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“Prospects for an American Muslim Polity:
Implications for Muslim World Democratization”

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The Essence of Democratization

The exploration of democratization must examine how any given society functions to achieve ends transcending social tensions. Democratic change implies that members of any collectivity agree on the management of existing conflicts. The absence of such condition means society will eventually break-up or be held together artificially by some coercive power.

In different ways, most societies in the world are pluralistic, which means that all societies are but collectivities laden with conflicting group capabilities, visions and interests. Working to develop institutions, rules and procedures for the proper functioning of the competing groups and subgroups is the essence of democratization. Accordingly, the process of democratic change relates to the structures of the state, civil society and community. This paper looks at how Muslims set up their own political house.

Inquiries about the prospects of democratization in the Muslim world have so far either examined (1) the theoretical question of compatibility between Islam and democracy; or (2) the empirical questions regarding relations between regimes and opposition groups – primarily the so-called Islamists. These are important factors, but they lack a proper grounding. To build a solid foundation for the discussion, one must begin by looking at existing societal cleavages. In this connection, key questions would include: What are the various constituents of a given collectivity? How are they similar and/or different? To what extent are they able to create legitimate decision making processes that emphasize their common interests? What mechanisms are in place to deal with communal tensions? The examination should then proceed by contemplating the proper civic and political structures that can help that society (or any smaller social organization) advance its higher goals.

We must keep in mind that the whole idea behind having a government or a public square is to address collective interests in a manner that offers a tangible basis for solidarity among citizens. A non-democratic government is sub-optimal because it fails to make the collective needs of its people as the reason for its existence. From this vantage point, the ability of people to make sure that their differences do not trump their ability to come together is a necessary condition not only for democratic

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governance but also for the very survival of any nation. This thinking warrants a close focus on the internal dynamics of any collectivity anywhere in the world and how it relates to other collectivities with which it shares extant space. This examination is essentially an exploration of the workings of civil society, which is the very entity that guarantees the survival of a voluntary social structure.

Whatever one wants to call democracy—be it *shura* or representative governance—the term assumes that the public domain is essentially about sorting out the main differences in society so that the whole collectivity can make decisions without resorting to the use of force. Such a condition ensures empowerment and progress for everyone in society. Seeking genuine democratization predicates a fresh look at how societal groups have managed sociopolitical cleavages.

Whatever elements of civil society existing in Muslim-majority countries today have been established within governance structures that the populace has had little, if any role in constructing. Even populist movements, including the moderate faith-based groups that became known as Islamic movements, for example, never fully deliberated diversity in their own societies. Much of their public discourse so far has centered on the ideology of the state. But supporters of the various ideological camps do not hold similar views on public policy. The serious discourse on societal cleavages and their meaning to state institutions and to state-society relations remains largely an elitist academic enterprise.

For some time, academics have argued that low levels of education and economic growth represent barriers to a successful democratic change. Such notions condemn the lower social strata in society to a life of endless strife. They also imply that people with modest or low income and lower or no college degrees are incapable of pooling their resources to articulate their collective needs. With respect to Muslim societies, virtually all Muslim-majority communities have a sufficiently educated class of citizens who are able to discuss public matters rationally and to order their affairs in a democratic fashion. This is certainly true of American Muslims, whose educational attainment level is higher than that of the national average.

It is often claimed that certain cultural and religious tendencies represent barrier to democratization. Islam in particular is held up as anathema to collective self-governing. The Qur'an, Islam's holy book, instills in Muslims appreciation for diversity among people. It acknowledges individual differences, as well as ways and means available to different classes of people, including the rich, poor and middle classes. The Qur'an recognizes men, women, senior people, and children. The Qur'an also places value on cultural differences represented by colors and tongues. It also gives recognition to people of other faiths, especially Jews and Christians. The Qur'an and Hadith (the collected sayings of Muhammad) stress that all humans are equal in the sight of God. In this sense, Islam promotes an egalitarian outlook to social life.

The Qur'an also teaches the values of tolerance, justice, *shura* (consultation in public affairs), equality, and the oneness and dignity of man. The holy book encourages Muslims to work together for the public good, even to compete or to collaborate with all others in working for it. Among other Qur'anic values is a clear condemnation of tyranny, oppression and injustice and a prohibition on coercion in matters of belief. The Qur'an promotes a meritorious culture based on good works (not just in matters of religious devotion).

The Prophet Muhammad established a society and government based on a charter that delineated rights and duties of the member communities. The Charter of Medinah recognized Jews and non-believers as communities and accorded them a political status. Although the Charter recognized the Muslims as one entity, no favors were accorded to any segment of this society because of its mere belonging to a religion, tribe, social class, or gender. Women were treated as human beings with equal worth. They owned property, managed business, acquired and transmitted knowledge, and participated in public affairs.

Governance in Islamic History

The first four caliphs that succeeded the Prophet came to power through a process of deliberation and public confirmation, called *bay'ah*. In the early decades of Islam, the claim to leadership was based on merit rather than a privileged social status. Even the Shia concept of *imamate* (vicegerency, or leadership after the Prophet), which is the closest notion to assigning status based on kinship, is limited to the House of the Prophet and reasoned by means of divine order—devoid of an assumption of social superiority.

A reversal of Islam's meritocracy took place after Mu'awiyah Ibn Sufyan ushered in the era of Umayyad rule. A pattern of dynastic succession was established. With some exceptions, Muslims have henceforth been ruled by men whose clans were able to muster enough strength to ensure submission or acquiescence by others. When European powers colonized Muslim-majority lands, Muslims had already been used to strong-man rule.

European colonial powers introduced new twists to the old political pathologies in the Muslim world; political legitimacy was based on the brute force of military and security forces in states equipped with the stunning power of modern technological armaments. As has been demonstrated in a number of countries, the vast technological gap between the ruler and the ruled meant that descent could now be put down effectively and quickly. This has led to stability, but it downgraded the capacity of people to self-govern.

In the contemporary era, the problem of unrepresentative government has been exacerbated by the fact that the state exercises a disproportionate amount of intrusion into the private sphere of its citizenry. Under dynastic rule, caliphs and sultans raised armies, maintained law and order and engaged in limited social welfare and public works. Modern states design and implement plans intervening in all aspects of life. States whose structures are appreciative of societal conflicts are more likely to be democratic. Conversely, states that suppress diversity in the name of unity are more likely to be tyrannical.

A World of Nation States

The contemporary world is divided politically into nation-states, most of which are members of the United Nations (UN). The UN is fundamentally a non-aggression pact, whose members, including 55 Muslim-majority countries, have signed treaties committing states to the protection of universal human rights and the equal treatment of all citizens. Islam teaches Muslims to keep their agreements. Under such obligation, it must be understood that while Muslims worldwide can celebrate their communal religious identity, they acknowledge that the *ummah* now consists of many political

entities whose relations with one another and with other members of the global community transcend religious affiliation.

Muslim intellectuals and religious leaders have not found in the major writings and documents defining the American nation ideas that offend the Islamic faith. The U.S. Constitution establishes a system of government intended to provide for domestic security and national defense, to regulate commerce and industry, and to promote the general welfare of the people. Citizens are obligated to pay taxes and serve in the military when drafted. In return, they have the right to vote, speak and practice religion freely, bear arms, and be secure in their private property.

While the Constitution is the ultimate frame of reference that defines how people can live together, what makes America's system of government legitimate is the voluntary involvement of people in their government and their community. American society is organized along lines of many types of interests including ethnicity, religion, gender, occupation, business, region, residence, and ideology. The organizations that embody these interests have extensions and relations all over the globe and wherever they go, money and ideas follow. Within this framework one can begin exploring the meeting place between Islam and democracy in the United States and its relevance to political change in the Muslim world.

American Muslim Diversity

American Muslims descend from nearly all countries of the world and are represented in all racial and ethnic populations, although most are South Asian, Arab or African-American. Some Muslims in America are converts; most are born into Muslim families. In terms of economic class, very few Muslims belong to the upper echelons of society. Some come from low-income households; and many are middle-class wage earners. Concerning religiosity, Muslims exhibit various attitudes from the strictly observant to those who do not practice the faith.

American Muslims have established faith-based and ethnicity-based organizations throughout the U.S. Ethnicity-based groups have founded community centers striving to maintain kinship ties, provide mutual aid and educate others about their shared experiences and concerns as American minorities. Ethnic groups conduct activities and sponsor publications expressing pride in their heritage. They also promote educational and social organizations and businesses that sell particular ethnic products. Clusters within these groups comprise professionals who have established guilds to improve their career chances. Faith-based organizations are most evident in the establishment of mosques, Islamic schools and Islamic missionary groups. While Islamic centers offer educational and devotional services, they have also become gravitation points of local community activism, providing social services to members and conduct interfaith relations.

The worlds of faith and ethnicity are not always separate; nor have they always led to exclusivist models of community building. At mosques ethnicity has played a role among the faithful in leadership dynamics; but the vast majority of mosque congregations are ethnically heterogeneous. Still, tensions within community organizations do exist and have occasionally resulted in splits. The formalization of membership and the introduction of voting in the running of community groups are institutional interventions that are increasingly used to prevent or contain conflict.

Attitudinal differences in the American Muslim community abound, but there is a shared feeling of threat emanating from ethnic profiling, stereotyping and secret

evidence laws, especially since the mid-1990s and most notably after September 11, 2001. These shared experiences have given rise to solidarity among Muslims in the United States. Individually and collectively, Muslims seek to maintain their religious and ethnic identities while working for the betterment of their lives and the lives of their children.

American Muslim solidarity, however, has not meant the creation of a Muslim political ghetto in America. Muslims have demonstrated proclivity toward experimenting with broad-based alliances. Although such encounters are nascent and ad-hoc in nature, they have dealt with important public issues, including civil liberties, immigrant rights, worker justice, among others. Allies included secularists, liberals, conservatives, and minority groups. Still, many Muslim groups have often stood together against prejudice directed at them on account of religion, ethnicity or national origin.

Community public affairs groups on both sides of the faith-ethnicity spectrum have sometimes worked together to address common issues, especially in the area of civil rights. Islamic centers and ethnic associations have held joint festivals, parades, bazaars, and political demonstrations. They have also joined functions held by other public and private entities to reinforce common bonds among the various ethnic and faith groups in America.

The growing involvement of Muslims in the public square is a clear sign that the Muslims of America are seeking to situate themselves within their country's civic and political structures. Some Muslims remain adamant in opposing such involvement, opting instead for an isolationist state of existence based on a strict reading of the Qur'an. But such voices have been increasingly marginalized by the rising tide of participatory American Muslim politics. The attacks of September 11, and the subsequent War on Terror, including the American military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, were associated with religious rhetoric that left many Muslims, especially immigrants, apprehensive about their future. But all these tragedies that pitted Muslims against Americans failed to dwarf the rising American Muslim interest in the political process.

In the 2004 election the American Muslim Taskforce for Election and Civil Rights (AMT) doubled its group membership over the previous election season. American Muslims, especially in Ohio and Florida, organized unprecedented get-out-the-vote functions. Muslim activists generally see the U.S. as a pluralistic society offering them a chance not only to prosper and live in freedom but also to become a bridge of understanding between America and the Muslim world.

The American Muslim quest to become part of American pluralism has engendered diverse responses from other groups. Some are tolerant; others are not. The American democratic model leaves it up to citizens to make sense of interactions among groups and relations between state and society. Paradoxically, now the Muslims of America, who number in the range of 4 to 7 million and have maintained a communal presence for nearly a century, have no representation in the three branches of the federal government. While some groups welcome Muslims as one more variety in the American multicultural experience, other groups, especially those in the far right, cast Muslims (and others for that matter) as people with dual loyalty or as enemies of the state. But these forces do not possess a definition of civil society that transcends their own ethnocentric worldviews.

The marginal political status of Muslims in America is not entirely due to exclusion or containment by others. The American Muslim involvement in public life has only begun in the last two decades. Furthermore, clout in the American political system demands resources that Muslims have not yet mustered. Chief among the power elements Muslims lack are: (1) substantial financial bases; and (2) large organizations. Currently, the structure of the American Muslim community is too fractured to allow any effective, large-scale mobilization. These challenges lie at the very heart of the democratization process. Building a culture sensitive to diversity allows its members to coalesce in the pursuit of collective will. In this sense, democratization empowers the whole collectivity.

Structural Challenges

Most American Muslim organizations were established within the past two decades and continue to cope with routinizing and formalizing their work. Even mosques, which historically have had a clearly defined role in Muslim life, continue to search for solutions as they grow in size and become more diverse and service-oriented. While some organizations have managed to define their functional roles and gained legitimacy, others continue to struggle in identifying specific, achievable goals, securing financial resources, and generally improving their effectiveness.

Some academics seem fixated on the indigenous-immigrant divide. As most community leaders will likely be American-born within a generation, this is a short-term issue. But together American Muslim organizations do not yet constitute a polity with communal deliberation—let alone decision-making—mechanisms. Indeed, the whole institutional structure of Muslim communities in the U.S. lacks connectivity between organizations, even ones involved in similar functions.

Islamic schools in the U.S. represent an unfortunate example of a disjointed structure. In much of the country every school is in of itself its own school district and as a result must cope with exorbitant overhead cost and limited resources for program enrichment. Organizations like the Islamic Schools League of America are attempting to fill in the vacuum, but it too lacks the resources required to fulfill its dream of establishing an educational support organization offering professional services in curriculum development, teacher training and school administration.

Other sectors of the community are also struggling to make their mark on the community. Public affairs groups meet only in political seasons. Although there is momentum in favor of political participation, there is no momentum for any strategic political choices in party politics or beyond. AMT has begun to change this situation; it continued to meet after last year's election. However, there is little public communication about the results of those meetings. Charity groups as a sector of community activism are not faring better. They only met once nearly ten years ago. Thus long before the post-September 11 Muslim charity crackdowns by the Bush Administration, this sector was not shaping up to meet future challenges. Even imams suffer marginalization, because they lack professional associations to link them.

One explanation for this predicament is that it will take time before community organizations develop their own web of communication. It is also possible that Muslims have assimilated into a group behavior characterized in America by the phrase "sticking to your own." Overcoming shortfalls can be achieved in a number of ways. Small groups can merge. Alternatively, they can institutionalize effective linkages. In

other words, to gain political clout a social or political group must create conditions where all natural members of the group have adequate incentive to join and where groups recognize the benefit of working together. Among the conditions conducive to progress are: transparency in finances and increased public forums for planning and implementing programs. This is a call for groups to go beyond the legal disclosure requirements in order to ensure that members identify with them.

There is reason to hope that change will take place. Muslim community organizations have internalized the norm of functional specialization, which has been a significant feature of the development of Western democratic institutions. Specialists in comparative politics call this process secularization. In part, the rise of professionals in the leadership of minority communities has had the effect of pushing groups into a focus on substantive action at the expense of ideological rhetoric. The process of institution building, however, has been slow as professionals tend to come from the educational background of science and technology and have little expertise in the domain of politics and institution building. As a new generation of leadership assumes the helm and as discursive thought on these issues takes new shape, rapid progress may become more attainable.

Aside from the question of political clout, there are many lessons the Muslim world can draw from the American Muslim experience. First, releasing the populace to express its own self-interest should not necessarily lead to anarchy. As American Muslims can testify from their own experience, the American democratic process is well accustomed to debating the balance between liberty and order. A potential solution for Muslim-majority societies in the search for a similar balance is integration into a global civil society through increased people-to-people contacts.

Second, as the American Muslim experience shows, democratic change is a learning process. Groups that are interested in reform must stick to a fact-based discourse that (1) appreciates differences among people; and (2) is focused on nudging the various factions to the center of the political spectrum. This is exactly what I attempted to do in my book, *The North American Muslim Resource Guide: Muslim Community Life in the United States and Canada*. In this light, the conversations on relations between Muslim groups and Western governments or private entities may be helpful only if they are framed within a broader view of pluralistic political discourse. Those with visions limited to exploring the replacement of secular/traditional elites with Islamic/Islamist ones do not necessarily increase our understanding of the future of Islamic democratic change.