

Arabs and Democracy

Critical Response by Kelly Hall, English 101H

In American society, one of the main questions regarding the institution of democracy in the Middle East is whether Islam is compatible with the ideals of democracy. But there is another question that is not often considered: Is democracy right for Arabs in general? Whether Arabs feel that democracy is right for their countries is most likely considered unimportant because of the erroneous yet not uncommon belief that Arabs and Muslims are synonymous. Though Arabs as a people should be the main focus, the significance of Islam in Arab countries cannot be forgotten when considering the compatibility of democracy in the Middle East. Although religion is one of the primary factors to consider because it is a central part in the lives of the majority of Arabs, culture, economy, and history are also significant deciding factors in the issue of democracy in Middle Eastern countries.

Religion, particularly Islam, is the deciding factor that causes the most conflict. Among several points of conflict is the issue of differences between religious law and national law. In America, it is necessary to separate the two forms of law to avoid corruption of national law under the guise of religion. As Abdelmajid Charfi, a teacher at Manobah University in Tunis and renowned Islamic thinker, states, "Islam is not free from the manipulation by the religious for social ends. All the traditional and pre-modern societies have experienced the system of laws justified by religion, which was considered the ultimate authority for the legitimization of the established order, including the political" (Charfi 71). One of the biggest fears of established Islam in Middle Eastern countries is the chance of an extremist group gaining control of the government and corrupting national law in the name of religion. I believe that some cooperation between religion and government is possible, but neither should have too much control over the other. When one religion gains too much control over the government of a country, it often sways the law to suit its own followers though it may not be compatible with another religion that resides in the country thereby destroying equality, the main idea of democracy.

A successful democracy must demonstrate equality between religions. Elias Mallon, writer for *America Magazine*, says, "That is precisely what citizenship entails: all citizens, regardless of religious affiliation, are equal before the law" (Mallon 16). Equality between religions demands the acceptance of the idea of pluralism, but pluralism is not readily accepted by Muslims. I trust it is possible that equality between religions may be established in Middle Eastern countries, but the establishment would be a lengthy process. As Mallon also says, "It cannot be expected that Islam will reach that position overnight, although the community of nations must keep religious equality before emerging democracies as an important and achievable goal" (Mallon 16). Achieving religion equality in countries where religious discrimination is rampant and Islam has been the only truly accepted religion for hundreds of years is a daunting challenge but not impossible. Arabs must find the form of democracy that best fits them and not just the ideals of Islam.

As western countries guide Middle Eastern countries towards democracy, equality of religion issues will be emphasized, but there is still a question of whether democracy is compatible with Arabic culture. Considering the historical and modern characteristics of Arab cultures, the American form of democracy is clearly not compatible with most Arabic nations. As stated by Weidhorn, the Arabic culture has little in common with "the fast-paced, future-oriented, gadget-obsessed, pleasure-loving, pragmatic American lifestyle" (91). A more traditional form of democracy would be more compatible with Arabic culture because its values differ so greatly from American culture.

Individualism, an idea that is as foreign to many Arabs as religious equality and nearly as difficult to achieve within the bounds of Islam, is one of the most prominent points of disagreement. As stated by Manfred Weidhorn, "Islamic suspicions and fears are justified by the tendency of democracy to undermine traditional values. One such value is communitarianism, which is being challenged by modern individualism" (Weidhorn 94). In the American form of democracy the idea of individualism, considering only oneself, challenges the responsibility of an individual within his or her community and family values of communitarianism. This sense of responsibility to community and family, however, is the basis of good citizenship which is necessary for a successful democracy. In this way, traditional Muslim values could even enhance democracy.

American and Arabic traditions also differ in terms of gender equality. Women in many Middle Eastern countries do not have the rights they wish to have, such as voting without influence from others, being allowed to receive education, and holding a job. Democracy in some countries is aiding Arabic women in gaining these rights. Many democracy advocates have even found a way to make these rights compatible with traditional Arab or Muslim values. Valerie Hoffman, from the Department of Religion at the University of Illinois, states that some liberal associations in Egypt “advocate reinterpreting the Shari’a to promote gender equality and equal human rights for all Egyptians” (Hoffman 691). If it is not possible to separate religion and government in Arab countries, then reinterpreting the Shari’a is another good way to establish equality not only between genders but also between religions.

These liberals are not alone in their goal to reform Islam. As stated by Bassam Tibi, an Arab-Muslim pro-democracy theorist, “Although Islam is basically a faith, a cultural system, and a source of ethics, and thus is not necessarily a political religion in its fundamental nature, in the course of Islamic history Islam has always been embedded in politics” (Tibi 154). He also states, “I believe that Islam as religious ethics and democracy are in fact compatible, provided that there is a commitment to religious reform” (Tibi 153). Like the liberal Muslims helping Egyptian women, Tibi believes that Islam can coincide with government but that certain reforms must occur; therefore, the liberals’ reinterpretation of the Shari’a would not only help Muslim women but would help all Muslims.

There are others who believe that there are certain historical aspects of Middle Eastern countries that make them incompatible with democracy. Specifically Weidhorn states, “The Islamic world, in reckoning the years from the time of Mohammed, is in its fourteenth century. By coincidence or not, its civilization resembles that of the fourteenth century in the West, that is, a century that had not yet felt the impact of the three R’s—Renaissance, Reformation, Revolution” (Weidhorn 93). It is true that these three factors that changed western civilization have had little or no influence in Middle Eastern countries until recently, but they are changing quickly. In several countries many people have skipped over renaissance and reformation and proceeded straight to revolution. Though these nations are slightly behind in progress, they have rid themselves of their long-time dictators and given the time they may yet be able to establish stable democracies.

Religious and cultural factors of democracy are extremely important to consider when judging the compatibility of Arabs and democracy but there is still the economic factor. Charfi seems to believe that democracy is incompatible with the economic status of Arabic countries. He states that for “almost in all Muslim countries, industrialization is either insufficient or simply inexistent. This shapes, directly and indirectly, the social configurations of the countries, not to mention that it is a necessary condition, albeit not sufficient, for the establishment of a democratic system” (Charfi 72). Charfi says that without industrialization democracy cannot exist, but in contrast I conclude that it is not necessary to industrialize first. Capitalism, if established alongside democracy while human rights are upheld, can allow democracy and economy to flourish just as well as in a highly industrialized nation.

The question of whether democracy is compatible with Arab or Islam is ultimately answered by the fact that democracy is one of the most flexible forms of government. The United States is an example of a democracy in which all religions and races and both genders are equal, but while England has gender and racial equality, they have an established church. France, on the other hand, has a government that is not affiliated with any religion at all. All three countries have working democracies that they developed to fit their own religious and cultural needs. If Western countries simply aid Middle Eastern countries by explaining the specific guidelines of democracy, Middle Eastern countries will be able to work out what form of democracy is best for them. As stated by Mallon, “Those who would help, however, must realize that democracy does not mean ‘just like us’” (Mallon 16). The American form of democracy may not be right for another culture. Those who are aiding Middle Eastern countries in their progression towards democracy must realize that they must allow the Middle Eastern countries to find for themselves what form of democracy best fits their culture.

Works Cited

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