crisis before Arab elites showed a serious inclination towards genuine participation politics, although promises had been extracted from them in some instances, such as in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. During 1991, it became obvious that something had to be done. The global wave of democratization is helping the process of opening up Arab polities, as is the prominent role being played by international and Arab human rights advocates such as Amnesty International, Middle East Watch, and the Arab Organization for Human Rights. These organizations are making it more and more difficult for Arab elites to draw upon their traditional coercive impulse and apparatus. Thus, while the Gulf crisis may not have led to a "democratic revolution" in the Arab world, it has definitely contributed to an erosion of Arab authoritarianism. Economic globalization and technological change (including, variously, such things as fax machines, television satellite dishes, and the global computer Internet) are generally held to have accelerated this process by breaking down international barriers, loosening the authoritarian grips of governments over the free flow of information, and empowering grassroots democratic activists. Among them are steady, even if modest, economic development, and a greater measure of social equity. Without these, the roads to democracy will be quiet rocky and reversals likely. Unemployment, especially among youth, and income disparities tend to breed fanaticism and violence. This encourages demagoguery and entices an authoritarian military to step in and derail the democratization process. Thus civil society, economic development, and social equity must proceed hand in hand. They are mutually reinforcing and bolster, as well, the prospects for democratization in the Arab world.

In the past two decades, the social movements of political liberalization in the Arab world- the organizations of modern civil society- suffered not only internal state control and repression but also international isolation. Indeed, during the mid-1980s, the intensification of the socio-economic and political crisis triggered popular and civil association opposition and increased regime repression and state terror. But such increased violations of human rights did not draw the serious attention of the United States, the European Community, or the international NGOs, except minimally. That is, not until the prodemocracy revolutions of Eastern Europe, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the victory of the allies over Iraq in the 1990-1991 Gulf War, and the articulation in the United States of a triumphant neoliberal ideology. Since then an American ideology of a worldwide "democratic revolution," bonded with idea of a privatized "free market economy" has been propounded in both the former Soviet bloc and the Third World.[35]

REFERENCES

1.   Gerado L. Munck (1994). "Democratic Transition in Comparative Perspective", *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 26, No.3, p 362. (355-375); Guillermo O'donell and Philippe Schmitter (1986), *Transition from Authoritarian Rule: tentative Conclusion about Uncertain Democracies,* Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, p. 5.

2.   Seymour Martin Lipset (1959). "Some Social Requisites of Democracy," *American Political Science*

Review, Vol. 53, pp. 145-179; Z. Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba (1963), *The Civic Culture*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Robert A. Dahl (1998), *On Democracy*, New Haven London: Yale University Press, p 145-179; Jr. Barrington Moore (1966), *Social Origins of Democracy and Dictators/tip. ' Lord and Peasant in Modern World,* Boston: Beacon Press;

3. S. Huntington (1991). *The Third Wave: Democratisation in the Late Twentieth Century,* Norman Okla: Oklahoma University Press, p. 210.

4. Doh Chull Shin (1994). "On the third wave of democratization: a synthesis and evaluation of recent theory and research", *World Politics*, **47** (1) : 141.

5. Geoffrey Pridham (1997). "The international Dimension of Democratisation: Theory, Practice and International Comparisons" in Geoffery Pridham, Eric Herring and George Sanford, eds., *Building Democracy: International Dimension of Democratization in Eastern Europe,* London: Leicester University Press, p 28. Also, see Kristian Skrede Gleditsch and Michael D Ward (2006), " Diffusion and the International Context of Democratisation", *International Organisation,* Vol. 60, falll, pp 911-933.

6. Amy Hawthome (2004). "Political Reform in the Arab World: A New Ferment?", *Carnegie Papers: Middle East Series,* Vol 52.

7. Aswini K. Mohapatra (2011). "Tureky's transition to liberal democracy: the EU membership issue", *India Quarterly*, Vol.67, No.2, p.2-3.

8. Karen L. Remmer (1995). "New Theoretical Perspectives on Democratization", *Comparative Politics,* **28** (1) : 105.

9. Gudrun Kramer (1992) "Liberalisation and Democracy in the Arab World", *Middle East Report,* No.174, p 83.

10. John L. Esposito and John O. Voll (1996). *Islam and Democracy,* New York: Oxford University Press*;* Salame, Ghassan. ed. (1994), *Democracy without Democrats? The Renewal of Politics in the Muslim World,* London: I.B. Tauris Publishers; Hunter, Shireen, Huma Malik (ed.), (2005), *Modernization, democracy, and Islam, Center for Strategic and International Studies,* Washington, D.C: Greenwood Publishing Group.

11. El Fadl, Khaled Abou, Joshua Cohen and Deborah Chasman (2004). *Islam and the Challenge of Democracy: A Boston Review Book*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

12. Ibid.

13. Louis Dumont (1986). *Essays on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective,* Chicago and London; Chicago University Press.

14. Bhikhu Parekh (1992). ' The Cultural Particularity of Liberal Democracy', *Political Studies,* Vol 40, special issue on *Prospects for Democracy,* p. 102

15. Samuel P. Hungtington (1984). "Will More Countries Become Democratic?" *Political Science Quarterly*, **99** (2) : 216.

16. Samuel P. Hungtington (1987). "The Goals of Development," in M. Weiner and S. R Huntington, *Understanding Political Development*, Harper Collins.

17. Samuel P. Hungtington (1991). *The Third Wave: Democratisation in the Late Twentieth Century*, pp. 298-307.

18. Mehran Kamrava (1998). *Democracy in the Balance. Culture and Society in the Middle East*, Seven Bridges Press, p. 32.

19. Ibid, pp. 31-32.

20. Bernard Lewis (1958). 'Communism and Islam", in Walter Z. Laqueur, ed., *The Middle East in Transition,* New York:Frederick Praeger

21.   Hasan Hanafi (1983). "Al-Judhur al-tarikhiyya li azmat al-huriyya…' (Historical Roots of the Crisis of Liberty and Democracy in our Contemporary Conscience), in Centre for Arab Unity Studies, *Al-Dimuqratiyya wa huquq al-insan,* (Democracy and Human Rights in the Arab Father land), Beirut:CAUS.

22.   Al-Tahir Labib (1992 b). 'Hal al-dimuqratiyya matlab ijtima'?' (Is Democracy a Social Demand?), in Sa'id Al-'Alawi, *AlMujtama' al-madani fi al-watan al-'arabi….* (The Civil Society and its Role in realizing Democracy in the 'Arab Fatherland'), Beirut:Center for Arab Unity Studies.

23.   J. Piscatori (1986). *Islam in a World of Nation States,* Cambridge, p. 114,

24.   Ibid, p. 24

25.   G.M. Choudhury (1990). *Islam and the Contemporary World*, London, p-iii- vi.

26.   Ibid, p. 45.

27.   Ibid, p –ii.

28.   Esposito and O. Voll (1996). *Islam and Democracy*, p. 21.

29.   Ami Ayalon (1987). *Language and Change in the Arab Middle East,* New York: Oxford University Press, p 212.

30.   Akbar S. Ahmed (1992). *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise,* London, 1992, p. 264.

31.   Augustus Richard Norton (1995). *Civil Society in the Middle East*, E. J. Brill, p. 5.

32.   Saad Eddin Ibrahim. "Liberalization and Democratisation in the Arab world: an overview", " in Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany and Paul Nobel (eds.) *Political Liberalisation and Democratisation in the Arab World,* Vol. 1, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1995), p.33

33.   Ibid, p.42

34.   Ibid, p.44

35.   Samih K. Farsoun and Christina Zacharia, "Class, Economic Change, and political liberalization in the Arab world, in Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany and Paul Nobel (eds.) *Political Liberalisation and Democratisation in the Arab World,* Vol. 1, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1995),p.269.

****