
What Muslims Want

In Afghanistan, and Elsewhere—Democracy

Thomas O. Melia

If ever there were a country so devastated and forlorn that democracy could be considered a luxury—to be pursued only after more rudimentary human needs were met—I expected that Afghanistan after the Taliban would be the place. After all, few countries have experienced comparable devastation from civil war, foreign invasion, natural disasters, and misrule over a twenty-five year stretch. None seemed more inhospitable to our notions of a modern liberal society, considering the gender apartheid that banned education for girls and work by women; medieval punishments for religious dissenters and common criminals alike; the destruction of the giant Buddha statues at Bamian as part of a bizarre campaign to erase from the country every last artistic rendition of the human face; and of course the hospitality shown to Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda henchmen. Surely there was more afoot here than a few Taliban zealots run amok. There could well be a broader cultural disinclination for democracy as we know it.

Eminent scholars, of course, have long explicated the ways in which Islamic culture generally is not conducive to democratic practice, though some others have disputed this claim.¹ The experts had said that democracy ought not to be a high

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priority of the international community in Afghanistan. In a widely read paper early in the year, two leading thinkers on democratization strategies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace had argued instead that a *modus vivendi* had to be established with the warlords who had made common cause with U.S. forces to rout the Taliban. Any

government of Hamid Karzai. While I was confident I could do part of what NDI wanted—record and amplify the views of Afghans about Karzai, the king, the Taliban, and reconstruction priorities—I was also prepared to report back that democracy was neither well understood nor in great demand. My findings could have ended up supporting the unappealing

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effort to mold the country into a democracy, wrote Marina Ottaway and Anatol Lieven, would be not only “quite impossible in Afghanistan today, but fits only the wishes of a small minority of Westernized urban individuals ... very out of touch with their own society.”²

So I went to Kabul last April fully prepared to disappoint my friends at the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, a non-governmental organization devoted to the promotion of democratic institutions and ideas worldwide (After more than a dozen years at NDI, I departed in early 2001 to join Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, Inc., an international opinion research firm). Decisions about the country’s future were being made in Washington, Bonn, Brussels, Tokyo, and other world capitals—but ordinary Afghans were not getting much of a chance to weigh in. Now NDI had asked me to help bring that perspective to light on the eve of the “emergency Loya Jirga.” This was a version of the traditional Afghan gathering of elders being convened in June 2002 with United Nations assistance to chart the country’s future and legitimize the interim

conclusion that accommodation with warlords was the only smart way to move the country forward.

The Research. The absence of reliable demographic data after so many years of dislocation, death, and destruction makes it difficult to conduct systematic opinion research in Afghanistan. At least a million people are believed to have been killed since 1979 and several million more have been uprooted. In addition, hundreds of thousands of refugees were returning from abroad last spring, which not only affected the composition of the population but also prompted massive internal movement as returnees reclaimed their former homes and dispersed squatters. Mainly for these reasons, we had already decided to conduct focus groups rather than to attempt a national survey. Focus groups are qualitative, rather than quantitative; they produce results in words rather than numbers, and they do not require a scientific demographic framework. Conducted and analyzed properly, focus groups yield vital insights into the attitudes of a population.

Focus Groups are structured small group discussions conducted by a trained moderator to elicit opinions in a deliberately open-ended manner, so the researcher can measure intensity and conviction (or uncertainty) as well as listen to the choice of words used unprompted by participants to express their views. Focus groups do not constitute a representative—or even a random—sample of people whose views reflect the opinions of the larger society. Indeed, participants are often recruited selectively, in order to create homogenous groups, as was the case in this project.

Focus groups are homogeneous for two reasons. One is to be able to compare the views of particular segments of the population to others. Depending on the purpose of the research, this could be men versus women, young versus old, employed versus unemployed, or members of different geographic, political, religious or ethnic communities. The other reason is to enhance the comfort level of participants by creating a group that is, to the extent practicable, composed of peers. Each person is thus more likely to feel everyone's opinion matters equally and that there is no need to defer to others in the group. This encourages frankness and participation.

Another constraint on our research soon became clear: five months after the Taliban had been driven from power, the shooting had still not stopped. Even in Kabul, where the British-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) tried to keep the peace, a military curfew remained in effect. Two days after my arrival at Kabul International Airport, an overnight mortar attack there obliged the mightiest military in the world to divert Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's airplane to Bagram Military Air Base, 50 kilometers north of the city. In the week I arrived, substantial cash rewards were on offer for "a live foreigner"—presumably by remnants of al Qaeda or the Taliban. While it was possible to travel outside Kabul, Westerners were advised to do so only with proper safeguards, which were time-consuming and expensive. Security considerations, therefore, as well as limits on time and money, obliged us to conduct our research in the greater Kabul area.

Then came the more pedestrian challenges of organizing the project in an environment where virtually no public opinion research had ever been done and where people were still reacquainting themselves with free speech.³ We

coached several university professors in proper techniques for recruiting participants, and required that they travel well beyond the outskirts of Kabul in order to find rural residents as well as city folk. Working through translators, I next trained schoolteachers to be moderators for the groups and familiarized them with the guidelines that had been developed in consultation with NDI. Each two-hour discussion would be conducted in the mother tongue of the participants—Pashtun, Dari (or the Hazara dialect), Uzbek, or Tajik. Then, as twelve groups were conducted over six days, my translator and I observed discreetly from an adjoining room. More than one hundred men and women, three-fourths of them illiterate (as are most Afghans) took part. I was prepared for some participants to be suspicious about who sponsored the research, but it turned out that none of them were concerned. They were simply delighted to be asked their opinions, something no one in authority had yet done in liberated Afghanistan.

Findings. So what did we learn? In addition to noting the unrealistically high expectations about the Loya Jirga's

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capacity to resolve the country's problems, we gathered a great deal of textured information about popular attitudes toward Karzai's government, the international community, and previous rulers—and recorded the intense fear and loathing most people shared for the Taliban.⁴ Some of what we learned was not surprising. Pashtuns, for instance, are much fonder of the old king, Zahir Shah (a fellow Pashtun), than are Tajiks and others. Women believe the most urgent problem facing the country is the dearth of housing, especially acute with so many refugees returning. People were grateful to the U.S. and the UN for driving the Taliban from power, though they were disappointed that promised aid to rebuild the devastated country had been slow to arrive. However, on two major themes—democracy and warlords—what we heard was not consistent with what the experts had led us to anticipate.

Support for a democratic form of government is very strong across Afghanistan's four principal ethnic communities—the Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks. Some people, especially illiterate women, hesitate to embrace the term "democracy" (*mardum salary*) saying they are not learned enough to discuss such things. Yet, by and large, Afghans want their country to enjoy much of what one normally associates with democracy. They want to have an elected government that is responsive to people's interests. They believe everyone should be equal under the law, and that even high government officials should

be held accountable. Afghans are also very keen about their right to free expression, particularly the right to criticize the government without fear of retribution when it fails to deliver.

We have not studied at school, but I think democracy means freedom. (Young, illiterate Pashtun woman)

It means having the right to criticize and to not have fear. (Middle-aged, high-school educated Tajik woman)

Practically, of course, democracy means free elections and freedom of expression. It means respecting everyone's rights. (Young Hazara man with a primary school education)

Afghans also do not believe that there is any incompatibility between Islam and democracy; they believe they can and should have both. Indeed, the Koran was cited as authority for the notion that people should choose their rulers and everyone should be treated equally, regardless of their status or religion. Some even note that in a democracy the right to worship in one's own way can be protected—and that this is a good thing. This appears to be at least in part a response to the rule of the Taliban, whose cruelty and zealotry in upholding even the most minor tenets convinced many people that not everything done in the name of Islam is just or constructive. Whether or not they thought so before the Taliban governed, ordinary Afghans today evince an appreciation for at least a modicum of person-

al space in the practice of one's Islamic faith. While it is not surprising that this would be the case among the beleaguered Hazara minority, who belong to the Shi'ia tradition in this mainly Sunni society, the sentiment is also shared amongst other ethnic groups as well.

The Taliban had a very poor understanding of Islam. Instead of doing those things that are obligations in Islam, they were obsessing on a few minor aspects of Islam, and treating them as supreme. (Young, high-school educated Hazara man)

Some people think that to be in a democracy is to abandon Islam. But that is not true. It just means you have a choice. If you want to pray five times a day, you can. (Illiterate, middle-aged Uzbek man)

Democracy means that a person can be Islamic. When it is time to say your prayers, do that. And when it is time for relaxing, do that. Your faith is your own to live. (Illiterate, middle-aged Pashtun Man)

At least as often as women, men cite the recent re-opening of schools to girls and of the workplace to women as signal accomplishments of Karzai's administration. At the same time, however, men and women both distinguish between a democracy consistent with their Islamic faith and the array of civil liberties that go with it—all of which they want for themselves—and what they understand to be the "excesses" of Western democracy, which are consistently described in terms of licentiousness among and with regard to women.

I do not like the Western democracy because it is an extremism and it has abandoned the middle road. We do not want our sisters to

go outside with bare bodies. (Young, high-school educated Hazara man)

In the West, a woman can divorce from her husband in one minute. Here we stay with our husband until the end of life. We do not want to be like Western women. (Young, illiterate Uzbek woman)

Democracy more or less means Islam. They are not opposite of each other. But not the extreme democracy of the Western countries ... in the West a woman can do anything she wants, go anywhere. But Islam doesn't allow women to do so. (Middle-aged, illiterate Tajik man)

As for the other thing the experts had led me to expect—an appreciation for the order established by warlords who had been the West's allies of convenience in the final assault against the Taliban—ordinary Afghans again expressed a different view. Men of all stations are very concerned about the international community's failure to disarm the militias, as many believed was promised in the Bonn Agreement. Occasional announcements that arms were being decommissioned were not reassuring. Particularly striking is how many people used phrases like "gun-ocracy" (*tufang salary*) or "rule of the commanders" (*qumandan salary*) as everyday terms that needed no explanation.

Karzai has begun to rebuild a destroyed country. But ... there are a lot of warlords dominating in various places. (Illiterate Pashtun farmer from Logar province)

The most disappointing thing is the dominance of the warlords and the fact the Mujahaddin are actually running the country. (Young, high-school educated Hazara man)

The warlords and the 'gun-ocracy' are why we

need to have the Loya Jirga and that is why we are trying in the Loya Jirga to make the government a people's government. (Middle-aged, illiterate Uzbek man)

Yet it turned out not to matter all that much what the people of Afghanistan want, or believe about democracy. More than a year after the Taliban were driven from power, and six months after the Loya Jirga ratified Karzai's government, little attention, and virtually no funding, has been devoted by major donors to the establishment of an accountable Afghan government. Some warlords have been brought into the Cabinet; others continue to control major cities. Their fiefdoms remain generally intact. Despite repeated pleas from President Karzai, ISAF still patrols only in Kabul, and the U.S. troops in the country focus only on the search for al Qaeda. While the U.S. has allocated almost \$850 million to reconstruction and humanitarian relief efforts in Afghanistan, little attention has been paid to the building blocks of democratic government.⁵ In a lengthy review of the Bush Administration's accomplishments in the rehabilitation of Afghanistan in mid-October, the Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Andrew Natsios, summed up their democratization work: "In the democracy and governance area, we were instrumental in providing the logistics systems to transport people who were chosen for the Loya Jirga... we also had the radio station put in place so that ... almost the entire proceedings could be broadcast to the whole country."⁶ That's it. Insiders joke the new Kabul-Kandahar highway is the "road to democracy" because \$5 million allocated for democracy work was diverted to this project.

Even when the Bush Administration finally overcame its aversion to "nation-building" in November 2002, and Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill promised that the President would sign legislation authorizing \$2.3 billion for Afghanistan,⁷ democracy did not become a priority.⁸

The Wider Debate. Meanwhile, several studies appeared about the attitudes of Muslims in other countries that seemed to echo my findings from Afghanistan. New research examined Muslim attitudes from the Gulf, the Levant, North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and the former republics of Central Asia. The underlying field research was conducted according to different methodologies. Nevertheless, the congruence of the findings is compelling: across the world, Muslims are as likely as people of other faiths to believe in the virtues of democracy as a political system. They want systems that respect individual rights and liberties in their own countries, *even while* they are often averse to aspects of Western culture (at least as perceived at a popular level in Islamic societies). There are many obstacles to democracy in the Islamic world, but ordinary Muslim men and women want it as much as people anywhere else.

For instance, national surveys in late 2001 in the Central Asian neighbors of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, places yet to experience much democracy, seem to confirm the apt observation by Richard Rose that "(e)ven if a country is ruled autocratically, those ruled may nevertheless hold democratic values."⁹ In both countries, where substantial Slavic Orthodox communities cohabit with large Islamic populations, 61 percent of adults agree with the statement: *Democracy may have its faults, but it's better than any other form*

of government. These figures do not vary substantially by religion and, as Rose notes, are “much the same as in Latin America, Africa, Taiwan, and Korea, and higher than in the Russian Federation.”¹⁰ The surveys also suggest that the more observant one is in either the Orthodox or Muslim faiths, the slightly lower likelihood there is that one would agree democracy is better than any other form of government. Rose concludes that not only is there a clear preference for democracy, but that “the evidence suggests that religion and ethnicity make less difference to political values than do ... education and economic well-being.”¹¹

Similar findings emerge in sub-Saharan Africa, in places with very different cultural, economic, and political histories (including varying degrees of democratic governance). In surveys that compared Muslim and non-Muslim populations living alongside one another in polyglot countries—Mali, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Uganda—Afrobarometer researchers asked if *democracy is preferable to any other form of government*. Overall, 71 percent of Muslims, and 76 percent of non-Muslims, concurred. This led to the conclusion that while “adherents of Islam in Africa occasionally display distinctive political attitudes, they do not differ much from non-Muslims on the subject of democracy, and their differences do not always run in an anti-democratic direction.”¹² When the Africans were probed about what they most associate with democracy, Muslims cited civil liberties, especially free speech, twice as often as they mentioned elections.¹³

A Saudi Arabian-American collaborative effort that surveyed Arabs in eight countries (Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) in Spring

2002 also found that the achievement of “civil and personal rights” is consistently the most important political issue overall.¹⁴ While this research did not explore attitudes toward political democracy per se, it established that Muslims’ views on important political issues vary considerably, even as they consistently desire to enjoy universally understood civil liberties—liberties that are best safeguarded in a democratic system.

The most far-ranging and in-depth study looked at data from 75 nations over six years (1995–2001), including nine predominantly Muslim societies and 22 predominantly Christian Western nations. After a rigorous re-examination of the accumulated data, Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart concluded that “compared with Western societies, support for democracy was marginally slightly *stronger* (not weaker) among those living in Islamic societies. This pattern was evident on three indicators: approval of the way democracy works in practice, support for democratic ideals, as well as disapproval for the idea of strong government leaders.”¹⁵ The only gap that emerged, regarding support for religious authorities playing a role in politics, turned out to be “less a cultural division between the West and Islam than it is a gap between the West and many other types of less secular societies around the globe, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and, to a lesser extent, in Latin America.”¹⁶ Samuel P. Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” does in fact exist, they wrote—but not on matters relating to political systems. Consistent with my findings from Afghanistan, Norris and Inglehart conclude that “there is a substantial cultural cleavage ... in social beliefs about gender equity and sexual liberation.”¹⁷

Conclusion. Emerging amidst news accounts declaring anti-American hostility was rising in many parts of the Islamic world, these studies seem to suggest a nuanced approach to America's engagement with the Islamic world, especially on matters of political reform.¹⁸ The clear desire of Muslims to live in democracy should thus be viewed separately from their concerns about supposedly lax morals in the West. It should also be distinguished from opposition to U.S. policies (on Iraq or the Palestinian-Israeli conflict)—issues on

which there is more division of opinion than on the more fundamental consensus on the desirability of democracy. It will be difficult to enlarge democracy in Islamic countries, but ordinary men and women there hope it will happen. Notwithstanding the wide gulf that exists with regard to international policy and cultural preferences, therefore, it may be possible to identify common ground between the Islamic world and the West on the saliency of democracy as a political system—if differences on other planes can be put aside.

NOTES

1 Those who believe Islam and democracy are incompatible include Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996); Francis Fukuyama, "The Primacy of Culture," *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 1 (January 1995): 1–14. The most widely cited argument to the contrary is John L. Esposito and John O. Voll, *Islam and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

2 Marina Ottaway and Anatol Lieven, "Rebuilding Afghanistan: Fantasy versus Reality," Internet, http://www.ceip.org/files/Publications/OttawayLieven_RebuildAfghan.asp?from=pubdate (Date accessed, 1 December 2002).

3 The only research into Afghan attitudes conducted during the Taliban years that I am aware of was conducted by my former colleagues at Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, Inc. in the summer of 1999, as part of a global project for the International Committee of the Red Cross on attitudes toward the rules of war, including the Geneva Conventions. That report is based on both quantitative and qualitative data. "People on War: Country Report Afghanistan," Internet, <http://www.greenbergresearch.com> (Date accessed: 1 December 2002).

4 Read the full report, "Afghan Perspectives on Democracy," Internet, http://www.accessdemocracy.org/NDI/library/1411_af_report_052802.pdf (Date accessed: 1 December 2002).

5 *Washington Post*, 24 November 2002, lead editorial

6 Andrew Natsios, "Assessing the U.S. Record: Afghanistan One Year Later," Internet, http://www.aei.org/past_event/conf021018a.htm (Date accessed: 1 December 2002).

7 Carlotta Gall, "O'Neill, in Afghanistan, Promises to Push \$2.3 Billion Aid Bill," *New York Times*, 19 November 2002, 21.

8 Bradley Graham, "Pentagon Plans a Redirection in Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, 20 November 2002, A(1).

9 Richard Rose, "How Muslims View Democracy: Evidence from Central Asia," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 4 (October 2002): 105.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*, 103.

12 "Islam, Democracy, and Public Opinion in Africa," Internet, <http://www.afrobarometer.org/papers/AfrobriefNo3.pdf> (Date accessed: 1 December 2002). Based at the University of Michigan, *Afrobarometer* is a nascent effort to collect time series opinion data on a consistent basis across sub-Saharan Africa. It has so far reached only 12 countries, but it does represent the broadest such effort underway at present.

13 *Ibid.*, 3.

14 James J. Zogby, "What Arabs Think: Values, Beliefs and Concerns," Internet, <http://www.zogby.com> (Date accessed: 1 December 2002).

15 Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, "Islam & the West: Testing the 'Clash of Civilizations' Thesis," *International Journal of Sociology* (forthcoming). Quotations taken from the draft found on Professor Norris's webpage. Internet, http://ksgnotes1.harvard.edu/people/Pippa_Norris_11-12 (Date accessed: November 2002).

16 *Ibid.*, 12.

17 *Ibid.*, 15.

18 Jane Perlez, "Anger at U.S. Said to Be at New High," *New York Times*, 11 September 2002, A(23).