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Why They Can't Be Democratic

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Abstract

This article makes a case of the basic distinction between Islam and Islamism and presents three central arguments: 1. through religious reforms and a rethinking of the Islamic doctrine, the cultural system of Islam can be put in harmony with democracy, 2. this (first) argument does not apply to Islamism (political Islam) for the simple reason that its end is an Islamic system of government. These two arguments lead to the third, namely that democracy is not simply a voting procedure, but also and above all a political culture of pluralism, individual human rights and civil society, all based on secular values. Unlike jihadist Islamists, institutional Islamists approve democracy, however, only in terms of balloting, not as a political culture of pluralism. Those Islamists who truly consent to democracy abandon the idea of a *shari'a*-based rule of God (the *Hakimiyyat*) and then are no longer Islamists, but democrats.

Islamist Parties

WHY THEY CAN'T BE DEMOCRATIC

Bassam Tibi

Bassam Tibi, who was born and raised in Damascus, teaches international relations at the University of Goettingen and is the visiting A.D. White Professor-at-Large at Cornell University. His latest book is Political Islam, World Politics and Europe (2008).

Noting Islamism's growing appeal and strength on the ground, many Western scholars and officials have been grasping for some way to take an inclusionary approach toward it. In keeping with this desire, it has become fashionable contemptuously to dismiss the idea of insisting on clear and rigorous distinctions as "academic." When it comes to Islam and democracy, this deplorable fashion has been fraught with unfortunate consequences.

Intelligent discussion of Islamism, democracy, and Islam requires clear and accurate definitions. Without them, analysis will collapse into confusion and policy making will suffer. My own view, formed after thirty years of study and reflection regarding the matter, is that Islam and democracy are indeed compatible, *provided that* certain necessary religious reforms are made. The propensity to deliver on such reforms is what I see as lacking in political Islam. My own avowed interest—as an Arab-Muslim prodemocracy theorist and practitioner—is to promote the establishment of secular democracy within the ambit of Islamic civilization.¹

In order to help clear away the confusion that all too often surrounds this topic, I will lay out several basic points to bear in mind. The first is that, so far, Western practices vis-à-vis political Islam have been faulty because they have lacked the underpinning of a well-founded assessment. Unless blind luck intervenes, no policy can be better than the assessment upon which it is based. Proper assessment is the beginning of all practical wisdom.

The second point is that Islam itself is basically a faith, a cultural system, and an ethics—and hence not necessarily political by its nature. But Islamism (or political Islam or Islamic fundamentalism—they all mean the

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