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Muslims can practice democracy

By Asma Afsaruddin

For a democracy to live up to its name, it has to be accommodating of religious values and sentiment, if that is reflective of the popular will

IT is widely assumed that the sine qua non of secularism in Christian-Western contexts is the separation of church and state. Meanwhile, secularism is also assumed to be a prerequisite for the successful democratisation of societies. The invocation of these two litmus tests has created much hand-wringing in the West over the potential for democratic processes to take hold in Muslim-majority societies today. Not only is secularism not gaining ground, but religious resurgence of various forms characterises many of these societies. Democracy's prospects seem dismal in these regions when viewed through this particular prism.

But is this kind of pessimism warranted? Despite the homespun "wisdom" buttressing gloomy predictions of this sort, recent polls conducted by the Pew Research Center and Gallup show that the majority of people in Muslim countries desire democratic reform and wish to see democratic governments installed in their countries. Yet at the same time, they do not want their religious values to be undermined and the freedom to practice their religion in both the private and public spheres diminished. Are Muslims then attempting to reconcile two hopelessly irreconcilable goals?

A thoughtful response at this juncture would be: It depends on how you define secularism and what your understanding is of the relationship between secularism and democracy. Secularism as practiced in France (laicite) has meant evacuating religion from the public sphere and banishing it to the private one. Secularism as it developed in the United States, on the other hand, has been more accommodating of religious values and expression in the public realm. The relation between secularism and democracy is, therefore, a variable one and democracy as a universal phenomenon is still a work in progress.

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fits-all democracy paradigm, regardless of different historical and social contexts. Such a parochial view fails to take into account the different inflections of democracy in different parts of the world with varying degrees of secularism. It also fails to take into account the recent resurgence of religious values in highly democratic societies, such as the US, and the process of negotiation this has entailed between religious and secular values.

For a democracy to live up to its name, it has to be accommodating of religious values and sentiment, if that is reflective of the popular will. As the Iranian philosopher Abdul Karim Soroush has perceptively remarked, in a religious society "any purely secular government would be undemocratic".

Another dogma needs to be dismantled here: that in Islam, religion and politics are forever joined at the hip and the two cannot be separated for fear of violating a presumed divine commandment. This dogma has grown out of a historical reading of the growth of Islamic political thought that disregards the lack of evidence in the early sources for a notion of sacred or sacralised politics in the Islamic polity. Rather, political governance was deemed necessary for the pragmatic purpose of maintaining order in society and no particular mode of government was understood to be mandated.

Even though later political theorists usually asserted the twinning of religion and state, in actual practice there developed fairly early on a de facto separation between political and religious authority, exercised by different and often mutually opposed groups of people (rulers versus scholars). This did not mean that religious and moral values had no role in the public sphere - quite the contrary. Politics, as part of the public sphere, was also meant to be guided by moral values and particularly by the Quranic prescription of consultative and collective decision-making (Shura).

Thus, the 12th-century Andalusian Muslim scholar, Ibn Atiyya, was of the opinion that an individual who did not confer with knowledgeable and morally upright people was liable to be removed from public office. Seven centuries later,

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the French political theorist, Alexis de Tocqueville, would remark that liberty "considers religion as the safeguard of morality and morality as the best security of law ..." One suspects that if Ibn Atiyya and Tocqueville had met at some convenient point in history, they would have had much to say to one another on the topic of a moral and democratic political culture.

Today, a common commitment to promoting good governance and civil society means that both religious and secular people can meet and interact in the public sphere on the basis of such shared values. Neither has to embrace the other's fundamental way of viewing the world nor of relating to a creator (or not), but each has to make space for the other. This is an important manifestation, after all, of what we now deem to be the democratic process.

COURTESY DAILY STAR

The writer is associate professor at the University of Notre Dame, and chair of the board of directors of the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy