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Representative Democracy and the Non-Democratic Force of Religion: Turkey, Israel, Algeria, India, and the United States

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Title: Representative Democracy and the Non-Democratic Force of Religion: Turkey, Israel, Algeria, India, and the United States

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Abstract. This article identifies and provides examples of a destructive, non-democratic force that is intrinsic to a democracy. This force impinges on democracy from outside and from within.

One essential feature of representative, democratic government is that formal political policies and their implementation are to reflect the will of the people. Another is that candidate representatives of the people must vie to be the instrument of the people's will. Certainly there are variations on these features among representative democracies: between de facto, de jure, and pro forma elements; among voting procedures; between plurality versus majority of votes as criteria to authorize representatives; among segments of the voting population and of that population's authorized representatives as to who possesses any will at all as well as varying degrees and kinds of knowledge, sophistication, and intent; among differences in power among authorized representatives and other power brokers, breakers, and makers.

Even with all these variations, however, there is a common force, a destructive, non-democratic force--with which all representative democracies must contend. This force stems from political actors who seek to use democracy against itself--playing the game to win and then change the playing field and the rules so the game is never played again.

In Turkey, secular representatives are impeding authorized and unauthorized Islamic representatives from many aspects of the democratic process. The most salient example is the subversion and premature termination of a national government led by Islamic political groupings. As cited in The New York Times, military authorities issued a statement that "No democracy should be obliged to allow a political formation that uses democratic means to destroy it."

In Algeria, a coalition of Islamic groupings actually were posed to govern the country legally after an initial set of elections. Some of these groupings publicly professed to be engaged with the political system only in an effort to destroy it for a variant of Shari'a. However, governing political officials cancelled later elections and outlawed a number of these Islamic groupings. Bloody civil war and terrorism persists to the present. Algeria was hardly a prototype of a representative democracy. Now it is much less so.

In Israel, the notion of a representative democracy is being challenged by two Issues. The first is the existence of de facto second-class citizens and, arguably non-citizens--those who are not Ashkenazi or Sephardic Jews. The second is the conflict concerning who are Jews and who are not. Both Issues have generated some options that threaten democracy--e.g., allowable behavior on the Sabbath, how to get married, service in the military, free association and speech, and viable political representation. Purveyors of certain orthodox perspectives even seek to use democracy to destroy it and the very existence of political entity called Israel.

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In India, many citizens and international observers feared that non-Hindus would suffer significant losses of human and civil rights with the coming to power of the Bharatiya Janata Party. Certain supporters of the Party have conflated nationalism and religion so that if one is not a good Hindu, one could not be a good citizen of India. Although there have been many incidents fueling and supporting these fears, the losses have so far been less than might have been expected from pre-election rhetoric.

In the United States (US), a number of Republican congresspersons have arrogated to themselves the right to discount and not to listen to non-Christian constituents in an effort to achieve some higher moral purpose--perhaps, some City of God. Some of these congresspersons have supported endeavors to shape the US along a particular set of Christian values--against the Constitutional intent of the U.S. Founding Fathers. Other citizens who don't share such perspectives are viewed as un-American and enemies of real democracy and the country.

In all five of these countries, there are political actors who view representative democracy as fine--up to a point. Then the actors must save democracy from itself. They may attempt to save their own countries or others. They may be already in power or seeking it. In all these efforts, democracy is rarely the winner. Even less rarely (perhaps, never) do the Moral and the Good and the True--in whose name democracy must be destroyed--emerge. Are the most religious societies those that try neither to explicitly prescribe nor to proscribe value through governmental policy? (See Crossette, B. (September 17, 1998). U.N. team lays most blame in Algeria on Islamic 'terrorists'. The New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Dugger, C.W. (August 30, 1998). A sacred Indian site, but still the font of strife. The New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Kinzer, S. (January 18, 1999). Turkey's new leader vows April elections, but delay is possible. The New York Times, p. A5; Schmemmann, S. (July 21, 1998). In Israel's bitter culture war, civility is a casualty. The New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com>.) (Keywords: Democracy, Religion.)