

An analysis of the freedom of expression politics essay



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Ever since the idea of freedom of expression flourished, there has always been that small irritating voice at the back of the government's head, contemplating as to whether or not freedom of expression could one way or another lead to the citizens taking advantage of their democratic rights. To stop such circumstance from happening, governments tend to put limits to the said advantage, the limits usually varying with religious or cultural backgrounds that the government belongs to. So what exactly is freedom of expression? Precisely, the term alone says it all: it is basically having the right to express ones thoughts, whether it is through speech, text or media, without having to worry about the consequences that one would have to face for not putting a boundary on the message being conveyed due to the lack of censorship and restrictions imposed on the state.

The intention of freedom of expression is to stir the citizens of a state into comprehending truth on their own, making it “ an aspect of self realization or human dignity” (Freedom of Expression in Canada 1963). This leads to self development, which on some basis would be a beneficial point, if it was not for the risk that self development might also lead to the realization of how corrupt a state may be on some terms, or how much a state lacks a certain foundation. To illustrate this further, it is most always likely that a state which supports freedom of expression to be a democratic state – the government of the people, ruled by the people – for the citizens make their own decisions, whether political or nonpolitical, through their freedom rights (Ray 2004). However, that does not necessarily mean that any state which claims to be democratic actually supports its citizens when it comes to freedom of expression.

A small number of political analysts believe that the main reason that more than plenty of Arab countries do not follow a democratic regime is for the cause that these Arab countries are also at the same time Islamic countries (Otterman 2003). Conversely, an excerpt from the Islamic Qur'an deems this piece of misleading fact to be false; Islam clearly states that freedom of speech in all cases should be accepted within a society, unless the claims being made are "evil, obscene, immoral, or hurtful to others" – that is if it is not done to serve the cause of justice (Kamali 1997). That being said, it is acceptable to say that there are in fact states in the Middle East which practice a democratic regime, such as Turkey. However, we do have other cases in the Arab world which lack democracy and the comfort of the government allowing its citizens to freely express themselves for other reasons, such as the fear of citizens overthrowing the government. One state which can exemplify this notion would be Egypt.

The Republic of Turkey is one of the very few democratic states in the Middle East which decidedly supports a democratic regime hand in hand with freedom of expression. This piece of information unfortunately goes incorrect. The start of a democratic regime in Turkey was not easy; journalists would try to express their thoughts via newspapers, only to be oppressed by the government by being forced to shut down their newspapers, or being prosecuted or arrested (Obituary: Hrant Dink 2007). Mustafa Kemal Atatürk – 'the father of all Turks' – then came into the picture; he came into power in the early 1920s, being elected president of The Grand National Assembly of Turkey.

He claimed Turkey as a Republic state in October 29th, 1923 before initiating democracy in Turkey a year later; in the years from 1924 up until 1938, he introduced to the state “ a series of radical reforms in the country’s political, social, and economic life” known as the Ataturk Reforms, in attempt to turn Turkey into a westernized, democratic and secular state (Sansal 1996-2010). Throughout these reforms, he succeeded in adopting general European policies, such as accepting new penal codes, and changing the Islamic prayer call and the Qur’an readings from the regular Arabic to the Turkish language. He even insisted on getting the citizens to dress like the Europeans did, and overall live a basic European lifestyle. The people of Turkey easily succumbed to all the changes that Ataturk developed, devoted to the ideas he proposed, and so they accepted the new implemented courses of action with arms wide open.

During his reign in power, Ataturk managed banning the religious brotherhoods; giving civil rights to the women of the country through a new civil code, and also the right to vote and run in parliamentary elections; introducing Secularism into Turkey; banning the public use of the Arabic script; and joining the League of Nations. The changes he implemented upon the country still remain until today and forever on in the hearts of Turkish people, for it was he who had modernized and democratized the nation state. He established elections, which gave the right for the people of Turkey to voice their own opinion as to who they think should be Prime Minister or President of the state (MidEastWeb for Coexistence RA. n. d.).

While the public sees Turkey as an all democratic state, on the other hand the citizens in the state are actually in fact being oppressed by the media, <https://assignbuster.com/an-analysis-of-the-freedom-of-expression-politics-essay/>

not being able to voice their opinions. In the year 2005, Turkey established a new penal code – Article 301 – which summed up that it is officially illegal for a Turk to insult any sort of ‘ Turkishness’, whether it is the ethnicity, government institutions, or just general criticism against the government. The penalty for breaking the code would be an imprisonment of a period between six months and three years. This Article caused an up riot, since it got in the way of democracy and freedom of expression; it even disqualified Turkey’s request to be a part of the European Union. A number of journalists were prosecuted, some sentenced to imprisonment; such as Hrant Dink, a famous Turkish journalist who was put on a suspended sentence; and Noam Chomsky, who was put on a trial but was soon after cleared of all charges (Armenian Assembly of America 2009).

A second Middle Eastern state that also claims to be democratic, as mentioned above, is Egypt. Yes, elections do take place in Egypt, and, yes, several candidates do step up to have their say. It is a multi-party government, and people are always expressing their love for the country freely, whether it is shown on TV or in the newspapers. All of this is with the exception that the citizens of Egypt are actually living genuinely oppressed lives, and being led on by the government to think that Egypt is a democratic country, when in fact the government plays its way around and acts for itself from behind the scenes (Consolatore 2005).

The declaration of the Republic of Egypt was proposed in the year 1953 by Muhammad Naguib and Gamal Abdel Nasser. Nasser had then taken

Naguib’s position as president, and made several further attempts to

transform Egypt from a Dictatorial Republic state to a Democratic Republic
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one. However, Egypt was at the time a police state, and remained being one up until the 1980s. Under both Nasser's and Anwar Sadat's, the third president of Egypt, rule, the freedom to express ones thoughts was completely prohibited; such laws concludes that Nasser's accomplishments happened " to fall short of democracy" (Guindy and Shukrallah 2000).

Despite Nasser's many accomplishments – of which he nationalized all industry, banned the Muslim Brotherhood and the communists, and gave women more political rights – people argue that he could have still done and sacrificed more for the country. He had the power, and the opportunity to fully democratize Egypt for once and for all, since people were liberal back then, and were more open-minded to freedom (Totten 2005). However, what Nasser did was ban all political parties, eliminating any other competition. Former presidents added on to Nasser's mistakes; Sadat, by bringing back the Muslim Brotherhood into the state of Egypt; and Hosni Mubarak, the latest President of Egypt, by " oppressing all liberals" (Totten 2005).

As a result, a great number of people were put on trials due to freedom of expression, from under Gamal Abdel Nasser's era, to Anwar Sadat's, and up to the present day, Hosni Mubarak's. In an interview done by The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, the legal advisor for the syndicate of journalists stated that there have been " more than one thousand" cases, " and the number of trials is about five hundreds" (Arabic Network for Human Rights Information 2007). Protests have been held against the government, but journalists and women are attacked by the police, as if doing so would justify all means.

Strangely enough, on top of all the oppression and the prosecutions taking place, a number of people in Egypt believe that the lack of freedom of expression is all for the best – and not for Islamic reasons! These people believe that if competitions and elections were fair, and that the balloting was not toyed with, then there would be more than a fifty percent chance that the Muslim Brotherhood would get most votes, being the party to take hold of the country. This being done would completely wipe out the idea of Egypt having any freedom whatsoever; by becoming an Islamic state, this means that books would be banned, just so that people would not get any new or ‘ crazy’ ideas; and women would be forced to wear the headscarf (Totten 2005). The other percentage of Egyptians who do not vote for the Muslim Brotherhood are completely against the idea of Egypt becoming an Islamic state, which is why not much is being done to enhance the freedom of expression in Egypt. There is also the idea that Egypt has to go through Islamism in order to reach liberalism, just like Afghanistan had done, but the idea is clearly too much of a risk (Totten 2005).

If one were to talk about democracy as a whole, regarding Egypt’s and Turkey’s current condition, then it should be obvious that Turkey is much better off on the subject of competition they have between their candidates; the political participation that the citizens of Turkey obtain; the rights, equality and fairness that they are given as a group; and furthermore, the confidence in knowing that the voting procedures and the balloting are to be trusted, instead of being deceitful.

A citizen accustomed to Western or European democratic standards might reflect that neither Turkey nor Egypt should be labeled as a democratic state
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at all in the first place, due to the restrictions imposed on the citizens living there. Still, there are levels to freedom of expression which should be considered before jumping to a conclusion. First, many people confuse freedom of expression with freedom of criticism, or biased unthinking. That sort of operation is often overlooked and mistaken to be legitimate and politically moral. For instance, there was the case in the year 2005 when twelve comical caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed were drawn and published in a Danish newspaper, evidently offending the Muslims and causing an up riot for obvious reasons. This act of ‘ freedom of expression’ was “ deliberately provocative towards Muslims,” winding up in a massive outrage throughout the different Islamic countries, resulting in “ deaths and destruction” (Asser 2010).

Many people might argue that there should be no limits to freedom of expression whatsoever. One must agree that each person should not feel permit to free his or her own opinions, but as long as it does not reach the borders of criticism. Limits should be applied in order to protect the rights of others; in the end, it is all also a matter of respecting others. Giving the people the right to freely criticize one another creates a spark of hatred between the community, which could eventually lead to unnecessary rebellion and riot.