



PROJECT MUSE®

Toward Muslim Democracies

Saad Eddin Ibrahim

Journal of Democracy, Volume 18, Number 2, April 2007, pp. 5-13 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2007.0025>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/214438>

TOWARD MUSLIM DEMOCRACIES

Saad Eddin Ibrahim

Saad Eddin Ibrahim, founder and chairman of the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies and professor of political sociology at the American University in Cairo, delivered the 2006 Seymour Martin Lipset Lecture on Democracy in the World (see box on p. 6). Dr. Ibrahim has been one of the Arab world's most prominent spokesmen on behalf of democracy and human rights. His 2000 arrest and subsequent seven-year sentence for accepting foreign funds without permission and "tarnishing" Egypt's image sparked a loud outcry from the international community. In 2003, Egypt's High Court of Cassation declared his trial improper and cleared him of all charges. He is the author, coauthor, or editor of more than thirty-five books in Arabic and English, including *Egypt, Islam, and Democracy: Critical Essays* (2002).

The late Seymour Martin Lipset was one of the greatest men I have known in my life as an academic and as an activist. He was the first person I was introduced to—through his seminal 1960 book *Political Man*¹—during my first year of graduate school at UCLA, in 1963. As a matter of fact, I had thought that I was going to be his student before I learned, much to my disappointment, that he was teaching at another campus of the University of California. Little did we know then, back in Egypt, that the University of California had so many branches! I sought contact with Professor Lipset whenever I could. I tried to be one of his disciples, like a Sufi follower. He was graceful, kind, helpful, and encouraging—qualities that he showed to generations of young scholars.

Thirty years later, I had the pleasure of being one of his colleagues for two years on a commission that the World Bank set up to examine concepts of civil society and social capital and to ask how they relate to democracy and democratic governance. I felt elated to be in Professor Lipset's presence for those two years, and I am likewise delighted and honored—as well as humbled—to find myself, some ten years later, delivering a lecture in a series named in his honor.

THE SEYMOUR MARTIN LIPSET LECTURE ON DEMOCRACY IN THE WORLD

Saad Eddin Ibrahim delivered the 2006 Seymour Martin Lipset Lecture on Democracy in the World on November 1 at the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington, D.C. and on November 2 at the Munk Centre for International Studies at the University of Toronto. The Lipset Lecture is cosponsored by the National Endowment for Democracy and the Munk Centre, with financial support this past year from the Canadian Donner Foundation, the American Federation of Teachers, and the Albert Shanker Institute.

Seymour Martin Lipset, who died on 31 December 2006, was one of the most influential social scientists and scholars of democracy of the past half-century. Tributes to Lipset's life and work can be found on pp. 185–88 of this issue.

While the first edition of *Political Man* hardly took note of Islam or Muslims, Lipset's 2004 book *The Democratic Century* (coauthored with Jason Lakin) contains more than thirty mentions of them.² In one especially relevant remark, Lipset observes that in earlier decades he and many other scholars had harbored doubts about whether Catholic societies could be hospitable to democracy, but that further study and events on the ground (especially in Latin America) had led him to the conclusion that Catholicism is no impediment to democracy. And he further encouragingly speculates that "Muslims may not conjure up democracy on their own, but after having tried it out (via borrowing or imposition), they will find it highly compatible with their own traditions."³

I have been striving, along with a whole generation of Arabs and Muslims, to promote democracy in our societies. Of course we have heard repeatedly that there is something called Muslim or Arab exceptionalism, something peculiar about Muslims or Arabs and their culture that makes our countries inhospitable to democracy. I have always resisted that proposition. At first, my resistance relied on faith rather than evidence. But then, in the best tradition of Seymour Martin Lipset, I examined the available empirical data and found that two-thirds of the world's more than one billion Muslims are currently living under democratically elected governments. These governments are found in such places as Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country with a population of almost 250 million; India with 150 million Muslim citizens; Bangladesh, overwhelmingly Muslim and with a population nearly the same size; Turkey with 70 million Muslims; and Nigeria with more than 60 million. As these figures suggest, Muslim-majority societies and democracy can indeed go together.

So why does the image that Muslims are inhospitable to democracy persist? There are several reasons. The first is that people acting in the name of Islam (or what they claim to be Islam) have committed sensational, horrific acts. The worst of these, of course, was 9/11, but they trace a bloody record that reaches back several decades and includes the terrorists who assassinated my country's President Anwar Sadat in 1981. Because the perpetrators of these terrible deeds claim that they were acting in the name of Islam, and because impressions created through the modern mass media often allow few distinctions, there came into being at the popular level a globalized general perception that there must be something about the religion of Muslims which makes them violent.

The Lagging Third

Then too, there is the empirical matter of the one-third of the world's Muslims who do *not* live under democratically elected governments. What about this "third third"? Who are they and where do *they* live? Sad to say, they are mostly Arabs and they mainly live in the broader Middle East, in countries such as Algeria, Iraq, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and my own Egypt. What can be done to understand and ameliorate the situation of this third third? Why has the "third wave" of democratization had so little effect on their shores? Is the reason something intrinsic to them and their culture, or are the causes of undemocratic governance in their lands less deep-seated and hence potentially easier to remove? Answering such questions is difficult, but I will try to deal with them as simply and as briefly as I can.

The first thing to note is the terrible irony that the Arab countries in the currently left-out third were in fact the first part of the Muslim world to begin a turn toward modernization. Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 sparked a process of modernization that included impressive and concrete steps toward democratization. Egypt got its first parliament and written constitution in 1866, long before many European countries had these things. This was no fluke, but rather was a methodical step taken by the modernizing ruler Ismail Pasha (r. 1863–79), who was immediately emulated by Tunisia's Muhammad III as-Sadiq (r. 1859–81) and Iraq's Dawood Pasha (r. 1830–69). Thus three Arab Middle Eastern lands—technically parts of the Ottoman Empire but in fact each with a substantial amount of autonomy—all started down a path of modernization that led them toward the embrace of liberal-democratic reforms.

That process could have proceeded steadily or at least cumulatively, but before long prospects for democracy and modernization in the Arab Middle East were aborted by France and Britain, the very Western countries to which modernizing Arab leaders had looked for ideals and models. As a result of colonization and occupation in the last quarter of the

nineteenth century, an Arab world that just a generation before had begun to embrace modernization and democratization found these processes gravely set back.

Then in the mid-twentieth century came another challenge, associated with the founding of the state of Israel. This is a highly complicated and sensitive subject, so I should explain carefully what I mean. In the two decades between the world wars, many of the colonized Arab countries strove for and won independence of a sort and immediately resumed democratizing. By the early 1920s, for instance, Egypt had adopted a new constitution and with it a new judicial system. In fact, the higher court that acquitted me four years ago⁴ dates from 1923 and is thus a survivor—by a fluke or perhaps by a miracle—from this second liberal era. The 1920s also saw the resumption in Egypt of competitive parliamentary elections, a practice that endured into the 1950s. Similar trends made themselves felt in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. From the 1920s to the mid-1950s, democratization was back on track. The effects that rippled out from the state of Israel's establishment in 1948, however, brought another setback that ended the second liberal-democratic flowering in the Arab world.

As of 1948, the so-called Arab street—feeling wounded, assaulted, and sympathetic toward the Palestinians, whom their fellow Arabs viewed as having been uprooted and deprived of their country—began putting tremendous pressure on Arab governments to fight in support of the Palestinian cause. Thus a number of Arab states that had only recently regained their sovereignty and resumed responsibility for their own political lives went to war against the newly established Jewish state. They were ill prepared for that war, and they mismanaged it. When there was an opportunity to negotiate, they failed to take it. They ended up losing badly. The return home of the defeated Arab armies opened the current era of Middle Eastern history. It has been a time dominated by military dictatorships, illiberal regimes with roots in the anger that Arab soldiers and their civilian supporters felt toward the liberal governments that had lost the war with Israel. Syria was the scene of the first putsch, which came soon after the war, in 1949. Similar coups then rolled across the region over the next decade, striking Egypt in the early 1950s and Iraq in 1958.

Wherever military rulers took over, the issue of Palestine appeared high on their list of self-justifications. According to one set of coup-makers after another, the civilian politicians' mismanagement, corruption, and servility toward the West were the underlying maladies that had caused the Palestine debacle, and—or so the soldiers further alleged—only an iron hand could cure them. So goes the story of the setbacks that have relegated the Arab part of the Muslim world to its current left-behind status as regards democracy. Let me hasten to add, however, that in our corner of the world we have become too used to

blaming outsiders for every ill and disaster that befalls us. Our own military rulers (and now in some cases their children) have proven highly skilled at staying in power. First, looking for any allies they could find against Israel and its Western supporters, the Arab dictators turned to the Soviet bloc and in the process improved their mastery of the arts of authoritarian and even totalitarian domination. Slow at so much else, our rulers have proven quick at learning all the tricks of holding on to power. This is not a religious or cultural tale of Muslim or Arab exceptionalism, but a political saga of dictators who have learned to wield the tools of power, obduracy, oppression, and fear in order to hold their own societies hostage.

The Arab Dictators' Cynical Appeal

We know well the talking points of the dictators and their apologists. They pose false tradeoffs, telling Arab publics that aspirations toward greater dignity, economic development, or social justice somehow require forgetting about hopes for democracy. This is cynical, but when skillfully employed can be highly effective. When the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, Arab dictators who had once looked to Moscow for help and sponsorship began seeking ways to put themselves in the good graces of the United States and the West. The dictators' key talking point in this effort has been the imminent danger of Islamic extremism. This is a message that has found willing audiences in Western intellectual and policy circles where, with the end of the Cold War, the notion of the "clash of civilizations" (and especially of the West versus Islam) has gained wide currency.

Thus we find Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak and Tunisia's President Ben Ali telling their Western interlocutors, in effect, "It is either us or Bin Laden." If that is the choice, of course Westerners—whatever their love for democracy—will opt for the autocrats over the theocrats. One of the roles of the small but emerging constituency of Middle Eastern democrats is to expose this ploy and warn the West about the scheme into which it is being drawn, in hopes that Westerners will question this cynical tradeoff and object to the dictators' attempts to narrow their people's choice to theocrats versus autocrats. In Egypt, for example, the Mubarak regime tries to decimate all liberal alternatives. At the beginning of this decade, I was imprisoned. In 2005, the Tomorrow Party's Ayman Nour (who had finished second in the presidential election that year) was sent to jail, where as of this writing in early 2007 he still languishes. And Talal Sadat, the late President Sadat's nephew, has just received a one-year prison sentence. The younger Sadat had twice been elected to a parliamentary seat from which he criticized the Mubarak regime and the autocratic predicament in which Egypt finds itself, and worked for a more genuine democracy. His real offense was publicly

challenging Mubarak's scheme to groom his son as successor to the presidency. Talal Sadat was tried by a military court from which there is no appeal, and taken immediately to prison. The regime has evidently learned something from my case, in which the civilian High Court of Cassation resoundingly overturned my original convictions.

In Tunisia, Ben Ali is also pursuing a strategy of crushing any liberal options. Bashar Asad's approach in Syria is the same. What does one do as a liberal-democrat in such a hostile setting? I have tried several methods. One has been to look among the Islamists for moderates who might be enlisted into the camp of the democrats. Why do this? Because the autocracy leaves me so little public space under the decades-old "state of emergency" laws that Mubarak uses to run the country. The Ibn Khaldun Center, which I direct, is in effect under house arrest. We can hold events in our own small offices, but if we were to hold a rally or demonstration—no matter how orderly—anywhere else, we would be violating the law. Acts of civil disobedience against such unjust laws are what landed Ayman Nour, Talat Sadat, and myself in prison.

The Islamists have the mosques, which give them ample public space for their own challenges to the regime. The situation is roughly analogous to that in communist Poland in the 1980s, when the Catholic Church provided a public space within which the Polish people could mobilize against Soviet rule. In Egypt, the regime fears that efforts to exert full control over the mosques would spark a rebellion, and so officials grudgingly allow Islamist activities there. And that is the situation which exists in Egypt today: Democrats are constricted and must think like guerrillas, while Islamists have more public space open to them.

During our time in prison, some of us in the democratic ranks talked at length with Islamists whom we met there. Our conclusion has been that it will be better for us as democrats, for the Islamists, and for Egypt to enlist Islamists under the flag of democracy. At first, my Islamist interlocutors had problems with the term "democracy," so I suggested that they could call it *shura*, an Arabic word which means "consultation." The precise word used matters less than agreement to the principles of rotation in public office via competitive elections and respect for basic rights and freedoms. They had no problem agreeing to those things, and indeed a few years later they actually adopted the word democracy, which was quite a revolution: They said that they will be for democracy even if it is Western-style democracy.

Although some in the Islamist camp continue to suspect that democracy is a Western ploy, growing numbers of moderate Islamists are adopting the democratic label, some for tactical reasons, no doubt, but others out of conviction. For a long time, the Muslim Brothers in Egypt were against taking part in elections, again on the pretext that voting is somehow a Western trick. Then they agreed to compete at the ballot box and tried to get a license to become a political party. The regime contin-

ues to deny it to them, so they ran in the last four elections as nominal independents. In 1984, when they first tried this, they got just 2 percent of the vote, but they kept at it. In 2005, they won 20 percent of the vote. As an advocate of democracy, I encourage such participation and hope that it further ties the Islamists to the system of electoral competition.

Hamas—the Palestinian offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood—used to be very hostile to democracy and democratic practices. After Yasir Arafat died in November 2004, the new leadership of the Palestinian Authority, anxious for legitimacy, set presidential elections for 9 January 2005. Hamas denounced this move and urged Palestinians to boycott the balloting. On election day, however, turnout was 70 percent. It was a display of the potent human hunger for a say in how one is governed that underlies “the magic of the ballot.” We have seen the same hunger at work in Iraq since Saddam Hussein fell, as dramatized by images of voters proudly displaying fingers dipped in indelible ink to show that they had cast their ballots.

Seeing the power of this hunger for participation, the shrewder leaders of Hamas changed their minds, if not their hearts, and decided to work with it rather than against it. Thus Hamas, having futilely boycotted the Palestinian presidential election in early 2005, took part fully in the Palestinian legislative balloting of early 2006. The result is well known: Hamas won a plurality (42 percent) of the total vote and was able to form a government. While many in Israel and the West consider this a setback for democracy because of Hamas’s use of violence (including suicide attacks), I consider what happened in the Palestinian parliamentary elections to be progress. During the year leading up to the vote, Hamas refrained from violence. The group did not renounce the use of force in principle, but did refrain from it in practice. Its campaign, moreover, was a skillful exercise in orderly persuasion and organization. Hamas did not use cheating or intimidation, and it won fairly in well-monitored voting.

Dealing with the Islamists

All in all, the Palestinian elections arguably represented a step forward for democracy in the Arab region. Yet the reading in Western capitals has been much more negative. The Bush administration, which had made democracy promotion a cornerstone of its foreign policy, greeted the results from Palestine and the electoral gains of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt with coolness. Those in Western councils who never really liked the idea of promoting democracy said, in effect, “We told you that it would lead to no good.” Middle Eastern dictators added their own two cents, blaming U.S.-generated pressures for democratization for sowing chaos in Iraq and then for bringing Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood one step closer to power. Speaking for myself as a

democrat, I know that there will be difficulties and that legitimate questions remain about Islamist intentions, yet I also want to be true to the principle of inclusion. Moreover, if the Islamists who now call themselves democrats renege on democratic rules and principles, I will be the first to oppose them, just as I oppose secular autocrats today.

The price of trying to shut the Islamists out may be learned from the tragic experience of Algeria. There, the Islamists won the first round of nationwide legislative elections in 1991, and the army—with few complaints from Westerners worried by the prospect of “one person, one vote, one time”—staged a coup d'état and cancelled the results. An internal war of almost unbelievable savagery erupted. A decade and more than a hundred thousand lost lives later, the country was back at square one, holding elections with the participation of nearly all Islamist groups. Algeria is now into its second cycle of balloting with minimal violence. There is no country in which Islamists have come to power through elections and then reneged on the rules of the game. It may happen, but so far it has not. The classic example of “one person, one vote, one time” comes not from any Muslim country, but from Germany, where Hitler and the Nazis won a plurality and were invited to form a government in 1933, from which position they proceeded to create their totalitarian and genocidal Third Reich.

The Koran and other Muslim religious texts contain nothing that bars democracy or liberty. Indeed, many theologians think that the central value of Islam is freedom of choice, even in matters that have to do with belief in God. All the great religious traditions have historically admitted of various readings, and a reading of Islam that holds freedom and tolerance up as central values is certainly defensible.

Fareed Zakaria reminds us that you cannot achieve democracy by elections alone, and that other things—especially respect for rights and the rule of law—are needed. This is true. By democracy we mean not simply electoral majoritarianism, but liberal democracy, under which individuals and minorities have their equal rights respected. Reviewing some of the seventy cases in which countries have made the transition from nondemocratic rule to democratic rule since 1974, one finds that some of them lacked a particularly long or robust liberal tradition. Some of them had none. Portugal itself, where the “third wave” began in April 1974, had gone forty years without any meaningfully functioning liberal institutions. Neighboring Spain, which joined the democratic wave a year later with the death of dictator Francisco Franco, was in a similar situation. Some of the Asian democratizers, including South Korea and Taiwan, had very thin (if any) liberal legacies on which to build. Some of these lands have liberal traditions now, but often these have grown up since the process of democratization began. Liberal institutions and practices are necessary in the long run, and it is better to have them going in, but even countries without them have made the

shift to democracy. Despite the setbacks that I described earlier, the liberal tradition remains alive in the collective memory of the Arab world. In Egypt, Tunisia, Lebanon, and even Syria and Iraq, that tradition is available to be rekindled and enhanced.

Adjacent to the Arab world are Muslim-majority countries that are democracies—Turkey, Indonesia, Senegal—which can be looked to as examples. Near the heart of the Arab world is the biggest Arab country, Egypt. Its size and centrality make it strategic. If democracy can advance there, its prospects throughout the lands where Arabic is spoken will become brighter. Democracy's advance in Egypt itself would be easier if the Mubarak regime did not get so much aid, trade, technology, and training from the West, especially the United States and France. This is not to say that democracy can be exported, but it can be supported. One way to support Arab democrats in the left-behind third of the Muslim world would be simply to stop sending so much help to autocrats.

The road ahead is long and arduous, but this will not daunt the Arab and Muslim democrats who are fighting to make democracy a reality in the lands and among the people they love. Seymour Martin Lipset and his students had a favorite saying: "We are not tough, we are not rough, but we are sure determined!" Thus inspired, I would say that we may not be as brutal as our autocrats or as numerous as our theocrats, but we are "sure determined" to fight the battle for the future, to fight for democracy, and we would welcome help.

NOTES

1. Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960).

2. Seymour Martin Lipset and Jason M. Lakin, *The Democratic Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004).

3. Lipset and Lakin, *The Democratic Century*, 196.

4. On 30 June 2000, Egyptian authorities charged me and some of my colleagues with crimes allegedly connected to our administration of the Ibn Khaldun Center, and closed the Center itself the next day. After a long legal fight and 15 months in prison, the Court of Cassation, Egypt's highest civilian judicial body, cleared me of all charges on 18 March 2003. The Ibn Khaldun Center reopened on 30 June 2003. For details of the case, visit www.democracy-egypt.org. See also Saad Eddin Ibrahim, "A Reply to My Accusers," *Journal of Democracy* 11 (October 2000): 58–63; and "Reviving Middle Eastern Liberalism," *Journal of Democracy* 14 (October 2003): 5–10.