

Democracy in Islam: Myth or Reality

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The solutions to the many problems of the world are in our classrooms, and global peace can be best achieved by promoting the spirit of democracy in our schools. In the history of American education, schools have always been used as tools of reform, and the most important lessons of the 21st century (in addition to teaching the advancement of technology and science) would be to teach the skills of living in peace and harmony in the world. At the heart of democracy lies the ideals of equality, justice, and fairness for all; democracy is not a form of government or theory but rather a way of life. In no other time in the history of our nation have our democratic principles been put to the test than it is today; hence, it is more important to teach about democracy today!

As educators begin to focus on teaching the different forms of government to our young citizens, the future leaders, it is vital that they give a fair picture of democracy. The Muslim world and Islam today have been distorted greatly, and one of the forms of distortion is the misinformation or lack of information about Islamic history. It may surprise many to hear that democracy has been at the cornerstone of Islam; unfortunately today this information is covered by the debris of terrorism and fundamentalism, the wars and destructions around the Muslim world and the Middle East. Organizations such as Council of American Islamic Relations (CAIR), Florida Law Related Education (FLREA), and State Bar of Texas can help educate to clear such misunderstandings.

Although only 15% of the total Muslim population of the world consists of Arabs, Islam and Arab have become synonymous after the recent attacks of September 11, 2001. More focus has been laid on the area of Middle East than any other part of the Muslim world. Asad AbuKhalil in his article The Islamic World Needs Secularism, states that Islam has been used by governments for centuries for political purposes, and it has consequently affected various aspects of Muslim life. But the questions of Islam and democracy as well as of Islam and secularism are often discussed in ways that imply a peculiar anti-democratic streak in Islam. Hence it becomes even more important for the west, and especially the United States a leading nation to gain more knowledge about the two from an unbiased perspective.

The last decade has brought political changes in several Arab countries that “are now leading to democratization of one form or another. Democratization of the political system occurred in Jordan, Algeria, Yemen and Lebanon, in spite of the many limitations and challenges of these countries. AbuKhalil emphasizes that “Democracy, as an aspiration and not as a political actuality, is now sweeping the entire region. Since the early 1980s, Arab men and women have clearly voiced their deep desire for democratic changes in their respective countries.” “The subject of democracy and openness has been the focus of Arab intellectual debates since before the demise of communist rule. Recent events in the Arab world have also forced them to believe that nationalism or “unity without democracy will be short-lived.” The ideological debate in the Arab world today, particularly in the scholarly writings, focuses on the way in which Islam, Arab nationalism and democracy can be linked together harmoniously. (AbuKhalil, 1995)

Unfortunately, Islam has been seen as a hindrance to democracy and a threat to the west. The division of east and west have for long been seen on opposite ends and against each

other, be it cultures or ideologies; Educating one's self and others about the uniqueness and different perspectives would help ease tensions between the western and eastern countries. The next few years will be as important for democracy's evolution as for Islam's. For two millennia democracy has taken root only in Western cultures. One of the next major global challenges will be determining whether democracy is adaptable to Eastern countries, including Islamic and Confucian societies, and vice versa. This is a moment to encourage, rather than obstruct, Islam's expression in pluralist forms." "The Islamic resurgence clearly presents a challenge to the West. But it also provides enormous opportunity." (Robin Wright, 1995) A time for opportunity to also educate the students, both Americans and Muslim-Americans about the truth about Islam and Democracy, and that democracy in the United States should mean the same to all Americans, regardless of their religion, ethnicity and cultural background.

Democracy in Islam

Democracy is not new to Islam. The foundation of the first government in the history of Islam was laid on democracy. "That Muslims attach great significance to their organization as a political community can be seen in the fact that their calendar is dated neither from the birth nor the death of the Prophet, but from the establishment of the first Muslim policy in the city-state of Madinah in 622. Before Madinah was founded, the Arabs had no state to "establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty." (Ahmad, 2003)

President Bush had rightly stated in his speech during the 20th anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington D.C. on November 6, 2003:

It should be clear to all that Islam—the faith of one-fifth of humanity—is consistent with democratic rule. Democratic progress is found in many predominantly Muslim countries—in Turkey and Indonesia, and Senegal and Albania, Niger and Sierra Leone. Muslim men and women are good citizens of India and South Africa, of the nations of Western Europe, and of the United States of America.

More than half of all the Muslims in the world live in freedom under democratically constituted governments. They succeed in democratic societies, not in spite of their faith, but because of it. A religion that demands individual moral accountability, and encourages the encounter of the individual with God, is fully compatible with the rights and responsibilities of self-government.

[\(www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003\)](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003)

President Bush further stated that the challenges that the Middle East is going through during the present times, whether it be poverty or the lack of rights for women, should not be misunderstood that this is due to Islam but it was the result of colonialism leading to the establishment of dictatorships. He emphasizes that “These are not the failures of a culture or a religion. These are the failures of political and economic doctrines.” He further states that any “working democracies always need time to develop—as did our own. We’ve taken a 200-year journey toward inclusion and justice—and this makes us patient and understanding as other nations are at different stages of this journey”.

There are certain important points to remember as one searches democracy in the history of Islam. The concept of democracy is present in the Qur'an as the Qur'an covers everyday life, including the political structure. Since Islam is a way of life, democracy fits in well with it – freedom of speech, religion, equality, are the rights of the people as long as they are well balanced.

Prophet Muhammad applied democratic principles in the establishment of the Muslim community 1500 years ago. The two major principles of democracy practiced during this time were: The concept of Bay'ah (voting) where the Qur'an says that the “ruler cannot rule without the consent of the people.” For example, Abu Bakr was the first elected Khalifa. He was democratically elected in the same way the earlier U.S. president George Washington was elected. A large number of Sahaba (companions of the prophet) would gather in the Saqifa where different parties would put forward different nominations open for debate and then would pick out a single nominee like the caucuses in the different parties in a constitutional democracy. At the time of Abu Bakr there were not two parties but three, and each party came up with their own nomination (Al Muhajeroon with candidate Abu Baker; Alansar with Saad bin Ubada; and Ali Bin Abi Talib and Abdullah Ibn Alzubir in a mixture of Muhajeroon and Ansar as the third party). After the individual caucuses the three major groups met in the Saqifa of Banu Saeda and agreed on Abu Bakr after much heated debates. Abu Bakr finally emerged as the nominee and he was presented to the masses as the candidate for them to make a final vote. In other words Abu Bakr did not become the Khalifa until the masses gave him the Biya, similar to the Democratic and Republican parties. Thus, “Abu Bakr’s election as the first caliph demonstrates the acceptability of the Electoral College as a method of electing the head of state.” (Ahmad, 2003)

Also, lack of a single model of elections described in the Quran shows that the model is not intended to be one stagnant for all times but it should always have an element of shura or democracy.

The concept of the Shura (consultation) is very similar to the democratic principle of debate and agreement. It is the community as a whole, not an individual that owns or exercises power. In a chapter on Al-Shura the Qur'an describes Muslim societies as one in which individuals manage their affairs through consultation. Shura is similar to direct democracy and is considered as a personal duty, which no one can perform on behalf of another. Shura is obligatory on Muslims as the five daily prayers are; like prayers Muslims are urged to practice shura in their daily work, family lives, and community

affairs. John Voll and John Esposito, 1995 in their article Islam Has Strong Democratic Traditions, emphasize on the Operational Concepts for Islamic Democracy. “Several Islamic concepts have a key role in the development of Islamic democracy: consultation (shura), consensus (ijma), and independent interpretive judgment (ijtihad).” These interpretations, like the “interpreted concepts such as citizens and parliament in the Western tradition, they have become crucial concepts for the articulation of Islamic democracy.” Thus, “Consultation, consensus, and independent judgment provide the basic concepts for understanding the relationship between Islam and democracy in the contemporary world, and an effective foundation to build an Islamic basis for democracy.”

The first constitution during the prophet’s life was the Charter of Medina which was drawn by Prophet Muhammad 500-600 years before the Magna Carta. It laid out a federal role over the tribes. It was a pact signed by the Prophet and the main non-Muslim tribes – some pagans and Christians, but mostly Jews. This charter became a way of life for the citizens of Medina. A comparison is drawn below between the Charter of Medina and the US Constitution by using a few examples from the time of the Prophet Muhammad’s life:

- a) Right to equality before law. It established equality, where it said all citizens of Medina were equal.
- b) Due process of law. One may not punish someone by guilt association.
- c) Minority Rights. The charter forbids giving any advantage to someone influential in executing punishments.
- d) Freedom of speech. People were free to provide consultation and criticism to the extent that free discussion was encouraged through ijтиhad (interpretation of the Quran).
- e) Bill of Rights. Hilf ul Fudool or a covenant was signed by Prophet Muhammad to protect those who are weak and to make sure that business dealings were conducted in all fairness.
- f) Right to vote. Women as a minority had the right to vote and women of Medina voted for the Prophet.
- g) Socio-economic structure was developed to maintain equality through zakat (charity) system where 2.5% of the total savings had to pay to help the needy and improve the standard of living for all.
- h) Right to religious freedom. Where the Jewish tribes were allowed to live according to their own rules and were not required to follow the rules of Islam. “Christian minorities in Muslim society have always had access to wine (which they need for their sacrament), despite the fact that Islamic law prohibits.” Thus, there was respect for diversity in religions and cultures as the Quran mentions, “We have made you into nations and tribes so that ye may understand each other and not despise each other. Verily the most honored among you is one that is most righteous.” Prophet Muhammad posed no religious test in the Medina Covenant. The Jews and Christians have held high positions in Muslim governments. While the “American restriction is one of geography, the Islamic restriction is one of

declared commitment to the source of the law.” True, anyone “can alter his or her religion but no one can alter his or her place of birth.” (Ahmad, 2003)

Causes for the decline of democracy after the Prophet

1. Differences arose among successors of the Prophet. (The Prophet did not assign a successor during his lifetime but left it to the people to decide their leader, thus setting an example – Sunnah).
2. People who were not pious took power and rulers went against the Islamic doctrine and “politics began to suppress religions, rather than religion suppressing politics”.
3. Long history of colonialism was prevalent around the Muslim world where colonial powers chose weak leader who acted more as puppets than true leaders. “European colonial rule and postindependence governments headed by military officers, ex-military men, and monarchs have contributed to a legacy in which political participation and the building of democratic institutions are of little concern.” (Esposito, 1994).
4. Colonialism also led to the reform in the education system where Arabic and Quran were eradicated from the schools. Thus people lacked the knowledge of the Quran and were denied to engage in ijтиhad (process of interpreting the Quran).
5. Lack of knowledge from the Quran and Sunnah led to misleading information that was more cultural than religious. (Women began to be oppressed, rulers became dictators, and inequality and corruption soon became the rule of the land).
6. The misconception that Islam is against democracy has its roots in the history of Muslim dictators who did not want to awaken the people to the truth about Islam. (Mughuls in India, Abbasid in Baghdad, and the Turks were all dynastic rulers not real rulers based on the principles described in the Quran & Sunnah).
7. Lack of successful democracies today has made it even harder for the Muslim countries to return to the true democratic and Islamic governments of the past. (www.islam-democracy.org)

Although the concept of democracy is not introduced to the Muslims by the west, the west will be given credit for bringing its ‘renaissance’ be it in the Middle East or any other parts of the Muslim world. John Esposito, a practicing Christian professor reminds his fellow citizens to learn lessons from “a past in which fear of a monolithic Soviet threat often blinded the United States to the Soviet bloc’s diversity, led to uncritical support for (anti-Communist) dictatorships, and enabled the “free world” to tolerate the suppression of legitimate dissent and massive human rights violations by governments that labeled the opposition “communist” or “socialist”. The risk today is that exaggerated fears will lead to a double standard in the promotion of democracy and human rights in the Muslim world as can be witnessed by the Western concern about and action to support democracy. . .” Support for democracy and human rights is more effective if it is consistent around the world. Treating Islamic experiences as exceptional is an invitation to long-term conflict.” (Esposito, 1994)

Voll and Esposito have rightly stated that the global dynamics of democratization reflect the dramatic changes of the present. True, throughout the world—including the Western democracies—the effort to create more effective democratic structures continues apace and

the Muslim countries are not an exception. “Movements like an-Nahda in Tunisia, the Muslim Brethren of Jordan and Egypt, and the Jamaat-i-Islami in Pakistan affirm that democratization consists of more than simply importing a set model from the West.” “Muslims have important contributions to make in the process of reconceptualizing democracy, especially in the area of consensual participation and non-adversarial democratic structures.” (Voll & Esposito, 1995) Educational seminars and workshops such as this would be a first step towards strengthening the culture and movement of democracy and helping towards the gradual evolution of democracy in today’s world.

Disclaimer

For more information or questions please visit the websites and other resources documented as references.

(<http://usinfo.state.gov> and www.islam-democracy.org).

The presenter is neither a scholar of Islam nor an expert in forms of government and democracy. For detailed information on Islam and Democracy please refer to the original sources in the History of Islam.

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