

IS DEMOCRACY COMPATIBLE WITH ISLAM?

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Abstract

For more than a century a question discussion has been whether democracy is compatible with Islam or not? The issue came into focus again after the recent phenomena of war on terrorism. The hypothesis is that in the wake of the terrorist act is a result of authoritarian and undemocratic regimes or politics. Similarly the issue has implications for the social sciences students also: does Islam in particular or religion in general, have an effective impact on the political establishment of a state? This question turns out to be more striking when one takes into account the reality that the greater part of the Muslim-majority countries are either unstable democracies or non-democratic regimes. The question whether democracy is compatible with Islam has a direct impact on almost one fourth of the world's populace.

In terms of modernization which is the component of the democracy the Islamic world has a poor record. Though it cannot be said that the cause of this situation is due to the religion i.e. Islam but there are other factors which should be given due consideration such as colonialism, international trading and economic systems and above all the role of the military. Identifying these themes permits us to find a way of considering the potential remedies to bring change in Muslim populated countries. The much propagated and widely spread misconception, that Islam

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values dictatorship has its origin in the history of Muslim rulers. But we cannot and should not make this assumption on the basis of the Mughal rulers of India, the rulers of Baghdad, Abbasid period, Spanish and Turkish rulers etc., as these rulers were not the rulers according to the teachings and the injunction laid down in the Quran. They were only the dynastic regimes. And in this same period of time, the West also had similar dynastic autocratic rulers.

The notion of democracy in Islam can be best defined as functioning at two levels: at the individual, and at the collective levels. Individually, the person has the freedom to adopt the way of worship that he or she likes, but when it comes to the collective level, it becomes a group matter, and the voice of the people in Islam, is given preference. From the social perspective, it is the communal Islam, which is prescribed to be practiced at all levels and thus democracy in Islam is a social concept more so than in any other theoretical tradition of democracy (e.g., Liberalism), and further, it is democracy understood as an expression of the group's voice which is more Islamic than any other theory of ruling.

This study reveals the relationship of Islam and democracy in practice and thus offers a new perspective to boost our understandings of both democracy and Islam. A main proposition of this study is that instead of repeating the cliché that Islam is compatible with democracy, the focus should be on 'how' is democracy compatible with Islam and thus how can we democratize Muslim societies?

Keywords: *Islam, Democracy, Modernization, Government, Muslim*

Introduction

The democracy is not only the majority representation of the people in the government; it is also to recognize the voice of the people in the society as well. It is to endorse the people's rights and freedom in almost every part of life, like

whatever they want to do, in a positive manner, for their own betterment. As they do this, they must be protected by the Law made by the rulers or the government.

The extensive meaning of democracy, by Abraham Lincoln, is that "it is a government of the people, by the people and for the people." This statement which was further elaborated upon by Daniel Webster, means the people's rule, made for the people, made by the people and responsible to the people. Here I would like to quote from Aristotle's *Politics*, specifically the sentence wherein he says:

"Democracy arises out of the notion that those who consider that when they are equal in any respect, they are equal in all respect." (Peter L. 1997) He further defines equality as equality by quantity and inequality by merit. For him clean democracy or clean oligarchy lasts as long as both have an intense observation of equality which leaves out at the end one of the two types, hence a rule having majority adequate constituents considered to be steadier (Ibid p.4).

Aristotle does not believe in any sort of fundamental equality of humankind. He emphasizes that by nature some people are created for slavery therefore slavery is the natural and normal phenomena.

When it comes to Islam we find common dilemma in the psyche, such as the way Islam has been misjudgment and misconstrued in the most recent century, largely by orientalist authors who mainly define Islam as a form of political thought rather than as a religion, whereas in practice individual Muslims in fact organize their whole personal lives around the articles of faith. As per this new plan and strategy, Islam is confined merely to a system comprising political ideas, and it was supposed to be applied to solve the problems of the Muslims all over the globe by this emerging perception of Islam. A very interesting point is that this viewpoint has not only been embraced by westerners, but it has also been adopted by some Muslims themselves. Sadly the Islamic legitimacy of this concept is never challenged or questioned.

A close interrelated issue arises in witnessing the emerging states in the Muslim-majority countries, which are regarded as Islamic, irrespective of any criteria to evaluate them as such. In a majority of the cases the politicians and the government officials used Islamic rhetoric and by such are categorized as Islamic

despite the fact that in such states no authorized Islamic law has been implemented. In essence, a majority of authoritarian leaders who rule these states take shelter in Islam and yet they do not fulfill the basics of Islamic teachings in practical. To sum up this argument, having a Muslim-majority populace or a Muslim leader does not make it an Islamic state and yet, in reality the state that merely employs Islam in its discourse should not be regarded as Islamic.

Voll and Esposito discussed this dilemma. Islamic political ideology has been regarded conservative by these two modern orientalists. To them, what we witness as self-proclaimed Islamic countries are nothing but the blend of authoritarian rulers with secular perceptions and democratic claims with their support of the Islamic segment of the population. “As an outcome, authoritarian political regimes have become recognized with secularist advancements to politics and modernization.” (John L. Esposito and John O. Voll 1996. p16)

Often politicians use religious rhetoric to legitimize their political strategies. Therefore just as German Chancellor Merkel’s or former President Bush’s (From an article by Ron Suskind) sporadic position to religion do not formulate their regime as non-secular, nor their respective countries theocratic, similarly references by the numerous rulers in the countries having Muslim majority should be treated in an equivalent way. Another challenging conceptualization apprehends the basic theory of secularism, and the separation of religion from political sphere. A common statement or allegation is that majority Muslim dominated countries are ruled with a blend of these two areas. Huntington while arguing against the opportunity of democratic rules in Muslim countries, argues that Islam decline any division among the religious and the political community, hence political participation is associated with religious association. (Samuel Huntington 1996).

Though Steven Fish observed, that it is in fact a very complicated to come up more than a few examples of Islamic states that interlink religious and political powers, like Iran and Afghanistan. (M. Steven Fish 2002).

Islam and Democracy

The basic doctrine of the Islamic faith is that sovereignty belongs to Allah and not the common man. According to the teachings of Islam Allah Almighty create this universe and He is the Law-giver, hence ultimately all power belongs to Allah in all human affairs. There is no room for the phrase such as ‘sovereignty of the

people' as the one who rules among the community would rule by delegated authority. Now the question arises to whom is this authority or sovereignty delegated? There is no priesthood in Islam like Christianity wherein monarchy and primogeniture was practiced. There was a controlled church with a hierarchy of certain priests and self-proclaim to be vicegerent of God, as can be seen in Catholic Church where, in the name of Christ priest holds power receiving its infallibility from Jesus directly.

The Prophet Muhammad (saw) entrust the propagation, preservation and execution of the faith to the whole community (Ummah) recommending them to select their leader from amongst themselves on the basis of appropriateness, irrespective of clan, race, tribe or wealth. The Quranic concept of sovereignty is collective or in other words universal, i.e. transcendental, non-territorial, meaning beyond human agency, inseparable, unchallengeable and truly absolute. Allah is the primary law-giver while representatives such as the Islamic state and the Vicegerent (Khalifa) enjoy marginal or subsidiary autonomy required to execute and implement the laws of their sovereign (Allah). This periphery of autonomy by virtue of vicegerency is the Islamic equivalent of popular sovereignty).

From the commencement of Islam democracy became mandatory through the Shura (consultative body of the elected leaders), a process in which people consult each other and select a representative amongst them, which is a parliamentary form of government.

A great example of democracy's role in Islam is evident in the Prophet's (SAW) passing away without assigning or appointing an heir or successor to rule the Muslim state. He left it to the Muslim with the intention that they come together to take the decision on this matter according to his teachings and hence set a precedent for those who come after to follow.

The Prophet in this regard did not give a single statement pointing out or giving any sign that indicates who would be his successor, therefore after his demise a meeting took place to elect the Caliph (leader). There was an utter disagreement among the companions at the beginning but the disagreement did not last long as they followed what Prophet had taught them i.e. through the Shura they reached consensus and chose Hazrat Abu Bakar Siddiqui with the vote of the majority. The fact is that the companions of the Prophet (saw) did not establish a

dictatorship or monarchy hence it demonstrated that in Islam the leadership is the choice of the people.

Throughout his life the Prophet Muhammad (saw) practiced and demonstrated a democratic process whenever he had to make a decision that would have an impact of the Muslim nation as a whole or part: he resembles his companions and his followers to perform a Shura (Consultation).

At one occasion before the beginning of the battle, one of the follower inquired of Prophet (SAW) whether the site of the Muslim campground should be selected, through consultation or divine insight. The Prophet (SAW) replied that it should be decided by mutual consultation and he advanced to follow the recommendations of the group to settle alongside the adjacent water well.

Shura, as a principle, is rooted in the Quran. In the Quran, two types of political consultations are mentioned. In the one, the Prophet Muhammad is asked to consult with his companions, but, ultimately, to decide on his own. In other words, the community of the faithful is described as the one that (among its other attributes) administers its affairs by mutual consultation.

Shura in Islamic political governance has two meanings.

1. A referendum which is the agreement upon a matter by the majority and also the basic process for selecting the ruler or leader in Islam. Likewise it is the way to approve his commands and decisions. mode
2. The advisory council or board (group of elected experts) which advises the leader in state affairs. Another task of this group is to monitor and administer the leader. They act as a supervisory and regulatory body to control any objective of the leader which may override the rights of the citizens. They are required to be aware of the distinctions and diversity in these rights within cultural, ethnic and environmental norms. The prime example can be seen in the present regime of USA, where we find the Federal system along with the state and local government as well as municipalities. Beside this there is a free press, which operates as a watchdog over the state; raising warnings whenever see the slightest indication that the interests of the people are infringed.

According to the teachings of Islam a Shura is not confined to the political field only, rather its scope is in all spheres of life starting from the institution of the family. Hence Shura stands for an effective and solemn participation in carrying out a decision and it's not just a ceremonial procedure. The Prophet Muhammad (SAW) was addressed in the Quran to have a consultation in making decisions in common matters for which there is no specific divine revelation has been ordained: "And consult them in affairs (of moment) then when thou hast taken a decision, put thy trust in Allah for Allah loves those who put their trust (in Him)." (Quran 4:159)

It is required in Islam for all the believers to involve people in decision making regarding common matters for which there is no particular revelation exists. Several precedents can be traced from the life of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and his successors about decisions made according to the majority opinions. Though the majority or a single person may be wrong or right, the majority opinion is always considered to be an acceptable procedure among mankind, as chances of risk of error in such matter is less than the opinion of the minority or of an individual.

Let us sum up the kind of state which Islam envisions as following;

- {i} Sovereignty belongs to Allah only and who wishes human beings to incorporate His attribute of love, wisdom and above all Justice in their deeds, words and thought.
- {ii} There is no requirement for the Islamic State to be theocratic, rather it is to be ideological, hence the rights and responsibilities of the citizens would be determined by the scope to which they classify themselves with the ideology of Islam.
- {iii} Non-Muslims have a complete right to practice their religion and are not obligated to participate in the defense of the state. However they are liable to pay tax which entitles them a complete protection of life, liberty and property.
- {iv} Women are entitled to have an independent economic status. Their personal earnings and inherited wealth or property shall be their own assets for which they are free to dispose of as and when they please. (Sahih Al-Bukhari, Hadith no. 1623, 1626, 6361).

{vi} There is no room for monarchy in Islamic state. People must elect their ruler on the basis of his/her capacity and character.

{vii} It is obligated on ruler to have a consultative body of advisors or consultants in order to make legislation and making major decisions. They too are selected on the ground of experience, integrity and wisdom. Non-Muslims are also not restricted to be a member of the counsel but cannot partake in the matters pertaining to faith.

{viii} Judiciary is separated from the executive and there shall be no distinction between the believers and non-believers in all civil and criminal matters. Every citizen entitles to seek the judicial decision though it is against the head of the state. So there is no question of immunity at any pretext.

There is a difference in pattern between Islamic democracy and the modern democracies. In Islam there is no room for political parties hence parliamentary government runs on a party basis is un-Islamic. Morally the slogan “My party, whether right or wrong,” is as ferocious as the slogan “My country, whether right or wrong”. The major aim of the party politics is not the wellbeing of the people or the state but to fortify the position of the party or decline the position of the opposition. When the party based leaders assume the power either by fair or foul way, its main focus turned against the will of the people for the larger interest of the party and indulged in the same things for which they raised the hue and cry against the opponents. In this process every day routine is to dislodge others as there is no division on the basis of the principles.

Modern democracies appeared as a reaction to the cruel and unjust monarchies hence devoid of moderation. We are witnessing hereditary regimes in the continent in the name of democracy where in one man rule like Cyrus and Ceaser not on the basis of capability or capacity but on the power of the malicious ideology of hereditary ownership of the sovereignty. This form of the government is an insult to the human being as their right to choose the ruler has been curtailed. The definition of the government of the people and by the people further lead rationally to adult authorization even in those countries where the mainstream is incompetent of considerate the intricate system of political issues and economics as well of modern day life due to their illiteracy.

No doubt Islam commands that good administration must be managed with consultation, however the important question is 'who is entitled to be conferred with and what would be the methodology to choose them? How it is possible that from the crowd of disadvantaged and illiterate people a proper person on the basis of integrity and wisdom be selected? Is it possible that a poor and disadvantaged person can afford the expensive electioneering process of campaign to get into the legislative body? The addition of franchise should go along with the extension of a correct type of education and economic liberty of the common citizen irrespective whether he is a peasant or wage earner. The Islamic democratic model of a state of free citizens could not last long as authority influenced Arab imperialism have given it a serious blow. There is no match between imperialism and democracy and one who claims to an alliance between them is hypocritical. Similarly there is no place of such concept of king or their divine right.

The original vision of Islam was democratic in nature. The Prophet Muhammad (SAW) had a high and privileged position never consider him above the law.

To sum up the discussion, the final point concerns the role of the citizen and the connection between the individual and the state. Islam considers the government as a bond between the ruler and the ruled. Both are required to fulfill their duties, responsibilities and rights to each other and are subject to the rule of law. Therefore there is no question of arbitrary or dictatorship rule which are illegitimate form of government according to Islam. In Islamic administration those who assume the leadership role obliged to obey like a common man. (Yahya M. Michot, Timur Yuskaev 2005).

Conclusion

We have to cautiously investigate the substitution or other aspects to explain for the lack of democratic policies in Muslim countries rather than endeavoring to find the root cause of the gap of democratic process in Islam. There are several diverse alternative justifications discussed in the literature to give the description of democratization. Out of which one model is reconstruction theory, which placed economic growth to the centre and emphasizes that the urbanization, social recruitment, education and communiqué are all essential parts of modernization progression that marks the advancement from conventional forms of life to contemporary ones. This whole process creates new social groups comprising

urban workers and community members who have special requirements from the political strata in comparison to the previous “social stratum”. Here the political system is positioned at the axis of the demands of the new social groups. At this point to counter to the newly rising requirements of the modern citizens, who become aware of their capacity, the political administration acquire additional approachable and democratic form. Similarly the right to rule is not which is to be given to any type of spiritual leader i.e. the Ulema, or any kind of religious institution. In fact the importance and value of the individual person and their righteousness is more stressed on numerous occasions. In this regard, Abou El Fadl addresses role of Ulema in Islamic rule. He argues that although in the past the Ulema had played arbitrator’s role among the leader and the common citizen and even disenchanted martial procedures but unfortunately, in modern era they have been seen as remunerated state functionaries who principally plays a legitimist and conservative role for the ruling heads of the Islamic world. (Nader A. Hashemi 2003)

Bottom line of this discussion is that it turns into imperative to identify the reality that Islam, on principal basis, emphasizes human rights, individual accountability, freedom of expression and freedom to practice religion. This signifies the compatibility of Islam within a political structure of democratic nature.

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