UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER

WestminsterResearch

http://www.wmin.ac.uk/westminsterresearch

What is liberal Islam? The elusive reformation.

Abdelwahab A. El-Affendi

School of Social Sciences, Humanities & Languages

What Is Liberal Islam?

THE ELUSIVE REFORMATION

Abdelwahab El-Affendi

Abdelwahab El-Affendi *is a senior research fellow at the Centre for the Study of Democracy, University of Westminster, and coordinator of the Centre's Project on Democracy in the Muslim World. His books include* Who Needs an Islamic State? *(1991) and* Rethinking Islam and Modernity *(2001).*

The overriding political problem with modern Islam is not just the embarrassing absence of democracy in most Muslim countries, but the more basic failure to provide any form of stable, and even minimally consensual governance at all. This problem is so glaring and of such long standing that it is difficult to dismiss out of hand the role of such "prepolitical" factors as culture and, in particular, religion in explaining it.

The more weight we ascribe to these "prepolitical" factors, the greater the need appears to be for a radical intellectual and ethical reorientation of Islam. But the argument that such a reorientation should take the form of an "Islamic Reformation" is nevertheless a precarious one. Despite the achievements of scholars who have followed the *sunnah* (tradition) of Max Weber in using religion to explain social phenomena, it remains risky for social scientists to double as amateur theologians, especially when they want to speak in a prescriptive mode. This need not discourage us from dabbling in theology, as long as we remember that theology and political sociology are profoundly different enterprises. The greater risk is not that theology will corrupt social science, but the reverse. Social scientists have a dangerous tendency to take such theological concepts as "the rule of God" at face value and then run away with them—projecting, for example, simplistic contrasts with the political concept of "the rule of man."

The question of whether liberal democracy can be given a "truly" Islamic basis is unanswerable, since there cannot conceivably be any Islamic democratic movement which is untouched by the influences and challenges of Western liberal-democratic thought and practice. Mean-

while, any modern Islamic reform movement trumpeting its liberal-democratic potential begs the question of whether religious-cum-cultural reform is a precondition for democratization, since to cite favorably the presumed liberal-democratic potential of a particular interpretation of Islam is to assume that there is already a broad Muslim constituency for liberalism and democracy as things desirable in and of themselves.

Not all those classified as "Muslim liberals" base their liberalism on theological assumptions; in fact the majority do not. But the conceptual amalgam that travels under the "Muslim liberal" label is more problematic than the easy combination of adjectives suggests—and not only because the term "liberal" is as hotly contested as it is. Islamic liberalism is often defined as a tendency that "share[s] common concerns with Western liberalism,"[1] in particular the privileging of "rational discourse" that aims primarily at "agreement based on goodwill" among participants in public life.[2] This appears to be a circular definition, tautologically generating the conclusion that "liberal Islam" is more congenial to democracy than other modes of Islam. If Muslim liberals are by definition those who share Western liberal democratic ideals, and if non-liberals are those who do not, then it goes without saying that "Muslim liberalism" is the intra-Islamic tendency that would promote liberal democracy within Islam.

It is significant, though, that reality does not accord with this "tautology." Those groups and thinkers who have gone the furthest in promoting "liberal" theologies within Islam (like the Ahmadis in Pakistan, the Bahais in Iran, or the Republican Brothers in Sudan) have been less inclined toward modern liberal democracy than toward positions of the sort taken by such early-modern Western liberals as John Locke, Jeremy Bentham, or James Madison, all of whom were at best "reluctant democrats."[3] Nor is it difficult to see why, since most of these reformist schools of Islam were often marginalized and even persecuted.

Liberalism—understood broadly as support for individual autonomy and the political and civil liberties that underpin it—has not always been democracy-friendly.[4] Liberals have often worried that empowered but misguided masses can threaten fundamental rights and liberties, especially property rights. In spite of the intimate relationship that is now thought to hold between liberalism and democracy, significant tensions persist between them—with certain tenets of classical liberalism even being arguably "profoundly hostile to democracy."[5]

Governance and Belief

It goes without saying that Islamic teachings, traditionally understood, certainly conflict with aspects of Western liberalism, but that does not in itself mean that they are an obstacle to democracy. Any set of religious beliefs, even beliefs based on caste stratification, could be

compatible with democracy (understood as consensual popular rule) if they are shared by all members of the community. On the other hand, differing and incompatible versions of beliefs would make democratic consensus difficult, regardless of their content.

One could, at this point, venture the counterintuitive thesis that not only Islam, but all religion is essentially "democratic," in the sense that religion as a matter of individual conscience can only be espoused freely. Religious communities—from the early Hebrews to early Christians, and down to the Pilgrims, Mormons, and Nation of Islam—depended for their existence on the continuous promotion of consensus. Other-wise they tended to fragment very quickly. Like any source of moral or spiritual values, religion can be deployed as an element of intimidation and coercion against dissidents (actual and potential), but that can only happen once the values in question have been widely accepted and have become constitutive of the community itself. The central problem that religion poses for democracy (or any form of government) is that strongly held beliefs or loyalties can also make consensus hard to secure.

Muslim communities have responded positively both to democracy and to most aspects of liberalism. Limits on state authority, the separa-tion of powers, and constitutionalism in general, have traditionally found strong support in Muslim circles. For evidence one could point to the constitutionalist movements that emerged in Iran, Egypt, and the Ottoman Empire during the nineteenth century. And upon gaining inde-pendence from colonial rule, almost all Muslim countries adopted some form of proto-democratic rule. Many leading reformers put forth theo-logical-political arguments for the compatibility of democracy and Islam. For the most part, however, these countries were run by instinctive lib-erals who did not bother to offer religious arguments for their political beliefs. The "founding fathers" in countries like Pakistan and Malaysia fit this mould, as did the monarchies of post-independence Iraq, Mo-rocco, Egypt, Jordan, and Libya. The subsequent collapse of proto-democracy from one Muslim country to the next coincided with general trends in the wider Third World, and had more to do with secu-lar ideologies such as socialism and nationalism rather than shifts in religious thought.

All dictatorships in the Muslim world in fact remain secular—as they must, since dictatorships are by definition political systems that subor-dinate all values and considerations, including religious ones, to regime survival. Even where dictatorships venture a theological justification, they do not lose this secular character. Ayatollah Khomeini's doctrine of the "absolute jurisdiction of the jurist" *(Mutlaq Velayat-e-Faqih),* enunciated in 1988, demonstrates as much, based as it is on the argu-ment that the survival of the Islamic state is the supreme value to which all other religious obligations must be subordinated. But unless the theo-logical principle in question has real majority support, the regime's

continuing survival cannot be ascribed to its theological credentials, but more to its secret police or petrodollars.

The Islamist Challenge

In the twentieth century, a rising number of Muslim thinkers *did* attempt to produce religious arguments against democracy and in favor of more "authentic" Islamic models, such as that of *shura* (consultative system) or various kinds of guardianship by religious scholars. Sayyid Abu'l-A'la Mawdudi (1903–79) from the Indian subcontinent, Sayyid Qutb (1906–66) from Egypt, and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1900–89) from Iran argued that the democratic idea of popular sovereignty directly contradicted the sovereignty of God.[6] Yet all these authors advocated some form of modern constitutional practice—albeit always with the proviso that some (variously defined) religious authority should have a final veto on the decisions of elected bodies. But these thinkers, like those theologians who serve as apologists for existing autocracies today, have enjoyed little popular support.

The rising popularity of Islamist trends has posed a dual challenge for democratization. On one hand, it has created a fear among liberals that democratic forms may hand power to illiberal Islamists. On the other, despots have used the Islamist threat to resist pressures to democratize—often with support from some local liberals and major foreign powers. Moreover, disillusionment among many Muslims with contemporary experiments in Islamicization (in Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia) has given rise to new liberal tendencies that claim the Islamic mantle and marshal religious arguments. Some commentators see these new tendencies as sure signs of a shift toward liberalism in the Muslim world, especially in Iran, where disillusionment with the Islamic "republic of virtue" is at its most acute:

> If, as the Christian West has shown, widespread disenchantment with attempts to create a "City of God" on Earth ultimately fuels the rise of a democratic "City of Man," then Islamic civilization is on the verge of a decisive, and familiar, breakthrough.[7]

Charles Kurzman distinguishes three strands of Islamic liberalism. One argues that Islamic teachings are essentially liberal; another argues that Islamic teachings are neutral toward liberalism; a third accepts that there is a conflict between liberalism and traditional Islam but argues that they can be reconciled through a process of mutual reinterpretation.[8] The new trends belong to this third or "revisionist" strand—a category represented by important movements such as Nahdatul Ulama in Indonesia and the reformism behind President Mohammad Khatami in Iran, as well as by individuals such as Iran's Abdul Karim Soroush.

For our purposes, the first two categories can be referred to as modes of "traditional" Islamic liberalism and the third, as "critical" Islamic liberalism.

Yet one can point beyond these to a fourth category, one exemplified by emerging parties such as Justice and Development in Turkey and Morocco or Ennahada in Tunisia, movements such as the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia or certain splinters from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Syria, and personalities such as Tarek al-Bichri in Egypt. These groups combine traditional with critical liberalism in that they show a full awareness of, and sympathy with, the revisionist trends, but they do not themselves explicitly make revisionist arguments. Instead, they self-consciously (if often tacitly) prefer to postpone or bypass the thorny issues implied by a commitment to both liberalism and Islam.

The positive aspect of these new trends is that they have helped to create prodemocracy coalitions by deliberately removing some of Islam's most contentious theological-political issues from the table, at least for the short to medium term. But unlike most traditional Islamic liberals, who were often unaware of or unconcerned with divisive issues, the new Islamic liberals are acutely aware of them and know that at some point they will need to defend their own stance on these hard questions, even if it is wise to get them off the front burner of politics for now. In places like Iran, the new liberalism has managed to generate broad coalitions that encompass critical Islamic liberalism, traditional liberalism, and even plain secular liberalism. As a result, it has managed to secure wide popular support for its programs of reform, as indicated by the landslide victory Khatami secured in the last presidential and parliamentary elections in Iran.

The rise of such a coalition does not, of course, prevent rivals from raising the issues that the new movements have wanted to keep off the agenda, and thus from reopening the battles anew. But these critics are less likely to mobilize significant popular support, and so less likely to destabilize the system. Recent elections in Turkey, Egypt, Indonesia, Morocco, Pakistan, and Malaysia have shown that radical parties, such as the Islamic Party of Malaysia or Fazilet in Turkey, do not enjoy significant popular support. Violent Islamist organizations, such as Egypt's Islamic Group, are even more isolated. The resulting stability may make it possible to debate these issues in a calmer atmosphere and maybe even to resolve them.

It can, in conclusion, be said that an "Islamic Reformation" is neither necessary nor sufficient for enabling Muslims to build stable and consensual political institutions. A reformation may be a desirable thing; that is a matter for Muslim believers to decide. But its prospect is unlikely to improve the outlook for political stability in the short term. Like the Christian Reformation before it, it would more likely be a dauntingly divisive and bloody affair.

NOTES

1. Charles Kurzman, "Liberal Islam: Prospects and Challenges," *MERIA Journal* (September 1999), *http://meria.idc.ac.il.*

2. Leonard Binder, *Islamic Liberalism: A Critique of Development Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 1–5, 358–59.

3. David Held, *Models of Democracy,* 2nd ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 100.

4. Marc F. Plattner, "From Liberalism to Liberal Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 10 (July 1999); David Beetham, "Liberal Democracy and the Limits of Democratization," in David Held, ed., *Prospects for Democracy: North, South, East, West* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993).

5. David Beetham, "Liberal Democracy and the Limits of Democratization," 58.

6. Abdelwahab El-Affendi, *Who Needs an Islamic State?* (London: Grey Seal Books, 1991), 49–56.

7. See the editors' introduction in Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmed Sadri, eds., *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

8. Charles Kurzman, "Liberal Islam."