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## THE REALITY OF MUSLIM EXCEPTIONALISM

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Alfred Stepan (with Graeme B. Robertson) poses a provocative thesis in arguing that the “democracy gap” in the Arab world results from conditions peculiar to Arab countries rather than from the influence of Islamic religious beliefs.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the evidence that he offers is too weak to support this thesis, and the conclusions that he draws rest on assumptions open to serious criticism.

In the first place, the suggestion that the Arab states form a subset of majority-Muslim societies that politically, and not only culturally, can readily be distinguished from a non-Arab subset is questionable. Relying on the Freedom House and Polity IV surveys, Stepan cites (in Table 1 of his July 2003 essay) eight to eleven non-Arab Muslim-majority countries that have exhibited at least three consecutive years of moderately high political rights since 1972. If allowing “moderately high political rights” over short periods is the qualifying condition, then Arab-majority states such as Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, and Yemen have about as good a claim to be included. Before a “reverse wave” set in, a number of Arab-majority countries experienced a degree of liberalization and some competitive elections, as Stepan acknowledges. Indeed, “across the Arab world” during the 1980s and early 1990s, “limited experiments in top-down political liberalization proliferated.”<sup>2</sup> Yet by the criteria that Stepan applies—namely, Robert A. Dahl’s seven “institutional guarantees” ensuring political rights—almost all Muslim-majority countries, whether predominantly Arab or not, have comparably low overall Freedom House scores. In reviewing these scores recently, Freedom House president Adrian Karatnycky remarked that, among these states, only Mali and Senegal are in the Free category and that over the past thirty years, when there was an overall growth in the

number of countries ranked as Free, the predominantly Muslim states showed a “diametrically opposite trend.”<sup>3</sup> As Bernard Lewis has lately observed, although many Muslim countries have experimented with democratic institutions, “the record, with the exception of Turkey, is one of almost unrelieved failure.”<sup>4</sup>

Karatnycky has noted that “all Islamic-majority electoral democracies are found on the geographic and cultural edges of the Islamic world.”<sup>5</sup> Until the breakup of Yugoslavia, Muslims in the Balkans enjoyed a “truly ancient tradition of interfaith coexistence and inter-religious pluralism” with their Christian and Jewish neighbors.<sup>6</sup> This is quite different from the intolerant triumphalism rampant in the Islamic heartland where, as in Saudi Arabia, non-Muslims are not allowed to practice their faiths, and, in many Muslim-dominated countries and provinces, the *shari‘a* (Islamic legal code) has been made the basis of civil law binding upon Muslims and non-Muslims alike. More recently, an extremist, politicized version of Islam emanating from India and Pakistan (and with funding from Wahabi-dominated Saudi Arabia) has begun spreading fundamentalism among Asian Muslims.

Four of the more populous “Muslim-majority” countries listed by Stepan (in Table 1)—Nigeria, Pakistan, Sudan, and Turkey—are especially doubtful candidates for designation as “Muslim-majority states” of a democratic tendency. Nigeria, as Stepan admits, is at best a borderline Muslim-majority state, since its population is split about equally between Muslims and non-Muslims. Observers, moreover, divide over the question of whether Nigerian elections are truly competitive.<sup>7</sup> The northern Nigerian states in which Muslims predominate are anything but bastions of political and civil liberty. Stepan lists Sudan as “non-Arab Muslim,” yet 39 percent of its population is Arab, and this population, allied to other northern Muslims, has supported a decades-long campaign of repression against rebellious southern Sudanese Christians and animists that has cost an estimated two million lives. Pakistan’s current government came to power in a 1999 military coup, and radical fundamentalist parties strongly opposed to secular government now control at least one of its four provinces. Samuel P. Huntington’s 1991 observation continues to hold: “Pakistan has had military and bureaucratic rule interrupted by occasional elections.”<sup>8</sup> For a different reason, it is misleading to identify Turkey simply as a “Muslim-majority country” if the aim is to show that Islamic belief is compatible with democracy. Turkey’s republican constitution was adopted as part of a secularist revolution in the early 1920s that decreed an end to the traditional religiopolitical offices of sultan and caliph, along with religious courts and schools. Since then, Islamist parties have found themselves forcibly suppressed or compelled to respect secularism. Surely the more relevant implication of the Turkish experience is that Islamic beliefs may have to be overridden or be denied embodiment in social and political institutions if democracy is to

rise in Muslim-majority countries, but that doing so is very likely to arouse a backlash which will sow persistent tension between the secular democratic state and the most ardent traditional believers.

Remove these four dubious cases and what remains is a handful of smaller states—ranging from Comoros with a population of 700,000 to Malaysia with 22.6 million—that are home to only a tiny fraction of the world’s estimated 1 to 1.5 billion Muslims. A great many Muslims are, to be sure, minority citizens of clearly democratic states, such as India, and others are majorities in states which have had at least some experience of liberalization and electoral competition, but insofar as Stepan’s case rests on the supposedly democratic character of the Muslim-majority states he adduces, it is a house of cards, and one constructed of only a partial deck at that.

Comoros happens to be a member of the Arab League and its current chief of state took power in a 1999 military coup—the latest of a series of coups and coup attempts since independence. Malaysia has experienced sustained party and electoral competition, but its government rules with so heavy a hand that it has been described as “more of a quasi democracy.”<sup>9</sup>

The weakness of the evidence would be especially obvious if the empirical range were broadened to consider the proportion of Muslim-majority states, both Arab and non-Arab, that are authoritarian. A table examining the fifty or so Muslim-majority states would show that most are far from hospitable to democracy. Stepan acknowledges that all the Arab countries remain outside the democratic camp, with the exception of Lebanon when it was Christian-dominated. But contrary to the Polity IV rankings cited (in Stepan’s Table 4), that is also true for most non-Arab Muslim-majority states, including the Muslim-majority “stans” of Central Asia, and of course Iran, the largest non-Arab Muslim state in the Middle East apart from Turkey. In Indonesia, the corrupt authoritarian regimes of Sukarno and Suharto were superseded in 1998 by a democratically elected government, but in view of the continuing role of the military in suppressing secessionists and the apparently rising threat posed by Islamist movements, it is premature to conclude that democracy has been well established in this most populous of Muslim-majority states. There have certainly been prodemocratic stirrings in Iran of late, but the Islamic Republic continues to rest on the principles enunciated by the Ayatollah Khomeini (1900–89), who denounced democracy as a pernicious example of “Westoxification.”

Khomeini and other Muslim theologians, both Shi’ite and Sunni, say

that since God is the sole source of all law, it is blasphemous to suppose that human legislatures can decide what is lawful by majority rule. In the Islamic state, wrote Sayyid Abu'l-A'la Mawdudi (1903–79), founder of the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami of Pakistan, “there is no legislator . . . and no law giver, for the only law deserving obedience is the law of God.”<sup>10</sup> Although many scholars would agree with Stepan that Islam, like other great world religions, is multivocal rather than univocal, the general bias of Muslim thinking, Arab and non-Arab, is in principle against the individualism, pluralism, and secularism characteristic of modern democracies. Mainstream Islamic traditionalists believe that there should be no distinction between the religious and the political, and that the purpose of government is to protect the community from corrupting external influences and to enforce the ethical precepts and behavioral injunctions of Islam. The attitude of the politically radical “Islamists,” Arab and non-Arab alike, is still more extreme. They oppose all forms of secularization and modernization as well as freedom of thought in matters of faith and morals, the political equality of women, and the notion that believers can choose to conform or not to conform to Islamic law. Khomeini rejected a proposal in 1979 to call the new Iranian state “a Democratic Islamic Republic,” because he associated democracy with his secular opponents and the West.<sup>11</sup>

### The Irony of *Ijtihad*

Stepan notes that several Islamic concepts, including *ijtihad* (independent reasoning or creative adaptation) and *shura* (consultation), provide a basis for a move toward democracy.<sup>12</sup> One Sunni school of jurisprudence (the Hanbali) allows *ijtihad* in matters not covered by scripture but otherwise the *ulama* (scholars of religious law) have claimed that the “doors” of *ijtihad* were closed in the tenth century C.E., a decision taken to avoid upsetting the consensus that the different schools had reached.<sup>13</sup> Ironically, it is the Islamists who now rely on the claim to *ijtihad*—revived by Salafi reformers in the nineteenth century—to undermine the authority of traditionalist clerics and justify Islamist *fatwas* authorizing *jihad* against infidels and apostates.<sup>14</sup> *Shura* has hardly had a democratic influence in Shi'ite Iran, where the elected legislature is subordinate to the clerically controlled Council of Guardians, or in Sunni (and Wahabi) Saudi Arabia, where the requirement for consultation is said to be satisfied by the royal practice of receiving subjects' petitions. As a quasi-official account proudly explains:

Under the Saudi system of government, there is a highly active and highly sophisticated consultative process which provides powerful and continuous input to Government thinking. . . . The Saudi system of government . . . is not a move towards Western-style democracy, much less an imitation of Western-

style democratic reform. It is an organic development of the consultative basis of the relationship between ruler and ruled that is inherent in Islamic tradition.<sup>15</sup>

It is certainly possible, nevertheless, that certain elements of Islamic belief could serve to support democracy, rather in the way the spiritual egalitarianism of the Gospels and the precedents of apostolic fraternity, conciliarism, and monastic elections helped rationalize the Roman Catholic Church's transition from a belief that royalism is the form of government most in accord with the divine order, voiced by St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) and by Dante Alighieri in his *De Monarchia* (ca. 1310), to the strikingly different attitude toward civil government expressed in Jacques Maritain's *Christianity and Democracy* (1945). But for the time being, Islamic belief is dominated either by the insistence common among Sunnis that *shari'a* obviates the need for human legislation or the insistence emanating from Shi'ite Iran on the political supremacy of the clerical "jurisprudent" as the ultimate earthly interpreter of God's will. Unless ascendancy passes to those who favor a version of Islam that allows for the separation of religious authority from political rule, the belief that Islam must form the basis of the state will pose a major obstacle to democratization throughout the Muslim world.

In this regard, comparisons with the Western experience are instructive but also cautionary. It is true that until fairly recently spokesmen for Christianity did not support democracy any more than spokesmen for Islam have. But as many Middle East specialists have pointed out, Bernard Lewis notably among them, the initial antagonism between the state and the early Christian communities prepared the way for an acceptance of a form of civil government different from that of the church and institutionally separate.<sup>16</sup> Islam differed at its origin in positing a synthesis of faith and polity. Whereas the Christian Gospels tell the faithful to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's, Muslims learn from their scriptures that Muhammad was at once the messenger of God and the font of civil and political authority, the collector of taxes, arbiter of civil justice, and commander of armies. Muslims learn, moreover, that among the original *umma* (community of believers)—a group still taken as a model—"Islam was born as a sect *and as a society*" in which Muhammad revealed and applied the law that governed all activities.<sup>17</sup> Those who claim to adhere to this early experience most scrupulously—including the Shi'ite mullahs of Iran and the Sunni Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as the violent Wahabi radical Osama bin Laden and his followers—all insist that "the Koran is our constitution" and that the only legitimate form of government is what amounts to a revived caliphate, combining spiritual and temporal authority and relying on *shari'a*.

In his conclusion, Stepan adds the suggestion that what has kept the Arab states from embracing democracy is the persistence of the Arab-Israeli conflict and that a resolution of the conflict could promote democratiza-

tion in the Arab states. He reasons that hostility to the perceived threat posed by Israel and the perceived injustices that it has wreaked upon Palestinian Arabs help to account for the survival of authoritarian regimes and their bloated military budgets. Presumably, rulers play upon public anger to support the need for dictatorial regimes and military establishments, and the fury of the street is directed against Israel rather than domestic inequity and corruption. This is at best only a partial explanation of the persistence of authoritarian regimes in the “frontline states” of Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia, all of which are mainly dedicated to maintaining their own power and privileges. But can it account even partially for the rise and persistence of authoritarianism in Libya, Sudan, and Iraq, or for the persistence of absolutism in Morocco and Tunisia and the failure of democratic reform in Algeria?

There are better and more obvious explanations. In the Arab countries, as studies such as the two recent UN-sponsored Arab human-development reports make clear, all the usual Third World barriers to democracy are much in evidence: illiteracy and ignorance; tribalism and ethnic conflict; abysmal poverty for the masses coupled with privilege and luxury for the few; relatively high rates of population growth in low-growth economies where the numerous young are then sentenced to joblessness; the repression of women; and rule by corrupt, self-aggrandizing dynasts and dictators. Add to all these conditions the prominence of spiritual authorities who interpret Islam as a prop for authoritarianism or theocracy or the wholesale rejection of outside influences, and you have a recipe for resistance to democratization that will prove particularly obdurate in Arab and other Muslim-majority states.

For democratization to take hold in more Muslim-majority states, there must arise a *modus vivendi* between Islam and a social system in which individual freedom and social and political pluralism are accepted. Given the myriad difficulties that have sprung from the merger of Islam and the state, perhaps the idea of separating them may prove appealing, as it has done in Turkey, as it was supposed to do in Pakistan (whose founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, was a secularist), and as it may yet do in Algeria and post-Saddam Iraq. A more flexible, pragmatic, or “liberal” version of Islam may come to the fore, allowing for man-made civil law and representative government, as it has (albeit under strong outside influence) in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The imposition or promotion of democracy by external powers (as in Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Iraq) could produce economic and social benefits strong enough to create constituencies that will hold the line against regression. The inducements of participation in the global economy may also affect Islamic political movements, as seems to be happening in Turkey, where the prospect of membership in the European Union may be influencing a party with Islamist roots to become a self-proclaimed Muslim equivalent of Europe’s secularized Christian Democratic parties. One way or another, however, Islamic beliefs will

need to be reconciled to democracy, in both Arab and non-Arab settings, if democratic transitions are to be achieved in Muslim-majority states.

## NOTES

The editorial work on this essay was handled by former associate editor John Gould.

1. Alfred Stepan with Graeme B. Robertson, "An 'Arab' More Than 'Muslim' Electoral Gap," *Journal of Democracy* 14 (July 2003): 30–59.
2. Steven Heydemann, "Middle East Studies After 9/11: Defending the Discipline," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (July 2002): 102–108. See also the contributions to "Democratization in the Arab World?" *Journal of Democracy* 13 (October 2002): 6–68.
3. Adrian Karatnycky, "The 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Freedom House Survey; Liberty's Advances in a Troubled World," *Journal of Democracy* 14 (January 2003): 103.
4. Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 117–18.
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8. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 308.
9. Zakaria Haji Ahmad, "Malaysia: Quasi Democracy in a Divided Society," in Larry Diamond, Juan J. Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds., *Democracy in Developing Countries: Asia* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1989), 347–81.
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13. Dilip Hiro, *War Without End: The Rise of Islamist Terrorism and the Global Response* (London: Routledge, 2002), 26, 126.
14. Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, trans. Carol Volk (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 32–33, 103.
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16. Bernard Lewis, *The Middle East: A History of the Last 2,000 Years* (New York: Scribner, 1995), 53–55.
17. Olivier Roy, *Failure of Political Islam*, 12. Emphasis added.