

The Hypocrisy of Al-Demoqratia

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So this is how democracy works?

In 2004, France banned headscarves and school principals chased after young “defiant” Muslim girls who continued to cover their heads in school. Now, following a national referendum, Switzerland has banned the construction of minarets, because minarets also somehow symbolize oppression. Thanks to the dedicated action of the far-right Swiss People’s Party, the Alpine skies will be free from the snaking menace, which would spread intolerance and taint the splendor of Swiss architecture.

In between these two peculiar events, the targeting of Muslims in Western countries and the subjugation of entire Muslim nations all over the world has never ceased. Not for a day.

Moreover, the collective targeting of small or large Muslim communities in Western countries, and the deliberate abuse and degradation of Muslim individuals and Islamic symbols (from the Holy Koran to the Prophet Mohammed) has also never ceased.

Bizarrely, most of these actions have been done through “democratic” channels and justified in the name of democracy, on the basis of upholding the principles of secularism and Western values.

Many thoughts come to mind here; all unreservedly angry.

I remember when the word “democracy” used to resonate so loudly among Arabs and Muslims around the world. The more they were denied it, the more they yearned for it. University campuses in Cairo, Gaza and Karachi took their student union elections so very seriously. Innocent blood was spilled in clashes around campuses as students desperately tried to express their right to vote, to speak out and to assemble.

Those were the days, when al-demoqratia, Arabic for democracy, was the buzzword in the Middle East and beyond. Even Palestinian political prisoners held their elections, ever so faithfully, surrounded by highly fortified towers and under the deriding gaze of armed men in the unforgiving heat of the Naqab desert.

Arab and Muslim masses were keen on democracy to the extent that there was a near consensus that democracy, although a Western conception, could be distinguished from the many ills invited by Western interventions, imperialism and wars that scarred and continued to impair the collective Muslim psyche.

An entire school of Muslim thought was in fact established around the concept that democracy and Islam are very much compatible. Such a notion goes back to Egypt’s Azharite scholar Rifa’a al-Tahtawi, who argued in the first half of the 19th century that the

principles of European modernity were compatible with Islam.

“Al-Tahtawi’s work influenced the philosopher Muhammad Abduh [1849-1905], another Azharite who is often described as the founder of Islamic modernism, which is captured in his statement that in Europe he found Islam without Muslims, while in Egypt he found Muslims without Islam,” wrote German anthropologist, Frank Fanselow.

If one sets his prejudices aside to ponder this for a moment, one would realize the intellectual valor it takes to consider and even embrace commonalities with the very powers that have instilled so much harm and fear.

Even in their darkest, least proud moments, Muslim intellectuals and nations displayed impressive open-mindedness. They are hardly ever credited for that.

More recently, in Egypt, people tried hard to vote, in the face of beatings, public humiliation and imprisonment. In Palestine in 2006 the price was even higher – starvation. Gaza continues to endure under a medieval Israeli siege, ultimately because of an election.

Muslim communities in the West have long been considered the luckiest; after all, they live in the abodes of democracy. They drink from the fountain of rights and freedoms that never runs dry.

However, these idealized assumptions missed the fact that Western democracy was conditional. And unconditional democracy can only be a farce.

Much has been said to explain the West’s faltering on its own commitment to democracy. No, the tragedy of September 11, 2001, is hardly the defining moment that created the growing chasm that made the West fearful of Islam. Despite all that has taken place since then – the constant spewing out of right-wing hatred, evangelical fanatic preaching and all the rest – America is still more tolerant than Europe. Nor was the growing anti-Muslim sentiment in Europe a response in solidarity to America’s woes.

Honestly, the French are not fond of Americans, nor are the Germans necessarily that passionate about the Swiss. But this didn’t stop a German Christian Democratic state interior minister, Volker Bouffier, from making a “recommendation” to Muslim communities in his own country: “Naturally the Muslims in Germany have a right to build mosques. But they should make sure not to overwhelm the German population with them.”

How do you overwhelm people with minarets? Is this a post-post-post-modernistic logic that we are yet to be informed of?

There are only four minarets in the entire country of Switzerland, a country with a population of approximately 7.6 million people. How overwhelming can that be? And aren’t religious freedom and the freedom of collective and individual expression basic rights guaranteed by democratic values?

But this is hardly about a 4.8-meter tall minaret in the northern Swiss town of Langenthal. It’s about the fact that the one who suggested the structure is a Muslim furniture salesman by the name of Mutalip Karaademi. He didn’t know, of course, that his modest idea of adding a minaret to the community’s mosque would generate a nationwide referendum, and an international “controversy”.

Karaademi was not trying to “Islamificate” the Swiss. He just wanted his community to have a place for worship (as opposed to the unused paint factory it currently uses for prayer), to be able to express its collective identity without fear. Ironically enough, the Muslim community in Langenthal is mostly Albanians, refugees who fled Kosovo seeking escape and deliverance.

What a strange paradox: Muslims escaping to the West, physically and figuratively, only to find double standards, self-negation and, at times, pure hypocrisy.

For now, however, a new consensus is forming: democracy can be invoked and used against Muslims only, and not for Muslims. It can be manipulated to deny them their identity in Europe and their freedom in Palestine, to ensure their subjugation in Iraq and in Afghanistan, and to meddle in their internal affairs everywhere else.

Al-demoqratia, indeed.

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