

FINAL PAPER

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“Why Muslims Want Democracy”

By: Carl Gershman, President
The National Endowment for Democracy, DC
carl@ned.org

The short answer to the question, “Why Muslims want democracy,” is that they want it for the same reasons that everyone else does. Let me elaborate upon what I mean by this. A remarkable development of the recent past, which I would put in the category of the dog that didn’t bark, is the absence of a reverse wave of authoritarianism following the historic expansion of democracy from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s that has come to be called the third wave of democratization. There have been numerous developments that could have set in motion a major reversal of the earlier gains – violent ethnic conflicts in the Balkans and in many African countries; sharp economic downturns in Asia and Latin America; rampant corruption, stalled transitions, and democratic back-sliding in many post-authoritarian countries; and, most recently, the war on terrorism that has fostered a less liberal international environment and given some governments new license to attack dissidents and minorities in the name of security. One certainly might have expected a broad setback for democracy as a result of these developments, but this has not occurred. On the contrary, democracy has continued to make advances, most recently with the elections in Indonesia and Afghanistan, the Rose Revolution in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, the January elections in Palestine and Iraq, and the pressures for change in Egypt, Lebanon, and in other parts of the once dormant Middle East.

The most compelling explanation for this remarkable (and mostly unremarked) absence of a democratic reversal is the enormous support that democracy now enjoys in non-Western countries and cultures. The existence of such support has been confirmed by a recent study of world opinion using data gathered by the World Values Survey. The study concluded that “democracy has an overwhelming positive image throughout the world” and has become, over the last decade, “virtually the only political model with global appeal, no matter what the culture.” While attitudes in Muslim societies are less liberal than they are in the West on gender equality, gay rights, and other social issues, there is no difference at all when it comes to support for democratic institutions. Close to 90 percent of the respondents in Muslim societies favor democracy, the same figure as in the West.

In developing societies, support for democracy is often greater among the poor and less educated than among the affluent. On the occasion of India’s 50th anniversary in 1997, the New Delhi-based Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) conducted a national survey assessing popular attitudes toward Indian democracy. The results constituted a stunning rejection of the common belief that the Indian people, the poor above all, had lost faith in the country’s democratic system. On the contrary, wrote Ashis

Nandy, the director of the CSDS, “The democratic system enjoys greater legitimacy today than in the past. The poor and deprived defend democracy more vigorously than the elite.”

The idea that ordinary people in developing countries desire democracy and are willing to sacrifice to achieve it is not yet sufficiently understood in the United States and other established democracies. There is still the view, left over from the period of the Cold War when communism claimed to speak for the least advantaged, that democracy is a luxury for the poor, who need bread before freedom. To be sure, the poor need bread, but relinquishing their rights is not the way to get it. While the rich may sometimes take democracy for granted, the poor are keenly aware that it is essential for their overall well-being.

There are four fundamental values that democracy has for the people of developing countries. They can be summarized as protective, instrumental, constructive, and intrinsic. Let me briefly describe what I mean.

Democracy provides *protection* for the people in a number of different ways. For example, it is the means by which the citizens can hold the government accountable for its policies and prevent corruption and an abuse of power. It also promotes human rights and protects people from the cruelties of autocratic regimes. As Amartya Sen has written it also protects people from certain catastrophes by giving governments the *political* incentive to guard against famines and to take preventive measures to relieve human suffering if there is a danger of mass hunger. In addition to deterring criminal negligence by government, democracy also prevents the deliberate use by government of apparently natural disasters to eliminate entire sections of the population that are considered to be politically disloyal, a criminal practice used by the Soviet regime in Ukraine in 1932-33 and by the North Korean government in the late 1990s.

Democracy also has an *instrumental* value for the people. It promotes economic development by triggering, in the words of the UNDP’s 2002 Human Development Report “a virtuous cycle of development – as political freedom empowers people to press for policies that expand social and economic opportunities.” A study published by the Journal of Democracy reported that 80 percent of the cross-country variation in per capita income growth among developing countries can be explained by factors that are aspects of democracy. The variables that contribute to economic growth share two characteristics: They represent institutions and policies that establish a rule of law enforced with fairness and justice (which encourages work, risk-taking, etc.); and that constitute forms of collective action at the government level – the enforcement of contracts, the protection of political and property rights, and the collection of taxes that can be used for public services.

This suggests another instrumental value of democracy: It alerts governments to the needs of their citizens and therefore promotes the health, education and overall well-being of the population. One of the best indicators of social and economic well-being is the infant mortality rate, which is consistently lower in democracies than in dictatorships. An additional instrumental value is the well-established fact that democracy promotes peace, both between states and within them. I refer to the multi-volume work of R. J. Rummel on this subject as well as to Immanuel Kant’s famous essay on “Perpetual Peace.

The third value of democracy is what Amartya Sen calls its *constructive* role in helping people in developing societies learn from one another through public discussion, thereby facilitating the formation of values and the generation of “informed and considered choices.”

And finally there is democracy’s *intrinsic* value since it is the only system that enriches the lives of citizens by recognizing their dignity as human beings.

As a result of this widespread support for democracy, there has emerged the phenomenon of Muslim Democracy that was alluded to by our previous speaker, Andrew Natsios, when he quoted from a recent essay by Vali Nasr who is a professor of Middle East politics at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School. As it happens, the essay is published in the current issue of the *Journal of Democracy*. Its basic point is that a Muslim version of Christian Democracy is already emerging today in Muslim-majority countries that permit a degree of political competition. Thus, in countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, and Turkey, pragmatic Muslim Democratic parties have occupied the political center and isolated parties of the Islamic ideological extremes.

But in more autocratic countries like Egypt, Tunisia and Syria, where Muslim Democracy has not been able to develop and the alternative are now limited to the current autocracy and an Islamist opposition, the challenge is to promote a gradual opening that will allow for the emergence of a democratic alternative. To meet this challenge, five priorities must be met:

- 1) The first is to build an internal democratic movement that can press for reforms and a real opening for democracy;
- 2) The second is protect the activists in this movement by marshalling support from international human rights and political support;
- 3) The third is for the governments in the region to implement a program of political, social, and economic reform;
- 4) Western governments will need to encourage such reforms by both pressuring governments in the Middle East and providing incentives for them to allow more democratic freedoms; and finally
- 5) Programs of the kind described by Andrew Natsios, and which are provided by the National Endowment for Democracy, should be offered providing financial, technical, and political assistance to internal democratic movements and organizations.

It must be emphasized that democratic change will be difficult to achieve and will require years of hard work. I have just returned from Afghanistan, and the devastation I witnessed there convinces me that democracy could easily unravel if locally elected governments and the international assistance community are not able to produce a better life for people at the grassroots. Ultimately, while people want and need democracy, the achievement of democracy is not automatic or guaranteed. It will require enormous efforts by all of us, most importantly by democratic activists who could be subject to harassment and persecution by autocratic governments.

This is why it gives me such a pleasure to introduce to you someone who has fought for democracy and who has paid the price of imprisonment for his beliefs and for his actions. It's a great honor to introduce to you one of the foremost democratic thinkers who is also a courageous fighter for democracy in the Middle East, my good friend Saad Eddin Ibrahim.