

Muslim Democrat

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Why Democracy?

By Radwan A. Masmoudi
CSID President

After the fall of communism, the Muslim world is now the new frontier in the struggle for human decency, freedom, and dignity. Extremist ideas and ideologies thrive when entire peoples, millions of people, are deprived of their basic rights, dignity and hope for a better future. Over half of the Arab population today (about 300 Million people) is under 20 years of age. These young men and women are growing up in an environment of despair, violence, corruption, lawlessness, oppression, and poverty. While many of these countries are rich in natural and human resources, the overwhelming majority within these countries are poor. Less than 5% of the people own over 90% of the capital and that too, through government corruption, bribes, and diversion of public funds. Unemployment is very high (between 30 and 40%) and growing at an alarming rate.

This situation is dangerous not only for Arabs and Muslims, but for the whole world. To achieve peace and stability, the international community has a moral obligation to promote freedom, justice, and dignity as the antidotes to these problems. Let us review, briefly, the conditions of basic freedoms and democ-

racy in the Arab world:

Freedom of the Press:

A free media is starting to emerge in the Arab world (thanks to satellite dishes and the internet), but governments continue to control access to written media (books, textbooks, newspapers, and magazines). The only way newspapers make money in the Arab world, is through advertising, most of which is controlled by the government. Some Arab countries (notably Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, and Lebanon) allow significant freedom for the journalists and this is a positive development.

Allowing and encouraging the growth of a free and liberal media in the Arab world is a first necessary step toward real political reforms and economic development. A free media plays a critical role in exposing and stopping corruption.

Free Market Economy: Economic freedom and entrepreneurship is the key to prosperity. Currently, most of the business and trade opportunities are given to pro-government individuals on the basis of



their loyalty.

Most Arab countries have free-market economies without transparency and accountability. Without an environment of free competition and rule of law, businesses cannot succeed and jobs cannot be created. International development agencies (the World Bank, IMF, USAID, the European Union, etc) must insist on transparency, rule of law, and accountability if they want real and sustained economic development. This, of course, cannot happen without democratization.

Freedom of Religion: Religious practice must be free of government interference. Freedom of religion is the only way to build a strong moral society, where people can deal with each other with dignity, respect, trust, and fairness. Government interference in religious practices impedes morality and encourages hypocrisy.

Many states in the Middle East claim to be secular, but use religion to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the people. The biggest department is the ministry of religious affairs, employing hundreds of thousands of religious preachers (Imams).

Nobody, including the state, should monopolize religion or claim to represent God on earth. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, which requires people to adhere to a strict religious code, nearly 75% of young people (between 20 and 30) do not perform their prayers, or go to mosques, on a regular basis. This is the highest percentage in the Muslim world, and clearly indicates that government in the name of Islam will harm the religion. Of course, the moral and ethical code of Islam must be respected by any political party if it wants to have popular support, but that is different from imposing religion on people, or from developing government policies in the name of Islam.

Free Judicial System: The biggest problem is the lack of an honest and independent justice system. Most judges

are appointed by the executive and receive their salaries from the president. In the Arab world, Egypt probably enjoys the most independent judicial system, which can at times contradict the decisions of the government, however, this is unheard of in other Arab countries. In many Arab countries, judges are known for receiving large bribes from people in order to rule in their favor.

Having judges elected by their constituencies, rather than appointed by the executive branch, is the only sure way to have separation of powers, with the check and balance protection that it provides. This is an essential requirement for democracy that is still missing in most Arab and Muslim countries.

Freedom of Association: Unfortunately, in the overwhelming majority of Arab countries, the right of citizens to form organizations or political parties is greatly curtailed by bureaucratic regulations and governmental interference.

A few Arab countries, notably Morocco, Egypt, and Jordan have a large and growing civil society. However, even in these countries, civil society organizations cannot organize meetings, solicit funding, or organize demonstrations without government approval, which is almost always denied. When free, open, and transparent organizations are denied existence, this will drive citizens - especially the youth - toward underground, violent, and radical movements, and therefore leads to the growth of radical and extremist groups and ideologies.

Free competition of ideas, and free debate about the real problems and the best professed solutions, between individuals and groups of citizens, is the only way to foster a democratic opening and allow the growth of democratic traditions and culture.

Free Elections: At the end of the day, the only way to guarantee that the government is at the service of the people, and not vice-

versa, is to have elected officials who are not only representative but also accountable to the people.

Term limits (either two or three terms, never to exceed 15 years) are mandatory for good governance. Yet, in the Arab world today, there has not been any alternation of power through peaceful means.

Many experts predict that, in free and fair elections, Islamic parties will inevitably win. If true (I doubt that it is true in all cases) this is the result of the mismanagement, corruption, and sheer incompetence of the current regimes. Sooner or later, preferably sooner, moderate Islamic parties must be allowed to compete for political power. We could start by having local and municipal elections.

Conclusions:

The only way to solve the crisis in the Muslim world is to end tyranny and corruption, and replace them with freedom, equality, and justice. This is the calling of our generation. After our fathers and forefathers liberated us from foreign colonialism, a new crop of corrupt, inefficient, and oppressive regimes took control of our lives and our communities.

Democracy is the key to re-opening the door of Ijtihad. It will foster free debate and create an environment that encourages a genuine renewal of Islamic thought. Values of freedom and liberty are not only compatible with Islam; they are required by it. Islam emphasizes that there must be no compulsion in religion, and that faith is a matter of choice.

The United States, the European Union, and the international community have an interest to exert real pressure on these governments. Genuine democracy and an honest, inclusive debate about Islam's role in society are the only way to resolve the long simmering problems that threaten peace and stability throughout the Muslim world. ■

Training Workshops in Nigeria

In July 2004, CSID held a conference on the "Implementation and Evaluation of Shariah in Nigeria" The idea behind the conference was to convene Nigeria's leading religious, political, and civic society authorities to discuss, debate, and analyze the impact of Shariah law on the eight states in Nigeria that have adopted Shariah.

Over three hundred people were present including the Imams of all major mosques, senior judges, women's rights activists, journalists, and even a representative of the Vice President.

But the conference was only one part of CSID's efforts. The conference served three purposes:

- 1) bring together segments of Nigeria (many of whom had never met) to discuss Shariah law;
- 2) broaden the debate on Shariah by bringing internationally recognized scholars like Professor Abdulaziz Sachedina; and
- 3) identify key Nigerian partners and then provide training to assist them with capacity building.

Following the summer conference, CSID identified several outstanding Nigerian civil society leaders and invited them for a training session in Washington DC. These training sessions were conducted by Ms. Gail Sadalla of Partners for Democratic Change, Dr. Iqbal Unus of The Fairfax Institute, and the staff of CSID.

Both focused on the following areas: leadership and management; written and oral communication; capacity building

and NGO development; conflict resolution and democracy promotion; interpersonal skills and network building. The workshops in DC were overwhelmingly praised by the five participants and CSID and Partners for Democratic Change returned to Nigeria for two additional training workshops.

The Ibadan workshop, held on February 11-13 consisted of twenty-six participants from the western, southern, and south eastern states of Lagos, Edo, Ondo, Oyo, Ebonyi, Imo, Enugu, Osun and Ekiti showed up finally. Nineteen different organizations-two of which were women's groups-were present. The workshops focused on leadership, management, and communication skills, conflict resolution, as well as Islamic approaches to human rights and democracy.

The Kaduna workshop was held a few days later and focused on similar themes. Speakers at this forum included Dr. Ibrahim Sulaiman, former Director of The Centre for Islamic Legal studies (CILS) of Ahmadu Bello University; Mallam Nafiu Baba-Ahmed, the Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Shari'ah and many

"The workshops focused on leadership, management, and communication skills, conflict resolution, as well as Islamic approaches to human rights and democracy."



Fifty NGO and political leaders and democracy activists participated in the two 3-day workshops in Ibadan and Kaduna.

others. Gail Saddalla and Dr. Iqbal Unus led the workshops.

Approximately 25 participants - NGO and civil society leaders - attended each workshop (in Ibadan and Kaduna). What was unique about these workshops was their emphasis on using Islam as a frame of reference. This resonated well with the participants who urged CSID to return to Nigeria for further training workshops and activities.

Workshop on Connecting Islam & Democracy in Jordan

By Shadi Hamid

While the need to discuss the theoretical issues relating to Islam and democracy is undeniable, there is also a need to go beyond theory and to discuss practical steps that can be taken to promote political and social change at the grassroots level.

This was the objective of the workshop, entitled "Connecting Islam and Democracy," organized jointly by the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID) and Street Law, Inc. This workshop is part of a long-term project, in which participants will work together to write and disseminate an Arabic version of the "Democracy for All" textbook.

The first day of the workshop provided an opportunity for the twenty participants from Egypt and Jordan to acquaint themselves with the project and with each other. The workshop featured participants from diverse ideological backgrounds, with prominent secularists and Islamists represented.

In the first activity on Friday morning, participants were given an index card, each describing a major principle of democracy, such as "constitutional rights." Each participant was responsible for becoming an "expert" on his or her own topic and then, in one minute or less, describing it.

In the next session, participants were asked to come up with words that described the concepts of "democracy" and "Islamic democracy." After a vote, eight words were selected for each concept. For "democracy," the terms "freedom of expression,"

"alternation of power," "freedom," "equality," "questioning and criticizing," "participation," and "opportunity" were



Saadeddine Ibrahim (leading secularist) and Isam al-Iryane (leading Islamist) from Egypt both attended and participated in the 3-day seminar.

chosen. For "Islamic democracy" the following terms were chosen: "accountability," "moderation," "human dignity," "consensus," "equality," "independent reasoning," and "rights of worship."

Friday's last session was devoted to understanding the linkages and tensions between consensus and majority rule. The presenters put forth a hypothetical situation: the Supreme Court of your country is ruling on whether or not the



The training seminar relies on hands-on techniques and methodologies to teach citizens (especially the youth) about democracy.

wearing of hijab is legally binding on all women. The question then posed was whether or not such a judicial decision should be made by consensus or by majority rule. The supporters of each position were asked to go on different sides of the room, while those who weren't sure were to stand in the middle. Members of each side were given the chance to make their case, with the objective to try to convince those on the other side of their position. What ensued was a passionate and productive debate, with many by the end realizing the advantages, disadvantages, and complexities associated with consensus and majority rule.

The first session on Saturday morning was devoted to exploring the notion of power: when is its exercise "legitimate" and when is it "illegitimate"? Jordanian and Egyptian participants also met with each other to develop a timeline and work plan for implementing CSID/StreetLaw's programs in their respective countries. Each group pledged to disseminate "Democracy for All" and to train at least 500 activists and educators in the use of the textbook.

The Saturday sessions were concluded by two activities that dealt with controversial issues particularly relevant in the context of the Arab world. The first explored the issue of how to deal with the past crimes of authoritarian governments after a transition to functioning multi-party democracy has been completed. Should the past President as well as members of the ruling party and security

apparatus be granted amnesty or should they be held accountable in a court of law? South Africa was held as an important case study in this respect. Surprisingly, a clear majority of participants - including those who have suffered prison time at the hands of authoritarian regimes - supported granting amnesty for most, if not all, of political crimes.

In the last activity of the day, the

“the two sides overlapped on a variety of issues, demonstrating that the gap separating Islamic and secular concepts of democracy are not as wide as is often thought.”

differences and similarities between “secular” and “Islamic” democracy were discussed. To promote the idea of understanding the “other,” Islamic-leaning activists were assigned to the “secular” argument, while secular-leaning activists were assigned to the “Islamic” argument. Interestingly, the two sides overlapped on a variety of issues, demonstrating that the gap separating Islamic and secular concepts of democracy are not as wide as is



Saadeddine Ibrahim and Isam al-Iryane discussed the pros and cons of “Islamic” vs. “secular” democracy in a role-reversal exercise.

often thought.

On Sunday morning, to conclude the workshop, participants took part in small group exercise in which they were asked to draw a human being, with each part of the body corresponding to a specific human right. This, once again, illustrated how educators can use interactive exercises to effectively convey important concepts relating to democracy and human rights.

After three days of discussing, talking, networking, and sharing ideas, participants left the workshop with a renewed sense of vision and possibility. Many, over the course of the weekend, expressed the belief that the Arab world is at a crossroads and that we have a unique window of opportunity. Understanding this, CSID and the participants will work together to do their part in the struggle for a more democratic future.

Sudan peace discussion a “Landmark Event”

By Hashim al-Tinay

The Discussion on “The Sudan Peace Process: Where do we go from here?” organized by the Salam Sudan Foundation (SSF) and the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID) on February 9th, 2005, in Washington, D.C set a powerful tone for an intercultural and interfaith-based vision for peace and understanding, locally and globally, in the United States.

It succeeded in setting a new, calm, spiritual, truth-centered and peaceful atmosphere; an invitation for quality in listening and a better understanding of the complex Sudanese, African, Arab, Muslim and regional issues. It succeeded in creating a larger, broader, and deeper context for the debate and a more thoughtful inter-cultural and interfaith approach, centered on peace, in word and

deed. The panel discussed the Sudan peace agreement signed on January 9th, 2005 in Nairobi, Kenya by the Sudan Government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). The panel of speakers included: Dr. Francis Deng, SAIS, Johns Hopkins University; leading expert on internal displacement, human rights, and conflict resolution in Africa, (via his paper the challenges of peace in the Sudan), Washington, D.C; Ambassador Mohamed Zeinelbdin, previously Sudan ambassador to Scandinavia, Washington, D.C.; Ambassador Khidir Haroun Ahmed, represented by Salah El-Gineid, Minister, Sudan Embassy, Washington, DC; Professor Sulayman Nyang, Howard University, Washington, DC; Dr. Hashim El-Tinay Founder and President of Salam Sudan foundation (SSF), Washington, D.C.; Joseph Montville, CSID board member,

moderator. Four central questions were addressed:

- 1) What does the peace agreement mean to Sudan's future? How can it be inclusive of the Sudanese forces absent from the negotiations? What does the agreement mean to the ongoing problems in Darfur and Beja?
- 2) How does the peace agreement affect Africa, the Muslim world, and the international community?
- 3) What are the foreign policy implications of a peace-centered approach to resolving conflict? Can such a model be duplicated in other contexts? How does the peace agreement alter (if at all) US engagement in Sudan?
- 4) What can we do to help move the peace process forward?

Sudan is still distantly far from becoming a true democracy but both groups believe that efforts like this are a step in the right direction.

ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY: QUESTIONS ON THE RELATIONSHIP AND ITS HORIZONS

Muhammad Furati, Tunis

An intellectual forum that caught the attention of leftists, Islamists as well as liberals.

A number of Arab and Tunisian intellectuals, academics and legal scholars demanded that democracy should be adopted as a life-style among all elements of the nation and as a way of development. In a forum held in the capital city of Tunisia, the participants also called for dialogue among all Arab and Islamist trends as a means to solve differences and renovate Islamic thought.

About 120 Tunisian and Arab political leaders, thinkers and scholars met in a conference entitled "Democracy and Islam: Questions on the Relationship and Its Horizons" held on December 15-16, 2004, and co-organized by the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID), the Arab Institute of Human Rights, and the Jahidh Forum. The forum was attended by a number of diplomats, and the first session was attended by the US ambassador and a number of former ministers in the Tunisian government. To some of the participants, the dialogue including Islamists, leftists, nationalists and liberals was considered as a shake of the legacy of the Arab intelligentsia among the intellectual circles of which the dialogue had been absent for quite a long time.

A number of leftist intellectuals emphasized that Islam as a religion should not be dragged into man's general affairs, and demanded separation of



The conference, attended by over 120 political thinkers and leaders, was considered as a major development in Tunisia's political history.

religion and state and that Islam should remain an individual affair. According to Abdil-Majid al-Sharfi, a scholar and professor at the Tunisian University, the problem of interpretation never succeeded in finding wholesome solutions for hanging questions along the history of Islam.

Rajaa Ben Slama called for going past the religious text in regard to women's issues and taking up positive laws. Radwan Masmoudi, President of the CSID,



The organizers (Masmoudi, Abuzaakuk, and Baccouche) with US Ambassador, William Hudson and Political Advisor, Elizabeth Hopkins.

stated that Islam, in its texts as well as its historic experiences, was in so many ways

ahead of other civilizations in respecting human dignity and working for man's -and woman's- rights. Masmoudi called also for developing Muslims' religious and intellectual discourse so as they may be able to convince others that there is no contradiction between Islam and democracy and human rights on the one hand, and to be able to depart from the stage of traditionalism to that of creativity.

Muhammad Gumani criticized the view that excludes religion from public life, asserting that Islam includes all aspects of Muslims' life, and this, to him, is a fact many secularists have failed to realize. The Quranic text and the canonical system in general comprise two parts: religious rites and behaviors.

Sami brahim claimed that the challenge that many modernists, who exclude religion from other aspects of life, confront is that their discourse remains utopist and superjacent in the Muslim community. For in man's life in general, religious beliefs cannot be separated from behavior. Consequently, religion as a life system intervenes in all aspects of the believers' life, including trade, marriage, social relations, education, politics, etc. Brahim urged secularists to try to understand the relationship between Islam and man, which cannot be exclusively ritual, or else Islam would become just a package of ecclesiastical rites. The speaker has also

asserted that the juristic experience all along the Islamic history has always been a positive, humanistic one and has never been a sacred one, and that the jurists have always dealt with the religious text in free manner.

The relationship between Islamic political movements and democratization aroused deep passions, especially in the presence of a number of figures from the Nahda Movement recently released from jail, like Mr. Ali al-'Urayyid, speaker of the Movement.

To some, Islam as a religion and democracy as a mechanism of political practice are contradicted, since each of them has its own turf. This view was expressed by both Muhammad Mawa'da and Muhammad al-Houni, from the Arab Institute of Intellectual Modernization in Lebanon. The latter has stated that the Muslims today should realize that there is no such thing as a religion that is good for all times and all places save in form and expressional rituals. When religion interferes in organizing the relations among men, it definitely gets desecrated as a result of profane conflicts following each human dispute. Thus, both religious and secular elites should stand up today to rescue this religion by ridding it from the claws of politicians and the opportunism of jurists, or else Muslims will sooner or later face urgent questions that must be answered.

Afif al-Bouni, an Arab-nationalist scholar and writer, claimed that Islam as a comprehensive religion does intervene in the Muslims' daily life and that it is futile to try to irrevocably exclude it from life, for this is procedurally impossible. Moreover, developing the religious text from one period of time to another is possible depending on how developed the human mind is, and that is what is meant by "good for all times and all places".

Slaheddine al-Jourshi, chairman of the Jahiz Forum, praised the friendly

atmosphere of dialogue among all participants. He appealed to all parties to reject extremism on either side and to work on understanding the mechanisms of Islam and its relation to mankind, which makes it a religion different from all others. This, in Jourshi's point of view, is due to the fact that Islam is a religion that is open to dialogue, interpretative judgment and plurality of understanding, which is a source of strength that has kept it alive in the hearts of the believers for fourteen centuries. Muhammad al-Rahmuni, an academic, described the dialogue of civilizations as "a dialogue of the deaf". He called all political trends and the Arab governments to open the way for alienated academics and intellectuals to activate a real dialogue among all different elites, away from all sorts of elimination or accusation of infidelity.



Discussions and debates were intense, and sometimes heated, but always cordial.

According to Mohsen Marzouk, a leading leftist and democracy activist in Tunisia, the governments must give access to Islamist movements into the field of political participation and integration in the wider community, first because those are public movements; and second, their access to the political arena may lead them to develop their discourse.

Saa'deddin Ibrahim, chairman of the Ibn-Khaldoun Center in Egypt, insisted that the participation of Islamists, especially moderates, in the political life

has become a necessity. He described his direct dialogues with Islamists in the



Mohamed Talbi, a leading voice for democracy in Tunisia, asked the participants to stop talking and join him in a peaceful demonstration on the street.

prisons of Egypt, which convinced him of the necessity to have the Islamist movement integrated in public life as a means to confine violence and extremism

Muhammad Ujar, a Moroccan scholar and a former minister of human rights, reviewed the democratic experience in Morocco, praising the participation of the Justice and Development Party, and enumerating the points of strength achieved by this Moroccan political party in parliament in connection with several positive attitudes toward some urgent issues that arose in the country.

In an interposition entitled 'The Dialectic of Islam and Modernity in Turkey', Abdallah Turkumani, a Syrian scholar, reviewed the experience of the Justice and Development Party in Turkey. Following his review of the historic development of the experience, he claimed that Turkey is even more democratic, just, economically stronger, less corrupt and more secure. The experience, in his point of view, will wind up in a rich expertise not only for the Turkish society but also for all Islamic revivalist movements all over the world. ■

RELIGION AND DEMOCRACY: IRANIAN EXPERIENCE

By Professor Abdulaziz Sachedina
CSID Director

CSID Conference Held In Partnership With Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran on December 1-2, 2004, in Mashhad and Tehran.

In recent years, a number of attempts to engage Iran in a productive dialogue regarding the development of constitutional democracy have been thwarted by internal Iranian politics and



Aziz Sachedina, member of CSID board of directors, spoke in Persian about the need for representation, participation, and accountability.

external negativism led by the American government towards Iran. For almost a decade a number of American based foundations have led delegations to meet with Iranian religious leaders and other political activists to seize the opportunity for political reform that was provided with the election of reformist president Muhammad Khatami. However, none of these foundations were seen as empathetic to the Iranian political intricacies by the Iranian themselves, and were, in most cases, regarded as "American" agents intrinsically opposed to Islam and anything Islamic.

Iranian experiment with Islam as a source of governance to replace the historical monarchical system still awaits full and impartial evaluation. The Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy with its mission to search for the compatibility between religion and democratic politics had special interest in the Iranian experiment.

The subject of democracy and religion has been controversial in the Islamic Republic of Iran since its establishment under the late Ayatollah Khomeini. The government has been divided on the question of exact nature of Islamic state from its inception in the 1978-79 constitutional debates. With the rise in anti-Americanism as an important rhetorical vehicle to keep the religious establishment in power, it is not surprising to observe extreme sensitivity on the part of Iranian academic establishment not to be seen as encouraging American interference in the internal politics of the country.

On its part, FUM welcomed the opportunity to collaborate with CSID, took all the necessary precaution to forestall any problem that could arise, and applied for official permission to hold the conference in Mashhad, which was fortunately approved at the highest level in Tehran.

Preparations and Logistics:

One of the major concerns for the CSID

was to hold the conference with inclusive participation of important voices, both proponent and opponent, of constitutional



The Vice Chancellor of Ferdowsi University of Mashhad (FUM) opened the session and welcomed all the participants.

democracy in Iran. It was easier to enroll the participation of the secularist-modernist academicians like Dr. Abdol Karim Soroush and his group of Iranian thinkers. The critical task for CSID/FUM was to get the traditionalists ulema to participate in the dialogue. For that purpose alone, Dr. Jamshidi, with excellent connection to the seminarians, was appointed as a "shuttle diplomat" to get as many members of the conservative ulema on board as possible. His diplomatic efforts paid off and the conference was able to enlist well-known figures whose views about a religious democracy were important to include in the larger debate about the role of clergy and Islam in a modern nation state.

As soon as the CSID delegation, made up of Drs. Masmoudi, Sachedina, and Antony Sullivan, arrived in Mashhad in

the morning of November 30, they learned that Ansar-i Hizb Allah, an extremist group, had actually demanded that five prominent scholars, who formed the liberal group in support of democratic governance in Iran, be barred from



Three CSID board members (Sullivan, Masmoudi, and Sachedina) visited the tomb of Imam Reza, in one of the most beautiful shrines in the world.

participation. More seriously, the group had threatened the lives of these five scholars, including Dr. Soroush and Dr. Mohsin Kadivar, a member of clergy with liberal views.

Ironically, these threats afforded the badly needed publicity to bolster the cause

“The critical task for CSID/FUM was to get the traditionalists ulema to participate in the dialogue.”

of democracy and freedom of speech in Iran. CSID/FUM moved quickly to arrange for alternative programs in Mashhad and Tehran, where a number of key participants had been asked to stay until further instructions from the conference organizers. Next day, that is, on December 1, the CSID delegation met with several faculty members in the Theology School and Faculty of Arts and Humanities. In the evening, some prominent scholars who were already in Mashhad met for about

three hours in FUM to present their views and discuss issues connected with democratization in a basically ideological nation state.

The Mashhad Meeting on December 1:

It is important to keep in mind the circumstances under which this meeting was being held that evening. The atmosphere was tense and discussions were open and critical of the role religion was playing in the Iranian politics. There was unanimity among the participants that unchecked religiosity could lead to dangerous and tyrannical system of governance, as the events of the last few years indicated.

Besides Dr. Masmoudi and Dr. Sachedina, Professor Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari, a member of clerical establishment, Professor Gholam Abbas Tavassoli, Drs. Mohammad Reza Beheshti, and Arjomand, among the Iranian group, led the discussion about secularism and the problematic of modern democratic society in which the role of religion had to be privatized by limiting its scope to the area of spiritual and moral well being of the people. There were also interesting exchanges about critical conceptual clarity about democracy and its cultural relativity.

Dr. Beheshti's presentation raised important issues in the emerging intercultural dialogue that had to deal with the truth claim in world religions. Peaceful coexistence among peoples of different religions depended upon resolving the exclusionary attitude generated by exclusive theology of faith communities. The unique aspect of this frank exchange between Iranian thinkers was the total absence of anti-American rhetoric, which was quite common among the members of clerical authority. The entire discussion was a demonstration of sophisticated understanding of the relevant issues related

to the development of democratic freedoms within the framework of a secular state that respected the wisdom of religion in directing its internal and external policies.

The Tehran Meeting on December 2:

Tehran meeting compensated all that was lacking in Mashhad meeting the previous day. The atmosphere was relaxed and the participants contributed extremely well in terms of quality and transparency that the subject demanded in the Iranian context. The issue that dominated the afternoon was not whether religion and democracy are compatible. Rather, that was taken as a given, without any defense of the position or any concern with the solution offered by those who maintain liberal democracy, namely, secularization through privatization of religion and its separation from the public square.

Liberal democracy with its questionable support for immoral social behavior,



CSID representatives discussed mutual cooperation and joint projects with a number of academics in Mashhad.

as pointed out by Dr. Soroush, did not agree with Muslim sensibilities. The search was for political democracy with accountable government that legislated for the people as citizens and not as believers. Dr. Reza Eslami took up the concept of citizenship and whether the Shari'a could endorse such a concept without first going through conceptual transformation to move from

the language of faith community to the inclusive idiom of secularity. No reformation could ignore the critical need to make the official religion sponsored by the state more inclusive in terms of guaranteeing the human rights of all its citizens.

Dr. Forough Jahanbakhsh, the only woman participant in the session, presented an overview of the theoretical attempts offered by different Muslim scholars since the beginning of 20th century. The significance of her contribution was the focus she provided to underscore the paradigm shift in the Muslim modernist discourse on religion and democracy and what obstacles confronted the reformers who believed in democratic governance for Iran. Dr. Mohsen Kadivar, a member of clergy, spoke about various readings of the Islamic tradition that had emerged during the last century. One of the prevalent readings dealt with Islam's privatization and its separation from the public square that should be left to radical pluralistic democracy with its commitment to freedom of religion as an ongoing policy of the state rather than one time endowment by the legislature. In some important ways Dr. Kadivar's position on democracy took Mohammad Mojtahed Shabistari's relativism in the

“CSID should make its publication available in Persian, both online and in print,”

religious readings a step further by actually providing an alternative paradigm for democratic governance to become deeply ingrained in the Iranian political processes. Dr. Ali Paya's model of democracy argued for an efficient political system that can respond to the needs of modern men and women searching to implement the best in the society. Democracy should respond to Muslim

values and create an Islamic democracy to suit the needs of Islamic societies. In this way Islamic democracy can compare with the existing best Western counterparts. Yet, the Islamic democracy has to be based on minimalist-rationalist reading of Islam.

Among the papers that were submitted in writing but could not be presented in person two deserve special mention. These were by two prominent traditionalist



The conference in Tehran was rich of excellent papers and thoughtful discussions between conservatives and reformers.

scholars. One of them was by Ayatollah Mohamed Jannati. In his paper he discussed the compatibility of the concepts of freedom and equality, the two pillars of human rights, with human nature and "divine religions" in which natural law provided the basic understanding of human rights. According to Ayatollah Jannati, freedom is the sum of rights recognized for human beings, who are free to accept them. However, human freedom, having private and public dimensions, should not be exercised in a way that causes harm to others or threatens other people's moral values. In Islam freedom is not absolute; it is delimited by the law that regulates freedom in the context of mutual rights and duties to one another. The other paper was by Ayatollah Amid Zanjani. His paper critically assesses the crisis over democracy in the Muslim world, which led to either total rejection or conditional acceptance of democratic governance. As evidence, he traces the history of political transformation in

Muslim countries that led to democracy taking the central stage in reforms that were introduced in the age of neo-colonialism for political reasons. His prescription for democratic politics is the adoption of middle path in espousing Western models in Muslim societies. No people, as he advises, should adopt alien systems of governance without assessing cultural legitimacy for them. Iran is no exception.

Suggestions for future activities in Iran:

CSID learnt a different lesson in Iran. The usual media presence that dominated the conference in other countries, where such meetings and workshops have been held, were conspicuously absent in Iran. This was intentional, so that the proceedings could maintain seriousness in deliberations with the clear goal of making these available to the large reading audience in Iran through timely publication.

In consultation with a number of active members of the committee that organized the conference following suggestions were made:

1. CSID should organize a follow up conference in the year 2005 in Tehran. Tehran offers the necessary open ambiance for such deliberations.
2. CSID should work more closely with Iranian democrats in the country by establishing contacts with people like Dr. Reza Eslami of Beheshti University and Dr. Ali Khazaefar of Ferdowsi University, in addition to religious scholars like Aytollah Amid Zanjani, Dr. Mohsin Kadivar, and Dr. Mohaghegh Damad.
3. CSID should make its publication available in Persian, both online and in print, to major institutions and prominent activists in Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia.



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DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENTS IN SYRIA AND LEBANON

By Omar El Masri
CSID Intern

Are the recent developments in Lebanon and Syria democratic demonstrations or a popular revolution to change the power structure in both countries? This was the central theme addressed by a CSID panel of experts on April 7, on the subject of "Democratic Movements in Lebanon and Syria." The program featured three speakers, Professor Michael Hudson of Georgetown University, Professor Najib Ghabbian of the University of Arkansas, and Professor Adib Farha of Lebanese American University. CSID board member Joe Montville moderated the discussion.

Michael Hudson began his presentation by posing the question on whether the world was on the "threshold of a new era of freer liberal democracy in Lebanon" and in retrospect, free of Syrian domination. In particular, Hudson said that the problems included those of power sharing and sectarian-driven insecurities among the Maronites; the Maronites were worried that the Muslim compatriots were linked with the Palestinian cause.

Adib Farha began his presentation by making the distinction that the events in Lebanon was an uprising for Lebanon's independence as opposed to a democratic movement. In his words, "the Lebanese themselves have compared their movement to the Orange revolutions. Citizens go beyond color coding." Farha believes that it was a terrorist attack that set Lebanon back on the march to independence with

supporting documents of the UN Security resolution 1559 that called for other steps to advance Lebanon's sovereignty and independence.

According to Farha, Lebanon is the oldest democracy in the Middle East region and, despite Syrian interference, has remained a vibrant democracy with strong democratic institutions and traditions. In his concluding remarks, Adib Farha reiterated that the Lebanese people are aware that although the recent bombings of Christian areas in the country are not the work of Muslims, but of security agencies, Lebanon is at a critical stage.

Najib Ghabbian began his presentation by asking whether we can speak of democratic movements in Syria. In his view, the sense of excitement among Syrians inside and outside the country about the prospects for democracy is high. The Civilization Project for Syria which called for dialogue within Syria referred to Islam as a reference point both for the supporters and the opponents of democracy in Syria. For the first time, the Muslim Brotherhood was able to talk with Baathists, Leftists, Secularists, and Islamists in August 2002. Professor Ghabbian noted that Brotherhood is no longer talking about an Islamic state but about the propagation of a democratic state within Syria. According to this pact, Ghabbian says that the role of Islam in public life was discussed as a civilizational reference for Syria. ■

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