THE HOEFER PRIZES FOR EXCELLENCE IN UNDERGRADUATE WRITING

In Recognition of Writing Achievement in the Undergraduate Field of Study

STANFORD UNIVERSITY
MAY 26, 2004
Is Islam the Barrier to Democracy in the Muslim World?  
An Empirical Analysis of Muslim Culture  
and Its Democratic Tendencies

Jennifer Graham

Political Science 116  
Non-State Actors in World Politics

Tim Büthe
Department of Political Science
1. Introduction

Since Iran’s 1979 Islamic Revolution elevated the perceived importance of Muslim world to the Western world, policymakers, scholars and the media have been engaged in debate over whether the world’s second-largest and fastest growing religion, Islam, is compatible with what is among the West’s most valued institutions – democracy.

This paper approaches this abstract question by measuring the propensity of citizens in predominantly Muslim countries to organize outside of the structure of the state, relative to the propensity of citizens in largely non-Muslim states to engage in similar democratic activities. Using the presence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to gauge the extent of extra-state associations, this paper contradicts the growing perception that Islam fundamentally precludes democracy by demonstrating that Muslim countries are no more or less likely to have NGOs operating in them than non-Muslim countries. While this finding in and of itself certainly does not prove the compatibility of Islam and democracy, it raises serious doubts about claims that Muslim societies lack the potential for a democratic future.

1.1 Islam and Democracy? Why the Question is Important

For many in the United States and Europe, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 cemented the perception that Islam is, at its core, hostile to the democratic way of life, and that any efforts to encourage democracy in the Muslim world must involve the eradication of Islam from any prominent role in government, education and other primary facets of daily life.

With the focus of Western foreign policy shifted onto the Muslim world after September 11, reaching a satisfactory answer to the question, whether democracy and Islam are compatible, assumes a new urgency because the answer to this question will have a
tremendous hand in guiding policy. Some scholars and policymakers argue it is easy to answer this question simply by observing the dearth of democracies in Muslim countries, and especially in the Middle East (Esposito 1999: 241). In 2002 Freedom House, which ranks countries based on their citizens’ political rights and civil liberties, counted only seven democracies in 43 countries described as “predominantly Muslim” and zero democracies in 16 Arab countries (Karatnycky 2003: 100-13). However, this simple observation does not immediately demonstrate that there is something about Islam that inhibits the development of democracy. In the broadest sense, there are two prominent approaches to explaining this phenomenon: the first emphasizes historical factors; the second focuses on doctrinal elements of Islam. These two explanations lead to markedly different conclusions about the fundamental compatibility of Islam and democracy.

1.2 Approaching the Absence of Democracy in the Muslim World

The first explanation attributes the situation in the modern Middle East not to inherent qualities of Islam or Muslim people but to the historical developments of the last century. The relative newness of Muslim nation-states – the vast majority were created within artificially drawn borders after World War II – has made it difficult for democratic forms of government to naturally develop (Ibrahim 1995: 30-2). Furthermore, many Muslim states have been dominated by foreign countries with strategic interests in these states, such as U.S. involvement in the Middle East because of its oil interests. The result of this policy has often been to repress democratic movements in these countries (Esposito 2003: Lecture). In fact, Esposito and Voll argue that Islam can be a tool in achieving democracy in authoritarian countries where Western-educated secular elites are in power, citing cases where “the most
effective opposition to authoritarian regimes is expressed through a reaffirmation of the Islamic identity and heritage” (Esposito and Voll 1996: 16).

In contrast, those who believe that Islam and democracy have fundamental contradictions that cannot be overcome cite aspects of Islamic doctrine that they consider to bar democracy from taking hold anywhere in the world of practicing Muslims. Princeton historian Bernard Lewis has argued that Islamic law lacks a conception of the collective body necessary for democracy, though he also contends that some aspects of Islamic law are conducive to democracy (Lewis 2003: 1B).

Others take this argument farther and cite historical aspects of the development of Islam as indicators that Muslim countries will never be able to democratize without seriously reforming their faith. “In marked contrast to Christianity, Islam is fundamentally incompatible with democracy. Jesus renounced political power. The prophet Mohammed seized political control” (Leishman 2002: A7). Arguments that follow from this line of thinking are that the role of submission to Allah in Islam and the dominance of the Sharia, Islamic law prevents Muslims from accepting other governance structures. The logical extension of this argument is that there are aspects of Muslim life itself that will prevent the emergence of democratic governance in any set of historical circumstances.

Islamic civilization, it is often argued, does not value intermediary institutions between the government and the people, thus precluding the emergence of civil society, and is based on a legal culture of rigidity, thus placing a premium on obedience and social conformity rather than on critical inquiry and individual initiative (Hefner 2000: vii).

The argument precludes democratic societies from emerging in the Muslim world by characterizing Muslims as trapped in a religious culture that discourages democratic participation (Ibrahim 1995: 30).
1.3 Beyond Regimes: Approaching Muslim Culture and Democratic Tendencies

I argue that simply counting the number of Muslim countries that are democracies is not satisfactory to evaluate the compatibility of Islam with democracy because historical factors like colonialism and foreign involvement have been substantial political obstacles. Moving forward on this question therefore requires devising a framework for testing whether some fundamental democratic tendencies are less common in Muslim societies than other societies. This would engage the claim central to the second explanation for why governments in Muslim countries are generally less democratic – that there is a fundamental aversion to democracy among Muslims themselves.

This paper uses the vibrancy of a country’s “civil society” as a framework to consider democratic potential, and uses NGO presence per capita as the measure of this vibrancy. Using 2001 data on NGO presence in 83 countries in Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe, this paper shows that while NGOs/capita is highly correlated with gross domestic product and some indicators of democracy such as civil liberties, there is no statistically significant connection between the proportion of Muslims comprising the population of a country and its NGOs/capita. This discredits assertions that Islam fundamentally constrains democracy, as citizens of Muslim countries are not systematically less likely to organize outside of the state – thus forming a civil society and demonstrating a basic democratic tendency – than citizens of non-Muslim countries.

2. A Theory About NGO Presence and Democracy in the Muslim World

A society’s or people’s fundamental compatibility with democracy relies on its constituents’ acceptance of democracy’s basic qualities and tendency to propagate the
institutions that define a democracy. Among the most basic institutions in a functioning
democracy is “civil society,” often considered an essential pre- or co-requisite for
democracies to develop (Ibrahim 1995: 27-8). Though variously defined, civil society can be
broadly understood as “an aggregate of institutions whose members are engaged primarily in
a complex of non-state activities – economic and social production, household life and
voluntary associations – and who in this way preserve and transform their identity by
exercising all sorts of pressures or controls upon state institutions” (Keane 1988: 14).
Because the formation of the institutions that comprise civil society occurs without the
compulsion of the state, the proliferation of the groups and thus the vibrancy of civil society
depends upon the initiative of a country’s citizens. This tendency to form associations has
historically been cited as one of the most basic democratic instincts. In his analysis of
American democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville cites the American propensity to organize as
one of the more unique aspects of United States society but also as a hallmark of the vibrancy
of its democracy: “As soon as several Americans have conceived a sentiment or an idea that
they want to produce before the world, they seek each other out, and when found, they
unite...In democratic countries knowledge of how to combine is the mother of all other
forms of knowledge” (de Tocqueville 1969: 516-7). Thus Tocqueville defines the
“democraticness” of American society by its propensity to form groups to achieve its aims
without the involvement of the state.

One type of such a group is the NGO. NGOs – broadly defined as an organization
that is separate from the state and can range from advocacy groups to religious organizations
to secular institutes – would not exist without citizens taking the initiative to form an
association, targeted at caring for some need not fulfilled by the state. As such, NGOs are a
quintessential component of civil society, which is clear through their compatibility with Keane’s definition: NGOs are voluntary associations that to various degrees serve as a control of state institutions by virtue of being separate from them. As non-state actors and operational members of civil society, these groups – regardless of the democratic nature, or lack thereof, of the group itself – enhance democracy by dispersing power, exercising governmental channels to advocate change, and developing democratic culture by agitating for civil and political rights. The Muslim Brotherhood’s success in encouraging democratic reforms in Egypt demonstrates the efficacy an NGO can have at encouraging democracy by being active in civil society and serving as a check on the state (Rutherford 1993: 315, 328).

Predicated on the logic that NGOs are an integral component of civil society and that civil society is a basic predictor of a country’s or group’s fundamental capacity for democracy, this paper uses the statistic of NGOs per capita to test the claim that Islam is a cultural barrier to democracy. If Islamic civilization has systematically discouraged democracy and Muslims adhere to a culture of societal conformity instead of “individual initiative,” as the argument cited by Hefner claims, then it would follow that fewer voluntary associations – or for the purposes of this paper, NGOs – would appear in the Muslim world. Since those who argue that Islam prevents the emergence of democracy trace the religion’s influence to limiting individual Muslims’ tendency to organize outside of the structure of the state, using the measure of NGOs per capita, or “tendency to organize per unit population,” is the most appropriate way to test this claim.

Extending this reasoning, the hypothesis it suggests can be stated: Countries with majority Muslim populations have fewer NGOs/capita than countries with small Muslim minorities or no Muslim population.
If this hypothesis is tested but not supported by the data, the alternative conclusion is: Countries with majority Muslim populations do not have fewer NGOs/capita than countries with small Muslim minorities or no Muslim population.

3. NGOs Across the Muslim World: Data and Findings

To empirically test the assertion that the presence of Islam in a society breeds a culture conducive to democracy, I performed a regression analysis using data collected on NGO presence in 83 countries.¹

3.1 Data

The dependent variable in this study is NGO presence in a country per capita, which was chosen to represent the extent to which a country’s society has a tendency to organize—an indication of democratic tendencies, as Tocqueville discussed.

Data on NGO presence in 2001 was gathered from the Yearbook of International Organizations for 83 countries in Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe.² The organizations included in the Yearbook dataset all are to some degree international. Comprehensive data

¹ Countries included with Muslim population ≥ 50 percent of the total population were: Afghanistan, Albania, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Brunei, Burkina Faso, Chad, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Libya, Malaysia, Maldives, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Tunisia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates and Uzbekistan.

The included countries with Muslim populations < 20 percent of the total population were: Armenia, Belarus, Benin, Bhutan, Bulgaria, Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroon, Central African Republic, China, Democratic Republic of Congo, Republic of Congo, Croatia, Equatorial Guinea, Fiji, Gabon, Georgia, Ghana, Greece, India, Israel, Kenya, Laos, Liberia, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Romania, Rwanda, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Togo, Uganda, Ukraine and Vietnam.

² Data collected from The Yearbook of International Organizations, Ed. 39 (2002/2003), Vol. 5, pp. 43-9. The study included organizations listed coded A-G, N or R, described by the Yearbook as: “federations of international organizations;” “universal membership organizations;” “intercontinental membership organizations;” “limited or regionally defined membership organizations;” “organizations emanating from places, persons or other bodies;” “organizations having a special form, including foundations, funds;” “internationally oriented national organizations;” “national organizations;” or “religious orders, fraternities and secular institutes.” Information on types of organization is found in Vol. 5, pp. 414-6.
on non-internationally oriented NGOs was not available, necessitating the use of the *Yearbook* data. Despite the stipulation that included NGOs must have some international aspect, the suitability of this data to the overall question still holds because establishing these organizations in each of the countries for which they are listed requires initiative on the part of that country’s citizens. Though a subset of the unknown total number of NGOs operating in each country, there is no reason to believe that this specific genre of NGO is more or less likely to appear in Muslim countries than in other countries. Thus using this data should still produce informative results.

The primary independent variable is the percent of a country’s population that is Muslim, drawn from the *CIA World Factbook*[^1]. This variable tangibly relates to the question in that it is directly correlated to the number of Muslims in each case, but also more abstractly in that countries with majority or in some cases exclusively Muslim populations will manifest any broad tendencies Islam has to encourage or discourage democratic association in its number of resident NGOs.

Given time constraints in collecting data, 83 countries were chosen from a single broad geographic region instead of including every country. To be included, a country’s population had to be either at least 50 percent Muslim or less than 20 percent Muslim. This strategy of selecting cases along the extremes of the independent variable is intended to highlight the variable’s effect. These two criteria were chosen to either ensure that, in the first case Islam was the predominant religious force in the cultural composition in the country or, in the second case, was in a clear minority and thus should have a relatively negligible impact. Furthermore, there was a large degree of geographic selection: all of the included cases.

[^1]: This data was gathered online at [http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/](http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/).
countries are either in Asia, Africa or Eastern Europe; no countries from North and South America or Western and Central Europe were included in this study. The exclusion of these regions from the study thus substantially impacts its results, as these regions – especially North America and Western Europe – are home to the countries that by far have the highest number of total NGOs. However, their exclusion is essential if the study is to actually gauge what role Islam has in NGO presence. Almost every country in these regions – with the exception of two in northeastern South America – have either no or essentially negligible Muslim populations. Furthermore, they are ethnically, developmentally, geographically and linguistically distinct from the Muslim world. Because of these differences and the fact that there is no significant variance in the Muslim populations between countries in these regions, it could be impossible to distinguish what role Islam had on NGO presence versus what role the other independent variables had. It is not necessary to include these countries, however, because there is sufficient religious diversity in the broad region that contains the world’s majority Muslim countries to deduce what role Islam plays. Of the 83 countries in the study, 46 are Muslim majority and 37 have Muslim populations that constitute less than 20 percent of the total, but all of the countries come from the same broad regions. This eliminates the analytical problems that would arise by comparing regions that were completely distinct in more than one independent variable.

3.2 Findings

In addition to the percent of a country’s population that is Muslim, the following controls were included as independent variables in the analysis:

- National Wealth: Two indicators were used to control for the wealth of included countries – GDP and GDP per capita (purchasing power parity) as reported by the
CIA Factbook.

- Government Type: This measured by a series of dummy variables in which countries were given a "1" in only one of the following government types, based on their classification in the CIA Factbook – monarchy, republic, theocracy, democracy, sultanate, dictatorship, transitional government or communist state.

- Region: This tested by a series of dummy variables in which countries were given a "1" in only one of the following regional categories – North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East, Southeast Europe, Caucasus, Central Asia or South and Southeast Asia.

- Political Rights: Using Freedom House ratings for 2001, countries were given a ranking between 1 and 7, with 1 being the most political rights and 7 being very few political rights. This variable was intended to serve as an indicator of the extent to which a country exhibited characteristics of a liberal democracy.

- Civil Liberties: Also using Freedom House ratings, countries were ranked from 1 to 7 based upon how protected civil liberties were in each case country, with 1 being very protected and 7 indicating a lack of freedom. This was included as a second democracy indicator.

3.2.1 Model One: NGOs/capita as an Indicator of Democratic Compatibility

I first estimated the following Model 1\(^4\) for all 83 countries:

\[
\text{NGOs/capita} = \beta_0 + \beta_1\text{Muslim} + \beta_2\text{GDP} + \beta_3\text{GDP/capita} + \beta_4\text{Government Type} + \beta_5\text{Region} + \\
\beta_6\text{Political Rights} + \beta_7\text{Civil Liberties} + \epsilon
\]

\(^4\) "Government Type" and "Region" are actually groups of dummy variables with multiple betas, but have been represented in Model 1 as "\(\beta_4\text{Government Type}\)" and "\(\beta_5\text{Region}\)" for notational simplicity.
Table 1 shows the results of this model. Testing for significance at the .05 level, two controls are highly correlated with NGO/capita: GDP/capita and civil liberties. These are both expected results. Recalling that “NGO” in this study is a broad category that includes a much wider range of organizations extending far beyond those focused on humanitarian and development issues, it is anticipated that citizens with greater financial resources will be more likely to form and sustain NGOs. This expectation is corroborated by the strong positive relationship between NGO/capita and GDP/capita. The apparent negative correlation between civil liberties and NGO/capita also reinforces the appropriateness of Model 1 to test the fundamental compatibility of Muslim societies and democracy. Because a numerically high civil liberties ranking on the scale from 1 to 7 actually indicates a poor record on civil liberties, the strong and highly significant negative correlation between the civil liberties variable and NGO/capita suggests that NGO/capita is highly correlated to good civil liberties situations. This finding gives credence to the theory that NGO/capita is related to democracy or democratic tendencies. It would be expected that political rights would also have a high apparent negative correlation to NGO/capita. Instead, there is a positive correlation, implying that a poor record of political rights in a country corresponds to a higher NGO/capita value. Though this finding is significant at the .10 level, it is not at the .05 level and therefore must be considered cautiously.

Most pertinently to this paper, this model suggests that there is no statistically significant correlation between the degree to which a country’s population is Muslim and the country’s NGOs/capita. This finding contradicts the tested hypothesis that Muslim countries will systematically have fewer NGOs/capita.
Table 1
The Effect of the Proportion of Muslims in a Country on NGOs Presence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1 DV = NGO/cap</th>
<th>Model 2 DV = NGO (number)</th>
<th>Model 3 DV = NGO/cap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>.061 (.543)</td>
<td>-1.56 (-1.572)</td>
<td>.075 (.713)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>-.152 (-1.586)</td>
<td>-.058 (-.199)</td>
<td>-.150 (-1.797)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP/Capita</td>
<td>.648 (4.907)</td>
<td>.252 (2.114)</td>
<td>.742 (6.733)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Rights</td>
<td>.347 (1.737)</td>
<td>-.654 (-3.666)</td>
<td>.426 (2.526)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Liberties</td>
<td>-.500 (-2.543)</td>
<td>.226 (1.305)</td>
<td>-.522 (-3.002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td></td>
<td>.481 (1.665)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government Type</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monarchy</td>
<td>-.064 (-.628)</td>
<td>-.072 (-.787)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theocracy</td>
<td>-.022 (-.247)</td>
<td>.009 (.114)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>.008 (.077)</td>
<td>-.045 (-.515)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sultanate</td>
<td>.167 (1.666)</td>
<td>-.077 (-.866)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dictatorship</td>
<td>.032 (.335)</td>
<td>-.056 (-.661)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitional</td>
<td>-.008 (-.096)</td>
<td>-.030 (-.391)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communist</td>
<td>.034 (.309)</td>
<td>-.068 (-.682)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Africa</td>
<td>-.179 (-1.695)</td>
<td>.238 (2.564)</td>
<td>-.204 (-2.200)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East</td>
<td>-.141 (-.964)</td>
<td>.076 (.584)</td>
<td>-.246 (-2.029)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast Europe</td>
<td>-.065 (-.566)</td>
<td>.1171 (.164)</td>
<td>-.081 (-.742)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasus</td>
<td>-.121 (-1.411)</td>
<td>.0831 (.096)</td>
<td>-.131 (-1.518)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Asia</td>
<td>-.108 (-1.109)</td>
<td>-.036 (-.421)</td>
<td>-.135 (-.421)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South and</td>
<td>-.083 (-.745)</td>
<td>.086 (.850)</td>
<td>-.067 (-.690)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast Asia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>.0002717 (2.551)</td>
<td>1646.698(4.566)</td>
<td>.0002333(2.630)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[\begin{align*}
  n & = 83 \\
  R^2 & = .594 \quad .690 \quad .567
\end{align*}\]

Standard errors are in parenthesis. Calculations performed in SPSS 10.1.

In Models 1, 2 and 3, "sub-Saharan Africa" was the "region" dummy variable omitted from the model.

In Models 1 and 2, "republic" was the "government type" dummy variable omitted from the model.

To ensure that potential multicollinearity between the "government type" variable and the "political rights" and "civil rights" variables was not significantly altering the results of Model 1, Model 3 reran Model 1 without the "government type" set of dummy variables. Omitting this variable did not substantially change the nature of the results from Model 1, implying that any multicollinearity was not unduly influencing the conclusions to be drawn from Model 1.

No government-type classifications were found to be statistically significant at the .05 level. If this paper's starting assumption were correct, it would be expected that the "democracy" government-type variable would be significantly positively correlated to
NGOs/capita. That it is not significantly related to NGO/capita is not good proof against this paper’s theory, however, and may be an artifact of the data. Of the 83 countries included, the CIA only classified 11 as democracies. Also, because the model is designed to test capacity for democracy and not necessarily the existence of a democratic government itself, a result that shows an insignificant relationship between democracy as a government type and NGOs/capita does not disprove this paper’s theory.

Additionally, no region-type classifications were significance at the .05 level. The region-type variable was included to control for regional trends in NGO presence that could be falsely attributed to religion or that would demonstrate how Islam functions differently in separate regions. North Africa showed a significant negative correlation to NGO/capita at the .10 level, though this finding is based on only six cases. All of these six cases are countries with majority Muslim populations, which could indicate that Islam is a force that inhibits association in this region. However, of the six countries, two — Algeria and Sudan — have recently been through or are in the midst of civil wars and a third, Libya, is especially ostracized by the international community, factors that could affect the presence of NGOs.

3.2.2 An Alternative Model: Total NGOs

Because of the non-linear relationship between a country’s population and the total number of NGOs present, there are some problems with using NGOs/capita as a dependent variable — despite its consistency with the theory advanced earlier in this paper and the coherence of the results produced by Model 1. Using NGOs/capita biases against countries with especially large populations, because while these countries do have more NGOs, once the total number of NGOs reaches a critical mass the number added as population increases drops substantially. Therefore countries such as China and India have extremely low values
for NGO/capita. This explains why Model 1 demonstrated a negative correlation between total GDP and NGOs/capita; countries with especially large GDPs normally also have very large populations, but for this reason will have very low NGO/capita. When NGO/capita is instead compared to GDP/capita, the result is positive and highly significant, as would be expected.

To further explore the role of population, I modified Model 1 slightly by choosing number of NGOs as the dependent variable and adding population as an independent variable. This model, Model 2⁵, is estimated:

$$NGOs = \beta_0 + \beta_1\text{Muslim} + \beta_2\text{GDP} + \beta_3\text{GDP/capita} + \beta_4\text{Government Type} + \beta_5\text{Region} + \beta_6\text{Political Rights} + \beta_7\text{Civil Liberties} + \beta_8\text{Population} + e$$

The results of this model are shown in Table 1. This modification does not substantially change the conclusions reached by Model 1, though there are some new results worth noting.

While Model 1 suggested a positive but highly insignificant relationship between the proportion of Muslims in a country and NGOs/capital, Model 2 suggests a less insignificant and negative relationship between proportion of Muslims and NGOs. This negative relationship would support the tested hypothesis and give weight to claims that Islam may in fact have a role in repressing democratic developments. However, this result is not significant at the .10 level, and certainly not at the .05 level, and therefore corroborates the basic conclusion of Model 1 that there is no definite connection between the proportion of Muslims in a country and the proliferation of NGOs.

⁵ "Government Type" and "Region" are actually groups of dummy variables with multiple betas, but have been represented in Model 1 as "β₄Government Type" and "β₅Region" for notational simplicity.
GDP per capita continues to be positively and significantly related to NGO presence, though not nearly to the extent it was in Model 1. Interestingly, changing the dependent variable to NGOs does not result in a significant correlation between overall GDP and NGOs; it actually makes it much less significant. A final change is that while civil liberties was negatively related to NGOs/capita in Model 1, in Model 2 its relationship is not significant (though also positive). However, political rights, the other democracy indicator of the independent variables, demonstrates a highly significant and negative relationship to NGOs in Model 2, while it demonstrated a much less significant and positive relationship in Model 1. Thus in each model, one of the two democracy indicators is strongly related to the dependent variable – implying that it also may be a good indicator of democratic tendencies. It is unclear, though, what causes the switch from Model 1 to Model 2 and why they are not both negatively and significantly related to the dependent variable in both models.

As in Model 1, the democracy government-type variable is insignificant, though this is not necessarily of concern for the reasons addressed in Section 3.2.1. The North Africa region variable is highly significant in Model 2, though is now positively correlated with NGO presence. Keeping in mind that this result considers only six cases, North Africa includes three of the Muslim world’s more populated countries, Algeria, Egypt and Sudan, and larger countries tend to have more NGOs. Because of the small number of cases in this subset and the completely contradictory results produced by Models 1 and 2, this result does not make a strong statement about North Africa as an exception to the region as a whole.
4. Discussion

This study suggests that if there are aspects of Islam that preclude democracy, they are not culturally manifested in citizens’ inclination to form and operate organizations outside of the structure of the state. NGOs are just one measure of civil society, however, and civil society is just one component of democracy. Building on these findings, further research could explore similar societal tendencies toward other activities considered consistent with democratic development. The difficulty in this research lies in separating the policies of a restrictive government from conclusions about the cultural tendencies of a country’s population.

Pursuant to this point, this paper does not address the implications that integrating Islam into government structures have on democracy; it simply addresses the question of whether Islam as a culture is prohibitive of democracy. Furthering the research presented in this paper would also address the interplay between repressive governments and the ability of citizens to organize. Outside of the few most oppressive states, is the basic freedom to form associations equal in democratic societies as in more authoritarian states, excluding associations that pose a direct threat to the state? If this is the case, then it will be possible to look at broad societal democratic trends to investigate cultural democratic tendencies. However, if authoritarian regimes effectively repress all fundamental expressions of democracy, then it will be more difficult to address cultural tendencies toward democracy and new strategies of investigation will need to developed.
5. Conclusion

These findings challenge the increasingly common claims that Islam and democracy are incompatible entities by using a ground-up approach to engage this central question of this paper. While this paper does not make suggestions about the democratic nature of current Islamic regimes or governments in the Muslim world, it does suggest that arguments attributing the current dearth of democracy in Muslim countries to cultural elements of Islam lack empirical support.

Based on the presumption that Islam is a fundamental barrier to democratic development, arguments calling for a conscious removal of religion from Muslim societies have proliferated, such as this suggestion in The Jerusalem Post:

The virtually unanimous record of political oppression in predominantly Islamic countries makes plain that they will never make the transition from inveterate political oppression to freedom and democracy without first experiencing either profound secularization or a radical reinterpretation of Islam (Leishman 2002: A7).

However, these results imply that for policymakers and academics interested in democratic development, an emphasis should lie less on the eradication of Islam from public life and more on identifying and correcting the specific historical and political factors that have inhibited democratic governance. Assertions that Muslims lack democratic inclinations because of their religion are dangerous because they drive policies focused on religion when this study indicates that religion is not the key variable in the relative lack of democratic governance in Muslim countries.

This paper argues that expanding the debate over democracy in the Muslim world beyond religion and essentialist statements about the nature of Islam may lead to a more
fruitful set of conclusions and policy options that will bring much greater benefits to the societies these policies affect.

Works Cited:


