

The Democratisation Failure in the Middle East: Causes and Prospects

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Abstract

It has almost become conventional wisdom among analysts and experts on Middle Eastern politics to relate the fate of the democratisation process and its failure in the region to the foreign policy platforms of the USA and its Western allies. Contrary to the prevailing interpretations of democratisation failure in the Middle East, it will be argued that the historical proclivity of leftist organisations and parties to conflate anti-imperialism with fostering hostility towards liberal values, the limited scope of industrialisation, and culturally and religiously ingrained competing loyalties are factors that have cumulatively made a significant contribution to the cultivation of a socio-political environment that is not receptive to democracy.

Keywords: democracy, democratisation failure, liberalism, Left's anti-liberalism, Middle East, kinship, religion, tribalism

Niepowodzenie demokratyzacji na Bliskim Wschodzie: przyczyny i perspektywy

Abstrakt

Wśród analityków i ekspertów ds. polityki bliskowschodniej utarło się, że szanse na powodzenie procesu demokratyzacji w tym regionie zależą od polityki zagranicznej Stanów Zjednoczonych i ich zachodnich sojuszników. W przeciwieństwie do dominujących interpretacji niepowodzenia demokratyzacji na Bliskim Wschodzie, w artykule przedstawiono argumenty na rzecz tezy o silnym zbiorczym wpływie na utrzymywanie się niesprzyjającego demokracji klimatu przez czynniki, takie jak historyczna skłonność lewicowych partii i organizacji do utożsamiania antyimperializmu z wrogością wobec liberalnych wartości, ograniczony zakres industrializacji oraz zaszczerpiona na gruncie kulturowym i religijnym lojalność wobec rozbieżnych zasad.

Słowa kluczowe: demokracja, porażka demokratyzacji, liberalizm, antyliberalizm lewicy, Bliski Wschód, pokrewieństwo, religia, plemienność

Introduction

Democratisation failure in Middle Eastern countries has continued to remain one of the most controversial subjects of debate among political scientists and students of Middle Eastern politics. It has almost become a prevailing proclivity among analysts and experts on Middle Eastern politics to relate the fate of the democratisation process and its failure in the region to the foreign policy platforms of the USA and its Western allies. The existing literature on the interplay of Western foreign policies in the Middle East and the fate of democratisation is dominated by two competing lines of interpretation. While Left-leaning intellectuals blame the democratisation failure in the Middle East on the doors of the foreign policy of Western powers particularly, the USA in sheltering autocratic and authoritarian regimes, Right-wing intellectuals attribute democratisation failure to the lack of determination by Western powers to integrate democratisation in their foreign policy platforms. Despite their differences in identifying the cause of democratisation failure in the Middle East, there is an undeclared assumption within both right and left perspectives that the soil of the Middle East is ripe for democracy. Contrary to this underlying assumption lurking beneath both perspectives, it can be argued

that there are certain endogenous conditions that have played significant roles in fostering a socio-political environment that is not receptive to and is resistant to democratic values and principles¹.

This paper is divided into four parts. Part one outlines the competing explanations for the interplay of Western foreign policy and democratisation failure in Middle Eastern countries. Part two explains the adverse implications of the Left's anti-imperialism crusade for liberal values and principles which has, in turn, undermined the cultivation of democracy in Middle Eastern countries. In part three, the ramifications of economic structure in Middle Eastern countries for democracy will be explained. Part four analyses the adverse consequences of loyalty to kinship and tribalism for democracy. Finally, in conclusion, the main findings will be recapitulated.

Literature review on the Western foreign policy and democratisation in the Middle East

Democracy has not only been invoked as a symbol through which countries signal to one another the democratic nature of their respective regimes, but it has also been employed as a weapon of international relations². Subsequent to the termination of

¹ Two points should be clarified from the outset. First, this study does not cover North African countries. The focus is mainly on Middle Eastern countries such as Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Iraqi Kurdistan, and Gulf countries. Second, Israel and Turkey are two countries in the region with relatively established democratic institutions though the legitimacy of their democratic institutions has been tarnished by the Palestinian and Kurdish conflicts respectively. They are exceptions to the general rule in this region. Their socio-political backgrounds differentiate them from the rest of Middle Eastern countries.

² The attractiveness of democracy radiates with enormous intensity across all cultural, ideological, and political divides. The appeal of democracy is so strong that democratic government has become the only acceptable form of political regime across the nations. Even dictatorial and authoritarian regimes utilise some aspects of democracy such as election (albeit a managed and flawed election) as a means to legitimise their repressive regimes. Like many political concepts and terms, democracy has been subject to different interpretations. Democracy has taken many forms (direct, representative, participatory), and there are three rival ideas of democracy (liberal democracy, socialist democracy in communist countries, and nationalist democracy in the Third World) (MacPherson). As John Schaar has pointed out, democracy has been the most used and abused term in political discourse and it has been employed as an effective and self-serving tactic to apply to one's favoured type of regime. Democracy has thus become a floating signifier since it means what people want it to mean (Heywood). Therefore, for this paper, it is essential to specify the form and the idea of democracy utilised. In this paper, the emphasis is on prevailing liberal democracy in Western nations which has become a point of reference to assess and judge the democratic nature of non-Western political regimes. The prevailing liberal democracy is a form of representative democracy where government by people has come to mean "government approved by the people" (Schumpeter 246) through a competitive party system, and where there is

WW II and the rising specter of the Cold War when the United States was propping up dictatorial regimes as a bulwark against the spread of communism, democracy came to be used by the United States and its Western allies as a powerful instrument to challenge the Soviet Bloc. Due to the titillating and mesmerising appeal of liberal democracy, the United States and its Western allies succeeded in shaping the axis of rivalry along the lines of liberal democracy/communism rather than capitalism/communism (Neep).

The elevation of promoting democracy to the top of the Bush administration's foreign policy was not a novel development. Since post-WW II particularly, with the arrival of the Carter administration, activating civic engagement, concern for human rights, and promoting democracy has been a central plank of the US foreign policy discourse pursued by both Democratic and Republican administrations. It was in fact during the Carter administration that a new Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs was established in the State Department. It was due to the pressure of the Carter administration that the Shah of Iran was forced to relax restrictive measures on political freedom which eventually facilitated the triumph of a clerical regime in Iran in 1979 (Wittes). The push for democratisation became pronounced and compelling during the Bush administration whose foreign policy was heavily influenced by the emerging neo-conservative ideology that countenanced the US invasion of Iraq (Butt).

It was and continues to be the central thrust of the neo-conservative theorisation that with the installation of a democratic government on the ruin of the Baathist regime in Iraq, the breeze of democracy would penetrate into the walls of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East. In line with this neo-conservative scenario, out of the bloodshed in Iraq would emerge a flood of democratisation which would inevitably inundate the tunnel of authoritarianism in the Middle East. A wave of democratisation emanating from Iraq would accordingly coerce the repressive political regimes in the region to join the parade of democratisation. It is a corollary of this line of interpretation that a gradual inroad of democracy in the Middle East would provide peaceful channels via which oppressed and marginalised layers of the population could transmit their demands into the political arena. It is argued that the Middle East is desperately in need of an ideological plan similar to the Marshall Plan deployed in postwar Europe. But to make the investment worth its while, the United States should not refrain from assuming the role of the democratic teacher, as it did in Europe (Ahmari). In his 2003 speech during the 20th anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy, Bush articulated the core of neo-conservative rationalisation for the democratisation project in the Middle East.

a constitutionally-expressed limitation on the power of government and strong provisions for the protection of individual civil liberties and economic freedom.

The success will send forth the news from Damascus to Tehran that freedom can be the future of every nation... The establishment of a free Iraq at the heart of the Middle East will be a watershed event in the global democratic revolution (Bush 1).

According to this neo-conservative explanation, the permeation of the Middle Eastern political cultures with democratic norms and values would allegedly restrict the space for the manoeuvrability of fundamentalist forces that the United States envisions as its archenemies and the sources of global instability. Since within the lexicon of neo-conservatism, Islamic radicalism is interpreted as an inevitable product of authoritarianism, the democratisation process has been found as an antidote to Islamic radicalism. According to this line of interpretation, the wind of democratisation would drain the Middle Eastern soil for the gestation of Islamic fundamentalism and would therefore break the cycle of dictatorship and extremism (Gambill).

It has already become common knowledge that the democratisation project in the Middle East has been a fiasco. The failure of the democratisation project can be explained by two sets of factors. First – the inability of architects of the democratisation project to take into consideration the existing economic, cultural, and religious factors that have not been receptive to democratic values and norms, which will be discussed in detail later. Second – the success of managed democratic reforms in Middle Eastern countries where pro-Western regimes are in power is conditional upon preventing radical Islamic forces from making electoral inroads in these countries. However, it would be a striking contradiction to exclude radical Islamic forces from political participation. Thus, the externally-manipulated democratisation process in the Middle East is not only bound to discredit democratic reforms as spurious and perfunctory, but it is also conducive to facilitating the entrance of radical Islamic forces into the political scene without committing themselves to adhere to democratic principles. In other words, these radical Islamic forces have not embraced democracy for its intrinsic virtues, but, rather, they have used elections as a bridge to capture governmental power and hence promote their radical political agenda. As Graham Fuller has suggested, Islamic forces which operate along with the traditional nationalist and populist parties regard the spread of the democratisation process as a gift since they enjoy a natural advantage in politicising social, economic, and political grievances. Francis Fukuyama, a prominent apologist of the neo-conservative project which has now come to a point where the repudiates neo-conservatism as a body of thought has highlighted how the US-led democratisation process would inevitably catapult the Islamic forces into the parliamentary scene.

Promoting democracy and modernisation in the Middle East is not a solution to jihadist terrorism. Radical Islamism arises from the loss of identity that accompanies

the transition to a modern, pluralist society. More democracy will mean more alienation, radicalism, and terrorism. But greater political participation by Islamist groups is likely to occur whatever we do about it. It will be the only way this poison of radical Islamism can work its way through the body of politics of Muslim communities (Fukuyama para 2).

Even the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research in its 2003 study on Iraq warned the Bush administration that the democratisation in Iraq "...could lead to the rise of Islamic-controlled governments hostile to the United States" (Basham and Preble para 4). It was, in fact, due to the democratisation process that radical Islamic parties in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories made impressive electoral inroads.

In sharp contrast to the neoconservatives' advocacy for the democratisation project in the Middle East, which in their views is a prelude to disrupting the relations between autocratic rule and the rise of Islamic reactionary forces, Left-leaning intellectuals have attributed the failure of progressive and democratic forces to advance the cause of democracy to the Western powers, particularly the United States, which have sustained dictatorial regimes (Brownlee; Fuller; Chomsky, "The U.S. and Its Allies..."). Despite the proclamation of the Bush administration to shift away from the Cold-War policy from dictatorial regimes in third-world countries, the United States has continued to retain political friendship with repressive regimes in many Islamic societies as long as its national interests deem such relations necessary. On the one hand, the United States has raised the flag of democratisation as a weapon of intimidation to drag the non-submissive and non-cooperative states into the American orbit and proselytise them into complaisant states. Under this scenario projected by left-wing intellectuals, the imperative of spreading freedom and liberty is invoked as a justification for disciplining non-submissive states. According to this line of reasoning deployed by leftists, beneath the democratisation project adulated by the United States lurks a surreptitious attempt to convert democracy into a modern weapon of imperial consolidation. Democratisation project is harnessed as a mechanism to coerce non-compliant states into loyal satellites and simultaneously emblazoning friendly authoritarian regimes with democratic decoration without undermining the authority of the ruling regimes (Ottaway and Carothers).

Though the USA and its Western allies have apparently called for democratic reforms in the Middle East, they have not nonetheless been keen on a seismic alteration of the political landscape in the region where compliant political regimes have been strategic partners of the West. Furthermore, despite all of those calls for democratic reform, the West feared that the alternative to the status quo would be "a radical Islamic takeover reminiscent of the Iranian revolution of 1979" (Hamid para 4).

The entire argument by the Left is encapsulated in Noam Chomsky's statement that the US and its allies will not desire the proliferation of democratic governments responsive to the will of the people, since it means the loss of their control over the region (Chomsky, "The West Is Terrified of..."). According to this leftist narrative, the democratisation project which is being utilised by the United States as a tool to expand and secure its frontier of influence might, in fact, provide a window of opportunity for the progressive and nationalist forces to utilise the mechanism of the ballot box to gain political power. The legitimacy associated with the democratic elections would, in fact, provide an atmosphere of opportunity for the emerging liberal democratic governments in the Middle East to recast their traditional pattern of alliance which would, in turn, have the potential to jeopardise the long-term strategic interests of the United States in the Middle East. Chris Zambelis has captured the possibility of the realignment of Middle Eastern countries that might follow the democratisation of the Middle East, which would have adverse strategic ramifications for the long-term interests of the United States in the Middle East. According to Zambelis, free election can, in fact, empower radical Islamists to employ populist language in order to gain power and, once in power, it will forge closer ties to US rival countries such as Russia and China (95–96).

According to Yakub Halabi, since there is a strong belief in the West that Islam and the West are natural enemies, then the Western powers are advised to strengthen their authoritarian allies in order to protect their own national interests in the region. According to this line of leftist interpretation, any Middle Eastern state that wishes to move towards democracy must first move outside of the sphere of American influence.

While the Left has blamed the foreign policy of the USA and its Western allies for suppressing the democratisation process in the Middle East, its own persistent anti-imperialist campaign has historically been conducive to generating hostility to liberal values and principles which are, in fact, essential preludes to the cultivation of democracy. In other words, the anti-imperialist crusade of the Left in the region has played a crucial role in preventing the spread of liberal norms and values which are *sine qua non* to the growth and consolidation of democracy.

The left's anti-imperialism and its adverse consequences for liberalism and democracy

Democracy has been successful in those societies where liberalism had already taken root. Democracy not only embraces but springs out of a body of liberal thought (Plattner). Liberalism promotes a liberated individual free from the shackles

of unquestioned traditionalism, dogmatic authoritarianism, and regimenting controls (Greene). Liberalism strives to promote equal opportunities, human dignity, constitutionalism, and rule of the law, all of which are also embraced by democracy (Plattner).

It can be argued that the mainstream Left in Middle Eastern countries has indirectly made a significant contribution to the emergence of a social-political environment that is not receptive to democratic principles. Fragmentation, internecine hostility, competition, ideological ambiguity, and alliance with repressive nationalist regimes have continued to be hallmarks of the Left in Middle Eastern countries. As Hisham Bustani has pointed out:

with few exceptions, the mainstream Arab Left is not a left at all... it is a compilation of psychological complexes and dissonances. The left has not been born in the Arab world... (para 31).

In most Middle East countries, leftist organisations and political parties emerged in response to the Bolshevik revolution of 1919 and were heavily inspired by Marxist-Leninist slogans of anti-imperialism. This was despite the fact that there was no strong industrial labour movement in these countries. The anti-colonial fever following the Bolshevik revolution led to the emergence of radical socialist and communist parties in several Arab and Muslim countries, which imitated the show of the Russian Bolsheviks and endeavoured to consolidate the Bolshevisation of their respective countries (Nuri El-Amin). The emerging radical regimes in Muslim countries such as Egypt, Syria, and Iraq during the Cold War era were never “devoted socialists”. They were flexible in discarding and even repudiating the titillating and mesmerising socialist slogans that they had advocated earlier. Under the slightest temptation and change in the balance of power at the international level, these so-called radical socialist regimes had no qualms in overseeing the implementation of privatisation which ran counter to their perfunctory socialist platform (Ayubi).

However, these leftist organisations and political parties presented themselves as the vanguards and mouthpieces of the working classes. In pursuit of their anti-imperialist agenda, these organisations and political parties have to a great extent conflated anti-imperialism with anti-Western liberal democracy. They have not only eschewed appreciating Western liberal democratic values, but they have also vehemently endeavoured to tarnish the image of liberal democracy. In their quest to fight imperialism, they have dismissed liberal democracy as bourgeois democracy. Despite their declared adherence to Marxism, many of these leftist organisations and political parties have historically adopted a controversial and ambivalent ideological stance that paradoxically ran counter to the Marxist paradigm. It was Marx’s exhortation to communists that in the advent of political

confrontation between liberals and conservative reactionary forces, communists should ally themselves with the formers. It has become a Marxist motto that the road to socialism will pass through liberal democracy (Bernstein).

At the heart of Marxism, there is an ingrained assertion that socialism is the radicalisation and transcendence of liberalism, and it should be seen as the radical fulfilment of liberal ideals of liberty and equality which liberalism subscribes to, but it has not fully realised those objectives (Rooksby). However, contrary to Marx's exhortation, leftist organisations allied themselves with Islamic reactionary forces which eventually culminated in the Islamic revolution of 1979 in Iran and the subsequent ascendancy of a theocratic regime whose prime victims were ironically leftists themselves. Across Middle Eastern countries, leftist organisations and political parties have historically been inclined to cooperate with Islamist organisations and political parties (Schwedler and Clark). As Chris Harman has pointed out, instead of allying themselves with the proponents of Western liberalism in Iran, leftists became the foot soldiers of Islamist conservatives who have demonstrated to be capable of imposing totalitarianism that can strangle any progressive aspirations. Thus, through its close cooperation with the Islamic regime, the left failed in defending democratic rules that were not only imperative to the development of the Iranian working class but were also vital to its own political and physical survival (Cronin; Smith, "Why the Left Has to Stand...").

The political blunder of the left in the Middle East has also been exacerbated by certain Western socialist intellectuals' attitudes towards authoritarian regimes in Third-World countries. As Rohini Hensman has meticulously pointed out, Western-based anti-imperialist leftists have not only subordinated people's struggle for democracy in Third-World countries to their obsession with fighting imperialism, but have also advertently or inadvertently condoned oppression and egregious atrocities committed by these authoritarian regimes.

The 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran was heralded by renowned leftist intellectuals in the West as an indication of the ingrained Third-World indignation and historical grievance to the USA and its Western allies in supporting the monarchical regime in Iran. The prevailing anti-American and anti-Western slogans during the revolution resonated with these Western leftist intellectuals' anti-imperialism crusade (Sixsmith). The Islamic revolution in Iran was heralded by prominent Western intellectuals with socialist orientations as a prelude to accomplishing social justice, political liberty, and equitable redistribution of wealth. Renowned leftist intellectuals such as Edward Said and Richard Falk exalted the Islamic revolution as an omen for the emancipation of oppressed people in Third-World countries (Zarnett). Since leftist intellectuals in the West have depicted the Islamic regime as anti-imperialist, they tend to mimic the Islamic regime's use of the threat of American imperialism to rationalise their indifference to the plight of the oppression of the Iranian people (Smith, "Why the Left Has to Stand with...").

In his attempt to convince the American audience of the progressive and peaceful nature of the Islamic revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic revolution who came to justify the reign of terror as a governing method to suffocate democratic and secular opposition in order to preserve the Islamic regime, Richard Falk impulsively proclaimed the birth of the Islamic regime of Iran as a harbinger of emancipation and freedom from the yoke of imperialism and colonialism:

Having created a new model of popular revolution based, for the most part, on nonviolent tactics, Iran may yet provide us with a desperately needed model of human governance for a third-world country (Falk 1).

Excessive preoccupation with challenging imperialism prevented these influential Western socialist intellectuals of high stature from comprehending the authoritarian inclination lurking beneath the Islamic revolution. As the harsh reality of the Islamic revolution manifested in suppressing democratic and secular groups and organisations pervading the entire society, these leftist intellectuals in the West came to the painful realisation of the fatal flaw in their misguided indulgence in the international acclamation of a regime that came to cultivate the reign of terror as a governing method to uproot democratic and secular opposition. Contrary to these leftist intellectuals' hasty celebration and depiction of the Islamic revolution as an anti-imperialist movement that would allegedly culminate in the ascendancy of a progressive and egalitarian political system that would become a source of inspiration for other oppressed nations, the emerging political regime can hardly be characterised as a progressive anti-imperialist regime (Bouzari). However, their premature jubilation and unconditional endorsement of the Islamic revolution which was accompanied by the systematic elimination of secular and leftist groups in Iran discredited their intellectual insight and the validity of their romanticisation of the Islamic revolution as a progressive socio-political movement (Sixsmith).

During the recent socio-political uprising known as the Arab Spring, leftist organisations in countries such as Egypt and Syria did ally themselves with the authoritarian regimes in their respective countries. By depicting the repressive Syrian regime as an anti-imperialist entity that is conducive to granting the regime a licence to quell aspiration for democracy, even certain leftist intellectuals and organisations in the West have also refrained from denouncing the indiscriminate slaughtering of Syrians by the Assad Regime and its allies (Hamad; Smith, "Anti-Imperialism and the Syrian..."). Michael Walzer has highlighted the contradiction lurking beneath the socialist platform of progressive leftists. According to Walzer, leftist and socialist-oriented intellectuals and organisations in the West have no qualms in criticising non-Islamic and nationalist movements such as Hindu

nationalists, Buddhist monks, and the messianic Zionist settlers. However, these leftist intellectuals have been reluctant to criticise reactionary and brutal Islamic regimes and organisations, because in their views these Islamic organisations and regimes are part of the global movement against imperialism. As Oz Katerji has aptly pointed out, Western socialists' anti-imperialism has become a dogmatic ideology that exhorts its followers to ignore the views of the oppressed population under dictatorial regimes "in favour of pro-regime conspiracism re-gurgitated by cosplaying revolutionary communists" (para 20).

Obviously, resisting imperialism and denouncing oppressive regimes have ideologically been the two sacred principles of left-oriented movements and organisations. Undoubtedly, a firm commitment to advance socialist principles of justice and human emancipation from the yoke of dictatorial regimes necessitates challenging both imperialism and dictatorial regimes. However, many Left-leaning organisations and intellectuals have revealed their abject failure in their own simultaneous commitment to reject both Western imperialism and authoritarian regimes. Due to their excessive preoccupation with unmasking and criticising imperial expansion and manipulation across the globe, many leftist intellectuals have condoned the oppressive and reactionary proclivity of authoritarian and undemocratic regimes that have wrapped themselves up with the flag of anti-imperialism. Clamorously assailing imperialism but disregarding the anti-democratic propensity of the so-called anti-imperialist regimes tends to tarnish and even trivialise socialists' historical commitment to promoting democracy and undoubtedly lends credence to those who have impugned socialism's affinity with democratic ideals (Karimi, "Noam Chomsky, Edward Said..."). Instead of rallying political support for progressive political forces in Middle Eastern countries, a considerable number of Western leftists have paradoxically attempted to supply intellectual legitimation for these pseudo-anti-imperialist and repressive regimes such as the Islamic regime of Iran and Assad's tyrannical regime in Syria. Consequently, their tacit support of these dictatorial regimes has, in fact, provided an auspicious atmosphere for reactionary nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism to thrive throughout the region.

While the Left-leaning intellectuals and organisations in the West can unequivocally and conspicuously formulate their ideas on national and domestic affairs as manifested in their call for deepening socio-economic equality, their stance on foreign policy is marked by a dramatic abandonment of the Left's historic mission of supporting democratic struggles in Third-World countries. In the quest of saving the world from imperialism, mainstream leftist organisations and intellectuals in the West have not only turned their back on any democratic uprising against dictatorial regimes, but have also contributed to the legitimation of repressive and authoritarian regimes. As Terry Galvin has pointed out:

Mobilization for solidarity with movements engaged in revolutionary, the democratic struggle has been almost totally supplanted by Stop the War, Gaza Flotilla spectacles, and other such highly ritualized performances that amount to little more than an exhibition of radical-chic narcissism. This has occurred either in spite of or because of the overwhelmingly “antiwar” and “anti-imperialist” claims the contemporary left makes for itself (para 4).

Thus, the Left’s excessive obsession with fighting imperialism which might be a valid point has led to their outright dismissal of the intrinsic virtue of liberal values and ideals that are indispensable to fostering democratic attitudes and mentality. Under the banner of fighting imperialism, leftists have not only tarnished the image of liberal democracy but have also become allies of dictatorial regimes which have advertently been utilising their resistance to Western powers as a justification to suppress aspiration for democracy.

Yassin al-Haj Saleh, an exiled Syrian socialist, has meticulously shed light on the fatal flaw in the anti-imperialist project by the Left in the West:

The anti-imperialist left remembers from the Cold War era that Syria was close to the Soviet Union, so its sides with this anti-imperialist regime. Consequently, those who resist this regime are “objectively” pro-imperialists. Framing imperial power as something that only exists in the West ascribes to the anti-imperialists a Western-centric tendency, which is no less severe than that of imperialist hardliners themselves (para 11).

Despite sharp differences in their analysis of the interplay of the USA and its Western allies’ foreign policy platforms and the democratisation in the Middle East, there is a common ground between both these rival perspectives. It is a shared assumption by both sides that the region is naturally ripe for democratisation. What seems to have not been discussed in explanations by both the Right and the left-wing intellectuals and analysts is a set of endogenous factors that have historically hindered the success of democracy in the Middle East.

Economic conditions

It has already become a conventional theme within the existing literature that the success of democracy in England and continental Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries was mainly due to industrialisation and its economic, political, social, and demographic corollaries. According to this line of interpretation, industrialisation and the entrenchment of liberalism as an ideological reflection of the emerging economic order broke down social and traditional rigidities and

engendered more opportunities for gratifying wants, all of which were favourable to democracy (Lipset). In addition to providing the economic basis for a vibrant education system and leisure, industrialisation and gradual institutionalisation of liberal principles were conducive to producing pluralism, which is positively correlated with democracy (Macon-Conney). Pluralism and multiplication of interests as outcomes of industrialisation tend to prevent the domination of one group and provide a check against the oligarchic tendency of all organisations.

This structural affinity between industrialisation, the entrenchment of liberal principles, and democracy can shed light on the unreceptiveness of Middle Eastern countries to the establishment of a democratic order. Despite variation across the economies in this region, the limited and incomplete scope of industrialisation is a striking feature of the Middle Eastern economies. By the time when most of Middle Eastern countries began to move towards a limited manufacturing activity in the second part of the 20th century, Western industrialised countries have already made a significant shift towards a service economy. The ubiquity of religious influence over governance has not only led to the state domination of economic activities, the rise of protectionism, and a stagnant private sector which is an engine of economic innovation and growth, but it has also contributed to the emergence of anti-intellectualism and anti-science bias which have, in turn, prevented the region's receptiveness to embrace and absorb international ideas and technological transfer³ (Rubin; Kuran, "Why the Middle East Economy is..."; Kuran, "Economic Underdevelopment in the Middle East"). According to Dr. Pervez Hoodbhoy, a Pakistani physicist and professor at the Quaid-e-Azam University in Islamabad, who has extensively written on Islam and science, "Muslims are seriously underrepresented in science, accounting for fewer than one percent of the world's scientists while they account for almost a fifth of the world's population" (cited in Overbye para 42).

One of the significant implications of weak industrialisation in Middle Eastern countries for democracy is the absence of an industrial working class, which is crucial for promoting democracy. Historically, labour movements have played a significant role in exerting pressure on the *status quo* for expanding the frontier of universal suffrage and multiparty elections. Industrial labour movements can harness unions, international labour networks, and their political vehicles (labour and social democratic parties) to coordinate their struggle against repressive regimes. In a major study of protests in 150 countries over a century, it has been found that

³ As Jared Rubin has pointed out, the anti-science of Islam is a modern manifestation of political Islam which has taken a hostile stance towards scientific knowledge. Islam was once a beacon of scientific progress. Nations that embraced Islam during the early centuries of its existence burgeoned not only in commercial activities but also in technology, agriculture, poetry, medicine, astronomy, and engineering, while the West was stagnating in these respects.

industrial workers have been key agents of democratization and, if anything, are even more important than the urban middle classes. When industrial workers mobilize mass opposition against a dictatorship, democratization is very likely to follow (Dahlum, Knutsen, and Wig para 3).

Furthermore, the initial national experimentation with income security programmes was, in fact, pursued in countries where the emerging industrial labour movements had appeared on the political scene. In other words, there had been a structural affinity and causal relationship between the rise of the industrial working class and the first major social welfare initiatives which were essential preludes towards the gradual consolidation of democracy in Western industrial societies (Hicks). The adverse implications of economic structure for democracy have also been exacerbated by the chronic pattern of ethnic kinship and religious tribalism in many Middle Eastern countries.

Ethnicity, religious tribalism, and democracy

Politically, most of the countries in the Middle East are marked by a history of authoritarianism, ethnic conflict, religious sectarianism, and tribalism (Faleh and Dawood; Abbas Zaidi). It is mainly due to the continuation of these inveterate social, political, ethnic, and religious cleavages that most of these countries have even failed in their nation-building project (Quandt). Furthermore, the continuation of these entrenched chasms has historically contributed to the eclipse of class struggles from the terrain of political discourse. One of the most formidable obstacles to the cultivation of democracy in Middle Eastern countries is the prevalence of religiously- and culturally-ingrained loyalty to extended kinship, tribes, and religious authorities that is conducive to stifling the growth of liberal values and norms. The reification of such cultural and religious orientation is bound to interfere with allegiance to the wider political community and democracy as a means to individual development and fulfilment (Pennock and Smith). Democracy requires the consolidation of liberal values such as individual autonomy and self-reflection which can hardly be fostered in countries where loyalty to tribes and religious authority reigns supreme. While democracy does not negate cooperation and group cohesion, individual members of the community are expected to decide based on their own convictions. It is undemocratic to tell members of the community how they should vote and whom should they support.

Tribalism and religious affiliation have taken strong roots in Middle Eastern countries (Salzman). It is a common religious practice, particularly among Shiite Muslims to adhere to religious leaders' decrees and ordinances. Furthermore, the allegiance to religious leaders is also fragmented along with various sources of *Marja-al-taqlids* (religious references). Since 1979, Iran has held numerous elections

and has claimed to have produced several democratically-elected governments. Yet, it is the supreme leader who has the final words on the main political, social, and economic issues. *Velayat-e faqih* (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist) has served as the foundation of the Islamic Republic of Iran since 1979. It is the source from which the Supreme Leader derives legitimacy for his simultaneous political and religious authority over the country. The Supreme Leader has the authority to depose the president who is elected by the people. Within the Islamic hardliner circle, obeying the Supreme Leader is tantamount to obeying God and the prophet. Representative institutions such as the national assembly are subject to strict supervision by other institutions staffed by clerics who are also appointed by the Supreme Leader. For example, the Guardian Council screens and approves candidates for the national assembly (Fisher).

In Iraq, Shiites have held deferential attitudes towards their religious leaders such as Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani, who has emerged as the centre of power, whose words can determine the legitimacy of a democratically-elected government. Since the removal of Saddam by US forces in 2003, all democratically-elected governments in Iraq must receive the blessing of Ayatollah Sistani in order to have legitimacy. In the Shiite confession, it is extremely imperative to have and follow a *Marja* (source to follow). *Marjas* (sources to follow) are recognised and respected grand *ayatollahs* who are qualified and accepted by the Shiite community to make decisions within the framework of Islamic rules and traditions. A *Marja* provides advice, and exhortation, and even makes decisions when followers are in doubt on religious, social, and even political questions (Djavadi). However, it runs counter to the spirit of democracy to order or require members of the community how they should vote and whom they should support. It is, therefore, a tall order for democratic values and norms to take root in such a socio-political climate.

Tribalism prevents the development of democracy when there is an intense rivalry between competing loyalties that avert the attachment to the wider political community and national cohesion. The situation in the Kurdish region in Iraq is also a classic example of how tribalism has aborted and undermined the consolidation of democracy in the region. Since 1991, this region has enjoyed some degree of regional autonomy due to the no-fly zone that the USA imposed on Iraq. Despite the availability of enormous financial and political opportunities provided by Western countries, the Kurdish region has failed to develop democratic institutional structures (Farhad). It is also an irony that the ruling political parties in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) claim to have been the vanguards of democracy. One of the main reasons behind this abject failure is the fact that Iraqi Kurds' loyalty is divided among two main ruling families (Barzani which runs PDK and Talabani, which leads PUK) who have dominated Kurdish politics for several decades. The historical rivalry between these two dominant families has, in turn, led

to a sharp division and fragmentation within the Kurdish Regional Government's (KRG) administrative, intelligence, and paramilitary units (Aydogan).

In recent years, corruption, partisanship, and nepotism have led to sporadic demonstrations against the two ruling families (Saeed). It can thus be asserted that the prevalence of parochial societal attitudes as manifested in dividing loyalties towards these two ruling families has hindered the development of attachment and belonging towards a wider Kurdish political community in Iraq.

The democratisation fiasco in Iraq and Afghanistan is a striking empirical testimony to the fallacy of the democratisation project theorised by neo-conservative pundits and implemented by the George W. Bush administration. The shocking outcomes of these two cases demonstrate that it is a fatal flaw and a consequential political blunder to entertain building democratic institutions in societies where tribal loyalty, kinship, and sectarian affiliation have taken deep roots (Karimi, "Afghanistan Shows the U.S. Folly..."). Kinship as well as religious and ethnic loyalty tend to foster a political atmosphere that is not receptive to liberal values, which are indispensable to the cultivation of democratic propensity. In such an environment with a political culture that emphasises loyalty to ethnic and religious affiliations over loyalty to the whole country, democracy would inevitably fail to flourish. Liberalism is a prerequisite for democracy, and both are complementary ideals. In other words, there is an intrinsic affinity between liberal values and democracy. As Marc Plattner has eloquently pointed out, "You can't have one without the other" (1).

Conclusion

As has been argued throughout this paper, democratisation failure in the Middle East is neither necessarily due to a lack of determination by Western powers to promote democracy, nor is it the result of Western powers' support for autocratic regimes, as has been respectively argued by the right- and left-wing intellectuals. The inability of democracy to make significant inroads in this region is to a great extent due to certain endogenous conditions that have cumulatively led to the creation of a socio-political environment that is not receptive to democratic values and principles. The Left's anti-liberalism crusade, the region's economic condition that has failed in producing vibrant industrial classes, and the ingrained tribal and religious loyalty have made significant contributions to the prevailing socio-political environment, which is not amicable to democracy.

In the absence of well-entrenched liberal values and norms, democracy can hardly thrive. Thus, liberalisation is a structural prerequisite to the cultivation of democracy in this region. The growing economic globalisation, trends towards moving away from protectionism, and the ongoing revolution in information and

communication technologies have the potential to generate a wind of liberalisation in Middle Eastern countries⁴. Embracing liberal ideals is a *sine qua non* for the consolidation of democracy. The proponents of democratisation in the Middle East must realise that liberalism is ancillary to democracy.

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⁴ There are strong indications of a seismic shift of attitudes in Middle Eastern countries. There has been a sharp decline in religious faith which has been accompanied by a corresponding strong trend toward secularization (Tamimi, Maleki; Holleis).

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