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A Historical Overview

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

A Historical Overview

Bernard Lewis (bio)

In a necessarily brief discussion of major issues, it is fatally easy to go astray by misuse or misinterpretation of some of the words that one uses. Therefore, I ought to say first what I mean by the terms “Islam”

and “liberal democracy.”

Democracy nowadays is a word much used and even more misused. It has many meanings and has turned up in surprising places—the Spain of General Franco, the Greece of the colonels, the Pakistan of the generals, the Eastern Europe of the commissars—usually prefaced by some qualifying adjective such as “guided,” “basic,” “organic,” “popular,” or the like, which serves to dilute, deflect, or even to reverse the meaning of the word.

Another definition of democracy is embraced by those who claim that Islam itself is the only authentic democracy. This statement is perfectly true, *if* one accepts the notion of democracy presupposed by those who advance this view. Since it does not coincide with the definition of democracy that I take as the basis of this discussion, I will leave it aside as irrelevant for present purposes.

The kind of democracy I am talking about is none of these. By liberal democracy, I mean primarily the general method of choosing or removing governments that developed in England and then spread among English-speaking peoples and beyond.

In 1945, the victors of the Second World War imposed parliamentary democracy on the three major Axis powers. It survives in all three, **[End Page 52]** precariously, perhaps, in one. In none of them has it yet confronted any crisis of truly major proportions. Among the Allies, Britain and France bequeathed their own brands of democracy—with varying success—to their former colonies during the postwar retreat from empire.

Perhaps the best rule of thumb by which one can judge the presence of the kind of democracy I mean is Samuel P. Huntington’s dictum that you can call a country a democracy when it has made two consecutive, peaceful changes of government via free elections. By specifying *two* elections, Huntington rules out regimes that follow the procedure that one acute observer has called “one man, one vote, once.” So I take

democracy to mean a polity where the government can be changed by elections as opposed to one where elections are changed by the government.

Americans tend to see democracy and monarchy as antithetical terms. In Europe, however, democracy has fared better in constitutional monarchies than in republics. It is instructive to make a list of those countries in Europe where democracy has developed steadily and without interruption over a long period, and where there is every prospect that it will continue to do so in the foreseeable future. The list of such countries is short and all but one of them are monarchies. The one exception, Switzerland, is like the United States in that it is a special case due to special circumstances. In the French Republic, established by revolution more than two centuries ago, the march of democracy has been punctuated by interruptions, reverses, and digressions. In most of the other republics of Europe, and, for that matter, in the rest of the world, the record is incomparably worse.

In all this, there may be some lesson for the Middle East, where the dynastic principle is still remarkably strong. The most purely Arab and Muslim of Middle Eastern states, Saudi Arabia, derives its name and its identity from its founding and ruling dynasty. So, too, did the Ottoman Empire—the most recent and by far the most enduring of all the Islamic empires. Even such radical revolutionary leaders as Hafiz al-Assad in Syria and Saddam Hussein in Iraq endeavor to secure the succession of their sons. In a political culture where the strain of dynastic legitimacy is so strong, democracy might in some places fare better by going with it rather than against it.

What of our other term, “Islam”? It too has multiple meanings. In one sense, it denotes a religion—a system of belief, worship, doctrine, ideals, and ideas—that belongs to the family of monotheistic, scriptural religions that includes Judaism and Christianity. In another sense, it means...



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