**Ummah & democracy**

BY N I A Z M U R T A Z A | 1/14/2020

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| IN dividing the globe by faith, it appears that among the nearly 50 Muslim-majority states globally, only five (Indonesia, Malaysia, Turkey, Senegal and Sierra Leone) meet the two common norms for being called electoral democracies: the last two elections were fair and unelected entities don`t have formal veto powers over the elected regimes.  A few flirt with these norms, ie, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Tunisia, Albania and Bosnia.  No Muslim state is a well-ruled democracy that ensures civil liberties. About half are misruled autocracies. The status is better among other faiths. Among the 100-plus Christian-majority states, around 70 are electoral democracies. Among 10 Buddhist majority-states, half are; and among three Hindu-dominant states, India and Mauritius have regular free polls. Israel, the only Jewish state, is a democracy. Among the four to five states where non-believers are the largest group, about half are advanced democracies.  These stark figures inspire Islamophobes to argue that Islamic edicts discourage democracy. When I analyse social issues as a social scientist, I only use agnostic lenses.  But even such lenses show that such Islamophobic logic is vague and fails to compare a specific set of core edicts properly with similar beliefs in other faiths. Actually, it could be argued more lucidly that Islam perhaps is the only faith whose early history (of the Medina state) provides a strong case of early democracy in practice.  Caliphs were chosen with consensus and on merit, and they ruled fairly accountably when other major states then had autocracies. Early rulers linked with other religions were dynastic kings. Clearly, the Medina state existing many centuries ago differed much from today`s democracy. But today`s democracy differs much from even modern Western democracy a mere 150 years ago, which had colonialism, women`s non-suffrage, slavery etc.  Today, it is contemporary factors that explain the current major democratic deficit in Muslim states. Regional analysis reveals that these factors undermine democracy not only in many Muslim but also many non-Muslim regional states. In East Asia, Indonesia and Malaysia are electoral democracies while only Brunei is an autocracy among Muslim states. Many more non-Muslim East Asian states are autocratic, eg, China, North Korea, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam. In the ex-Soviet bloc, the six Muslim STANs (Kazakhastan, Uzbekistan etc.) are non-democratic but so are Russia, Belarus and Ukraine. South Asia`s four stronger democracies include Bangladesh and Pakistan while its four laggard democracies include two non-Muslim states. A similarly mixed picture is found in Africa. TheMiddle East is almost entirely Muslim, and an intra-regional comparison is not possible with non-Muslim states there. Thus, outside the highly developed Western and East Asian states, the frequency of democracy across states of various faiths is more even.  In looking closely at Muslim states today, one hardly finds religious edicts influencing the thoughts and decisions of elites either way about the nature of the political systems anywhere, except Iran. Elsewhere, eg, Saudi Arabia and Brunei, they are used as facades to justify corrupt autocracies. Several secular factors also undermine democracy in Muslim and other regional non-Muslim states. In the Middle East, US support helps 1(eep secular autocrats in power as earlier in East Asia. The ambitions of politicised army generals, almost all secular, have kept democracy in check in other Muslim states as earlier in non-Muslim Latin America. In many small African states with few competitor power bases, both Muslim and nonMuslim, autocrats are able to survive for decades. Democracy also fails to thrive in naturalresource-based rentier states, eg, Muslim Gulf states and nonMuslim Angola.  Thus, there does not appear to be a single, faithbased explanation for the current Muslim democratic deficit. Instead, there are multiple contemporary factorsat play in different regions. It is true that linked fundamentalist movements are much more powerful in Muslim rather than nonMuslim states today. Such movements, which first became strong a few decades ago, today have a presence in over half the Muslim world. However, the trend towards democratisation has actually increased in the ummah in these decades despite the rise of fundamentalism. Even Iran, the only Muslim state run by clerics, became a bit more democratic after its Islamic revolution.  Catholic and Buddhist states, which were once called unripe for democracy due to faith-based issues, have eventually moved towards democracy. It is a matter of time before the same happens within the ummah as citizens` movements thrive.  The writer is a Senior Fellow with UC Berkeley and heads INSPIRING Pakistan, a progressive policy unit.  murtazaniaz@yahoo.com Twitter: @niazmurtaza2 |  |