

TEMA A DEBATE: *Islam y democracia ¿son compatibles?*

HISTORIA DEL DERECHO ESPAÑOL
GRUPO DADE (51)
Profa. M^a Magdalena Martínez Almira

Islam and Democracy

By John L. Esposito and John O. Voll

<http://www.neh.gov/news/humanities/2001-11/islam.html>

The relationship between Islam and democracy in the contemporary world is complex. The Muslim world is not ideologically monolithic. It presents a broad spectrum of perspectives ranging from the extremes of those who deny a connection between Islam and democracy to those who argue that Islam requires a democratic system. In between the extremes, in a number of countries where Muslims are a majority, many Muslims believe that Islam is a support for democracy even though their particular political system is not explicitly defined as Islamic.

Throughout the Muslim world in the twentieth century, many groups that identify themselves explicitly as Islamic attempted to participate directly in the democratic processes as regimes were overthrown in Eastern Europe, Africa, and elsewhere. In Iran such groups controlled and defined the system as a whole; in other areas, the explicitly Islamic groups were participating in systems that were more secular in structure.

The participation of self-identified Islamically oriented groups in elections, and in democratic processes in general, aroused considerable controversy. People who believe that secular approaches and a separation of religion and politics are an essential part of democracy argue that Islamist groups only advocate democracy as a tactic to gain political power. They say Islamist groups support “one man, one vote, one time.” In Algeria and Turkey, following electoral successes by parties thought to be religiously threatening to the existing political regimes, the Islamic political parties were restricted legally or suppressed.

The relationship between Islam and democracy is strongly debated among the people who identify with the Islamic resurgence in the late twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. Some of these Islamists believe that “democracy” is a foreign concept that has been imposed by Westernizers and secular reformers upon Muslim societies. They often argue that the concept of popular sovereignty denies the fundamental Islamic affirmation of the sovereignty of God and is, therefore, a form of idolatry. People

holding these views are less likely to be the ones participating in elections. Many limit themselves to participating in intellectual debates in the media, and others hold themselves aloof from the political dynamics of their societies, hoping that their own isolated community will in some way be an inspiration to the broader Muslim community.

Many prominent Islamic intellectuals and groups, however, argue that Islam and democracy are compatible. Some extend the argument to affirm that under the conditions of the contemporary world, democracy can be considered a requirement of Islam. In these discussions, Muslim scholars bring historically important concepts from within the Islamic tradition together with the basic concepts of democracy as understood in the modern world.

The process in the Muslim world is similar to that which has taken place within other major religious traditions. All of the great world faith traditions represent major bodies of ideas, visions, and concepts fundamental to understanding human life and destiny.

Many of these significant concepts have been used in different ways in different periods of history. The Christian tradition, for example, in premodern times provided a conceptual foundation for divine right monarchy; in contemporary times, it fosters the concept that Christianity and democracy are truly compatible. **In all traditions, there are intellectual and ideological resources that can provide the justification for absolute monarchy or for democracy.** The controversies arise regarding how basic concepts are to be understood and implemented.

A relatively neutral starting point for Muslims is presented in a 1992 interview in the *London Observer* with the Tunisian Islamist leader and political exile, Rashid Ghanoushi:

“If by democracy is meant the liberal model of government prevailing in the West, a system under which the people freely choose their representatives and leaders, in which there is an alternation of power, as well as all freedoms and human rights for the public, then Muslims will find nothing in their religion to oppose democracy, and it is not in their interests to do so.”

Many Muslims, including Ghanoushi himself, go beyond this and view democracy as an appropriate way to fulfill certain obligations of the faith in the contemporary world.

The Islamic tradition contains a number of key concepts that are presented by Muslims as the key to “Islamic democracy.” Most would agree that it is important for Muslims not simply to copy what non-Muslims have done in creating democratic systems, emphasizing that there are different forms that legitimate democracy can take. Iran’s President Mohammad Khatami, in a television interview in June before that country’s presidential elections, noted that

“the existing democracies do not necessarily follow one formula or aspect. It is possible that a democracy may lead to a liberal system. It is possible that democracy may lead to a socialist system. Or it may be a democracy with the inclusion of religious norms in the government. We have accepted the third option.”

Khatami presents a view common among the advocates of Islamic democracy that “today world democracies are suffering from a major vacuum, which is the vacuum of spirituality,” and that Islam can provide the framework for combining democracy with spirituality and religious government.

The synthesis of spirituality and government builds on a fundamental affirmation at the heart of Islam: the proclamation that “There is no divinity but The God” and the affirmation of the “oneness” of God. This concept, called tawhid, provides the foundation for the idea that one cannot separate different aspects of life into separate compartments.

Ali Shariati, who made important contributions to the ideological development of the Islamic revolution in Iran, wrote in *On the Sociology of Islam*, that tawhid “in the sense of oneness of God is of course accepted by all monotheists. But tauhid as a world view . . . means regarding the whole universe as a unity, instead of dividing it into this world and the here-after . . . spirit and body.”

In this worldview, the separation of religion from politics creates a spiritual vacuum in the public arena and opens the way for political systems that have no sense of moral values. From such a perspective, a secular state opens the way for the abuse of power. The experiences of Muslim societies with military regimes that are secularist in ideological origin, such as the Baath Arab Socialist regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, reinforce this mistrust of separating religious values from politics.

Advocates of Islamic democracy argue that the Oneness of God requires some form of democratic system; conservatives contend that the idea of the sovereignty of the people contradicts the sovereignty of God; often the alternative then becomes some form of a monarchical system.

The response to this is an affirmation of tawhid, as expressed by a Sudanese intellectual, Abdelwahab El-Affendi, in the October 2000 edition of *Islam 21*:

“No Muslim questions the sovereignty of God or the rule of Shari’ah [the Islamic legal path]. However, most Muslims do (and did) have misgivings about any claims by one person that he is sovereign. The sovereignty of one man contradicts the sovereignty of God, for all men are equal in front of God. . . . Blind obedience to one-man rule is contrary to Islam.”

In this way, it is argued that the doctrine of tawhid virtually requires a democratic system because humans are all created equal and any system that denies that equality is not Islamic.

There are a number of specific concepts that Muslims cite when they explain the relationship between Islam and democracy.

In the Qur’an, the righteous are described as those people who, among other things, manage their affairs through “mutual consultation” or shura (42:38 Qur’an). This is expanded through traditions of the Prophet and the sayings and actions of the early leaders of the Muslim community to mean that it is obligatory for Muslims in managing their political affairs to engage in mutual consultation.

Contemporary Muslim thinkers ranging from relatively conservative Islamists to more liberal modernists to Shi’ite activists emphasize the importance of consultation. There would be little disagreement with the view of Ayatollah Baqir al-Sadr, the Iraqi Shi’ite leader who was executed by Saddam Hussein in 1980, who said in *Islamic Political System*, that the people “have a general right to dispose of their affairs on

the basis of the principle of consultation.” What this meant for the constitutional system of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which was influenced by al-Sadr’s thought, was affirmed by President Khatami in last June’s interview: the *“people play a fundamental role in bringing a government to power, in supervising the government and possibly the replacement of the government without any tension and problems.”*

Another basic concept in the development of Islamic democracy is “caliph.” In contemporary discussions, traditional political usage of the term caliph has been redefined. Historically the term caliph was used as the title of the monarchs who ruled the medieval Muslim empire. When medieval Muslim political philosophers spoke of the institutions of caliphal rule, the caliphate, they were analyzing the political institution of the successors to the Prophet Muhammad as the leader of the Muslim community. However, this concept of the caliphate was something that developed after the death of the Prophet.

In the Qur’an, the Arabic words for caliph (khalifah) and caliphate (khilafah) have a different meaning. These terms in the Qur’an have the more general meaning of steward and stewardship or trustee and trusteeship. In this way, Adam, as the first human, is identified as God’s caliph or steward on earth (2:30). Muhammad is instructed to remind humans that God made them the caliphs (stewards or trustees) of the earth (6:165). In this way, in the Qur’an, the term caliphate refers to the broad responsibilities of humans to be the stewards of God’s creation.

By the late twentieth century, long after the last vestiges of the political caliphate had been abolished by the reforms of Ataturk in Turkey in 1924, Muslim intellectuals began to see the importance of the concept of all humans as “caliphs” or God’s stewards. As the intellectual dimensions of the late twentieth-century Islamic resurgence became more clearly defined, Ismail al-Faruqi, a scholar of Palestinian origins, outlined an ambitious project in a small book, *Islamization of Knowledge*. The concept of the caliphate involved responsibilities for all humans, in all dimensions of life, but especially the political: “Rightly, Muslims understand khilafah as directly political. . . . Islam requires that every Muslim be politicized (i.e., awakened, organized, and mobilized).”

The implications of this reassertion of a more explicitly Qur’anic meaning of human stewardship for Islamic democracy were spelled out by the South Asian Islamist leader, Abu al-Ala Mawdudi in *The Islamic Way of Life*:

“The authority of the caliphate is bestowed on the entire group of people, the community as a whole. . . . Such a society carries the responsibility of the caliphate as a whole and each one of its individual[s] shares the Divine Caliphate. This is the point where democracy begins in Islam. Every person in an Islamic society enjoys the rights and powers of the caliphate of God and in this respect all individuals are equal.”

XXX In theory and concept, Islamic democracy is, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, quite well developed and persuasive. In actual practice the results have been less encouraging. Authoritarian rulers such as Ja’far Numayri in Sudan and Zia al-Haq in Pakistan initiated formal programs of Islamization of the law and political system in the 1980s with results that were not encouraging for democracy. A military coup brought a combination of military and civilian Islamists to rule in Sudan in 1989 and despite the proclaimed goal of creating an Islamic democracy, the regime’s human rights record in terms of treatment of non-Muslim minorities and Muslim opposition groups is deplorable.

International human rights groups have also been critical of the treatment of non-Muslim minorities in Iran, where the Shah was overthrown in 1979. During its first decade, the Islamic Republic set narrow

limitations on political participation. However, the end of the nineties saw the unprecedented presidential election victory of Mohammad Khatami, who had not been favored by the conservative religious establishment. He was reelected by an overwhelming majority again in 2001. Although there are continuing grounds for criticizing Iran in terms of its repression of opposition and minorities, increasing numbers of women and youth are voting in elections. Instead of “one man, one vote, one time,” the “one man” is being joined by “one woman” as a voting force.

Beyond the formally proclaimed Islamic political systems, there has also been an increasing role for democracy with an Islamic tone. In many countries, Muslims who are not activist Islamists have participated in electoral processes and brought a growing sense of the need for morality and Islamic awareness in the political arena. In an era when politics in many countries is becoming “desecularized,” leaders of Islamic organizations play important roles in electoral political systems that are not explicitly identified as Islamic. When the military regime of Suharto in Indonesia was brought to an end, the person who became president in 1999 as a result of the first open elections was Abd al-Rahman Wahid, the leader of Nahdat ul-Ulama, perhaps the largest Islamic organization in the world. He did not campaign on a platform of Islamizing the political system, even though he participated in the democratic system as a clearly identifiable Islamic leader. When he was removed as president this year, it was by a process of orderly replacement, and neither his followers nor his opponents engaged in religious warfare.

Similarly, Islamically oriented political parties have operated successfully in the secular electoral politics of Turkey, with the leader of one such party, Necmettin Erbakan, serving as prime minister briefly in 1996-1997. Although in succession, the Islamically oriented Turkish parties have been suppressed and many of their leaders jailed, the response of the people in the parties has simply been to form new parties and try again within the political system rather than withdrawing into a violent underground opposition.

The Turkish experience reflects the fact that many Muslims, whether living in formally secular or formally Islamic states, see democracy as their main hope and vehicle of effective political participation. One important dimension of this participation is that despite conservative Muslim opposition to the idea of rule by a woman, the three largest Muslim states in the world -- Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Pakistan -- have had or now have elected women as their heads of government. None of these women was explicitly Islamist and one was directly opposed by an Islamist party.

In this complex context, it is clear that Islam is not inherently incompatible with democracy. “Political Islam” is sometimes a program for religious democracy and not primarily an agenda for holy war or terrorism.

Islam and Democracy (Oxford University Press, 1966) has been translated into a number of languages, including Arabic, Turkish, Japanese, and Indonesian. John O. Voll received \$126,058 from NEH to conduct a Summer Institute for College Teachers on modern Islam and John L. Esposito received \$126,058 to research the works of modern Muslim scholar-activists.