

# Democracy WITHOUT Democrats?

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THE RENEWAL OF  
POLITICS IN THE  
MUSLIM WORLD

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Edited by Ghassan Salamé

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Ghassan Salamé

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# Introduction: Where are the Democrats?

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GHASSAN SALAMÉ

With the end of the Cold War, the disintegration of the USSR and the declining appeal of left-wing ideas in the past few years, the hopes of a further expansion of representative democracy have, without any doubt, increased. Western countries have witnessed not only the collapse of a strategic counterweight to their influence in the world, but also the undisputed failure of a rival model of voluntary and authoritarian modernization which in the recent past has inspired, in variable measure, many a Third World experiment in state building. A new wave of universalism has filled the void: if democratization was feasible in Eastern Europe it might also take root in other regions. The ideological *caesura* demarcated by the Cold War is no longer a *summa divisio* and societies which have already borrowed the European model of the modern state might be expected to embrace democracy unhampered by the political alignments of superpowers or leftist condemnations of 'bourgeois' political practice. Representative democracy has quite suddenly become a kind of 'common good of humanity' or, at least, a mode of government widely considered as normatively superior.

Contemporary events in the Arab-Islamic region have meanwhile reinforced a contrary but widespread idea according to which that part of the world has been too slow in adjusting to this trend, somewhat resistant to a rapid democratization process. While Southern Europe and, later, large parts of Eastern Europe and Latin America were increasingly adopting forms of democratic government, the region stretching 'from Tehran to Marrakesh' has witnessed the uninterrupted rule of authoritarian leaders. While the limits to experimentation with representative democracy are tested and becoming obvious in most newly democratic countries, the Islamic region in general and the Arab world in particular has not, it seems, even had the opportunity to experience this process. Elected governments have been toppled (Sudan), elections brutally stopped (Algeria), and when an authoritarian regime has been threatened, the fear of utter chaos (Somalia), of partition (Iraq) or of civil war (almost everywhere else) has been too common to be brushed aside.

The idea of an Arab and/or Islamic 'exceptionalism' has thus re-emerged among both western proponents of universal democracy and established orientalis, and this in turn has encouraged a great many local apologists of 'cultural authenticity' in their rejection of western models of government. Illusions con-



cerning the rapid fall of some regimes have been reinforced by fears triggered by the undemocratic nature of most opposition groups as well as by the revival of clichés about deeply rooted cultural obstacles to democratization in this part of the world. Calls for democracy have remained too muted, too superficial, too dispersed to convince any observer that a push towards political participation is really sought in these societies.

It is precisely this presumed 'exceptionalism' that this book intends to question. Drawing upon a large number of national cases, the authors have engaged in a discussion of social change, of institutional evolution and of the prevailing political discourse. In doing so they have produced a complex picture. They do not refute exceptionalism out of hand: its existence as much as its causes are widely discussed (see in particular the chapters by Leca and Waterbury). Beneath the surface of continuity, societies have changed greatly during the past two or three decades and while leaders may remain in power, the nature of their power has been altered by incessant adjustments both to domestic, regional and international constraints. When accepted as a fact, the Arab/Islamic exception still has to be explained, and the reasons for its existence may not be the ones which are most frequently suggested: (in religion, as suggested by many), in culture, in a specific combination of socio-historical factors (Sharabi 1988) or in the permanence of intractable conflicts (and the ensuing militarization). Emerging from the discussion in this book is a clear idea that forms of political participation are there, though there are no compelling unifying factors triggering a unilateral political evolution towards democracy. More importantly, while calls for democratization may indeed be muted, and while the political discourse dealing with democratization may be only partly convincing, forms of political opening are increasingly viewed by the leaders themselves, if not by the society, as a precious instrument through which a rapid deterioration of law and order, if not of the collapse of the whole state apparatus, might be avoided or at least delayed.

'Pacts' on limited forms of political participation are in these situations negotiated between the ruling group and significant sectors of the civil society. O'Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead (1986) have already suggested that such pacts could prove to be crucial to the survival not only of nascent experiments with democracy but also of the state itself and have since been followed by many others, most notably Przeworski (1988; 1991). Where the Middle East is concerned, the idea, though alluded to by Lisa Anderson, writing on Tunisia, and Rémy Leveau on the Maghreb, needed further discussion. In some countries this 'pact' has been rather explicit as a para-constitutional *mithaq* (Jordan, Yemen, Kuwait, Lebanon, Tunisia), while elsewhere it is implicit (Morocco) though in all pacts, the informal part (as on the autonomy of the armed forces during the transitional phase, or the political impunity of royal families) is often crucial. The absence of such an understanding has sometimes proven fatal to a new experiment: the Algerian case is there to demonstrate that the electoral process is easily reversible when viewed as irremediably detrimental to some

significant social or political factor such as the armed forces. If pacts have proved to be useful for a gradual, non-aggressive political opening, they are, of course, no guarantee for the success of the experimentation.

In this sense, democracy could be judged less by the attachment to its principles by some actor or the other, than by its common use as a means to avoid civil war or institutional chaos. Thus, forms of political participation are being sought by regimes which have come to believe that their old-style authoritarianism may be difficult to maintain or is becoming counterproductive. Others have arrived at the same conclusion because of their inability to adopt an IMF-inspired austerity programme without help from representative sectors of civil society. Still others have concluded that this is, after all, the only way to make a segmented society live together. Those who have engaged in the process may well be intolerant, repressive, dictatorial. The programme of some opposition groups may well be simply to replace an existing authoritarianism by one of their own. In all such cases, forms of democracy are defined and judged less by the identity of those who made them happen than by their efficacy in phases of transition. Democrats may not exist at all, or they may not exist in great numbers. Yet democracy can still be sought as an instrument of civil peace and hopefully, gradually, inadvertently, produce its own defenders.

### *Islamism and democracy*

This is all the more true in the present situation in the region where old-type authoritarianisms are facing opposition groups gathered around a religious banner. Culturalists (those who think that a specific culture and/or religion could in itself be an obstacle to experimentation with democracy) generally concentrate their 'exceptionalist' views on Islam which they think of as organically different from all other religions. Since the Prophet revealed a religion and founded a state at the same time, his successors are unable to isolate these two elements without betraying his message. This view has of course its own weakness: a democrat, at least in the tradition opened up by the French revolution, can hardly accept a de-universalization of democracy without questioning the very essence of human rights and citizenship. He might be able to adapt his democratic expectations to the evolution of different societies at different tempos, admitting that access to democracy could not be achieved at the same time everywhere, but he could not accept a geographical, human or allegedly transcendental limit to the extension of democratic values. (Hence western governments' negative reaction, during the 1993 Vienna UN conference on Human Rights to calls for 'regional' charters of human rights: non-universally acceptable human rights simply cease to be 'human'). On the other hand, a Muslim would have difficulty in accepting that his religion legitimizes nothing but authoritarianism, even if he admits that Islam has in effect been taken as an obligatory point of reference by innumerable non-democratic regimes and par-

ties throughout history. Someone who is both a good Muslim and a good democrat is not an aberration.

Culturalists may be on a more solid ground on other points which are susceptible of historical explanation. The first is that in western thinking, as Norberto Bobbio among others has remarked, dictatorship is viewed as a temporary and exceptional phenomenon, even in the face of historical evidence that is, to say the least, ambiguous. In the Roman tradition, the dictator was the magistrate to whom exceptional powers were legally entrusted, as a temporary measure, to deal with a foreign invasion or sedition; dictatorship was never taken to be a normal form of political organization. This could not be as clearly induced from islamic thought, in which, as Ridwan As-Sayyid, Charles Butterworth and Abdallah Laroui have demonstrated, authoritarian power is generally assumed to be the norm and democracy the exception, supposing that democracy is actually envisaged as a possible form of government, which is not the case for most authors of the islamic tradition (Salamé 1987a). Taking a trans-historical view, traditional islamic thought thus appears more realistic than its western counterpart, in that autocratic and more generally non-democratic regimes have been more numerous and more durable in world history, from China to Latin America, not forgetting Europe, and from classical antiquity to our own days. One needs to remember that authoritarian regimes, of various persuasions, have been the norm in world history and democracy has been and remains exceptional. Hence the basic intellectual effort should be to explain why democracy has flowered in certain countries at certain times rather than, as is usually the case, to try and discover the reason for its absence from most countries most of the time.

In the islamic tradition, more specifically, the opposition between order and chaos, state authority and civil war is stated vividly and continuously, as if there could not be an interstice between these two extremes. Who does not recall Ibn Taymiyyah's preference for a tyrant for a year rather than a single night without a ruler? What internal fragility in islamic societies has kept its thinkers on the alert in this way, triggering a continuous confusion between an understandable need for public authority and the mere surrender to authoritarianism? The answers given by students of islamic thought differ: some have noted an obsession with keeping the *umma* united, at any price; others insist on the confusion between political opposition and religious secession, itself triggered by the ambivalent nature of leadership in the caliphate; still others oppose islamic teachings to dynastic realities, or expose the wide Sassanian and Byzantine influences on the definition of islamic power during its formative years. Whatever the answer might be, the question remains: supposing that the sediment deposited by a long tradition really is such, what is the actual verifiable effect of that tradition on political behaviour today? Is written tradition being given a contemporary relevance which it does not normally have and for what purpose? Are we not exaggerating the impact of this tradition only because it is more familiar and in many ways more accessible to us than the actual evolution

of Muslim societies? Are we not taking at face value the incantation of 'the Fathers of the Islamic tradition' by today's Islamists? What is the real political efficiency of that tradition?

To these questions different answers have been proposed; the idea that tradition is being reinvented remains the most convincing. But reinventing tradition is a project implemented by contemporary Muslims with contemporary objectives in mind, which of course explains the permanent selectivity with which the tradition is generally approached, usually dictated by political expediency. This does not prevent most Islamists and many orientalist from maintaining the view that Islam as such informs political behaviour, or could or should do it to levels social scientists can hardly accept. In mainstream orientalism, the idea that democracy, human rights, political participation, ought to be understood according to each culture's values, or even entirely ignored in the study of some cultures, is quite prevalent. The opposition was already vivid, a few decades ago, between missionaries trying to export the West's values, customs (and religion) to the rest of the world and orientalist who considered this endeavour as sheer folly. A similar debate is perceptible nowadays in many a western society: while diplomats, NGO militants and pro-democracy institutions are actively trying to spread western values, 'experts' and 'analysts', not to mention revived orientalist, are insisting on some old clichés such as 'Islam is Islam and the East is the East'. This permanent tension in western culture between universalism and alienation from the world is well mirrored on the other side by the deepening cleavage now opposing old-style nationalists who adopt the West's models yet fight against its domination and Islamists who seek to reject the West's model and influence altogether.

The 'culturalists' may be on even shakier ground when democratization is explicitly linked to secularization. Generalizations are common here, despite the fact that Muslims, supposed to be given to confusing *din* (religion) with *dawlah* (government), do not systematically confuse the two themselves, while societies ruled by democratic regimes have many clear cases of such confusion. Laroui has shown how historically political *fiqh* (jurisprudence) very quickly became part of an exercise in the idealization of Islamic power, being content, in the context of the whole, to be subject to authoritarian power in the name of emergency or defence of national unity, reciting, like al-Mawardi among others, the qualities of a 'good' Islamic power while knowing perfectly well that such a recital constitutes an incantation linked to the function of a *faqih* rather than an immediate exigency which could be opposed to the governing power (Laroui 1984). In fact it is difficult to think of the policy of the *fuqaha* as fundamentally opposed to the historical powers the Islamic world has seen. It is more of a utopian representation, repeated, embellished or given slight differences of meaning, but not necessarily something whose practical incarnation was vigorously sought.

The present establishment of the Islamic law (*shari'a*), therefore, raises the very interesting problem of the status of non-Muslim minorities. Those putting

the *shari'a* into practice have a reply which it would be wrong to reject immediately, namely that an islamic regime ruled by the *shari'a* easily admits the principle of plural legislations, particularly in the matter of personal status (covering a field wider than in other legal traditions), to the advantage of non-Muslims. We are, of course, faced here with a direct attack on the modern national principle of one law for all citizens. But for many minorities, it seems more acceptable to deny that principle than to relinquish the right to their own law. In fact it would be easier to get an islamist to exclude those who do not share his faith from the application of the *shari'a* than to make him admit western political principles of the protection of political minorities. In other words, if society really seeks a re-imposition of religious tradition, it might be easier to establish religious (and consequently legal) pluralism than political pluralism. This is a serious obstacle to efforts for democratization, since it presupposes that adherents of the islamic majority would be deprived of the right to withdraw from application of the *shari'a* (a god-defined and therefore un-amendable legislation), while members of non-Muslim minorities would have the advantage of being able to avoid it. But in such a system members of those minorities would be as much victims as members of the islamic majority, since they would be deprived of the support of a neutral and secular state against the possible excesses and inevitable closure of their own community law.

What then can be done to ensure that the islamic religion (of the majority) and the other religions and/or sects (of the minorities) play a part not only in the legitimation of political power but also in limiting and even contesting it? Put like this, the problem obscures the fact that militant islamism is in some ways playing that oppositional role today, even in Iran. We should therefore think instead of a path for islamists to take which would not entail their passing from absolute opposition to the power of others to absolute legitimation of their own. Rather than a ruthless shift such as occurred in Algeria at the beginning of 1992 which saw the islamic revolutions in Iran 'devour' a number of its moderate children, or which was forcibly installed in the Sudan with the military regime of General al-Bashir, it would be more relevant to seek a process of mutual accommodation that would operate both before and after a possible acquisition of power by the islamists. One of the most attractive ideas is that of pre-electoral pacts between the regime in office and the various component parts of the opposition, including the islamists, pacts which would clarify the nature of the shift in power, the function of the first elections to be held and those that followed, and offer guarantees of both the quality of the polls and a preservation of the electoral practice in future. It need hardly be said that such pacts fostering the gradual adoption of representative democracy would be possible only if the islamists agreed to consider the decisions they made once in power as democratically reversible, and their policies open to legitimate contestation. If on the other hand they saw themselves as carrying out meta-political, transcendental values and policies, immune to any possible later revision by other political and social forces, such pacts would become unthinkable, if not actually perverse.

Beyond the case of Islam itself, the relationship between religion and democratized politics remains problematical, to say the least. It is interesting to note that Alain Touraine, among others, readily puts islamism into the category of dictatorships, while seeing the Solidarity movement in Poland as an almost unique case of the triumph of a democratic movement in our time. His theory of 'subjectivation' is even more problematical in that democracy is defined both in terms of its opposition to the religious element, and then, on the contrary, in terms of the subject's capacity to counterpose a meta-policy, which might be religious in nature, to the state and the free market. Touraine thus wants 'subjectivation', i.e. the dissociation of the man from the citizen and the non-subsumption of the former in the latter, to be brought about by recourse to tradition 'for the individual separated from all tradition is merely a consumer of material and symbolic goods, unable to resist the pressures and persuasions manipulated by those in power' (Touraine 1992, 403). Yes, indeed, but then what is there to say that this 'subjectivation' by recourse to tradition will not be to the advantage of religion and the religious? Nothing, says Touraine, adding that 'subjectivation' appears where political and social power is actively limited by 'the religious or more widely speaking spiritual appeal'. The problem, then, is whether and how far the islamist movements correspond to this profile. In other words, we must determine whether the islamist trends of today are political movements like those against which they are struggling or whether, on the contrary, they aim to form an absolute or at least absolutist meta-political structure.

There is a widespread and predominant notion that the question is primarily one of political actors, parties and groups seeking to take power. All the ambiguity of islamism today may perhaps arise from its political nature on the one hand (being a sort of islamism without Islam) and, on the other hand, from its meta-political discourse – that permanent, opportunist and disturbing balancing act between its political nature and its religious discourse. But matters are not much simpler on the secularist side. In a work of luminous clarity, Aziz Al-Azmeh has shown that the modern state in the Arab world was secular to begin with, but that for reasons of political opportunism it progressively accommodated the islamist sectors of the population becoming an instrument of islamization itself, in a perverse process which led it to adopt the programmes of its critics (Al-Azmeh 1992a). Olivier Carré had already come to this conclusion through his study of school textbooks bearing the distinct stamp of religion, albeit in a country wearing the secularist badge of Nasser's Egypt (Carré 1982). Al-Azmeh shows that in Egypt this process of change was hastened under Sadat, and furthermore that such a renunciation by the modern state of its twin liberal and secular origins has been seen throughout the Arab world as a whole, notably in Iraq and to a lesser extent in Syria (and he might have added even more obviously the Algeria of the FLN). He also notes with sadness the resignation of the secularizing intelligentsias to the victory of islamism even before it has come about.

If that is the case, we can see that the Islam of the islamists may be nothing

but a discourse, and the secularism of the modern state only a remnant already sacrificed on the altar of survival. But such a conclusion badly blurs our view of the two principal actors in current conflicts, and severely devalues the place of the spiritual factor in its links with politics. For the religious element no longer appears as a meta-political point of reference which may perhaps exert some control over authoritarianism, but as an instrument of discourse in an ordinary struggle for power between forces which at bottom resemble each other more than they would care to admit in their contempt for both democracy and religion. This would make the islamists different simply in their more systematic and politically more efficient use of a frame of reference to which regimes in office, and even supposedly secularist oppositions, do not hesitate to have recourse when they feel the need. It has been, for example, convincingly suggested that the opposition between the FLN and FIS in Algeria was not between two different ideologies but between two different networks and two different generations within the Algerian nationalist nebula. If this is the case, we should stop putting the question of the alleged uniqueness of Islam (whose similarity to eastern Christianity on the social and ritual level has often been observed), and ask a completely different one: why is the reference to religion politically useful? Such a question would bear less on theology or political thinking (not to mention religious sociology), than on analysis of the discourse and its effects. The beginnings of a reply to this (practical) question may perhaps be sought in the organic illegitimacy (and poor achievements) of dictatorial powers and consequently the fact that their nationalist discourse is no longer effective, and above all in a centuries-old segmentation of societies which turns the religious reference into a sublimated appeal to unity around the state, and to the state's advantage.

With the rapid spread of Islamist contestation this work could not avoid such questions. Jean Leca rightly reminds us that the presumed Arab 'exceptionalism' is generally linked to that of Islam, but the connection is not unique: it may be, as Gellner notes, that the Arab world is exceptional (in a negative sense) in its relation with democracy because of historical factors that are unique but not necessarily instigated by the predominance of the Islamic faith. But is 'eternal Islam' to be interrogated on this point, or the Islamists of today? John Waterbury observes a genuine 'analytical dilemma', suggesting that democratization would gain more from circumventing that factor than using it in a more or a less opportunist way. Gudrun Krämer describes both the discourse and the practice of the Islamists in the face of a policy of reaction on the part of governments in office which is made up of both accommodation and exclusion. The outcome remains uncertain and ambiguous, as though the time to draw up a balance sheet has not yet come. Aziz Al-Azmeh lays emphasis on the totalizing nature of an Islamist discourse obsessed, to an overwhelming degree, by the uniqueness of history and a quasi-automatic correspondence between history, Islam, society and the power to be established, Islamist 'democratization' actually being a means of translating an ideal of societal corporatism into the reality

of a state corporatism. The latter, of course, repudiates all political pluralism of the western kind, retaining only confessional pluralism or that of 'world civilizations'. (Incidentally, a militant islamist would confirm (and be greatly comforted by) Samuel Huntington's more than debatable views on an imminent 'clash of civilizations' – Huntington 1993.) Other national cases are cited in this volume; Jean-François Bayart observes a revival of Turkish Islam which, in his view, may not endanger democracy at all but on the contrary encourage it to take root, just as parties owing allegiance to Roman Catholicism have done, almost despite themselves, in a number of South European countries.

### *Democracy, the prisoner of the asabiyyat?*

If the non-discursive reality of politicized religion presents problems that it would doubtless be premature to settle out of hand, that is not so much the case with the organized *asabiyyat*, whose continued existence or new development should help to explain the prevalence of religious discourse as a supra-segmentary if not unitarian frame of reference, as well as delays in democratization. In such an investigation, we cannot remain within purely traditional parameters. Although a Khaldunian interpretation of the societies studied here is useful, it is impossible to ignore the limitations of such an interpretation at the end of the twentieth century: the *asabiyyat* exist, but they are as urban as they are rural and, even more important, they are more frequently constructed than inherited. The 'nations' created by Stalinist planning are as present in the landscape of Central Asian identity as the secular ethnic groups; the heterogeneous Third Estate of the big cities can be identified as easily as the traditional ethnic, confessional or linguistic groups. Any simple reading of these societies is bound to become simplistic, for it seems that the ravages of modernity are found as inevitably as the remnants of identity from a more distant past. An un-statist interpretation of Syria in the manner of Michel Seurat should be complemented by another which sets out from and returns to the state, as Volker Perthes has done in his contribution to this book: the two interpretations are not mutually exclusive, but complementary and mutually enlightening.

The question of the continued existence of some *asabiyyat* and the rise of others actually presents a much more serious problem, i.e. the contemporaneity of, and to some degree the collusion between, the two concepts of the nation and of democracy in pioneering experiences such as those of France or the United States of America. The idea of the nation in fact derives from that of the individual who is its constituent element, and who acquires, through the democratization of the political regime, the right to contribute to the future of the whole. This triplet, nation/individual/democracy, constitutes a problem in those societies where one might look for democracy while the first two elements remain vulnerable, superficial and threatened and, more importantly, reversible. Those regimes which say that democratization could lead them not only to lose their



authoritarian ascendancy but to destabilize the entire state should be taken a little more seriously. This is not just propaganda: from the moment the dominated *asabiyyat* decide that any sign of the opening up of authoritarian regimes actually signals weakness on the part of the hegemonic *asabiyya*, it is difficult for them to avoid slipping towards centrifugal tendencies, from a simple questioning of the dictatorial regime to questioning the very existence of the state which marks its geographical limits and provides its legal justification for existence.

If this question appears particularly acute in most islamic societies, it is less because they are 'mosaics' (on many levels Europe looks far more of a mosaic than the Arab world, which has a clear religious, confessional and linguistic majority within it), but because the persistence of the ancient tribal, confessional and ethnic *asabiyyat* and the existence of a social and political environment favourable to the constitution of new ones (most notably because of the prevalence of neo-patrimonialism) have been factors militating against the emergence of the triplet mentioned above. The 'nation' has suffered from the legitimacy of these *asabiyyat*, recognized to a greater or lesser degree, throughout early Islamic, Byzantine, Persian and Ottoman history, and the 'individual' has suffered even more. This is why the most interesting western democratic models for this part of the world are not so much those founded on nation/individual/democracy as those where a certain degree of community organization is seen to be legitimate.

For this reason, the democrats of the islamic world cannot easily avoid a preliminary consideration of the place of the individual in their societies. This consideration is rendered yet more urgent by the mythologization of the demographic factor, for democratization must also be regarded as a competition between equals in an already largely post-patriarchal society, as indicated by Philippe Fargues in a very original hypothesis presented in this volume. When western sociology invites democrats to denounce extreme individualism along with their more traditional struggle against authoritarianism, the South can take that invitation up only circumspectly. There are two fronts here; one is the (common) struggle against dictatorships, and the other is the necessity of keeping communities from confining individuals within them. The search for democracy thus becomes a four-pronged procedure beginning with the state rather than the nation, going on to recognize communities, then to re-evaluating the individual, and ending in some experience of democracy. The task is arduous precisely because one must think of democracy as both the defence of ascriptive groups and the defence of the individual confronting the twin and rival authorities of those groups themselves and of the state. In this authoritarian climate the emergence of the modern state appears both a blessing and a curse. While it has allowed the individual, in imitation of the western model of the modern state, to define himself outside the *asabiyya*, it has also shown him that in future individuals will have to suffer the double constraint of their *asabiyya* (even if the state impels them to ignore or surpass or extract themselves from it) and of the state to which they now belong. Individual liberty, when it is possible, is often the