Critically Assessing the Role of Islam in Authoritarian Contexts

https://www.e-ir.info/2013/05/18/critically-assessing-the-role-of-islam-in-authoritarian-contexts/

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In this essay we will be considering the ways in which one can critically assess the role of religion in authoritarian contexts. Focusing on Islamic societies, we will look at a variety of different ways in which the relationship between Islam, authoritarianism, and the prospects for liberalization and democratization have been assessed. After presenting them the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches will be evaluated. Arguments from a range of different and often conflicting perspectives and sources will be considered. In this essay we will consider three broad approaches; the Orientalist approach, the Apologist rebuke, and we will look at some of the alternative explanations and analyses of the relationship between Islam and authoritarianism. The goal of this essay is to judge which of the viewpoints provide the best insights into the topic and identify the schools of thought that are weakest. Within the Orientalist school we will look at contributions from writers such as Huntington, who claims that Islam is inherently hostile to democracy, and Lewis, who considers totalitarianism the natural outcome of Islamic belief. We will also look at responses to these perspectives from Apologists like Said with his accusation that Orientalism stems from xenophobia and Esposito, who identifies aspects of Islam from which could spring democracy. Finally, in searching for alternative explanations we will consider writings from Mukherjee, who claims that religion is used by authoritarian regimes, and Bayat, who criticizes the purely textual approach of the Orientalists and Apologists.

Bernard Lewis is one of the foremost advocates of the Orientalist school of thought. Lewis asserts that the connection between the caliph, the leader of the Muslim world, and God, for whom he was considered vice-regent, accounts for the Muslim people's submission to authority (Lewis 2002, p.108). He discusses how that lack of separation of church and state are at the core of Islam's incompatibility to democracy, and deems the cause to be a lack of historical reason for this. According to Lewis the Christian experience of the Protestant/Catholic division and the violence that followed caused the separation of Church and State, meanwhile "Muslims experienced no such need and evolved no such doctrine" as Islam accorded for a tolerance of non-believers, if not full equality (Lewis 1990, p.4). He also states that Muslim countries have a tendency to distrust the West and Western thought due to a combination of Nazi race theory, Soviet Marxism, and 'Third Worldism' (Lewis 1990, p.2). For him, all these reasons account for the prevalence of authoritarianism in the Islamic world. However, one must question this for a number of reasons. One of the major criticisms leveled against this kind of sweeping Orientalist thought is that Arabs or Islam "separately or together were supposed by the mainstream academic thought to be confined to the fixed status of an object frozen once and for all in time by the gaze of western percipients" (Said 2000, p.201). It could also be criticized for its disregard of introspective Islamic scholarship, only accepting the Western view as valid (Said 2000, p.206) and its "fairly uniform avoidance of the relationship between European imperialism" (Said 2000, p.210). Its consideration of Islam as a single homogenous group is also quite outrageous given the vast number of people and geographic locations that constitute the Islamic world. On balance, one can't help but disregard many of these claims as not founded in reason.

Huntington attempts to explain the prevalence of authoritarian regimes and deficit of democracy in the Middle East by claiming that "the world's great historic cultural traditions vary significantly in the extent to which their attitudes, beliefs, and related behaviour patterns are conducive to the development of democracy" (Huntington 1993, p.298). Huntington states that there are two forms of the cultural thesis. The 'more restrictive' one claims that democracy is a cultural phenomenon that developed in the culture of North Western and Central Europe and is incompatible with

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other societies (Huntington 1993, p.298-299). The evidence put forward for this is that democracy originated in the West, since the early 19th century most democratic countries have been Western, and that democracy outside of Europe is mainly prevalent in former colonies (Huntington 1993, p.299).

The second 'less restrictive' outlook is that some cultures are particularly hostile to democracy, namely Confucianism and Islam. Huntington compares the movements against authoritarian regimes in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and East Asia, which were markedly democratic in their rhetoric, to Islamic societies where "in the 1980s movements explicitly campaigning for democratic politics were relatively weak, and the most powerful opposition came from Islamic fundamentalists" (Huntington 1993, p.308). "Liberalization in Islamic countries thus enhanced the power of important social and political movements whose commitment to democracy was questionable" (Huntington 1993, p.309). Huntington does accept some limitations to this argument, stating that cultural arguments have not held up in the past (as per Weber's argument that Catholicism and democracy were incompatible), that great historic cultural traditions such as Islam are so complex to label it non-democratic could be facile, and the dynamism of culture and religious tradition over time (Huntington 1993, p.311). The arguments against Huntington are so strong that even he must admit the limitations, but he seems to brush them aside and not address them adequately, despite their undermining his whole argument.

Kedourie is another notable Orientalist, and forwards the thesis of political quietism as an explanation for authoritarian prevalence in the Islamic World. He discusses that how due to the concept of the *caliph* and the Arabic history of despotism and turmoil in the region it was incorporated into the religion the notion of obedience. The idea was that this would stem anarchy in the region (Kedourie 1994, p.7-8). He claims that this encouraged political quietism that caused a tradition of strong states and weak societies that would not challenge their rulers (Kedourie 1994, p.8). These arguments can be brushed aside by simply looking at events in the Arab world, whether recent such as the Arab Spring, or older such as the Tobacco Revolt in Iran during the 19th century. Kedourie explains the popularity of the notion of democracy among Arabs by asserting that they do not understand the concept (Kedourie 1994, p.5-6). This statement is again guilty of the wide sweeping generalization as Lewis and Huntington were above. Lipset puts the lack of Muslim countries' participation in the 'Third Wave' of democracy down to the fact that Islam offers not only a set of spiritual beliefs to live your life by, but a set of rules to govern society by also (Lipset 1993, p.6) and emphasizes the separation of church and state is integral to liberalization of society (Lipset 1993, p.5). However, we will see below that there is a strand of scholarship arguing that this is not necessarily the case.

Esposito and Voll lay out a number of principles taken from the analysis of the Qur'an that contradict the Orientalist claim that Islam is inherently authoritarian. Their argument is based on the idea that Islamic doctrine can be read in such a way as to fit with democracy. The first principle that they cite as being pro-democratic and anti- authoritarian is that of *tawhid*. *Tawhid* is the idea there is no God but God, and leading on from that, that the only sovereign is God (Esposito and Voll 1996, p.23). In one way of reading this it may seem that democracy is impossible as the concept of popular sovereignty is in conflict with this. However, Muslims only insist that a political system "be framed within the worldview of *tawid*" (Esposito and Voll 1996, p.23) and therefore there is a possibility for a sort of moral democracy. They go on to show how this concept could in fact compliment democracy in that the concept provides "the conceptual and theological foundation for an active emphasis on equality within the political system" and that it has been used as "the basis for going beyond the affirmation of equality to call for the revolutionary overthrow of oppressive dictators" (Esposito and Voll 1996, p.25).

Another concept they touch on is that of *khilafah*. The traditional way of looking at this concept has viewed it as a monarchical device, a support for authoritarianism, and a justification for submission (Esposito and Voll 1996, p. 26). Despite that it is possible "to interpret some sections of the Qur'an as identifying human beings in general as God's agents on earth, and human stewardship over God's creation" (Espositio and Voll 1996, p.26). When read in this way the Qur'an lays down the foundations for democracy in Islamic society, where all people should have a duty and right to have a say in the way their community is run. Esposito and Voll go on to look at the concepts of *shurah* (consultation – read in such a way to mean consultation with the community), *ijma* (consensus – formerly restricted to consensus among scholars, but reread to broaden its scope), and *ijtihad* (independent imperative judgment) (Esposito and Voll 1996, p.27-30). Indeed, other scholars have recognized the possibility here also, with Mukherjee commenting "Islam should not be seen as incompatible with democracy and in this connection, mention maybe made

of the concepts of *shura* and *ijma,* which refers to consultation and consensus" (Mukherjee 2010, p.337). In this way it is shown that Islam is not inherently authoritarian, and in fact it can be read in such a way as to make it democratic in nature. Former president of Iran Mohammad Khatami stated in an interview with CNN "Ultimately, the Islamic Revolution had-and should have-two directions: First, an interpretation of religion which couples religiosity with liberty… Second, there is the issue of the independence" (CNN 1998). He uses the example of the American experience as an exemplar of religiosity blended with liberty, and of struggles for independence, and then draws a parallel between the American and the Iranian experience. He attempts to illustrate that it is in fact possible for both religion and the state to be intertwined and still maintain an effective democracy. However, it must be conceded that we are wanting for examples, even with the presence of Iran, when trying to illustrate that democracy and Islam can be blended effectively.

All of the approaches above suffer from the same limitations and have been criticized accordingly. They assert that all of these countries are on a single track between democracy and authoritarianism. Eisenstadt disputes the notion that Europe and the West is the pinnacle of modernity, and instead claims that societies all developed distinctively modern traditions "influenced by specific cultural premises, traditions, and historical experiences" (Eisenstadt 2000, p.2). He claims that multiple modernities may emerge due to the interaction of the process of modernization and cultural, institutional, or social factors already present in a state (Eisenstadt 2000, p.13- 15). The notion that the world is not as simple as things being one way or another makes a lot more sense than a world with preset outcomes and parameters in which to operate. This is not the only problem that the Orientalists and the Apologists share. Bayat criticizes the methodology of both approaches because "both 'skeptics' and 'apologists' share an exclusive commitment to texts, drawing their arguments from the literal reading of sacred scriptures (the Qur'an and hadith), and pay astonishingly little attention to what these texts mean to the fragmented Muslim citizenry in their day-to-day lives" (Bayat 2007, p.4). We will now go on to consider some less textually based arguments.

For Bayat "the question is not whether Islam is or is not compatible with democracy or, by extension, modernity, but rather under what conditions Muslims can make them compatible" (Bayat 2007, p.4). He claims that the way Islam is interpreted is what matters, not the textual content, and key to understanding this is understanding who is interpreting it, and the societal conditions in which those interpretations thrive (Bayat 2007, p.5-6). He explains how the current popular reading of Islam, bringing about the violent Islamism that spawned groups such as al-Qaeda, was brought about by "two simultaneous but contradictory processes…: opportunity and suppression. The opportunity for massive educational expansion, economic development, an abundance of wealth (oil money), and social mobility went hand in hand with continuous political repression, marginalization, a sense of humiliation, and growing inequality" (Bayat 2007, p.7). Bayat illustrates how these readings change due to their environment with an example from the mid-1990s, with Islamist rule facing profound crisis wherever it was put into practice and the failure of some of the armed Islamist struggles, "many departed from totalizing discourses or violent methods and began to develop a more democratic vision for their Islamic projects" (Bayat 2007, p.9). Bayat suggests that post-Islamism will rise in the future. Bayat defines post-Islamism as both a condition and a project. It is the condition where the sources of legitimacy, energy, and appeal of Islamism is exhausted. The eventual pragmatic abandonment of the principles of Islamism follow in an attempt to reinvent itself (Bayat 2007, p.10-11). The project of post-Islamism "represents an endeavor to fuse religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty" (Bayat 2007, p.11). It is an attempt to create an alternative modernity that incorporates Islam. In this way we can see that Islam is not inherently anything, but it is what it is shaped to be by those with the power and interests to do so. Now we will look at what implications this approach has for authoritarian rule.

Mukherjee uses the example of Pakistan to illustrate his point that "Islamic revivalism has been related to the personal gains and interests of individuals and groups and how political figures have used Islamist groups in particular to strengthen their own power base, especially when lacking political legitimacy" (Mukherjee 2010, p.331). He shows that the creation of the Jamaat-i-Islami created a distinctly Islamic voting bloc in Pakistan (Mukherjee 2010, p.335) but that it was certain politicians that brought Islam to the national political discourse (Mukherjee 2010, p.338). He demonstrates this by taking a number of examples of authoritarian figures in Pakistani political history of varying levels of piety – including Yahya Khan, Zia-ul-Haq, Sharif, and Musharraf – and showing that in times of turbulence, when their illegitimate rule or actions were in question, they tended to introduce a stream of laws leading to the Islamization of Pakistani society (Mukherjee 2010, p.340-345). The limitation to this proposal is that it is only a

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consideration of Pakistan. Given the diversity and size of the Islamic world one must look further before declaring Islam as a tool for authoritarian or democratic ends. Adul-Latif and Moaddel point out how in the 1960s the king of Morocco courted Islamist groups to curb the influence of the left (Abdul-Latif and Moaddel 2007, p.262). This offers further evidence for the idea that Islam is not inherently authoritarian or democratic, but could be either, neither, or both depending on the context.

A multitude of studies have been conducted on opinions of democracies among Muslims. Ciftci discusses a range of factors that contribute to apathetic, or even supportive, attitude among non-elite citizens living under an authoritarian regime. These include the provision of jobs and benefits, the presence of strong government in political and economic life, and that they may only challenge authoritarian practices once they have experienced considerable independence from the state (Ciftci 2010, p.1445). He dismisses the religious explanations for the deficit in democracy in Muslim societies, finding high levels of support for democracy among Muslims in 10 countries. He states that "the evidence is impressive, and it implies that individuals may be religious and have democratic orientations at the same time" and that "wanting Sharia does not automatically translate into wanting a theocracy" (Ciftci 2010, p.1447-1448). In Rose's study of opinions of democracy in two Central Asian states it was found that "in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, there is very little difference between Muslims, the Orthodox, and nonbelievers. Even more strikingly, the most observant Muslims are almost as pro-democratic as those who are non-observant. Furthermore, an absolute majority in each category of observance endorses democracy" (Rose 2002, p.106). Rose found that in Central Asian countries at least far more than religion or ethnicity, a person's perception of economic prosperity, age and level of education were key factors in influencing ones political values (Rose 2002, p.108). In Tessler's 2007 study he found that "Islamic orientations and attachments have at most a very limited impact on views about democracy" (Tessler 2007, p.116) and that "all that can be said is that most people claim to be pious and most also have a favorable opinion of democracy, thus suggesting, in the aggregate, that there is no incompatibility between Islam and democracy" (Tessler 2007, p.116). One could claim that Kedourie's argument that those being interviewed do not understand democracy could account for these studies (Kedourie 1994, p.5-6), but in doing that one is making several grave assumptions; that the West has a monopoly on the concept of democracy, that the concept of multiple modernities can be so easily dismissed, and about what those interviewed know and do not know without testing your assertion.

In conclusion, there are so many factors at play that could be conspiring against the liberalization of the politics of the Islamic world that one cannot account for them purely by choosing one consequential detail, their religion. We have seen through Bayat and Mukherjee's studies that it is likely that Islam is used as a tool by authoritarian regimes to sustain their power. Through studies by Ciftci, Tessler, and Rose we have also seen that Muslims in this part of the world have a remarkable positive attitude towards democracy, further discrediting the concept that Islam and authoritarianism are connected. Although the Orientalist and Apologist points of view are insufficient for explaining the situation in the Islamic world they can offer some benefit to this conclusion in that they illustrate quite well that Islam is exactly what people want to understand it to be – for some a great emancipator, for others a tool with which to consolidate their power.

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Date written: March 2013