

Islam and democracy: a difficult relationship

Ruud Koopmans

When the WZB was established 50 years ago, democracy and human rights were in short supply in large parts of the world. Many countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia had authoritarian regimes. Eastern Europe suffered under the yoke of Communist dictatorships, Spain and Portugal were ruled by the fascists Franco and Salazar, and in Greece, army officers had recently seized power in a military coup. Across the globe, only three in ten countries were democracies. Since then, the world has changed a great deal, notably for the better as democracy has made great progress. It is, today, difficult to imagine that not so very long ago, popular holiday destinations such as Spain and Greece were ruled by cruel regimes. In the intervening years, military regimes in Argentina, Chile, and Brazil have been replaced by stable democracies, and dictatorships in South Korea and Taiwan, as well as the apartheid regime in South Africa, have come to an end. Everywhere in the world, democracy has spread its wings.

Everywhere? No, there is one part of the world that completely missed out on the wave of democratization of the past 50 years as the Muslim world has yet to adopt democracy in most cases. In the early 1970s, there were 36 independent states with a predominantly Muslim population. Only four of these –

Lebanon, Malaysia, Gambia, and the Maldives – were free democracies according to the Freedom House Index of Political Rights and Civil Liberties, leaving the proportion of democracies in the Islamic world at only 11 percent – far below that among the non-Islamic countries (38 percent). Since then, the gulf separating the Islamic and the non-Islamic world has become much deeper. In the non-Islamic world, democracy has become the norm, with 57 percent of non-Muslim countries democratic. Only 15 percent of the non-Islamic world is categorized as being ruled by non-free, authoritarian regimes. The remaining 28 percent are classified by Freedom House as “partially free.”

The opposite is true when it comes to the Islamic world. 53 percent of these countries have authoritarian regimes with a meagre 4 percent deemed democratic in nature. In 2018, there were only two democratic countries with a predominantly Muslim population: Senegal and Tunisia. Until a few years ago, two more Islamic countries, Mali and Indonesia, could be counted as democracies, but under the influence of fundamentalist movements, the latter two have drifted towards authoritarian rule. For some time, Turkey also seemed to be on the right track, but since 2010, when the country seemed ready to

make the transition to democracy, the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan has led further and further into authoritarianism. The “Arab spring” of 2010 and 2011, which was supposed to bring freedom and democracy, eventually brought – with Tunisia as the only exception – the exact opposite, spawning bloody civil wars in Syria, Iraq, and Libya, as well as a global wave of terrorism.

The difference between the Islamic and the non-Islamic world cannot be explained by poverty, colonial history, or economic dependence on oil and other resources. The deficits in terms of democracy and human rights, as well as the increase in violent conflicts within the Islamic world, must rather be attributed to the rise of religious fundamentalism since the 1970s. The desire for a state governed by Islamic values and laws has led many countries to base their legal systems on Sharia law. In some cases, such as Iran, Sudan, or Afghanistan, this happened as a result of Islamists seizing power. In other cases, such as Pakistan and Egypt, it happened because the ruling autocrats mobilized Islam to serve their own purposes, introducing Islamic laws to take the wind out of the sails of the Islamists. In 2018, Sharia law was an explicit part of the legal system in 29 of the 47 independent Islamic states, with most of the other Islamic states having adopted laws derived from Sharia law as well.

Once states adopt the rules of Islamic law, women become second-class citizens, freedom of religious criticism is abolished, and sexual freedom

is severely curtailed. Under the pretext of protecting Islam and the Prophet Muhammad, freedom of speech is trampled upon nearly everywhere in the Muslim world. Alleged blasphemers, apostates, and atheists are oppressed, sometimes by the government, sometimes by the population, and often by both. Homosexuals don’t have an easy life in many countries, but in most Islamic countries, they simply don’t have any life at all. In ten Islamic countries, homosexuality is punishable by death. The civil liberties of women are extremely limited in the vast majority of Islamic countries. Underage girls may be legally married, women’s right to divorce is restricted, and women are deprived of the right to custody of their own children after divorce. Furthermore, women inherit only half of what men receive in most Islamic countries. Likewise, if the full Sharia law is adopted, a woman’s testimony in criminal proceedings is only worth half of that of a man, and women may be prosecuted for having extramarital sex even if they were raped.

The fusion of the political and the religious massively increases governmental power. After all, the group in control of the government will also define what is allowed and what is forbidden in religious terms. The oppression of religious minorities in the Islamic world leads to persistent and violent conflicts. The seemingly endless conflict between Sunnis and Shiites is a prime example, but feuds between fundamentalist and secular groups are common as well, and even disputes between differ-

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ent groups within the fundamentalist camp occur. In countries with large Islamic minorities such as Nigeria, Thailand, and the Philippines, the goal of establishing an Islamic state and introducing Sharia law has led to violent conflicts between Muslims and the rest of the population. A departure from the interpenetration of political and religious rule is a necessary prerequisite for democracy and peace to get a chance in the Islamic world.

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The WZB on film: For questions that matter

How do you introduce a research institute to people who have never heard of it? Sometimes it takes images, a little bit of pathos, and possibly a hint of irony as well. We took all of these ingredients and ventured into creative territory with students of the Baden-Württemberg Film Academy. The result is 60 seconds of WZB on film (directed by Willi Kubica). The focus is on our research questions, which are the big questions of our time. What and how do we have to learn to live in freedom and self-determination?

How much inequality can society tolerate? What does integration mean, and what scares us? Each question corresponds to an image, accompanied by music composed for the WZB by Meike Katrin Stein. 60 seconds for questions that matter. Can it work? See for yourself: youtube.com/wzblive