English edition

Democracy Contested: China, Central Asia and the Middle East

The Czech Academy of Sciences

Oriental Institute
The Czech Academy of Sciences

Science 53 Around Us
Challenges and Questions

The Oriental Institute (www.orient.cas.cz) is a public non-university research institution. Formally established in 1922, just six years after SOAS in London, the Oriental Institute is one of the oldest institutions dedicated to the study of Oriental cultures in Central and Eastern Europe. Since 1993, it has fallen administratively under the auspices of the Czech Academy of Sciences (CAS), an umbrella research institution similar in function to its counterparts in continental Europe, such as the CNRS in France.

POWER AND STRATEGIES OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ORDER

Since 2015, the Oriental Institute (OI) has been investigating a multifaceted, interdisciplinary and comparative long-term research project entitled Power and Strategies of Social and Political Order. Proceeding from a broad concept of power as the heteronomous reduction of individual and collective autonomy that can be effected through military, economic, ideological and political means, the project addresses a range of questions pertinent to the study of the countries of the Middle East and Asia, from the ancient past to the present. Additionally, and more generally, it is designed to contribute to a deepened historical, sociological, cultural and anthropological understanding of the emergence, stability and transformation of political and social structures.

The project is structured as follows:

Foundations of Power

This section focuses on the ideological, religious, and philosophical facets of power and investigates how power relationships are conceptualized and contested in interactions between non-state actors, as well as between social groups and the state.

Representations of Power

This section explores symbolic projections of power through ways other than the use of blunt coercion, such as conspicuous consumption, the patronage of artworks, displays of military potential, royal progressions, elaborate ritual, and monumental architecture.

Structures of Power

This section is devoted to the analysis of those institutions and structures through which power is concentrated and exercised on both state and society levels, as well as through reference to the articulation and pursuit of interests vis-à-vis state or non-state actors.

Cover photo Clément Steuer

Democracy Contested: China, Central Asia and the Middle East

This brochure aims to provide insights into different conceptions of democracy across the regions, from China through Central Asia to the Middle East. Today, democracy is a contested term not only in the theoretical debates but also in the political discourse of different countries. Some of the countries, such as China, Russia, and Uzbekistan, have explicitly articulated an alternative model to Western democracy, i.e. one that builds on national cultural and political traditions and contradicts the claims of universality, which is common in the West. Furthermore, diverse discourses on democracy have also become popular among non-state actors, such as Islamic movements, non-formal authorities, and civil societies across the Middle East and Central Asia.

In this brochure, a group of scholars and analysts bring these processes closer to the public through the medium of the interview. Based on their intrinsic knowledge of both theoretical debates and the particular dynamics prevalent in their areas of expertise, they explain conceptions of democracy as understood both from above – at the state level of countries such as China, Uzbekistan and Turkey, as well as from below – such as among the Islamist groups or in Afghan society, where democracy building has taken place during the past fifteen years under the pretext of promoting peace, stability and maintaining international security.

Discussion at the conference "Democracy in the Political Culture of the Middle East, Asia and Russia", organized by the Oriental Institute on September 16, 2015 in Prague (photo Stanislava Kyselová)

Democracy in China

Jie Lu is Associate Professor of Government at the American University. He studies local governance, the political economy of institutional change, public opinion, and political participation. His regional expertise focuses on the Greater China Region and East Asia. His work has appeared in *Comparative Political Studies, Comparative Politics, Political Psychology, Politics & Society, Political Communication, Journal of Democracy*, and other journals. He is the author of *Varieties of Governance in China: Migration and Institutional Change in Chinese Villages* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015).

What do you consider to be the most interesting aspects of democracy in China nowadays?

Both the discourse and practice of democracy in China are great topics for research. Up till now, China only officially endorses truly competitive democratic elections at the grassroots level (i.e., administrative villages in rural China and residential communities in urban China). Such grassroots democracy has been widely promoted and covered in China's news media, and further used as evidence by the Chinese government to demonstrate its sincerity in promoting democracy. However, despite some interesting findings regarding the influence of such managed democratic elections on local governance, their implications for China's governance and politics are limited. The CCP (Chinese Communist Party) regime also emphasises the significance of intra-Party democracy (i.e., democratic practices within the CCP for policy deliberation, making, and implementation, as well as cadre management and promotion); nevertheless, such practices are not systematically and effectively enforced and play a limited role in shaping the CCP's rule in China. Overall, I think China's varying discourses on democracy, as well as on how the Chinese people respond to such discourses (which, in turn, may shape their political attitudes and behaviour), provide more valuable opportunities to examine the dynamics of political communication, governance, and legitimacy maintenance in contemporary China.

How does the government use the concept of democracy (in relation to other values promoted by the Chinese government and in the discourse regarding national minorities)?

First of all, according to the Chinese government, democracy is something good and desirable. They have never rejected democracy or publicly argued that China does not need democracy. Actually, democracy has always been embraced by the CCP since its establishment in 1921. Second, in contemporary China, the CCP clearly states that Western-style democracy (featuring checks and balances, the division of power, partisan politics, etc.) cannot be practised in China and should not be considered a potential model for China. Resonating with the arguments of some Asian leaders (such as Kuan-Yew Lee), the CCP regime has repeatedly emphasised China's unique socioeconomic, political, historical, and cultural characteristics in necessitating a democracy with Chinese characteristics. Third, a key feature of the so-called democracy with Chinese characteristics (as emphasised by the CCP regime) is the indispensable leadership (or dominance) of the CCP in its practice. In other words, for the CCP, China's democracy, primarily, should not foresee any political party alternation (e.g., all officially recognised democratic parties should and do follow and support the leadership of the CCP).

Within the CCP, "democratic centralism" has been upheld as a key principle for channelling and organizing different voices and opinions. Outside the party (dealing with average citizens, including national minorities), the mass-line has been emphasised as a key strategy to solicit ideas and opinions from the people. Over the past decades, the CCP has shown more tolerance toward discussions on low-level politics (e.g., economic and social welfare policies), but has still maintained effective controls over deliberations and discussions regarding high-level politics (e.g., constitutionalism, civil society, human rights, and one-party rule).

In the spring of 2011 public assemblies in over a dozen cities in China, including Beijing, took place and became known as the Chinese Jasmine revolution (photo Jerry of Wong, Wikimedia Commons)

In China, the government organises elections and utilises the concept of democracy. Yet it is perceived as being an authoritarian regime. How do you explain this paradox?

It is a worldwide phenomenon that authoritarian regimes cherry-pick some democratic practices in their governance. And there have been various terms coined for such hybrid regimes, such as competitive authoritarianism, delegated authoritarianism, etc. Ever since the Third Wave, democracy has effectively secured its dominance in the world's political discourse. Few authoritarian leaders would publicly claim or acknowledge the lack of democracy in their governance. Therefore, China is not an outlier in this regard. Furthermore, as discussed previously, China has effectively managed its democratic elections, which are primarily constrained to rural villages and urban residential communities. In this way, the CCP regime can make sure that democratic politics (primarily electoral politics) have very limited influence over its governance through the five-tier administration system (i.e., centre-province-city-county-township) and should have little erosive impact on its control over government officials via its cadre management system. And, given the findings of existing research, such controlled and localised democratic elections actually contribute to the CCP's power consolidation, governance capacity, and legitimacy.

When we talk about perceptions of the CCP regime's nature, it really depends on the nature of the audience under examination. For scholars and intellectuals who conceptualise and promote democracy following the liberal tradition, contemporary China is far from a democracy, given its lack of key democratic institutions. For a large percentage of Chinese people, (according to different national and local surveys) today's China is already a democracy, despite some minor or major issues that should be addressed. Here, popular conceptions of democracy matter a lot.

You have carried out several public opinion surveys in China. What are the specifics and issues linked to implementing a public opinion survey in a country like China?

Conducting public opinion surveys is not easy in China. First, it is very expensive. Due to the relatively low and uneven penetration of new information technologies in China, as well as China's large rural population, the only methodologically acceptable way of collecting national representative survey data is via face-to-face interviews (either in the traditional paper-pencil-mode or assisted by computers). Therefore, the financial costs of sending interviewers to and securing scheduled interviews in different regions are very high. Depending on the sampling schedule and mode of interview, it costs about 250 to 400 thousand US dollars to complete a national survey in today's China.

Second, the Chinese government has a tightly controlled regulatory and approval system regarding public opinion surveys, particularly those sponsored by foreign resources. Theoretically, questionnaires for such surveys should be reviewed and approved by a designated government committee first; and only four or five survey institutes have the officially approved license that allows them to conduct surveys of foreign scholars or institutes. Some sensitive questions (such as the popular approval of national leaders) cannot usually be asked in public opinion surveys. Third, Chinese local governments are quite sensitive to such kinds of survey (which might reveal some of their local problems and their bad behaviour/policies), and are thus generally

not willing to cooperate and might even deliberately obstruct fieldwork. Overall, it is critical to secure strong and extensive local collaborations in China in order to undertake public opinion surveys. Extensive personal connections and strong local relationships can be of significant value for such kinds of research in China.

What should we do in order to better understand the system of democracy in China?

Maintaining our sensitivity in relation to China's socioeconomic, political, and cultural environments is very important in this regard. This may not just be the case with regard to China, but also with reference to many societies with socioeconomic conditions and historical trajectories that are different from those in Western Europe and North America. I am not promoting some form of culturally deterministic arguments here, but simply emphasizing that socioeconomic, political, and cultural environmental features might moderate or reshape some general theoretical arguments that have been developed primarily with a focus on the experiences of Western European and North American societies. Furthermore, politicians and the average Chinese citizen, as well as those in other developing countries, learn from the experiences of developed societies, in both good and bad ways. Such dynamics of learning have made it even more challenging to simply impose the framework that we have (again primarily based on the experiences of developed societies) on under-developed societies, for which democracy is a salient issue. It is always easy to make sweeping arguments and predictions, based on generalised theories. Unfortunately, however, this approach has proved again and again to be ineffective and even futile in explaining Chinese politics, let alone in making meaningful predictions.

Democracy in Uzbekistan

Vera Exnerova is Research Fellow at the Oriental Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences. Her expertise focuses on Central Asia and Afghanistan and regional views on Islam, politics, and democracy. She was visiting fellow at the Institut Français d'Etudes sur l'Asie Centrale, Moscow State University and Fulbright-Masaryk Fellow at Harvard University. In 2007–2008 she lived and worked in Afghanistan. Her recent publications include Radical Islam From Below: The Mujaddidiya and Hizb-ut-Tahrir in the Ferghana Valley, in Pauline Jones Luong: *Islam, Society and Politics in Central Asia*. University of Pittsburgh Press 2016.

"*Our goal is peace, wellbeing and the democratic renewal of the country*". An Islam Karimov billboard, prior to presidential elections in March 2015 (photo Alexey Volosevich)

What do you consider to be the most interesting aspects of democracy in Uzbekistan nowadays?

The most interesting aspect is the effort being made to build a democratic society from above, or what the Uzbek leadership would refer to as an evolutionary way towards democracy. Among policy-makers and scholars, Uzbekistan is often considered to be a highly authoritarian state. Its attempts to claim that it operates a democratic system are therefore disregarded as being mere window dressing or a performance aimed at satisfying global requirements. Yet, if we look more closely at the dynamics surrounding democracy in Uzbekistan, we can clearly see that the Uzbek elites are in need of the concept of democracy in order to sustain their internal rule. In other words, the Uzbek leadership uses democracy to justify their right to power and to create diverse legal frameworks, institutions and initiatives to enforce their rule.

This, in turn, has implications for the way in which democracy is articulated in Uzbekistan and how it is being conceptualised in schools and universities, or discussed in scholarly circles and society. For example, in 2015 Islam Karimov decided to replace political science in universities because it did not take into account the "Uzbek" model of development. The replacement course was entitled "The theory and practice of building a democratic society in Uzbekistan". The course explains that democracy means the rule of people, but it also claims that local society has very little experience of democracy and that Uzbeks should look for inspiration

with regard to democracy in works of the medieval thinkers al-Farabi, Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd. In an environment where there is limited access to independent sources, as well as to discussions about democracy in the contemporary world, and in a highly controlled society, a whole generation of Uzbek youth is being introduced to democracy through the works of president Islam Karimov, al-Farabi and Amir Timur.

How does the government use the concept of democracy in relation to other values promoted by the Uzbek government?

When speaking to its population the Uzbek government explains that democracy should be viewed not only as a set of procedural rules, or in relation to the organised character and professionalism of the government, but also as a way of life for a nation – along with its mentality, traditions, and specificities of culture and psychology. For example, in his numerous works and speeches on democracy President Islam Karimov argues that unlike the Western emphasis on individualism and the excessive politicisation of the masses, the East demands a democracy that is based on the ideology of collectivism, paternalism and the prioritisation of public opinion. This is close to the articulation of democracy in the Singapore of the past or in contemporary China. In this way, the Uzbek leadership posits that Uzbek society is not yet prepared for democracy and that it needs a strong state to develop a strong civil society in the future.

Furthermore, the government often refers to morality when addressing democracy, which is the same trend we also see in other Muslim societies and countries. From this perspective, the Western style of democracy violates the "moral purity" of Uzbek culture. This argument is not only used internally but also with regard to international relations, as can be observed in the Wikileaks documents. Here, Islam Karimov explains to his South Korean counterpart that Western democracy is not seen as being appropriate for Uzbekistan´s 85 % Muslim population because, among other things, it allows for or fosters the practice of homosexuality. In this way, building a democratic society not only becomes mixed up with other issues, but it is also articulated in very strong cultural terms.

Are there any other institutions (civil society, traditional, religious) that are presented by the state as being democratic?

The official texts and textbooks aimed at internal consumption explain that in the past there were only a few specific examples of democracy, for example the military-feudal conventions (*qurultais*) among the Turkic nations, or local self-administration through the election of elders (*aksakals*), etc., which operated under the absolute power of the monarch. In more recent history, a group of *jadids* (named after *jadid usul* – a new method in education), who promoted reforms in different spheres of social life at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, have been presented as the carriers of ideas relating to democracy and civil society.

Nowadays, the main channel for democracy has become *mahalla*, the traditional local community. Officially, the government portrays the transfer of government functions to public organisations including this "unique body of

self-government" as one of the most important tasks in the process of democratizing government. In reality, the heads of *mahalla* committees are often elected only if approved by the heads of districts. They mainly carry out the instructions and orders issued "from above" and control the activities of citizens and business at a local level. Similarly, the government registers thousands of NGOs, which are officially tasked with either implementing social and legal protection and education or contributing to the "democratisation of social relations". However, these NGOs are financed by the government or by public organisations and they mainly fulfil the goals established by the state; some are not particularly active. In addition, the role of the trade unions in Uzbekistan is mainly to mobilise workers for communal work undertaken on Saturdays, as well as to fulfil plans for the collection of metal and waste paper etc. Local civil society institutes are thus used mainly to undertake the work of the Uzbek state under the control of government organs. Any other activity that occurs outside this state discourse on democracy is mostly regarded as being suspect.

Who are the most vocal critics of democracy in Uzbekistan?

Paradoxically, the building of a democratic society from above petrifies society and very little space remains for open criticism or activism. Criticisms of democracy come mainly from the Islamist circles that operate underground. Among the most active opposition movements in Uzbekistan are members of Hizb-ut-Tahrir al-Islami (the Islamic Party of Liberation), a transnational non-violent Islamist party that claims that Muslims do not need democracy. In their view, Uzbekistan has already experienced socialism and democracy and these man-made regimes are inappropriate for followers of Islam.

Among the people, views of and conceptions about democracy differ, although we can clearly see that Karimov´s efforts have had a lasting effect on the articulation of democracy in Uzbekistan. In a recent poll on the occasion of the 800th anniversary of the Magna Carta, BBC Uzbek asked its readers to share their views on democracy. Most of the respondents saw democracy, and especially liberalism, as contradicting the rules of Islam and believed that Uzbeks have either not needed democracy, or have had to build their own Eastern religious democracy. Some claimed that it was impossible to have democracy in their country, even though democracy in general was good. Of course, there is very little information about what is actually going on in the country and, without having access to debates about democracy and a plurality of information, as well as being in a society where there is fear of state persecution, people tend to more easily internalise the claims of the Uzbek government.

What should we do in order to better understand the system of democracy in Uzbekistan?

We should study how democracy is used as a tool for gaining political power and how it is contested from both above and below. During the last two decades, the Uzbek government has skilfully shifted the debate away from authoritarianism versus democracy to its concept of an evolutionary way towards the development of democracy. They have done so by contrasting the alleged Western form

of individualistic democracy and the Uzbek model. Furthermore, the Uzbek leadership has played on the fact that politicians and scholars outside Uzbekistan have often overlooked, or have not understood, these dynamics. This is partially the result of the focus on studying the transition process and/or its failures after the end of the Cold War. Partially, however, it is also due to the fact that the internal dynamics are not seen as being important. If we continue only within the confines of the discourse on democratic transition, or in explaining Central Asian states as hybrid regimes, we can be surprised by future developments in the country and the region.

Democracy in Afghanistan

Thomas Ruttig is the founder, a co-director, and a senior analyst of the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN), an independent think tank based in Kabul and Berlin. He graduated in Afghan Studies from Humboldt University (Berlin) and speaks both Pashto and Dari fluently. Starting in 1983, he has spent more than ten years in Afghanistan and Pakistan, most of it from 2000 onwards: as a political affairs officer and head of various offices for the UNSMA and UNAMA missions, as deputy to the EU Special Representative and as a counsellor at the German Embassy. Since 2006, he has been a freelance political analyst and consultant, a visiting fellow at SWP Berlin and has been with AAN since 2009.

What do you consider to be the most interesting aspects of democracy in Afghanistan nowadays?

The most interesting aspect for me is the contradiction between the urge on the part of large parts of the population, particularly youth (not only in the cities) to participate in politics and have their say in political decision-making and the substandard operation of political institutions. This was reflected in the large turnout that occurred during the first round of last year's presidential elections, when many young people came out in a wave of enthusiasm because they saw that, with the end of the Karzai era (after two terms in office the president was not allowed to run again), there was a chance to change not only the person at the top of the

state but also the style of government. They wanted the new president to crack down on corruption and dismantle the patronage system: as the Afghans say, to replace *rawabet* (connections) with *zawabet* (merit). But then, the election ran into trouble. There were so many irregularities and so much political interference, that the electoral institutions were unable to produce a result acceptable to both of the second-round contenders. There was even a situation where no election result figures were issued. The elites were simply not ready to announce a winner and loser. They had to resort to actions that are, in fact, unconstitutional, i.e. by appointing both contenders to a National Unity Government (NUG) and by creating the position of Chief Executive Officer for one of the two because the constitution does not allow for a Prime Minister. As a result, there was even – as in Iran in 2009, although on a much smaller scale – a movement that publicly demanded: What happened to my vote?

You work as an analyst, meeting with diverse opinion makers and decision makers across the country. What are the most widespread opinions about democracy that you hear?

For me, the most important thing is what the electorate, the people, are saying. And here, I regret to say, the mood has turned from one of hope for the achievement of a democratically structured government – following the overthrow of the Taleban regime in 2001 and after almost three decades of war and anti-democratic

An Afghan man shows his inked finger to demonstrate that he has voted during the elections in Barge Matal, Afghanistan, in August 2009 (Wikimedia Commons, public domain)

regimes (pseudo-republican, communist, Islamist) – to deep disappointment about how "democracy" has been implemented in post-Taleban Afghanistan. Afghans are not – or have not been in the past – adverse to democracy, but they have experienced a period of 15 years during which laws have been manipulated or clearly violated and democratic institutions have been marginalised. This happened initially because, in my view, the US-led coalition did not trust Afghans to be capable of "doing democracy". They took decisions on their behalf (for example by pushing forward Karzai as the head of state and later on by over-centralising the presidential system) and allied themselves with anti-democratic players, i.e. the former warlords who believe that democracy is a threat to their power. This was not only viewed by many Afghans as representing interference, but also – and correctly so – as being an example of the West's hypocrisy vis-à-vis its own democratic values.

Afghan elites have a very utilitarian approach to democracy. Many pay lip service to it, as long as they believe the West is serious in democratising Afghanistan. Others see it as a useful means of gaining power, but there is doubt as to whether they would continue to act in a democratic way if unchallenged when in power. Until now, Afghanistan's elite has been fractured so there is no absolute power. This situation allows for a degree of political freedom and some genuine pluralism. But at their core, these elites are not democratic and, in addition, the course of the last 15 years' events has not forced them to become democratised.

Who is the most vocal critic of democracy in Afghanistan?

There are two forces. First, there are the Islamic clergy, who are not only very conservative but who have also become predominantly Islamist. This means that more and more clergymen see democracy and everything that emanates from the West as being anti-Islamic. The problem is that the leading clergymen are identical with what is now officially referred to as the Jihadi (i.e. the former mujahedin) leaders. This means that they combine both religious and political power in their own hands. They also dominate the discourse, interpreting every attack on themselves and their politics as being an attack on Islam. And, as they have both the power and the control of the institutions of the state (including the courts) and can mobilise armed groups – either from the legitimate security forces or from so-called militia groups – they have the power to enforce their opinions very effectively. No one in Afghanistan dares to resist them anymore. The secular elements have been quietened.

The second force constitutes large sections of the youth population, i.e. well-educated young people. Among them, particularly those who attend the many universities (most of the 34 provinces have one), there are neo-Islamist groups who have a wide and growing influence. I would say they exercise a high degree of hegemony within the higher education system – at least in terms of there being no visible counter-force, apart from the supporters of some mujahedin parties. These neo-Islamists directly and publicly oppose democracy (as do the Taleban and the former mujahedin) and postulate that Islam is the only way. This includes groups such as Hezb ul-Tahrir but also, and much more so, the home-grown groups that claim to be the real inheritors of the Muslim brotherhood legacy – by which most mujahedin parties were initially inspired.

Recently, since the growth of disillusionment with democracy in Afghan society, different actors have started to look at alternative ways of explaining democracy, i.e. through reference to examples from the Qur´an, through changing the vocabulary (from a focus on human rights to meeting the basic needs of each person – law, justice, etc.). What kind of trends have you observed in this respect?

I do not see strong forces in support of the concept of an Islamic democracy. Some groups which have become disappointed with Western-style "democracy" have adopted the Iranian word, *mardom-salari* – which has the exact meaning of democracy: mardom = people; salari = rule. The conflict – which is also the cause of the NUG's paralysis – is in relation to the presidential versus parliamentarian system argument. This is essentially about centralism versus de-centralisation; pluralism and a multi-party system against a dominant executive. But it is an elite form of pluralism since, as mentioned above, the elites are fragmented in the same way as society as a whole, with a vertical, ethno-centric mobilisation still in operation. This is not really about democracy but about inter-elite conflict. But, better to have a pluralist society than a monolithic elite, as this retains an opening for the exercise of freedom. In Afghanistan, you also have a relatively active civil society that bases its activities on the concept of rights. However, in practice, this sphere has been ethicised as a result of the political and ethnic re-polarisation since the 2014 elections (and even before, under Karzai) – and parts of civil society have been co-opted, respectively, by both parts of the NUG.

What should we do in order to better understand the processes related to democracy and different conceptions of democracy in Afghanistan?

I see a more general problem. We have witnessed the privatisation, militarisation and monopolisation of research in relation to almost everything concerning Afghanistan. Donors (primarily, the various military groups) fund Afghan and non-Afghan researchers, pocket their findings, with much of what is researched never coming under the spotlight of public or academic scrutiny. This is extremely dangerous as research can not only be instrumentalised by political agendas, but can also lead to – or at least contribute to – fatal political decisions, with decision makers not always being well-informed in relation to high quality research findings. No one even reads the longer papers, just focusing on the executive summaries. But countries such as Afghanistan are so highly complex that you cannot simply explain things in one page.

This is reflected in the current focus on so-called "lessons learned exercises" that are taking place in governments – and this, ultimately, has to do with the issue of democracy. Governments often operate from too short a perspective; in the case of Afghanistan, even developments that occurred between World War II and the outbreak of the conflict associated with the Soviet invasion in 1979 are seen as ancient history by many, and often this is the case even with everything that happened before 9/11. From such a perspective, the warlord structures in Afghanistan, for example, that are the result of post-1979 events, appear as "traditional" structures. In Germany, for example, new government guidelines dealing with fragile states

recommend that countries should refrain from resorting to what is seen as the "imposition of democracy" (which has never actually occurred) and should instead work more with the existing "traditional" or religious structures. If this is implemented, there will be a further strengthening of the extremely violent and even illegitimate regimes which, with the West's support, have managed to sideline nascent pro-democratic forces. Therefore, while research into how different political and social forces in Afghanistan conceptionalise democracy, or how state organisations in general are very important, there should also be a focus on research into the results of interventionism. This needs to be undertaken independently and academically and without interference from the politicised atmosphere that has recently polluted academic research in relation to Afghanistan.

Democracy and Islamism

Shadi Hamid is a fellow at the Brookings Institution's Center for Middle East Policy and the author of *Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East* (Oxford University Press), which was named as a Foreign Affairs Best Book for 2014. An expert on Islamist movements, Hamid served as director of research at the Brookings Doha Center until January 2014. Prior to joining Brookings, he was director of research at the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) and a Hewlett Fellow at Stanford University's Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law. He is currently vice-chair of POMED's board of directors and a contributing writer to The Atlantic. Hamid received his B.S. and M.A. from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, and his Ph.D. in political science from Oxford University.

What do you consider to be the most interesting aspects of democracy with regard to Islamism nowadays?

The interesting, and yet counterintuitive aspect is that if we compare Islamists and secularists, Islamists (for all their faults) have had the better record in relation to democracy. Here, of course, I am talking about *mainstream*

Demonstration by Hizb al-Nour (Party of Light), the Salafi party in Egypt that came second to the Muslim Brotherhood in 2011–2012 parliamentary elections (photo Clément Steuer)

Islamists, whom I would define as affiliates and descendants of the Muslim Brotherhood. This is not to say Islamists are "liberals"; they aren't. And this is why I used my first book, *Temptations of Power*, to discuss the apparent paradox of "illiberal democracy." In the Western imagination, we see liberalism and democracy as inextricably intertwined, but this is not quite correct. We went through a particular historical sequencing, the foundations of constitutional liberalism first and democracy – in the sense of political equality and universal suffrage – only coming later.

The fascinating question for me is the question of alternative ideologies. Should Egyptians, Jordanians, or Pakistanis have the right to decide, through the democratic process, that they would rather *not* be liberals? Why shouldn't they have that right to decide?

You have conducted interviews with mainstream Islamists in Egypt and other countries. What are the most widespread opinions about democracy that you have come across?

What we have witnessed over the course of the past couple of decades is the widespread Islamist acceptance of "democracy." If you had spoken to these groups in the early 1980s, they would have refused to use the word, seeing it as a foreign import. They preferred *shura*, an Islamic concept meaning "consultation."

But for a variety of reasons, Muslim Brotherhood movements in Egypt, Jordan, and elsewhere slowly began to embrace not just "democracy" as a word, but also many of democracy's tenets, including the alternation of power, popular sovereignty, and multi-party pluralism. Later on, in the 2000s, new phrases were introduced, such as the "civil state." Islamist parties were in the process of playing to new audiences, trying to demonstrate moderation to potential liberal and leftist allies at home, as well as trying to persuade Western audiences that they were not to be feared. Of course, the question that many ask is: how much of this embracing of democracy was natural, organic, and deeply felt and how much of it was "forced." A related question is: how much importance do we attribute to what is in the hearts of men and women (something which is ultimately unknowable) versus what we can perceive from observable behaviour?

Ultimately, mainstream Islamists received little in return for their new national commitments. They did what they were supposed to do, particularly in the 1990s and 2000s as a result of coming under increasing pressure from Western interlocutors as well as from secular parties at home, to become more "moderate." Yet, the irony of it is that the more that Islamists came to terms with democracy, political parties, and the nation-state, the more they found themselves rejected and repressed. In light of the failures of the Arab spring, and the July 2013 Egyptian coup in particular, more Islamists have begun to question their belief in, or reliance on, the democratic process, particularly their pre-coup obsessive focus on electoral politics (at the expense of the traditional core priorities of *da'wa,* or religious education, and social service provision). Contesting and winning elections became the overwhelming and consuming concern of the Egyptian Brotherhood, for example. The results, needless to say, were not good.

Who is the most vocal critic of democracy among Islamists in Middle Eastern countries?

Among mainstream Islamists, there aren't really any vocal "critics" of democracy, at least none of any great prominence. The one exception would be the Brotherhood-linked activists or groups in countries such as Saudi Arabia. They are products of a more conservative context and, of course, "democracy" is not something many people publicly advocate in Saudi Arabia (or the UAE either). This, though, does not necessarily mean that they publicly attack democracy as an idea; more that they avoid using the word.

Where there is more divergence is in relation to the question as to how much of the "liberal" part of "liberal democracy" should Islamists accept, with parties such as Ennahda being most accommodating, while others being much less so. There are, of course, Islamists such as the Turkish President Erdogan who act undemocratically in practice, but this has not reflected any theoretical reconsideration of democracy as a system (Erdogan's AKP, in particular, holds to a very majoritarian conception of democracy). Now, if on the other hand we are talking about Islamism writ large, and not just simply mainstream Islamists, then there are many Salafis and Salafi-Jihadis who oppose or argue against democracy. The main objection is

that democracy allows the people, through their elected representatives, to legislate, a situation that violates God's sovereignty as He is the sole lawgiver. This has long been one of the main lines of attack against the Brotherhood from extremist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. They see the Brotherhood as betraying Islam (even to the point of apostasy) by accepting the secular foundations of modern electoral politics and the modern nation-state.

Do Islamists use or look for alternative ways to explain democracy (for example through the examples of the Qur´an, references to local customs of governance, or the changing vocabulary of democracy)?

It depends on the local context. Most mainstream Islamists would argue that democracy is the modern-day equivalent or analogue of *shura*. In this way, Islamists can draw on their own traditions to appropriate, justify, or "Islamise" democracy (which, of course, did not exist at the time of the Prophet Mohamed). Contrary to popular belief, mainstream Islamists are *not* literalists or fundamentalists. They are actually the successors of the Islamic modernists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The defining feature of the modernists was their flexibility with regard to Islamic tradition, including aspects of Islamic law, through their use of sweeping *maslaha* (public interest) arguments. This is one of the main points of divergence between Brotherhood-inspired Islamists and Salafis.

What should we do in order to better understand the processes related to democracy and conceptualisations of democracy among Islamists?

The most important thing to do is, in some ways, rather simple: i.e. to sit down with real-live Islamists, talk to them, and get to know them. There is no reason to mystify Islamists and their beliefs. At least those of the mainstream variety are easily accessible and are willing to discuss and debate with Western researchers. The challenge, of course, is to make sense of what they are saying, and this requires more time, effort, and research. And this is what any scholar of Islamist movements must at least attempt to do: i.e. to immerse him or herself in a very different world and be willing to be exposed to something fundamentally *different*. This can be difficult for those of us of a more secular background. Many in the West have lost the ability to see a world where religion is, or has the potential to be, the prime mover. We still, too often, speak of strict binaries between the "religious" and the "political" or the "secular" and the "sacred," where in the mind (and heart) of the Islamist believer, the two are endlessly intertwined.

Democracy in Turkey

What do you consider to be the most interesting aspects of democracy in Turkey nowadays?

The history of Turkish democracy is haunted by the political power of the military with its self-assigned role as guardian of the secular regime. Many believed that democratic consolidation was about to come due to the civilianisation process in the 2000s, particularly when Turkey-EU relations were intense as a result of the accession talks. Contrary to expectations, as of 2016, democracy seems to have broken down in Turkey.

Pelin Ayan Musil is a senior lecturer in comparative politics at the Anglo-American University, Prague. Her research interests include democratisation, political parties and the politics of Turkey. She earned her Ph.D. degree in Political Science from Bilkent University (2010, Ankara). She was a Fulbright visiting researcher at the Department of Government at Georgetown University between 2007-2008. She is the author of the book *Authoritarian Party Structures and Democratic Political Setting in Turkey* (Palgrave, 2011) and has published in journals such as *International Political Science Review, South European Society and Politics, Turkish Studies* and *Teaching in Higher Education*.

Since 2002, a party of Islamist origin has governed Turkey. In the eyes of many experts, when it first came to power, the party and its founder, Erdogan, offered a promising outlook in relation to improvements in the field of democracy. It had abandoned its ties with its Islamist predecessor and had adopted a pro-EU party programme. During the AKP incumbency, civilian control over the state was extended and it became harder to ban political parties that offended the "deep state" structures associated with an intensely secularist ideology. Yet, these developments did not make the country more democratic as they went hand in hand with executive degradation. The AKP used its electoral strength to dominate political institutions and extended partisan control over the judiciary and the bureaucracy, firing and arresting journalists, buying off media moguls, as well as suppressing the political opposition, public protests, and critical sections of the media. Therefore, what had characterised the main problem for democracy in Turkey for over sixty years (i.e. military tutelage) vanished, while new and serious threats, such as executive degradation, have appeared over the past decade. This development shows that a return to an authoritarian regime is likely in the country and is contrary to the predictions of the Turkish political scientists in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Turkey recently witnessed a coup attempt. How did the public discourse on democracy change after this attempt?

Prior to the coup attempt it was possible to categorise the democracy discourse in Turkey into three groups. There was the government discourse, which conceptualises democracy from a majoritarian and populist perception. According to government officials, the AKP has received the majority of votes in four consecutive elections,

People gathering in the Turkish capital to protest against the military coup attempt in July 2016 (photo Pivox, Wikimedia Commons)

which justifies the party's right to carry out the policies that "people have chosen". The second discourse belongs to the main opposition party in parliament, the CHP (Republican People´s Party) and its supporters, who have highlighted the suppression of the opposition and a deterioration in relation to the freedom of speech, blaming this on the AKP government. The third discourse is the province of the leftists, who include feminists, the LGBT community, and ethnic and religious minorities (such as the Kurds, the Alevis and the Christians). In a similar way to the CHP supporters, the members of this group, who have recently united under the HDP (Peoples´ Democratic Party) party brand, also criticise the AKP's majoritarian concept of democracy. But, as distinct from the CHP, it also highlights the need to safeguard the civil liberties of the minorities and disadvantaged groups by bringing about direct democracy and a decentralisation of power within the country.

Since the failed coup attempt on July 15, Turkey has witnessed for the first time a level of accord between the government and opposition parties (which includes the nationalist MHP (Nationalist Movement Party), along with the three parties mentioned above). All condemned the coup attempt and stood in support of electoral democracy. All mainstream media channels were flooded with headlines such as "it's the people who won" or "democracy won." President Erdogan called on the public to "claim the streets" and to "endorse democracy". People gathered every night in the public squares to remember the people killed while resisting the coup attempt. These gatherings were then labelled as the people's

"democracy watch" in the media. Recent research on these gatherings, however, showed that 84 per cent of the participants were AKP supporters. However, when the "democracy watch" ended at its peak in Istanbul on August 7, the two opposition party leaders (the CHP and the MHP), who had previously been the most vocal critics of Erdogan, cooperated with him by engaging in the new democracy discourse, which included the terms "compromise", "civilianisation" and "one nation, one heart". It is not surprising that the HDP, affiliated with Kurdish supporters, was not part of this alliance. Indeed, the HDP broke the accord shortly after the failure of the coup attempt and continued its resistance to the majoritarian concept of democracy. To summarise, it has been observed in the aftermath of the coup attempt that almost all political actors in Turkey (the government, the opposition parties – except the HDP – and the media) have determined to conceptualise democracy as being equivalent to civilianisation, thus reinforcing the majoritarian understanding of democracy that previously was the exclusive preserve of the AKP government.

Who are the actors in Turkey who most influence the discourse on democracy? Who are the most vocal critics or proponents of democracy in Turkey?

In my previous answer, I already identified the major actors who influence the democracy discourse as being the four political parties in Turkey. Of these, the MHP has contributed little to the development of a democracy discourse. In fact, it has rarely uttered the word "democracy", its main focus being the creation of a discourse on Turkish nationalism, which is essentialist in nature. The secularist state forces, particularly the military and the judiciary, used to contribute to the democracy discourse before they lost influence in politics, emphasizing the "secularist" notion of democracy. But, as these actors have lost their prominence on the Turkish political scene, this discourse on secularism has been reduced to the efforts of some Kemalist circles in the public domain, which constitute a part of the CHP electorate. On the other hand, civil society is quite weak and is not able to provide any direction regarding the public discourse in Turkey. The mainstream media has experienced a profound transformation and has become more or less pro-government in its stance. This is why it is hard to believe that the media can shape the discourse from a different angle.

In Turkey, every party is a vocal proponent of democracy. The vocal critics, i.e. the radical Islamists who would rather support a sharia regime, or people who are in favour of a military government, constitute a small section within society. Their existence does not pose much threat to democracy. What is rather more problematic is the way the concept of democracy is being exploited by the powerful actors who consider themselves to be the proponents of democracy. In particular, the AKP and its supporters conceptualise it as "civilianisation" and as "elections", but do not seem to consider the rights of the minorities or civil liberties as part of this concept. Furthermore, when the word "election" is uttered, it is hard to say that it implies "a free and fair process", which is necessary for any democracy. In fact the most recent election process was highly manipulated as a result of the dramatic rise in political violence within the country.

You have lived in both the Czech Republic and Turkey. How does the public discourse on democracy differ between the Czech Republic and Turkey?

Of course, the characteristics of the two political regimes are nowadays quite different. Turkey is in the process of regressing towards authoritarianism, while the Czech Republic is a liberal democracy and has its own problems, such as corruption and deinstitutionalised parties. Therefore, one would expect the democracy discourse to be different in the two countries. I have already mentioned that in Turkey the major democracy discourse is based on civilianisation and rests upon a majoritarian understanding, which is challenged by leftist and liberal groups. These groups, which constitute perhaps 10–15 per cent of Turkish society, place the emphasis on human rights, civil liberties, freedom of speech and opposition rights. In the Czech Republic, these issues constitute the meaning of democracy for the majority of society. This is probably the main difference.

However, in the Czech context, these liberal dimensions of democracy are often considered to be "European values". Even some intellectual circles consider them in this way. This is another distinction between the two countries; the liberals in Turkey consider these values to be universal, whereas the Czech liberals see them as European. Yet, associating these values with Europeanism may reinforce Eurocentrism or a perception based on the superiority of European culture over others in society, which is potentially problematic as well.

What should we do in order to better understand the processes related to democracy and the different concepts of democracy in Turkey?

It is unfortunate that both the Turkish media and the Western media have presented biased information about recent developments in relation to Turkish democracy. Except for a few opposition newspapers, the mainstream media in Turkey had already become pro-government. Particularly after the coup attempt, it adopted the same democracy discourse as the AKP. On the other hand, the Western media seems to have embraced an extremely anti-Erdogan approach in its news coverage, focusing on the authoritarian measures taken in the country after the coup attempt. While this is an important part of the story, it does not cover the full picture and does not reveal how the other actors, particularly the opposition parties, have been switching sides, allying themselves with the government by creating a common enemy, referred to as the "Gulen Terror Group (FETO)", which was declared as the main plotter behind the coup. Therefore, I would recommend the reader to access and read the op-eds of the Turkish political scientists who write on online platforms, such as *Open Democracy* or *Research Turkey*.

Thematically related international conferences and workshops organized by the Oriental Institute:

PROTEST MOVEMENTS IN THE CONTEMPORARY MIDDLE EAST

May 29–30, 2014

Co-organized by the Centre Français de Recherche en Sciences Sociales (CEFRES) in Prague, with the support of Groupe de Recherches et d'Etudes sur la Méditerranée et le Moyen-Orient (GREMMO, Lyon) and Cercle des Chercheurs sur le Moyen-Orient (CCMO), the conference discussed the themes of elections in the wake of the protest movements, as well as autocracy and political culture in the Middle East.

IDEOLOGY, PROPAGANDA AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN XI JINPING'S CHINA

September 17, 2015

The workshop initiated collaborative research into the CPC's ideology, propaganda and political discourse as an important means of forging political, social and cultural order in the PRC during Xi Jinping's era. The project combined area expertise with a theoretically and methodologically innovative perspective, of interest to policy makers, students and the general public alike.

TALKING ABOUT ARABS: ECHOES FROM DIFFERENT EUROPES

May 27–28, 2016

The conference sought to investigate the nexus between three different fields of knowledge production and diffusion in today's Europe: media, academic/intellectual and policy-making. The goal was to examine the ways in which various scholarly traditions, journalistic cultures and political interests (or disinterests) affect knowledge about the Middle East in different parts of Europe.

POWER AND STRATEGIES OF POLITICAL ORDER IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

October 14, 2016

Southeast Asia as a region and cultural area is renowned for its unique ancient concepts of authority and statehood. The conference explored both historical concepts of kingship, datu-ship and other traditional forms of authority, as well as more modern modes and strategies used in gaining power and maintaining political order.

CENTRAL ASIA AND MIGRATION THROUGH THE PERSPECTIVE OF ORAL HISTORY (IN THE 20th CENTURY)

November 11, 2016

The workshop contributed to an understanding of migration by exploring 20th century oral histories concerning cross-border migrations between Central Asia and Afghanistan, China and other countries. The goal was to address issues of migration from below and beyond the static view of history and politics, and discuss the local backgrounds, outcomes and challenges of migration.

This brochure is an outcome of the conference "Democracy in the Political Culture of the Middle East, Asia and Russia" that took place on September 16, 2015 in Prague, organized by the Oriental Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences. The conference was a Partner event of the 19th Forum 2000 conference "Democracy and Education". It was financed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic as a public diplomacy project, linked to the priorities of Czech foreign policy and international relations, as well as by Strategy AV21 of the Czech Academy of Sciences.

COMING UP IN THE SCIENCE AROUND US SERIES:

Michal Koblížek: **Stanislaus von Prowazek**
Libuše Čižmárová: **Česko/Czechia**
Jan Vít: **Jan Patočka**

ALREADY PUBLISHED:

Ondřej Beránek: **Oriental Institute (English edition)**
Kateřina Piorecká and Pavel Janáček: **Czech Literary Studies and the Institute of Czech Literature, CAS (English edition)**
E. Semotanová, P. Chromý, M. Semian, Z. Kučera: **Historical Geography Research Centre (English edition)**

Science Around Us | Challenges and Questions
Democracy Contested: China, Central Asia and the Middle East | *Věra Exnerová*

Published by the Centre of Administration and Operation CAS, v. v. i.
Layout: Jakub Krč; Type: Serifa. Editor in charge: Petra Královcová.
First edition, 2016. Edition number 12053.
Print: SERIFA®, s. r. o., Jinonická 80, 158 00 Praha 5.

ISSN 2464-6245
Registered by the MK ČR under No. E 22344

Other volumes available at:
www.vedakolemnas.cz | www.academiaknihy.cz | www.eknihy.academia.cz