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OP-ED: Chicken and egg of development —*Ishtiaq Ahmed*



I am pleading for another massive economic input like the Marshall Plan for such Muslim states from the West. Of course this must be done with great care so that the funds are not pocketed by corrupt elites

Anjum Altaf (The road to development, Daily Times, January 19, 2004) takes issue with my suggestion (Material Development and Muslim attitudes, Daily Times, December 14, 2003) that negative Muslim attitudes could change if the world economy were to make provisions for modernistic Muslim societies to achieve industrial development and thus gain a fair share in productive wealth.

He describes my argument 'as the chicken and egg problem' although he does not provide evidence either from my essay or his own that either of us poses the problem in such terms. A superficial reading of my essay would indicate that I consider material development a pre-requisite for changes in attitudes compatible with liberal democracy. On the other hand, Altaf comes out strongly in favour of the reverse order when he observes: 'In the Western cases which form the bases for such generalisations the causality ran much more plausibly from individual freedom and the rule of law to material development and liberal democracy'.

I have no problem in accepting Anjum Altaf's general assertions based on Fareed Zakaria's *The Future of Freedom* that liberty emerged in the West as a result of the power struggles between church and state, king and lord, the various sects and business interests and that these were fought out in a decentralised structure of authority in Europe. This is the standard account taught in all schools and colleges in western Europe, and Zakaria is not making a terribly original point. However, more advanced scholarship, and that includes the path-breaking comparative case studies of Barrington Moore Jr. (*Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, 1966) and Theda Skocpol (*States and Social Revolutions*, 1979) clearly shows that generalising the English path of development is unwarranted.

Anjum Altaf, Fareed Zafaria and indeed the original source of such theorising, W W Rostow *The stages of economic growth: a non-Communist Manifesto* (1960), do just that, thus creating a myth of individual freedom and the rule of law preceding the development of capitalism, and consequently resulting in liberal democracy. Even in the English experience it is to be wondered if the Magna Carta and Bill of Rights and the liberal ideas of John Locke and John Stuart Mill would have culminated into a democracy if colonial plunder and the industrial revolution together had not created the material basis for the state to confer the right to vote on working men (19th century) and women (early 20th century). Therefore the material basis for a liberal type of democracy cannot be ignored in any serious analysis.

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It is worth noting that Rousseau, conventionally recognised as the main ideologue of the French Revolution, was not a supporter of individual rights. He invested faith in the inerrancy of the General Will based on the organic unity of the citizen body. Germany and Italy became democracies based on the respect for individual rights and practising the rule of law only after the Second World War. The purpose of the Marshall Plan was primarily to provide the material basis for war-ravaged western Europe to adopt liberal democracy and individual rights as a supra-ideology rather than succumb to dictatorships of either left or right.

Thus apart from a propagandist approach to individual rights and the rule of law, which claims that the former preceded material development, reality reveals a dialectical relationship between the intellectual and material instances to sustain contemporary liberal democracy.

Leaning again heavily on Zakaria, Altaf asserts, "Zakaria cautions against using cultural explanations (like 'Muslim attitude') for the problem of under-development." Here, I would like to quote what I said in my article, "In the longer run, however, notwithstanding dogmatism of different types and degrees, beliefs and doctrines are likely to be revised and re-defined. Cultures can be only more or less amenable to the objective process of change. They cannot be immune to such change."

Having said that, I would still insist that dogmatic Islamic culture has proved a major hindrance to the acceptance of individual autonomy and freedom. Many Muslim states inherited liberal democracy from the colonial period but none of them was able to stabilise it.

Of all the Muslim states, Turkey has the most clear and determined vision of becoming a proper democracy in which not only the state but the citizens also share a faith in individual autonomy and liberty. What is missing is a fully developed industrial base and strong economy to sever once and for all the linkage with a feudal and medieval past which still predominates in the poorer eastern provinces.

More interesting in this regard are the new Muslim-majority states of central Asia. They seem quite determined to become liberal democracies. I get a chance to talk to many young students from these countries, who spend one term or a year in Sweden. They deplore that the material base for sustaining individual freedom and the rule of law within a democratic framework is too poorly developed. The danger is that Islamist movements, which are very active in the region, may cash on the growing frustration of the masses and for the next several decades totalitarian Islamist regimes might come to power, unleashing barbarism of another variety.

One need not labour the point that we should continue to propagate the virtues of individual freedom and the rule of law. These are essentially British values and are thus external to all other societies except the British Isles, but have gained acceptance all over the world. Altaf has no moral qualms in prescribing them to Muslim societies although they are external inputs. So, his principle objection to my submission that an external input is necessary to propel Muslim societies towards democracy is contradicted by his reasoning.

Therefore my argument is that industrialised nations should enable modernistic Muslim states to establish a sound material basis for sustaining democracy. In other words, I am pleading for another massive economic input like the Marshall Plan for such

Muslim states from the West. Of course this must be done with great care so that the funds are not pocketed by corrupt elites. What is needed most is a comprehensive scheme for establishing the intellectual as well as material basis for democracy in Muslim societies. I foresee this happening only through co-operation between the West and deserving Muslim states.

The author is an associate professor of Political Science at Stockholm University. He is the author of two books. His email address is Ishtiaq.Ahmed@statsvet.su.se

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