DEMOCRACY IN MUSLIM WORLD - MYTH OR REALITY

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Introduction

In spite of the disagreement over its definition, “Democracy”, is today regarded as the most accepted way of governing a country. While the world has witnessed a rapid wave of democratisation, especially since later half of the last century, the Muslim world has been comparatively slower in this transformation.

There exists no consensus, however, on the approaches and techniques to accurately measure the content and quality of democracy in a country. The divergence arises from the differences in the basic definition of democracy, which varies from the minimalist to more elaborate forms. A model following the minimalist definition is given by “Freedom House”, a leading NGO working for promotion of democracy, which measures “electoral democracy” in a country based on following minimum criteria.

- A competitive, multiparty political system.
- Universal adult suffrage.
- Regularly contested elections conducted on the basis of secret ballots, reasonable ballot security and the absence of massive voter fraud.
- Significant public access of major political parties to the electorate through the media and through generally open campaigning.

Similarly, there exist other models based on more elaborate definition of democracy – also sometimes referred as “liberal democracy”. One such model is given by Robert Dahl, who calls it “Polyarchy”. The essential conditions for his model include:

- The mandate to run the government is constitutionally vested in elected officials.
The elected officials are chosen through frequently held fair and transparent elections.
The right of vote to practically every adult.
Practically all adult have a right to run for the elective offices.
Citizens have the right to express themselves freely on the political matters without the fear of any severe punishment.
Sources of alternative information exist and the citizens have the right to seek it.
Citizens have the freedom to forms associations, parties, including political, and interest groups.

The first four indices cited by Robert Dahl constitute, effectively, the criteria of electoral democracy given by Freedom House, whereas, the last three are reflective of the status of civil liberties and political rights in very basic, but measurable, form. All together, this represents a balanced model to test the status of democracy, both electoral and liberal, in the Muslim World. In our subsequent analysis, we will employ the same model.

Status of Democracy in Muslim Countries

Political systems in Muslim countries vary greatly. In the following paragraphs, these systems are analysed in context of the criteria of electoral and liberal democracy established earlier. However, due to limited space, a detailed study of only three countries is made, while the others are covered regionally.

Malaysia

Electoral Democracy in Malaysia. Malaysia is a federal parliamentary monarchy, with Prime Minister as head of the government, and King as head of the State with only ceremonial powers. Having inherited parliamantry system from the British, it has been having regular elections throughout the last decades, under universal adult suffrage and multi-party system. However, since independence, the United
Malays National Organisation (UMNO), has held the power although in a coalition. The elections in Malaysia have been generally free of massive vote frauds, however the government is blamed for manipulation of electoral boundaries in favour of ruling coalition. There have been complaints, regarding use of state machinery by the ruling coalition, and presence of “phantom voters”, in the elections, though; the reported severity and magnitude of these problems have not been too significant.

**Political Rights and Civil Liberties.** The ambit of political and civil rights is large, however its study in this paper is limited to the provisions included in Dahl’s model i.e. freedom of expression, alternative information and associational autonomy. The Malaysian Human Rights Commission identifies a multitude of laws, which inhibit political and civil rights of the people. These include the Police Act, which restricts the assembly of people, the Internal Security Act (ISA), which allows detention without trial, and the Printing Presses and Publication Act, which inhibits the media freedom. The government is accused of discriminatory use of these laws. The opposition parties also blame the pro-government mainstream media for unfair treatment and limited access. The government is also blamed for selective use of constitutional provision to allow registration of political parties. One of the most serious challenges to civil rights is the practice of arbitrary arrests and detention, and the treatment meted out to former Deputy PM Anwar Ibrahim is a case in point.

**Summary.** Malaysia has made considerable progress on path of democracy and certainly fulfils the necessary conditions of electorate democracy. Notwithstanding, some valid objections to its credentials as liberal democracy, there is certainly positive movement towards that goal as well.
Turkey

➢ **Electoral Democracy in Turkey.** Turkey follows a parliamentary system, with Prime Minister as the head of the government. Since 1946, Turkey has undergone 15 general elections, which are now contested between more than 20 parties, represented by thousands of candidates. The political parties have free access to media and there are no substantive allegations on the free and fair nature of the elections. Such performance leaves little doubt about Turkey’s status as genuine electoral democracy.

➢ **Liberal Democracy in Turkey.** The historical dominant political role of military, which has intervened four times, including three direct coups, impinges upon the political rights situation in Turkey. However, the constitutional amendments, adopted in May 2004, demonstrate the gradually diminishing role of military. Most importantly, the National Security Council (consisting of five military representatives), which was once seen as a board of necessity, is now seen as just an advisory board. Criticism is also levied on the Turkish governments for continuing with article 301 of the penal code, which sets out punishment for people guilty of speaking on sensitive topics. The constitutional article was amended in April last year but its basic provisions remain substantially unaltered. The Government has also made considerable legislative changes called Harmonization Law Packages, which received wide praise from the EU. Turkey has ratified a number of human rights treaties since 1999, and has introduced many legislative reforms, such as setting up human rights monitoring bodies in government ministries.

➢ **Summary.** Turkey, in spite of frequent military interventions, has firmly remained on the path of democratization. A legacy of peaceful transfers of
power through regular elections, qualifies Turkey as an electoral democracy. The diminishing role of military and gradual assertion of civilian government combined with profound and far-reaching changes in social, political and cultural dimensions, qualifies Turkey as a liberal democracy also.

Egypt

- **Electoral Democracy in Egypt.** Egypt remained a monarchy after its independence until the military coup by Nasser in 1952. Subsequently, a strong presidential system was established, which continues to date. The elections, supervised by interior ministry rather than independent commission, are held regularly. These have been consistently won by National Democratic Party (NDP) with more than two third majorities. Obviously, these elections are alleged by the opposition and the independent observers to be massively rigged. The local elections also present a similar picture. The government candidates swept the local elections in April 2008, after 80% of the opposition candidates were banned from contesting. Hosni Mubarik has been winning the presidential elections, now six times in row, since 1982, amidst massive allegations of use of power to own advantage.

- **Egypt as a Liberal Democracy.** While a multi party system exists in Egypt, there are severe restrictions on forming new parties. A level playing field is denied to the opposition by use of strict laws. They are allowed limited time on electronic media, in contrast to ruling party. Workers in Egypt are allowed to form unions, but the state exerts significant influence over these through various legal restrictions. Human Rights Watch in 2005 and Amnesty International in 2006 reported the routine use of torture, mistreatment of political prisoners and ordinary citizens, and custodial deaths.
Summary. Strong presidential rule, suspect elections, complete dominance of the ruling party in the political system, and a continuing state of emergency severely undermine the democratic credentials of the state. Consequently, Egypt, does not qualify the minimum conditions for even an electorate democracy.

The Arab World and the Middle East. The Arab world consists of 19 countries located in Asia and Africa. Large differences of historical experience, socio-economic development and the natural resources have impacted the political and cultural landscape of these countries. On the whole, however, the region is not identified with credible democratic practices. Middle East in fact, is considered “exceptional in its resistance to political liberalization, respect for human rights and formal democratic practice26”. While in general, the region is subjected to authoritarian regimes, the characteristics, as indeed, the degrees of authoritarianism differ significantly. For instance, a large number of these countries are ruled by monarchs who exercise enormous executive power. Saudi Arabia, is one such example, having no meaningful legislature, no political parties and no written constitution27. Some monarchies are relatively liberal like Oman, Morocco, Bahrain, Kuwait and Jordan, where the rulers have taken significant steps including elections, (mostly non-party) and formation of a legislative council. Morocco among these has the longest record of multi-party elections, yet, whenever the king's men risked losing, the king dissolved the assembly and changed the rules28. However, such small, half-hearted measures do not indicate any progress towards democratization, as long as the executive power remains with the monarchs. Thus, all that can be said of Arab rulers who liberalize is that at best they are enlightened autocrats, in comparison to those who are only absolute autocrats29. The media too, in all these countries remain in control of the governments and there is hardly a voice of dissent. Within the Arab world, there are countries which have a parliamentary system in place, but there is no real alternative available to the voter to express his choice, either because there exists only a single party like Syria and Libya, or even if a multi party scenario exists, like Yemen, Egypt, Algeria, Sudan.
and Tunisia, the domination of the ruling party is so complete that possibility of replacement of the regime does not exist. There also exists within the Arab states a very small group, including Lebanon and Palestine, which does conform to various institutional requirements of democracy including a multi-party system, relatively free and fair elections and change of governments. Ironically, however, the country with best democratic credentials in the region i.e. Iran, continues to draw the most criticism from the West, while others enjoy friendly relations with the same.

The Central Asia. The Central Asian Republics inherited authoritarian regimes after breaking up from Soviet Union. Little progress has been made ever since with regards to democracy. However, within the CARs, the degree of totalitarianism differs. Kyrgyzstan follows a system which is closest to democracy, however there too; the legislative branch is under significant control of the government. Thus, overall the region remains devoid of any democratic credentials.

The South and South East Asia. The region includes the three most populous Islamic countries including Indonesia, Pakistan and Bangladesh. These countries have constitutions, legislatures and political parties, yet their record of democracy has remained chequered. A common feature is the presence of strong politically dominant military, with history of direct and indirect interventions. Though, there are positive signs now in most of these countries, the process remains slow and susceptible to halts.

Summary. Democratization has thus, remained a weaker impulse in Muslim countries, and even the recent wave of democratization in the world has not been able to make profound changes in their political systems. Four distinct groups can be identified in the Muslim world with regards to democratization. Firstly, a very small group including countries like Turkey and Malaysia, with significant democratic credentials. The second group includes countries which have chequered record of democracy like Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia - their democratic progress being halted frequently by military coups. However, these countries continue to show potential and prospects for democratization. The
third group consists of regimes, especially in the Arab world; including, Morocco, Bahrain, Jordan and Kuwait, which despite their autocratic character are trying to decentralize and liberalize without being ready yet to transfer the power. And, finally, we have countries like Saudi Arabia, which are almost stagnant on their authoritative positions, showing no signs of conceding to the call of democratization. All in all, it is a varying picture - rather bleak when compared with the non-Muslim countries, but promising indeed, in the context of past record.

Explaining the Deficit of Democracy in Muslim Countries

Various factors are cited by writers\(^34\), which tend to affect the democratization process in a country. The relevance of these factors to the prevailing environments in Muslim world is discussed in preceding to find an explanation of their dismal democratic performance.

**Modernization Theory - Relevance to Muslim World.**

“Modernization” or socio-economic development is often cited as the main factor which propels societies toward democratic forms of governance\(^35\). Within the various socio-economic indices, the academics have differed in choosing the ones which matter most. The Muslim world in general has disappointing socio-economic indices, including overall low per capita income, literacy rates and health indicators. The modernization theory thus, figures out prominently in explaining some of the democracy deficit in Muslim countries. The oil rich Gulf countries, which have one of the poorest democratic records in spite of high income, present an interesting exception. The fact that the major benefit from the oil revenue is accrued to the state which tends to increase its power and wealth vis-à-vis its citizens is often cited as an explanation to this exception\(^36\).

**The Cultural Theory - Relevance to Muslim World.**

Scholars such as Huntington considers various cultures, including Islam, as averse to democracy\(^37\). Other writers like Fukuyama, have dispelled the culture-specific theory of democracy.\(^38\) In some ways however, the culture attains importance while analyzing
democratization in Muslim countries. Democracy, generally takes roots in a society which has strong political identity and a sense of affinity amongst the citizens which surpasses other loyalties. Muslim countries today, in many ways, suffer from identity crises. The allegiance to tribes, sects, ethnicities, even ideologies such as Pan Islamism, create an identity issue within states, inhibiting the growth of democratic culture. This also explains the fact that countries with a strong sense of nationalism like Turkey, and Iran have performed better than most Middle Eastern countries, which seem to lack this feature. Democracy also requires tolerance, a willingness to listen to other’s viewpoint, and acceptance of one’s defeat in a democratic process. Forces of extremism, hard-line and stubbornness, which are commonly found in Muslim countries today, thus tend to obstruct the process of democratization.

State and Political Institutions – Relevance to Muslim World. A powerful state, or over dominance of a state in relation to the civil society tends to impede democratization process. Usually, such dominance implies state control over most valued economic opportunities, prompting corruption, nepotism and mismanagement of public funds. With such high financial stakes associated with government, the ruling elite become reluctant to relinquish power and participate in democratic competition.

Powerful Military – Relevance to Muslim World. Powerful and politically dominant military presents a significant impediment to process of democracy. In the Muslim majority countries we have ample examples of military domination in the politics, which has impeded the process of democratization in these countries.

Strong Civil Society – Relevance to Muslim World. A robust civil society is considered an important instrument against the authoritative tendencies of the rulers. Strong autonomous groups and social movements also tend to attract media attention which in turn can bring pressure to bear on authoritative regimes. Traditionally, the Muslim countries have lacked the element of a vibrant civil society. Partly, it is owed to the cultural tradition of respecting the authority of state, and partly due to the lack of self
awareness due to limited exposure to modern education and influences.

**Conclusion**

The process of democratization in the world has gathered momentum in the post cold war era. Definitional dilemmas of democracy however continue, as the academics attempt to grapple between a minimalist and maximalist approach.

Even based on the minimalist definition, the status of democracy in the Muslim majority countries does not look impressive. Degree of democratization, of course varies from country to country, and on that basis, four groups can be identified. On one hand, there are countries like Malaysia and Turkey, which are consolidating their significant progress in democratisation. The second group consists of countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia, where democracy has been present but in an unsteady state, and they would take time to consolidate democratic traditions. The third group consists of countries, especially in Arab World like Jordon and Morocco that have started to decentralize and liberalize, without allowing meaningful elections which can accomplish a transfer of power. These countries are still far away from qualifying even for the minimum definition of democracy. And finally, there is the group of authoritarian regimes like Saudi Arabia, which disallow even little decentralization, and continue to function without any participation from the people.

Poor socio-economic indicators, especially with regards to education, cultural tendencies, powerful state structure with large public sector, presence of strong, politically dominant military and absence of a vibrant civil society are some of the salient factors which explain the dismal state of democratisation in Muslim world. The deficit in democracy in the Muslim countries is likely to persist, at least for some years, as no perceptible change in the prevailing environments is foreseen. However, the fact that some predominantly Muslim nations have achieved relatively respectable degrees of political freedom suggests that this deficit may not be a permanent condition.
Notes

3 Robert Dahl, Democracy and its Critics (Yale University press, 1989), 221.
5 Ibid, 40.
6 Ibid, 48.
9 Robert Dahl, Democracy and its Critics (Yale University press, 1989), 221.
15 Cengiz Candar, “Redefining Turkeys Political center, Journal of Democracy, Number 7 (October 99), 129.
19 Ibid.
23 Ibid, 227.
24 Ibid, 227.
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30 Alfred Stepan and Graeme Robertson in “An Arab More than Muslim Electorate” in *Journal of Democracy* Volume14, Number 3 (July 2003), 39.
34 Ibid, 24.
37 Ibid, 298.
44 Ibid, 28.