
Islam and Democracy

MARK GREEN AND HALLAM FERGUSON

Needless to say, it has been a tough year for democracy in the Middle East. In April 2014, a presidential election in Afghanistan that initially showed great promise was bogged down by accusations of fraud and threats of violence. A month later, Egyptian General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi swept away the last vestiges of the Arab Spring in his country with 97 percent of the vote in an “election” that didn’t even pretend to be free and fair. Next door in Libya, a succession of elected interim governments were gradually overwhelmed by battles among armed gangs and militias over resources and power. Perhaps the darkest turn yet began last June, when the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), an abomination born in Iraq’s chaos but grown into a monster in Syria, came home to roost. In little more than a month, the apocalyptic cult routed the Iraqi army and took control of nearly a quarter of the country. ISIS proclaimed the re-establishment of the medieval Caliphate, even as it proudly used social media to disseminate grisly videos of its atrocities.

It is no wonder, then, that so many observers have despaired over the region’s prospects for democracy. Every so often, a tantalizing sign appears that causes democracy dreamers to see opportunities for more citizen-oriented governance in the Middle East, only to have their hopes dashed against the rocks of turmoil and authoritarian clampdown. For the better part of a generation, the region has seemingly rocked from one crisis to the next.

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Unfortunately, disappointment about setbacks and missed opportunities has led some observers to misconstrue these events as evidence of something else: that Muslims “can’t handle” liberty and democracy; that Islam is somehow inherently incompatible with democracy; or, worst of all, that the world would have been better off if the Arab Spring had never happened.

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three largest democracies in the world. The largest, India, is home to 165 million Muslims, who as patriotic Indians participate regularly and constructively in elections and in civil society; Muslims account for one out of ten voters in 40 percent of India’s parliamentary constituencies, and are an important demographic courted by parties there.¹ Muslims are also committed participants in the United States, the world’s second

largest democracy, where no one could seriously argue that Muslim Americans are not capable of engaging in politics or governance.

Perhaps the best example of Muslim participation and action within a democracy is in Indonesia, which is the world’s third largest democracy and is 88 percent Muslim.² Indonesia has sought innovative ways to effectively balance Islamic traditions with a commitment to secularism, in order to build a nation that encompasses a plurality of faiths. Since the end of the Suharto dictatorship in 1998, the country has worked to integrate democratic institutions, including a free media, into that equation. Last July, Indonesia held the second largest single-day vote in the world, and elected Joko Widodo, a political outsider whose story of humble beginnings, common touch, and record of clean government would appeal to voters in any established democracy.

In addition to engagement in some of the world’s largest democracies, Muslims are also driving democracy forward in some of the world’s smallest. Despite the wide coverage of setbacks in African democracies in recent years, we somehow overlook examples of largely successful Muslim majority democracies on the continent. Senegal is a vibrant democracy in sub-Saharan Africa where 94 percent of the country’s 13.6 million residents identify as Muslim. The country has celebrated an uninterrupted series of

peaceful transfers of power since independence in 1960. In its 2012 election, when then-President Abdoulaye Wade ran for a third term (after persuading his hand-picked judiciary to decree that the constitutional term limit did not apply to him), voters repudiated his plans by electing President Macky Sall instead.

Mali, Senegal's majority Muslim neighbor to the east, enjoyed a similar reputation for democracy until 2012, when a long-simmering Tuareg rebellion in the north boiled over and a military junta overthrew the elected president. However, within months of the coup, military leaders began efforts to return the country to democratic rule. In July 2013, Mali held a new presidential election that was widely deemed credible and transparent. If the coup is evidence that democracies, especially young democracies, can be fragile, then the restoration of democracy is surely evidence of how resilient a democracy can be—including in a country that is majority Muslim. Ronald Reagan's claim in his historic speech before the British Parliament in 1982—"democracy is not a fragile flower"—is just as applicable in a Muslim majority country as in any other.³

To the north, the Arab world continues its own halting march toward greater political inclusiveness. Tunisia has faced many trials in its democratic transition since the 2011 revolution that overthrew dictator Ben Ali, including cultural upheaval, political assassinations, and demonstrations. At every turn, however, Tunisian

political parties have ultimately pursued policies of compromise for the best interests of their country. After the first post-Arab Spring elections in October 2011 gave the Islamist party Ennahda a plurality of seats in the new National Constituent Assembly, the party was able to create a governing coalition with two of its secular rivals. Then, after a troubled two years in government, in September 2013, Ennahda agreed to cede authority to an interim government rather than cling to power in the face of popular protests. Four months later, Tunisian Islamist and secular parties heatedly debated their liberal, post-Arab Spring democratic constitution, article by article, and then passed it almost unanimously. In each stage of the democratic transition, Tunisia's parties of all ideological stripes showed a willingness to put their country before their own political interests.

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Even if Islamic democracy doomsayers qualify their gloomy observations by limiting them to the Middle East and not considering Africa, they are ignoring the efforts of many leaders to bring greater citizen-oriented government to their lands. Jordan and Morocco are cautiously opening space for greater political participation, by instating an independent election commission to oversee parliamentary and municipal elections in Jordan, and laying the foundation for devolution of power to the regions in Morocco. Furthermore, although the country remains beset by violence, it is important to remember that Iraq, too, has made significant democratic progress and has hit the historic benchmark of democratic transition from one prime minister to the next. While no one should mistake the country for a European or Jeffersonian democracy, Iraq has gone through no less than three full election cycles since the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime. Today, it enjoys a largely free media and active civil society. Democratic consolidation grows in small steps: from election to election, from one peaceful handover of power to the next.

Indeed, it wouldn't be much of an exaggeration to say that the Islamic world is in the midst of a long-term *expansion* of democracy. In the last two years, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iraq have all hit historic milestones of democratic handovers, and each country has freer media and civil society than it did ten years ago. The Arab Spring, although now clearly suffering through a period of retrenchment, and at risk of further setbacks if ISIS and its ilk are left unchecked, should be seen as part of this larger and long-term trend. While the Arab Spring certainly didn't transform or even advance democracy in every country it touched, it has fostered changes in the social and political makeup of the Middle East that will, hopefully, take stronger root in the long run.

All of this brings us to the demeaning suggestion many have made: that the Middle East would be better off under authoritarian rule. Let's be clear: if the Arab Spring had not occurred, Tunisia would have remained the personal property of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who systematically warped the laws and institutions of Tunisia for his and his family's profit. A report by the World Bank, published earlier this year, detailed the extent of this corruption: although Ben Ali family-owned businesses made up only 3 percent of the country's economic output, they accounted for an astonishing 21 percent of net private sector profits.⁴

This parasitic regime was sustained through the systematic application of state terror. During Ben Ali's rule, Amnesty International recorded year after year of organized harassment, torture, unfair trial, and lengthy imprisonment of political opponents, human rights defenders, journalists, and everyday citizens who dared to protest the high unemployment or crushing economic conditions.⁵ It was one such citizen, a fruit seller named Mohamed Bouazizi, who, in utter despair at regime mistreatment, set himself on fire. His ultimate protest lit up the social media world like Paul Revere's call, "the British are coming!" That call spread outward because it was fanned by young citizens who demanded a greater voice in shaping their future.

Make no mistake, Tunisia has a long way to go before it is a fully consolidated democracy. But it *is* on its way. Instead of suffering under the arbitrary whim of a dictator, today Tunisia is ruled by a democratic constitution that is heralded as the most liberal in the Arab World. It ensures the rights of women and minorities, and blazes a path marked by political pluralism and government by popular election. Every article of this constitution was vigorously debated by Tunisia's elected National Constituent Assembly. Compromise after compromise was forged across political ideolo-

gies to ensure the constitution's passage, and when the final votes were tallied, the constitution had nearly unanimous support. The constitution managed to meet the demands of both conservative Islamic parties and die-hard secularists, offering proof that under the right circumstances, these groups *can* co-exist and work together in the same political space. A video capturing the spontaneous celebration that broke out in the Assembly after the constitution's

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passage suggests some of the same emotions seen in videos of democracy activists on the Maidan reacting to news that Viktor Yanukovych had finally fled for Russia, or marking the fall of the Berlin Wall.⁶

Tunisia's emergence as a true democracy is far from complete, but the progress throughout the constitutional process is unmistakable. On October 26, 2014, Tunisia held parliamentary elections that my organization, the International Republican Institute (IRI), concluded were "credible, transparent and competitive for all political stakeholders."⁷ Some 3.2

million Tunisians turned out, despite threats of violence from extremist groups, and cast their votes. In all likelihood, the Tunisian Parliament will be led by a coalition of parties representing a wide variety of ideological interests. At the time this article went to print, Tunisia had just held a similarly successful presidential election, with a run-off scheduled for December 2014.

It is worth reminding ourselves that the path to democracy is often uneven, and it often moves at a pace too slow for impatient youth like those who took to the streets in Tunis, Cairo, and Tripoli in 2011. Our

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own first steps in democracy were often halting and sometimes off the mark. Remember the Articles of Confederation? Or the fact that the core text of our Constitution lacked a Bill of Rights? Or the great shame of how we mistreated women and African Americans for decades? We needed twenty-seven Amendments to our Constitution to get it right—and that's assuming we finally have.

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 The pursuit of freedom and liberty has never been an easy one; it has been fraught with dangers and setbacks. The path to democracy in the Middle East will be no easier. But those countries where initial hope has given way to the cynical re-imposition of authoritarianism show that the latter road is no road at all. Even before Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi was deposed by the military in 2013, democracy was struggling in the country, with worrying signs of suppression of minorities, civil society, and media. In December 2011, seventeen international and Egyptian NGOs were simultaneously raided, their property confiscated, and some of their employees detained. IRI was among these organizations. We had been working in Egypt since 2005 supporting political parties and civil society.

President Morsi's overthrow by the Egyptian military did little to improve the freedoms and fortunes of everyday Egyptians. Eight hundred protesters were killed in the immediate aftermath of the 2013 overthrow, and since then, some 40,000 Egyptian citizens have been detained on political charges, with 1,200 sentenced to death. Local and international journalists have been imprisoned and new and greater restrictions have been imposed on Egyptian and foreign NGOs. Is this the kind of autocrat that Islamic Democracy Doomsayers would like to see imposed elsewhere

in the Muslim world? Or would they prefer the Ben Ali brand, more kleptomaniacal and less brutal?

In his historic 1982 speech to the British Parliament, which launched IRI and other groups dedicated to fostering citizen-responsive government, President Reagan said, “We must be staunch in our conviction that freedom is not the sole prerogative of a lucky few, but the inalienable and universal right of all human beings.”⁸ Mohamed Bouazizi, the martyred fruit seller in Tunisia, whose death overturned both a despot and, to a degree, despotism itself, would likely agree with the U.S. president. Apparently, the same cannot be said of some of today’s foreign policy pundits. *f*

ENDNOTES

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- 2 Pew Research Centers Religion Public Life Project RSS, “Muslim Population of Indonesia,” November 4, 2010, <<http://www.pewforum.org/2010/11/04/muslim-population-of-indonesia/>> (accessed November 24, 2014).
- 3 Ronald Reagan, Speech, London, England, June 8, 1982, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, <<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1982/60882a.htm>> (accessed October 31, 2014).
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- 5 Amnesty International, <<http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/tunisia/report-2010>> (accessed October 31, 2014).
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- 7 International Republican Institute (IRI), October 27, 2014, <<http://www.iri.org/news-events-press-center/>> (accessed October 31, 2014).
- 8 Ronald Reagan, “*Address to Members of the British Parliament.*”