The Islamic Democratic Paradox

Feb 3, 2006 Álvaro de Vasconcelos

The rage across the Arab world over the publication in Denmark (months ago) of cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed, together with the victory of Hamas in Palestine and the increasing radicalization of Iran's politics, has made "political Islam" a fundamental question of international diplomacy. But a one-size-fits-all response won't work. Indeed, we need to abandon the idea that there is a holistic or global Islamist movement.

Political Islam of all colors has emerged as the main alternative to secular Arab nationalist regimes whose legitimacy, based on the struggle for national liberation, has evaporated due to their inability to resolve economic and social problems, establish the rule of law, and guarantee fundamental freedoms. In Palestine, for example, the Islamists triumphed over Fatah because of years of bad governance under the harsh conditions spawned by Israeli occupation.

Successive European and American governments share an atavistic fear of the "Islamic alternative" to Arab secular nationalists like Fatah, and so have defended the status quo. But repression of all Arab opposition movements by the region's monarchs and secular dictators meant that "protection of the Mosque" became the only umbrella under which to engage politically.

Now political Islam can no longer be contained, because democracy cannot be built by driving underground parties that have a strong social base, as was tragically demonstrated in Algeria 15 years ago. The only alternative to authoritarianism is to craft a transition that allows Islamists to participate in public life and encourages them to accept unequivocally the rules of the democratic game.

There are already many examples of more or less conservative Islamist parties that are willing to play along. It is no accident that there are Islamists in the legislatures of all the countries undergoing some form of political reform, including Lebanon, where Hezbollah is part of a freely elected government, as well as Jordan and Morocco.

In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood has become a strong force in parliament despite the limits imposed on the participation of Islamist groups in last year's elections. In Iraq, free elections have revealed the enormous influence of Islamist currents. In Turkey, the transition to democracy led the Islamist Justice and Development Party to power. That government has undertaken various important democratic reforms and initiated accession negotiations with the EU. These Islamist parties have nothing to do with Al Qaeda, even though some of the most conservative among them have adopted somewhat similar ideological positions.

The risk of political transitions that may lead to the victory of Islamist parties is a democratic paradox that Europe and the US must accept if they are to devise inclusive reform policies – in other words, policies that are the polar opposite of the type of democratic imposition practiced in occupied Iraq. Indeed, one of the less fortunate consequences of the intervention in Iraq was to reinforce the notion of a "clash of

civilizations" between the West from Islam, which in turn serves to create a climate favorable to Islamist movements.

After all, political reform movements in the Muslim world emerged long before the US-led "war on terror," and reformists were not waiting for the EU to become stronger to press for change. These movements were not created in the US or Europe after September 11, 2001, and they will not wait for or depend on the US or the EU to act. Nevertheless, the success of Muslim moderates may well depend on how the EU and the US respond to pressure for reform and how they decide to encourage change.

It is now necessary to show that democracy is the best path for Palestinians to attain their national goals. This depends largely on the new Hamas government and its transformation into a democratic force that respects the rule of law, democracy, and international legality. But it also depends on Israel and the international community, which must do all they can to ensure a future Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital.

Supporting Palestinian democratization does not mean that the international community should not demand that Hamas abandon terror for once and for all, demilitarize, respect the Palestinian constitution, and accept the existence of the state of Israel. But it also does not mean supporting sanctions that would hurt the Palestinian people after they have expressed their will democratically. This would be a terrible mistake in any effort to consolidate Palestine's new democracy, with a negative impact in other reforming countries in the Arab world.

Similarly, accepting the right of non-violent Islamists to participate in public life does not mean giving up on the political and ideological struggle to defeat ultra-conservative, and in some cases totalitarian, conceptions of society. Combating racism, promoting tolerance, and respecting the religious sentiments of others does not mean that we need to question press freedom or accept Islamists' demands for censorship, even when real religious sentiments are offended, as in the case of the Danish caricatures. Islamist conceptions of society that violate individual rights must be rebutted politically.

That political challenge is one of the paradoxes of democracy, which allows all ideas to compete freely with each other. Political Islam is a risk, but we can minimize it only by devising intelligent, case-sensitive strategies that promote democracy, not by denouncing the results of democratic choice.