A Research Note on Islam, Democracy, and Secularism

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the validity of the argument that the alleged theological lack of state-religion separation in Islam is the reason for authoritarianism in many Muslim-majority countries. The essay criticizes this argument by showing that a) secularism, in the sense of state-religion separation, is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for democracy; b) Islam is not an inherently and exceptionally political religion, and c) 20 out of 46 Muslim-majority states are secular. The essay point out that rather than analyzing the so-called essence of Islam as pro-democratic or anti-democratic, it may be more effective to explore the socio-political and economic conditions that have led to democracy or authoritarianism in Muslim-majority countries.

According to Freedom House, out of 193 countries in the world, 119 are electoral democracies. Yet among 46 Muslim-majority countries, only nine are electoral democracies. In other words, the ratio of democracies in the world is 62% while that in Muslim-majority countries is only 20%.[1] In addition to defining them as democracy or not, Freedom House also gives specific scores to countries to categorize them as "free" (scores from 1 to 2.5), "partly-free" (3 to 5), or "non-free" (5.5 to 7). Authoritarianism in many Muslim-majority countries is also reflected in their scores: only two Muslim-majority countries are currently listed among the "free countries." Moreover, the tables below point out that authoritarianism in Muslim-majority countries is a long-term problem, which has persisted despite the worldwide trend toward democratization.[2]

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Table 1: Ratios of Free, Partly Free and Non-Free Countries					
Year	Total No.	Free Countries %	Partly Free Countries %	Non-Free Countries %	Total %
1972	151	29	25	46	100
1990	165	40	30	30	100
2008	193	46	32	22	100

Table 2: Ratios of Muslim-majority Free, Partly Free and Non-Free Countries					
Year	Total No.	Free Countries %	Partly Free Countries %	Non-Free Countries %	Total %
1972	37	11	27	62	100
1990	38	3	39	58	100
2008	46	5	44	51	100

Some scholars point to the alleged theological lack of state-religion separation in Islam as the reason for authoritarianism in many Muslim-majority countries. According to Ernest Gellner, Islam is a secularization-resistant religion.[3] In his words, "Islam is the blueprint of a social order. It holds that a set of rules exists, eternal, divinely ordained, and independent of the will of men, which defines the proper ordering of society....These rules are to be implemented throughout social life."[4] In "Islam and Liberal Democracy: A Historical Overview," Bernard Lewis claims that among Muslim countries, "Turkey alone has formally enacted the separation of religion and the state."[5] For him, Islam and Judaism are similar to each other, and differ from Christianity, in that they do not have clear and distinct conceptions of "clergy" versus "laity" and "sacred law" versus "secular law." Lewis thus defines the state-religion struggle as a "Christian disease" and secularism as a "Christian remedy."[6] Samuel Huntington embraced Lewis's approach and went beyond that: "In Islam, God is Caesar; in China and Japan, Caesar is God; in Orthodoxy, God is Caesar's junior partner. The separation and recurring clashes between church and state that typify Western civilization have existed in no other civilization."[7] Regarding democracy, Huntington concludes: "Whatever

the compatibility of Islam and democracy in theory, in practice they have not gone together."[8]

In this paper, I will examine the three components of this claim: a) secularism, in the sense of state-religion separation, is a sine qua non for democracy; b) Islam theologically opposes such a separation; and c) therefore, Muslim-majority countries lack secularism and democracy.

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Secularism: A Necessary and Sufficient Condition for Democracy?

As Alfred Stepan rightly emphasizes,[9] secularism, in the sense of a state-religion separation, is part of neither the narrow definition of democracy as a power transition through free, fair, and frequent elections with universal suffrage, nor the broader definition of democracy elaborated by Dahl's eight institutional guarantees: "1. Freedom to form and join organizations, 2. Freedom of expression, 3. Right to vote, 4. Eligibility for public office, 5. Right of political leaders to compete for support, 6. Alternative source of information, 7. Free and fair elections, 8. Institutions for making government depend on votes and other expressions of preference."[10]

This conceptual observation is confirmed by quantitative and qualitative analysis of actual cases. I previously prepared an index of state-religion regimes by examining countries' constitutions and the US Department of State's International Religious Freedom Reports. The index classified countries into four types:

1) Religious states, which institute religious laws and courts as the basis of their legal and judicial systems (e.g., Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan);

2) States with established religions, which recognize an official religion without making it the center of their legal and judicial systems (e.g., England, Denmark, and Greece);

3) Secular states, which a) have secular legal and judicial systems in the sense of being out of institutional religious control, and b) do not establish an official religion (e.g., the United States, France, and Turkey);

4) Antireligious states, which show an official hostility toward religion, generally by establishing atheism (e.g., China, North Korea, and Cuba).[11]

> Secularism is not a necessary condition for democracy. Similarly, secularism co-exists with both democracy and authoritarianism. Thus secularism is not a sufficient condition for democracy either

The tables below correlate my index with Freedom House's data on democracy and authoritarianism. Table 3 shows that democracy co-exists with both secular states and states with an established religion. So, secularism is not a necessary condition for democracy. Similarly, Table 4 indicates that secularism co-exists with both democracy and authoritarianism. Thus secularism in not a sufficient condition for democracy either.

Table 3: Democracy in Secular and Established-Religion States		
	Democratic	Authoritarian
Secular	79 (66%)	38 (66%)
Established-Religion	40 (34%)	20 (34%)
TOTAL	119 (100%)	58 (100%)

| Table 4: Secularism with Democracy and Authoritarianism		
	Secular	Established-Religion
Democratic	79 (68%)	40 (67%)
Authoritarian	38 (32%)	20 (33%)
TOTAL	117 (100%)	60 (100%)

In some cases, such as Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, secularism co-exists with an authoritarian regime. In other cases, including several of the European Union's first 15 members, democracy is present without secularism. Four of the EU's first 15 members have established churches—Anglicanism in England and Presbyterianism in Scotland, Lutheranism in Denmark, Orthodoxy in Greece, and Lutheranism and Orthodoxy in Finland—while three members, Italy, Spain, and Portugal, signed concordats to recognize certain privileges to the Catholic Church. Even in other members states that are secular states by my definition,

there are close relations between the state and religion at the financial level, as reflected in Germany's federal church tax, or the discursive level, as seen in the Preamble of Ireland's Constitution: "In the name of the Most Holy Trinity, from Whom is all authority and to Whom, as our final end, all actions both of men and States must be referred. We, the people of Ireland, humbly acknowledging all our obligations to our Divine Lord, Jesus Christ...." France appears to be an exemption as it literally uses the term *secularism* in its constitution and lacks religious instruction in public schools. However, even in France, there is no absolute state-religion separation given that church buildings built before 1906 are public properties; one in of five students attends Catholic private schools, 80% of whose budgets come from public funding; and that there are four established religions (Catholicism, Lutheranism, Calvinism, and Judaism) in the Alsace-Moselle region (including Strasbourg) where secularism is not effective.

On the other hand, a total religious control over the state or vice versa definitely contradicts democracy. As shown in the table below there is not a single democracy in these two categories.

Table 5: Authoritarianism with Religious and Antireligious States		
	Religious	**Antireligious**
Authoritarian	11	5
Democratic	0	0
TOTAL	11	5

In religious states, such as Saudi Arabia, religious experts and courts control law-making and judicial processes and they are unaccountable to the people. A particular version of religious state structure is the theocracy in Iran symbolized by the Supreme Leader. These characteristics of religious states are incompatible with the democratic principle of people's sovereignty. In antireligious states, such as China, the atheistic ideology has resulted in the systematic oppression of religious groups. That is not compatible with democracy either. For these reasons, Alfred Stepan emphasizes the importance of the "twin tolerations" between the state and religions for the development and consolidation of democracy.[12] "Twin tolerations" is a more flexible concept than "separation of the state and religion." Democracies in different parts of the world have produced various versions of the
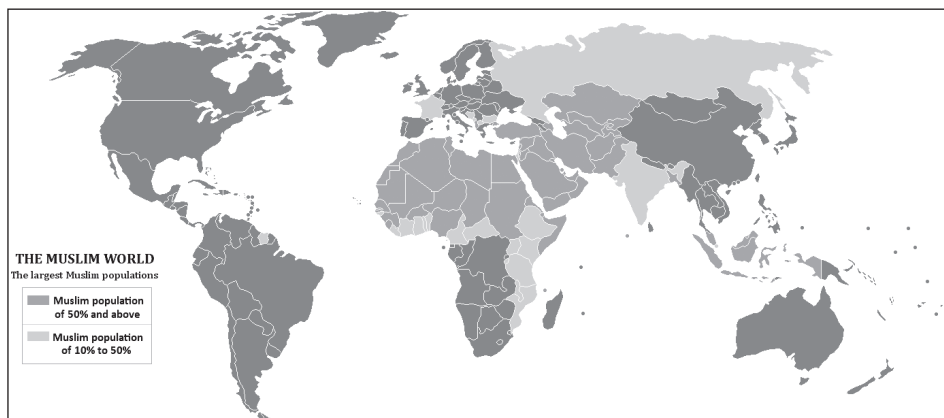
Muslim-majority countries have sharply diverse political regimes in which Islam does not have a monolithic impact.

twin tolerations between the state and religion based on certain level of mutual respect, differentiation, and autonomy. Some Muslim-majority countries (e.g., Senegal and Indonesia) seem to be more successful than others (e.g., Iran and Uzbekistan) in terms of producing the twin tolerations convenient to both democracy and their socio-political conditions.

Islam: An Inherently Political Religion?

Recently the secularization theory, which predicted the gradual extinction of religion's public roles in modern societies, has started to lose its influence in the social sciences given the increasing relevancy of religion in world politics reflected by the rise of the Christian Right in the United States, the "Muslim Question" in Europe, and Islamist groups in the Middle East. This trend has led some scholars to move from one extreme (ignoring religious factors) to another (making over-generalizations about religions to produce monocausal explanations). A major problem of this new trend is that it essentializes Islam as if there is a monolithic Islamic world run by Islamist politics. That has been followed by sweeping and shallow explanations of complex phenomena from suicide terrorism to regional wars by referring to some verses from the Qur'an or some sentences written by Sayyid Qutb. Such an essentialist approach paradoxically embraces an understanding of Islam that radical Islamists have tried to promote.

As Stepan rightly stresses all religions are "multivocal":[13] they may have pro-democratic and anti-democratic, as well as pro-secular and anti-secular, interpretations. These interpretations are largely shaped by socio-political and eco-

nomic contexts. Simply referring to the verse of the Bible about rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's does not contribute much to the analysis of Christian-majority countries' complex experiences of historical religious wars and church-

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state struggles, their substantially diverse state-religion regimes at present, and the current religiously driven debates on political and legal issues such as divorce, abortion, gay rights, and evolution.

Anthony Gill points out that even the most hierarchical religious institution, the Catholic Church, has shown strategic flexibility, rather than theological consistency, when it comes to political decisions. He shows how the Catholic Church has implemented various political strategies in different Latin American countries with regard to diverse political and religious competitions.[14] Stathis Kalyvas emphasizes political flexibility on the part of both Catholic and Protestant actors: "The dissimilar political behavior of Catholics and Protestants does not appear to be culturally driven: when challenged by anticlerical legislation, Protestants in the Netherlands reacted the same way Catholics did, whereas when no anticlerical attack took place, Irish Catholics did not organize politically on the basis of religion."[15]

Besides the six pillars of faith and five pillars of worship, even many theological aspects of Islam, let alone its political interpretations, have been open to disagreements and debates. In addition to the Sunni-Shia division, there are many schools of thought and law within the Islamic tradition. L. Carl Brown and Mohammad Ayoob, in two separate but complementary books, emphasize the difficulty in, if not the impossibility of, explaining contemporary radical Islamist activism with mainstream Islamic political thought that repeatedly prioritizes order and therefore requires obedience to the state authorities in a quietist manner.[16] Centuries before Thomas Hobbes, Muslim thinkers, such as Ibn Jama'a, wrote that "forty years of tyranny…are better than…one hour [of anarchy]."[17] Another example of the gap between Islamic theory and Muslim political praxis is the hereditary monarchy, which is not a preferable way of governing in Sunni Islamic political thought given that the first Four "Rightly Guided" Caliphs were elected and did not inherit the role.[18] Yet hereditary kingship has been used as the general political system throughout the history of Muslim-majority countries, as it was in other parts of the world. Even today, several Muslim-majority countries are such kingdoms (Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar,

Bahrain, and Brunei). In short, to explain the political behaviors of Muslim actors by simplistic references to Islam is not an appropriate social scientific method. That is why Daniel Eickelman and James Piscatori titled their book *Muslim Politics*, instead of *Islamic Politics*, in order to stress the importance of human agency, which really conducts politics, rather than religious principles.[19]

Politics in Muslim-majority countries, as politics everywhere, has always been affected by complex socio-political and economic factors. In his seminal article, Ira Lapidus explains that there have existed separate religious and political authorities in the Muslim world since the eighth century. At that time, independent Sunni schools of law, Shia sects, and Sufi tariqas, in addition to secular military and administrative rulers, challenged and replaced the institution of the caliphate, which claimed to represent both political and religious authorities.[20] In his 970-pages *A History of Islamic Societies*, Lapidus elaborates the complexity and diversity of political systems that Muslims have produced throughout their 1,400 years of history.[21] Today Muslim-majority countries have sharply diverse political regimes in which Islam does not have a monolithic impact if it has any. Perceiving Islam as an inherently political religion leading to authoritarianism does not make a considerable contribution to the analysis of diverse and changing regimes in Muslim-majority countries. Such a perception has a hard time to explain the large spectrum of democratization and authoritarianism in Muslim-majority countries as shown in their vast range of Freedom House (2.5 to 7) scores. Diverse state-religion regimes in Muslim-majority countries also refute the allegedly inherent incompatibility between Islam and secularism as the next section reveals.

Muslim-majority Countries: All Islamic States?

My index of state-religion regimes includes 46 Muslim-majority countries. Among them, only 11 are Islamic states where law-making and judicial processes are under the control of some Islamic scholars and courts; 15 declare Islam as the official religion without having such strict religious institutional control over legal and judicial processes; and 20 are secular in a sense that they have neither religious control over law-making and judiciary, nor an official religion. The table below elaborates this data and disproves the alleged incompatibility between the secular state and a Muslim-majority society. It also refutes the myth that Turkey is the only secular state in the Muslim world, a claim that has been embraced by Lewis and many others in the academia and the media.

I do not dismiss the impact of anti-democratic Islamist ideologies on authoritarianism. They have contributed to authoritarianism in countries such as Saudi

State-Religion Regimes in 46 Muslim Countries		
Islamic States (11)	**States with Islam as the Established Religion (15)**	**Secular States (20)**
1. Afghanistan	1. Algeria	1. Albania
2. Bahrain	2. Bangladesh	2. Azerbaijan
3. Brunei	3. Comoros	3. Burkina Faso
4. Iran	4. Djibouti	4. Chad
5. Maldives	5. Egypt	5. Gambia
6. Mauritania	6. Iraq	6. Guinea
7. Oman	7. Jordan	7. Indonesia
8. Pakistan	8. Kuwait	8. Kazakhstan
9. Saudi Arabia	9. Libya	9. Kosovo
10. Sudan	10. Malaysia	10. Kyrgyzstan
11. Yemen	11. Morocco	11. Lebanon
	12. Qatar	12. Mali
	13. Somalia	13. Niger
	14. Tunisia	14. Senegal
	15. United Arab E.	15. Sierra Leone
		16. Syria
		17. Tajikistan
		18. Turkey
		19. Turkmenistan
		20.Uzbekistan
Source: Adopted from Kuru 2009, p. 259. Reprinted with permission.		

Arabia, Iran, and Sudan. Islamism is also influential in some of the 15 states with Islam as established religion, such as Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. In some other cases, even if Islam is the established religion, the Islamists are oppressed by assertive secularist official ideologies, as we see in Tunisia.[22] Even if the Islamist ideology is not affecting the state structure as an official ideology of the country, it may still have an influence in politics as a source of opposition. In countries such as Algeria and Egypt, Islamists have largely contributed to authoritarianism by their anti-democratic discourses, as well as providing a justification to the ruling regimes to maintain authoritarian policies. It is also true that none of these countries were democracies before the rise of Islamists as rulers or as the opposition. Therefore, Islamists cannot be regarded as the sole reason for authoritarianism. Moreover, not all Islamists are anti-democratic. Some Islamist actors have contributed to democratization in such cases as Indonesia.[23] Therefore, one needs to examine the impact of Islamists on democracy and authoritarianism case-by-case.

In short, Muslim-majority countries reflect deep variations in terms of state-religion regimes which cannot be explained by perceived generalizations about

Islam is not an inherently and exceptionally political religion

Islam's political characteristic and its allegedly monolithic impact on Muslim societies and polities. Scholars should be cautious while generalizing even about the Islamist ideology and its relations with democracy.

Conclusion

This paper reviews an argument about the incompatibility between Islam on the one hand, and secularism and democracy on the other. Scholars like Lewis and Huntington at least implicitly refer to the allegedly political nature of Islam as the reason for the lack of secularism (as state-religion separation) and thus the lack of democracy in Muslim-majority countries. I criticize this argument by showing that a) secularism is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for democracy, b) Islam is not an inherently and exceptionally political religion, and c) 20 out of 46 Muslim-majority states are secular. I attach importance to the "twin tolerations" à la Stepan, i.e., mutual respect between religion and the state to each other's autonomous sphere, for the development and consolidation of democracy in Muslim and non-Muslim countries alike.

The problems mentioned in this essay show that scholars of Islam and politics in particular, and religion and politics in general, should a) avoid making theological generalizations without having well-defined questions, sufficient data, and nuanced conceptualization; b) take seriously the impact of socio-cultural, economic, and political factors on diverse political interpretations of religions; and c) attach importance to the human agency who actually both interprets religious texts and makes political decisions. The last point is particularly important in the analysis of democracy and authoritarianism because regime changes are primarily the result of individual and group struggle over political power rather than their religious affiliations.

I do not totally rule out the possibility that Islam may play an important role in the formation of Muslims' attitudes toward democracy through symbols, idioms, etc. Rather than analyzing the so-called essence of Islam as pro-democratic or anti-democratic, it may be more effective to examine particular thinkers and movements who produce pro-democratic or anti-democratic discourses using an Islamic terminology. Pro-democratic discourses making use of Islamic references are more convenient for the development of democracy in Muslim-majority countries in comparison to a radical Islamism opposing democracy and assertive secularism which alienates practicing Muslims.[24]

The exceptionally high ratio of authoritarian regimes in Muslim-majority countries constitutes one of the biggest puzzles facing social scientists. This paper argues that it cannot be explained by simply referring to Islam and its allegedly anti-secular characteristic. Further research is needed to include alternative economic (oil production), geographical (neighborhood effect), and political (interstate and within state conflicts) factors into the analysis.

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Endnotes

1. Freedom House lists electoral democracies regarding four criteria which can be summarizes as the followings: 1) A competitive, multiparty political system; 2) Universal adult suffrage for all citizens; 3) Regularly contested elections conducted in conditions of ballot secrecy, security, and in the absence of massive voter fraud; and 4) Public access of major political parties to the electorate through the media and open political campaigning.

2. All data was accessed from the website of Freedom House, http://www.freedomhouse.org, in August 2009.

3. Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 5–7.

4. Ernest Gellner, *Muslim Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 1.

5. Bernard Lewis, "Islam and Liberal Democracy: A Historical Overview," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (1996), p. 62.

6. Lewis, "Islam and Liberal Democracy: A Historical Overview," pp. 61-62.

7. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), p. 70.

8. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), p. 308.

9. Alfred Stepan, "The Multiple Secularisms of Modern Democracies and Autocracies," in *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. by Mark Juergensmeyer (forthcoming), p. 3.

10. Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), p. 3. For another broader definition of democracy, which still does not include secularism, see Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), Chapter 1.

11. Ahmet T. Kuru, *Secularism and State Policies toward Religion: The United States, France, and Turkey* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 7-8, 247-53.

12. Alfred Stepan, "The World's Religious Systems and Democracy: Crafting the 'Twin Tolerations,'" in his *Arguing Comparative Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

13. Alfred Stepan, "The World's Religious Systems and Democracy: Crafting the 'Twin Tolerations'."

14. Anthony Gill, *Rendering Unto Caesar: The Catholic Church and State in Latin America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

15. Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Rise of Christian Democracy in Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 3 n6.

16. L. Carl Brown, *Religion and State: The Muslim Approach to Politics* (New York Columbia University Press, 2000); Mohammed Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Muslim* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007).

17. Erwin I. J Rosenthal, *Political Thought in Medieval Islam: An Introductory Outline* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1958), p. 44.

18. Rosenthal, *Political Thought in Medieval Islam: An Introductory Outline,* 21-61.

19. Dale F. Eickelman and James P. Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

20. Ira M. Lapidus, "The Separation of State and Religion in the Development of Early Islamic Society," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (1975), pp. 363-85.

21. Ira M. Lapidus Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

22. "Assertive secularism" requires the state to play an assertive role in excluding religion from the public sphere. It is the opposite of "passive secularism," which demands that the state play a passive role by allowing public visibility of religion. Kuru, *Secularism and State Policies toward Religion: The United States, France, and Turkey*, p. 11.

23. Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

24. See Nader Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy: Toward a Democratic Theory for Muslim Societies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).