

RADICALISATION IN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE: HOW SUCCESSFUL IS DEMOCRATISATION IN COUNTERING RADICALISATION? (*)

Maurits S. Berger

Democratisation as the answer

Shortly after the attacks of 11 September the Western world almost unanimously agreed that the root cause of Muslim radicalism was the political, social and economical marginalisation experienced in Muslim countries. The lack of any outlet had channelled the discontent onto the path of violent opposition against the autocratic regimes responsible for this marginalisation. The violence then spilled over against Western nations that were blamed for supporting these regimes.

This analysis was aptly phrased by president Bush in his speech of 6 November 2003 for the National Endowment for Peace: 'Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did not make us safe [...] because in the long run, stability can not be purchased at the expense of liberty. As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export.'

According to this analysis, Islamic radicalism and terrorism can best be fought by taking away its root cause, that is the lack democracy, rule of law, good governance and human rights. Promoting these values (hereafter referred to as the 'democratisation project') was swiftly turned into a policy vigorously pursued by international bodies¹ as well as Western states.²

¹ See for instance:

Security Council: 'We know that respect for human rights and democracy in all fields is the best protection against terrorism.' (4512th meeting, Monday, 15 April 2002.)

UN Secretary-General Kofi Anan: 'We should all be clear that there is no trade-off between effective action against terrorism and the protection of human rights. On the contrary, I believe that in the long term we shall find that human rights, along with democracy and social justice, are one of the best prophylactics against terrorism.' (Addressing the Security Council's meeting on counter-terrorism, 18 January 2002.)

OSCE Charter on preventing and combating terrorism, 7 December 2002: The OSCE... '20. Are convinced of the need to address conditions that may foster and sustain terrorism, in particular by fully respecting democracy and the rule of law, by allowing all citizens to participate fully in political life, by preventing discrimination and encouraging intercultural and inter-religious dialogue in their societies, by engaging civil society in finding common political settlement for conflicts, by promoting human rights and tolerance and by combating poverty.'

The European Union Counter-Terrorism Strategy (Justice and Home Affairs Council) 1 December 2005, under point 11: 'There is a range of conditions in society which may create an environment in which individuals can become more easily radicalized. These conditions include poor or autocratic governance; rapid but unmanaged modernization; lack of political or economic prospects and of educational opportunities. Within the Union these factors are not generally present but in individual segments of the population they may be. To counter this, outside the Union we must promote even more vigorously good governance, human rights, democracy as well as education and economic prosperity, and engage in conflict resolution. We must also target inequalities and discrimination where they exist and promote inter-cultural dialogue and long-term integration where appropriate.'

² For example, the US State Department established in 2003 the Middle East Peace Initiative (MEPI), a multi-million dollar fund financing projects that 'strongly support(s) the reformers who are working to

Results

The pertinent question now is: has this premise of combating terrorism by promoting democratisation yielded any results? To answer this question one must first look at the success of the democratisation project itself. When scanning the Muslim world in terms of democracy, human rights or rule of law, the picture still looks bleak.

According to recent polls, like those conducted by Pew (2003) and Gallop (2007), the majority of people in the Muslim world favour democracy, and even Western-style democracy. However, this yearning has apparently not been sufficient to reform or topple autocratic regimes in Muslim countries.

Developments in countries like Turkey, Morocco, some of the smaller Gulf States, or Indonesia may look promising, but are in too early a stage to assess on their structural merits. Democratic movements in Egypt and Lebanon have brought Western politicians and media to make comparisons with the Orange and Rose Revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia but so far these developments have come to naught.

With regard to Islamic terrorism, we see on the one hand that the number as well as the viciousness of Muslim terrorist acts is increasing. On the other hand, polls show that the popular support for terrorism in the Muslim world has been declining in the past years. (The fact that most victims are Muslim, and that in countries like Iraq specific groups of Muslims are being targeted might play a role in this).

What to make of these observations? Does the increase of violence by Muslim radicals mean that the premise of democracy-promotion is not working and should be abandoned? Or should the decline in support for terrorism be an incentive to put extra efforts in forcing Muslim regimes into democratic reform?

The democratisation project is in too early a stage to answer these questions. However, two comments can be made. The first relates to democratisation as a process leading up to the final situation of democracy as a situation of stability in terms of politics, economy, human rights, social security, and so forth. This phase is by its nature one of chaos and insecurity, both in terms of orientation and strategy and in terms of power struggles. The necessary process of searching and struggling may incite even more radicalism or terrorism. Secondly, democracy as an end stage does not necessarily preclude radicalism or terrorism, as European experiences with terrorism have shown in the 1970s and now in the past years.

These two factors need closer scrutiny in order to assess the failure or success of the democratisation project: first, factors that are detrimental to the democratisation process itself, and second, factors that contribute to radicalisation but are outside the scope of the democratisation project.

First: factors that are detrimental to the democratisation project itself

Western intentions

The democratisation project suffers from being propagated as something that is morally and pragmatically 'good', while it is essentially undertaken to safeguard Western security. Islamic terrorism and radicalism are not new to the Muslim

countries, but it is only since it targeted Western countries that the promotion of democracy became a key goal in Western foreign policy vis-à-vis the Muslim world.

Such an approach is justified, of course, but when shrouded in other, loftier, terms, one ought not to be surprised when met with suspicion. Because a discrepancy has arisen between the Western – and especially American – rhetoric of democracy and freedom as universal and moral rights, on the one hand, and the Western determined focus the ‘War on Terror’ on the other.

This shows for instance in the apparent relapse of Western countries into their support for autocratic rulers. For in the War against Terrorism it is preferable to deal with a stable regime rather than potentially unstable or unreliable democratically elected government. Pakistan and Egypt are cases in point when it comes to Western unwillingness to use some muscle in their call for democratic reform.

Given the fact that a vast majority of Muslims favours democratic reforms – as has been repeatedly shown by polls and surveys – the Western hesitance in promoting democracy while loudly advocating it gives rise to a mounting suspicion and frustration among Muslims regarding the democratisation project.

Western credibility

A series of incidents have seriously undermined Western credibility in their promotion of democracy, human rights and the rule of law: the way the occupation of Iraq has been conducted, Guantánamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, and mounting evidence of CIA-interrogation facilities of terrorist suspects in European and other countries.

In addition, the concept of democracy appears to be gradually redefined by Western countries. Whereas the emphasis was on electoral democracy – electing one’s own government and having the right to stand as a candidate in elections – more importance is now attached to liberal freedoms.

This may be illustrated with the changing jargon used by the Bush-administration. Although it repeatedly stressed that it does not care about the Islamic nature of an elected government, it has recently started to use the term ‘freedom’ rather than ‘democracy’ when calling for changes in the Muslim world. This may indicate a change in policy, which also shows in the American support for smaller Gulf States that are definitely not textbook democracies but according to American policy makers, tend to be more open to introducing liberal freedoms than many other Muslim countries.

The shift in policy away from electoral democracy may be explained by a general Western fear of the scenario of Islamic forces grabbing power by democratic means and subsequently using that power to dismantle the democratic institutions. The traumatic Western experience of exactly such a scenario-taking place in Germany in the 1930s and the resulting horrible and devastating events have fuelled Westerners anxieties in this respect.

Whatever the reasons for this policy of redefining democracy, it definitely contributes to suspicion among Muslims as to the true intentions of the Western democracy project. The landslide electoral victory of Hamas in 2006 proved to be the litmus test: the American and European refusal to accept the outcome of free and fair elections – even though this refusal had to do with Hamas’ stand vis-à-vis Israel rather than its Islamic character – was interpreted by Muslims all over the world as a Western refusal to accept the electorate’s voice anywhere in the Muslim world if that voice expressed wishes different from the West’s.

Misleading meanings of 'democracy'

Apart from the different intentions behind democracy and the changing of its meaning, as mentioned above, there is also another misunderstanding on the essence of 'democracy'. To many Muslims – especially the Islamists – democracy stands for a system of arbitrary rule.

This perception is understandable from a practical point of view for many autocratic regimes of Muslim countries call themselves 'democratic' while everyone knows the elections are a farce and that the rule of law is dictated by the whims of the regime. Democracy as being practised in these countries is therefore indeed a system that ought to be rejected.

From this perspective, promoting democracy is bound to fail, especially if the credibility and intentions of the promoters only add to the conviction that democracy is up to no good.

Second: factors outside the scope of democratisation but leading to radicalisation

One of the reasons that the democratisation project in Muslim countries does not yield the expected results in countering radicalism is that the radicalism among Muslims is also being fed by other factors than a lack of democracy, rule of law and human rights. Examples of such factors are the following.

The 'Mother of all Conflicts'

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has taken centre stage in Muslim rhetoric on injustice in general and Western double standards in particular. The conflict that until recently was seen as a nationalist struggle between two peoples has now acquired religious dimensions. Where before the support for Palestinians came from Arabs, now the support comes from Muslims living in countries as far as Malaysia and Norway: they identify their own struggles and feelings of injustice with the plight of the Palestinians. This identification has led to an exceedingly emotional involvement with the conflict. Every time Israel is considered to violate human rights in dealing with Palestinians, and the Western world – US and EU in particular – fails or refuses to respond adequately, Muslims are fuelled with anger against Israel but also against the Western nations deemed supportive of Israel.

Occupation

What is it that triggers the radicalisation process in the case of a deficient democracy? Radicals themselves usually refer to the lack of justice – socially, economically, and politically. However, there are situations other than a failing democracy that may lead to a lack of justice. For instance, a strong sense of injustice is caused by occupation. This now is a recurrent theme in the Muslim world.

Considering the fact that most of the Muslim has been occupied by Western powers for shorter or longer times, and that quite some Muslim countries after their independence since the early and late twentieth centuries have been confronted with Western military interventions, one may understand the Muslim's sensitivity with 'occupation'.

In this respect the goals of perpetrators of terrorist acts in Indonesia, Bangladesh, Egypt or Saudi-Arabia are different from the goals of Islamic movements in Chechnya, Palestine or Iraq that claim to be fighting a foreign occupation force. Their methods and even ideologies may be similar, but the source of anger and

radicalisation of the Islamic ‘resistance’ movements does not stem from a lack of democracy but from occupation.

Fundamentalism and morality

In a number of Muslim countries, Muslim radicals are targeting persons and institutions that, in their view, are not behaving in accordance to the morality and decency demanded by Islam. The attacks have been physical (killing of alleged apostates or Islam-critics, maiming of allegedly loose women, bombing of cinemas and theatres), but also legal (petitions filed against journalists, novelists, filmmakers and academics) or by means of *fatwas*.

The switching of religious zeal among Islamic fundamentalist from politics to public morality is a recent phenomenon. The revolutionary spirit of the 1970s and 1980s to transform a society and state structure has been gradually replaced by an equally ardent desire to impose an Islamic morality. (These two do not necessarily need to exclude one another: changing society ‘top-down’ by means of changes through the state or ‘bottom-up’ through changes in human behaviour may both be means for the same goal, i.e. establishing an Islamic society).

The ‘bottom-up’ approach appears to be very successful. In most Muslim societies one observes an increasing adherence to Islamic social and moral rules of conduct. One cannot influence, steer or guide such human conduct by democratic processes or reforms, because they flourish by the very freedoms ensured by democracy. Aside from the violent methods used by some, the atmosphere of Islamic social pressure created in many Muslim societies is also hard to fight with ‘democracy’, especially when this pressure is – indirectly – exercised by typical democratic means like the freedoms of speech and litigation.

Psychological marginalisation

The assumption that Islamic radicalisation can be countered by democracy alone is also refuted by the European experience. Here one witnesses radicalisation of young Muslims, some of whom have even committed terrorist attacks. Given the fact that most of these young radical Muslim are born and raised in European countries, and live in societies where economic, social and political freedoms are guaranteed, one must come to the conclusion that other factors than a lack of democracy lead to radicalisation.

These factors of radicalisation are still being studied, but a picture is emerging. First, there is something that one may call ‘psychological marginalisation’. What has euphemistically been called the ‘Islam-debate’ was not a debate *with* but *about* Muslims, and was accompanied by much Islam-bashing and vilification of Muslims in general. This has affected especially the young Muslims of the second and third generation, many of who have retreated into an angry and ‘pure’ Islam. It is telling that these young Muslims do not see themselves as actors but as victims: ‘I am not radicalising but I am being radicalised [i.e. by the circumstances and society]’ is an often-heard statement.

Second, the newly found ‘Muslim’ identity of young European Muslims has contributed to an increased identification with fellow Muslims all over the world. The sufferings that Muslims experience in other countries are strongly felt by Muslims in Europe. Since many Muslims in the West hold Western nations primarily responsible for inflicting these sufferings, their anger turns against their own countries. This combined with the psychological marginalisation may lead to a further disconnection

of the young Muslim from his or her environment, a disconnection that is susceptible to a process of radicalisation.

Anti-Western sentiments

Anti-Western sentiments harboured by Muslims are complex, because based on a variety of factors, some of which have already been mentioned above. It is also complex because of the often contradicting sentiments that play a role. For instance, it is often assumed that Muslims truly hate the West. Pure hatred is seldom the case among Muslims, however, for there is also much admiration for much that the West represents or has to offer. This, together with all kinds of actions and characteristics of the West that anger many Muslims generates a sentiment that at best can be described as a love-hate relation with the West.

Such a sentiment, however confusing it may be to many Muslims, is not sufficient to explain radicalisation. A factor that may be more elucidating in this respect is the commonly felt Muslim fear of the West 'taking over', not only politically, economically and militarily, but also culturally, morally and socially: clothing, music, literature and architecture are largely adopted from the West; Muslim countries appear to be mere pawns in on the political chessboards played by Western powers; most Muslim countries are dependant on the global forces of finance and economics that are largely driven by Western powers; a successive series of military interventions in Muslim countries since the second half of the twentieth century only adds to the feeling that the imperialist times have never ended; Muslim countries are under continuously criticised by the West for their lack of democracy, human rights and civil liberties.

It is important to note that these are perceptions and not necessarily factual truths. Unfortunately it is the perception that counts, and that has resulted in a defensive reaction in the Muslim world towards the West and anything typically 'Western', especially views and values. These sentiments contribute considerably to a process of radicalisation.

Conclusion: the road ahead

It is too early to pass judgement on the thesis that democracy may act as a counterweight to Islamic radicalism, mainly because the thesis can not be tested now that democracy has not yet been established in autocratic Muslim. The democratisation project undertaken by Western countries vis-à-vis some Muslim countries is still in the phase of the *process* of democratisation, and this proves to be a bumpy road.

However, with regard to the ulterior motive of this democratisation process – countering radicalisation and terrorism – two critical points are in order. First, from the Muslim perspective, the democratisation project is often deficient in motive and credibility. Second, other factors than a lack of democracy may be the cause of radicalisation.

How to remedy this? With regard to the Western approach to democracy promotion, one should be more critical of the Western meanings given to the word and the intentions that go with it. A lack of credibility from the Muslim perspective is the West's main enemy in this respect. It would also serve the interests of the democratisation project if terminology were reduced to a very basic and descriptive jargon, in order to get rid of its Western image.

A fierce opponent in this process, however, is that of perceptions, in particular that of presumed Western imperialism and hidden agendas. By now, even the best intentions on the Western side will crash on the granite wall of suspicion that has been erected in Muslim countries in the past years. Overcoming this will be the most daring challenge of Western foreign policy and diplomacy in years to come.

Also, if the West wants to fight radicalisation and terrorism, the lack-of-democracy-premise is accurate but insufficient. Many other factors lead to Islamic radicalisation and terrorism, several of which have been discussed in this article. Characteristic of these factors is that only one can be related to a material situation – occupation – while the others are of a more psychological nature: the Palestinian-Israeli conflict being ‘used’ by Muslims to illustrate their rejection of injustice, the pursuit of morality in the public sphere, marginalisation of Muslim youth in Europe, and anti-Western sentiments.

We can conclude by saying that promotion of democracy is a much more delicate operation than anticipated and should be handled accordingly. Also, the fight against Islamic radicalism has to be taken to other battlefields than only that of democracy.

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