

Islamic Approach to Democracy: A Theological and Political Appraisal

Nurjima Khatun

M.A in Political Science, Dept. of Political Science, Rabindra Bharati University

ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 15 May 2020

Keywords

Islam, Democracy, Government, Muslim, Liberalism.

*Corresponding Author

Email: nurjima80[at]gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The notion of democracy in Islam can be best characterized as working at two levels - the individual and the aggregate levels. Independently, the individual has the freedom to embrace the method of worship that he or she likes. But with regard to the aggregate level, it turns into a collective issue and the voice of the people in Islam is given inclination. From the social viewpoint, it is the public Islam, which is endorsed to be polished at all levels. Consequently, democracy in Islam is a social idea more so than in some other hypothetical convention of democracy and further, it is democracy comprehended as an outflow of collective voice which is more Islamic than some other hypothesis. This study uncovers the relationship between Islam and democracy in practice and in this manner offers another point of view to help our understanding of both democracy and Islam. The main purpose of this paper is to show the compatibility between Islam and Democracy. The focus is on 'how' democracy is compatible with Islam and accordingly how we may democratic Muslim societies.

Some democratic thinkers or critics have argued that democracy has no place in political system of Islam. Islam isn't just a religion; rather it is a complete code of life and all aspects of Muslim society, collectively or exclusively considered are secured by the social structure of Islam. The connection between Islam and Democracy is an exceptionally confounded subject. Today Islam is a standout amongst the most fervently, deliberated and talked about issue that has picked up momentum with strengthening after the post 9/11 world. The civil argument over democratic system and democratization in the Muslim social orders, according to Zoya Hasan,

...its definition and fundamentals, as well as its impact on governments domestic and foreign policies, has continued for a long time. (Zoya, 2007, p.11)

But, as it has procured an impetus in recent years this debate has now profoundly strengthened. When we are discussing about the democracy, then question arise, 'Does the religion Islam relation with democracy?' Or 'Is there any relation between democracy and Islam?' 'What essentials are there in Islamic institutions which are provisions of democracy?' Or, 'Is democracy suitable or advantageous as a political organization for Muslim societies?' Addressing to these questions, in the following passages, an effort is made to demonstrate that in the Islamic custom, there are numerous notions that give an effectual ground work to show democracy in Islam. In another words, Islamic custom indeed contains certain notions that are comparatively helpful in understanding the Islamic perceptions of democracy.

It is necessary here, before going into details on this discussion to throw some light on the idea of Western democracy. The democracy is not only that majority of the people are represented in a government, but also to voice of the people in the society. It is to embrace the individual's rights and freedom in relatively all aspects of life, similar to whatever they need to do, in a positive way for their own improvement. They should be ensured by the law made by the rulers or the

legislature. The broad importance of democracy by Abraham Lincoln is that 'it is a government of the people, by the people and for the people.' This announcement which was additionally explained upon by Daniel Webster implies the people's rule, made for the citizen, made by the citizen and accountable to the citizen. Here I might want to cite from Aristotle's Politics, particularly 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, 1997, p.3)

He additionally characterizes equality as equality by quantity and inequality by merit. For him clean democracy or clean theocracy keeps going as long as both have serious perception of equality which forgets toward the end of the two types, consequently a rule having majority sufficient constituents considered to be steadier. In this manner, the Encyclopedia of Nationalism depicts,

Democracy is a system of government in which the people rule. Modern democracy differs from ancient democracy in aiming to enable people to govern themselves through several forms of autonomy: collective, plural, and individual. Ancient democracy gave almost exclusive emphasis to collective authority and did not recognize universal human rights. (Alexander, 2005, p.101)

In the modern times, there are different elucidations of this definition and thus all through the history political thinkers have characterized democracy from their own points of view, implying there is no all-around acknowledgment or clearly characterized model of democracy. In fact the term 'democracy' is fit for numerous understandings and applications and the acknowledgment of its challenged nature. Its assorted variety and progression of advancement empowers the acknowledgment that there can be elective opponent uses of the term 'democracy'. Same is the situation with the Muslims. All through the Muslim world, from North

Africa to South and Southeast Asia and from Middle East to Central Asia, Muslim researchers and scholars are sincerely and overwhelmingly occupied with characterising and deciphering democracy in Islamic conventions. They are engaged with developing, defining and establishing a reliable and attainable Islamic democracy by using longstanding traditions and conceptualizations of *Khilafah* (Vicegerency), *Shura* (mutual consultation), *Ijma* (consensus) and *Ijtihad* (independent reasoning), *Bay'ah* (oath of allegiance) the primary key traditional ideas of Islamic nations.

In the Muslim world too there is a variety incorporating numerous voices, i.e., there are numerous responses to democratization. Others trust that democracy can completely be acknowledged if Muslim societies confine religion to private life; while others argue that Islam is fit to accommodate and support democracy. Participating in a procedure of changes, this contend the similarity of Islam and democracy by utilizing the traditional,

...consultation (*shura*) between ruler and ruled, community consensus (*ijma*), public interest (*maslaha*) and *ijtihad*. These mechanisms can be used to support parliamentary forms of government with systems of checks and balances among the executive, legislative and judiciary branches. (Esposito, 2002, p.159)

However, as a rule, democracy is taken as a form of government in which sovereignty belongs to Almighty Allah; man is thought to be His vicegerent; and basic leadership on each issue is described by mutual consultation (*Shura*) and consensus of the community (*Ijma*). They contend that if by democracy is implied an arrangement freedom, justice, equality and human rights then Islamic lessons already contain these values and systems. In fact, these values are basic to Islam. Mawlana Syed Abu Ala Mawdudi, expressed that

The political system of Islam has been based on three principles, viz; *Tawhid* (Unity of Allah), *Risalat* (Prophethood) and *Khilafat* (Caliphate). (Mawdudi, 1988, p.40)

For him, it is hard to acknowledge diverse parts of the ...Islamic polity without fully understanding these three principles. (Mawdudi, 1988, p.40)

John Esposito and John Voll in *Islam and Democracy* unequivocally proclaim that the Absolute Sovereignty and Oneness of God as communicated in the idea of *Tawhid* and the part of the individual's as characterized is the idea of *Khilafah*. In this way give a structure inside which researchers have in recent years developed distinctive political theories that are self-portrayed and visualized being democratic. Specifically, Islamic democracy is viewed as attesting longstanding Islamic ideas of consultation (*Shura*), consensus (*Ijma*) and independent interpretive judgment (*Ijtihad*). These terms have not generally been related to democratic establishments and have an assortment of uses in contemporary Muslim discourse. These ideas are vital to and are extremely premise of Islamic democracy,

Consultation [*Shura*], consensus [*Ijma*] and *Ijtihad* [independent reasoning] are crucial concepts for the articulation of Islamic democracy within the framework of the oneness of God and the representational obligations of human beings. These are the terms whose meanings are contested and whose definitions

shape Muslim perceptions of what represents legitimate and authentic democracy in an Islamic framework.... [T]hey provide an effective foundation for understanding the relationship between Islam and democracy in the contemporary world. (Esposito and Voll, 1996, p.28)

These are the main functioning key ideas of Islamic democracy as well as essential standards of Islamic political system.

Tawhid, the recognizing of the Unity of Allah, the indivisible, Absolute and the sole Real is the co-ordinal, essential. Fundamental principle of Islamic life meaning is that, the Absolute sovereignty and ultimate authority belong to Him. Besides, for Professor Khurshid Ahmad, the comprehensive guidance of Islam and its essential relationship with to all aspects of life are entrenched in the doctrine of *Tawhid* the foundation of Islam. It is a "revolutionary concept" and points to the "supremacy of the law in the cosmos", and being an active doctrine, it presents a "unified view of the world and offers the vision of an integrated universe"; and it is "a dynamic belief and a revolutionary doctrine". (Ahmad, 1976, p.160) For Mawdudi, *Khilafah* as mentioned in holy Qur'an 2: 30, is the person,

Who exercises the authority delegated to him by his principal and does so in the capacity of his deputy and agent. Hence, whatever authority he possesses is not inherently his own, but is derived from and circumscribed by, the limits set by his principal. A vicegerent is not entitled to do what he pleases, but is obliged to carry out the will of his master. If the vicegerent were either to begin thinking himself the real owner and to use the authority delegated to him in whatever manner he pleased, or if he were to acknowledge someone other than the real owner as his lord and master and to follow his directions, these would be deemed acts of infidelity and rebellion. (Mawdudi, 1988, pp.59-60)

In this manner, from Islamic perspective, Muslims consider themselves to be God's representatives with a celestial command to set up God's govern on keeping in mind the end goal to make an 'just society'. Mawlana Mawdudi to call this political system in Islam is as an 'ideal form of democracy'. He declared that *Khilafah* as prevalent vicegerency is where democracy in Islam or the 'real foundation of democracy in Islam'. Furthermore, there is no segregation of colour, race, and language in sharing the identity of the state. In Islamic society, there is no place for dictatorship or authoritarianism of any person.

Ijma means 'Assembly'; it is another important operational concept regarding democracy. *Ijma* is a consensus, expressed or tacit, on a question of law. It is assumed an essential part in the improvement of Islamic law and contributed fundamentally to the corpus of the law. In the modern times, Muslim scholars have saturated the idea of consensus with new possibilities. Louay M. Safi says that the "legitimacy of the state depends upon the extent to which state organization and power reflect the will of the Ummah", for as classical jurists have insisted, the "legitimacy of the state institutions is not derived from textual sources but is based primarily on the principle of *Ijma*". (Safi, 1991, p.233)

Ijtihad means 'Effort'; it is another functioning concept of major significance related to the relationship between 'Islam

and democracy'. *Ijtihad* is applied to those questions which are not covered by the Qur'an and Sunnah, that is, neither by established precedence, nor by direct analogy from known laws is regarded, by many Muslim thinkers, as the key to the performance of God's will in any given time. Prof. Khurshid Ahmad contends that,

God has revealed only broad principles and has endowed man with the freedom to apply them in every age in the way suited to the spirit and conditions of that age. It is through the *Ijtihad* that people of every age try to implement and apply divine guidance to the problems of their times. (Ahmad, 1976, p.43)

Bay'ah truly signifies 'a pact', in an extremely expansive sense implies the demonstration by which "a certain number of persons, acting individually or collectively, recognize the authority of another person" a ruler, a king. A significant principle of the constitution of Medina was that Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) represented the city-state of Medina by virtue of consent of its citizens. This constitution "established the importance of consent and cooperation for governance" and the principles of "equality, consensual governance and pluralism" are beautifully enmeshed in it. (Khan, 2009, p.22) During the early time of Islamic history, the procedure of *bay'ah* was a vital foundation that tried to formalize the consent of the governed. The early Caliphs practiced the procedure of *bay'ah* after rudimentary forms of electoral colleges had elected the Caliph, in order to legitimize the authority of Caliph. Therefore, *Ahl al-hall wa al-'aqd* means, 'those who are qualified to unbind and to bind' are the representatives of the Muslim community who act on their behalf in appointing and deposing a caliph or another ruler.

To put in other words they provide the basic concepts for understanding the relationship between Islam and democracy in the contemporary world and an 'effective foundation' to build an Islamic basis for democracy. These are the terms whose meanings are contested and whose definitions shape Muslim perceptions of what represents legitimate and authentic democracy in Islamic framework. These are the concepts for the articulation of Islamic democracy. Presently there are various scholars who are sincerely devoted to the Islamic political issues; they are sincerely in search of resurgence of Islam and have been engaged in a lively debate on Islam and modernity. Arguing that democracy as commonly understood is based exclusively on the sovereignty of people, Mawdudi concluded, from the view-point of political philosophy, that Islamic state is the very antithesis of secular Western democracy.

The Shari'ah provides the broad framework within which the people under one umbrella of Divine Guidance participate in developing a civil society and its institutions, including all the organs of state. It is evident, now, that all aspects of human life including governance system require first the submission of the people and those who govern them to the ultimate Sovereignty of the law outlined in the Qur'an and Sunnah. Also, the role of

Shura is central to Islamic governance or system of government in all of this there are features of Islamic governance which resemble Western forms of democracy and other features which give the system its Islamic Identity. Iqbal, as quoted by A. Aleem Helal also supports, to some extent Mawdudi's distinction between Islamic and Western democracy, when he says that what distinguishes the

Islamic democracy from the democracy of the West is that in an Islamic democracy, sovereignty is vested in a democratic Caliph or President, while in the Western democracy sovereignty is vested in the Parliament. Thus while Islam recommends a democratic Caliphate or a Presidential form of government, the political thinkers of West have recommended a parliamentary form of government. (Helal, 1995, p.285)

The foregoing assessment of the Islam-democracy debate along with an assessment of some key operational concepts of 'Islamic democracy' reveals that the Muslim thinkers are engaged in a pursuit to develop an Islamic form of democracy. They have attempted in the recent past and are attempting to develop it by taking help of some Islamic concepts, institutions, values, norms and ideals that emphasize the equality of people, the accountability of leaders to community and the respect of diversity and other faiths. These are ideals fully compatible with modern conceptions of democracy. Precisely, what they argue, at least theoretically, is that Islam and democracy are indeed compatible.

Taking the above discussion into consideration, that there is no reason at all why, in the modern age, one should object to the adoption of certain democratic procedures. As the Islamic tradition in fact contains certain key concepts like *Shura*, *Khilafah*, *Ijma* and *Ijtihad* that can be used to conceptualize an authentically Islamic program of democracy. Increasingly the same, a few democratic values and principles like freedom, justice, equality and human dignity are not only in harmony with the Islamic teachings, but are embedded in the primary sources of Islam and its law. Furthermore, Islam and democracy are compatible for the reason that there are various institutions and mechanisms, models and forms of government possible in Islam. Muslims have a rich history and custom that will fit look forward and settle on develop decisions for political movement. Finally, I would like to end this paper by these words of Professor Khurshid Ahmad, when he writes, as Islam's guidance is absolute, universal and eternal; it has been left to the *Ummah* to develop different forms, institutions and mechanisms of governance setup suitable to different socio-historic conditions. A variety of governmental forms and arrangements are possible within this dynamic framework of Islam. Some of these systems have been experienced in the past. New experiments and arrangements can be made today and tomorrow by implementing them in a particular Muslim society. This is the beauty and potential of Islam and its law, intellectual and cultural legacy. This has been the distinctive feature of the Muslim historical experience spread over more than fourteen centuries.

References

1. Ahmad, K. (1976). Islam: Basic Principles and Characteristics. In Khurshid Ahmad (ed.), *Islam: Its Meaning and Message*. London: Islamic Council of Europe.
2. Alexander, J.M. (2001). *Encyclopaedia of Nationalism*, Academic Press: US.
3. Esposito, J.L. and J.O. Voll. (1996). *Islam and Democracy*, New York: Oxford University Press.
4. Esposito, J.L. (2002). *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam?* New York: Oxford University Press.

5. Helal, A.A. (1995). *Social Philosophy of Sir Muhammad Iqbal*, Delhi: Adam Publishers and Distributors.
6. Mawdudi, S.A.A. (1988). Towards Understanding the Qur'an, English translation of *Tafhim al-Qur'an* (Trans. & Ed.) Zafar Ishaq Ansari, vol.1. (Rep. 2004) New Delhi: Markazi Maktaba Islami.
7. Peter L. Phillips Simpson. (1997). *The Politics of Aristotle*, London: The University of North Carolina Press.
8. Safi, L.M. (1991). The Islamic State: A Conceptual Framework. In *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences (AJISS)*.
9. Zoya, H. Ed. (2007). *Democracy in Muslim Societies: The Asian Experience*, New Delhi: Sage Publications (Pvt. Ltd).