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Opinion: Muslims too prefer secular government

By M. Steven Fish
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Are Muslims more religious than non-Muslims? To many people, it appears that they are. Furthermore, Muslims often seem to be intent on fusing religious and political authority.

Once released from the shackles imposed by secularist tyrants, Muslims therefore might be expected to select religious zealots at the polls.

I recently published a statistical study on mass attitudes in the Muslim world that casts doubt on common assumptions. I draw on the World Values Survey, which has tapped some 100,000 people in more than 80 countries. It includes several questions that measure personal religiosity.

One asks whether the respondent considers himself or herself "a religious person." A large majority of people who self-identify as Muslims -- 85 percent -- say they do. Yet 84 percent of self-identified Christians do as well.

The survey also queries people on how often they attend religious services. I divide respondents into those who attend one or more times per week and those who attend less frequently or never. The meaning of weekly attendance is comparable across Muslims and Christians, since Muslims consider weekly attendance at Friday noon prayers and sermons at mosque an important practice of their

faith, much as Christians regard turning out at Sunday morning worship services a centerpiece of theirs.

A higher percentage of Muslims than Christians attend religious services at least once a week -- 43 percent to 37 percent. Upon

closer inspection, however, we find that the entire difference between Muslims and Christians is due to variation across subgroups of Christians. Globally, 42 percent of Catholics and 44 percent of Protestants attend services at least once a week, while only 13 percent of Orthodox Christians do. Low church attendance among Orthodox Christians, most of whom live in Eastern Europe and the countries of the former U.S.S.R., accounts for the entire difference in religious observance between Muslims and Christians.

The findings on whether Muslims favor combining religious and political authority are also remarkable. Several questions in the survey elicit whether respondents think the clergy should have a role in politics. One asks whether the respondent agrees with the statement "religious leaders should not influence how people vote."

Muslims share in a global consensus on keeping clerics away from voters. Sixty-six percent of Muslims, compared with 71 percent of Christians, agree that "religious leaders should not influence how people vote." Once the data are analyzed using appropriate methods, even this modest difference fades into insignificance.

Each time a major Muslim country has reasonably free elections, much of the world braces for the worst. When secularist and temperate Islamist parties do well and militant Islamist parties show poorly, many observers show surprise and relief. This issue arises yet again in the wake of the recent

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uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt.

If the findings of my study are valid, our anxiety may not be justified. Islamists have sometimes gained power by the ballot. The impressive performance of Hamas in the Palestinian elections of 2006 provides an example.

But this case is exceptional. More typical are outcomes that bring secularists or temperate Islamists to power. Most elections in Muslim countries where contests are free, as in Turkey in 2007, Indonesia in 2008 and 2009, and Pakistan in 2008, bring secularists or moderate Islamists to power, and parties representing militant Islamist tendencies perform abysmally.

In light of my findings drawn from global surveys, these results may not be surprising. Careful analysis of the global data shows that Muslims are neither extraordinarily religious nor especially prone to favor joining religious and political power.

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