

## ‘Is Islam compatible with Democracy?’

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As the world’s second largest religion, Islam consists of a variety of streams and of interpretations of the Muslim source texts and of Islamic law (*shari’a*). The real question is which interpretations are favoured by contemporary dominant movements within Islam? These are traditionalist and Islamist, basing themselves on mainly literalist readings of the source texts, on the paradigmatic model of Muhammad and on classical *shari’a*. At one end of the scale they engage in semantics to prove that democracy is an Islamic invention, while at the other end they totally reject all notions of democracy as incompatible with Islamic scripture and law.

### 1. Rejection

Some traditionalists and Islamists totally reject democracy as a foreign infidel import that has no place in Islam. God’s sovereignty precludes any sovereignty of man in any form. They hold that *shari’a* is God-given, perfect and needs no amendments or change, and it includes a divine blueprint for the Islamic system of government. Some claim that in *shari’a* no equality is possible between believer and unbeliever or male and female. They make no apology for this, believing that it is an intrinsic part of Islam. God, God’s religion (Islam) and God’s law (*shari’a*), must rule.<sup>1</sup>

### 2. Islamise Democracy

Nineteenth century reformers tried to reconcile Islam with modernity using flexible principles of reason and public good to reinterpret *shari’a*. ‘Abduh<sup>2</sup> and other reformers tried to make Islam compatible with modernity by reinterpreting traditional concepts in modern terms. He developed criteria for selective borrowing from the West and for creating a synthesis of Islam and modernity. *Ijtihad* (personal interpretation) enables Muslims to apply Qur’an and *sunna* (the example of Muhammad) to modern conditions. *Shura* (consultation), *ijma’* (consensus) and *maslaha* (public good) were instituted to limit the caliph’s powers and thus can be compared to democratic principles: *shura* is equivalent to a legislative assembly, *ijma’* to public opinion, and *maslaha* to the common good. These ideas impacted traditional seats of learning such as Al-Azhar University in Cairo and Islamic elites in the early independence era of Muslim states. They have been picked up by Islamists seeking to enter the political process and by Islamic progressives.

The concept of *shura* especially is used to legitimize a variety approaches to democracy. It is based on the Qur’anic verses “and consult with them in affairs (of moment)” (Q 3:159) and “those who (conduct) their affairs by mutual consultation” (Q

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia Enters the Twenty-First Century: The Political, Foreign Policy, Economic, and Energy Dimensions*, Westpoint, CT & London: Praeger, 2003, p. 148; Faisal bin Mashaal bin Saud Al-Saud, *Decision Making and the Role of Ash Shura in Saudi Arabia*, New York: Vantage Pres, 2003, p.16; Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones (ma’alim fi’l tariq)*, Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1990, pp. 106-108.

<sup>2</sup> Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905) in Egypt was one of the first modern reformers.

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42:38). Parliaments are often called *majlis al-shura* (consultative council), and the same name is given to the ruling bodies of Islamist movements.

Islamists follow 'Abduh in claiming that Islam contains in itself all relevant democratic concepts, adding that these can be implemented in an Islamic state within an Islamic framework. A variety of Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jama'at-i Islami, claim that Islamic government as laid down by Muhammad and the first four caliphs who followed him (the Rightly Guided caliphs), was the first true democracy and that Western democracy has Islamic roots.<sup>3</sup> It is claimed that in the early Islamic state all Muslims were equal before the law, Jews and Christians were tolerated, the leaders (caliphs) who came after Muhammad were elected by representatives of the community (*ulu' al-amr*) and had to rule by consultation (*shura*), while legislation was modified by consensus (*ijma'*) and constant interpretive efforts (*ijtihad*) with the aim of maximising the common good (*maslaha*). Islamic government was a contract (*bay'a*) between the ruler and the ruled, obligating both. The Islamic doctrine of God's unity (*tawhid*) was a guarantee against individuals or groups setting themselves up as tyrannical rulers in God's place. This allegedly democratic system was, however, soon lost as monarchic dynasties took power and perverted original true Islam. However, in spite of their democratic claims, all Islamist theorists accept that Islam must dominate the political system and express the doctrine of God's sovereignty (*hakimiyya*) by implementing *shari'a* as the legislative framework of the Islamic state which is seen as a restored Caliphate (*khilafa*). No laws repugnant to *shari'a* can be valid.

There is much discussion as to the exact meaning of the various Islamic terms used to define the Islamic democratic system. Some views are so restrictive that they leave no space for any human freedom of activity and are in reality a semantic cover to a rejectionist attitude. Others are more flexible, seeking acceptable ways to widen the realm of human activity and choice within the constrictive framework of Islamic law. Most leave open the question as to who actually decides what is contrary to *shari'a*, even though these select individuals would hold an extremely powerful position in the new Islamic order. However, all view Qur'an, *sunna* and *shari'a* as in some way fulfilling the role of the constitution in Western democratic systems, with the proviso that this constitution, being of divine origin, is eternal and cannot be changed in any way. Obviously, *ulama'*, the legal experts in Islamic law, would hold a key position in any such setup.

Ghannouchi<sup>4</sup> understands *hakimiyya* as asserting that human authority is derived from God and is relative. Human government exists within the framework of *hakimiyya*, which is not imposed but left to be accepted or rejected by an act of free choice. *Hakimiyya* does not mean that God intervenes constantly in running human affairs, but that he has provided broad guidelines to help them make the right choices. Exercising *hakimiyya* is a human endeavour that involves interpreting the divine guidelines and performing *ijtihad* when necessary. Differences in interpretation are valid and must be tolerated. While Islam sets the framework for all human endeavours, it includes large free areas (*faraghat*) for humans to fill in accordance to the changing contexts and needs. Islam distinguishes between absolute sacred religious activities (*al-dini*) and matters pertaining to the political and profane (*al-*

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3 Azzam Tamimi, Rachid Ghannouchi: A Democrat within Islamism", Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 79-81.

4 Rashid Ghannouchi, founder and leader of the Tunisian Islamist al-Nahda movement.  
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*siyasi*). Ghannouchi thus seeks to broaden the limited space accorded to democratic processes in most Islamist systems.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Accept Democracy as Universal Norm

A small minority of progressive Muslims defy traditional and Islamist concepts by reinterpreting Islam in a way compatible with modern concepts of democracy: secularity, a neutral civic society, individual human rights, pluralism (intellectual, economic, political and cultural), freedoms of expression and of religion, and gender equality. While rejectionists stress a culture of religious duty, progressives represent a culture based on rights that places universal human values above traditional understandings of Islam. The progressives reject the use of Islam as a political ideology leading to a totalitarian system. Most accept a core of basic Islamic values, distilled from the Muslim source texts, which determine all contemporary interpretations. Some see a need to radically change traditional orthodox Islam in such a way as to integrate liberal humanistic values at its core.<sup>6</sup> Contemporary progressives argue that *shari'a* laws are human interpretations of the eternally fixed principles of Islam, so they can be changed to fit modern contexts.

A conference of progressive intellectuals and researchers from Arab and other Islamic countries was held in Cairo, October 5<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> 2004. It discussed the issue of reform within Islam, as well as the possibility of “moderate” Islamist movements participating in democratic systems. The conference published a final statement listing ten recommendations calling for religious and political reforms. The most important of these was a call for a radical revision of Islamic jurisprudence and its relationship to the *sunna*, based on the principle of ongoing *ijtihad* and the primacy of the Qur'an over *hadith* (traditions recording what Muhammad said and did). Another important point was a call to break the monopoly of religious establishments on the interpretation of Islam, stressing the full right of individual Muslims to develop their own contextualised interpretations.<sup>7</sup>

Dr. Sa'ad Al-Din Ibrahim, Chairman of the Ibn Khaldun Center For Development Studies in Cairo (the main sponsors of the conference), in his opening speech explained *jihad* as the intellectual struggle to keep the gates of *ijtihad* wide open until Judgement Day, in order to protect freedom of thought and expression in all matters. This struggle includes the efforts to prevent the marginalisation of the Muslim intellectuals by their own governments, by official religious institutions and by extremists, radicals, and zealots who have turned Islam into a means of intimidation and terror all over the world.<sup>8</sup>

However, high-ranking clerics in the Egyptian Religious Establishment attacked the seminar and its participants.

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<sup>5</sup> Azzam Tamimi, *Rachid Ghannouchi: A Democrat within Islamism*, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 182-199.

<sup>6</sup> “What is Progressive Islam?” *ISIM Newsletter*, No. 13, December 2003; Radwan A. Masmoudi, “The Silenced Majority”, *Islam 21*, Issue No. 34, May 2003.

<sup>7</sup> “Final Declaration”, Islam and Reform Workshop Cairo, October 5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup>, 2004, Ibn Khaldun Centre for Development Studies (ICDS), NGO Events/News, Egypt, 7 October 2004, <http://www.mengos.net/events/04newsevents/egypt/october/ibnkhaldun-English.htm>, viewed 25 November 2005, also <http://www.brookings.edu/fp/research/projects/islam/cairoclosing.pdf>, viewed 25 November 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Y. Yehoshua, “A Cairo Conference Calling for Reform Raises the Ire of the Egyptian Religious Establishment”, MEMRI Inquiry and Analysis Series - No. 192, 22 October 2006.

## Elements in Islam inimical to Democracy

1. The individual's rights and liberties are subordinate to the community's interests. A Muslim's identity and security are fixed by his membership in the global *umma* (the Muslim community), in his kinship and denomination. The community always comes first. This tends to suppress individual rights and freedoms.
2. Early rationalist concepts that emphasised free will, reason and causality<sup>9</sup> were soon overwhelmed by orthodox Islamic theology. This holds that humans cannot understand God by reason but must submit to his inscrutable and arbitrary omnipotence and will. God is not accountable even to his own self and norms. There is no link between cause and effect, as God in every moment creates all things anew according to his will. Such views stressed a totalitarian view of God and encouraged totalitarian forms of government. Reason, freedom of thought and debate were stifled and intellectual opposition repressed. This trend opposes efforts at real democracy.<sup>10</sup>
3. *Shari'a* is accepted as divine law, a total system binding on individuals, society and state.<sup>11</sup> It is God-given, perfect, eternal and unchangeable, the ultimate criterion of right and wrong.<sup>12</sup> A Muslim's faith is incomplete without total obedience to it. A Muslim should have no choice in the matter of obeying *shari'a*.<sup>13</sup> This message of total submission to *shari'a* is constantly repeated in all contemporary Muslim societies, so even secular-minded Muslims tend to feel subconsciously guilty for not keeping *shari'a* regulations. It is the duty of the state to implement *shari'a* regardless of opposition and of possible harmful effect on non-Muslims, whose feelings cannot be taken into account.<sup>14</sup>
4. Those who deny the validity of *shari'a* are categorised as infidels and apostates.<sup>15</sup> Any criticism of *shari'a* is heresy.<sup>16</sup> Muslims wanting to critique *shari'a* in any way face the threat of being prosecuted as apostates (who deserve the death penalty in *shari'a*). There is thus no real space for free democratic debate in Muslim states and societies.
5. Muhammad's migration (*hijra*) from Mecca to Medina is accepted as a paradigmatic model to be followed in all times. The first Muslim community developed in clearly defined stages: the stage of weakness in which Islam was peacefully proclaimed; separation from unbelievers and migration to a safe place where Muslim strength could be built up; and finally the sacred fight (*jihad*) to reconquer lost space and extend Muslim political dominion. Such views are inimical to democratic concepts as they are based on the

<sup>9</sup> For instance the 9<sup>th</sup> century *mu'tazila* movement.

<sup>10</sup> Fatema Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World*, Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 1992, pp. 18-21, 34-35.

<sup>11</sup> Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights, and International Law*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> Khurram Murad, *Shari'ah the Way of Justice*, Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1982, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *Non-Muslims in the Islamic Society*, Indianapolis, IN: American Trust Publications, 1985, p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *Non-Muslims in the Islamic Society*, pp. 14, 54.

<sup>15</sup> Mahmud Shaltut, *al-Islam 'Aqida wa-Shari'ab*, Cairo: Dar al-Qalam, 1966, p. 23, as quoted by Meir Hatina, "Historical Legacy and the Challenge of Modernity in the Middle East: The Case of al-Azhar in Egypt", *The Muslim World*, Vol. 93, January 2003, p. 60.

<sup>16</sup> Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights, and International Law*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990, p. 11.

inherent superiority of Muslims over non-Muslims which has to be implemented by force if necessary.

6. Power in the state should be in the hands of Muslims: "It stands to reason that Islam was revealed to rule and not to be ruled, to guide and not to be guided. How come do you equate between the ruler and the ruled, the guide and the follower?"<sup>17</sup> At the core of Islam is a constant striving for political supremacy in all states and societies. The aims of Islam cannot be realized when infidels hold power. It is therefore the duty of Muslims to launch an organized struggle to secure power in the state for Islam.<sup>18</sup> As power and leadership are decisive factors in any state, determining its dominant religion and law, Muslims must aim at wresting control of all centres of power.<sup>19</sup> However, a state in which power is limited to one part of the population cannot be termed democratic.
7. *Shari'a* discriminates against non-Muslims who are treated as second-class citizens (*dhimmis*, literally "protected"), who merely enjoy the right of survival within the Islamic state.<sup>20</sup> Muslim traditionalists and Islamists want to preserve or revive discriminatory *shari'a* rules affecting non-Muslims, refusing to endorse the principle of equality as understood in international law.<sup>21</sup> They would exclude non-Muslims from positions of authority in the judiciary, legislature, military and cabinet and ban any propagation of non-Muslim religions.<sup>22</sup> *Dhimmis* must not meddle in the affairs of state and are to be relegated to an inferior status.<sup>23</sup> Traditional and Islamist views on non-Muslims in the Islamic state are evidently incompatible with modern notions of democracy, human rights and religious freedom.
8. *Shari'a* discriminates against women in spite of many proclamations to the contrary. Muslim apologists in the West claim that Islam offers women equal status to men, however, most women in the Muslim world still suffer from legal and cultural discrimination, restrictions on personal freedoms, and treatment as second class citizens. Civil and criminal codes in most Muslim countries use *shari'a* as a main source of legislation and have a discriminatory impact on women's rights in the name of Islamic values. This is especially severe in countries that operate *shari'a* courts in addition to the secular court system and even more so in Islamist countries that operate only under *shari'a* law.<sup>24</sup> Most Muslim states, basing themselves on *shari'a* family law, discriminate against women.
9. *Shari'a* discriminates against Muslims branded as heretics, who are given no rights whatsoever. They must recant or else be killed. Islamist parties in Pakistan were at the forefront of the drive to define the Ahmadiyya movement

<sup>17</sup> Yusuf al-Qaradawi, "Challenging the Applicability of Shari'ah", *Islam Online Fatwa Bank*, [http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask\\_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1119503544858](http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1119503544858), viewed 10 August 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Abul A'la Mawdudi, *The Islamic Movement: Dynamics of Values, Power and Change*, Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1984, p. 79.

<sup>19</sup> Khurram Murad, "Introduction", in Abul A'la Mawdudi, *The Islamic Movement: Dynamics of Values, Power and Change*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>20</sup> S. Hussain, "Status of Non-Muslims in Islamic State", *Hamdard Islamicus*, Vol. 16, 1993, pp. 70-78.

<sup>21</sup> Ann Elizabeth Mayer, *Islam and Human Rights: Tradition and Politics*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991, p. 150.

<sup>22</sup> Azzam Tamimi, *Rachid Ghannouchi: A Democrat within Islamism*, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 76-77; Ann Elizabeth Mayer, *Islam and Human Rights: Tradition and Politics*, p. 152.

<sup>23</sup> Ann Elizabeth Mayer, *Islam and Human Rights: Tradition and Politics*, p. 152.

<sup>24</sup> "Memorandum On reform of the Islamic Family Laws and the Administration of Justice in the Syariah System in Malaysia", Sisters in Islam, 2000, <http://www.sistersinislam.org.my/memorandums/20022001.htm>, viewed 15 November 2005.

as non-Muslim and to harass and persecute its adherents using *shari'a* concepts of blasphemy and apostasy. In Iran, following the Islamic Revolution, the Bahais faced brutal repression that included killing some of their leaders and expropriation of their property. A system that cannot tolerate minorities and dissent cannot be termed democratic.

### Islamist movements participating in the democratic process

Several Islamist movements willingly participate in the democratic process of their respective countries where allowed to do so, setting up political parties and contesting elections. The Jama'at-i Islami has done this in Pakistan and Bangladesh. The Muslim Brotherhood has never been allowed to organise as a political party in Egypt, but has forged alliances with other parties to gain access to the National Assembly and has set up members as independent candidates. It has participated as a political party in Jordan and in the Sudan. In Algeria the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), a movement similar to and allied to the Muslim Brotherhood, entered the political process as a party and won the first round of elections in 1992 before it was stopped by the FLN government and the military, resulting in a brutal civil war. The Palestinian HAMAS, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, entered the political process in the Palestinian Authority in 2005, competing in elections and winning a majority of seats in the Palestinian Council. The Shi'a Hizbullah entered the Lebanese political scene as a party in the 1990s, gaining a fair number of seats in parliament and a number of powerful cabinet posts. In Turkey, after the forced removal of the Islamist Refah party under Necmettin Erbakan from power in 1998, it reincarnated itself as the Justice and Development Party, winning the 2002 elections and forming the new Turkish government under Recep Tayyip Erdogan. While flaunting its commitment to democracy and secularism, it has moved subtly to implement Islamist objectives in Turkish society.<sup>25</sup>

Some of the Islamist debates on democracy can be attributed to semantics, as it does seem that many use it in a tactical utilitarian sense to imply that their proposed systems of government offer the positive benefits of Western democracy even as they repudiate those very systems as illegitimate Western infidel innovations. The main question facing observers of these developments is as to the real commitment of Islamists to the democratic system. There is no doubt that for many it is a convenient tactical ploy to achieve power in the state, implement *shari'a* and then set up an undemocratic Islamic system. There may be some who genuinely believe that an Islamic democratic system is required and attainable, but the danger is that they simply act as gate-openers for the more radical Islamists who will manipulate them to gain power and then sideline them or annihilate them, as was practised by Khomeini in revolutionary Iran of the 1980s. Hasan al-Turabi and the Muslim Brotherhood in Sudan undertook a similar shift from democratic commitment to Islamist supremacy when they supported and participated in the 1989 military coup. Once in power, they established a system which silenced the opposition and disadvantaged non-Muslim minorities.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> "The AKP Government's Attempts to move Turkey from Secularism to Islamism (Part III): PM Erdogan: Islam is Turkey's Supra-Identity", MEMRI, Special Dispatch Series No. 1086, February 7, 2006.

<sup>26</sup> John L. Esposito & John O. Voll, *Islam and Democracy*, New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 98-101.



An inherent contradiction in many Muslim societies, exemplified by a variety of surveys, is that while large majorities believe that Western-style democracy can work in their countries, they also support a prominent and expanding role for Islam in the political life of their countries.<sup>27</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The subject is highly complex and increasingly open to a variety of interpretations. There are for example countries, such as Pakistan and Bangladesh which, after independence from colonialism, followed a democratic route at times and yet are still conservative Islamic. Then there is the question of whether the problem lies with culture rather than with religion; some say that the failure of Arab states to be democratic is because of Arab culture rather than because of the religion of Islam. Furthermore there are Muslim-majority countries, such as Syria and Iraq under Saddam Hussein, which are strongly secular but neither democratic nor Islamic. Nevertheless, Islam as classically interpreted is inimical to democracy for many separate reasons.

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<sup>27</sup> "Islamic Extremism: Common Concern for Muslim and Western Publics", Pew global Attitudes Project: Summary of Findings, 14 July 2005, <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=248>, viewed 11 December 2006.

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