



BOOK REVIEW

MUSLIM CIVILIZATION: THE CAUSES OF DECLINE AND THE NEED FOR REFORM

By M. Umer Chapra, The Islamic Foundation, 2008. ISBN: 978-0-86037-4619, xxii+225 pp.

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The Muslim world exhibited clear signs of decline by the 18th century; after decades of advancement and prosperity. M. Umer Chapra's *Muslim Civilization: The Causes of Decline and the Need for Reform* is an attempt at answering the questions of why and how the Muslim world is in its present state of decline, at least relative to its historical legacy as the leading center of commerce and learning from the 10th until the 15th century. The book explores the role of Islam in the rise of Muslim civilization and questions whether Islam plays a role in its decline. It then explores lessons from past experiences and suggests that there is a need for a comprehensive democratic reform in the Muslim world.

In doing so, Chapra employs Ibn Khaldun's socio-economic-political dynamic framework spelt out in the *Muqaddimah*. The framework shows that the rise and fall of a state or civilization is a complex process with cyclical interrelationships among moral, social, political, institutional, economic, demographic and historical factors. It suggests that a strong government is needed to implement the *Sharī'ah*. The government gains its strength from the people. Development will produce wealth that is necessary to sustain the people who are needed to support the strong and well-functioning government. Development, in turn, will be achieved if the government is just, and the actualization of justice requires the implementation of the *Sharī'ah*. Following this framework, in order to explain the rise and fall of a state, a trigger mechanism that reverses the cycle needs to be identified.

The trigger that sparked centuries of socio-economic and technological advancement in the Muslim world was Islam. The spread of Islam brought with it justice and development. The spread of Islam guided all of the developmental factors in a positive direction. The most important factor responsible for this development was the human being. *The Holy Qur'ān* states: "God does not change the condition of a people until they change their own inner selves" (13:11). Islam gave maximum attention to the people, uplifting them morally, spiritually, and materially, and reformed the institutions around them. It made individuals equal in their position as the *khalīfahs* of Allah. It replaced tribal relationships with religious relationships, enlarging an individual's horizon to that of the *ummah*.

If Islam is the reason for the advancement, how then could Islam be responsible for the decline? Chapra posited (p. 45): "given the upward push that Islam provided to these societies, there would be little justification in blaming it for their later decline." He argued that the root cause of underdevelopment in the Muslim world, the trigger that turns the cycle of development and prosperity around, is political illegitimacy.

"Muslim history took a wrong turn when the *Khilāfah al-Rāshidah* was brought to an end by the accession of Muawiyah in 41/661 . . . This sowed the seeds of political illegitimacy and gave birth to hereditary monarchy with absolute power and without adequate accountability, in clear violation . . . of the ideal political system enjoined by Islam for Muslims." (p. 54)

This illegitimacy and the failure of the governments led to unnecessary military conflicts, unnecessary taxation, and policies that were not in the interest of the welfare of these societies. These factors has led to socio-economic decline and to declines in education, science, and technology as support for the governments dwindled.

In explaining the decline of Muslim civilization, the book stresses that the argument that underdevelopment in the Muslim world is the unintentional consequence of classical Islamic institutions cannot be accepted. Kuran (2004) and Lydon (2009), among others, have argued that classical Islamic institutions promoted development; however, the unintended consequences and inability of the same Islamic institutions to adjust to the "modern economy" hampered economic development at the latter stage. The classical institutions inherited gave rise to

institutional traps at the time when Western Europe was making rapid and sustained advances on the basis of critical institutional innovations (Platteau, 2008). In countering this argument, Chapra's book specifically takes on the arguments advanced by Kuran (2004) that the decline of the Middle East was due to: (a) Islam's egalitarian inheritance system, which did not allow primogeniture to take root in Muslim societies; (b) the absence of the concepts of limited liability and juridical or legal personality in Islam; and (c) the misuse of the Islamic institution of *waqf*. Chapra argues that primogeniture is not the cause of development of large corporations in the Western world; the concepts of legal entity with limited liability of shareholders did exist in Islamic jurisprudence; and the misuse of *waqf* should not be blamed on Islam.

We can also add that the existence of large corporations is not a prerequisite for innovation and economic development; usually it is small startups that come up with new innovations and technology. Indeed, the Middle East did have large guilds, similar to modern firms, that controlled manufacturing and trade (see Greif, 2006).

Chapra concludes with a call for comprehensive reform; morally, politically, and institutionally. He suggests the importance of democracy and democratic institutions, but within an Islamic context, in turning the tide of illegitimate government. These democratic institutions are needed to re-trigger the cycle of development and prosperity in the Muslim world.

It is true that the Muslim world needs to have a comprehensive reform. However, the book does not provide concrete suggestions as to how the proposed democratic institutions are to be built in the different Muslim societies, with different socio-economic and political structures. What are the mechanisms needed to build the democratic institutions? How can the present "autocratic" governments be made to relinquish their power, or is there a need for it? In fact, which of the present governments are legitimate? The book does not clearly define what is meant by a legitimate government, except for the ideal era of the *Khilāfah al-Rāshidah*. The suggestions for reform are largely devoid of institutional contexts. To expect Muslims and their leaders to suddenly accept democracy and become an ideal *Homoislamicus* is not realistic. If Muslims have been behaving as *Homoislamicus*, this book would not have been written.

Further, even though the book argues that the cause of the downfall of the Muslim world is illegitimate government, it does not adequately compare the differences between illegitimate governments in the West

and in the Muslim world, as even with democracy, corruption is rampant in the Western world.

“The consensus among historians seems to be that corruption was endemic in 18th century politics, with the sale of office, for instance, a widespread phenomenon throughout Europe.” (Swart, 2002: 104).

“The common or narrow meaning of ‘Old Corruption’ is fairly plain. It is widespread use of pensions, sinecures, and gratuitous emoluments granted to persons whom the British government, between the earlier eighteenth century and the Age of Reform, wished to bribe, reward or buy. It was an all-pervasive feature of British politics in this period – indeed, among the elements which most distinguished eighteenth century British politics from that of the nineteenth [. . .].” (Rubinstein, 1983: 55)

So, how is it that “similar illegitimate governments” can have opposite outcomes? To argue that illegitimate governments are the ones that had brought down Muslim civilization, the book needs to at least touch on the differences. What is the difference between the West and Middle East with regard to their leadership accountability? Are the leaders of the West more accountable than the East?

In addition, studies on the relationship between democracy and economic growth show that democracy, at best, does not harm economic performance, or is inconclusive in its effects. Hence, to suggest democracy as a panacea may not be appropriate. In fact, the East Asian countries have managed to experience rapid economic growth in recent decades although these countries are not exactly considered to be models of democracy.

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