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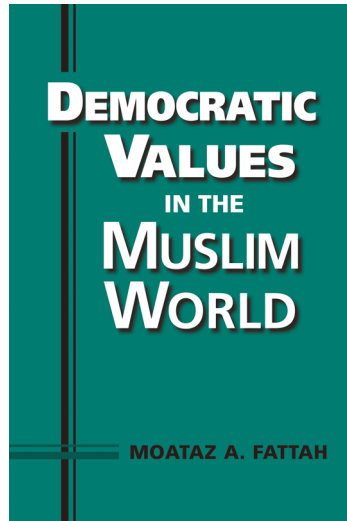
# Democratic Values in the Muslim World

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# 1

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## Introduction

*It is outrageous and amazing that the first free and general elections in the history of the Arab nation are to take place in Iraq, under the auspices of the American occupation, and in Palestine, under the auspices of the Israeli occupation.*

—Salameh Nematt, in the Arabic daily *Al-Hayat*, March 27, 2005

*Democratization in the Muslim world is in the interest of the U.S. . . . Bahrain, Qatar and—to a certain extent—Jordan [have] several reformist elements. We want to be supportive of them.*

—Condoleezza Rice, US national security adviser,  
in the *Financial Times*, September 23, 2002

*We in the Arab and Muslim world know our way. We have our own will and we hold firm to our rights. Besides, we do not need anybody to give us lessons in how to run our countries.*

—Ahmad Maher, Egyptian foreign minister, in response to  
Rice's comments, in the Arabic daily *Al-Hayat*, September 25, 2002

There is no question that Muslim countries are disproportionately autocratic. In 1975, predominantly Muslim countries were the seats of around 25 percent of the world's nondemocratic regimes (Potter et al. 1997), and by 2005 this number had grown to 55 percent. Moreover, no one single Muslim country qualifies today as a consolidated democracy by a commonly accepted measure (Linz and Stephan 1996). One study shows that predominantly Muslim countries “are markedly more authoritarian than non-Muslim societies, even when one controls for other potentially influential factors” (Fish 2002: 37).

Another commentator put it this way: “Islamic democracy has no

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track record, since it barely exists as yet” (Burma 2004). Even worse, “while the countries of Latin America, Africa, East Central Europe, and South and East Asia experienced significant gains for democracy and freedom over the last 20 years, the Islamic world experienced an equally significant increase in the number of repressive regimes” (Karatnycky 2002: 103). Using Robert Dahl’s typology, we find that the great majority of Muslim polities are classified as nondemocratic. And while six are considered new democracies, none qualify as well-established democracies (Dahl 1998).

The predominance of authoritarian and semiauthoritarian regimes in the Muslim world, as well as the current nation-building projects in Afghanistan and Iraq, continue to make some wonder whether Islam is compatible with democratic governance. In other words, why do Muslims not cry out for democracy when the evidence suggests that they should? Or do they?

Surprisingly, despite the prevalence of this question in scholarly, journalistic, and policy circles, there have been very few attempts to systematically measure Muslim attitudes toward democracy or to assess whether there is a single Islamic mindset regarding democratization. Journalistic answers have always been somewhat cursory, anecdotal, and normative, and even the scholarly work has been largely historical and interpretive, failing to let Muslims speak for themselves. The present work presumes that popular values structure—and perhaps set limits on—both the pace of and the possibilities for social and political change. Thus, to gauge the potential for democratic reform in the Middle East, one has to understand the values of its citizens.

This book, then, explores the following questions: Do the values and attitudes of Muslims obstruct or decelerate the democratization process in Muslim countries? If yes, why? If no, who are the possible social agents of democracy in the Muslim world? These questions are examined, in turn, in the following three ways: by analyzing how opinion leaders understand and portray democracy to the masses, by exploring individual attitudes about democracy and the factors that shape them, and by discerning commonalities and differences among Muslim societies in their potential for democratization.

While this is not the first investigation of Muslim public opinion, it is distinctive in that the survey questions were designed exclusively for a Muslim audience, they are supplemented with responses to mostly open-ended questions from focus-group discussions, and these responses are situated in the larger landscape of Muslim political and religious thought. When appropriate, the findings of other surveys have been

brought in to shed more light on a particular aspect of the Islam-democracy question. Though no single study can claim to be the final word on Muslim public opinion, the multiple methods and sources used here should give readers a fairly high degree of confidence in the reliability of the reported findings.

The survey itself covers 31,380 literate Muslims in thirty-two Muslim countries across the Middle East, North Africa, and Central and Southeast Asia, as well as minority Muslim communities in the United States, Europe, and India. Borrowing from previous analyses of democracy, this study seeks to capture two major components of democratic values. The first involves democratic norms, or the public's commitment to the political equality of all citizens and to the negotiated settlement of political disputes. Students of democracy have been particularly interested in whether citizens will tolerate political activity by their most hated opponents or the traditionally disenfranchised, because without tolerance, genuine democratic competition is impossible. To test Muslims' commitment to democratic norms, this project looks specifically at tolerance for the political involvement of women and of members of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities.

The second component of democratic values relates to support for political institutions such as elections and political parties. Most of the literature on democracy recognizes the importance of other features of democracy such as an independent judiciary, legal constraints on the state, the separation of powers, a viable civil society, and a free press. Nevertheless, this analysis focuses on the former set of institutions, since they are the most basic elements of democracy and the key requisites of democratic transitions. Probing for more than general beliefs about democracy, the study also gauges individual attitudes about incumbent rulers and the extent to which Muslims are willing to make sacrifices for their political rights.

What, generally, does this study tell us about Muslim attitudes toward democracy? Many of the findings do not lend themselves to pat summaries. As in other societies, there are often tensions in Muslims' thinking about democracy. Support for political institutions, for example, does not always translate into support for political tolerance, and general support for democracy does not mean that people are willing to make significant sacrifices to bring it about. Many of these tensions must be understood in the particular social and political contexts in which they arise.

Other findings, however, allow for clearer and more sweeping conclusions. What is particularly intriguing is the wide degree of variation

in the potential for democratization based on the measurement of democratic values, something not captured by a simple examination of regime type in the Muslim world. The diversity of Muslim views demonstrates the need to refine our statements and debates about Islam and democracy. The issue is not whether the two are compatible but how to identify the contexts and manners in which the two can be reconciled. This book takes an important step forward in identifying the strongest correlates of democratic attitudes in the Muslim world.

Another striking conclusion is that, whether or not Muslims are supportive of democracy, personal experiences and perceived benefits of democratization play an important role in shaping Muslim attitudes toward democracy. We can conclude, then, that Muslims are not passionately and irrationally antidemocratic as the popular media and some scholars have often implied, but rather they are conditioned to view democracy with positive expectations or skepticism. This finding offers hope, then, that with the right mix of experiences and incentives, Muslims will be motivated to demand more from their leaders and to push for democratic reforms.

Muslims' values are shaped by personal experiences, including religious influences, so it is natural that democracy in Muslim countries would be influenced by religion. This study demonstrates that Islam is one of many environmental factors shaping attitudes about democracy and that its salience, while relatively strong, varies from society to society and individual to individual.

The analyses of Muslim public opinion found in the subsequent chapters will illuminate these conclusions in greater detail. Chapter 2 offers a brief overview of contemporary Muslim religious and political thought, based on interviews with opinion leaders and textual analysis of their debates. It identifies the major strains of debate about political reform and introduces the three predominant worldviews influencing religion and governance: traditionalist Islamists, modern Islamists, and secularists. These categories will reappear throughout the text to illuminate the ideological underpinnings of beliefs expressed in the survey and focus groups. The overview of opinion leaders also reveals that ordinary Muslims do not randomly choose their positions on political issues but rely on opinion leaders to make sense of the world they live in and to respond to the challenges they face.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the factors and actors that shape individual Muslims' attitudes toward democratic norms and institutions. In Chapter 3, the collected data are analyzed to discern the impact of demographic factors: income, education, age, and gender. The effects of

personal religiosity and experience with democracy are also tested. Chapter 4 examines Muslim attitudes toward their respective incumbents, the West, and religious scholars to understand how each of these shape Muslims' political values. Detailed comments obtained from focus-group discussions supplement the statistical analysis in both chapters to allow for a richer understanding of why certain factors correlate with democracy and to offer insights into unexpected findings.

Chapter 5 aggregates the survey data to investigate how opinions differ across communities and countries and to illuminate the prospects for democracy in each society. The concluding chapter summarizes the most important findings and highlights their implications for democratization and the promotion of democracy in the Muslim world.

This book is meant to speak to a wide variety of readers, and thus every attempt has been made to meet the needs of specialists and non-specialists alike. For those who lack detailed knowledge of the Muslim world, the first appendix offers a glossary of Arabic and Islamic terms. Also, to enhance the readability of the chapters and to focus on the larger implications behind the wealth of statistical findings, more technical statistical discussions have been placed in Appendixes 2 through 5. There readers will find extensive information about data collection, the survey instrument, and various methods of statistical analysis. Other technical issues will be addressed in the endnotes.