

Muslim majorities open to democracy, but cautious

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January 9, 2014

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(RNS) Women should cover their hair. Government should implement Shariah law. But democracy and separation of church and state may be best for society.

Those are among the findings of a new study about public attitudes in seven bellwether Muslim-majority countries, published by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan.

More than half the people surveyed in Turkey and Tunisia and nearly half in conservative Saudi Arabia said women should choose what they wear outside their homes, but majorities in all three countries also said women should wear headscarves in public.

The kind of headscarf is a different matter. Nearly three-quarters of people in Saudi Arabia said they believed women in public should wear either burqas or face-veils, known as niqabs. By comparison, Tunisians and Turks preferred more moderate versions of the headscarf known as the hijab, and significant minorities — 32 percent in Turkey, 15 percent in Tunisia — said women should not wear headscarves at all. In Lebanon, 49 percent said women should not wear headscarves in public, perhaps reflecting the 27 percent of Lebanese surveyed who are Christian.

The report, which surveyed people in Egypt, Iraq and Pakistan, too, offered surprising findings on attitudes toward secular government, religious tolerance and attitudes toward Americans.

Large majorities of people in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Tunisia and Turkey said their country would be better off if religion and government were separated. In Pakistan,

only 9 percent of people said the country would be better off with church-state separation, while no results were available in Saudi Arabia.

In all seven countries, overwhelming majorities said democracy, which was not defined, is the best form of government. At the same time, strong majorities in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Egypt, as well as half of Iraqis, said government should implement Shariah (Islamic law), a view shared by only 20 percent to 27 percent of people in Lebanon, Tunisia and Turkey.

“These numbers tell us that people want democracy, but they don’t want a democracy that is antithetical to religion — they don’t want a democracy where religion has no role,” said Ebrahim Moosa, a professor of religion and Islamic studies at Duke University.

People in the West and in Muslim countries have very different notions of what Shariah, or Islamic law means, too, Moosa said. While Westerners think of Shariah as a harsh penal code, many Muslims think of it as justice, equality, fairness.

The survey also suggested that in Saudi Arabia, 70 percent of respondents said non-Muslims should be prohibited from practicing their religion in their country. But only 27 percent of Turks, 23 percent of Iraqis and 18 percent of Tunisians felt the same way. In Pakistan, the scene of frequent anti-Christian violence, 4 percent of people said non-Muslims should not be allowed to practice their religion.

Mansoor Moaddel, a sociologist at the University of Maryland, College Park, and the principal investigator, said Tunisia had the best chances for establishing a liberal democracy based on the study’s results.

“Tunisia had the highest level of religious tolerance,” he said. “The higher the religious tolerance, the higher the level of tolerance for disagreement.”

The report was published Dec. 15. The study was conducted between 2011 and 2013. The overall survey response rate was 78 percent. Among the 3,070 respondents, 55 percent were female.

The seven countries surveyed comprised roughly a quarter of the world’s Muslims. Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Islam, and Tunisia is where the Arab Spring began.