

Democracy and Tolerance

Mohamed Rabie

Studies on the democratic issue indicate that the establishment of a democratic system in any country requires a sociocultural environment conducive to the acceptance of the democratic idea and its translation into a system of governance. The most important conditions for a successful democracy, according to most political philosophers, are political plurality, neutral media, and a middle class. Political Plurality means more than one political party to give voters options in terms of ideas, programs, and visions of the future. Neutral Media means having media outlets capable of investigating important issues and spreading the truth without favoring one side over others, or being biased toward a particular point of view. The Middle Class must be strong, self-confident, conscious of its role in society, and capable of defining its interests and defending them. In fact, no social class can be created in any society, whether a working-class, a middle class or a bourgeois, without having a class consciousness that ties its members together and enables them to think as a special group, having shared interests, and similar concerns and ambitions.

However, my life experience living in the United States and Europe, besides my studies in the social, cultural, political and economic fields, has convinced me that these three conditions cannot ensure a truly democratic system. The availability of these conditions does not necessarily mean that most people accept the legitimacy of different views, attitudes, and religious beliefs of others, which means that there is a need for a fourth condition; a culture of tolerance that recognizes that all members of society have equal rights, and leads them to deal with each other on this basis.

People promoting freedom and social justice use the word "tolerance" to encourage openness and achieve equality of rights and obligations in society. But the way tolerance is interpreted in most societies suggests that cultural groups do not view each other as equals; one cultural or religious group often enjoys a high moral authority, while none of the other groups enjoys the same authority. As a result, the first group tends to denigrate members of other groups and their cultural values and beliefs. This means that the word tolerance falls short of achieving the desired goals; it may even convince one cultural or religious group of being superior to the others, and lead it to discriminate against them.

Nevertheless, every word reflects the meaning we assign to it. So as we promote a culture of tolerance, we need to stress that tolerance means equality of social, cultural, economic and

political rights. As such, tolerance becomes a sociocultural value that regulates relationships among citizens in one society. And that causes tolerance to become an individual and group attitude embedded in the social and cultural fabric of society. Where tolerance prevails in society, people tend to interact with one another naturally on the basis of equality and mutual respect; most people would go beyond being friends and coworkers and neighbors to establish relations that transcend ideological and religious taboos.

Democracy as a system of political governance guarantees regular elections and the transfer of power peacefully; however, as a sociocultural value, democracy guarantees that people stick to the principle of equality of rights and duties, mutual respect of others' opinions, and the right to freely express such opinions. If democracy as a system of governance means ends dictatorship and states' abuse of power, democracy as a sociocultural value ends monopoly of the truth by any philosophy, such as religion, nationalism, and Marxism; it also puts an end to organized action by any group to control thought, mold and remold public opinion, and impose their worldviews or beliefs on other citizens. In fact, if democracy succeeds as a sociocultural value, it will succeed as a just political system; if it fails a sociocultural value, it will fail as a just political system.

Without weaving tolerance into the value system most dominant in society, we would not be able to stop racism and discrimination; and democracy as a system of governance would fail. And that usually leads to spreading corruption and violating people's human rights, causing both culture and politics to be polluted and lose their validity and legitimacy. This is why America today is going through a chaotic transition that witnesses the undermining of culture and politics. The agreement on the meanings of concepts is a necessity for reaching consensus on issues that concern society. And this requires thinkers, intellectuals, sociopolitical and socioeconomic activists to work together to correct misconceptions. Lack of attention to this issue would raise the fears of some people, cause the rights of others to be violated, and give no peace of mind to most citizens. That is why we had to preserve and treasure Martin Luther King's immortal words, pronounced before he was assassinated by the criminal mind of racism: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere".

Prof. Mohamed Rabie

www.yazour.com