Democratic Islam or Democratic Muslims? Political Freedom through the Eyes of Islam

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Abstract

The aim of this essay is to highlight the concept of political freedom in Islam and the present the practices that proves the practices that give evidence of this argument. This essay spots the similarities and differences between the Islamic and the modern examples of political freedom, the concepts of Shura 'consultation' and Democracy were some clear examples stating those similarities and differences. The essay also presents the subject according to two different schools of Islamic thought, the traditional and the early and mid-twentieth century schools of Islamic thought. The latter was also presented according to different discourses, the quite radical presented by Sayyid Qutb and the less radical discourse with Malek Bennabi as the pioneer of this discourse in modern Islamic thought. Finally, this essay will defend the fact that political freedoms are secured in Islam through verses of the Holy Quran, situations from the early ages of Islam and readings from the past and present.

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Introduction

This essay, will argue that Islam had clearly secured political freedoms for the individuals and groups of its community. It will defend this argument through explaining how the teachings of Islam could a) link the legitimacy of the ruler to the approval of the community, b) build a democratic awareness in the Muslim personality and c) ensure that political diversity is guaranteed.

The essay will firstly set the context for Shura concept in Islam as a political term and link it to the concept of legitimacy through proving that religion and politics cannot be separated in Islam. Then it will discuss how Islam released the human mind and built the Muslim personality on democratic awareness towards himself and the others around him. Finally, it will prove that political diversity is ensured through permitting the formation of parties or political fronts in issues that matter the society.

The aforementioned arguments will be defended through verses from the Holy Quran, situations from the early ages of Islam and readings from the past and the present.

The significance of this essay lies in the idea that nations should not necessarily have a common understanding or agreement on a specific type of freedom, as the United States for example did not sign the Universal Declaration of Human Rights because the American community has its own distinct convention of human rights, Islam also has its own distinct and unique lexicon of human rights. Another two points that also make this essay significant are the importance to understand that Islam is not the religion that isolates the Muslim from his lived reality and its teachings are valid for any time, in addition to the fact that Islam does not always provide direct solutions for problems facing the community, rather it gives the Muslim the space to think and take rational decisions after linking the teachings to the context people live in.

An Earlier Example of Democracy; the Distinct Islamic Example

As a starting point, we should be aware of what democracy and *Shura* mean to understand the context better. Democracy is a Greek expression that is consisted of two words; "demos" (the people) and "*kartia*" (rule), hence the literal meaning will be "the government of the people, by the people, for the people"[1]. Functionally, it means: "a government where the people share in directing the activities of the state, as distinct from governments controlled by a single class, select group or autocrat."[2] "*Shura*" on the other hand literary means consultation, and functionally it refers to the "mandated mode of decision-making whose call for open discussion could facilitate principles of democratic governance"[3]

In traditional Islamic thoughts, the ruler must be chosen according to community mutual consultation "*Shura*", he must obtain the approval of the entire community to be announced ruler.[4] "*It is part of the Mercy of Allah that thou dost deal gently with them Wert thou severe or harsh-hearted, they would have broken away from about thee: so pass over (Their faults), and ask for (Allah's) forgiveness for them; and consult them in affairs (of moment). Then, when thou hast Taken a decision put thy trust in Allah. For Allah loves those who put their trust (in Him)."[5] "Those who hearken to their Lord, and establish regular Prayer; who (conduct) their affairs by mutual Consultation; who spend out of what We bestow on them for Sustenance."[6]*

But the question is who the people of *Shura* are? In other words, who are the people who represent the community in selecting the ruler or agree on a significant decision that critically matters the nation?

According to *Al Nawawi*: *Imamah*[7] is concluded when allegiance is pledged, and the most right is the allegiance of the people of power and decision from the scholars and leaders of the community who can be brought to assembly easily, and those have the same criteria as witnesses *"shohoud"*.[8]

Although part of this illustration might be seen as incomplete freedom of political agency of individuals inside the Muslim community, the ruler still needs legitimacy, and this legitimacy stems from religious and legal scholars according to traditional Islamic thoughts. Those scholars accordingly have the right to reject the decisions of the ruler if they contradict with the laws of *Sharia*.[9] Commenting on this, we could here see an earlier Muslim example of the parliament, the group of selected people by the people to hold the ruler accountable and in the same time advise him when managing the internal and external affairs.

Additionally, if we accept the modern concept of separating religion and politics then we will never consider a communist state a democratic one,[10] neither would we consider a country ruled by a president promising of a new crusade a democratic nation.

Building the Politically Free Personality; Inner and Outer Awareness

In a deep look into democracy and political freedom in Islam we will find that they differ from other freedoms and democracies which ensure some political rights or social guarantees in the way that they gave the human in addition to this a value that tops those social and political rights, this value is the value of honor, *"We have honored the sons of Adam; provided them with transport on land and sea; given them for sustenance things good and pure; and conferred on them special favors, above a great part of our creation"*.[11] The human feeling of God's honor to him or herself instills in the Muslim's consciousness (*awareness*) an honor and appreciation to himself and the others, and this adds a spiritual aspect that excels other civic examples.[12]

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1. Osman, *Islam in a Modern State*, 4.

2. New Columbia Encyclopedia, cited in, Osman, *Islam in a Modern State*, 4.

3. Jillani, *Democracy and Islam*, 737.

4. Voll, *Islam and Democracy*, 173.

5. Q. 3:159

6. Q. 42:38

7. The state of ruling.

8. Al Nawawi, *Menhajul Talibeen: "Methods of the Enquirers,"* 500.

9. Malinova, *Is Islam compitable with democracy.*

10. Ibid.

11 Q. 17:70

12 Bennabi, *Al Qadaya Al Kubra: "The Biggest Issues,"* 147.

One may ask how Islam refined the Muslim personality to be in such an aware status towards self and others. One clear significant example of this can be illustrated through the *Quranic* text that says: *"(They are) those who, if We establish them in the land, establish regular prayer and give regular charity, enjoin the right and forbid wrong: with Allah rests the end (and decision) of (all) affairs."[13]* This text speaks to both levels of awareness; establishing prayers in its spiritual and moral meaning to refine the self from impurities and shape the personality that is conscious when it comes to distinguishing the right from the wrong. This personality is the same that has an equivalent level of appreciation to others when the holder has an obligation to the community by giving regular charity (*Zakat*), and enjoining the right and stopping the wrong or denying it as the lowest degree of prohibition. Therefore, this model of two-dimensional awareness that starts from the inside (self) out (community) resembles an earlier firmly established democratic awareness in one of the most developed social, political and economic systems ever.

As Islam worked on the building of the democratic awareness in the Muslim's personality, it also established principals that restrict the Muslim from practicing the opposite of the above mentioned democratic awareness, that is despotism. This can be noticed in the *Quranic* verse: *"That Home of the Hereafter We shall give to those who intend not high-handedness or mischief on earth: and the end is (best) for the righteous."[14]*

Islam had theoretically put the principals of the relationship between the ruler and the ruled, and how political freedoms are or should be practiced. *"O ye who believe! Obey Allah, and obey the Messenger, and those charged with authority among you. If ye differ in anything among yourselves, refer it to Allah and His Messenger, if ye do believe in Allah and the Last Day: That is best, and most suitable for final determination."[15]* Although this verse acknowledges the absolute privileges of the ruler according to the majority of *Tafsir* texts, it should be understood that this understanding is framed with the existence of the democratic awareness we talked about. In the texts mentioned above we can see the link between the *Quranic* verses in a beautiful way that make us reconsider looking at the verses without isolation from the rest of the text, or in many cases with considering other texts in different chapters.[16]

Back to our discussion, the existence of awareness towards self and others (or what we refer to as the democratic awareness) grew in the Muslim ruler a substantive understanding of the reality of commitment that could be simply expressed with the attitude of *Umar*, the 2nd. Caliph when he asks the public to oppose him and correct his mistakes. In parallel, obedience from the perspective of the ruled is derived from the political freedom(democratic awareness)built and ensured by Islam and understood clearly by Muslims who read the text as a way of life not as abstract stagnant concepts. "If we witnessed a fault from your side, we would correct it with our swords," [17] said one of the public to the Caliph. This shows an impressive fact about Islam, it does not provide detailed applications in its teachings, but rather it opens the space for the human mind to be creative in establishing coping mechanisms with the continuously changing human societies.[18]

Finally, as we acknowledge that Islam has constituted political freedoms within its teachings by building and refining the self-aware free personality, we should also acknowledge that the problem lies in bringing those freedoms into practice throughout the history of Islamic states after the era of *Sadr Al Islam* (early Islam). Starting from the period of *Muawiyah Bin Abi Sufian*, the first Umayyad Caliph, the Islamic democratic experience and reflection of political freedom went through some ups and many downs. Ever since, there have been many violations of these freedoms and it clearly appeared that the controlling rules (system) were not problematic but the practical experience of these rules is the driving force for violations added to the lack of understanding of the social contexts.

Secured Political Diversity

"And from among you there should be a party who invite to good and enjoin what is right and forbid the wrong, and these it is that shall be successful."[19]

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13. Q. 22:41

14. Q. 28:83

15. Q. 4:59

16. Bennabi, *Al Qadaya Al Kubra: "The Biggest Issues,"*153.

17. Ibid.

18. Osman, *Islam in a Modern State*, 8.

19. Q. 2:104

In traditional interpretations, this verse entails the existence of a group or groups within the Muslim community that invite people to Islam and the teachings of Islam, and order people to follow Mohammad (PBUH), in return, this group should forbid *kufr* and disbelief of Mohammad's (PBUH) message even if this requires fighting disbelievers until they show obedience. [20]

In a more authoritarian approach, Sayyid Qutb claims that this group should have the authority to order or forbid, and the authority given to it will make this group subject to obedience from the people of the Muslim community, he also states that the legitimacy of this group is derived from the shared values of its members: Faith and brotherhood in Allah. As a result, it is a combination of two types of powers, the power of faith and the power of love.[21]

Yet, both interpretations forgot (either because of the social and political circumstances they were produced in, or for having a certain ideological stand by the author in times of political change or disagreement)to take into account the rapid changes the community's context might be exposed to. Although *Sayyid Qutb* succeeded in understanding one of the essences of political freedom given to Muslims in the Qur'an and that is the combination of faith and love, he on the other hand, does not show clearly in his writings an acknowledgement of diversity in political views and in a way or another excluded righteousness in one group that decides what is good and what is not for the community. Therefore, as we all may agree on the fact that communities go into an ongoing changing process over the course of time, we should perhaps deal with the text in a more comprehensive way of understanding that favors coping over stagnation and contextualize the readings not to the past only but also to the present and the future.

The verse mentioned above (Q. 2:104), from a socio-political perception, guarantees political freedom and gave people the right to form political parties[22] or groups to stand in the face of injustice, or take a specific position in times of disagreement for the good of the community. Historically, this was the case. We can strike a clear example after the death of prophet Mohammad (PBUH) and the appointment of his successor where there was disagreement about the person in "*Al Saqifa*." [23]

In this event of the Islamic history, some groups of the prophet's companions (*Sahaba*) took a position that can be described as a political opposition that favored other *Sahaba* to be the next leaders of the Islamic nation. This understanding from *Sahaba* and respect to the opposite opinion expresses the political and intellectual diversity Islam ensures and encourages for the sake of building a strong community.

Conclusion

Islam's teachings have stated that people can express their political freedom, and this freedom is ensured by the teachings of Islam. Through *Shura*, the Islamic refined term for democracy, Islam had guaranteed community participation not only in choosing the ruler, but also in other social, economic and political aspects of life and it opened the door to question the legitimacy of the ruler and practically linked it to the community approval on his decisions and performance without separating religion from politics but with an inclusive approach that combines both in one entity.

It also built the free Muslim personality and increased the democratic awareness in it through enhancing feeling of the value towards self and the others as well as demolishing the despotic spirit in its consciousness. Islam from another perspective does not only put rules, but also opens the space for the Muslim mind to come up with creative adaptation mechanisms for the social changes towards creating political freedoms of his own.

Moreover, in a comprehensive look at the *Quranic* text, we will find that Islam has given people the right to form parties and form political assemblies that have the right to disagree with decisions or constitute political opposition, *Al Saqifa* meeting to debate around choosing the successor of prophet Mohammad (PBUH) reflects an example among many of the political diversity inside the Muslim community.

20. Al Tabari,*Tafsir Al Tabari: "Interpretation of Al Tabari,"* 661.

21. SayyidQutb, *Fi Zilal'elQura'n:"In the Shades of Qura'n"*, 444.

22. Osman, *Islam in a Modern State*, 8.

23. Ibid, 16.

Finally, to answer any enquiry that questions Islam's space of political freedom for its believers, it is stated in the body of this essay that the problem is not in the teachings themselves, but in bringing those teachings to practice and in the lack of developing coping mechanisms by readers to take the stagnant understandings to another level.

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