Rethinking Modernization Strategy of Muslim Society: The Need for Value-Based Approach

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Abstract : The notion of secular society that evolved over the last two centuries was initially intended to free the public sphere from religious imposition, before it assumed the form a comprehensive ideology whose aim is to prevent any overt religious expression from the public space. The negative view of religious expression, and the desire by political elites to purge the public space from all forms of religious expressions were first experienced in the Middle East in the last decades of the twentieth century in relation to Islam, before it manifests itself in the twentieth century Europe. Arab regimes were encouraged by European democracies to marginalize all forms of religious expressions in the public as part of the secularization process that was deemed necessary for modernization and progress. The prohibition of Islamic symbols and outlawing the headscarf was first undertaken to Middle Eastern republics, such as Turkey in 1930s and Syria in 1970s, before it is implemented recently in France. Secularization has been perceived by European powers as the central aspect of social and political liberalization, and was given priority over democratization and human rights, so much so that European elites were willing to entrust the task of nurturing liberal democracy to Arab autocrats and dictators. Not only did the strategy of empowering autocratic regimes to effect liberal democratic culture failed, but it contributed to the rise of Islamist extremism and produced failed states in Syria and Iraq that undermine both national and global peace and stability. The paper adopts the distinction made by John Rawls between political and comprehensive liberalism to argue that the modernization via secularization in Muslim societies is counterproductive and has subverted early successful efforts at democratization and reform in the Middle East. Using case studies that illustrate the role of the secularization strategy in Syria, Iran, and Egypt in undermining democratic and reformist movements in those countries, the paper calls for adopting a different approach rooted in liberal and democratic values rather than cultural practices and lifestyle. The paper shows that Islamic values as articulated by reform movements support a democratic and pluralist political order, and emphasizes the need to legitimize and support social forces that advocate democracy and human rights. Such an alternative strategy allows for internal competition among social groups for popular support, and therefore enhances the chances that those with inclusive and forward-looking political principles and policies would create a democratic and pluralist political order more conducive to meaningful national and global cooperation, and respectful of human dignity.

Keywords : democracy, Islamic values, political liberalism, secularization