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When the Holy Prophet of Islam (Peace be upon him) passed away in 632 AD, the first Khalifa, Hazrat Abu Bakr Siddique, took over the leadership of the newly born Islamic Ummah, to become the first of the four great Khalifa e Rashidun. He was not appointed by anyone but to the contrary was elected, as were all the other three great Caliphs who followed him. This was the meticulously followed method until the first Umayyad Caliph, Muawiyah, arranged for the accession of his son Yazid before he died in 680 AD - a decision which was to result in a schism in Islam that survives to this day.

Even so, the principle of absolute monarchy with all the pomp and splendour that it entails was not finally entrenched until the great Abbasid caliph Haroon ur Rashid (786-809) almost a hundred years later, whose rule was in keeping with the Hollywood image of a pre-modern Muslim ruler. Gone was the informality and close contact with the subjects that characterised the rule of the Khalifa e Rashidun; courtiers were made to kiss the ground when they came into his presence which would have been unthinkable during the days of Hazrat Abu Bakr, when every Muslim knew clearly that he only prostrated himself before Allah. Even the Holy Prophet himself was addressed by his given name, just as any other Muslim; by contrast, the great Caliph, by now based in Baghdad, sported the grand title of 'Shadow of God on earth'; he always had an executioner standing behind him to show that he exercised power over life and death, which all Muslims had always been taught was a power that was God's alone.

So how could the same teachings, the same values, and the same ideals, embodied in the Holy Qur'an of which not a word has changed over the past 1400 years, produce systems of governance so vastly and unrecognisably different?

Over the past few years, particularly over the past couple of years, there has been much debate over the compatibility of Islam with democracy and much argument whether the two can ever ride side by side. And yet, when Islam was in its most pristine - dare one say most fundamental - form it was almost inconceivable for those who adhered to this faith to have any system that did not run on consensus. It was not just the election of the Khalifa that was based on consensus but all-important decisions were taken on

this basis too.

It is my view that the change was directed not by Islamic philosophy or any perception of Islamic theory, but by the fact that the Islamic Empire started to grow by leaps and bounds and in the pre-modern era, whenever this happened, democracy and the concept of consensus went out of the window. There were in fact, two major reasons for the transformation from a consensual form of government to a totally autocratic one and the Islamic Empire was not the first to be forced to go down this road; the first and most obvious reason was that the institutions for indirect democracy had not been conceived and it is indeed doubtful in the extreme whether these engines of modern democracy which make indirect democracy possible, could possibly have functioned without some degree of modernity in terms of education and means of communication and production. The second reason was that with the economy being largely agrarian, surplus production, on which the wealth of nations depended, was limited and therefore had to be centrally managed and carefully allocated. The luxury of the industrialised economy producing vast amounts of surplus, with its attendant developments in education and land reforms which followed the industrial revolution and provided the impetus for the growth of western style democracy, is a phase in human history which, let us not forget, bypassed the Muslim world entirely - and not due to any religious factor. As a matter of fact, it could well be argued that the great success of pre-modern Muslim Empires like the Umayyads, Abbasides, Fatamids, Seljuks, and Mughals was the very reason why they were left unable to cope with the demands of modern democratisation. The need for the pre-modern Empire builders was a strong centralised system whereby one man decisively called the shots. A weak man, or the division of power - and the two were often considered synonymous - led to the break-up of the Empire. So the Muslim rulers centralised authority in a way western rulers were not able to, or did not have the resources to attempt.

The argument suggested itself to me one day as I visited Bosworth Fields near the town of Market Bosworth in the goodly county of Leicestershire. There, on a late summer's day in August 1485, one of the most important battles in English history was fought, a battle which just like the Norman conquest of Britain in 1066, was to change the course of the country's history. At Bosworth Fields Henry Tudor met the reigning monarch Richard the Third and although

heavily outnumbered, won the day due to an act of almost incredible impetuosity by Richard, thus ushering in the Tudor era. What struck me during a visit to the tiny museum at the battleground was a letter written to King Richard by one of his nobles in the midlands pledging to present himself at the field of Bosworth with full 85 retainers to fight beside the noble king against the Tudor impostor. Given the fact that Henry had less than 5,000 men under his command and the king had a little more than 11,000, 85 men plus or minus could be meaningful. The total number of human beings on that battlefield in August 1485 was thus no more than 16,000. Just over forty years down the line, in April 1526, Babar fought the ruler of India, Sultan Mohammad Ibrahim Lodhi on the fields of Panipat in a battle that was to establish the great Mughal Empire in the south Asian subcontinent. Against the 16,000 men that were present on the field of battle at Bosworth Fields, there were in excess of 130,000 men on the field of Panipat. The point of this is that the Muslim ruler generally made sure that his power was so overwhelming that he did not have to depend on anyone for support to ensure his existence. Much of British democracy has had its roots in the need of kings to depend on their dukes and barons and earls and lords of all description to provide manpower in times of war, both defensive and offensive, and the basis of the modern European consultative process which led to the final establishment of the mother of parliaments, is based on this factor. In most parts of the Muslim world, and certainly during the 700 year period of Muslim rule in the south Asian subcontinent, this was never a factor, although lesser rulers were called upon to aid the monarch in times of threat, they were seldom in a position to answer such a call in any way but one. The result of this overbearing central authority and intolerance it almost inevitably breeds was that the progress in science and technology, which was the vehicle of the great industrial revolution in the west, missed the Muslim world completely. Power begot wealth and wealth could get anything industrial mass production could produce, including the fancy machines of war. Education was de-prioritised as a means of perpetuation of power and with that, the view of the world extended no further than the borders of one's kingdom. Sadly, this de-prioritising of education is an attitude that still prevails in many parts of the Islamic world, Pakistan by no means excluded. Of the many mind boggling tales of corruption concerning the

so-called democratic governments that country has had over the past 15 years, the one that in my book wins pride of performance by taking one's breath away by virtue of its sheer audacity is the one that revealed in the late 1990s that were as many as 20,000 'ghost' schools in Pakistan. For those not initiated in the finer points of corruption, a ghost school is a school that exists only on paper. While a budget allocation is approved for it and money is being shown as being spent on account of teachers' salaries, repair of buildings and furniture, text books and so on, in actual fact there is nothing on the ground except a goat tied to the stump of a tree - that too probably decaying! This in a country that professes itself to be set up in the name of a religion whose Holy Book, The Qur'an, mentions the word 'ilm' or knowledge more often than any other word except the name of God Himself.

Democracy is a function of certain social, political and economic conditions. Many of these social political and economic conditions never got a chance to germinate in lands that had to bear the brunt of colonisation just when these factors were developing in other parts of the world. The concepts that are basic and fundamental to Islam are those of equality, justice and consensus and there can be no better ideological base for democracy than a thought system that promotes these features. If democracy has failed to catch on in most of the Islamic world it is not because of Islam, but in spite of it. Indeed, in furtherance of the argument that social political and economic factors rather than religion are the determining factors for the development of democracy, one could perhaps say that even these factors were largely responsible for the democratic traditions of early Islamic governance systems under the Khalifa e Rashidun, as much as the qualities emphasised by Islam. Although Muslims believe that Islam came for all mankind; it was founded as an Arab religion and it took on many of the norms of governance that were prevalent in Arab society in those days. The Sayyid, or leader of the tribe, was an elected, not a hereditary or nominated office and all- important decisions, like the waging of war, were taken by consensus. The early democratic character of Islamic governments by the Khalifa e Rashidun was as much a reflection of this as of the undoubtedly egalitarian principles of Islam.

I would be less than honest if I did not admit that the debate on Islam and democracy is something I find

worrying and often even frustrating. In recent times, one has started to increasingly get the impression that when the West, particularly the English speaking West, talks of 'democracy' it means a government that is well inclined towards itself and not well inclined to those deemed its opponents or enemies, and that the factor of popular approval does not really come into it at all. Thus the movements spearheaded by Lech Walesa in Poland, against Nicholas Ceausescu in Romania and the events that took place at Tianamen square were defined as 'pro-democracy' movements while the Iranian revolution that saw the back of Raza Shah Pahlavi, which was about as hard core as democracy can ever get, was not hailed as such and the election victory of the Islamic FIS in Algeria did not produce any expression of appreciation - rather the military coup that negated the verdict of the people was seen as a development that somehow furthered the cause of democracy. On the other hand, there have been and still are any number of undemocratic governments in the Muslim world which do not draw so much as a poop from the West as long as these governments let the West do its will. Thus democracy as a western political philosophy is seen as being rather two faced at best and at worst, a system based on about as much intellectual honesty as anything Al Capone, the famous Chicago gangster, could come up with. That is not the way the Islamic world is going to be persuaded to take the democratic path. More recently, after the events of 9/11, the great concern for democracy in the Islamic world has acquired another albeit equally unreal dimension. I cannot help but get the feeling that the great concern for democracy in the Muslim world is based on the supposition that once the Muslim world is on the same political 'wave length' as the Western world, they will be able to see eye to eye on all issues and that the differences between them will either disappear or at least be contained in a non-violent form. The first supposition belies a complete lack of willingness to accept the real factors that pit the Islamic world against the world today; the second, more a hope than a supposition, is just not the way democracy works or is supposed to work. The differences democracy learns to contain within itself are of an internal nature, not external. Thus while the differences between various political ideologies within a society can be contained and handled by democratic institutions, they are neither designed nor meant to contain external differences like the taking over of

land by external powers and the denial of such basic and fundamental rights as that of self-determination by them. The differences we see today between Islam and the West are due to what is happening in Palestine and Kashmir and Chechniya, and not because of any factor of Islamic philosophy.

None of this means that democracy is not, as the great bard would have put it, 'a consummation devoutly to be wished' for the Islamic world. It undoubtedly is, but for the sake of the Islamic world itself, not because it will result in containing the differences between Islam and the West. The greatest impetus that the West could give to the development of democracy in the Islamic world would be by supporting democratic causes. All the great faiths of the world, Islam included, spread by example; if democracy is to spread, it has to take the same path. It has to prove that the values it proclaims do not fall by the wayside when friends violate them and that these values have a purpose greater than acting as a stick with which to beat enemies, real or conceived. And along with a fairer international political order will have to come a fairer international economic order.

Democracy cannot, on the one hand be worshipping at the altar of the laissez faire economic system and on the other be doling out huge subsidies to its own farmers and denying countries of the developing world the right to sell their goods in its markets.

Beyond that, the issue of broad based education and land reforms will have to be emphasised in Islamic countries much more than periodical elections of dubious validity. I can give you the example of Pakistan and its former wing, East Pakistan now known as Bangladesh. I would think that Bangladesh today is much further on the road to the development of democratic institutions simply because feudalism had less of a hold there and what hold it had was effectively swept away by the East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act, passed as early as 1952, barely five years after Pakistan got independence. On the other hand, many attempts by various Pakistani governments, none of them even remotely sincere, have produced no more than a reallocation of land among various family members and friends. Feudalism brings with it a value system that is the antithesis of democracy and two value systems so diametrically opposed cannot function side by side.

Education is another very important factor - and the feudal vested interest knows this. Thus the 22,000 ghost schools in Pakistan, a statistic in the creation

of which feudal lords and people's representatives - who, in a feudal society are often the same people - played a big role. People will not fight for their rights unless they know what these rights are, and equally importantly, what duties and responsibilities these rights envisage. Perhaps with that education will come the realisation that democracy is not a western thought system; it is simply the process by which power is exercised by an increasing number of people and to that extent, it is an inexorable process of history. On the other side of the great divide, there has to be the realisation that not all societies will follow the same route in this inevitable devolution of power, and that the end product will not necessarily always look and feel the same.

Indeed, democratisation of the Islamic may force the West to rethink the basis on which it interacts with the Islamic world. The present basis of having an individual who carries out the West's bidding in complete violation of popular opinion and feeling, without the latter's opinion having any avenue of expressing itself, serves neither the West nor the Islamic world. Democratisation would allow the public expression of such opinion and force the West to take it into consideration while formulating policies that effect the Islamic world. If that was the basis of interaction, it would have been unthinkable for the West to ask any Muslim country to send troops to Iraq as one simply cannot see any set of circumstances under which any government of a Muslim country will ever be able to sell that to its people.

In the ultimate analysis, that could well be the greatest service that democratisation of the Islamic world could provide. Views in the Muslim world, by finding public expression, should help towards better appreciation of the Muslim pulse in the West since, at the moment, it seems to be the issue most deserving of attention and where the gap is the largest.