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Liberal Democracy and its Discontents

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Introduction

The rise of liberal democracy as the dominant political model of the 20th century is increasingly being met with skepticism and criticism, both globally and within Muslim-majority societies.

Defined by principles such as individual liberty, freedom of association, rule of law, and the protection of minority rights, liberal democracy promises not only political freedom but also socio-economic development. However, in recent years, dissatisfaction with this system has grown, driven by the erosion of public trust in institutions, rising inequality, and the appeal of populist and authoritarian alternatives (Fukuyama, 2018; Mounk, 2019). In Muslim-majority societies, these challenges are further compounded by the complex interplay between religious values, political power, and socio-cultural dynamics, raising critical questions about the compatibility of liberal democracy with Islamic governance models (Esposito & Voll, 2018; Ayooob, 2008).

The global decline in liberal democratic norms is reflected in the increasing number of countries experiencing democratic backsliding, where elected governments gradually undermine democratic institutions. This phenomenon is particularly relevant in Muslim-majority nations, where political instability, religious tensions, and socio-economic disparities often intersect. Scholars argue that the tension between secular and religious values, the influence of entrenched military and bureaucratic elites, and the fragility of civil society institutions contribute significantly to the struggles of democratization in these regions (Brownlee, 2012; Diamond, 2015). The webinar themed "Liberal Democracy and its Discontents" hosted by the Islam and Liberty Network (ILN) delved into these issues, drawing on both academic literature and contemporary case studies. Presenters explored the challenges faced by liberal democracies in Muslim-majority contexts, focusing on the recurring conflicts between secularists and Islamists, the role of populism, and the persistent impact of authoritarian legacies. These discussions are not merely academic; they highlight pressing real-world challenges that affect governance, human rights, and economic stability across the Muslim world.

As global trends increasingly question the sustainability of liberal democracy, this research brief seeks to frame the key issues at stake and propose new interventions into examining the state of liberal democracies. By examining the broader regional and global context, this brief aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the factors undermining liberal democracy in Muslim-majority societies, offering a foundation for further research and informed public dialogue.

Liberal Democracy: An Overview

Liberal democracy is fundamentally rooted in the principles of individual rights, rule of law, political pluralism, and majority rule balanced by protections for minority rights.

At its core, it emphasizes the protection of individual liberties such as freedom of expression, association, and religion, all underpinned by the rule of law which ensures that no one, including those in power, is above the law (Dahl, 1998). More simply put, liberalism prioritizes individual moral rights, particularly liberty, which is the freedom to design one's life and pursue personal projects without harming others (Şahin, 2024). Political pluralism, a key tenet of liberal democracy, allows for a multiplicity of voices and ideologies, ensuring that power is dispersed across various institutions and actors. Additionally, while liberal democracy operates on the principle of majority rule, it tempers this with robust safeguards for minority rights, recognizing that unfettered majoritarianism can lead to the "tyranny of the majority" (Mill, 1859). These principles create a political system that seeks to balance the will of the people with the protection of fundamental rights, aiming for a governance model that is both just and inclusive.

The theoretical foundations of liberal democracy can be traced back to classical liberal thought, which emphasizes the primacy of individual freedom and limited government. Thinkers like John Locke, who advocated for natural rights and the social contract, and John Stuart Mill, who championed individual liberty and free speech, have deeply influenced the development of liberal democratic ideals (Locke, 1689; Mill, 1859). Contemporary perspectives, such as those offered by Amartya Sen and Francis Fukuyama, argue that liberal democracy is not only a moral imperative but also essential for economic development and political stability in diverse societies (Sen, 1999; Fukuyama, 1992). However, as discussed in the ILN webinar, the application of these principles in Muslim-majority societies raises complex questions. The tensions between religious values and liberal democratic norms, as well as the influence of authoritarian legacies, challenge the assumption that these principles can be seamlessly integrated into every cultural context. These dynamics highlight the need for a nuanced approach to understanding the compatibility of liberal democracy with the socio-political realities of the Muslim world.

Discontents with Liberal Democracy

In recent years, liberal democracy has faced increasing global criticism due to the rise of populism, growing economic inequality, and the erosion of trust in democratic institutions.

The surge of populist leaders who challenge liberal norms, often by exploiting societal fears and nationalist sentiments, has led to a decline in democratic values across many regions (Mounk, 2019). Populist rhetoric frequently pits "the people" against elites, undermining pluralism and encouraging authoritarian tendencies. Simultaneously, economic disparities and inequality have fueled discontent, with many arguing that liberal democracy has failed to deliver equitable opportunities and social justice (Piketty, 2014). This dissatisfaction has resulted in declining voter turnout, increased political polarization, and diminished faith in traditional institutions such as the judiciary and media. As these challenges persist, questions arise about the resilience of liberal democracies and their ability to adapt to changing socio-political landscapes.

In Muslim-majority countries, these global challenges are exacerbated by contextual factors specific to the region, such as the tension between secular and religious values and the role of political Islam. Many of these societies struggle with reconciling liberal democratic principles with deeply rooted religious traditions, often leading to conflicts over issues like freedom of expression, women's rights, and governance models (Ayoob, 2008). The rise of political Islam and the interplay between religious and state institutions have further complicated the democratization process. In countries like Tunisia, which was initially seen as a democratic success story following the Arab Spring, divisions between secular and Islamist factions have hindered efforts to establish inclusive governance, leading to political instability (Stepan & Linz, 2013). Moreover, the legacy of authoritarianism and state control over civil society in many Muslim-majority nations has weakened the foundations necessary for a functioning liberal democracy, such as an independent judiciary and a free press. These factors create a unique set of obstacles that make the path to liberal democracy more challenging in these contexts.

Case Studies and Regional Trends

Several trends and patterns have emerged across Muslim-majority countries that are shaping the trajectory of liberal democracies.

One critical pattern is the resilience of authoritarianism, where autocratic leaders adapt to changing political dynamics by co-opting religious rhetoric or manipulating electoral processes. This trend is not unique; across the Muslim world, authoritarian leaders often exploit religious sentiment to weaken democratic opposition and legitimize their rule. The persistence of these patterns underscores the difficulties of establishing and maintaining liberal democracy in environments where state power is concentrated, religious identities are politicized, and external actors prioritize stability over democratic values.

The struggles of liberal democracy in Muslim-majority countries are evident in cases like Türkiye, where the democratic reversal illustrates the tension between secularism and Islamism. Bican Şahin, in his analysis during the ILN webinar, discussed Türkiye's struggle with the rule of law, tracing back to its foundation on Kemalist principles, which emphasized Turkish nationalism and secularism. This led to a judiciary tasked with guarding these principles, often at the expense of political pluralism and liberal democratic values. The state coups of 1960 and 1980 further entrenched a tutelage system, where the judiciary and military maintained significant control over the political landscape. The ongoing struggle between these forces has left Türkiye's democratic institutions weakened, contributing to the erosion of civil liberties and rule of law (Şahin, 2024).

Similar patterns are observable in other Muslim-majority countries where the balance between secularism and political Islam remains precarious. In Egypt, for instance, the brief experiment with democracy following the 2011 revolution ended with the military's return to power, illustrating the resilience of authoritarian structures that resist democratic transitions (Brownlee, 2012). The interplay between religious and secular forces, coupled with deep-seated institutional weaknesses, has made it difficult for these societies to sustain liberal democratic governance.

Unresolved Issues and Areas for Further Study

The relationship between liberal democracy and Muslim-majority countries remains complex and multifaceted, with unresolved issues that continue to pose significant challenges.

One of the central questions is how Islamic principles can be reconciled with liberal democratic values without compromising the integrity of either framework. The tension between religious authority and secular governance is particularly pronounced in Muslim-majority societies, where both secular and Islamist factions vie for influence in shaping public policy and social norms. While some scholars argue for the possibility of a "hybrid" model that integrates aspects of both liberal democracy and Islamic governance, others caution against the potential pitfalls of such an approach, which can lead to blurred lines between state and religion, ultimately undermining both (Esposito & Voll, 2001). Moreover, the historical experiences of colonialism and external interventions have left a legacy of distrust towards Western models of governance, making the adaptation of liberal democratic values a sensitive and gradual process. This raises further questions about the role of civil society in revitalizing democratic practices in contexts where state institutions are heavily influenced by entrenched elites and religious authorities.

Another key issue lies in the variability of political and religious freedoms across Muslim-majority countries. As highlighted in the Islam & Liberty Network's "Freedom and Governance Report," there are stark differences among countries in the level of religious and political freedoms. For instance, while nations like Senegal and Suriname demonstrate relatively high degrees of religious freedom, countries such as Egypt and Malaysia are marked by significant restrictions and hostilities toward religious minorities (Omercevic, 2021). This variability underscores the broader challenges of applying a uniform liberal democratic model across culturally diverse regions. The ongoing struggle between secularism and political Islam further complicates the democratic landscape, as seen in the divergent trajectories of countries like Tunisia and Turkey. These unresolved tensions call for further exploration into how civil society can act as a counterbalance to state control, fostering environments where pluralism and inclusive governance can flourish.

The need for deeper research is evident in the gaps that persist within the existing literature and policy frameworks. One potential area for study is the impact of globalization on democratic consolidation in Muslim-majority countries. Globalization introduces external influences, both economic and cultural, that can either support or undermine local democratic initiatives. Another area ripe for exploration is the effectiveness of hybrid governance models that blend elements of Islamic governance with liberal democratic principles. While such models offer potential solutions to the tensions between religious and secular authority, they also raise critical questions about long-term stability and inclusivity. As the political landscape in the Muslim world continues to evolve, addressing these unresolved issues through rigorous research and informed dialogue will be crucial in charting a path toward more resilient and equitable democratic systems. Addressing these challenges requires a nuanced approach that respects the unique socio-religious contexts of each country while promoting inclusive political dialogue and robust legal frameworks.

Conclusion

The prospects of building liberal democracies in the Muslim world are cautiously optimistic, reflecting a complex interplay of socio-political, economic, and cultural factors.

While countries like Tunisia and Indonesia provide encouraging examples of democratic transitions, many Muslim-majority nations face significant challenges, including political instability, religious intolerance, and weak governance structures. Studies emphasize that the success of liberal democracy in these contexts often hinges on the ability to foster inclusive coalitions between secular and Islamist factions, as well as the implementation of effective governance practices that uphold the rule of law and control corruption (Esposito & Voll, 2001; Kaufmann, Kraay, & Mastruzzi, 2010). Furthermore, the Islam & Liberty Network's webinar discussion "Liberal Democracy and Its Discontents" highlights that pressing on the challenges and contentions surrounding liberalism are essential for enhancing overall democratic resilience.

Overall, contemporary scholarship underscores that while there are notable examples of building liberal democracies in the Muslim world, many countries continue to grapple with significant obstacles. These include balancing secular and religious interests, addressing economic disparities, and improving governance frameworks to support and sustain democratic norms. The ongoing research and dialogue within platforms like the Islam & Liberty Network are vital in addressing these challenges and promoting a more comprehensive understanding of how liberal democracy can thrive in Muslim-majority contexts. As such, the journey towards liberal democracy in the Muslim world requires sustained efforts to address these multifaceted challenges, promoting a balance between universal democratic values and the unique socio-religious contexts of each country.

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