Why Has Democratization Bypassed the Muslim World?

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Two Holiday Paradises

If one does not look beyond the resorts and palm-fringed beaches, one will not discover much difference between Mauritius and the Maldives, two tropical island states in the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. Mauritius has 1.2 million inhabitants, the Maldives five hundred thousand, and both have a colonial past. Mauritius was French until 1810 and subsequently British. The Maldives long remained an independent sultanate, but in 1887 they were integrated as a protectorate into the British Empire. The Maldives became independent in 1965, Mauritius in 1968. Neither of the two states has natural resources such as oil, gas, ores, or rare minerals, and they are mainly dependent on tourism for their foreign-currency earnings. Fishing is a source of revenue for the Maldives, as are sugar cane cultivation, textile production, and financial services for Mauritius. They are also similar in terms of their levels of prosperity: the gross national product (GNP) per capita in 2015 was US$9,446 in the Maldives and US$9,041 in Mauritius.[1]

But the façade of swaying palms hides a world of difference between the two countries in terms of democracy and human rights. Since independence, Mauritius has been a model of political stability, governed by successive democratic administrations. The majority of the population are Hindus, but the large Christian and Muslim minorities can freely practice their faith. Besides Hindu holidays, Christmas and the Islamic Feast of Sacrifice are also official holidays.[2] Three of the country's presidents have been Muslims, including, most recently (2015 to 2018), the country's first female president, the chemist Ameenah Gurib-Fakim. In the Maldives, by contrast, democracy has never taken root.[3] After independence, things got off to a good start, and democracy held out for a few years. But from 1978 to 2008, the same president, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, winning elections in which there were no opposing candidates, ruled continuously. Raised in Egypt and educated at Cairo's Islamic Al-Azhar University, Gayoom institutionalized fundamentalist Islam by, among other things, making Sunni Islam the state religion in 1994, and prohibiting the public practice of other religions in 1997. In 2008, Gayoom decided to call democratic presidential elections for the first time and promptly lost. The subsequent brief democratic opening was ended by a coup in 2012. Under the dictatorial government of Abdulla Yameen, Gayoom's half brother, the influence of radical Islamist groups grew even stronger, and the Maldives earned the dubious distinction of becoming the country with the highest worldwide per capita rate of foreign fighters supplied to the so-called Islamic State in Syria

and Iraq. As in many other Muslim countries around the globe, the radicalization of Islam in the country has been fueled to an important extent by returning students from extremist Islamic universities and madrasas in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Egypt.[4]

The Maldives have no religious freedom: all elected officials must be Sunni Muslims, and non-Muslims cannot become citizens. The legislation is partly based on sharia law and provides for corporal punishment for, among other things, adultery and homosexuality. The Maldives are also among the ten countries worldwide—all Muslim—where apostasy, or leaving one's faith, carries the death penalty.[5] No wonder, then, that the Maldives rank second in the world in both the Index of Lack of Religious Freedom, compiled by the American sociologists of religion Brian Grim and Roger Finke, and the Index of Religious Persecution, compiled by the Israeli political scientist Jonathan Fox. Only in Saudi Arabia is the situation regarding the rights of religious minorities even worse, according to both indices. In both indices, eight of the ten countries with the greatest religious persecution and lack of freedom have a Muslim-majority population.[6]

Although the Maldivian elections of 2018 brought the opposition to power, the strong influence of Islamist extremists, supported by the powerful Ministry of Islamic Affairs, remains a barrier to democratization. For instance, in November 2019, the government gave in to demands by Islamic clerics to ban the country's most important prodemocracy and human rights nongovernmental organization, the Maldivian Democracy Network, because it had issued a critical report about the influence of Islamic extremism in the country. Azra Naseem, one of the report's authors, accurately sums up how Islamic fundamentalism stands in the way of democracy not just in the Maldives, but in many parts of the Muslim world:

> What the clerics have in common, despite many differences, is a subscription to the belief that "true Islam" can only be practised by reviving the "Islam of its first three generations." A philosophy, in other words, that "believes in progression through regression." The dissemination of this belief in various forms has been a prominent part of life on the islands for over a decade. Belief in democratic ideals, on the other hand, appear[s] to have suffered a setback, equated as it is with secularism, and therefore [being] "incompatible with Islam."[7]

Freedom and Democracy in International Comparison

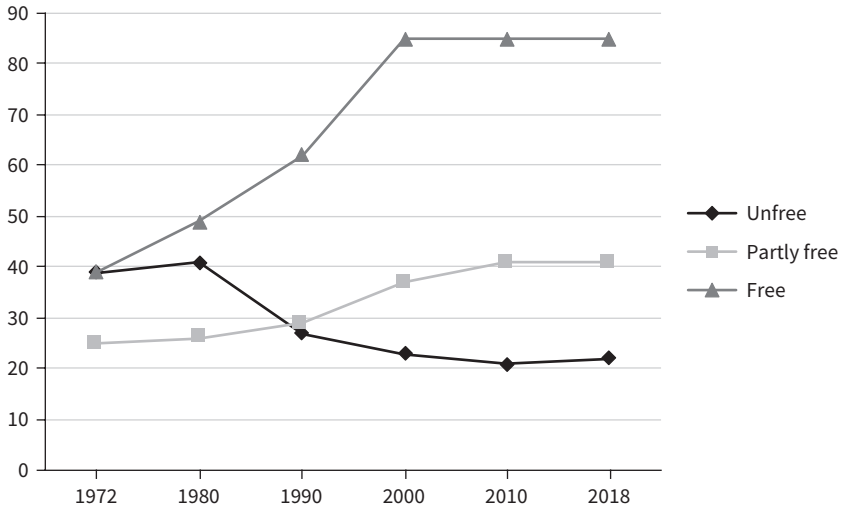
Of course, a comparison between just two countries in itself proves little. Democracy and human rights are not in such a bad state in all Muslim countries as in the Maldives, and not all non-Muslim countries are as democratic as Mauritius. In order to provide a generalizable answer to the question of the extent to which factors such as economic prosperity, the composition of the economy, colonial legacies, and religion play a role in explaining democratization, we need to make a broader, global comparison.

To this end we can use international comparative measurements of the degree of democracy and freedom. Several sources provide relevant information, but the one compiled by Freedom House provides comparisons over time, is based on a broad definition of democracy, and covers a larger number of countries compared to alternative indices.[8]

The Freedom House index takes into account political rights and civil liberties and ranks them on a scale from 1 for the most democratic and free countries to 7 for the most authoritarian and freedom-limiting countries. Countries with a score from 1 to 2.5 are labeled by the index as "free"; the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia (all three with a score of 1), and the United States (2) belong to this category, as do all countries of the European Union, with the exception of Hungary. Under the leadership of the right-wing populist Viktor Orbán, Hungary has fallen, with a score of 3, into the category "partly free," which includes countries with a score between 3 and 5 points. This category also encompasses, for example, India (3), Indonesia (3), Ukraine (3.5), and Bangladesh and Pakistan (both 5). Countries with a score between 5.5 and 7 points are considered "unfree." Examples are Turkey (5.5), Iran and Egypt (both 6), China and Russia (both 6.5), and countries at the bottom of the list such as North Korea and Saudi Arabia (both 7). Before the Taliban took over power in 2021, Afghanistan was already authoritarian (5.5). With the Taliban back in power and draconian sharia rule reintroduced, it will rejoin ranks with Saudi Arabia among the most unfree countries on the planet.

Figure 1 shows the development of democracy and human rights in the world between 1972, the first year for which Freedom House data are available, and 2018. In 1972,

Figure 1. Political regimes in the independent states of the world, 1972–2018



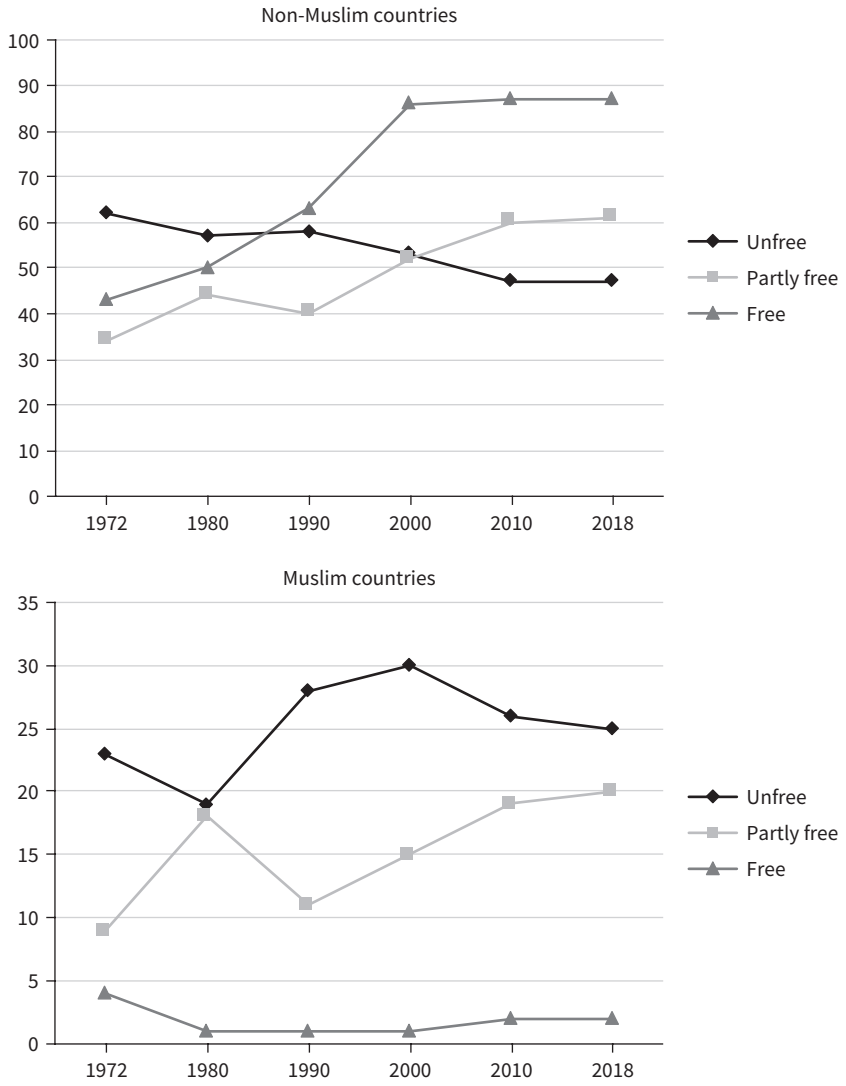
Source: Freedom House.

democracy was by no means common. In Latin America, Africa, and Asia, authoritarian regimes of various kinds dominated; Eastern Europe struggled under the yoke of communist dictatorships; in Spain and Portugal, respectively, the fascists Franco and Salazar ruled; and in Greece, a military junta had seized power. Only three out of ten countries in the world were democratic at the time. Since then, and especially since the end of the Cold War, democracy has made unprecedented progress. Although decolonization and the collapse of multiethnic states such as the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia created more than fifty new independent countries, the number of unfree dictatorships fell from sixty-two to forty-seven, while the number of democracies doubled from forty-three to eighty-seven. It is hard to imagine today that not so long ago, popular holiday destinations such as Spain and Greece were ruled by cruel authoritarian regimes. By 2018, with the exception of Russia and Belarus, Europe no longer had any real dictatorships. Former military regimes in South America such as those in Argentina and Chile have also become democracies, as have the former dictatorships in South Korea and Taiwan and the apartheid regime in South Africa. All over the world, democracy has spread its wings.

Everywhere? No; one part of the world has completely missed the wave of democratization that has swept across the world in the last fifty years. At the beginning of the 1970s, there were thirty-six independent countries with a Muslim majority. Only four of them—Lebanon, Malaysia, the Gambia in West Africa, and, at that time still, the Maldives—were free democracies. Thus, the proportion of democracies in the Muslim world, at 11 percent, was already well below that of non-Muslim countries (38 percent). Figure 2 shows that the gap between the Muslim and non-Muslim world has since become much wider. In 2018, there were only two democratic countries with a Muslim majority, although the number of independent Islamic states had increased from thirty-six to forty-seven. Moreover, by 2020, Senegal had dropped into the "partly free" category, with a score of 3. In July 2021, Tunisian president Kais Saied suspended parliament. Unless he restores democracy before the end of the year, the Muslim world will end up without a single democracy in the next Freedom House report. Until a few years ago, two other Muslim-majority countries, Mali and Indonesia, could still have been considered democracies, but under the influence of fundamentalist movements they have now moved in an authoritarian direction. For a while Turkey also seemed to be on the right track, but there, too, after a few hopeful years, the situation has changed radically. Since 2010, when Turkey seemed to be on the verge of transition to democracy with a score of 3 points, under the rule of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan the country has slipped progressively into authoritarianism and now finds itself in the dubious company of dictatorships such as Myanmar and Zimbabwe with 5.5 points. The Arab Spring of 2010 and 2011, which promised freedom and democracy, brought—with Tunisia as the only exception—the opposite: bloody civil wars in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen, as well as an unprecedented global wave of terror.

The Muslim world now leaves the rest of the world behind only in terms of the number of dictatorships: no fewer than twenty-five, as opposed to twenty-two non-Muslim

Figure 2. Political regimes in non-Muslim and Muslim countries, 1972–2018



Source: Freedom House.

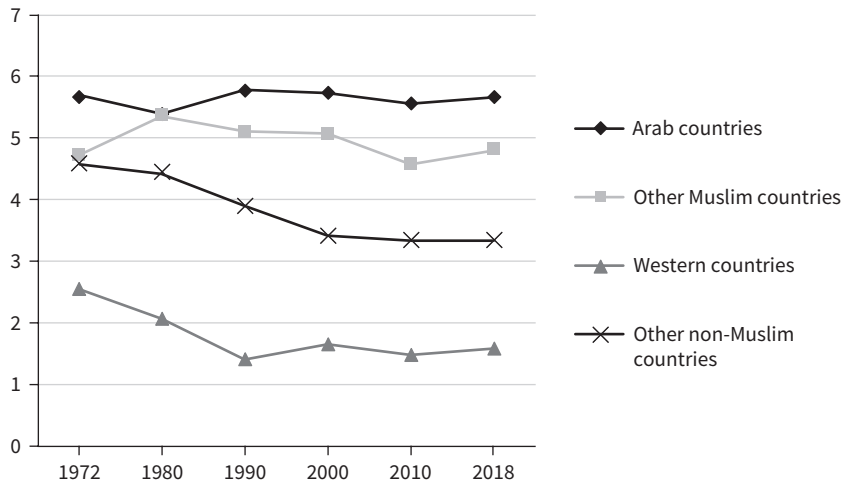
dictatorships. And this despite the fact that only a quarter of the independent countries in the world have a Muslim majority. In the non-Muslim world, democracy has now become the norm: 57 percent of non-Muslim countries are democratic, and only 15 percent have unfree, authoritarian regimes. This is not an exclusively Western phenomenon. In the non-Muslim regions of Central and South America, Africa, Asia, and Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand, as these are considered "Western" countries), 45 percent of the countries are democratic and only 20 percent have unfree regimes. In the Muslim world, the situation is exactly the opposite: 53 percent of Muslim countries are governed by authoritarian regimes. A meager 4 percent were democratic in 2018, and with the suspension of parliament in Tunisia, there is now not a single Muslim democracy left.

Thus, the remarkable difference between the Maldives and Mauritius is not at all an isolated case but illustrates a much broader phenomenon. While the rest of the world has become much more democratic during the last several decades, in the Muslim world authoritarian regimes have spread further. While in other parts of the world popular uprisings and revolutions in the last fifty years against authoritarian regimes have often led to democratization, revolutions in the Muslim world have almost always resulted in new forms of authoritarianism, either because Islamic fundamentalists seized power by force themselves, as in Iran and Afghanistan, or because the army staged a coup against the threat of a fundamentalist takeover, as in Algeria and Egypt, or because democratically elected Islamists, as in Turkey, have gradually abolished democracy. One can have a long debate about whether Islam and democracy can theoretically go together, but in practice this marriage has rarely worked out.

An Arab or an Islamic Democratic Deficit?

Is it justified to speak of a democratic deficit in the Muslim world, or are we dealing with a specifically Arab problem? Some authors have claimed that Arab countries in particular suffer from a lack of democracy, while other Muslim countries are not significantly different from the rest of the world.[9] The homogeneity of the non-Muslim world can likewise be questioned. Is the trend toward democratization over the last fifty years mainly a Western phenomenon, or does it also extend to non-Western countries? We can answer these questions by looking at figure 3. It shows the average score on the Freedom House scale, with 1 representing the most democratic and 7 the most authoritarian regimes, for four groups of countries: Arab countries; other Muslim countries; Western countries; and

Figure 3. Degree of political unfreedom (1 = maximal freedom; 7 = maximum unfreedom) in Arab countries, other Muslim countries, Western countries, and other non-Muslim countries, 1972–2018



Source: Freedom House.

non-Western, non-Muslim countries. Arab countries include the twenty-one independent states that are members of the Arab League. I define Western countries as all European countries except Russia, as well as the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

We see that since 1972 there has been no movement toward more democracy in either of the two groups of Muslim countries, although the political regimes of the Arab countries are even less free than those in the rest of the Muslim world. On the other hand, there has been a clear trend toward democratization both in Western countries and in the rest of the non-Muslim world. In the Western world, this was a consequence of the fall of dictatorships in Southern and Eastern Europe, while in the other non-Muslim countries democracy gained ground most of all in Central and South America, East Asia, and parts of Africa. As a result, the democratic divide between the Islamic and non-Islamic world has grown considerably since 1972. The Arab countries distinguished themselves as early as 1972 by their high degree of authoritarianism, but since then a large democratic gap has also emerged between the non-Arab Muslim countries and the rest of the world. So we are really dealing with an Islamic democratic deficit and not just an Arab problem.

The Curse of Oil

The democratic gap between Muslim and non-Muslim countries is not explained by wealth. The Islamic world includes some of the wealthiest countries in the world, but these are not any less authoritarian for it. Perhaps the decisive factor is not so much how wealthy a country is, but what that wealth is based on. With the exception of Bahrain, the prosperity of all rich dictatorships in the Muslim world is largely based on oil revenues. The same applies to non-Muslim dictatorships in countries such as Equatorial Guinea and Venezuela. The idea of the "resource curse" has played an important role in the literature on economic development for many years.[10] This term refers to the possible negative economic effects of dependence on natural resources, which may hinder innovation, investment, and economic reforms and thus impair competitiveness in the long run. Revenues from oil and other natural resources can also be a political curse.[11] Authoritarian rulers in countries that are rich in natural resources are less, if at all, dependent for their state revenues on taxation of their citizens' income and therefore also less dependent on the active support and sympathy of their subjects. The first democratization movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were driven by the conviction that states could not demand taxes from their citizens without giving them a say: "No taxation without representation!" was the motto of the American Revolution against British colonial rule. The flip side of this is that it is harder for citizens in states that do not depend on tax revenues to put pressure on those in power to grant them political rights. In addition, states can use the revenues from natural resources to provide citizens with favors such as free health care, cheap education, or well-paid jobs in an expansive state apparatus. The army can also be satisfied with amply flowing state funds for the purchase of modern weaponry. A strong and loyal army, in turn, is useful in fighting the remaining dissidents who cannot be bought with

material benefits. In addition, a regime that can finance itself from revenues from natural resources is less susceptible to economic pressure from abroad to do something to improve its human rights situation. So there are many reasons to believe that democratization movements have a harder time in countries that are rich in natural resources. Of course, this argument applies not only to oil, but also to natural gas, gold, diamonds, uranium, iron ore, bauxite, and the like.

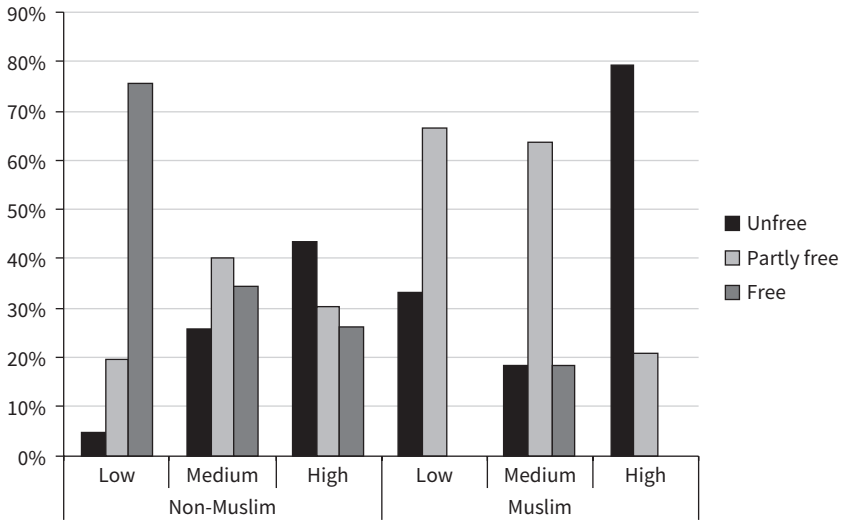
Compared to the rest of the world, dependence on natural resources is much greater in Muslim-majority countries. On the whole—averaged over the period from 1970 to 2016 in order to correct for the strong annual fluctuations in world market prices—natural resource revenues in Muslim countries account for 13 percent of the GNP, with peaks of up to 43 percent (Turkmenistan).[12] In non-Muslim countries, this share averages only 5 percent. Of course, there are also countries in this group that are highly dependent on raw materials, such as Angola (39 percent). And by no means are all Muslim countries rich in natural resources. In Bangladesh and Afghanistan, for example, the income from them amounts to less than 1 percent of GNP.

The question now concerns the extent to which dependence on natural resources can explain the lack of democracy in the Muslim world. To address this, we again divide the countries of the world into three groups: those with a dependency on raw materials of less than 3 percent of GNP make up about half of all countries; about a quarter belong to the middle group, with a share of 3 to 10 percent of GNP; and the remaining quarter are countries that derive more than 10 percent of their income from natural resources. It should be noted that the actual economic importance of the natural resource sector is much greater than these figures suggest. In resource-dependent countries, much of the rest of the economy is also based on activities financed by the revenues from raw materials, such as the large state apparatus and the consumer spending by all the public servants working within it.

Figure 4 shows that the correlation between democracy and resource wealth is indeed strong in the non-Muslim world. More than three-quarters of countries with low dependence on natural resources are free democracies, and only two of them—Belarus and Cuba—are not free. In the middle group with moderate resource dependence, the proportion of democracies is already well below 50 percent, and of the countries that are heavily dependent on natural resources, just over a quarter are democratic and almost half are authoritarian. Nonetheless, a number of countries manage to escape the resource curse: Chile, Mongolia, the Solomon Islands, Trinidad, Guyana, and Suriname are heavily dependent on raw materials and yet are democratic.

Among Muslim-majority countries, the connection is much less clear. The two until-recently democratic Muslim countries, Senegal and Tunisia, belong to the middle group. However, the percentage of unfree regimes is much higher—almost 80 percent—among the Muslim countries with high resource dependence, while the groups with medium

Figure 4. Political regimes in non-Muslim and Muslim countries by degree of economic dependence on natural resources



Source: Freedom House (democracy); United Nations/World Bank (resource dependence).

and low dependence are dominated by partially free regimes; examples are Morocco and Pakistan. Nevertheless, the contrast with the non-Muslim world remains great, even if we consider the economic role of natural resources. Of the non-Muslim countries with low resource dependency, only 5 percent are unfree and 20 percent are partly free. In the Muslim countries with low resource dependency, the figures are 33 percent and 67 percent, respectively. Even in the middle group and in the group with high resource dependency, wholly or partly democratic regimes are much more widespread among non-Muslim countries. Although the curse of natural resources helps to explain variations in the degree of democracy among non-Muslim countries, it does not answer the question of why the democratization of the Muslim world has lagged so far behind that of the rest of the world.[13]

The Colonial Legacy

One of the most popular explanations for the lack of democracy in the non-Western and especially the Muslim world is the legacy of Western colonialism. Economic dependence on the former colonial rulers, the psychological scars of racism and slavery, arbitrarily drawn colonial borders, ethnic and religious antagonisms fueled by the divisive policies of colonial rule—the list of incriminating legacies attributed to the colonial era is long. The fact that these explanations for economic underdevelopment and lack of democratization are widely believed does not release us from the obligation to examine them critically. The key to doing this is to treat Western colonialism as a variable that varies in strength and duration, rather than as a holistic, global constant immune to empirical scrutiny.

To this end, we can make use of the fact that not all non-European countries were affected to the same extent by European colonial rule. A number of these countries have always remained independent: Thailand, Japan, China, Bhutan, Nepal, Turkey, Iran, Oman, and Liberia are examples. Of course, this does not mean that these countries were unaffected by Western imperialism. China, for instance, was forced to grant Western powers as well as Russia and Japan a range of extraterritorial trade concessions, mostly in coastal cities, the last of which, formerly Portuguese Macau, was handed back only in 1999. In the Ottoman Empire, Western powers wielded influence through "capitulations" that granted trade and tax privileges to their nationals, as well as through the increasing dependence of the empire on foreign loans. Iran, though formally remaining independent, had to accept strong Russian and British influence during the early decades of the twentieth century, and Oman, too, stood under strong British influence. Nevertheless, if a legacy of Western colonialism is a variable that exerts a negative influence on contemporary chances of democratization, we should find that this influence is less strong in countries that remained formally independent as compared to countries that lost their sovereignty completely and became fully integrated into colonial empires.

Some of the states that never became part of Western colonial empires have themselves ruled over large empires during their history. As a result, there is a sizable group of countries that were part of non-Western empires but were never colonized by the West. This applies to the former Japanese possessions of Taiwan and Korea; to Mongolia, which was part of the Chinese empire; to the Central Asian and Caucasian countries, which were part of Russia and then the Soviet Union; and to Saudi Arabia, which became independent after the fall of the Ottoman Empire without ever going through a period of Western rule.

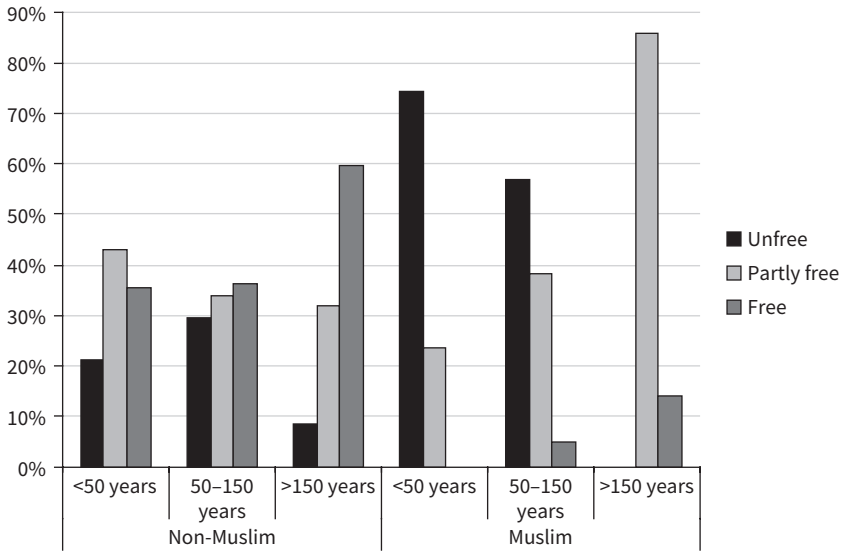
Further, among the countries that *were* colonized by the West, there are large differences in the duration of colonial rule. Ethiopia, for example, was in Italian hands for only five years after Mussolini's troops invaded the country in 1936. At the other end of the spectrum are countries whose colonial past dates back to the sixteenth or seventeenth century and that only became independent after the Second World War. Examples are most Caribbean countries; West African coastal states such as Senegal, Ghana, and Angola; and Asian countries such as India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Of course, duration is not the only possible indicator of the depth of the influence of colonialism. Other relevant dimensions could be the distinction between protectorates and colonies, and among the latter the distinction between those governed by direct rule and those governed by indirect rule. The distinction between protectorates and colonies is highly correlated with duration, because most protectorates were relatively short-lived, as they were established after the First World War when former German and Ottoman possessions were divided among the victorious powers. Direct and indirect rule are difficult to compare across the whole range of former colonies of different European powers, and often varied within one colony, as in British India and Nigeria. The example of Nigeria reveals that the Muslim-majority north of the country, which the British ruled indirectly, leaving much of the local institutions,

legislation, and elites in place, has fared a lot worse in terms of democratic development (as well as economic development and violent conflict) than the south of the country, which was subjected to direct colonial rule and its attendant institutional transformation.

In sum, if the legacy of Western colonialism is partly responsible for the difficult spread of democracy in parts of the non-Western world, the states colonized by the West should, on average, be less democratic than countries that escaped colonization or that were dominated by non-Western powers such as the Japanese, Chinese, Russian, and Ottoman empires. We should also find a negative correlation between the duration of Western colonial rule and the degree of democracy, for if colonial dependence has a negative influence, this should be all the more the case where it has lasted longer and has thus had more time to leave deep traces, be they economic, institutional, cultural, or psychological. To investigate whether this is the case, I divide the non-European countries into three groups: countries that were never dominated by a Western colonial power or were so for less than 50 years (21 percent of the non-European countries); a middle group whose colonial period lasted between 50 and 150 years (43 percent); and finally, countries that were under colonial rule for more than 150 years (36 percent).

Figure 5 shows that there is hardly any difference between the first two groups among non-Muslim countries. More than a third of the countries without or with less than 150 years of Western colonial rule are free democracies. Examples are Japan, South Korea, Botswana, and Samoa. Another third are partly free countries (e.g., Armenia, Liberia, and Singapore), and

Figure 5. Political regimes in non-Muslim and Muslim countries by duration of European colonial rule



Source: Freedom House (democracy); own calculations (duration of European colonialism).

almost 30 percent are not free (e.g., China, Cameroon, and Eritrea). Among the countries with a colonial rule of more than 150 years, however, the proportion of democracies is much higher: 60 percent. This group includes many Latin American and Caribbean countries, but also African countries such as South Africa, Ghana, Mauritius, and the former Portuguese colonies of Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe. The largest democracy in the world, India, is also among them. The four exceptions are Cuba and the oil states of Angola, Equatorial Guinea, and Venezuela.[14]

If we look at Muslim countries in comparison, we see here too a positive rather than a negative correlation between the duration of Western colonial rule and the degree of democratization. Thirteen of the seventeen Muslim countries (70 percent) with less than fifty years of Western colonial rule are not free. Two of these countries—Iran and Oman—have always remained independent; Azerbaijan and Central Asian dictatorships such as Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan were ruled not by Western colonial powers but by Russia; and Saudi Arabia immediately moved from Ottoman rule to independence. Inaccessible Afghanistan remained outside the influence of foreign rule for a long time, but after a lost war the kingdom came under British influence in 1878. After a successful rebellion, however, British rule ended not long thereafter, in 1919. The three other authoritarian states belonged to the Ottoman Empire for centuries, and after its collapse they were ruled for only a very short time by Western powers as colonies or protectorates. Libya was conquered by the Italians in 1911, was liberated by the English in the Second World War, and became independent in 1951, after only forty years of Western rule. After hundreds of years of Ottoman rule, Iraq was occupied by the English in 1917, but became an independent kingdom again fifteen years later. Syria became French mandated territory in 1923 but gained its independence in 1946. It is to these few decades of Western rule that many ascribe all the evils of the modern Middle East. The many centuries of Ottoman rule that preceded this period, however, are rarely mentioned as a cause of the region's institutional deficiencies and lack of democratic success.

If a few decades of Western governance would negatively affect the chances of democracy, how much worse should it be in countries that had to deal with Western colonialism for much longer? The opposite seems to be the case. The only two recent Muslim democracies have a much longer history of Western rule than most Muslim dictatorships. Tunisia was French from 1881 to 1956. As early as the fifteenth century, Senegal came under the influence of the Portuguese, who were briefly replaced by the Dutch, and the country was then under French colonial rule for three centuries until independence in 1960.

True democracies remain a rarity among the Islamic countries, regardless of the duration of Western colonialism, but among the Muslim countries with a colonial period of more than 150 years are a large majority of at least partly free countries.[15] There are also a number of Muslim countries that were no longer democratic in 2018, but that have at least known longer periods of democracy after independence: the Gambia, which was British

from the mid-seventeenth century until independence in 1965; Malaysia, which was initially under Portuguese and Dutch influence and was finally a British colony until independence in 1957; and Indonesia, which was Dutch from the seventeenth century until 1949. In other words, there is no sign whatsoever that Western colonialism has had a negative impact on democratization among Muslim countries. To the contrary, the longer Western colonialism lasted, the greater the likelihood that a country is now fully or, like Indonesia and Malaysia, partly democratic. If Western colonialism has anything to do with the delayed democratization of the Muslim world, it seems to be because Muslim countries have been much less subject to Western influence than non-Muslim countries. On average, Western colonial rule in non-European Muslim countries lasted eighty-six years. Non-Muslim countries outside Europe were under Western colonial administration for an average of 183 years, more than twice as long.[16]

How could something as repulsive as colonialism be a positive factor for democracy and human rights in the world today?[17] This notion is not as paradoxical as it seems once one realizes that everything is relative, and was so in the past as well. Western colonialism is reprehensible by today's standards. But what were the historical alternatives? Most of the non-European countries that were never or only briefly ruled by the Western colonial powers were part of other empires whose treatment of subjected peoples failed current standards of democracy and human rights as miserably as, or sometimes even more than, Western colonial rule did. And the authoritarian rulers of countries that always remained independent, such as Turkey and China, did not necessarily treat their subjects any better than the Western powers did their colonial subjects.

After the Enlightenment and the American and French Revolutions, the rise of the ideas of democracy and human rights in the West had a great influence on the thinking of the leaders of the independence movements in the colonies. The intellectual, political, cultural, military, and economic elites of the indigenous populations had been trained in educational systems that were based on Western models in terms of content and form, and some of them had even studied in the colonial metropoles. Of course, the colonial regimes did not offer them these educational opportunities out of charity, but out of self-interest: without the help of a qualified indigenous elite it would have been impossible to control the colonies. But the colonial rulers thus inevitably also conveyed values and norms that were ultimately turned against them: Mahatma Gandhi studied in London, as did the South African archbishop and antiapartheid activist Desmond Tutu; Ghana's first president Kwame Nkrumah studied in the United States and in London; Mohammad Hatta, one of the driving forces behind Indonesian independence, studied in Rotterdam; and that country's first president, Sukarno, attended Dutch primary and secondary schools in the Dutch East Indies.[18]

Not only democratic norms and values, but also the political institutions and legal systems of the mother countries exerted a lasting influence on the postcolonial states. The legal

systems of the former colonies are still largely based on Roman law or the British common law. The separation of powers among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government and the principle of separation of religion and state were in many cases retained by the former colonies after independence. It is also no coincidence that almost all colonies became republics or constitutional monarchies after independence. When the colonies became independent, absolute monarchies in the colonial motherlands had either been overthrown, as in France, or, as in Great Britain and the Netherlands, had been placed under parliamentary control and reduced to a ceremonial and symbolic role. Authoritarian monarchies, on the other hand, survived longer in countries that were not at all or hardly colonized by the West, such as Ethiopia (until 1975), Iran (until 1979), and, to this day, in Thailand, Saudi Arabia, and the Persian Gulf states.

Democratic Attitudes in the Muslim World

The results so far provide evidence for a democratic deficit in the Muslim world that cannot be attributed to level of economic prosperity, resource dependence, or colonial legacies. However, some studies have claimed that attitudes of individual Muslims toward democracy do not differ significantly from those of non-Muslims. Most famously, American political scientists Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart have argued on the basis of data from the World Values Survey that the value differences between people living in Muslim and non-Muslim countries consider not *demos*—i.e., prodemocracy values—but rather *eros*—values related to gender and sexuality.[19] Because this conclusion refers to citizens' attitudes rather than political regimes, it does not necessarily contradict the above findings. But if true, it would mean that the lack of democracy in Muslim countries is due to institutional barriers and antidemocratic elites rather than a lack of democratic preferences of ordinary Muslims.

The claim that people in Muslim-majority countries prefer democracy as much as people elsewhere is based on responses to statements such as "democracy may have its problems, but it is better than any other form of government" or preference for a democratic political system over army rule or rule by a strong leader who does not have to bother with elections. Indeed, majorities of over 80 percent in Muslim countries agree with these statements, as do people in virtually all other countries of the world.[20] However, in Norris and Inglehart's original study, one set of questions deviated from this pattern; these asked respondents about the role of religion in politics, measured by statements such as "politicians who do not believe in God are unfit for political office," which are approved by majorities in Muslim countries, but not in most other countries.[21] Other studies show that such sentiments about the role of religion in politics refer not just to the choice of leaders, but also to the content of laws: in most Muslim-majority countries, most of the people are of the opinion that sharia should be the law of the land, including, in countries where these questions were asked, fundamentally illiberal support for such things as the death penalty for apostates and adulterers. For instance, in Afghanistan in 2013, 99 percent of respondents in a representative survey were in favor of making sharia the law of the land. When asked about

specific sharia prescriptions, 81 percent of them were in favor of corporal punishments for crimes such as theft; 75 and 79 percent, respectively, agreed to the death penalty for adulterers and apostates.[22]

American political scientist Mark Tessler has reported similar findings from surveys in Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, and the Palestinian territories.[23] While large majorities in all four countries said they preferred a democratic political system, between 50 and 60 percent also agreed that "men of religion should have influence over government decisions" and "the government should only implement laws of the sharia." Tessler calls those who affirm both sets of statements "Islamic democrats," but giving nonelected religious leaders a say in government decisions and making religious rules the basis of law can hardly qualify as democratic in any liberal sense of the term. Liberal-democratic ideals are better represented by those whom Tessler calls "secular democrats," who affirm democracy *and* reject religious leaders and religious law as a basis for political decision making. They constitute a minority in all four countries, even though, with 37 to 45 percent of the population, they are a sizable group.[24]

Ronald Inglehart himself later came back from his original conclusion that citizens of Muslim-majority countries do not differ regarding their support for democracy, because endorsement of the formal principle of democracy as free elections is not sufficient if it is not undergirded by the acceptance of basic principles of equality and freedom:

> Although the populations of virtually every country in the world now endorse the goal of democracy, there is no global acceptance of the self-expression values (such as social tolerance, gender equality, and trust) and the postmaterialist emphasis on participation and freedom of speech that are crucial to democracy. Today, these divergent values constitute the real clash between Islamic societies and the West.[25]

The combination of widespread support for the formal principle of democracy with the simultaneous preference of majorities for a strong role of religion in politics explains a recurring phenomenon in Muslim countries: that elections, even if they are by and large free, have often brought to power Islamist parties and regimes whose aims and actions run counter to the liberal foundations of democracy. This is what happened after the revolution in Iran in 1979, in the first free elections in Algeria in 1991, in the Palestinian territories in 2006 when Hamas came to power, in the wake of the Arab Spring in Egypt and Tunisia, and in a more gradual way in Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In all these countries, there are also sizable parts of the population that are against a political role for Islam and in favor of a truly liberal democracy, but with the exception of Tunisia, they have not been able to prevail.

Putting the Pieces Together

So far, we have looked at alternative explanations one at a time. However, it could be that no single influence but rather the accumulation of various factors can explain the

difference between Muslim and non-Muslim countries. On average, Muslim countries are poorer, they are economically more dependent on natural resources, and they have not or have only briefly been exposed to the influence of Western colonialism. Can these factors taken together explain the difference between Muslim and non-Muslim countries? In order to investigate this, we can use so-called multivariate statistical methods, which make it possible to investigate the influence of different factors simultaneously. The results of these analyses show that all the factors identified here make an independent contribution to a country's chances of adopting democracy. A low dependency on natural resources, economic prosperity, and a Western colonial past all have positive and statistically significant influences on the probability of a country being democratic. For the difference between Muslim and non-Muslim countries, the dependence on oil and other natural resources is the most important explanation, followed by the colonial experience, and then the level of prosperity. As far as the colonial past is concerned, this result contradicts the popular assumption that Western colonialism is responsible for the crisis of the Muslim world.[26]

However, most of the difference (60 percent) between Muslim and non-Muslim countries cannot be explained by resource dependence, colonialism, or the level of prosperity. This confirms the picture with which we started. If we take a Muslim-majority and a non-Muslim country that are similar in other relevant aspects—a comparable level of prosperity, a similar colonial past, and the same dependence on natural resources—it is likely that the non-Muslim country will be democratic and the Muslim country partly or wholly unfree. This applies not just to Mauritius and the Maldives, but also, for example, to Greece and Turkey. Both countries were long part of the Ottoman Empire—with Turkey in the role of colonizer and Greece as a subjugated nation—and are nowadays not far apart in terms of economic prosperity, but Greece (with a Freedom House score of 2 in 2018) has long escaped its past as a military dictatorship, while Turkey has once again fallen back into authoritarianism (a 2018 Freedom House score of 5.5).

There has been a great reluctance to acknowledge that Muslim-majority countries are less likely to be democratic than countries in other parts of the world, because such a conclusion is taken to imply an "essentialist," or intrinsic and inevitable, contradiction between Islam and democracy. But this need not be the case. All that the evidence presented here shows is that in the past fifty years Muslim-majority countries have been less likely to democratize than other countries. However, I would argue that this must be seen in the context of several decades of fundamentalist propaganda by regimes such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Qatar, fueled by billions of oil dollars, and not necessarily as an immutable characteristic of Muslims or Islam. The best proof that it is not is the fact that even after these decades of fundamentalist mobilization, sizable parts of the populations of Muslim countries, including many who identify as believers, do support liberal notions of democracy. They are the best hope for change. For the moment, however, the predominance of fundamentalist versions of Islam, and widespread popular support for a fusion of religion and politics in which illiberal religious laws constrain democracy and human rights, remain formidable barriers against liberal-democratic progress in the Muslim world.

NOTES

1 Data from United Nations and World Bank, in "current US dollars," that is, in dollar prices for the respective year. See http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?q=GDP+per+capita&d=SNAAMA&f=grID%3a101%3bcurrID%3aUSD%3bpcFlag%3a1.

2 See, for instance, Barbara Wake Carroll and Terence Carroll, "Accommodating Ethnic Diversity in a Modernizing Democratic State: Theory and Practice in the Case of Mauritius," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23 (2010): 120–42.

3 See, for instance, Fathima Musthaq, "Shifting Tides in South Asia: Tumult in the Maldives," *Journal of Democracy* 25 (2014): 164–70.

4 "Maldives: Extremism and Terrorism," Counter Extremism Project, accessed November 17, 2021, https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/maldives.

5 "The Right to Apostasy in the World," Humanists International, accessed November 17, 2021, https://humanists.international/get-involved/resources/the-right-to-apostasy-in-the-world.

6 See Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke, "International Religion Indexes: Government Regulation, Government Favoritism, and Social Regulation of Religion," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* 2 (2006): 32–36; and Jonathan Fox, *The Unfree Exercise of Religion: A World Survey of Religious Discrimination against Religious Minorities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016). Fox's data set can be downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) at http://www.thearda.com/archive/files/Descriptions/RASMIN.asp.

7 Azra Naseem, "A Test for Maldivian Democracy," *Himāl Southasian*, January 23, 2020, https://www.himalmag.com/a-test-for-maldivian-democracy.

8 See Freedom House, "Freedom in the World," accessed November 17, 2021, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world.

9 See, for instance, Alfred Stepan and Graeme B. Robertson, "An 'Arab' More Than a 'Muslim' Electoral Gap," *Journal of Democracy* 14 (2003): 30–44. See also the criticism by Ahmet T. Kuru, *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment: A Global and Historical Comparison* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019). With more recent data, Kuru refutes Stepan and Robertson's claim that the democratic deficit of the Islamic world is limited to Arab countries (53).

10 See, for instance, Michael L. Ross, "The Political Economy of the Resource Curse," *World Politics* 51 (1999): 297–322; and Jeffrey D. Sachs and Andrew M. Warner, "The Curse of Natural Resources," *European Economic Review* 45 (2001): 827–38.

11 See, for instance, Macartan Humphreys, Jeffrey D. Sachs, and Joseph E. Stiglitz, eds., *Escaping the Resource Curse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); and Michael L. Ross, "What Have We Learned about the Resource Curse?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 18 (2015): 239–59.

12 Calculated on the basis of World Bank data, downloadable from https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.TOTL.RT.ZS.

13 For a similar conclusion but using a different method for calculating resource dependence, see Kuru, *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment*, 48–52.

14 I am not the first to note the positive correlation between duration of colonial rule and democracy; see Axel Hadenius, *Development and Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Michael Bernhard, Christopher Reenock, and Timothy Nordstrom, "The Legacy of Western Overseas Colonialism on Democratic Survival," *International Studies Quarterly* 48 (2004): 225–50.

15 Without differentiating according to the duration or presence/absence of Western colonialism, Kuru (*Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment*, 33) reaches a very similar conclusion. He notes that of the non-Muslim former colonies that gained independence after the Second World War, three-fifths democratized, whereas this was the case for less than one-fifth of former colonies with a Muslim population majority.

16 My calculation of years of colonial rule considers only the period since 1648, the year of the Treaty of Westphalia, which established the modern international order of nation-states.

17 I do not differentiate here among colonies ruled by different Western colonial powers. However, several studies have found that former British colonies have a better democratic performance than former colonies of other European powers. See, for instance, Bernhard, Reenock, and Nordstrom, "The Legacy."

18 See also Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? The Clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (New York: Perennial, 2002), 61–62.

19 Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, "Islamic Culture and Democracy: Testing the 'Clash of Civilizations' Thesis," *Comparative Sociology* 1 (2002): 235–63; and Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

20 See Mark Tessler, *Islam and Politics in the Middle East: Explaining the Views of Ordinary Citizens* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 26–27.

21 Norris and Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular*, 146–47.

22 See "The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society," Pew Research Center, April 30, 2013, https://www.pewforum.org/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-2013-2.

23 Mark Tessler and Eleanor Gao, "Gauging Arab Support for Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 16 (2005): 83–97.

24 See also Tessler, *Islam and Politics*, for similar findings for other Islamic countries.

25 Ronald Inglehart, "Changing Values in the Islamic World and the West: Social Tolerance and the Arab Spring," in *Values, Political Action, and Change in the Middle East and the Arab Spring*, ed. Mansoor Moaddel and Michele J. Gelfand (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 3–24; similarly, Helen Kirsch and Christian Welzel, "Democracy Misunderstood: Authoritarian Notions of Democracy around the Globe," *Social Forces* 98 (2019): 59–92.

26 For a similar result, see Jan Teorell, *Determinants of Democratization: Explaining Regime Change in the World, 1972–2016* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Teorell shows that Muslim-majority countries were not only less likely to be democratic in 2006 in a static multivariate model but were also less likely to democratize and more likely to develop in an authoritarian direction in a dynamic analysis over the period 1972–2006.

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