A Tale of Two Trajectories

Debate about “democratic deficit” in the Middle East is not new. What is novel is the excessive attention given to Islam as a factor that is said to hinder democratic reform. With its emphasis on God’s sovereignty and patriarchal disposition, Islam is argued to be essentially incompatible with democracy. Even though many Muslims refute the charge by suggesting that God has granted sovereignty to humans to govern themselves, and that Islamic justice disallows discrimination based on class, race, or gender, the debate has in general been bogged down in entirely textual and philosophical terrains, with little effort to understand the political, religious, and historical implications of Muslims’ perception of their religion in relation to democratic ideals.

In Making Islam Democratic I suggest that the question, raised so persistently, is not whether Islam is or is not compatible with democracy (itself a convoluted concept), but rather how and under what conditions Muslims can make Islam embrace democratic ethos. Nothing intrinsically Islamic—or any other religion—makes it inherently democratic or undemocratic. It depends on the intricate ways in which the living faithful perceive and live through their faiths: some deploy their religious ideas and values in exclusive and authoritarian terms, while others read them in terms of justice, representation, and pluralism. As to why individuals and groups perceive and present the same scriptures differently is a most intriguing and complex question, one that depends largely on their different biographies, social positions, and interests.

While much is discussed about the “fundamentalist Islamist” trends that draw often on puritanical and exclusivist interpretations of the doctrine, little is known about the social movements, what I call “post-Islamists,” that aim to bridge the gap between Islam and democracy. Grown out of the anomalies of Islamist politics, “post-Islamism” represents an endeavour to fuse religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty. It wants to turn the underlying principles of Islamism on its head by emphasizing rights instead of duties, plurality in place of singular authoritative voice, historicity rather than fixed scripture, and the future instead of the past.

Whether or not Islam corresponds to democratic ideas depends primarily on whether advocates of these perspectives—Islamism and post-Islamism—are able to establish their hegemony in society and the state. The history of socio-religious movements in Iran and Egypt since the 1970s offers a fertile ground to examine the logic, conditions, and forces behind rendering Islam democratic or undemocratic. In Iran, the 1979 Revolution and establishment of an Islamic state set conditions for the rise of post-Islamist ideas and movements that aimed to transcend Islamism in society and governance. In their daily struggles, as I show in detail, Muslim women, youth, students, religious intellectuals, and other social groups incorporated notions of individual rights, tolerance, gender equality, and the separation of religion from the state into their faith; by their active presence and promotion in society, they compelled religious and political leaders to undertake a paradigmatic “post-Islamist” shift. The reformist government of President Khatami (1997–2004) represented only one, the political, aspect of this pervasive trend.

In Egypt, on the other hand, and instead of an Islamic revolution, there developed a pervasive Islamist movement with conservative moral vision, populist language, patriarchal disposition, and adherence to scripture. Engulfed by the pervasive “Islamist mode,” major actors in Egyptian society—the intelligentsia, the new rich, Muslim women activists, al-Ahram, the ruling elites, and the state—all converged around the language of nativism and conservative moral ethos to configure Egypt’s religious “passive revolution.” This Gramscian “passive revolution” represented a managed Islamic restoration in which the state, the original target of change, succeeded to remain fully in charge, while marginalizing critical voices, innovative religious thought, and democratic demands.

In this article Bayat challenges the widespread assumption that Islam is incompatible with democracy and argues that analysis should focus instead on the conditions in which Muslims can make Islam embrace democratic ethos. Detailing the different trajectories of Iran and Egypt, the article concludes that the extent to which Muslim citizens gain the skill and spirit to assert collective will, in spite of constraints—that is, master the art of presence—proves crucial in the road towards democratic polity.

Thus neither did Egypt’s Islamist movement succeed in fully “Islamizing” the Egyptian state, nor Iran’s post-Islamism in democratizing the Islamic Republic. Both movements encountered stiff opposition from their respective power elites. In other words, the political impasse in these countries has been less a function of religion per se than of structural impediments and the long-term vested interests of ruling elites. To what extent then social movements, without resorting to violent revolutions, alter the political status quo in the Middle East—a region trapped by the authoritarian regimes (both secular and religious), exclusivist Islamist opposition, and blatant foreign domination?

Pervasive social movements are not single-episode expressions that melt away under an act of repression. Rather they are prolonged multifaceted processes of agency and change, with ebbs and flows, whose enduring “forward linkages” can revitalize popular mobilization when the opportunity arises. Through their cultural production—establishing new lifestyles and new modes of thinking, being, and doing things—movements are able to recondition, or socialize, states and political elites into the society’s sensibilities, ideals, and expectations. Socialization of the states—this concept might offer a clue as to how to understand the effect of social movements and an “active citizenry” to bolster a democratic turn in Muslim societies.

However, social movements do not evolve in a vacuum; they feed intellectual grounds and basic critical sensibilities, which can not only nurture a collective movement for change, but also embrace democratic institutions. After all, change in societies’ sensibilities is a pre-condition for a sustainable democratic turn. Such change is triggered not only through information and education, but especially by the active citizenry of ordinary people (teachers, students, the young, women, workers, artists, and intellectuals) who in their everyday lives voice their demands, broadcast violations, fulfill their responsibilities, and excel in what they do. Muslim citizens cannot spearhead a democratic shift unless they master the art of presence—the skill and spirit to assert collective will in spite of all odds by circumventing constraints, utilizing what is possible, and discovering new spaces within which to make themselves heard, seen, and felt. Through their active presence in every available social space, ordinary citizens can transform their society into one that dejects authoritarian personality, surpasses its governing elites, and becomes capable of enforcing its collective sensibilities on the state and its henchmen.

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