

## FINAL PAPER

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“Islam and Democratization – The Winds of Change”  
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Mr. Ibrahim was presented with CSID’s Democrat of the Year  
Award during the annual banquet on April 22, 2005, Washington, DC  
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Mr Chairman, ladies and gentlemen:

I am deeply humbled by this award and I accept it in all humility. I would also like to share this award with Dr Azizah, whose tenacity in the face of adversity continues to be a source of strength for me. Let me thank the Center for this great honor, but let me not hesitate to say that there are still thousands out there who are in jail one way or the other for their political beliefs. Let us take this opportunity to express our solidarity with them; let us resolve to continue to support the cause of freedom regardless of color, creed or religion.

About two months after gaining freedom, I visited Indonesia to call on old friends and to congratulate them for the remarkable success story in political reform, that is, the practice of democracy on a scale unseen in the Muslim world. The changing tide in the rise of democracy in other parts of the Muslim world pales before this nation with the largest Muslim population as it stands out as the most significant political development in the recent history of democracy.

When the Asian financial crisis broke out, Indonesia was among the worst affected. But just as it is always darkest before dawn, the riots, violence and the killings were the birth pangs to the emergence of a new nation. In place of oppression and dictatorship, Indonesia is now secured by the pillars of freedom and democracy. Indeed, Indonesia can serve as a model of democracy for the world. There were attempts to galvanize Islamic radicalism, but when Muslims in Indonesia were asked to choose between ideological exclusivism and moderation they overwhelmingly chose the latter. They took the road that was closed on them by 30 years of corrupt dictatorship. They elected for a free press, an independent judiciary and free speech. They elected for freedom and democracy. And the changes brought about now provide an enduring lesson on making that giant leap from autocracy to democracy without violence or bloodshed.

The other enduring lesson from Indonesia, which reinforces what I have been advocating for some time now, is that the impetus for democratization of the Muslim world can and must come from Muslims themselves. And that is what Indonesia has done. Why must such a process be driven by America or Europe or any other region for that matter?

We hear the view that Islam and democracy are diametrically opposed because it is argued that sovereignty belongs only to God. By juxtapositioning the exercise of state power with the

sovereignty of God, this view confers on tyranny the mantle of not only worldly legitimacy but divine ordination. On the other hand, secularists raise the specter of radical Islam gaining power in the event of elections by popular vote. This generates fear among established democracies in the West who naturally then opt for the so-called lesser of two evils, which is to allow secular despots to hold on to power. The upshot of all these is that the Muslim world suffers the dubious distinction of having the longest ruling autocrats and dictators.

Clearly therefore it is not Islam but the exploitation of the fear factor that has precluded the democratization of the Muslim world. I call on Islamists who are opposed to democracy to change their mind set and work towards developing a vibrant democracy. Marshall the forces of freedom and harness them so that Muslims may stand up for their fundamental dignity and establish the institutions of democracy, freedom and civil society.

### **Compact to constitutional freedoms**

While the history of Islam's expansion is replete with the stories of conquest, it is equally true that Islam was also spread through commerce and trade. Even as it spread its wings, multi-cultural and multi-religious societies evolved. Muslim societies in this regard stood out for their tolerance and moderation, not chauvinism or bigotry. Isn't it therefore conceivable that when the seeds of democracy and freedom are planted in the hearts of Islamists these values will germinate in the psyche of their worldview? In the current tide to move to democracy, Islamist political parties, and for that matter other parties as well, should be bound by a compact to respect and honor the values and principles of democracy and freedom, and not to renounce them upon gaining power.

In promoting democracy and freedom, it is imperative that outside parties should be weaned away from their fixation on perpetuating the separation of church and state. For the Muslim world, a more productive pursuit lies in finding how democracy and freedom can resonate through Islam's public and private realms. For Islamists in particular embracing democracy and freedom should carry no stigma. Accepting democracy and freedom is not converting to American values or ideals; nor does it mean that they will have to stop criticizing US foreign policy, culture or values.

Likewise, it is also misconceived for the US to view the movement of Islamists to democracy from the prism of so-called die hard fundamentalist groups in the Arab world. This fallacy has led to the assumption that Islamists are diametrically opposed to the United States and will have nothing to do with them, or worse, that they will work towards the destruction of the America. This anxiety sometimes borders on paranoia and is of course completely unfounded, 9/11 notwithstanding. Yet, we must concede that anti-American sentiments are not a mere figment of the imagination. While I do not propose to discourse on their underlying causes, it may perhaps be useful to take a moment to look closer into this.

There seems to be a general consensus that the underlying causes for the progress of political reform in the Muslim world, particularly in the Middle East, have their roots in the Bush Administration's "forward strategy of freedom". Under this strategy, democracy and freedom is to be spread across the Muslim world through multilateral as well as bilateral initiatives. True, these efforts have made some impact but they have not succeeded in ameliorating anti-American sentiments as a whole. To a large extent, this is because the strategy has been long on rhetoric but rather short on reality.

I say this because American foreign policy vis-à-vis the Muslim countries is still mired in a “strategy of selective ambivalence”. This is a policy of vicariously aiding certain countries to resist the tide of reform through omission rather than commission. This policy has meant turning a blind eye to blatant human rights violations and other kinds of abuses which clearly make a mockery of the democracy and freedom being preached. This policy means that in return for the support to the United States in the war against terror, these countries are made strategic partners and are given economic aid and other sweeteners. To my mind, this is a case of reverse conditionality. This strategy of selective ambivalence confers on repressive regimes the mantle of legitimacy simply because they raise the specter of terror and vow to fight it as an ally of the United States.

These regimes are not averse to claiming legitimacy through Islam even though the people are denied civil liberties enshrined in Islam. How can anyone talk of an ideal Islamic society without freedom of thought and expression, or freedom from arbitrary arrest and rule of law? Isn't it farcical to talk of an ideal Islamic society without sustainable economic development, social justice or cultural empowerment? Can there be an ideal Islamic society where intellectual development is stifled and women continue to be treated as second-class citizens?

## **ISLAM AND CIVIL SOCIETY**

While the bloodshed of Algeria's aborted elections of 1992 continues to haunt us, the lessons of history should fortify instead of weaken our conviction to pursue freedom and democracy. 9/11 should never be allowed to take us backwards. That there is a need to wage war on terror is not in dispute in as much as terrorism terrorizes all. But the zeal with which this war is being prosecuted should be reinforced by the conviction to forge ahead to promote the principles of freedom and democracy where they are needed most, not sacrifice them on the altar of expediency.

Even leaving aside now the issue of selective ambivalence, one has to be rather guarded about jumping to conclusions when talking about the winds of change in the Muslim world. Apart from Indonesia, and to a certain extent Turkey, do elections really demonstrate that democracy is alive or are they merely tools to legitimize state power? Isn't it true that certain states continue to be under one-man or one-party rule despite the trappings of reform including the possibility of presidential elections? A few elections do not make a civil society.

To be fair, certain states are already moving positively and firmly on the path to real democracy. Yet I must caution that one may be long on promise but short on delivery. All Muslim countries must seize the moment now to adopt modern, democratic constitutions, hold free and fair elections, ensure the separation of powers and guarantee fundamental civil liberties including allowing the full participation of women in political life. They must put a stop to extra-judicial procedures, arbitrary arrests, and the use of the state apparatus to silence political opposition. With these institutions and practices in place, abuse of power will be checked, corruption can be more effectively dealt with, and economic wealth can be more equitably distributed to the people.

### **Role of a vibrant opposition**

Constitutionally guaranteed civil liberties become pious platitudes when the voices of dissent are not allowed to be heard. Democracy is participatory government in its fullest sense and that presupposes the existence of a vibrant opposition, as the bulwark against the tyranny of absolute power.

Opposition must not be just merely tolerated but must be allowed to flourish as the people's conscience. Its paramount role is to hold the powers that be to account when they go astray and to remind them that power is trust, not might. .

The challenges ahead remain daunting for the Muslim world as well as for America. Many parts of the Muslim world still look at the United States as arrogant purveyors of power. And it doesn't serve the cause of freedom for America to merely dismiss this perception as a manifestation of hatred of modernity or hostility fuelled by fundamentalist ideology. I have no hesitation in applauding the role of the United States in promoting freedom and democracy, not just in the Muslim world but the world at large. After all, freedom is not a territorial construct. Nor is democracy only needed in the Muslim world. As I've said before, whatever its faults, the United States has been the strongest advocate of democracy throughout the world without which the voices of freedom would have remained still and silent.

As for the Muslim world, let us forge ahead with a renewed resolution to fight not just extremism and terrorism but authoritarianism and despotism in all its guises. Let us not forget the untold acts of torture, brutality and massacre committed under the regimes of Hitler, Stalin, Mao Tse Tung and Saddam Hussain. Even today, Gulags, sham trials and information apparatchiks continue to oppress and terrorize the people. These remain the greatest impediments to freedom and democracy and the establishment of the institutions of civil society.

In this regard, I dare say with conviction that the role of Muslims in the West should not be taken lightly. Muslim civil societies in America such as the CSID for example must be applauded for their intellectual and moral leadership in the quest for freedom and democracy. It is our fervent hope that they will continue in this noble cause and not recoil in the face of adversity. The time is ripe to move forward.

On such a full sea are we now afloat, and we must take the current when it serves, or lose our ventures.

Thank you.