

James L. Holly, M.D.

Universal Values and Muslim Democracy Part I

By Anwar Ibrahim

Your Life Your Health

The Examiner

July 5, 2007

Few things contribute to the promotion of health as does freedom. As we continue to examine ways in which we can improve our health, we must never forget this fundamental truth – without freedom true health – mental, emotional and even physical is not totally possible. As the East and West continue to try to find ways of interacting with each other constructively, I find the following essay to be very helpful. As we have just celebrated the birth of our nation, we must celebrate the gestation of the seed of democracy in other nations as well.

Anwar Ibrahim has served as education minister, finance minister, and deputy prime minister of Malaysia. Jailed in 1998, he was the victim of a highly politicized trial and spent six years in prison before the Malaysian Federal Court overturned the charges against him, leading to his release in September 2004. He is currently a Distinguished Visiting Professor in the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. This essay draws upon speeches that he gave at the New York Democracy Forum in December 2005 and the Assembly of the World Movement for Democracy in Istanbul in April 2006.

At this pivotal moment in history, when East and West are growing increasingly alienated from one another over issues of freedom and justice, I am reminded of our upbringing in multicultural and multiethnic Malaysia. It was this upbringing that infused the Malaysian psyche with what Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has described as a plurality of identities. By nature we Malaysians are an inquisitive people, interested in other faiths and cultures. We studied the Koran and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad at the same time that we devoured the works of Dante, Shakespeare, and T.S. Eliot. For me, there has never been any doubt that our world and the West are compatible, and that this spirit of inclusiveness and pluralism will continue to be a source of inspiration in bridging the gaps between cultures and civilizations.

Yet there are some who persist in arguing vehemently that the great civilizations are destined for confrontation if not outright conflict. While the end of the Cold War gave a great boost to the spread of freedom and gave rise to a prevailing sense of optimism, in many corners of the earth these values have yet to take root. On the contrary, we see fundamental liberties being trampled upon and abused, fueling discord among nations and civilizations. My own struggle against those who seek to keep humanity shrouded in tyranny led to my incarceration for six years, a time during which I realized with blinding clarity that freedom is the very essence of being which unlocks the full potential of the human spirit.

There are many who believe that democracy is a construct of the West, molded in response to the peculiar historical circumstances that shaped it. Others argue that freedom and democracy, while suitable in some parts of the world, are by no means universal goods. They say that other nations ought not to adopt the ways of freedom and democracy without due regard to their own political, cultural, and social traditions. It is true that the founding principles of constitutional democracy, as we know it today, have their antecedents in the political philosophy of John Locke, which through the writings of Voltaire entered France and then deeply influenced the framers of the U.S. constitution. But the fact that these principles of political freedom and democracy were first articulated in the West does not preclude them from universal application, nor can it be asserted that they have not been expressed in other contexts.

It has been argued, for example, that “Asian values” developed in clear opposition to democratic values. Confucian ethics is cited in this respect as stressing the importance of filial piety, and, by extension, submission to state authority. But this argument completely ignores another central precept of Confucian

ethics, which, as Tu Wei-Ming correctly asserts, also emphasizes the primacy of the self and the importance of self-cultivation in realizing human potential and guarding against exploitation by the powers that be.

Amartya Sen and another Nobel laureate, former South Korean president Kim Dae Jung, have effectively debunked the Asian-values thesis. The experiences of South Korea and Taiwan, two states with a clearly Confucian ethical heritage, further lay waste to the notion that Western concepts of democracy are incompatible with Asian civilization. Thailand, a state with a largely Buddhist population, and Indonesia, with the largest Muslim population in the world, have also succeeded in building democracies. Contrasted with these examples, the false discourse of “Asian values” merely shows how far authoritarian rulers, along with their cronies and apologists, will go in order to justify and preserve their rule. Although autocrats remain entrenched in some places, their influence over the masses is waning, and it is undeniable that Asian peoples have demonstrated not only their desire to promote democratic principles, but also their ability to sustain democratic institutions and freedoms.

Harrowing theories have also been concocted claiming an inherent contradiction between Islam and democratic values, in an attempt to drive a wedge between two great civilizations. It is said, for example, that whereas liberal democracy places sovereignty in the hands of the individual, in Islam sovereignty belongs solely to God, thereby reducing the individual to a mere agent with little concern for the exercise of creativity and personal freedom. This view is a misreading of the sources of religion and represents a capitulation to extremist discourse. The proper view is that freedom is the fundamental objective of the divine law. Islam has always expressed the primacy of *‘adl*, or justice, which is a close approximation of what the West defines as freedom. Justice entails ruling according to the dictates of Islamic law, which emphasize consultation and condemn despotism and tyranny.

As articulated by the great jurist al-Shatibi (d. 790 C.E.), the *maqasid al-shari‘a* (higher objectives of the *shari‘a*) sanctify the preservation of religion, life, intellect, family, and wealth, objectives that bear striking resemblance to Lockean ideals that would be expounded centuries later. Many scholars have further explained that laws which contravene the *maqasid* must be revised or amended to bring them into line with the higher objectives and to ensure that they contribute to the safety and development of the individual and society. Notwithstanding the current malaise of authoritarianism plaguing the Muslim world, there can be no question that several crucial elements of constitutional democracy and civil society are also moral imperatives in Islam—freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, and the sanctity of life and property—as demonstrated very clearly by the Koran, as well as by the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, perhaps most succinctly and eloquently in his farewell address.

There is an ongoing debate over these issues in the Muslim world. The extremist view, by conflating the exercise of state power with the sovereignty of God, confers on tyranny the mantle of legitimacy. On the other hand, the secular elite espouses a vision that purports to eliminate the role of religion within the public sphere. The current assertions about Islam’s hostility to democracy hold no more water than did the discredited Asian-values thesis.

A Muslim Wave of Democracy?

The quest for democracy among Muslims today is one of the most prominent and transformative features of our time. An earlier democratic wave brought down the Berlin Wall, liberated Eastern Europe from communism, and triggered the implosion of the Soviet Empire. Almost a decade later, Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world, broke free from the yoke of military-based authoritarian rule and plunged headlong into democracy after more than thirty years of oppression and dictatorship. Indonesia is the world’s largest Muslim-majority nation; its successful transition is the single most significant development in the recent history of democracy. The press in Indonesia is free, and the fairness of Indonesian elections is unsurpassed.

Fundamental liberties are enshrined in the constitution and fully recognized and respected by the powers that be. The people may gather to protest government decisions and policies without fear of reprisal. Still, efforts to bolster democratic institutions must be pursued relentlessly. Economic progress through free-market reforms must remain high on the list of priorities, with a concomitant program for socioeconomic justice. The fight against corruption must continue with full conviction. It is true that Indonesia still has significant steps to take, particularly toward fulfilling the socioeconomic objectives of democracy, but it undoubtedly remains a beacon for Muslim nations aspiring to attain democracy and freedom.

What happened in Indonesia in 1997 stands as one of the decisive moments in Islam's modern history. What is happening in Turkey in the current decade is no less remarkable. If Indonesia enjoys the prestige of being the largest Muslim country, Turkey is remembered among Muslims as the seat of their last great empire, as well as of the caliphate. The Turkish Republic came into being after the First World War as a modern state with an avowedly secular character under Mustafa Kemal. Until recently, however, Turkish democracy was beset by a fundamental contradiction: Its secular character was maintained not by popular consent, but by military force. Moreover, secularism had morphed into a religion of its own.

Hopes of joining the European Union have helped to contain the once unrestricted power of the military elite and to open up political space in which parties may operate without fear of reprisal. In this new climate, the current government has a clear democratic mandate from the people. The work that Turkey has done in order to navigate its way to a "new consensus" marks the country as one of the most vibrant and mature Muslim democracies. It is within a democratic framework that this nation aspires to refresh its collective memory of its cultural heritage. Turkey seeks to mature further as a democracy while retaining its Muslim identity.

Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the former "people's mayor" of Istanbul who spent time in jail for his devotion to his political convictions, embodies the qualities needed to advance democratic reforms and social justice. Under his leadership, secularism is no longer seen as "against religion" but rather as a fundamental principle of impartiality and tolerance of religious diversity. To my mind, if a modern democratic Muslim state seeks to set limits on governmental authority in deference to the rights of the individual, this is wholly in line with the requirements of constitutional democracy.

Though the relevance of the Turkish experience to the rest of the Muslim world may seem self-evident, there is considerable dispute over the lessons to be drawn from it. According to some interpretations, for example, the primary lesson of the Turkish case is that a secular political order is a prerequisite for constitutional democracy. But the experiences of Egypt and Iraq under Nasserism and Baathism, respectively, clearly reveal that secularism, far from being a guarantee of constitutional democracy, may become a formula for tyranny. Indonesia under Suharto was explicitly secular, but it certainly was not a constitutional democracy. It is more correct to say that constitutional democracy cannot take root in a society, whether secular or Islamic, without a firm and profound commitment on the part of the political elites to protect the fundamental rights of all.