

Muslim world will evolve its own democracy

As Islamic societies redefine the role of government, the West must learn to differentiate between moderates and radicals, writes John Esposito



Focus

THE stunning victory of Hamas in Palestinian elections, constitutional debates in Iraq and Afghanistan involving the role of Shariah or Islamic law and the Muslim Brotherhood's emergence as the leading parliamentary opposition in Egypt continue to raise questions about the compatibility of Islam with democracy.

The examples of the Taleban's Afghanistan and the self-proclaimed Islamic governments of the Sudan, Iran and Pakistan reinforce the fears of many in the international community. Some warn that the promotion of a democratic process runs the risk of furthering Islamic inroads into centres of power and is counterproductive to western interests, even encouraging a more virulent anti-westernism and increased instability.

The apostasy case in Afghanistan, the persecution of religious minorities and oppression of women in some Muslim countries reinforce the belief that Islamic values and democratic values are inherently antithetical.

For Muslims, both the principles of democracy and the process of democratisation have been the subject of vigorous debate. Some Muslims reject any form of parliamentary democracy as westernising and incompatible with Islamic or with local traditions. Many, if not most, Islamic intellectuals and activists have tried to come to terms with the idea and the process.

Thus, since the late 20th century, Islamically-oriented candidates and political parties in Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Turkey, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Pakistan, Malaysia and In-

onesia have successfully contested and won municipal and parliamentary seats, held cabinet positions and served as prime minister of Turkey and Iraq and president of Indonesia.

In the 21st century, democracy has become accepted as a marker, a kind of signpost, of public life in many countries. However, questions as to the specific nature and degree of participation remain unanswered.

In many places, it has become a litmus test by which both the openness of governments and the relevance of Islamic groups are certified. While democracy is still not entrenched in modern Islamic political thought and practice, it has become a powerful symbol of legitimacy, legitimising and delegitimising precisely because it is seen to be a universal good.

A major question or hurdle facing Islamic candidates and movements is their willingness when in power to tolerate diversity. Some in the Muslim world and the West believe that their participation in electoral politics is merely tactical and that, once successful, they would impose an intolerant, monolithic order on society.

However, the record of secular authoritarian regimes has long demonstrated an unwillingness to foster power-sharing and a vibrant civil society, tolerate diversity or leave power. In contrast, the recent example of Turkey, the most secular of Muslim countries, under the governments of the Welfare and now the AK (Justice and Development) Party, as well as countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, demonstrate the extent to which Muslim rulers' experience and political reality often shape a



The 700-year-old Salah Eddine Citadel, which was built to protect Cairo from the Crusaders

Picture: Getty Images

constructive, pragmatic engagement and response domestically and internationally.

In the 21st century, the tendency of policymakers and experts to assume the monolithic nature of political Islam or of "Islamic fundamentalism" obscures the diversity of ideological interpretations and the even greater diversity of actual practice in Muslim societies.

For more than a decade, the moderate or pragmatic majority of Islamic organisations have pursued a policy of gradualism, calling for political liberalisation and democratisation, seeking to bring about change within the political system. Government suppression, directly or indirectly supported by western powers, can radicalise moderates, transforming reformers into violent revolutionaries as occurred in Algeria.

To the extent that governments prevent participation in elections, limit self-determination or crack down and imprison political activists, violence and instability become likely. Alternatively, fostering a process and experience of democratisation: the institutions of civil society – NGOs, political parties, trade unions, and a free press –

are critical to replacing cultures of authoritarianism with broader a culture that emphasises broader political participation, government accountability and the rule of law.

The challenge today is to distinguish between Islamic movements that are an imminent threat and a majority that represent legitimate indigenous attempts to reform their societies.

Most Islamic movements have resisted pressures to turn to violence but remain a challenge to Muslim governments and western powers to honour their commitments to political ideals of self-determination and popular political participation. Some, as the record of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Welfare Party in Turkey and the Justice and Spirituality Party in Morocco show, have put up with repression, imprisonment and in some cases torture and chosen not to turn to violence. However, the failure to differentiate between Islamic movements that are moderate and those that are radical (violent) and extremist is simplistic and counterproductive.

We are watching experimentation and a long-term process unfold. The western experience of democratisation was a process of trial and error, ac-

companied by progress and regression, successes and failures, civil wars and intellectual and religious conflicts. So, too, in the Muslim world, societies that attempt to redefine the nature of government and of political participation as well as the role of religious identity and values in society are engaged in a process of trial and error in which short-term risks will be the price for potential long-term gains.

Autocratic governments may be able to derail or stifle the process of change; however they will merely delay the inevitable. The realities of most Muslim societies and the aspirations of many citizens require greater political liberalisation. Failure to do so will continue to contribute to the conditions that foster militant opposition, radicalisation, political instability and global terrorism.

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The line between civilisation and barbarism is thin but strong

PLATFORM

ALEX MASSIE

IT IS safe to say that millions of Americans are disheartened by a Virginia jury's reluctance to send Zacarias Moussaoui to the electric chair.

According to his own testimony he was a member of al-Qaeda, charged with taking control of a fifth plane on the morning of 11 September, 2001. Had he not been arrested a month earlier on immigration offences he might have had the opportunity to do so. As he is

the sole conspirator arrested and tried, it is scarcely a surprise that many Americans hoped, like Rudy Giuliani, that Moussaoui would be executed.

Such hopes are understandable, but misplaced. Like other opponents of the death penalty, I would not have shed many tears for Moussaoui had he been sentenced to death. Nonetheless, it is better that Moussaoui live than die.

His joyfully defiant cry when the verdict was returned, "America, you lost!" would not have been less accurate.

The war on terrorism may or may not be a clash of civilisa-

tions; it is certainly a clash of world views. The contrast between Moussaoui's treatment and the fate of anyone, such as Nick Berg, captured and subsequently beheaded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, is pointed.

The line between civilisation and barbarism may be thin, but

Moussaoui's joyfully defiant cry at the verdict, 'America you lost', could not have been less accurate

at moments such as these it still seems strong.

Though the jury quite properly could consider only the evidence before them, their verdict prevents Moussaoui from becoming another martyr who died for radical Islam.

Whether he wished to martyr himself is immaterial; his death would surely have been perceived as such a sacrifice across much of an anti-American Arab world.

Secondly, Moussaoui's life sentence should remind some of those British and European élites who so disparage the United States that it is not the

barbarous land they sometimes seem to imagine it to be.

Given the way in which the Bush administration has flouted the law in its treatment of terrorist suspects, it is depressing, mildly shaming, to have to point out this small but important victory of the rule of law and civilised restraint.

The US is sometimes too much in love with its belief in its own virtue. Yet it would have been impossible to build the US, still the greatest political experiment of our times, without that belief.

On this occasion, however, and though the US legal system

remains imperfect, the fact that Zacarias Moussaoui, a co-conspirator in the most catastrophic foreign attack on American soil in history, can be afforded the same rights as the least significant common criminal dignifies that legal system and the US itself.

Moussaoui and terrorism lost; the US, its allies and civilisation won. The mills of justice may grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly well.

One day, Osama bin Laden will find that out as well.

■ Alex Massie is the Washington correspondent of The Scotsman