

ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY

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PROF. KHURSHID AHMAD



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Prof. Khurshid Ahmad¹

As the Twentieth Century is approaching its end and humanity is moving towards the third Millennium, the world is awash with new dazzling claims and disquietening apprehensions. On the one hand there are claims about the demise of the ideology of communism, the end of cold war and the final victory of western liberalism, political and economic, heralding an 'end of history'², and on the other there is widespread hue and cry about religious resurgence all the world over and apprehensions of a new era to be marked by a 'clash of civilizations'³. It is time sober intellectuals, particularly those representing the Islamic Ummah address themselves to the issues that are being debated in the world academia as well as its corridors of power, and try to spell out the portion of Islam and the Muslim Ummah vis-a-vis these challenges. Some of the major issues that are agitating humanity today, and are also the direct concern of the Islamic Ummah are: Globalization, Liberalization, Democratization, Privatization, Secularization, Religious Resurgence and the bogey of International Terrorism In this paper we propose to examine some aspects of the democratization debate.

The thesis of this paper is that 'democracy', as it has developed in the context of the Western Civilization and polity, is not a monolithic concept. In fact, it is a multi-faced phenomenon, both at conceptual as well as operational levels. It is, therefore, intellectually unacceptable and culturally untenable to assume that some certain western model of democracy could be the ideal form of polity for the entire mankind, particularly the Muslims, who have their own distinct moral and ideological identity and historic cultural personality. Western democratic thought and experience, despite their richness, are conceptually flawed and riddled with operational contradictions. Its 'export' to the Muslim world, as also to other third world countries is not a realistic option. As such pursuit of the spread of western secular democracy as an active goal of foreign policy is ill-advised. The present writer further submits that it is possible to differentiate between the two major dimensions of democracy, i.e. its roots: the concept of popular sovereignty and consequent principle of legitimacy, and its mechanisms for finding out the will of the

1. Senator Professor KHURSHE) AHMAD, Chairman, Institute of Policy Studies, Islamabad, and Chairman, the Islamic Foundation, Liecester, U.K., and a former Federal Minister for Planning and Economic Development of Pakistan, has authored or edited over sixty works on Islam, Economics, Education and World Affairs. He received the Being Faisal International Award for Service to Islam in 1990 and the Islamic Development Bank Award for contributions to Islamic Economics in 1988.

2. See: Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History', in National Interest and his book The End of History and the Last Man, the Free Press, New York, 1993.

3. See, Samuel P. Huntington, "The clash of civilizations?" Foreign Affairs, (vol. 72, No.3) summer, 1993 pp. 22-49. Also see the debate on this thesis. Foreign Affairs, vol. 72, No. 4: pp. 2-26 and No.5, pp. 186- 94. Also Huntingtons' book, "The Clash of Civilization".

people and seeking their participation in process of decision-making. It is also the contention of this writer that within the context of Islamic faith, history and culture, there are clear lines of guidance which suggest a unique and distinct political framework that can rightly be described as truly participatory, both in substance and spirit and capable of establishing a just political order, which could also remedy some of the conflicts, contradictions and failures of secular democracy.

The Islamic political order is based on the concept of Tawheed and seeks its flowering in the form of popular vicegerency (Khilafah) operating through a mechanism of Shura supported by principle of equality of humankind, rule of law protection of human rights including those of minorities, accountability and social justice. The Shariah provides the broad framework within which the people participate in developing a civil society and its institution including the state. This system provides for healthy coexistence of religions, cultures and civilizations at national and global levels. There is vertical consistency and horizontal harmony in the system that can ensure the establishment of peace and a just socio-political order for all human beings.

Democracy: The Western Perspective

The word democracy entered English in the sixteenth century from the French democrat. The word is Greek in origin having been derived from democrat the root meaning are demos (people) and kratos (rule). Democracy, as such, refers to a form of government in which, in contradistinction to aristocracy, monarchy, dictatorship and authoritarian rule, the people are regarded as the real source of power and point of reference. It is the people who are looked upon as the sovereign, enjoying the right to rule and to whom those in authority are accountable. The term democracy indicates both a set of ideals and principles, and a political system or mechanism. The real kernel of democracy is its principle of legitimacy, laying down that power is legitimate only when it is derived from the authority of the people and based on their consent. In the post-renaissance era of European history, the kings' divine right to rule was challenged. There was popular rebellion against the monarchies of Europe and their aristocratic regimes as well as against the authority of the church and its ecclesiastical rule. It was in this context that the principle of sovereignty of man was expounded, severing the relations of politics with religion and divine authority. 'The People' were affirmed as the source of political power and the real arbiter of their own fate. They were crowned to be the source of all values and authority; their well being and glory to be the real goal of all political effort.

The philosophical roots of democracy lie in the concept of popular sovereignty. It consists, on the one hand, of denial of the existence or at least relevance of eternal and absolute religious and moral values, and on the other, the affirmation that the people, their popular will is source of all authority and power. In short, the legal as well as political sovereignty was located in the people, giving rise to a variety of forms and expressions of democratic polity direct, representative, functional, parliamentary, republican, federal, proletarian, etc.

"The central principle that drove democratic demands along during the nineteenth century", claims Richard Jay "was that of the sovereignty of the people."⁴ However fizzy the concept of 'the people' is, both conceptually and in practice, this has remained the philosophic and moral bed-rock of secular western democracy.

The other dimension of democracy relates to forms of self-government, i.e., developing a political process instrumental in finding out the will of the people and as such running the affairs of the state in accordance with their wishes. The operational model is based on the principles of liberty, equality, division of power and rule of law and gives the vision of a government that is chosen by the people and is accountable before them. This western democratic model is based on the principle of separation between religion and politics and as such is concerned only with the worldly welfare of the people. The entire corpus of law, its galaxy of human rights, the multi-party system, electoral mechanisms for periodic selection of political leadership, separation of judiciary and executive, institutional arrangements for legislation - unicameral or bicameral - constitute major dimensions of this political dispensation.

Democracy in the West has failed to establish a healthy and stable society because it lacks firm moral moorings. As absolute values have no place in this system, the standards of right and wrong were subjected to the whims of the people, who began to change their ethical values as they changed their clothes. A process of decriminalization of major evil practices and moral sins began, with the result that human society was exposed to the tyranny of moral relativism, idiosyncrasies of majority rule, ethnic, racial and class- based tensions, economic rivalries and exploitations, and erosion of all that had sustained the human society from time immemorial. Democracy substituted quantity for quality counting hands in place of attending to standards of right or truth. Party politics led to further degeneration of the system. In certain countries one-party system was introduced that led to the establishment of a party dictatorship in the name of democracy. Some of the principles on which democracy was based began to get diluted with the result that practice so deviated from the original concepts that the whole exercise began to turn into a mockery. Giovanni Sartori, in his article on 'Democracy' in the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences says:

"According to the minimal standard, roughly half of the world may be included in the realm of democracy; according to the medium standard the number of democratic countries dwindles; and according to the high standard, a mere dozen or so countries have achieved a satisfactory degree of democracy. And it requires little effort to imagine how easily the label "democratic" can be turned into "undemocratic," and vice versa, simply by switching from one standard to another...Westerners have lived under democratic system long enough to have reached the phase of democratic disillusionment... Up to this point we are able to specify what democracy is: the border between a democratic and a nondemocratic political system is still definite. But no sooner do we apply the word democracy to

4. "Richard Jay, "Democracy", in Political Ideologies: An Introduction. Robert Ecclesholl et. H., second editor, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 129.

most of the Third World, and in particular to the so-called developing nations, then the standard becomes so low that one may well wonder whether the word democracy is still appropriate.⁵

In fact in the latest issue of Foreign Affairs, the prestigious American journal, Thomas Carothers, laments that the 'world-wide democratic revolution has been cooling off around the globe. He declares:

"What appeared too many enthusiasts a few years back to be a grave unifying movement may, at least over the next several decades, heighten the political divide between the Western World (including Latin America, Eastern Europe and parts of the former Soviet Union) and the non-Western one? This is not a prophecy of a clash of civilizations but a warning against facile universalism."⁶

It is the considered opinion of the present writer that secular Western democracy has its own distinct ethos and its indiscriminate export to other parts of the world cannot lead to the establishment of a stable and just political order. A number of lessons can be learned from the democratic experiments made in different part of the world, but the people in the non-Western world, particularly the Muslim Ummah, must not blindly follow any of the Western models; instead they should draw upon their own ideological and historical sources and establish institutions that represent their own values and ideals. There is no harm in learning from the experiences of the mankind, but only those arrangements can really be fruitful which can flourish within the context of our own value framework and are in consonance with our cultural ethos⁷.

Islamic Political System

Islam is not a religion in the limited sense of the word, as used in the Western philosophic and religious literature. Literally meaning submission it stands for man's total submission to the Will of Allah subhanahu wa Ta'ala and firm commitment and surrender to all His Commands and Guidance. As such while first and foremost Islam represents a relationship between man and God, it is also a covenant to follow the entire guidance revealed by Allah and exemplified by His prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) and integrating oneself with the community of believers, the Ummah, which has been raised to invite mankind to the Path of Truth, to establish what is right and to forbid what is Wrong

5. The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, The Macmillan Co., vol. 3, p. 113-118.

6. Thomas Carothers, "Democracy without Illusions", Foreign Affairs. January/February, 1997, p.90.

7. Literature on Democracy is vast. Some of the major works consulted are: David Held, Models of Democracy. Cambridge, U.K. 1987; Joh Kean, Democracy and Civil Society. London, 1988; Robert A Dahl, Democracy and its Critics. New Haven, Conn, 1989; David Held "Democracy, the Native State and the Global System", in David Held, ed. Political Theory Today. Cambridge, U.K. 1999; Robert A Dahl, A Preface to Democratic Theory. Chicago, 1963; Giovanni Sartori, the Theory of Democracy Revisited. Chattam, N.J., 1987; J. Lively, Democracy. Oxford Blackwell, 1979; A Arblestee, Democracy, London, 1987; C.B. Macpherson, The Real World of Democracy. Oxford, 1966; M.J. Crozier S.P. Huntington, J. Watenuia; the Crisis of Democracy. New York, New York University Press, 1975.

to establish what is Right and to forbid what is Wrong. Islam is a complete code of life, a din that covers all aspects of human existence, personal and public, moral and mundane, spiritual and material, legal and social, economic and educational, national and international. Din is the basis of loyalty and identity, and shariah is the ordained path covering all walks of life, from prayer to socio-economic progress. Islamic political system is not something independent or self-contained. It is part of the Islamic way of life and is inseparable from other aspects of this Life is visualized as an integrated unity. Iman is the seed and the starting point. The tree that grows out of this seed covers all areas of human existence. The guidance is eternal. The real objective is seeking Allah's good pleasure and aspiring for success in the everlasting life that is to come. Din and dawla (state) are therefore inseparable. Tawheed is the cardinal principle on which the entire fabric of Islamic life rests.

In the light of this foundational principle the key elements of the Islamic political order are as follows: ⁸

1. Sovereignty belongs to Allah Alone. He is the Creator, the Master, the ' Rab, the Law-Giver, the Guide. Man is His creation (Makhlooq). His 'abd (servant) and His Khalifa (vicegerent and representative). Man's assignment on the earth is to live a life in obedience to the Divine Will, establish the Shariah that has been revealed for his guidance and be at peace with himself -with the universe and with his lord, the Creator. This would bring peace, justice, bliss and prosperity in this world and real salvation in the hereafter. All human beings are equal before the Lord and subject to the same Law that He has ordained. The Islamic political system is based on the principle of the sovereignty of Allah and the supremacy of the Shariah. Legitimacy of the system comes from loyalty and obedience to Allah and commitment to follow and establish the Shariah. The Quran is very explicit on this point:

Verity His is the Creation and His it the Law **(7:54)**

The Authority rests with none but Allah. He commends you not to surrender to anyone save Him. This is the right way (of life). **12: 40**

And those who do not make their decisions in accordance with that revealed by Allah are in fact the unbelievers, the unjust... the evil-doers. **(5:44- 46)**

8. Theme related to Islam and Democracy has been discussed in the literature. Some of the important readings are: Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi Islamic Law and Constitution, ed. By Khurshid Ahmad, Lahore, Islamic Publication, 7th edition 1980; Islam. Democracy, the State of the West. A Roundtable with Dr. Hasan Turabi, Tampa, USA, 1993; Fatima Mernusi, Islam and Democracy: Fear for the Modern World. tr. By Mary Jo Lakaland Reading, Mass, 1992; John L. Esposito and John O. Voll. Islam and Democracy. Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press. 1996; Tawfiq as-Shawi. Fiqh as Sunna. Cairo, 1993; Islamic Resurgence: Challenges, Directions and Future Perspectives - A Roundtable with Khurshid Ahmad, edited by Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi, Tampa, 1995; Shura fi al-Islam. 3 vols. AlBait Foundation, Amman, Jordan, 1990.

2. Mans position is that of Allah's vicegerent, Khalifa. This Istikhlaaf has been entrusted on all those human beings who accept Allah as their *Rab* and Sovereign. The concept is one of popular vicegerency, shared by all the believers. This limited authority has been delegated, not to any chosen person, family, tribe or group, but to all the Muslim men and woman and has to be exercised by them in accordance with the Islamic principle of Shura.

Allah has promised to those among you who believe and do righteous deeds that He will assuredly make them to succeed (those who rule) and grant them vicegerency in the land just as He made those before them to succeed (others). **24:55**

The theory of state that follows from this and other injunctions of the Quran lays down the principles of God's sovereignty and: "popular vicegerency" of the believers. Hence legitimacy in the Islamic political order comes, first and foremost, from accepting Allah as the Sovereign and His Law i.e., the Shariah as the Supreme Law, and secondly, enjoying the confidence and support of the Muslims, the Ummah, who are the real repositories of Khalifa. It is very clear from the verse quoted above that the authority or assignment to rule over the earth has been promised to the whole community of believers and not to any particular person or group. The Istikhlaaf granted to the faithful is in the nature of a popular vicegerency - each and all have been given this assignment. That is why the mode of decision-making for the Ummah has been described as Shura and their role and responsibilities tied to qualities of dutifulness and accountability (Taqwa). The Prophet s.a.w. has said:

(Every one of you is in command of his herd (i.e. ruler) and every one of you is accountable for his words).

All distinctions of cast, colour, tribe and nobility have been abolished, establishing real equality between humans. The only criteria for excellence being merit and virtuous behavior (Taqwa).

The principle of obedience in the Islamic polity is considered by loyalty to Allah and His Prophet and the people's right to free speech, discussion and dissent granted by the Shariah.

O you who believe, obey Allah and obey His Messenger and those from among yourselves who hold authority; then if there is any dispute between you concerning any matter refer it to Allah and His Prophet if you (really) believe in Allah and the Last Day" **(4:59)**

The picture of an Islamic polity that emerges from this guideline is very clear. This faith-based society. Its sheet-anchor is loyalty to Allah and His Prophet and decision-making in accordance with the Shariah. There is, however, no room for any privileged class or priestly order in this system mundane power is shared by all members of the community who are equal before law. Their rights of the peoples, particularly the weaker ones, have been enshrined in the Shariah and no one has any power to abridge these rights or ignore them Freedom and equality are the very breath of this

society, Amr bil'ma'ruf and nahi'anil Munkar are its life-mission. Shura is its way. This is so in respect of all its affairs, social, economic, political or otherwise. Political authority and power-sharing have to be devised on the basis of supremacy of Shariah and the consent and confidence of the people. Accountability is not only also before God, it is also before the law and the people. Any arrangement is possible as long as these principles and values are fully respected as Islam's guidance is absolute, universal and eternal. It was left to the ummah to develop different forms and mechanisms suitable to their socio-historic conditions. A variety of forms is possible within this framework. That is the beauty and glory of Islam.

Comparative Position: A Summing Up

Islam's strategy is unique. It focuses on man: his soul and personality. It is the spiritual flowering within every human being that lends real strength to the Islamic system. Change begins by changing man from within. The starting point is the creation of a 'moral man' who then plays his part in creating a 'moral society'. Islamic ummah is a universal community. Within this wider ummah there can be smaller groups, yet they constitute parts of the total mosaic. Islam builds a civil society, with a spectrum of institutions. State being one of them, albeit very important and at the apex; yet an organ of the community and the civil society. There is total harmony between its social, political and economic principles and all taken together create a society that is ideological, norm-based, and permeated with spirituality. This society is to be organized on the basis of mutual help, social responsibility and Justice and equity for all. It is a law-abiding society in which rights and duties of all members, including the minorities, are fully respected. The purpose of the state is service and establishment of justice. There is no room for despotism, dictatorship or arbitrary rule.

The Islamic state is different from a secular democracy as it is diametrically opposed to the concept of the sovereignty of the people. Allah is the Supreme Law-Giver and Shariah is the law of the land. Within the framework of Shariah new problems are faced and their solutions worked out. This is the cardinal difference between the two. As far as the principle of rule of law, protection of fundamental rights, and supremacy of judiciary, safety of minorities and choice of policies and rulers in accord with the wishes of the people are concerned, Islam ensures them within in its own framework. In respect of some of these matters there is a common ground with Western democracy and as such to that extent Muslims can learn from the experiences of others, as other can learn from ours. But because of the basic differences as to the source and nature of law, the two systems are distinct and unique.

Islamic state is characterized by the supremacy of the shariah yet it is diametrically different from theocracy as it has been known in history - Pharaonic, Babylonian, Jewish, Christian, Hindu and Buddhist. The differences are very fundamental.

Theocracy stood for divine rule through and ecclesiastical class whose word became the law, undisputed, undisputable. In Islam there is no priestly class. Allah is the Sovereign his Will is clearly available in the form of the Quran and the Sunnah. The Shariah is a known quantity, available to all

and not a divine secret known only to the priesthood. In Islam there is no possibility of any group of people imposing their personal will or preferences over others in the name of God. It is through an open process of debate and discussion that the law is developed and implemented. All participate in this process. Precisely the differences are:

- a) Shariah, the epitome of Divine Will, is available intact, unpolluted and unpolluteable by any change or interference.
- b) There is no class of religious intermediaries or official spokesmen for God. Prophet Hood has been come to an end. The guidance has been perfected. Now it is the community which has to understand and implement it.
- c) There is complete freedom hi the society to discuss and resolve problems through Shura. The entire Islamic Fiqh has developed through a process in which the community and its believers have participated in an open process.

Islamic state and society are concerned with all the physical and worldly problems of man and try to solve those problems in accordance with the principles of justice and social well-being. The entire domain of the secular world is the concern of Islam and the Muslims, yet the Islamic and secular approaches are fundamentally different. The Prophet (s.a.w.) has said that the entire landscape of the world is my mosque. As such Islamic domain covers all matters, spiritual or secular. To that extent Islam has no quarrel with the secularists, who were the product of those religious traditions which neglected the secular world and confined their interest to the spiritual realm. Islam also accepts the principles of tolerance and pluralism and gives to all human beings the right to belief, and accepts multiplicity of cultures and community life-styles. This is part of the Islamic matrix. Where Islam is at war with secularism is its claim to solve all human problems without reference to religion or divine guidance. That is the very anti-thesis of the Islamic approach to life. On that count the two represent two worlds apart.

Although communism and fascism are no longer dominant political ideologies, yet there are people who still subscribe to some variant of these ideologies. Both of them are products of the socio-political situations as they developed in the context of the Western civilization. Central to these had been the totalitarian role of the state. Both represented different kinds of dictatorship and authoritarian rule. In Islam there is no place for arbitrary power. Islam establishes state as one of the organs of the civil society and Islamic community. The Islamic state is a creature of law and the rulers are as much accountable before law as any other citizen. In fact the Islamic state does not confer upon its functionaries even those immunities which are common in western democracies. Human rights in Islam are inviolable, as sacred covenants from Allah subhanahu wa Ta'ala. Individual is respected as the basic unit of society. Every human being has a sacred entity and is morally responsible for all his choices and actions, here and hereafter. The individual has to behave with a sense of social responsibility but he is not a mere lifeless cog in the wheel of the state. As such there is all the difference in the world between the Islamic political order and the dictatorial and authoritarian ideologies of our time.

In view of this comparative analysis we would like to conclude that the Islamic political system is unique, despite some similarities with other political ideologies. Islam is an organic whole and aims at establishing a society that is not confronted with the dilemma of a 'moral man in an immoral society' or of humans herded in an 'animal farm'. Islam wants to ensure simultaneous flowering of the spiritual and material potential of all human beings, enabling them to live in peace and justice, serving the higher moral ideals of life, aiming at God's good pleasure and eternal bliss. The Islamic state is an ideological, educational and consultative state providing a socio-political framework in which real democracy can flourish.

PROF KHURSHID AHMAD