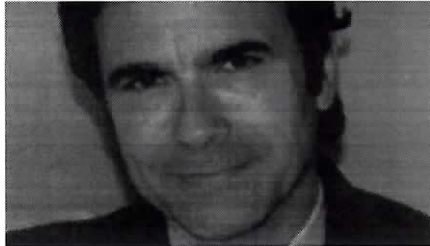




# It's democracy, stupid!

By **M. Steven Fish**, Special to CNN  
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**Editor's note:** *M. Steven Fish is professor of political science at Berkeley, and the author of "Are Muslims Distinctive? A Look at the Evidence."*

**(CNN)** -- Westerners have become accustomed to regarding Muslims as immune from democracy's charms. Little wonder the popular revolts around the Arab world have taken us by surprise.

We often think of Muslims as extraordinarily religious and eager to combine religious and political authority. According to late-night favorite Bill Maher: "Muslims still take their religion too seriously. Whereas we have the good sense to blow it off." Maher may be joking, or he may really believe as and many others do that Muslims' religiosity inclines them to theocracy and jihad rather than democracy and reason.

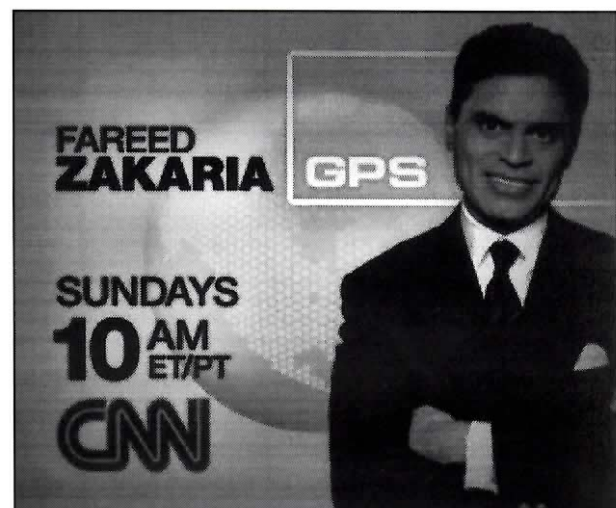
I recently did research for a book that compares the attitudes of Muslims and non-Muslims on political questions. The findings challenge some common assumptions.

I relied on the World Values Survey, the prominent global project on popular attitudes that is directed by Ronald Inglehart of the University of Michigan. The survey covers about 100,000 people in more than 80 countries. The world's most populous Christian and Muslim societies are included in the study.

One survey item asks whether the respondent considers himself or herself "a religious person." With Muslims, 85% say yes, but 84% of Christians do as well. Maher might blow off religion, but most people do not.

Yet religiosity does not translate into thirst for theocracy. Sixty-six percent of Muslims versus 71% of Christians agree that "religious leaders should not influence how people vote." When the numbers are crunched with the proper controls, even this small difference evaporates.

The survey also asks about preference for political regime. Respondents are asked to evaluate four types of political systems: "A strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections." "Having experts, not government, make decisions according to what



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they think is best for the country." "Having the army rule." "Having a democratic political system."

Working with a co-author, Danielle Lussier, I created an index of the four response items, reversing the direction of responses for the "democratic system" and averaging across all responses. The result is an index ranging from 1 to 4, in which 1 indicates least support for democracy and 4 represents highest support for democracy.

When the data are analyzed using the appropriate statistical methods, the score for a Muslim respondent is 2.94, compared to 2.98 for a non-Muslim. This difference -- 0.04 points on scale that runs from 1 to 4 -- is trivial.

The uprisings in the Middle East are all about aspirations for self-government. Demonstrators are demanding the ouster of dictators and free elections. They are not calling for trading secular dictators for rule by religious guides.

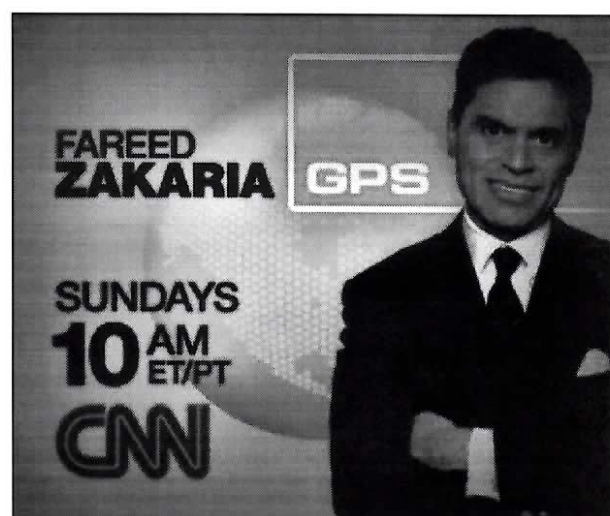
The fault lines that divide governments in the Middle East are telling. Most governments, including those of Algeria, Libya, Syria and Saudi Arabia, have reacted with dismay to events in Egypt and Tunisia. One major Muslim neighbor, Turkey, has supported the uprisings.

The reaction of the Saudi government would seem to be especially peculiar. The Saudis stake their legitimacy on their puritanical brand of Islamist rule and their alliance with the

kingdom's hidebound Wahhabi clergy. Yet Saudi rulers eagerly offered refuge to Tunisia's fleeing dictator, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali -- a man who for a quarter century mercilessly persecuted any Tunisian suspected of embracing Saudi-style Wahhabi beliefs.

Saudi rulers also ordered their clergy to condemn the Egyptian uprising as un-Islamic, even though Hosni Mubarak, the dictator who is the target of the Egyptian demonstrators' ire, is a staunch foe of Islamism of any type.

Yet such reactions are not as ironic as they might seem.



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The Algerian, Libyan, Syrian and Saudi Arabian regimes differ in countless ways, but they share a common trait: The rulers fear their people. Turkish leaders suffer no such discomfort, since their people elected them. The Turkish prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, holds power at the pleasure of the voters, who elected his party in 2002 and reaffirmed its mandate in 2007.

Even on the international level, the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia are not about religion. They are about democracy versus tyranny.

If the demonstrations are not about religion, isn't it possible that Islam will still hinder democratization in Egypt and its neighbors?

The Muslim world does lag on democracy. But experience counsels skepticism about assuming a hard link between religion and regime.

During the first three decades after World War II, scholars produced copious explanations for why democracy could thrive in Protestant countries alone. Catholics were seen as being steeped in a spirit of hierarchy, patriarchy, and rigidity that made them resistant to democracy.

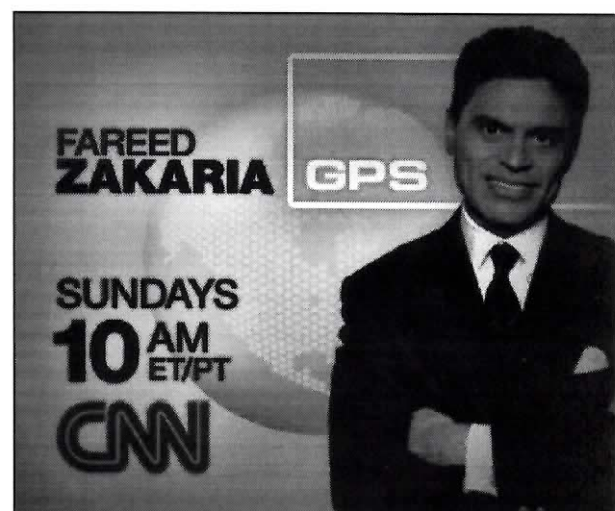
From today's perspective, such theories look almost humorous. The Spanish and Portuguese threw their dictators out in the 1970s. Latin America, the Philippines and

Catholic Eastern Europe followed suit in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Perhaps in 2025, our theories about Muslims and democracy will seem as quaint as our older theories about Catholics look today.

The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of M. Steven Fish.

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