

Islam and Muslim Societies

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Book Reviews

Democracy in Muslim Societies: The Asian Experience By Zoya Hasan, 2007, Sage Publications, New Delhi.

Democracy in Muslim Societies – a study of six Asian countries, overwhelmingly Muslim in terms of population, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Turkey, Indonesia and Malaysia and the process of democratization therein – seeks to discuss in detail the impulses at work in Muslim societies and the dynamics of social forces shaping opinion and actions. It explores the character of the political transformation and democratic transition as well as assesses the extent of actual democratization in these six countries. Ultimately, this book concludes that there is no fundamental incompatibility between Islam and democracy in the Asian Muslim societies/countries.

The book consists of 6 chapters, preceded by Foreword (pp.7-9) by M. Hamid Ansari and Introduction (pp.11-45) by the editor Zoya Hasan – Professor, Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi – and followed by ‘Notes about Contributors’ (pp.258-260) and ‘Index’ (pp.261-266).

The 6 chapters are six country study papers (by 7 great Scholars) contributing to dwell on the democratic discourse and its outcome in these countries – attempting to understand the process of democratization by looking to Asian societies to grasp the varieties of Muslim politics and multiple paths undertaken in the quest for democracy – from Turkey in the West to Indonesia in the East of Asia.

Zoya Hasan in her Introduction – a descriptive assessment of the six papers – discusses the process of democratization, raising and answering many questions related to the theme of democratization of Muslim societies, the problem of which is not primarily of Religion (Islam), but of “history and political and economic development”, and of western and imperial domination of the region (p.20).

The book attempts to examine and analyze the process of democratization in Asian societies by looking at the growth of democratic politics and the politics of Islam within the context of “state-society” relations and the “civil society/ democracy debate” (p.23).

The study reveals the fact that there is remarkable historical differentiation and diversity within the Muslim societies, in the interpretation of Islam (and Islamic sources) itself and across nations with majority Islamic (Muslim) populations. The “constitutional and political situation” in Indonesia and Malaysia is very different from that of the Maghreb (Middle East) or Sub-Saharan (African) countries; South Asia in particular, is a “contested part” of the Muslim world. Similarly, the Arab world is rather different again, and Iran and

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Turkey are a case unto them. Islam, within these diverse Muslim nations/countries, has become “multi-hierarchical”, with numerous religious authorities commanding the allegiances of portions of the population (see, p. 41).

The experience of these six nations/countries reveal a variety of political processes, political systems, and political transitions; and whilst there have been many ups and downs in their political trajectories, there is no evidence of any fundamental incompatibility between Islam and democracy. More noteworthy is the fact that Islamic norms of governance do not figure prominently in the organization of government. Indeed, the most striking feature, argues Zoya Hasan, is the “varied forms of politics and political systems” (p.42). It is followed by Chapter one.

The **chapter 1**, “The Struggle of Democracy in Bangladesh” by Amena Mohsin and Meghna Guhathakurta (pp. 46-74) – covering a period of 35 years: from the birth of Bangladesh in 1971 to the end of 2006 – provides a wide-ranging overview of the political trajectory in Bangladesh, arguing that the hostility between the ruling coalition and main opposition party (Awami League), a spiraling trend of violence, the government’s utter disregard for the rule of law, the diminishing importance of parliament, and growing religious militancy have all delivered serious blows to democracy.

Since the birth of Bangladesh in 1971, democracy is in “crisis” there not because it is a “Muslim society”, but because it is a “developing nation”, where institutions of parliamentary democracy have not developed in the same way as in western democracy (pp.72-73). Although the democratic parties are gaining ground at micro-level, the progress is indeed very slow at the macro-level, in Bangladesh, argue the authors (p.73).

Chapter 2, “The Indonesian experience in Implementing Democracy” by Andriana Elisabeth (pp.75-111), focuses on the Indonesian experience in practicing democracy. The depths of political and economic crises, and the weakness of national government to resolve them, Elisabeth underlines, have complicated the positive movement toward democracy in Indonesia and the major challenges before Indonesian democracy are ‘protection of minorities’, dealing with ‘communal and political conflicts’, and tackling terrorism or ‘terminating terrorist acts’ by radical groups (see, p.92).

Elisabeth argues, in the conclusion, that Indonesia has a long way to go before it can become democratic as massive corruption and socio-economic exploitation hamper the growth of democracy (p. 102).

Chapter 3, “The History of democratic Movements in Iran in the 20th Century” by Sadegh Zibakalam (pp.112-127), contends that the struggle for democracy in Iran must be understood within its own historical and cultural context that embodies the powerful role Islam and the Shi’a ‘Ulema play in society and politics.

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Islamic Iran provides a very complex case for an objective and unbiased assessment on the state of democracy and human rights. As for as democracy and openness are concerned, with the exception of Israel, Iran is by far ahead of all the other Middle Eastern countries, argues Sadegh. But the crucial issue is how to make further progress in democracy and human rights as the best scenario for further progress in democracy and human rights in Iran is the slow but steady “evolutionary path” of changing and reforming the system within (p.126).

Chapter 4, “Islam and Democracy in Malaysia” by Abdul Rehman Embong (pp. 128-176), seeks to address questions such as: Can Muslim nations institute governance that is democratic, just and transparent? What lessons can be learnt for modernizing Muslim societies in the 21st century?, and related questions by examining the case of Malaysia. The chapter first briefly addresses Malaysian history with regard to its plurality and Islamization, as well as the impact of colonialism; then provides an analysis of Malaysian development performance within the context of relatively stable political and social systems. The next part examines a number of important experiences and lessons that have contributed to the relative success of the Malaysian experiment, including the political system, the leadership and the conflict of resolution mechanism, the role of developmentalist state and affirmative action, gender parity, as well as governance, ethics and integrity. The final section/part of this chapter discusses how the question of Islam and Muslims is being addressed by both the country’s leadership, the opposition and civil society in order to engage with modernity and globalization, as well as the contestations and tensions that have been emerging in the society. The central argument of the chapter is that the Islamization of Malay politics needs to be appreciated in relation to shifting socio-political ideas and boundaries that define the political process in Malaysia.

For Malaysia to move forward, the state must be responsive to challenges and popular demand, with leaders walking their talk. In this way, concludes A. R. Embong, “substantive democracy” can be enhanced, which in turn will help strengthen “formal democracy” (p. 173).

Chapter 5, “Functioning of Democracy in Pakistan” by Muhammad Waseem (pp.177-218), attempts to answer the question, ‘why has democracy not been consolidated in Pakistan?’ by highlighting those democratic norms and institutions that have failed to compete with the more powerful traditional forces that are highly resistant to change. The chapter looks critically at the institutional approach, behaviouralist model, survey-based research and the civil society approach, and argues in favour of a structural approach to the study of politics in Pakistan; leading to an analysis of democracy in terms of state formation along with the pivotal role of the army, as well as electoral dimension of politics. The chapter also discusses the questions of economic growth, human development and human rights in Pakistan and their relevance with democracy therein. In the final section, it looks at democracy and Islam in the context of Pakistan, and exploring the way the “ideological

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framework” of the state has interacted with patterns of authority inherited from British India (p.178). The observations in this paper clearly point to the futility of a culturist approach to the issue of democracy in Muslim-majority states such as Pakistan. A structural approach to politics has necessary potential to explain the “lack of democracy” in that country, argues Waseem (p.214).

Chapter 6, “Interaction of Democracy and Islam in Turkey” by Korel Goymen (pp.219-257), provides an overview of the Turkish polity, highlighting the Turkish experience in relation to democracy and Islam within a “conceptual framework” of indeed development, bureaucratic ruling tradition, institutional and social dualism, centre-periphery interaction and globalization, and underscores the point that broadening the political arena by giving Islamic parties an opening, pacifying influence on the polity (p.219).

K. Goymen argues that Turkish experience with democracy has been successful at instituting periodic competitive free and fair national and local elections for public office, but, undoubtedly the most important contemporary challenge for Turkish democracy has been/is its “candidacy for European Union [EU]” (p.245).

At the same time, the Turkish political system has several shortcomings due to constitutional limitations, patronage systems, corruption, and institutionalized censorship. Goymen argues, in the conclusion, that there is no doubt that due to the combination of internal factors and external inducement, Turkey faces its most “crucial challenge and opportunity at the same time” (p.246); however, the Turkish model can “serve” as a case to derive selective conclusions of “what not to do” as well as “what to do” (Ibid).

In this book, the study of Asian experience highlights four important issues, which are:

- a) Shifting of the focus from Arab to Asian countries highlights the positive potential for democracy and democratic transitions in the Muslim world;
- b) As there is no one type of political system, there is no single model of democracy;
- c) There is no fundamental incompatibility between Islam and democracy in Asian Muslim world; and
- d) Muslims are engaged in vigorous debate on the political system.

There are some significant trends that emerge from the assessment of the country reports. Each country is anxious to demarcate its identity as being distinct from the Arab world; and all countries, except Turkey, have a colonial past. Significantly, all countries have experienced military/authoritarian rule at some point of time or the other; each country has followed a different historical and developmental trajectory in spite of having many common factors. To cut a long story short, Democracy in Muslim Societies is a great endeavor/attempt to bring forth the Asian experience of democracy – the debate over

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which has acquired/gained an edge from the final decades of the 20th century CE – revealing that there is no fundamental incompatibility between Islam and democracy in the Asian Muslim societies/countries. And at the same time, the book reveals the fact that a single model of democracy cannot work across these six countries as each country has a different history and has tread on a different path in the search for democracy.

In short, Democracy in Muslim Societies is a valuable work on the thesis of compatibility of Islam and democracy in Muslim Asia and will prove useful and helpful to the students and scholars of this field alike.

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