Alexis de Tocqueville and Democracy in Muslim Societies

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Citation

Texts
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Following the tragic events of 11 September 2001, the relationship between religion and democracy has emerged as one of the most important and vexing questions of our age, particularly as it relates to Muslim societies. Most of the theoretical debate surrounding this relationship involves a discussion of Arab and Islamic political culture, secularism, and the problems of separating mosque and state in Muslim political theory. A critical prerequisite for democratic development is the transformation of religion. This conclusion is implicit in the writings of one of the early theoreticians of democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville. What lessons can democratic activists in the Muslim world learn from his observations of the early American republic?

Alexis de Tocqueville
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At first glance the relationship between religion and democracy seems inherently contradictory and conflictual. Both concepts speak to different aspects of the human condition. Religion is a system of beliefs and rituals related to the 'divine' and the 'sacred'. In this sense it is decidedly metaphysical and otherworldly in its orientation and telos. While religion may differ in its various manifestations, most religions share these features. It is precisely the dogmatic claim – for which religions are infamous – that they alone are in possession of the absolute Truth and the concomitant shunning of scepticism in matters of belief that makes religion a source of conflict. Furthermore, religions tend to set insurmountable boundaries between believers and non-believers. Entry into the community of religion demands an internalizing of its sacred and absolute Truth.

Democracy, on the other hand, is decidedly this worldly, secular, and egalitarian. Regardless of religious belief, race, or creed, democracy (especially its liberal variant) implies an equality of rights and treatment before the law for all citizens without discrimination. Its telos is geared towards the non-violent management of human affairs in order to create the good life on this earth, not in the hereafter. Critically, unlike religious commandments, the rules of democracy can be changed, adjusted, and amended. It is precisely the inclusive and relativistic nature of democracy that separates it from religion and theologically based political systems.

One of the leading early writers on the relationship between democracy and religion was the 19th-century French aristocrat, Alexis de Tocqueville. In *Democracy in America* he wrote: 'On my arrival in the United States the religious aspect of the country was the first thing that struck my attention' (Tocqueville 1999:308).* In the context of democratic theory, Tocqueville is usually remembered for his warnings on the problem of the 'tyranny of the majority' and his observation about the 'equality of conditions' in early America. It is generally forgotten, however, that he also wrote extensively about the connection between religion and democracy. His ruminations on this theme are not only explored in several chapters of *Democracy and America* but are peppered throughout this work. What lessons can Muslim democrats today learn from Tocqueville on the relationship between religion and democracy?

Tocqueville describes religion in the United States 'as the first of their political institutions; for if it does not impart a taste for freedom, it facilitates the use of it' (305).

He sees religion as a moderating force in the United States that exists in natural harmony with its democratic character. 'The Americans combine the notions of Christianity and of liberty so intimately in their minds', he observes, 'that it is impossible to make them conceive the one without the other' (306).

Tocqueville, it should be recalled, was not writing for an American audience but rather for the educated classes in Europe where the normative relationship between religion and politics was still unresolved, or as he put it: 'the establishment of democracy in Christendom is the great political problem of our times' (325). The core problem as he saw it was that in Europe the 'spirit of religion and spirit of freedom [were almost always] marching in opposite directions. But in America … they were intimately united and … they reigned in common over the same country' (308). Tocqueville concludes his reflections on religion and democracy by stating that while the Americans have not completely 'resolved this problem … they furnish useful data to those who undertake to resolve it' (325).

One of the confident assertions that Tocqueville makes about the peaceful coexistence of religion and democracy in the United States is its decidedly secular character. All with whom he spoke on this matter – including the clergy – were in unanimous agreement 'that they all attributed the peaceful dominion of religion in their country mainly to the separation of church and state' (308). Tocqueville invokes the absence of this separation in the case of Islam to explain its democratic deficit.

Mohammed professed to derive from Heaven, and has inserted in the Qur'an not only religious doctrines but also political maxims, civil and criminal laws, and theories of science. The Gospel, on the contrary, speaks only of the general relations of men to God and to each other, beyond which it inculcates and imposes no point of faith. This alone, besides a thousand other reasons, would suffice to prove that the former of these religions will never long predominate in a cultivated and democratic age, while the latter is destined to retain its sway at these as at all other periods (II, 23).

Tocqueville was simply repeating the standard view of what is now a sacred and unexamined equation: 'no secularism equals no democracy'. While there is no denying that secularism has been an inherent part of the development of democracy in the West, when applied to Muslim societies it encounters several theoretical and historical problems. Leaving aside the emotionally charged and exaggerated debate about Islam and secularism, what are the lessons here for the struggle for democracy in the Muslim world?

First encounters

The first observation is that Tocqueville is not talking about religion generally but really about a particular type of religion – in this case various strands of Protestant Christianity, three hundred years after Martin Luther, which had been transplanted into the New World because of religious perse-

cution in Europe. The many Protestant Churches that Tocqueville encountered in his travels were largely anti-élitist, community-run organizations. Many of these institutions had undergone a significant democratic transformation during the early years of the American republic. According to Nathan Hatch's seminal work *The Democratization of American Christianity,* anti-clericalism, religious pluralism, egalitarianism, and the supremacy of the individual were core characteristics of American religion by the 1830s.

Secondly, democratic ideas and debates that flowed from the American Revolution and constitutional debates indelibly affected the practice of both religion and democracy in America. In other words, the enveloping context was democracy friendly and democracy enhancing. In most Muslim societies, by contrast, a different situation exists. The historic Muslim encounter with modern democracy has been a bitter experience. The late Eqbal Ahmad, a prominent democracy activist and dissident Muslim intellectual captures the point:

> *Our first encounter with democracy was oppressive. Democracy came to us as oppressors, as colonizers, as violators. As violators, they spoke in the language of the Enlightenment and engaged in the activities of barbarians…. Secondly, after decolonization our experience was again with the democratic power centers, United States, France, [and] Britain. Our experience even in [the] second stage of our post-colonial history, was one of these big Western powers calling themselves the 'Free World' and … actively promoting neo-fascism and neo-fascist governments in one Muslim country and Third World country after another. Historically the United States has spoken of democracy and has supported Samozas, Trujillos, Mobutu Sese Seko, Suharto of Indonesia, the Shah of Iran, Zia ul Haq of Pakistan…. Therefore, our first experience with democracy was one of outright oppression and our second experience with democracy was one which [the West] promoted fascism, global fascism in some cases. (Ahmad 1996)*

Not only has the historic Muslim experience with democracy been different, but also a strong argument can be made that existing mosques and religious schools in the Muslim world – unlike their early American counterparts – actually foster values that are antithetical to democracy and liberalism. A content analysis of the *jumᶜa khutab* (Friday sermons) in the major mosques of Cairo, Mecca, Beirut, Damascus, Tehran, and Karachi (not to mention most North American mosques and Islamic schools) would be profoundly revealing in this regard. Themes of popular sovereignty, political account-

ability, and (gender) equality are rarely if ever expounded.

Finally, the doyen of American democratic theorists Robert Dahl, in responding to the question of how a democratic culture can be created in a non-democratic society, observed that 'few would seriously contest [that] an important factor in the prospects for a stable democracy in a country is the strength of the diffuse support for democratic ideas, values, and practices embedded in the country's culture and transmitted, in large part, from one generation to the next' (Dahl 1999:2). In the Muslim world today, who is promoting, propagating, and transmitting democratic values, ideas, and practices? The ulama (clergy)? the education system? the media? the intellectual class? the family? (I am deliberately leaving out the state for obvious reasons.) The point is a self-evident one. To quote Ghassan Salamé, you cannot have 'democracy without democrats'. Tocqueville realized this over 170 years ago as he surveyed the political culture of early American society. Unlike Europe in the 19th century and large parts of the Muslim world today, in the United States, by contrast, the 'spirit of religion and spirit of freedom … were intimately united and … they reigned in common over the same country' (Tocqueville 1999:308). In his writings on religion and democracy, Tocqueville provides considerable food for thought for Muslim democrats to read and reflect upon as they grapple with the problems of political development that afflict their own societies.

Note

* I am indebted to Hillel Fradkin's essay 'Does Democracy Need Religion?', *Journal of Democracy* 11 (January 2000): 87–94, for stimulating my thinking on this topic, as well as the writings of Saad Edeen Ibrahim on Islam and democracy.

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