Modern Concept of Democracy: The Response of Muslim Intellectuals of Twentieth Century

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Abstract

The domination of western powers and disintegration of the khlifat *system were the major events of the 19th and early 20th centuries that influenced almost all the educational, social, and political institutions of Muslim society. During and after the end of colonialism, the Muslim world encountered the western concepts of state and society. New states emerged on the basis of nationalism. Since then, the Muslim world has tried to solve the challenges of the western concepts such as modernity, modernism, capitalism, democracy, nationalism. The great dilemma in the entire Islamic world is the absence of an adequate system, which provides them with stability and prosperity. The traditional systems are not adequate and viable to run the state and satisfy society while modern systems are not considered harmonious with some socio-religious perspectives. Muslim intellectuals elaborate many theories to come out from this miserable situation. This article aims to analyse Muslim behaviour towards the modern concept of democracy. It also tries to explain the Islamic concept of democracy and the responses of Muslim scholars towards western democracy.*

Introduction:

Politics is considered a general phenomenon but it has relevant definitions for the understanding of political systems, which has the rationale and justification for the execution of the demands and wishes of society and the embodiment of societal predispositions. Here are the different aspects of any general phenomenon, which are connected, inter-related, and interdependent and also make social or political sense only when analyzed in its cultural traditions. Action happens not in a vacuum but in a specific environment where its validity makes it palatable but our concern to that action is contingent upon the application of the social motives behind that action and their channelling in a system, coming out in the form of out put action.

Islam has a long history of strong political institutions and the Islamic legal system fulfilled the demands of state and society for a long time. 'The human contribution to the development of Islamic jurisprudence has benefited world legal culture and must be acknowledged. In this sense, Islamic law has benefited not only Muslims, but the whole of humanity.'[1] After the disintegration of the *khilfat* system, there was a vacuum and Muslim intellectuals tried to fill up the gap with meaningful discourse.

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The contemporary resurgence of the Muslim world and the wish for democratization of Muslim society are the vibrant topics of modern research. It is appropriate to elucidate Islamic value and democratic dimensions of Islam before stating the analysis of the opinion of intellectuals and their theories of democracy and the Islamic political system.

The Concept of Democracy and *Shura*:

Democracy is a western concept of a political system. The definition of democracy should be a straightforward affair. Epistemologically and historically, the term (from the Greek words for people, *demos* and rule, *kratia*) emerged to designate a certain form of governance, the rule of people (or the many), in contrast to rival forms, such as monarchy (rule by one person) oligarchy (rule by few), plutocracy (rule by rich) or anarchy (rule by no one). The core idea behind it (that of "a political system in which the members regard one another as political equals, are collectively sovereign, and possessing all the capacities, resources and institutions to govern themselves") also appears to be simple enough. The fifth century BC famous Athenian leader, Pericles, put it succinctly thus: "Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people. Put simply thus, a democracy is a system of government in which all members of the community are permitted to participate in the public decision making in some manner found acceptable to all or to the majority."[2]

Before the advent of Islam, there was a tribal system in the Arabian Peninsula and each tribe had its own tribal system. There was no concept of individual freedom and individual liberty. All the decisions were made on tribal levels. Islam introduced the *shura* system. The *shura* system encourages consulting the opinion of common people in public and states affairs. In some affairs, the consultation is considered obligatory. The Prophet (peace be upon him) always consulted the opinions of the companions in all-important matters. The key rules of this system are explained in the *Sura al-Shura*. God orders the believers for consulting the opinion of people in the matters: "And those who answer the Call of their Lord [i.e. to believe that He is the only One Lord (Allah) and to worship none but Him Alone], and perform *al-Salat* (obligatory prayers), and who conduct their affairs by the mutual consultation, and who spend of what We have bestowed on them."[3] This concept is elaborated in another place. God said: And by the mercy of Allah, you (Muhammad) dealt with them gently. And had you been severe and harsh-hearted, they would have broken away from about you; so pass over (their faults), and ask (Allah's) forgiveness for them; and consult them in affairs. Then when you have taken a decision, put your trust in Allah, certainly, Allah loves those who put their trust (win Him).[4]

The first verse is a Makki verse and it describes the importance of consultation of individuals in all religious and social matters. The second verse is a Madani verse and it elaborates the importance of consultation in all socio-political affairs because the Muslim state had been established after the imagination from Makka to Medina. In this situation, the prophet was ordered to consult the believers

in all social and political matters. The prophet always consulted his companions in different matters. There is sound proof that he consulted them in the events of Badr, Uhad and Khandaq.[5]

Al-Shawi writes: the verse of *Sura al-Shura* reveals the theoretical dimension of consultation and provides the fundamental principle in this respect and the verse of *Sura Aal-Imran* reveals the practical aspects of the consultation. Muslim society came into being during the stay at Medina and every day Muslims encountered different new matters, therefore God ordered the Messenger to consult the believers in the matters.[6] Ramadan writes: "*Shura* is the space which allows Islam the management of pluralism. The Arabic word signifies "consultation", "concerted", or "deliberation". It appears in several instances in the Quran. However, two verses are generally cited, since it is from these that the principle of general orientation is conveyed."[7]

Al-Shawi explains the opinion of al-Shaykh al-Shaltut about the *shura*. Al-Shaltut writes: the foundational rule in the consultation is the man who is being consulted must be sane and independent. Neither Quran nor the Prophet constituted any particular system for the consultation. The system was very simple in the time of the Prophet. Whenever the Prophet or after him the companion had to face any problem they gathered in a place and discussed the matter and took the opinions and they preferred the collective opinion after long discussion and debate. The Prophet did not devise any particular system for the *shura*, because it is a matter, which takes different shapes with the changing of time and space. If he constituted a specific system then it would not be applicable for the generations to come. And it could create a great difficulty and hardship for the next generations. Therefore, it leaves only the opinions of people without specifying any particular system. However, the main thing is consultation that is compulsory in all circumstances.[8]

According to the above-mentioned explanation, consultation is obligatory in all conditions but it has no specific form. It is on the discretion of believers that can adopt any suitable form. This is the main spirit of the Islamic concept of *shura* that is also exhibited in democracy. Now we examine how Muslim intellectuals incorporate this idea with the Western concept of democracy. And how is their attitude in this respect. In principle, all Muslim intellectuals agree to confess the liberty and democratic sense of the Islamic political system but their views are different and divergent about the Western concept of democracy and its institutions. They can be divided mainly into three groups:

I- Orthodox
II- Interpretationist
III- Modernist

I-   Orthodox Response

The orthodox scholars get inspiration from the early history of Islam. Some of them reject the western style of democracy completely and others reformulate it according to the Islamic perspectives. *Hizb al-Tahrir* rejects the western concept of democracy completely. *Hizb al-Tahrir* is a small group of the Muslim Brotherhood.

It was founded in 1953 in Palestine. The leader of this movement Taqiuddin al-Nabhani (1909-1977) emphasizes to adopt the *khilafat* system as it had been observed before the final collapse in Turkey in 1924. They perceive democracy as a product of western society and scholarship. The leaders of *Hizb* believe that there is great contradiction between Islam and western civilization. Muslim civilization is based on divine revelation and on the central belief that life must be directed towards fulfilling divine commands. Western civilization, by contrast, is based on utilitarianism, materialism, secularism, and individualism. It is devoid of morality or spiritual values, and its ultimate objective is immediate gratification of individual desires.[9]

Democracy is the main ideology if the western civilization is anti-Islamic since it is based on secularism, rationalism and supremacy of the human will. In Islam, by contrast, both reason and the human will are subject to revelation, and must submit to the divine will as embodied in Islamic law. Reference in all decisions, public or private, must be made to revelation, which has given clear guidance in all matters, either directly or indirectly. It is divine law that is sovereign in the truly Muslim polity, and it is not possible for the community, everyone in it agrees, to change or defy the law. Therefore, democracy is the antithesis of Islamic values, and Muslims are thus forbidden to adopt it, advocate it, form political parties on its basis, accept it as a worldview, implement it, and use it as a basis for constitution, law, or education.[10]

II-   Interpretationist Response

In the beginning of the 20th century, Muslim scholars seriously started the process of democratization of the Islamic political system. Allama Muhammad Iqbal, a philosopher and poet of India, initiated serious steps in this respect. He was a very early exponent of political reform and democratization of Muslim society. He emphasized the reconstruction of Islamic thought and the revival of *ijtihad* in the Islamic law to re-examine the Islamic teachings making them harmonious with the contemporary society. Khan writes: "From 1910 to the 1930s Muhammad Iqbal the philosopher-poet par excellence of the subcontinent was already arguing that Islam was an egalitarian faith that had room for neither the clergy nor the aristocracy. Even as he rejected the imperialist tendencies and argued that Muslims too must aspire for a similar egalitarian system. Like all contemporary Muslim democrats, Muhammad Iqbal too recognised the importance of *ijtihad* and argued for its democratization and institutionalization in a popular legislative assembly thereby bridging the theoretical gap between divine and popular sovereignty. Some superficial readers have misunderstood his critique of Western societies as rejection of democracy, but even they will concede that Iqbal was a strong advocate of freedom, individuality, equality and brotherhood, all necessary ingredients of liberal democracy." [11]

The other group of interpretationists are the *Ikhwan Muslimun* of Egypt and *Jamat Islami* of Pakistan. The renowned scholar, Hasan al-Banna founded the *Ikhwan al-Muslimun* in Egypt in 1928, in reaction to the growing influence of western cultural and religious influence. Sayyad Qutb (1904-1966) was one of the

active leaders of *Ikhwan* after al-Banna. Sayyad Mawdudi (1903-1979) founded *Jamat Islami* in India. Both movements share many traditions and values and their interpretations are very much similar. Mawdudi's application of deductive reasoning in his interpretation of the *Shari'a*, and especially in his theory of the Islamic state, represents a triumph of scripturalist doctrine, both because of its logical coherence and because of its appeal to a new generation of the Muslim intelligentsia. His influence was also deeply felt in Egypt for many reasons, including the fact that his work was translated into Arabic by the Muslim Brotherhood and diffused in Egypt during the repression of the repression of the Brotherhood under the Nasir regime, while its logic-deductive form made it seem powerful and irrefutable.[12]

Both movements tended to the revival of Islam based on its foundational principle. The elimination of innovation and heresies from Muslim society is the most important task of these movements. The leaders of these movements consider that the contemporary Muslim societies are living the life of *jahiliyya* (pre-Islamic Barbarism). A very small number of people are acting upon the teaching of Islam. 'Only the minority of committed and enlightened thinkers and activists who would lead the rest of the *ummah* back to the right path could be described as Islamic. The combined will of the majority, as it stands today, cannot therefore be deemed as authoritative or legitimate, and it needs to be guided by the enlightened few.[13]

Qutb refused as a matter of principle to discuss the detail of the organizational structures of the future ideal Muslim society and how its affairs were going to be managed. These will only emerge when that society comes into existence and could not be speculated about this side of utopia.[14] Mawdudi did venture a solution, however, a model which he dubbed a "theo-democracy," a system of rule based on popular sovereignty, but limited by divine law. In this system, the rulers do not initiate legislation, but only implement and enforce divine law. The men of authority, led by the supreme ruler (the *khalifah*) will determine what the law is.[15] Mawdudi presented the idea of *hakmiat* of God in his political theory and he incorporated it with democracy and recommended limited right of legislation according to the Quran and *Sunna*. According to Mawdudi, there are three main characteristics of the Islamic state:

1- No person, class, or group, not even the entire population of the states as a whole, can lay claim to sovereignty. God alone is the real sovereign; all others are merely His subjects;

2- God is the real lawgiver and the authority, of absolute legislation vests in Him. The believers cannot resort to totally independent legislation nor can they modify any law that God has laid down, even if the desire to effect such legislation or change in Divine laws is unanimous.

3- An Islamic state must in all respects, be founded upon the law laid down by God through His Prophet. The government that runs such a state will be entitled to obedience in its capacity as a political agency set up to enforce the laws of God and only insofar as it acts in that

capacity. If it disregards the law revealed by God; its commands will not be binding in the believers.[16]

It can be asserted that *Ikhwan* and *Jamat-e-Islami* are the movements of the revival of Islam on the pattern of pious caliphate. They want a change based on Islamic tradition but they would not be able to present a concrete solution of contemporary challenges.

Among the interpretationists, there are the Iranian Shi'i scholars. Ayatollah Khomeini (1902-1989) was a dynamic leader of the time. He introduced a mode of Islamic constitutionalism based on the Shi'i doctrine. According to the Shi'i doctrine, the Caliph is to be appointed by the Holy Prophet. Moreover, authority in an Islamic state devolves on and infallible *Imam* authorized and designated specifically by revaluation.[17] *Khomeini* introduced a unique idea that the Shi'i community should follow the Sunni example and appoint his own rulers.[18]

Khomeini attempted to incorporate the western democracy with the pure Islamic teaching. He founded the Islamic Republic of Iran and implemented his model of Islamic democracy. According to Khomeini, a Muslim community cannot remain without a legitimate government, and this government should be run by men of learning. An Islamic government is neither tyrannical nor absolute, but constitutional. It is constitutional in the sense that rulers are subject to a certain set of conditions. It is the laws and ordinances of Islam comprising this set of conditions that must be observed.[19]

Mansur and Kamran view that "Khomeini himself also emphasized the necessity of popular participation in selecting leaders, in his last Will and Testament, he stated that it was the "heavy responsibility of the people" to select "experts and representatives for the selection of the leader or the Leadership Council." He advised the people of Iran that "in all elections, those of the president, *Majlis* representatives or selection of experts for the choice of the Islamic Leadership Council, you must take part. All of you, from the *Maraji'* [religious authorities] and great *'ulama* to the bazaaris, formers, workers and government employees, are responsible for the destiny of the country and Islam."[20] This reformative resurgence is the most successful in the contemporary Islamic world. The movement achieved the desirable results of its struggle but its fate is still to be decided by the Iranians particularly those live in the big cities and civilian society.

III- Liberal Response

Nationalist religious thinkers believe that Islam did not present any particular form of government. Muslims can adopt any system of government for their betterment. The main condition of that government is the implementation of justice, equality and equity. Form is not necessary at all. Therefore, democracy is not contradicted by Islam and it can be adopted. The Gulen movement of Turkey is the best example of this notion.

The Gulen movement is considered one of the most influential liberal Islamic movements in Turkey. This movement is in favour of modernism,

nationalism, tolerance, and democracy without disregarding the religious precepts and identity. The Gulen movement is a reformative resurgence that has a rationalistic and liberal nature. Fethullah Gulen (b. 1938) is the founder of this movement. He is a prolific writer and author of more than sixty books. The main themes of his books are social justice, education, science, Darwinism and economy. He takes fundamental inspiration from a nationalist religious scholar Sa'id Nursi (1877-1961), who endorsed the secular education system, rejected the so-called contradiction between East and West, and Islam and reason, and emphasized to reconcile between Islam and modernity. He considered Islam a tolerant, flexible belief system. This movement is considered the continuity of the Nursi movement.[21]

The issues of democracy and human rights have again acquired a special importance and are now the most sensitive topic in the dialogue between the West and the Muslim world. These issues are closely linked with another factor which deserves our attention when analyzing Fethhullah Gulen's views on democracy: the current stage of the relationship between the West and the Muslim world. All these problems are of special interest and importance when forecasting the development of the Muslim world in the very near future and in particular when evaluating the potential of plans aimed at the promotion of the so-called Great Middle East, which embraces the majority of the Muslim nation.[22]

As contrary to the traditional scholars, Gulen considers religion as a private matter and he thinks that the implementation of Islamic law is unnecessary because most Islamic rules and regulations concern people's private lives except a small portion of law, which is related to the state, such as taxation and warfare. The Gulen movement does not intend to subvert modern secular states rather than it encourages getting the benefits which they offer. It believes that the democratic form of government is the best option and criticises the authoritarian regimes of Iran and Saudi Arabia. Cetin writes: 'According to Gulen, the understanding of democracy and human rights within the theoretical heritage of Islam is not dogmatic but it centres around values such as compromise, stability, the protection of life, honour and dignity of the human being, justice, equity, and consultation. Islamic political theory is flexible and does not bind Muslims by any rigid limits in the choice of concrete forms of government and political systems. The main principle in Islamic political theory is the implementation of three fundamental values: equality, justice and consultation. The forms and means of enactment of these are vested in the hands of the community. Thus, the actual realization of the three pillars can and must take into account the conditions of Muslims' lives, their traditions, cultural preferences, and other factors. Gulen argues that the social, cultural, political and historical aspects of societies should be taken into account in the development of democracy in the entire world'.

The Gulen movement believes in the awareness of Islamic teaching not in radicalism. According to Gulen, 'Salafi attitude, classical, traditional Islam was not different than the static social structures of the Middle ages. Because of that, Islam

could develop modern concepts in the face of western values, this was an attempt to read the Qur'an in a new, social, and political manner, for the traditional manner of reading did not give them the opportunity to deduce what they wanted from the sources. They reformulated many legal and political principles according to Western forms. It can further be said that what pertains to Islamists is their will to present Islam more as an ideology than a religion. This is what accounts for Islamism's emergence as a contemporary ideology within the context of urbanization, Westernization, and modernization and for the fact that it shares the sociological fate and foundations of other contemporary ideologies'.[23]

Nursi and Ziya Gokalp (d. 1924) emphasized the necessity of the combination of indigenous Turkish culture and western science and technology. Gulen goes a step further accepting western civilisation as a suitable foundation of material life while considering Islamic civilization as suitable for spiritual life. He believes in the *hizmet* (service) and wants to use spiritual passion to build a prosperous society. According to Bulent, his ideas very much resemble the ideas of Weber as described in *The Protestant Ethics of Capitalism* and his *hizmet* resembles Weber's *in-worldly asceticism* which was significant in the development of capitalism.

The movement attracts a large number of people particularly young urban people of middle class, educationists, and business men. The movement has established more than a thousand educational institutes in more than ninety countries in Eurasia, Africa and America. After disintegration of the Soviet Union, the movement has gained many loyal followers in the Turk republics and they have established many schools in these states. A Turkish sociologist Nilufer Gole gives much importance to the school network of this movement. She stated that the Turkish schools have global significance and bring people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds together in peace. Besides these schools the movement has its own print and electronic media resources such as *Zaman* newspaper, *The Fountain Magazine*, and *Samanyolu* TV. Despite a reasonable number of adherents and considerable influence on Turkish society, Gulen could not win the hearts of secularists nor Islamists. Islamists perceive him a serious threat to the traditional Islam while secularists suspect his activities as an endeavour to transform the secular system of the country. In the 1980s, the military identified the Gulen movement as a threat to the republic. They purged the adherents of Gulen from military academy. Since then, the military pressured politicians to take action against him. However, his non-political and integrated approach reconciles him with state and society.[24]

Conclusion:

The issues of identity, human rights and democracy have obtained a special significance in the world and particularly the Islamic world at the end of colonialism. Muslim society has to face many changes in its socio-political environment. Their countries transformed from the *khilafat* system to nationalism. All their institutions are in a state of flux. Indigenous culture and civilization is going to be replaced by

the dominant western civilization. Democracy developed in the western countries. Islamic countries were not familiar with this kind of government. Therefore, Muslim scholars analyzed democracy. Their reactions were different and divergent. Some of them considered it highly against the Islamic teaching and civilization whereas others accepted it and accommodated it in their political theories. A group of scholars tried to harmonize it with Islamic tradition. Those scholars who rejected democracy, they presented the alternative models of democracy: 1. *khilafat* 2- *shura* 3- Theo-Democracy or Islamic constitutionalism. Only the Islamic Republic of Iran successfully implemented its model of Islamic democracy. Still much more needed to work for a viable Islamic political system. However, it is the positive aspect of western interaction with the Islamic world that Muslim scholars have begun to involve in the intellectual discourse and a long era of stagnation comes to end.

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