Is Democracy Consistent with Islam?

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Global Research, February 16, 2019

Theme: History

Most people are under the impression that democracy and Islam are somehow incompatible. However, I don't see any contradiction between democracy and Islam, as such. Although, I admit, there is some friction between Islam and liberalism.

When we say there is a contradiction between Islam and democracy, we make a category mistake which is a serious logical fallacy. There is a fundamental difference between democracy and liberalism. Democracy falls in the category of politics and governance, whereas liberalism falls in the category of culture. We must be precise about the definitions of terms that we employ in political science.

Democracy is simply a representative political system that ensures representation, accountability and the right of electorate to vote governments in and to vote governments out. In this sense, when we use the term democracy, we mean a multi-party, representative political system that confers legitimacy upon a government which comes to power through an election process which is a contest between more than one political parties in order to ensure that it is voluntary. Thus, democracy is nothing more than a multi-party, representative political system.

Some normative scientists, however, get carried away in their enthusiasm and ascribe meanings to technical terminology which are quite subjective and fallacious. Some will use the adjective liberal to describe the essence of democracy as liberal democracy while others will arbitrarily call it informed or enlightened democracy. In my opinion, the only correct adjective that can be used to describe the essence of democracy is representative democracy.

After settling on theoretical aspect, let us now apply these concepts to the reality of practical world, and particularly to the phenomena of nascent democratic movements of the Arab Spring. It's a fact that the ground realities of the Arab and Islamic worlds fall well short of the ideal liberal democratic model of the developed Western world.

However, there is a lot to be optimistic about. When the Arab Spring revolutions occurred in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain and Yemen, and before the Arab Spring turned into an abysmal winter in Libya and Syria, some utopian dreamers were not too hopeful about the outcome of those movements.

Unlike the socialist revolutions of 1960s and 1970s, when the visionaries of yore used to have a magic wand of bringing about a fundamental structural change that would culminate into equitable distribution of wealth overnight, the neoliberal democratic movements of the present times are merely a step in the right direction that will usher the Arab and Islamic worlds into an era of relative peace and progress.

The Arab Spring movements are not led by the likes of **Gamal Abdel Nasser, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Jawahar Lal Nehru** and other such charismatic messiahs that socialist thinkers are so fond of. But these revolutions are the grassroots movements of a society in transition from an abject stagnant state toward a dynamic and representative future.

Let us be clear about one thing first and foremost: any government – whether democratic or autocratic – would follow the same economic model under the contemporary global political and economic dispensation. It's a growth-based neoliberal model as opposed to an equality-based socialist model. It's a fact that the developing, Third World economies with large populations and meager resources cannot be compared with the social democracies of Scandinavian countries where per capita incomes are more than $40,000.

A question would naturally arise that what would the Arab Spring movements accomplish if the resultant democratic governments would follow the same old neoliberal and growth-centered economic policies? It should be kept in mind here that democracy is not the best of systems because it is the most efficient system of governance. Top-down autocracies are more efficient than democracies.

But democracy is a representative political system. It brings about a grassroots social change. Enfranchisement, representation, transparency, accountability, checks and balances, rule of law and consequent institution-building, nation-building and consistent long term policies; political stability and social prosperity are the rewards of representative democracy.

Immanuel Kant sagaciously posited that moral autonomy produces moral responsibility and social maturity. This social axiom can also be applied to politics and governance. Political autonomy and self-governance engender political responsibility and social maturity.

A top-down political system is dependent on the artificial external force that keeps it going. The moment that external force is removed, the society reverts back to its previous state and the system collapses. But a grassroots and bottom-up political system evolves naturally and intrinsically. We must not expect from the Arab Spring movements to produce results immediately. Bear in mind that the evolution of the Western culture and politics happened over a course of many centuries.

More to the point, the superficially "socialist" Arab revolutions of 1960s and 1970s only mobilized the elite classes. Some working classes might have been involved, but the tone and tenor of those revolutions was elitist and that's the reason why those revolutions failed to produce desirable long-term results. The Arab Spring movements, by contrast, have mobilized the urban middle class of the Arab societies in the age of electronic media and information technology.

In the nutshell, if the Arab Spring movements are not about radical redistribution of wealth, or about creating a liberal utopia in the Middle East overnight, what is the goal of these movements then? Let me try to explain the objectives of the Arab Spring movements by way of an allegory.

Democracy is like a school and people are like children. We only have two choices: one, to keep people under paternalistic dictatorships; two, to admit them in the school of representative democracy and let them experience democracy as a lived reality rather than some stale and sterile theory. The first option will only breed stunted bigots, but the second

option will engender an educated human resource that doesn't just consume resources but also creates new resources.

Finally, I would like to clarify that the militant phenomena in Libya and Syria has been distinct and separate from the political and democratic phenomena of the Arab Spring movements as in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain and Yemen.

A question arises that when political movements for enfranchisement turn violent, do their objectives cease to be legitimate? No, the objectives remain the same, but from a pacifist standpoint, we ought to make a distinction between political movements for democratic reforms, to which we should lend our moral support; and the militant phenomena, which must be avoided at any cost due to immense human suffering that proxy wars and military interventions anywhere in the world inevitably entail.

In legal jurisprudence, a distinction is generally drawn between lawful and unlawful assembly. It is the inalienable right of the people to peacefully assemble to press their demands for political reform. But the moment such protests become militarized and violent, they cease to be lawful.

Expecting from heavily armed militants, as in Libya and Syria, who have been described by the Western mainstream media as "moderate rebels," to bring about political reform and positive social change is not only naïve but is bordering on insanity.

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