

HARVARD UNIVERSITY
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“The Quest for Democratic Values in the Islamic World”

Presentation by

Dr Hassan RAHMOUNI
FULBRIGHT SCHOLAR
<http://rahmouni.i8.com>

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Introduction

In recent decades, the world has been rapidly moving towards an era of growing promotion of democratic thinking. Starting in the mid seventies in southern Europe (Portugal, Spain and Greece), following up with massive Latin American shifts to more democratic practices in the eighties, the trend has later been confirmed with the after Perestroika access to liberty, basic freedoms and democratic styles of government in former Warsaw Pact countries. The call for democratizing societies has progressively been pressuring various leaderships into unavoidable reforms. The recent Seoul Conference of “*Democratic Countries*” [1] registered the participation of 120 democracies or democracies to be. It clearly stems from its minutes that democracy is growing into a worldwide phenomenon. Aspiration to liberty has been confirming its universality. The first Warsaw Conference, held on the topic of “*Democratic reinforcement*” in 2000, paved the way. The official signature of the “*Inter-American Democracy Charter*” on September 11th, 2001, strengthened the trend. More regional initiatives are ineluctably due to be launched in the near future. Yet, the MENA region has still been massively left out of the process. The emerging timid experiences in the area are so dim that they are sensibly overshadowed by stubbornly established conservative trends.

The “*Arab Human Development Report*” [2] points at the multiple causes of democratic negation in the region. With a few scarce exceptions, individual liberties, gender equality and development inducing educational structures have been adamantly lacking. The annual report of the “*Freedom House*” for 2001-2002 has clearly pointed out the huge democratic deficit prevailing in most of the Muslim countries. According to its norms of democratic appreciation, not a single Arab or Muslim country is among the 36 countries which joined the prestigious club of democracy in the last two decades.

This regrettable situation definitely needs to be overcome. Easily reached solutions have tended to stress a would-be incompatibility of Islam with democracy and democratic values. This position, based on hasty findings, ought to be totally refuted. Evident “Coranic” clues demonstrate the solid attachment of Islam to “consultation” and to its democratic derivations. Furthermore, community organization based on exemplary behavioural patterns within the “civil society” has precisely and repetitively been defined by the “Coranic” precepts of Islam as well as by the “Sunna” (السنة), which consists in the Prophet’s teachings either through his expressed words or “Hadith” (الحدِيث) or his behavioural settings or “Sira Annabaouia” (السيرة النبوية) [3].

I. Defining Democracy :

Over the years, democracy has grown to mean the government of the people, by the people and for the people. Philosophers from ancient Greece, along with political thinkers from the centuries of European enlightenment have paved the way for modern politicians to define a complete approach for democratic appreciation.

1. From the Greek Heritage to the Theories of Separation of Powers :

Needless to reassert the evident influence of Greek antique thought on modern political theories. The apostles of modern democracy haven’t added much to what the “Greek Miracle” set forth more than twenty five centuries ago. Democracy has been praised by some thinkers as a virtual system and criticized by others as the impulsive power of an ignorant multitude [4]. In Greek thought, democracy remains, however, a political phenomenon, implying a popular participation to the exercise of power. Quantitative criteria, the will of the people and the enactment process of laws are determining factors in the appreciation of a democratic regime.

Classical writings of political thinkers such as John Locke (1632 - 1704) [5], Charles de Montesquieu (1685 - 1755) [6] and Alexis de Tocqueville (1805 - 1859) [7] are commonly referred to as bearing the basic ideology underlying the democracy of present times. Separation of powers, systems of checks and balances prevailing in the presidential systems of government, as well as reciprocal controls exercised by the three branches of government within the parliamentary regimes are all deeply rooted in their respective political thoughts. All western democracies are profoundly inspired from their basic teachings. The U.S. President Abraham Lincoln (1860 -1865) has even gratified the universal political knowledge with his famous definition of democracy as being the “*Government of the People, by the People and for the People*”. Even Karl Marx’s and Friedrich Engels’ [8] critical writings about liberal democracies haven’t been able to erase the impact of such a strongly established system of government. Liberalism has even gained further space in the aftermaths of the soviet perestroika. Time has even come now for the western hemisphere to define new criteria for democracy.

2. The New Parameters for a Democratic Culture :

The growing trend, after Jurgen Habermas’s [9] thoughtful input about public sphere development, as well as the wide proliferation of civil society activism, has been much in favour of innovative conceptions of newly emerging democratic cultures. One of the most recent official definitions of what ought to be understood by acceptable democracy has been set forth by Rick Haass [10], Director of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff. According to him, American foreign policy will be guided in the future mostly by concerns related to political participation, support for the civil society and due respect for the rule of law. It is definitely clear that, through his

“new commandments”, it is not only the political functioning of a system which will be determining for the appreciation of a democratic culture. Societal progress is also becoming a fundamental factor. Henceforth, it is within this framework that approaches to democratic reform will need to be carried out. Haass sketches a list of new parameters of appreciation; among these, are:

- **Political Democracy**: It is evident that there is not a unique model of democracy. Paths and patterns for democracy are multiple and each environment may generate a democratic style adaptable to its context; yet, minimal conditions are to be met.

- **Pluralist Tolerance**: In this context, a mature development of the civil society is a prerequisite for a successful democracy. Elections per se may be subject to manipulation. In order for the electoral participation process to bear its full meaning, it needs substantial accompanying measures in relation with a full maturity of civil institutions as well as an appropriate diffusion of power.

- **Relevant Education**: Not only does education contribute to the appropriate teachings of citizens’ rights, but it also develops an adequately informed population. And as democracy is tributary to the level and quality of education of a target population, it becomes evidently apparent that sensible shifts will have to be made in this context towards developing critical thinking and creativeness. Education does not consist only in going to school. It implies more imaginative parameters.

- **Independent Media**: Freedom of the press is a determining clue to democratic progress. Yet, deontological rules need to be governing the extent to which this freedom is managed. Responsibility should be constantly underlying the deployment of this freedom. The role of a freed media from the pressure of government therefore becomes more of an educational job than a preaching mission.

- **Gender Equality**: The sensitive issue of gender is growing to be an unavoidable clue to democratic achievements. It concerns in most cases the access of more than half the population to its basic political and social rights. It is evidently understood that a society which fosters women’s subordination to a dominant male leadership paves the social bases for more servility of subjugated men towards other men. This is, of course, a total negation of democratic values.

- **Interdependence of Economic and Political Reforms**: The shared standards of economic liberalism and free initiative exercise an inductive effect, as well as benefit from, the deployment of the politically democratic values. They both interact into generating economic progress and democratic decision making.

- **Democracy has to stem from within**: It represents a time consuming process in which the dynamics emerge from the concerned society itself. Democracy cannot be transplanted; it has to be deeply rooted in the target system.

3. Transposing Western Democratic values to MENA Realities :

Within this context of democracy and growing democratic values, as constantly evolving from mere political concerns to more societal preoccupations, involving gender, educational and media aspects, one might wonder where do the Arab-Islamic Middle Eastern and North African states stand in relation with the ongoing democratic strive? How much progress has been made towards entrusting the 400 million Arab and Muslim inhabitants of this region [11] with their primary right to a democratically chosen leadership and to democratic forms of government?

In line with this primary concern, Secretary of State Collin Powell has boldly set forward an open scheme for bringing about democratic values to the MENA region. In his public address to the “Heritage Foundation” on December 12th, 2002 he clearly defined a “**Middle East Partnership Initiative**” [12] which will “*involve partnering with community leaders to strengthen civil society, expand political participation, and lift the voices of women.*” In his answer to a question related to bridging “*democracy with the profound levels of depth of theocracy and theology which is prominent in the Muslim world*”, he unequivocally stated that “*there has to be a model found that will allow faith to coexist with political institutions that serve the people. Strong leaders will have to come forward and the peoples of the region will have to come forward to raise up strong leaders that are willing to find the balance between faith, theocracy and an open political system*”. And that model does exist. The sought balance is also reachable. But, in all cases, it needs to remain respectful of the deeply anchored values in the area.

Needless to ascertain here that the Islamic faith holds within its principles most of the fetched clues to the contemporary concerns related to the Middle Eastern and North African zone. Since the prevailing societal cement in these lands has constantly resided in the Islamic faith during the last fifteen centuries, one might logically wonder about the extent to which this religion may bear the seeds of a genuinely democratic evolution?

II. Adapting the MENA Countries to Innovative Democracy :

Geographically, the concerned territories extend from the Persian (Arabian) Gulf to the Atlantic Ocean. They cover 22 countries, including Iran and Turkey. Standards of democracy are extremely variable in their context: they range from solidly established theocratic systems to relatively secular styles of temporal organization. Eight of these countries are ancestral Monarchies, Emirates or Sultanates. These are: Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Koweit, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. The remaining fourteen have been developing seemingly republican trends. Six of them have stemmed from “coups” that have ousted traditional monarchs (Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya and Iran). Others have also stemmed from coups that have ousted other republican rulers (Algeria, Mauritania, Sudan, and Tunisia). The case of Somalia remains particular given its recent evolution. The few remaining others have directly ventured into republican life in the aftermaths of their independence from colonial occupation, while the State of Palestine is still struggling for its independence and searching for the adequate political patterns that will govern its leading institutions. With the relative exception of Lebanon (based on a multi-confession equilibrium search) and Turkey (for whom Mustapha Kamal has launched, from the outset, the sound basis of a secular state, and despite the recent access of the PJD to power) , most of the twenty other states are declared Islamic regimes. Various levels of democratic moves have been diversely registered in their recent history. Yet, evident dissatisfaction is still reported about most of their “democratic” styles.

In his West Point commencement ceremony address, presented on June 1st, 2002, President George W. Bush stated that “*When it comes to the common rights and needs of men and women, there is no clash of civilizations. The requirements of freedom apply fully to Africa and Latin America and the entire Islamic world. The peoples of the Islamic nations want and deserve the same freedoms and opportunities as people in every nation. And their governments should listen to their hopes.*” This is an unequivocal message that time has come now for real action. Defining means and ways to bring about the necessary democratic change represents the most urgent challenge for the concerned communities and their respective leaderships. But, it is necessary to consider that any ground solutions to be brought to the democratic deficit of the concerned states of the area will ineluctably need to integrate Islamic values to their approach. These crucial reformist moves may be met through actions aiming at bridging the democratic deficit, on one side, and generating a set of

societal accompanying measures, on the other side. Needless to pretend, however, to any quality of lesson givers or to any intention of stone throwing to others' glass homes while one's may be as vulnerable. Tentatively, objective appreciation will be much needed for any such endeavour.

1. Bridging the Democratic Deficit :

It consists mainly in paving the way for democratically elected rulers. The concerned populations have suffered so much from various types of political privation that they have legitimately become eligible for democratic quietude. There are high expectations linked with the democratic designation of authentically chosen representatives who will be called upon to lead, govern and administer a reform apparatus potentially generating more progress towards the launching of new values and practices. Various challenging fronts will need to be faced as will be numerous the challenging missions to be carried out. If it is certain however that only democratically elected institutions can quench the growing thirst for change and sound institutional building, it is also as evident that other regime determination and clear political measures will have to be set forth from the outset.

Basing the preliminary reformative assumptions on stability preservation and on the maintenance of much of the prevailing socio-political equilibrium, parliamentary regimes, partly dosed with aspects of presidential forms of government have demonstrated an appreciated adaptation both to Monarchies and to Republics. The possibility is offered for the reform inducing authorities to choose among diverse prevailing political models all over the globe. The strengths and weaknesses of the various existing systems are known; and so is their adaptability to various political choices. Both of the most expanded of them imply a modern style Montesquieu regime of separation of powers. But some will allow for respective political action of one branch of the state on the other (such as the dissolution of the assembly or the overthrow of the government by a majority vote in the Parliament) while others will specify the precise exercise of a system of checks and balances without necessarily generating any executive instability or any legislative uncertainties. Whether there is a single Chief of State (King, Sultan, Emir or President) who governs with the help of a Cabinet directly responsible to him or whether the executive power is invested in a prime Minister appointed by the Chief of State, removable by him and directly responsible to the legislative Assembly, is a determining choice that only a duly elected Constitutional Assembly can determine for each state of the region. In some instances Constitutional drafting committees have proven to present some advantages. Introducing reform, will also have to benefit from compared experiences and success stories of a wide range of world wide experimented intermediary systems.

The Islamic "Shoura" concept finds itself usefully updated to allow for authentic choices of the political rulers.

2. The Concept of Shoura in Islam:

Islam as a political thought is not contradictory with the values cherished by democracy. The Islamic 'Shoura' (الشورى) concept ineluctably finds itself particularly adaptable. Its usefulness in terms of western terminology may not only allow for authentic choices of political rulers but will also prove to be particularly relevant in the determination of crucial policy making.

'Shoura' may be translated literally as 'Consultation'. In some instances, it has been interpreted as conveying the western value lying beneath political participation and its democratic implications. It is mentioned in various 'Sourates' of the Holy Coran as representing a fundamental principle of the organization of the Islamic community [13]. It has been commonly established that

the concept of 'Shoura' was applied to its fullest by the Prophet Sidna Mohamed Ibnu Abdillah both in his public and his private life. He constantly consulted with his 'Sahaba' (Companions). After the 'Hijra' from Mecca to Medine, he continued consulting with the 'Ansar'. He was also fully acted upon by his successors: 'Al Khoulaftaa Arrachidoune' (الخلفاء الراشدون), who were the early rulers of Islam. In his comment about the principle of 'Shoura', the Islamic theology thinker Hassan Al Basri implies that "*God's order to His prophet to consult with the Muslim community means more of a consultation pattern for them to follow in their own societal behaviour*" [14]. At that time, the public conduct was to be determined by mutual consultation between the partners, were it in State affairs, in business or even in domestic matters [15]. Two basic elements are included in the concept of 'Shoura': the right for the 'Umma' to express itself on such important matters as the choice of its leaders and its right to self management in accordance with its will and ultimate interests. Such situations are evidently in perfect line with the expectation of classical type political democracy, as later developed by such classical writings of European political thinkers as Charles de Montesquieu and Alexis de Tocqueville: i.e. separation of powers, systems of checks and balances prevailing in presidential systems of government, as well as reciprocal controls exercised by the three branches of government within parliamentary regimes, including 'orleanist' styles.

What has been ailing in most of modern time Arabo-Islamic contexts is that the development of various types of autocratic dynasties has progressively driven the principle of 'Shoura' into a dwindling speck. New impulses have therefore become badly needed for an institutional renewal of the Middle Eastern and North African political arenas.

3. The Societal Accompanying Measures:

Consulting an elected leadership makes its contributive function more representative of ground level trends and more stabilizing for the status quo. Valuable input can then be expected from democratically elected bodies both at the national level and at the regional and communal levels. Long run planning and implementation will however be needed to carefully and methodically determine the electoral lists, divide the territory into electoral districts, define the ballot system and organize the political campaign. The verdict of the ballots has proven to allow for democratically chosen and politically responsible decision makers. So, there is no doubt about the necessary call on the polls to arbitrate between the different pretenders to popular legitimacy. Yet, various electoral systems are known to lead to various pre-desired political situations. The issue of the vote will vary according to the applicable polling system: under the same conditions, the results will be different according to whether the voting age is 21, 20, 18 or, as it has been fixed in countries like Brazil, Cuba and Nicaragua, to the age of 16. The issue will also be different based on whether it is a uninominal majority system or a uninominal proportional basis vote, on whether it is a direct vote or an indirect choice mode of elected officials. Some choices definitely favor conservative vote while others tend to favor more progressive political choices. Results may also vary according to the list system used (if deemed preferable to the uninominal candidacy system): blocked lists, preferential lists, mixed lists or incomplete lists offer a wide range of electoral organization choices. Other electoral techniques have also proven to have unquestionable pre-planned effects on the final issue of the poll. Campaign organization and proportional media use by the protagonists also needs to be carefully defined in order to avoid any undesired and harmful situation to the free democratic expression of choice. Relevant lessons, both positive and negative, may however be drawn from recent successful experiences in the region.

Promoting an active civil society has also proven to be extremely valuable in a few countries of the MENA region. Beyond the most current forms of resistance to grass root level initiatives, some relevant success stories pertaining to the rewarding result of state-civil social partnerships have given tangible evidence of the positive impact of such joint ventures. These have covered and definitely need to further extend to such complementary aspects of democratic concern as gender integration, responsible media enhancement and relevant educational reform.

The governing leaderships within the states represent the main driving force for any successful reform. Global approaches therefore need to be defined diplomatically in order to pass the message through to reluctant decision makers. Multi-faceted pressuring styles can be deployed for this purpose: bilateral cooperation, project funding, conditioned assistance and so forth. Encouraging state sponsored local or regional symposiums, organized around, non compromising topics related to the positive impact of social society activities, may generate a growing implication of the various public partners, including the official spheres. Enactment of associative legislation is also to be strongly, but subtly, encouraged. It will prove to be extremely valuable for legalizing the activities of the newly emerging social activities which will offer the cradle for the growing democratic culture. Progressively, the new associations will evolve into credible partners that can help, assist, and if need be, supplement the passiveness of the state in these various fields related to democratic institutional building. Well established ancestral traditions within these Islamic communities may be capitalized upon. Joint efforts can then be undertaken through youth mobilization initiatives centered around community service activities. As they further develop their scope of action, these various independent associations may consider mutual reinforcement of their respective initiatives through some form of associative “Council for Durable development”.

Along the path, other conscience developing forces, such as trade unions, political parties, media instruments and educational institutions are most eligible to echo these efforts through further structured activism. Educative components may also be incorporated to the instructional curricula. Global awareness of rights and responsibilities will progressively develop accountancy. Responsibility will accordingly be assumed and tolerance will allow for accepting the difference. Hasn't the prophet Mohammed said in one of his Hadiths “*All of you are shepherds; and all shepherds are responsible for their dependants*”? (*كلكم راع وكلكم مسؤول عن رعيته*). And hasn't the « Holy Coran » stated in various « Sourates » that responsibility is one on the basic qualities of the Muslim? [3]. Through an appropriately dosed modern democratic impregnation and a subtly called upon religious renewal, relevant democratic traditions may henceforth become progressively rooted. The MENA region will then have conciliated profitable progress with due respect of traditional values, thus carefully and meticulously engaging into a politically promising democratic path.

Dr. Hassan RAHMOUNI

Cambridge, April 26 2004.

[1] – « *Conference of Democratic Communities* », Seoul, November 10 to 12 , 2002.

[2] – “Arab Human Development Report 2002: Creating Opportunities for Future Generations”, Sponsored by the UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States, 2002.

[3] – Ref. Our paper presented at the second UCLA Mediterranean Conference : “Aspects of State and Community Organization in Islam”, by Dr. Hassan Rahmouni, January 5th, 2003 [http://rahmouni.i8.com].

[4]– Ref. our paper presented at the first UCLA Mediterranean Conference in Athens : “*Building a Democratic Culture: referring to Mythological Greece for Inspiration*”, by Dr. Hassan Rahmouni, October 5th, 2002 [http://rahmouni.i8.com].

[5] – John Locke, « *Letters on Tolerance* » (1689) and « *The Second Treaty on Civil Government* » (1690).

[6] – Charles De Montesquieu, « *L'Esprit des Lois* » (1748).

[7] – Alexis De Tocqueville, « *Democracy in America* » (Vol. I, 1835 & Vol. II, 1840)

- [8] – Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, “*The Communist Party Manifesto*” (1845)
- [9] – Habermas, Jürgen. “*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*.” Trans. Thomas Burger. 1962; Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989. Habermas, Jürgen, “*Legitimation Crisis*” Trans. Thomas McCarthy. 1973; Boston: Beacon Press, 1975.
- [10] – Richard Haass, “*Reinforcing Democracy in the Islamic World*”, Presentation to the “Council on Foreign Relations”, Washington, D.C., December 4th, 2002.
- [11] – In this paper, the target region is defined as including all the member states of the “Arab League” along with their Turkish and Iranian neighbours.
- [12] – Collin Powell, “*The Middle East Partnership Initiative*”, Presentation to the “Heritage Foundation”, Washington, D.C., December, 12th, 2002.
- [13] - In the verse # 159 of Sourate ‘Ale Imrane’ عمران , it is clearly instructed to the Prophet that he should consult his community in affairs: “It is part of the Mercy of Allah that thou dost deal gently with them. Wert thou severe or harsh-hearted, they would have broken away from about thee. So, pass over their faults and ask for Allah’s forgiveness for them. And consult them in affairs. Then, when thou hast taken a decision, put thy trust in Allah. For Allah loves who put their trust in Him”. فيما رحمة من الله لنت لهم و لو كنت فظا غليظ القلب لانفضوا من حولك فاعف عنهم و استغفر لهم و شاورهم في الأمر. فإذا عزمنا فتوكل على الله إن الله يحب المتوكلين trust in Him”. [و الذين استجابوا لربهم و أقاموا الصلاة و أمرهم شورى بينهم و مما رزقناهم ينفقون] . Translation drawn from ‘Mushaf Al Madina Annabawiyah: The Holy Coran, Meaning and Commentary’, revised and edited by the General Presidency of Islamic Research, Iota, Call and Guidance, King Fahd Printing Complex, Al Madinah Al-Munawarh, 1990.
- [14] - Mohammed Redha, “Muhammad Rassoulou Allah” (In Arabic), Dar Al Kitab, Beyrouth, 1945.
- [15] - Sourate ‘Al Bakara’, البقرة verse # 233: “If they both decide on weaning by mutual consent and after consultation, there is no blame on them”, [فإن أرادا فصلا عن تراض منهما و تشاور فلا جناح عليهما] .