Conference Report

Democracy and elections in the Muslim world

A two day conference on "Democracy and Elections in the Muslim World" was held at the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM), on 7 and 8 December 2011. The conference was jointly organized by the Department of Political Science and the Electoral Studies Unit, IIUM, and was inaugurated by Professor Dr. Zaleha Kamaruddin, the Rector of the IIUM.

The conference brought together 150 participants from IIUM and other institutions of higher learning. At the conference, democracy was generally defined as a form of government in which all adult citizens have an equal say in the decisions that affect their lives. This includes regular free, and fair elections, rule of law, accountability, and women empowerment. Similarly, elections were defined as a formal decision-making processes by which qualified citizens select, in a free and fair manner, their representatives. Elections are recognized as the mechanism by which modern representative democracy operates.

The keynote address was delivered by Professor Dr. Chandra Muzzaffar (Noordin Sopiee Chair of Global Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia) who began by explaining what is meant voting. He then elaborated the reasons for voting and its significance in a democracy. To him, voting represents the right of a citizen as well as his freedom, human dignity, trust (*amānah*) and finally provides a mechanism for holding governments accountable. He affirmed that these values are clearly encouraged by Islam, and thus, democracy is in tandem with Islamic teachings. He further pointed out that Malaysia is a Muslim majority country that has not experienced democratic breakdown since its independence. Nevertheless, he expressed concern as "the possibility always exists that democratic principles are subverted" and that the eventual outcome may not reflect the people's true aspirations.

This is due to the malpractices in conducting a democratic election. Prof. Chandra also touched upon plutocracy, observing that a wealthy minority always exerts influence over the political arena. He referred to the importance of the Central Fund established by the Central Agency in Scandinavian countries, whose funds are used by candidates for running election campaigns. This, according to Prof. Chandra would create better accountability and a transparent election system. He asked the participants to let their imagination run wild and think about a global democracy, global election and global parliament. He further argued that the bottom line is that such a mechanism should serve justice, freedom and dignity of human beings. He also equally touched on the unrest in the Middle East and North Africa and its impact on democracy and democratization. He refused to use the term "Arab Spring and Winter", as he felt demonstrations and protests that occurred in the Arab world do not depend on the climate or weather situation, but rather were able to spark at anytime.

Following the keynote address, the conference continued with presentations from participants. There were seven sessions. The first session dwelt on Elections and the State of Democracy in the Muslim World, with presenters exchanging ideas on wide-ranging issues and topics related to the 2011 Tunisian Elections and the electoral system, socio-political changes in the Gulf countries and the relationship between political culture and democracy. In short, the Muslim world is committed to promoting freedom and democracy with focus on the rights of individual, freedom, and human dignity, as well as the desire of a country as a whole, trust and political accountability.

In the second session, "Elections and the State of Democracy in the Muslim World," issues of social capital with respect to the value of social relations and the role of cooperation and confidence in attaining collective results and a genuine consolidation of democracy were deliberated at length. A comparison of elections and the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes between Egypt (1981-2011) and Sudan (1989-2011) was also discussed. Presenters also agreed that Muslim countries have had periodic elections; but that little has been done for other fundamental tenets of democracy such as freedom of speech, respect of human rights and freedom of press among others. Concepts such as *shūrā* (consultation), *ijmā'* (consensus), *ḥurriyyah* (freedom), *ḥuqqūq shar'iyyah* (legitimate rights) are yet to be integrated into the affairs of these states.

The third session, "Elections, Media and Party Systems, Agenda Setting Theory," revolved around the theme that the media has a large influence on audience in terms of referenda, internal politics and foreign affairs in Sudan was also been presented. Furthermore, problems and prospects for democracy in the Middle East and North Africa as well as a reference to the recent Arab uprising were explained using the modernization and trickle down theories. The possibility of Malaysia moving from a dominant party system towards a two-party system regardless of ethnic basis was also discussed.

Topics regarding the suppression of political expression and the foreclosure of constructive debates practiced by military governments that had helped heighten political conflict, the legal status of religion in Malaysia and Nigeria and the status of religion in the electoral process in both countries as well as with regards to the interim arrangement, dubbed the Caretaker System were deliberated on during the fourth session, "Elections: Electoral Politics, Ethnic/Religious/Regional Cleavages."

In the fifth session, "The Arab Spring I" and Session 6, "The Arab Spring II," issues deliberated included the failure of international commentators in predicting the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa; practices of democracy; civil liberties and elections in Muslim countries; as well as the Turkish model of Democracy; the participation of Salafi preachers and their followers during the revolution and the establishment of Salafi-oriented parties to participate in the Egyptian post-Mubarak general election; the effectiveness of government performance and constitutional reform undertaken by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey, and how it could serve as a good model to Muslim countries.

In the seventh session, "Malaysia: Women Representatives in Parliament and By-Elections," presentations focused on women parliamentarians campaigning for women-friendly policies and changes as well as topics on how by-elections results in Malaysia may be explored in order to see the linkages between by-elections and national elections in Malaysia.

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