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Prospects for Democracy in Islamic Countries

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The current overall picture is that no democratic country with an Islamic majority exists.¹ In his *Patterns of Democracy*, Arend Lijphart (1999) deems 36 countries to be stable democracies during the past 20 years. Only 5 of them are geographically located in Asia or Africa (Botswana, India, Israel, Japan, Mauritius), and none has an Islamic majority (though India has a Muslim minority of some 100 million).

When the Soviet empire crumbled, democracy took root the quickest in countries with a Catholic-Protestant background. It did so more hesitatingly in Orthodox ones, and not at all in Islamic countries. Fond hopes lasted for a long time in the West that Kyrgystan would be an island of democracy in Central Asia, but by now even the greatest optimists must have given up such hope. In the Balkans, democracy is fragile in predominantly Muslim Albania, and in Bosnia and Kosovo it has survived only thanks to the bayonets of international peace-keeping forces.

Further east, note that India has maintained democracy pretty steadily while, with the same British colonial inheritance, Pakistan has oscillated between short-lived attempts at democracy and longer periods of dictatorship. Separated from Pakistan, Bangladesh has followed a similar course. Since achieving independence, Indonesia did not make it to democracy for 50 years, and it is not yet out of the woods.

Turkey has rehearsed for democracy over 80 years, but dress rehearsal is still to come. Iran has an elected parliament and president, but major decisions are made by non-elected clerics. Among the Arabic countries, the half-Christian Lebanon had hopes for democracy 40 years ago, but it has moved backwards. South of Sahara, we do not encounter anything close to stable democracy, be it in Muslim-majority or other countries, until we reach Botswana.

One may therefore ask with good reason whether a culture based on Islam is as unsuitable grounds for democracy as Sahara is for agriculture. Before drawing such a conclusion, however, one should take a look at the broader history of democracy, brief as it is, focusing on Catholic countries in particular.

Catholicism, Democracy and Islam

Seventy-five years ago, in 1928, democracy may have looked like a peculiarity of Protestant culture, finding little fertile ground in Catholic lands. The entire Protestant Europe was democratic, from Britain, the Netherlands and Switzerland to Latvia, Estonia and Finland, while among the Catholic countries this was the case only in Belgium, France and Czechoslovakia. Democracy had recently crumbled in Catholic Italy, Portugal, Hungary, Poland and Lithuania, and it was shaky in Austria and Spain. The Americas offered a similar contrast between the

¹ Prepared for the Conference on "Development, Democracy and the Islamic World", Center for the Study of Democracy, University of California, Irvine, 7 March 2003

predominantly Protestant and democratic North America and proneness to dictatorship in Catholic Latin America.

Of course, the picture looked different seven years later, in 1935, when the predominantly Protestant Germany had given up on democracy, and Estonia and Latvia followed in the footsteps of Poland and Lithuania. But even so, the shrinking island of democracy remained overwhelmingly Protestant, ranging from the British dominions to the Nordic countries. In the 1930s, one could have presented a conference paper on "Prospects for Democracy in Catholic Countries", concluding that such chances were slim.

As of now, the picture has changed altogether. Democracy tends to look like a characteristic of the entire Protestant-Catholic cultural area, from the Mediterranean to South America. Of course, democracy also extends to Japan, India, Israel and Greece--and there are gaps in South America. My main point is that "Prospects for Democracy in Catholic Countries" has become a moot issue.

As communism crumbled in Central and Eastern Europe, the first free elections produced a clear pattern. Democrats won in traditionally Catholic-Protestant countries, while communists survived in Orthodox and Islamic countries. The difference became blurred later on, especially on Croatia's account. But economic reform indicators preserved the gradient, from Catholic-Protestant countries to the Orthodox ones and on to the Islamic. By one rating (Cameron 2000), Catholic-Protestant countries ranged from 29.5 points in Hungary down to 24.0 points in Croatia, while Islamic countries ranged from a mere 22.7 in Kyrgystan to a pitiful 11.4 in Turkmenia. The Russian Federation came in at 20.3 points. Of course, market economy is not the same as democracy, but there is some connection. Regarding political and individual freedom in 1999 to 2000, Cameron (2000) gave 12 to 13 points to all post-communist Catholic-Protestant countries, except Croatia (7 points), while the score in Orthodox and Islamic countries ranged from 11 in Romania to 1 point in the realm of the megalomaniac boss of Turkmenia. Russia rated 6 points.

Democracy hardly has persisted anywhere for more than 2 centuries, if that much. Against the backdrop of humankind's 50 centuries of written history, future historians may well consider it mere chance that democracy first took root in Protestant countries. Instead of Protestantism, one might as well ascribe it to a Germanic influence, including formerly Celtic areas colonized by Anglo-Saxons or named after the Germanic Frankish tribes. A few centuries from now, who cares that democracy tended to take root in Catholic countries a few decades later?

In that light, what are the chances that Orthodox countries and then Islamic ones could surmount the threshold the Catholic countries did during my lifetime? Which Islamic countries might lead? Potential favorable factors might include the following:

- 1) Geographical closeness to Europe. It strengthens hope for Bosnia, Albania and Turkey, but also for Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, due to the persistent influence of French language.
- 2) Use of Latin script, which reduces the psychological-cultural distance to Europe. This factor favors not only Bosnia, Albania and Turkey, but also Indonesia.
- 3) Low corruption, given that heavy corruption may make people wish for a strong hand at the helm. The Elite Integrity index, which is the reverse of the Perceived Corruption Index and ranges from 0 to 10, places Malaysia, Tunisia and Jordan highest among Islamic countries, with a middling 5 points (Sandholtz and Gray, 2000; Sandholtz and Taagepera, 2003). They are followed at a distance by Morocco

(around 4) and Turkey and Egypt (around 3.5). All other predominantly Islamic countries are below 2.5. The aforementioned Albania has 2.4 and Indonesia 1.8, while figures for Algeria and Bosnia are lacking. Bangladesh (0.8) is perceived as the world's most corrupt country.

- 4) Current strength of democratic grass roots. Here I would place Iran ahead of countries like Turkey and Indonesia where democracy seems an elite idea. They are followed by Morocco, Malaysia, Pakistan, Jordan and maybe others, where elections hover in-between real and fake.

I will discuss the current stage of pre-democracy (real or fake) in more detail. On the basis of the four considerations above, the following coarse ranking would emerge:

- I. Turkey, Bosnia and Albania;
- II. Indonesia, Malaysia, Tunisia, Jordan;
- III. Iran and Morocco;
- IV. the rest.

It will be seen that my final gut-feeling ranking will be somewhat different.

Elements of Democracy in non-Arab Islamic Countries

The label "Islamic" makes some of us think of Arab countries, given that Arabic is the language of the Qurann. Although the present Arab vernaculars differ from classical Arabic as much as Spanish does from Latin, the Qurann still gives the Arab countries a central place in the Islamic world. This Arab core has the strongest self-awareness and seems the least willing to accept western ideas, democracy included. Yet, an overwhelming majority of Muslims live in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Indonesia. I will briefly consider the non-Arab Islamic lands, and then focus on the Arab.

Location, Latin alphabet and desire to participate in European wellbeing give hope to Bosnia and Albania (if it were not for corruption!). Turkey has desired to join Europe ever since Ataturk's reforms, but more at the elite than mass levels. Setbacks to democracy have been so numerous that even the carrots offered by the European Union may not change Turkey soon. Pakistan and Bangladesh lack even that carrot, and their attempts at democracy have repeatedly drowned in corruption. Indonesia's present attempt faces the same challenge. East of Iran, multicultural Malaysia looks the most promising, at least in terms of limited corruption. However, the Malaysian elites seem afraid that democracy might upset the ethnic-religious balance. And this was the consideration that delayed reforms in the Soviet Union until it was too late.

Paradoxically, I have high hopes for a country which, at least in the United States, is viewed as the worst example of Islamic extremism -- Iran. True, supreme power is in the hands of unelected clerics, but underneath that superstructure genuine presidential and parliamentary elections take place. These institutions lack power, but electoral victory requires superiority over the clerics in local grassroots organizing. There are countries where democracy has been introduced by the elites (Turkey) or imposed through student demonstrations (Indonesia), while a civic society is missing. When students return to uphold democracy. In contrast, the struggle with the clerics in Iran seems to represent tremendous grassroots schooling in democracy. If and

when democracy wins in Iran, its society might be as well prepared for it as the Spanish society was at Franco's twilight.

Elements of Democracy in Arab Countries

Let us not forget that not all "Arab countries" are purely Islamic. Christianity exists in Lebanon, Egypt (the Copts) and elsewhere. Nor are these countries entirely Arabic. A large portion of Moroccans and Algerians speak Berber at home, and the language landscape becomes quite varied in Sudan and beyond, despite the elite attempts to go Arab. This said, I resign myself to use the term "Arab countries" in its customary broad sense.

Most of these countries have held elections at least occasionally, but all too often these have been fake elections orchestrated by the government in favor of one party. Formal choice among several parties has been available during the 1990s in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, Kuwait and Yemen. But genuine competition has been sadly limited. Marsha Posusney (2000) has characterized the conditions with two terms: *taddaxxul* (intervention) prior to elections and *tazwir* (falsification of results) thereafter. These tactics make it certain that the existing power-holders do not risk replacement. The legislative and judicial powers are firmly under control. Opposition parties find it difficult to achieve legal status, reach the media, and carry out campaigning. Voters are pressured to vote for the government party. Advances toward *ta'adudiyya*, a multiparty system, are conceivable but difficult. Much of what follows is based on Posusney (2000).

Inventing peculiar electoral rules is part of governmental games. A favorite rule is that winner takes all--in single-seat districts or even in multi-seat districts, where all seats go to the largest party--and *taddaxxul* makes it sure that it is the government party. If proportional representation rules are used, they are combined with a high countrywide votes threshold. In Egypt 1984, the threshold was 8%--and all votes for parties failing to surpass it were transferred to the successful. As a result, the government party supposedly received 73% of the votes and most assuredly pocketed 87 % of the seats. The rules of the game have varied in Egypt, but the government party's seat share never has fallen below 79%. Along with co-opted "independents", it rose as high as 94% in 1995.

When the king of Jordan deemed to have elections in 1989, after a hiatus of 22 years, the rules fired back. They turned out to favor the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamics hostile to the king (and to democracy), giving them 42% of the seats on the basis of a much lower share of votes. So, for the next elections in 1993 the government made rules that favored tribal fractionalization, thus cutting the Islamist representation down to 25%.

In Palestine 1996, Fatah received 30% of the votes, yet 58% of the seats. In Southern Yemen 1993, the socialists got 57% of the votes and 95% of the seats. In Tunisia 1989, the ruling Democratic Constitutional Coalition won *all* the seats; in 1994 it was down to 88% only because 12% were reserved for other parties. In 1999, this reserved share was even raised to 20% --generously, and without any risk to the government, thanks to *taddaxxul* and *tazwir*.

The Algerian presidential elections of 1999 started out well, with seven candidates, including some who addressed the Kabyl Berber voters in their own language. The press looked free, and the general tone of the campaign was constructive. Then came *taddaxxul*, some sort of intervention that made six candidates give up. On the eve of the elections, the spokesperson for one of the candidates announced, in the name of six candidates: "We withdraw from the presidential elections and do not recognize their outcome" (Bouandel 2001). The sole remaining

candidate, the army favorite Abdelaziz Bouteflika, raked in 73.8% of the votes. The remaining 26.2% voted for the other candidates, regardless of their withdrawal. Officially, participation was 61%, but some journalists estimated it no higher than 30%.

Morocco has the longest record of multi-party elections--1963 on. Yet, whenever the king's men risked losing, the king dissolved the assembly and changed the rules. In 1993, the two main opposition parties avoided competition and, together, won 45 % of the directly elected seats. In 1997, they even surpassed the governmental bloc. By this time, however, an indirectly elected second chamber was in place, where the government enjoyed a 76:44 advantage. Nonetheless, Morocco may still offer the most hope among the Islamic Arabic countries. (I will bypass the fuzzy half-Christian Lebanon.) French influence remains strong in Morocco, meaning contacts with the democratic world. Corruption is relatively limited. The oldest opposition party, Istiqlal (Freedom), has survived ever since the times of French occupation. In contrast to neighboring Algeria, the risk seems low that anti-democratic fundamentalists could carry free and fair elections in Morocco.

Distorted electoral rules and practices present the opposition parties with a dilemma: Do they get more out of boycott or participation? They have tried both. If democracy is to come to the Arab world, Posusney (2000) feels that reforms are needed that go beyond formally allowing opposition parties to run. Respect for individual and group rights must become reality. The overriding power of the executive must be hemmed in. In monarchies, executive power must shift to elected bodies.

As of now, Arab rulers have not introduced multi-party elections so as to proceed toward such goals but rather so as to preempt them. Still, some of those limited elections may unintentionally lead toward democracy. By tying their legitimacy to electoral campaigns, the autocratic rulers give the democratic activists not only an opportunity to participate in elections but also to protest their limitations.

Sharia and World Values

When facing past attempts to explain social reality in the Soviet Union through Marxist holy scripts, I countered with a recommendation to try explain Western society on the basis of the Bible. Such attempts are hopeless. Voluminous holy scripts always contain contradictory dictums that can be used to explain and justify anything, from slavery to freedom.

Islam differs in that the Qurann is complemented by *sharia*, a detailed collection of behavioral and administrative norms. It is not possible to base state administration solely on the Bible or the Qurann, without additions that fill in essential blanks in the holy script. It is possible to do so, in principle, on the basis of *sharia*. Such attempts have been made in the past and are likely to continue. This particularity has been pointed out to argue that democracy and Islam are contradictory, so that one cannot develop as long as the other prevails.

I can think of more creative developments. The Western world has been able to preserve a Christian format while no longer literally believing that the world was created in seven days. If so, than selective interpretations may occur in other cultures too. I do not know how Muslims carry out their Ramadan fast north of the polar circle, where the sun does not set for an entire month, yet eating and drinking is forbidden before the sun sets. Nether mind, they will find a solution. It is far easier to justify democracy in Islamic terms, once the need for it is felt. Is there such a need?

Yes and no. One may well desire the fruits of democracy but not be willing to pay the price in terms of cultural change. The results of World Values Survey (Inglehart and Long, 2002) place the Islamic and African countries in a very special location. Answers to this large set of questions organize themselves, to a remarkable extent, along two axes: traditional values vs. secular-rational, and survival concerns vs. self-expression. Stable democracies tend to be high both on secular-rational values and self-expression. Latin America is traditional and moderately high on self-expression. Post-communist countries (and South Korea) are secular-rational but stress survival over self-expression. Muslim and African countries are both traditional *and* survival-oriented--which places them in the opposite corner, compared to stable democracies. Partial exceptions are post-communist Albania, Bosnia and Azerbaijan that hover between traditional and secular-rational values. The least survival-oriented Islamic countries are Turkey, Indonesia and Iran, but they too fall markedly short of even the most survival-oriented countries among Lijphart's (1999) 36 stable democracies--Colombia, Venezuela and Portugal.

Self-expression values load heavily on gender equality and tolerance. Secular-rational values go light on belief in god, faith, obedience and national pride. If such values look conducive to democracy, would the Islamic peoples be willing to shift in such a direction, or would they feel that possible material gains would not offset the loss of their very identity?

Democracy requires not only an abstract will but certain skills in interpersonal transactions. Are the present values in Islamic countries conducive to such skills, were democracy is proclaimed? This may be the crux of Turkey's delayed democratization. The democratic shell has been around for 80 years now, but Turkish values have remained traditional and survival-oriented.

I started out with a question that could have been posed 75 years ago: "Is democracy possible in Catholic countries?" We now can answer "Yes", but is it that democracy has been adjusted to Catholic values or that Catholics have adjusted their values to be more conducive to democracy? I suspect that West European Catholics were 75 years ago appreciably more traditional and survival-oriented than they are now--more like today's Poland or Brazil. Has their democracy been stable, because their values shifted, or has practice of democracy caused their values to shift? It may be a two-way street.

In this light, my conclusion is that democracy is possible in Islamic lands too. But what is possible is not always inevitable. The fruits of democracy in terms of well-being may well have an appeal in Islamic countries. But do they have the skills needed to implement democracy, and are they willing to shift their values in the direction conducive to such skills? Much will depend on a demonstration effect in one country. If I had to name three top candidates, these would be Bosnia, Morocco and Iran.

I write these lines in mid-February 2003. By the time of the conference on March 7, the U.S. may have started an attack against Iraq. To what extent might that alter my conclusions? An early version of this presentation was written for an Estonian magazine prior to the destruction of Twin Towers but was printed thereafter. I saw no reason to change anything. Some givens in the history of civilizations have considerable inertia.

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