



DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS, BOSTON

WORKING PAPER SERIES

**WINNING THE NEW DEMOCRATIC PEACE:
Rethinking Secular Rhetoric and Foreign Policy**

By

Jalal Alamgir

Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science
University of Massachusetts, Boston
Email: jalal.alamgir@umb.edu

March 2006

Note: This paper represents a work in progress. Please contact the author before citing any information from this paper.

Winning the New Democratic Peace

By Jalal Alamgir¹

Support for democracy is a major cornerstone of US foreign policy. The idea is now familiar: Democratic ethics would deter conventional violence, like inter-state war, and freedom of expression by the marginalized might deter unconventional violence, like terrorism. But is the US foreign policy establishment ready to tackle the unpalatable consequences of democracy? The recent election result in Palestine is a stark case in point. Hamas won 74 out of 132 seats in the January 2006 elections, which was observed by international monitors and declared to be generally free and fair. Clearly, the Palestinian people have given legitimacy to some (not all—there are divisions within supporters of Hamas) of the ideals that Hamas represents. That is a democratic verdict. But it has opened up questions about the ethics and practicality of recognizing an elected government with ties to terrorism. It will be tempting for US and Israeli policymakers, in this situation, to continue to guide foreign policy first and foremost by their security needs. In essence, foreign policy would be a reaction to the content of Hamas's professed goals and its past.

That would be a mistake. This victory is a blessing in disguise: it offers a superb opportunity to realize the potential of democracy to temper extremism. With the right vision and support, Hamas could be made a test case of what is considered a terrorist organization eventually reforming itself. As more places in the Middle East begin experiments—however small—with elections and democratic decision-making, more surprise victories like this will spring up. A peaceful future from these experiments

depends as much on the Middle East's ability to carry out free elections as on the West's ability to engage democratic verdicts positively.

Grievances and Representation

The United States and Israel, and to a lesser extent some other European nations, are justifiably worried about two of Hamas's ideological pillars: the destruction of Israel and the use of violence. Both of these, however, are expressions of a more fundamental Palestinian yearning that found currency among voters: freedom from oppression. That, more than anything else, secured its victory. To continue to use the blanket term of "terrorism" automatically with an elected Hamas will prevent a nuanced understanding of its support base and thus the formation of right ways to engage it. First of all, the majority of Palestinians support Hamas because they view it as a legitimate resistance movement against occupation. While occupation has been Hamas's reason for violence against Israel, the organization has not supported wholesale violence against the West, a stance disapproved by groups like Al-Qaeda. Hamas, moreover, has supported democratic participation, professing that an Islamic state cannot succeed unless it is voluntarily adopted by citizens, which necessitates a democratic form of decision-making. Finally, Hamas is economically conservative and market-oriented, and its economic policies will likely benefit both local and foreign business. In other words, Hamas represents for Palestinians much more than violence. Foreign policy guided by an automatic interpretation of Hamas's win as a victory of terrorism and anti-Semitism is therefore likely to fail. A more sophisticated understanding of what Hamas represents for Palestinians will provide the West with concrete opportunities for positive outcomes,

spanning from strengthening democratic norms in the Middle East to rooting out corruption to increasing market-focused reforms, and toward implementing a peace agreement. Since Hamas represents issues felt by the majority of Palestinians, it has credibility: its negotiations with Israel will carry more weight in the eyes of ordinary Palestinians than the PLO could muster during the Oslo Peace Agreement in the 1990s.

This type of representation and grievance-led victory is nothing new. Take the world's largest democracy for instance. In 2004, the Congress Party was swept to power in India, surprising many observers. The incumbent party, BJP, had run on a platform of optimism, termed "India Rising." This eventually distanced it from the majority of India's 670 million voters, who saw themselves more than a few steps away from the trickling down of prosperity. The Congress Party, with a strong grassroots organization, was more in tune with the perception of the majority—that it is inequality that is rising, that some large swathes of rural India are depressed economically, that the rural poor want jobs. It mattered less what the stated economic and foreign policy philosophies were—there was not much distinction between the two parties—but what mattered is who represented the electorate's grievances more faithfully.

In Bolivia, a country that gives the United States a certain degree of uneasiness, Evo Morales got elected in December 2005. The US has been pursuing a war on drugs in Bolivia, with a goal to eradicate coca farming. The administration certainly could have hoped for a better election outcome than the victory by Morales, an Aymara Indian and a coca farmer backed by a historic 54% of the votes. Prior to the elections, his supporters had chanted not only about coca farming but also about nationalization of foreign assets, especially in the energy sector, which sent additional shudders to the investor community.

Now that he is elected, he has begun to assuage subtly some of those fears. But what got him into power had less to do with his purported future policies and more to do with his representative credibility that he understood the problems faced by indigenous peoples in the first place, who comprised two-thirds of Bolivia's population. This distinction is important because not understanding its significance will likely set Western policymakers up for some big surprises in the quest of spreading democracy.

Preparing for a Heartbreak

What has happened when non-democratic countries have opened up political space? Results have not always been as expected. Communists were returned to power through free elections in Eastern European countries. Many Muslim societies have also tended to elect parties or candidates that represent their yearnings but in secular eyes come across as extremists.

Egypt held elections in 2005, attracting more than 5,000 candidates for the 444 parliament seats in a three-phased contest that lasted a month. In a landscape dominated for years by Hosni Mubarak's party, NDP (National Democratic Party), electoral rules were drawn carefully to limit threats to power. Opposition parties were allowed to run, but under a strict code, starting with Emergency Laws that have been in place for more than two decades to restrict political action. Religion could not be used as a platform, forcing the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), a fundamentalist organization, to field its candidates as independents. Especially before and during the final round of polls in December 2005, MB members endured regular persecution and arrests. The rules almost

guaranteed that NDP would win; the real question was who would become the main opposition group.

Surprising many observers, “independents” backed by MB won almost a fifth of the seats, an unexpectedly high proportion, and six times better than their previous performance. The secular parties that Western advocates of democracy were pinning their hopes on did poorly. If elections in Egypt were completely free and fair, and if NDP did not have the full weight of the government’s resources behind it, then it is likely that MB would have emerged as the winner in this most populous Arab country.

Iran, a major site for the struggle between moderates/reformists and fundamentalists, has been more democratic in some ways. It, too has restrictions, and retains a formal and powerful role for clerics, but, unlike Egypt, it experiences rotations in power in regularly-held national elections. In 2000, liberals led by Mohammad Khatami won. In 2005, power swung the other way, bringing the conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad into the presidency. The result initially was confusing for Western observers. Ahmadinejad is Iran’s first non-cleric President in more than two decades, which denoted a decline in the formal role of the clergy. At the same time, he had taken part in the Islamic Revolution in 1979, and soon appeared a firebrand hardliner, encouraging anti-Western sentiments in Iran and abroad. The pendulum of power in Iran has swung, for the time being, clearly in favor of a strong regime with even pan-Islamic pretensions. But the rub is that he is an elected popular representative.

Under King Abdallah, the Hashemite kingdom in Jordan has been experimenting with greater political openness. The first elections during his tenure, for the lower house of the parliament, were supposed to be held in 2001. They were postponed amid rising

concerns that Islamic fundamentalists might win too many seats, especially in the context of the Gulf War and the Intifada. Political participation has increased there since then, but, like in Egypt, formal limits are imposed to contain the power of pro-Islamic forces. Out of the 110 seats in the Parliament, 30 are reserved for Muslims. In a country that is predominantly Muslim, this type of limit is essentially an effort to limit the number of seats that parties running on an Islamic platform can possibly win, though, like in Egypt, they may be able to back independent candidates behind the scenes. When elections were held in 2003, the Islamic Action Front (IAF) won 17 of these 30 seats amid complaints of fraud and irregularities against them. The outcome would certainly have been more in favor of IAF had the panoply of quotas and political restrictions not been in place.

Countries like Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar do not allow political parties. Contenders for any electoral exercise—and there have been a few limited ones—are by default “Islamist” and regime-loyalist. Even if a secular opposition were allowed to exist in non-democratic Arab countries, chances are that aside from a few exceptions (like Jordan), pro-Islamic parties would be the beneficiaries of initial rounds of free elections. Survey data between 2000 and 2004 also show that while support for democracy is fairly widespread in the Arab world, support for secular democracy is much lower. As one observer analyzing the survey results noted, “It is possible that some or even most prefer a political system that, while democratic, does not call for a separation of religion and politics.”² This is the heartbreak for which secular Western democracies have to prepare themselves. Over time, through repeated electoral cycles, moderate forces might gain power, and some Islamic parties themselves will

likely become tempered in their approach, but initial elections will produce some strong pro-Islamic outcomes.

There are two reasons for this. First, if allowed to exist, political parties in many countries will have to live side by side with vestiges of the past. It is not reasonable to expect that Saudi Arabia will suddenly become free from the wealth and influence of the Ibn Saud dynasty that has ruled it since 1932. Representing issues through an Islamic lens will allow parties to draw support from both the top and the bottom, the erstwhile rulers and the masses. Indonesia, the largest Muslim-majority country, offers an example. Indonesia emerged out of Suharto's authoritarian rule in 1998. Elections were held in 1999 to elect legislators who would in turn elect a President. The natural contender for President was Meghawati Sukarnoputri, whose party had won most seats in the Parliament. But a Muslim traditionalist, Abdurrahman Wahid, was elected—rather, selected—as President, even though he commanded less than 10 percent of parliamentary seats. Wahid, a cleric who led a 30-million strong Islamic organization, was chosen because he would represent, at least formally, the grievances and the voices of Indonesia's Muslims, both moderates and extremists. His policies and his administration eventually failed, but his selection as the first president under political openness signifies the pragmatic need to provide voice to a majority, religious or not.

The second reason is simpler: winning would come from giving voice to the long-term grievances felt by the majority, just like Hamas did. In most Arab countries this will necessarily entail anti-Western and anti-secular rhetoric. The causes are not difficult to imagine. One set of reasons go back to Arab memories of the series of Western interference, invasions, and coups since the First World War. Another set of reasons

relates to secularism. The narrative of spreading democracy contains implicitly the idea of “secular” democracy. But for many Muslims, this marriage of terms is not so obvious; it contains uncomfortable implications and contradictions. Most post-colonial secular regimes in the Arab world, of both the socialist and capitalist sorts, have been autocratic. Their agenda was modernization, not democratization. Ataturk is one example: orthodox Muslims in Turkey have felt for generations that their voices and grievances were forcibly repressed in the name of secularism and modernization. Even Nasser of Egypt, who rallied others for Pan-Arab modernization, ruled through a highly centralized administration, and repressed members of the Muslim Brotherhood, pushing it toward greater fundamentalism. The initial secular Baathist regimes in Syria and Iraq failed to deliver progress and became bastions of corruption. Secularism for many in the developing world brings a bitter taste, for it represents forced modernization and tyranny.

Winning the New Democratic Peace

Winning a democratic peace against extremism and terrorism will require a set of prudent policy choices. First of all, foreign policy narratives about “rule of law” should not reject outright the rule of Islamic law or even the prospect of an “Islamic state.” All self-proclaimed Islamic states around are limited: Islamic law only governs some aspects of society. Iran has a legislature and a judiciary. Laws governing the economies of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan are mostly civil laws, and contain incentives for foreign investment. Blanket policy rhetoric of “rule of law” can even have a negative connotation. As one observer noted, “many Arabs view the rule of law in a manner similar to American legal scholars on the left, as an ideology of political control, not as a check on political

abuse.”³ Instead of suggesting the sources and the types of law that should rule, US foreign policy should simply support the democratic process, on the faith that ultimately democratic politics itself would move countries toward a greater reliance on civil law, even if there is a mix of Islamic law in private or other specific spheres.

Another choice that policymakers have to make is between anti-Western and anti-democracy sentiments. There is an imperative in some circles to “protect the idea of the West.”⁴ But winning the peace requires that the democratic process is favored over fighting anti-Westernism. Foreign policy geared toward winning hearts and minds needs to acknowledge that the history of intervention in many Muslim-majority states has created powerful anti-Western feelings that will continue for some time and will necessarily come to be expressed in democratic politics. Domination and subjugation have been part of the narrative, part of common parlance, in most post-colonial societies. That new democracies in the age of mass and micro media would broadcast this idea forcefully is a natural outcome, not a historical anomaly.

A further choice is between secularism and democracy. We need to realize that while they are assumed compatible in Western societies, they can be competing ideals elsewhere. In fact, advocacy of “secular politics” and rebuffs to “Islamist politics” will do disservice to both democracy and stability. It will evoke powerful memories of repression around the Muslim world. It will also not stand to scrutiny. Christian Democrats are a strong political force in a variety of Western states. “Christianist” politics are on the rise in the United States. Within the Middle East, Lebanon has strong a Christian presence in politics, and the President is constitutionally mandated to be a Christian. To Muslim observers, Western policymakers seem to have problems with mixing religion and

politics much less with Christianity but particularly when it comes to Islam. Even the phrase “political Islam,” so often used in the West, is problematic; it connotes a lack of understanding.

Negative reactions by Western democracies, including the United States and Israel, to power gains by Islamic parties will, by extension, keep on framing conflicts as an on-going struggle between the West and Islam, notwithstanding careful public declarations to the contrary. Those declarations ring empty if the West does not recognize that a democracy should allow religious groups to speak as well, as they do in the West, and even gain power if backed by popular vote. In Iraq, for example, the United Iraqi Alliance, which won most seats in the elections in December 2005, is led by the Islamic Daawa Party and the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq. Religious divides will continue to be a major public issue in Iraq. What is important is to provide support for the democratic process, instead of worrying about Islamic law, anti-Westernism, and secularism.

These options essentially come down to two: process versus content. The spread of democracy in an environment that is suspicious of Western values will benefit from focusing on process, not content. This is where distinguishing between grievance-led victory and policy-led victory becomes important. The whole point of democracy being a deterrent to terror is defeated if both the marginalized and the majority are not free to express their grievances using the political process. If the United States continues to be sidetracked by the content of Hamas’s purported policies, it will lose a major opportunity to support the electoral process in not just a fledgling democracy but for a land and a people that have come to symbolize an injustice felt by Muslims around the world. The

threat to choke a Hamas-led government fits smoothly into their framework of injustice and anti-Westernism, and does nothing but damage the cause for democracy. The content of some of Hamas's policies is worrisome for sure, but it is sourced in genuine grievances. The right way to engage this situation is through carrots, not sticks.

Installation payments, offers of additional investment, the lure of becoming accepted around the world, the trappings of diplomatic protocol, and most of all, the erosion effect of democratic politics—let all of these work together and strategically to temper Hamas into renouncing violence and an eventual recognition of Israel.

The prospect of reform is not out of the question. Within a few weeks of forming a government, Hamas has already begun to convey messages that contain openings for future changes in stance. As its leader Khaled Meshaal said: "The movement always acts in the interests of the Palestinian people, and makes any changes to its strategy only after careful deliberation."⁵ In other words, change is possible. Another Hamas leader, Mohammed Nazzal, told AFP: "If Israel is willing to recognise Palestinian rights and a completely independent Palestinian state, then we will be ready to announce our position."⁶ This type of change will not come overnight, but fostering it now is essential while being careful to not condone some of Hamas's past acts. This is a significant test for the United States. Engaging Hamas positively, as befits the winner of a democratic process, is the right policy to take.

The initial years of democratization in the Middle East will see more secular heartbreaks and grievance-led victories. Rejecting them would portend disaster. When the Algerian regime opened up political space in the late eighties, anti-socialist and anti-Western sentiments, hitherto suppressed, combined with Islam into a powerful mix. In

the local elections in 1990, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won more seats than FLN, which used to enjoy a single-party rule. In the first round of parliamentary elections the following year, FIS took almost a majority, winning 188 of a required 216 seats. As it became clear that FIS will likely win the full elections due in January 1992, the military intervened, eventually plunging the country into an eight-year-long civil war in which 150,000 people perished. Going even further back to 1970, when West Pakistan's government, which was backed by the United States, refused to hand over power to East Pakistan's Awami League, which had decisively won the national elections, a brutal civil war ensued and slit the country asunder, killing a million people in a mere nine months, and creating a new state, Bangladesh. It is a dangerous game to reject a popular, democratic verdict.

¹ Jalal Alamgir is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Thanks to Leila Farsakh for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

² Mark Tessler and Eleanor Gao, "Gauging Arab Support for Democracy," Journal of Democracy, vol. 16, no. 3, July 2005, p. 89.

³ David Mednicoff, "Middle East Dilemmas," in Thomas Carothers, ed., Promoting the Rule of Law Abroad (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006), p. 258.

⁴ See Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies (New York: Penguin, 2004).

⁵ “ Hamas Rejects Al-Qaeda’s Support,” BBC News Online, 5 March 2006,
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4776578.stm.

⁶ *ibid.*