THE WRONG QUESTION: CAN ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY COEXIST?

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By Jana Elsalhy

ABSTRACT   Debates about whether Islam and democracy are compatible have been dominated by the most polarizing Orientalist and Islamist opinions. This paper discusses why the question of their compatibility is the wrong question to ask; the assertion that Islam and democracy are intrinsically oppositional prioritizes the most fundamentalist and essentialized understandings of Islam and democracy. Instead, a more appropriate discussion surrounds the conditions under which Muslim-majority nations can and do employ certain democratic practices given that neither understanding of Islam or democracy are monolithic. There are Islam(s) and democrac(ies) as there are multiple contextual practices and comprehensions of Islam and democracy.

INTRODUCTION

An ongoing debate exists regarding whether Islam is compatible with democracy. Within this debate, there have been expressions of several opinions ranging from the Orientalists and Islamists to the more moderate theorists who assert that Islam and democracy are not inherently oppositional. I will discuss these ideas in four sections. In my first section, I highlight the Orientalist and Islamist perspectives which, although antithetical, both position Islam in opposition to democracy. In my second section, I explore the popular will of Muslims to democratize their nations. In my third section, I highlight examples of what democratization in Muslim-majority countries could look like, making specific reference to Indonesia's practice of democracy as an example of Islamic democracy in practice. Finally, in my fourth section, I reference Asef Bayat's Islam and Democracy: What Is the Real Question? and discuss how the question of whether Islam is compatible with democracy is often not the right one. Instead, as I explain in the prior sections, the question should consider ways Muslims can incorporate democratic principles into their practice of government. This is an academic exercise, and

in this paper, I am not advocating for the democratization of all Muslim countries; instead, I seek to explore how Islam and democracy have been framed as oppositional as well as explore what ways they can and have coexisted.

THE TWO EXTREMES: ORIENTALISM AND ISLAMISM

There are two major opinions on the topic of Islam's compatibility with democracy: Orientalism and Islamism. These extremes are antithetical to one another, yet they further the same argument that democracy and Islam can never operate in tandem. In this way, Islamism and Orientalism serve as foils to one another (Dupret 2018, 2). This section will discuss both perspectives and their arguments against the possibility of cooperation between Islam and democracy.

Both Islamism and Orientalism primarily operate using literalist and essentialist readings of Islam. The essentialism found in both perspectives is unfair, and it is founded on different reasonings. As John Esposito and

John Voll put it, those who "formally and publicly oppose democracy or who are willing to describe their programs as nondemocratic usually represent a marginal sect or group on the extreme of the religio-political spectrum" (Esposito and Voll 1996, 11). Furthermore, the "narrow and parochial" understandings of concepts like democracy and Islam are "dangerous and limiting" (Esposito and Voll 1996, 14). Asef Bayat highlights how the 9/11 terrorist attacks and developments following have "intensified Western anxieties over the 'threat' of 'Islamic fundamentalism'" which reinforces the idea of the "'peculiarity of Muslims'" (Bayat 2007, 5). Furthermore, as Bayat describes, the media depicts Muslim-majority nations as "monolithic, fundamentally static, and consequently 'peculiar'" entities by emphasizing their essentialization (Bayat 2007, 6). The West often portrays itself as the pinnacle of modernity while nations with differences like Islamic rules are seen as backward non-conformists (Khan 2006, 162).

There seems to be a "demagogic" objective in projecting Islam "as a totalitarian ideology that seeks to undermine personal and political freedoms" and positing it as a "system" that is "opposed to individual rights and is a barrier to the creation of a tolerant, pluralistic and democratic [societies]" (Khan 2006, 151). There exists a "superficial [perception]" in the West about the "paradox of democracy in the Middle East" wherein Western Orientalists fear that Middle Eastern (or Muslim-majority nations') "democratic elections might bring to power an anti-democratic regime" (Schwedler 1998, 25). For Orientalists like Samuel Huntington, "'the prospects for democratic development [in the Middle East] seem low'" (Sadowski 1993, 14). Orientalists have long held that Middle Eastern societies are "resistant" to democratization and their arguments now highlight a belief that only "civil" societies are compatible with democracy, furthering the harmful narrative that Middle Eastern/Muslim-majority countries are uncivilized (Sadowski 1993, 14).

Some of the opposition to democratization in Muslim-majority countries comes from the Islamic concern that the only true voice of authority and reason is God. More moderate Muslims tend to believe there is a point that can connect their belief in God's superior authority while also valuing democratic qualities like human deliberation, the multiplicity of interpretations of religious ideas, the appreciation of rights and freedoms, and the appreciation of social justice. For instance, the principle of popular rule - a pillar of democracy - does not necessarily oppose God's rule, but rather opposes "the rule of the individual, which is the basis of dictatorship" (al-Qaradawi 2009, 238). Bayat describes Islamism as a "language of self-assertion" that mobilizes the middle class who "[feel] marginalized by the dominant economic, political or cultural processes in their societies" as well as for those who substitute a "language of morality (religion)" for politics due to the failure of "both capitalist modernity and socialist utopia" (Bayat 2007, 14). Moreover, Islamists can be described as reverse Orientalists (Muharram 2014, 47) who "[rebuff] 'Western cultural domination'" (Bayat 2007, 14). Essentially, the reason for the rise in Islamism was to protect Muslim-majority nations in a way they saw fit. For many Islamists, democracy is an exclusively Western practice that ought to be rejected.

Both secular and religious scholars from both Orientalist and Islamist perspectives maintain a "discourse of difference" (Khan 2006, 149) between the West and Muslim-majority nations. The exception would be "Islamic modernists" under the Esposito school of thought who feel as though the West "has gone further than Muslims in extending political freedoms and human rights guarantees to their citizens" (Khan 2006, 149). Notably, "neither of [these] two competing epistemic communities" are honest (Khan 2006, 149). Western scholars "either selectively compare Western present with a highly caricatured Muslim present, or they compare Western ideals, such as democracy and religious tolerance, with the worst manifestations of Muslim realities such as the extremism of the Taliban" (Khan 2006, 149). Islamists respond similarly and compare a "glorified Islamic past with selected aspects of Western present" (Khan 2006, 150).

Islamists and Orientalists disagree in different ways: Orientalists feel Islam is incompatible with democracy because it is not able to modernize, and Islamists believe Islam is incompatible with democracy because it is a supposedly Western creation and because the word of God dominates all. However, both Islamist and Orientalist arguments are extreme and essentialize Islam.

MUSLIMS AND THE DESIRE TO DEMOCRATIZE

People around the world express a desire for democratic government (al-Qaradawi 2009, 231), and this is not limited to Western nations. This "demand for empowerment in government and politics" (Esposito and Voll 1996, 13) is unsurprisingly also being expressed by many Muslims. As previously discussed, the discourse surrounding whether Islam is compatible with democracy often relies on a very rigid, monolithic, and fundamentalist understanding of Islam. However, this discourse also often discusses democracy as if there is one singular way to practice it. In reality, there is no mould of democracy that nations must fit into, rather, various democratic practices and principles are what are ultimately used to fit into the values of a given society.

Many pro-democracy movements in the Middle East and North Africa have grown in influence, with many being reactions to authoritarian regimes. Several of these pro-democracy demands "spurred a broad-based debate among Muslims concerned about the correct Islamic point of view on the subject (al-Hibri 1992, 1). Furthermore, after "the first stirrings of the Arab Spring, there [continued] to be a strong desire for democracy in Arab and other predominantly Muslim nations" (Pew Research Center 2012). Furthermore, these everyday Muslims appreciate democratic practices like "competitive elections and free speech" (Pew Research Center 2012). Coupled with a desire for elements of democracy in their governments, many Muslims express a "strong desire" for Islam to have an influence public life

and on their country's laws, even if marginally (Pew Research Center 2012). This highlights how many Muslims do not have a problem with, and are even supportive of, democratization.

Asef Bayat discusses post-Islamism as a term that articulates the "metamorphosis" of Islamism's "ideas, approaches, and practices, from within and without" (Bayat 2007, 17). Post-Islamism seeks to "marry Islam with individual choice and freedom, with democracy and modernity, to achieve what some have called an 'alternative modernity'" (Bayat 2007, 19). This would be reflected in the formation of unique combinations and modes of practicing Islam with democracy, rather than describing Islam and democracy as oppositional ideas. As Bayat puts it, "post-Islamism denotes a departure, albeit in diverse degrees, from an Islamist ideological package which is characterized by universalism, monopoly of religious truth, exclusivism, and obligation, towards acknowledging ambiguity, multiplicity, inclusion and compromise in principles and practice" (Bayat 2007, 2).

Many theorists have expressed how Islam is not inherently anti-democratic nor is democracy inherently secular. For instance, Yusuf al-Qaradawi asserts that democracy is a "feasible and disciplined means to an honorable life" and explains how democracy allows people to "enjoy the right to choose their rulers, to hold them accountable, and to change them if they go astray without having to resort to revolutions or assassinations" (al-Qaradawi 2009, 244). Esposito and Voll make arguments that illustrate how Islam is an inherently democratic religion and argue that "hierarchical, dictatorial [systems of government have] historically been condemned as non-Islamic" (Esposito and Voll 1996, 25). They also go on to describe "Ijtihad" (Esposito and Voll 1996, 27) which is the independent interpretive judgment or adjudication practiced in Islam that reflects a kind of democratic practice of rule-by-the-people where people are the ones who interpret Islam and relate it to their daily lives; this is contrary to the understanding of Islam as monolithic and static. As Bayat explains,

Muslim-majority nations are "never monolithic as such" and instead, "national cultures, historical experiences, political trajectories, as well as class affiliation, have often produced different cultures and sub-cultures of Islam" with different "religious perceptions and practices across and within different Muslim nations" (Bayat 2007, 7). These Muslim-majority nations are "comprised of people with various degrees of religious affiliations" and in this way, "are quite similar to their [Western] counterparts" (Bayat 2007, 7) - unlike what is posited by the Orientalist and Islamist arguments.

ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY IN PRACTICE

Arguments against the possibility of democratization of Muslim-majority countries made by Orientalists and Islamists often rely on a very essentialist, fundamentalist, and narrow understanding of Islam and its socio-political applications. While democracy is interpreted as something with no fixed definition or formula, Islam is seen as monolithic, ignoring "the broader contemporary global context and within the broad heritage of Islamic history and tradition (Esposito and Voll 1996, 17). There are several opinions about what is necessary for a democratic government; in this section, I will discuss a few of these opinions.

Azizah al-Hibri describes two main principles of democracy: The rule of the people, and the separation of powers (al-Hibri 1992, 2). Azizah al-Hibri goes on to explain how the primary sources of Islamic jurisprudence come from the Quran as "the literal word of God revealed to the Prophet Muhammad", peace be upon him (PBUH) (al-Hibri 1992, 3), and the Sunnah which is "comprised of the hadith (reported sayings of the Prophet [(PBUH)] and his reported actions'' and is used to supplement Quranic laws "as well as to help interpret them" (al-Hibri 1992, 4). The Quran and the Sunnah make up the Sharia, which can be understood as the body of Islamic law (Khan 2006, 165). While many understand Islamic law to be unchangeable and absolute, some understand it to be more fluid and capable of evolving with the people who follow it. Azizah al-Hibri, for instance, claims that "Islamic law rests on the consent of the Muslim people in the same way the American Constitution rests on the consent of the American people" (al-Hibri 1992, 26). In this case, the Sharia is no less democratic than Western jurisprudence as it relies on the same sort of acceptance to maintain legitimacy. While the Quran is the ultimate voice of authority for Muslims, it "does not attempt to articulate, except in certain specific cases, detailed rules to be followed in every country," rather, the Quran establishes "certain basic principles which could then be used by Muslims to develop specific laws" which suit their country and needs (al-Hibri 1992, 26). Azizah al-Hibri also explains how in seeking to improve the democratic character of Muslims' governments, Islamic law should not be rejected (al-Hibri 1992, 27). Furthermore, according to al-Hibri, the Quran requires that government is based on consultation along with the "supremacy of Islamic law" and the use of ijtihad, which "points to a de facto if not de jure separation of power" (al-Hibri 1992, 27). The use of the Sharia in governance in at least some capacity enjoys broad support and can be considered "natural and effective" because anyone can "appropriate" it and interpretations of the Sharia vary globally (Baudouin 2018, 29).

Islamic democracy requires "[consultation], consensus, and ijtihad" for its legitimation (Esposito and Voll 1996, 30). These concepts are necessary for Islamic democracies' operation "within the framework of the oneness of God and the representational obligations of human beings" (Esposito and Voll 1996, 30). Furthermore, these terms do not have only one definition (Espositio and Voll 1996, 30) and this furthers the need for human interpretation - ijtihad - as the "key to the implementation of God's will in any given time or place (Espositio and Voll 1996, 29). In this way, as Bayat explains, "individuals and groups with diverse interests and orientations may find their own often conflicting truths in the very same scriptures" (Bayat 2007, 12). The interpretation of these texts is left to Muslims, and the nations' laws created with consideration and

reference to these texts would also thus be Muslim made; not made by God, but by Muslims who consider God's will in their creation of these laws.

Muqtedar Khan describes a set of "tasks" that he feels must be accomplished before a nation can accept democracy as an Islamic principle (Khan 2006, 156). Some of these tasks include linking political legitimacy to consultation, rejecting the idea of a "fixed" Sharia in favour of keeping it open and "dependant on negotiated understanding", explaining how discussions of "divine sovereignty" work to free rulers from accountability, treating Islamic values as guiding points rather than as a "system of ready-made solutions to problems", and ensuring that past legal opinions "must not subvert contemporary political reflections" as Muslims must be able to "freely determine for [themselves]" what the Sharia is (Khan 2006, 156). Khan also makes the point that even determining what Islamic law should be democratically negotiated (Khan 2006, 162). Khan describes how some "Muslim nations have managed to democratize" to some degree like Bangladesh, Turkey, Malaysia, and Indonesia (Khan 2006, 155).

The constitutions of nations like Indonesia highlight how incorporating democratic values does not necessarily mean Muslim-majority countries should replicate the governance systems of Western countries. However, while there are minimum standards required to legitimately claim adherence to democracy, such as the promotion of human rights, equality, justice, etc. Indonesians (like other Muslim-majority nations) have their own version of democracy and will neither be capable of nor desire replicating Western iterations of democracy. Drawing from the work of Edward Schneier, Indonesia's "civil Islam" is considered "distinct in its tolerance, civility and culture of participation" and Indonesia is regarded as "'a paragon of civil Islam'" (Schneier 2015, 212). Political parties in Indonesia themselves have adopted Islamic principles, and even as their political parties may become less identifiably 'Islamic', "Islam

has been integrated into all the [political] parties" (Schneier 2015, 215).

Indonesia has gone considerably further than other nations like "Turkey's Islamic majority in enacting faith-based policies" (Schneier 2015, 216). Indonesians have also gone "further than before in pushing an Islamist agenda on such issues as lifting prohibitions on the veil, increasing funding for Islamic schools and creating an Islamic bank", and in most cases, the laws built upon the Sharia "have sought not to impose them on the general population but to establish state guidelines for religious courts for those agreeing to use them" (Schneier 2015, 216). This represents an effective remedy to many of the arguments against practicing Islam and democracy simultaneously as non-Muslims living in Indonesia do not have to use the Muslim courts, and Muslims who wish to have access to rulings based on Islamic principles and the Sharia are provided with such opportunities. Furthermore, the Indonesian Supreme Court reviewed "virtually all cases from the religious courts" and "issued a Compilation of Economic Sharia Law that in theory at least provides uniform guidelines for resolving economic disputes among those agreeing to use the religious (as opposed to civil) courts" (Schneier 2015, 216). There have been similar regulations "of an optional, voluntary nature" that have also been enacted "with regard to Islamic banking, religious foundations and charity" (Schneier 2015, 216). Indonesia represents an example of a nation that has successfully reconciled practicing Islam with democracy in their own way without attempting to clone any Western democratic practices.

THE QUESTION OF ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY

Asef Bayat discusses how the Muslim world is "still measured by the 'exceptionalist' yardstick" which has led to the "marginalization of this region from mainstream scholarly perspectives (Bayat 2007, 7). In his view, there are three factors which have contributed to the exceptionalist outlook. The first is the

Orientalist thought existent in the West which converges with "interventionist foreign policy objectives" (Bayat 2007, 7). The second is due to authoritarian rules by local regimes which have also (ironically) been supported by many Western states (Bayat 2007, 7). The third has been the emergence and expansion of Islamist movements which have "often displayed socially conservative and undemocratic dispositions" (Bayat 2007, 7). According to Bayat, it is these three factors that have most given rise to claims "around the infamous question of whether Islam is compatible with democracy" (Bayat 2007, 7). Bayat feels the question of Islam's compatibility with democracy is the wrong question to pose because the "'Islam vs. democracy' debate centers almost exclusively on one side of the equation, Islam, as if, the other side, democracy, is free from complexities" (Bayat 2007, 9). Ultimately, it is more appropriate to ask under what conditions can Muslims make Islam and democracy compatible as there is "nothing intrinsic in Islam, and for that matter any other religion, which makes them inherently democratic or undemocratic" (Bayat 2007, 10). It is people as "social agents" who "determine the inclusive or authoritarian thrust of religion" (Bayat 2007, 10).

The question of Islam's compatibility with democracy is framed such that one system must heed the commands of the other rather than articulated as to how Islam and democracy can operate in tandem. The question of Islam's compatibility with democracy relates to a rigid concept of Islam in opposition to a rigid concept of democracy and compares these two isolated concepts without any sociopolitical context. This is wrong because there are Islams in the sense that different interpretations of Islam exist among the diverse population of Muslims and there are democracies as there is more than one way of practicing democracy. Islam in Bayat's sociological approach is much more than a collection of static words written in ancient texts. Islam includes a very dynamic life of ordinary Muslims across the world. In this way, there are two dominant theoretical approaches to the discussion of Islam and democracy.

There is the overly textual, ahistorical, out-of-context, essentialist, Orientalist, and Orientalist-in-reverse reading of Islam which views Islam as a text out of social context and argues it is incompatible with the other out-of-context concept of democracy. This approach is not as strong as the alternative sociological approach. The sociological approach puts Islam and democracy into the larger social context, and in this approach, the unit of analysis is not the text, but rather human beings. Ordinary Muslims as social agents who under certain conditions and different sociopolitical contexts can make these two ideas compatible. Not simply by certain intellectual/philosophical endeavors - which are not enough - but by practicing it and by doing it. Rather than looking at certain texts which follows the behaviour of Orientalists and Islamists/Orientalists-in-reverse, we must observe social contexts and under what conditions can ordinary Muslims make Islam and democracy compatible.

Western interventionist efforts to "civilize", "democratize", "[Westernize]" and invade the Orient are not helpful for democratization in Muslim-majority countries. Democracy should come from within a given society, as it is a dynamic process that cannot be imposed upon a group of people. Furthermore, Western democracy is one of many democratic forms, and even within the West, there are many different kinds of democracies. There is no one conception of what democracy is, and we should therefore be open to multiple forms of democracy. Democratization does not necessarily mean Westernization, and Muslims can have their own ways of democratizing. No Western democracy is perfect, and it would be unfair to hold a democracy in a Muslim-majority nation (or an Islamic democracy) to an unreachable standard of perfection upon its inception. Democratization is a process that evolves with the people who operate by it. This is to be the same for any Islamic democracy. To expect the institutionalization of democracy in Muslim-majority nations to be perfect immediately would impede the practice of democratization. Muslim-majority nations will never - and should never - fit into rigid Western

moulds of what democracy should supposedly look like. The democratization of these nations is possible and wanted, but it can only happen gradually and in their own way. A Muslim-majority nation's version of democracy that is still true to the Islamic faith can exist, as is demonstrated by the previously mentioned case of Indonesia.

According to Yusuf al-Qaradawi, "Islam antedates democracy in establishing the basic principles on which the essence of democracy rests" but it has also "left the details to be worked out by Muslims" through ijtihad (independent reasoning) as well as "in accordance with the principles of their religion, their worldly interests, the evolving circumstances of their lives in terms of time and place, and changing human conditions" (al-Qaradawi 2009, 236). Furthermore, regardless of where democratic ideas stem or can be found, Muslims can claim wisdom wherever they find it (al-Qaradawi 2009, 237). Thus, "[Muslims] ought to adopt the procedures of democracy, its mechanisms and its guarantees as they suit [them], retaining the right to make alterations and modifications" while also refraining from adopting practices of turning "the forbidden (al-haram) into the permissible (al-halal) and vice versa, or invalidate things made obligatory by religion (al-Qaradawi 2009, 237). The two processes of Islam and democracy are "contradictory and competitive only if 'democracy' is defined in a highly restricted way" and is viewed as possible only if specific Western institutions are adopted, "or if important Islamic principles are defined in a rigid and traditional manner" (al-Qaradawi 2009, 21).

CONCLUSION

As Yusuf al-Qaradawi states, the "essence of democracy" irrespective of academic definitions "is that people choose who rules over them and manages their affairs", "that no ruler or regime they dislike is forced upon them", and that "they have the right to call the ruler to account if [they err] and to remove [them] from office in case of misconduct" (al-Qaradawi 2009, 232). He further argues that anyone who "contemplates the essence of democracy finds that it [therfore] accords with the essence of Islam" (al-Qaradawi 2009, 232). Where Orientalists and Islamists essentialize Islam and place it in opposition to democracy, many theorists and ordinary Muslims advocate for the cooperation of Islamic practice and democratic practice in their systems of governance. Democratization does not necessarily mean Westernization, contrary to the Islamist perspective, and contrary to the Orientalist perspective, Islam is not an ahistorical phenomenon, but the interpretation of the Sharia is context dependent.

Just like there is no one definition of democracy, there should be no one standard to follow for nations who aspire to incorporate democratic principles in their way of government. To question whether Islam is compatible with democracy positions Islam as a rigid, ahistorical concept that must fit into another rigid, ahistorical concept of democracy. Rather, both Islam and democracy are ideas with diversities in opinion and practice. Arguments about Islam's democratic or undemocratic nature are often essentialist and reduce the practice of Islam to be static and over-reliant on text. Meanwhile, Islam is something that is practiced by people who have the right to make decisions in a way that they consider fit. To assert that Islam is incompatible with democracy reduces Islam to an essentialist reading while also prioritizing Western ideas over all else.

While it was beyond the scope of this paper, a future avenue of research could be to investigate whether Islamic practices and principles are inherently democratic and if they can therefore ameliorate democratic practices elsewhere. Furthermore, this future research could investigate the economic-centered and egoistic concept of politics and government and seek to bring in elements of ethics, humanism, morality, and maybe religion in a broad, liberatory concept.

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