

Islam and Democracy

Al Masry Al Yawm

By Mohamed Salmawy 25/1/2008

Hiroaki Kanazawa, the man in charge of Middle East affairs at 'Nikkei', the main economic newspaper in East Asia and the second biggest in Japan, asked me whether it was possible for the Arab World to achieve democracy in spite of Islam.

This question seems to suggest that Islam is opposed to democracy, as if it were a religion of coercion and despotism where there is no room for freedom and political participation.

Such an idea, in spite of its being strange, is not new. I have read about it many times in Western writings and even by supposedly sagacious political researchers and analysts.

Therefore, I was not surprised to hear it from a great journalist who follows up on our region from up close and who has noticed much coercion, despotism and an undemocratic decision-making process.

I told him: "You're mixing up Islam with Muslims. If Muslim rulers are very undemocratic, Islam introduced democracy before Europe."

While I was not surprised by his answer, he was astonished by mine. He raised his eyebrows and said: "How come?"

"Let's go back in history for a moment to the origins of Islam to see how Muslims used to run their public affairs.

They applied all aspects of democracy without anyone teaching them. For instance, when the Prophet Mohamed died, the Caliphate did not pass on to one of his relatives, but to the person that allegiance was sworn to (allegiance was the equivalent of elections in modern society).

At that time, Europe was dominated by the principle of 'Divine' Right of Kings. In other words, the king ruled the country not because his subjects had sworn allegiance to him, but for a divine right that no one could question. Because of this divine right, the kingdom automatically passed on to his first heir, whether he was his son, his brother or his closest relative.

Moreover, Islam introduced a 'consultative' or parliamentary system while in Europe power was monopolized by the king, who had the first and final say in all the affairs of the country, including religion."

I then told this great Japanese journalist: "I am not only talking about the middle ages. After that period, the British King Henry VIII changed England's religion, cut his ties with the Pope in Rome and made the English Church subject to the Crown and therefore to him after the Pope refused to approve his third divorce so that he could get married for the fourth time.

Tell me: Is this democracy, a parliamentary system or any form of allegiance?"

He said: "But this form of allegiance is no longer fit for the modern era."

"Yes," I answered, "but direct democracy as it used to be in ancient Athens is not suitable for this modern age, either. However, I'm talking to you about the origins of power in Islam and I'm telling you that the Islamic world embraced democratic ideals before Europe did."

As for modern democracy, Egypt, for instance, has known the modern parliamentary system for more than 150 years. This doesn't mean that we've achieved democracy, but that we've been trying to apply it for a long time, even since before the West called on us to do so.

A constitution has been indeed among the most important requests of the patriotic movement in Egypt and the Arab World since the 19th century, and many leaders, intellectuals and writers paid a heavy price for having made this request, both under the Sultanate, the Monarchy and the Republic."

Then I told him: "What is said by Bush and the so-called Neo-Conservatives about their 'noble' wish to establish democratic power in the Arab World is only ridiculous."

These modernists don't know the people they're talking about and their history. All they know is the nature of the political regimes with which these modernists are allied in the region. But if they tried to see the truth, they would understand that the Arabs started to fight for democracy long before Bush was born."

The Japanese journalist kept silent. I asked him: "Any other question?" "No", he answered, "you've said it all"