

Islam and Democracy

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Introduction

Recent political developments in Tunisia which ended the twenty three year rule of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali have raised a question on whether Islam inhibits the growth of democracy. President Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia after weeks of mass protests.

I met a Muslim who told me that he was so inspired by democracy that if he were to have a child, instead of reciting *azaan*, he would recite the slogan of "Democracy" in his ears. Examples such as these convey that the current environment perceives Islam to be anti-democracy. But an objective study of Islam proves that this notion is incorrect. In fact it was Islam that started the process, which culminated into modern democracy.

History of democracy

The Prophet of Islam began his mission in 610 A.D. in Mecca. At that time, there were two great empires – Byzantine Empire and Sassanid Empire that represented the age of kingship. There was a clear segregation between the ruler and the ruled, which had no room for equality. The "ruler" could do no wrong and he alone had the right to think. During the two thousand years of Roman rule, very little scientific growth took place because thinking had become the monopoly of the ruler.

These colossal Empires took Islamic movement as their rival and became hostile towards it. This led to armed conflict between the two. The result was that both the Empires were disintegrated. Bible has described this event as follows,

Abadi chattanein toot gayin (The eternal mountains were shattered!)

This was the beginning of the concept of equality. As French historian Henri Piranne rightly observed, "*this was the beginning of democracy.*" Now, every man had the right to think and contribute to human development. It is must be clarified that equality is not moral subject; it does mean being "equal" but that every one has the right to think and contribute to the best of his capabilities.

Process of Change

Change in history is not an overnight process. While an individual may convert instantly but any substantial change in history cannot be brought about suddenly. It requires a long process and there are many factors that contribute to this process. The same happened in the case of democracy. Initially the Muslims were champions of this movement but due to internal strife, they could not develop this idea further. Meanwhile, this wave of democracy reached Western Europe where it found fertile soil and favourable factors, which eventually led to its culmination in the form of the French revolution in 1789.

It was only after Islam ended the rule of kingship that a process of change commenced, culmination of which was the democratic revolution of France. People think that democracy started in France but in reality what happened in France was a culmination of events that took place after the Islamic revolution.

Old type kingship was not simply a political system. Its ideology was that all the departments of life including religion are a part of state. Due to this concept, no religion other than state was allowed at that time. Anyone who adopted an independent religion was subjected to religious persecution.

Islam bifurcated between these two departments – religion and state – not in ideal sense but in practical sense. According to Islam, there is a difference between personal conduct and social system. In case of personal conduct, one can adopt idealism but in social system, one must find adjustment with other groups. According to Islam, everyone is free to adopt religion according to his own choice but as far as social system is concerned, this kind of idealism is not possible. So, in such case, Islam adopts the formula of practical adjustment, that is, rule of majority, which will be determined by democratic process.

It does not mean that Islam believes in separation of religion and politics. It only means that religion is a matter of personal obedience while, there are no fixed norms for social system. It is subject to people's opinion. If someone has a different opinion, he may persuade others and until others are persuaded, the opinion of majority shall prevail.

It is imperative to explain here that Islam believes in freedom of expression. Dissent is not a taboo in Islam. Quran tells us that when God wanted to create Adam, He told angels about His scheme. Angels expressed their dissent but God did not chide them away, He simply explained and the angels were satisfied. This was the first precedent that was set in the divine tradition itself.

It is a fact that right to dissent and freedom of expression are key principles in democracy and these principles were followed by the Prophet during his lifetime as also by his Companions who represent the first generation of the history of Islam.

Contribution of Islam in history of thought

Islam has a key contribution in the history of thought. Prior to it, people did not know the art of differentiation. Islam clearly differentiated between individual character and social system. In other words, an "I" has the choice to decide that "henceforth, I will become this.." that is, personal character is in the hands of the individual himself and can be changed by him.

Social system however was made subservient to the society. According to a Hadith,

The rulers are the same as the ruled (Mishkat)

The Principle therefore is: *The thinking of an individual moulds his character.* But the same does not hold true for a society. Seeking an overnight change in the society would only lead to confrontation. An individual has the right to choose his path but if he intends to break the societal system and start afresh, it is unislamic. This is because Islam does not propound radicalism.

As per the Islamic principle, individual became subordinate to his thinking and society became subordinate to democracy. Now, all men had the freedom to do what they liked, peace being the only pre-condition.

There is a story from the days of America's newly-won independence from foreign political domination which admirably illustrates this point. It seems that a newly liberated American, out to celebrate his freedom in his own way, strutted exuberantly down the street, swinging his arms in a carefree manner with scant regard for the convenience of other pedestrians. Eventually he hit a passerby on the nose.

The latter was enraged and shouted: "What kind of foolishness is this? Why are you walking in this frivolous manner and swinging your hands about in this way?" "America is free," replied the man.

"I'm free to do as I want and walk as I wish." "Well," said the passerby, "your freedom ends where my nose begins!" It is quite possible for everyone to be free in his actions, but his freedom ends where his actions begin to encroach upon the lives of others. Enjoying freedom of action must also entail the honouring of other's freedom.

World order changed

Prior to Islam, the differentiation between individual conduct and societal system did not exist because while kingship had no such distinction, democracy on the contrary distinguished between the two. A study of the Islamic history will make clear that while the Quran lays clear guidelines around individual conduct, neither Quran nor Hadith carry any reference towards the establishment of a political system. Let me take an example to clarify this. A verse in the Quran reads

**God will not forgive anyone for associating something with Him, while He will forgive whoever
He wishes for anything besides that (4:48)**

This means that absolute status is being given to faith as it is a fundamental part of the creed. But so far as the political system is concerned, there exists not a single reference of it. In fact the procedure for electing the head of state was never the same. The Prophet became the head of state as he was at the forefront of affairs. He however did not nominate anyone. The first caliph Abu Bakr, was selected by a group that met at Saqeefa banu-Sadah. Umar Farooq was nominated by Abu Bakr and Uthman was selected by a board or committee.

In other words, Islam does not preach that the political system is absolute. After Islam brought about the change, the most important requirement was that of educating the masses. In fact, Islam for the first time made education accessible to all. The first school set up by the Prophet Muhammad comprised of all non-believing (*mushrik*) teachers who taught the children of believing men and women.

It is therefore to be understood that only when education is popularised, can democracy survive. Educating the masses is also a process and cannot happen overnight. Generations elapse before the entire community is brought on the platform of education.

History shows that in the later period, the Muslims in general, followed the democratic values that were laid down by the Prophet like equality, freedom of expression, consultation and social justice, although not in the perfect sense. Let me quote an instance from Islamic history here.

Amr ibn al-As was the governor of Egypt during the Caliphate of Umar Faruq. One day the governor organized a horse race in which his own son Muhammad ibn Amr ibn al-As, also took part. But in the race, the horse of the governor's son was beaten by the horse of a Coptic, a non-Muslim. The Coptic expressed his jubilation and this hurt the governor's son. He lashed the Coptic with his whip, saying, "Take that! I am the son of a nobleman!" As narrated by Anas ibn Malik, the Coptic came from Egypt to Medina and complained to Umar Faruq that the governor's son had whipped him. Umar asked him to stay in Medina and immediately sent a special emissary to Egypt to bring Amr ibn al-As and his son without delay to Medina, the capital. When they arrived, they were both brought before the Caliph. Then the latter sent for the young Coptic and asked him if this was the man who had beaten him. When the Coptic replied in the affirmative, the Caliph handed him a whip and asked him to flog this 'son of a nobleman.' The Coptic did so, and went on flogging him till he felt that justice had been done. Then the Caliph asked him also to flog Amr ibn al-As, the father of the young wrongdoer, as it had been his high status – as Umar explained – which had encouraged the son to take his whip to him. But then the Coptic said, "No, I have whipped the person who whipped me, and I wish no more than that."

Umar Faruq said to the Coptic: 'By God! if you had beaten him (the governor) we would not have intervened, until you yourself had stopped beating him. Then Umar Faruq turned to Amr ibn al-As and said: 'O Amr, since when have you enslaved people who were born free?' (Ibn Jauzi, *Seerah Umar ibn al-Khattab*).

It was this dictum, expressed by second Caliph, which was repeated in the well-known book of Rousseau, *Social Contract*, in these words, *Man was born free but I see him in chains*

Muslims couldn't sustain the change

This democratic tradition continued up to near about one thousand years but it was not sufficient because like the famous saying goes, *"it requires a lot of history to make a tradition."* Gradually, the Muslim psyche underwent a change. The main reason was the advent of colonialism. The Muslims took the phenomena of colonialism at its face value and became hostile. They became anti-colonial powers and then opposed, everything that was related to West including democracy.

The idea of democracy therefore despite being introduced by Islam could not sustain itself in the later generations of the Muslims. In the name of caliphate, they re-started kingship. This was not a result of Islamic teachings but due to lack of education amongst Muslims.

Nineteenth century onwards, anti-colonial movement spread all over the Muslim world. This movement failed to achieve its political target. Then, only for the sake of Muslim mobilization against the colonial powers, they adopted some new religious slogan. First was, "Pan-Islamism" under which they developed this notion that for Muslims, nationhood is based on religion. This was a kind of invitation of Communist International but this effort also failed.

Then, there emerged some new thinkers. These were political thinkers in the Arab world as well as non-Arab world. They tried to give Islam a political interpretation. This interpretation was based on the notion that Islam is a complete system. So, you have to establish Islam as a whole including its political system otherwise, your Islam is incomplete and consequently unacceptable to God. I am reminded of an instance here which I would like to narrate. I was once called to speak on the belief system of Islam in a gathering which comprised primarily of the non-Muslims. In my talk, I spoke about all aspects of the belief system of Quran except the political interpretation. After my speech ended, a senior Muslim came to me and said, *"Maulana, you did not present Islam in totality."* He said so because Muslims erroneously believe that establishing political system, just like faith is absolute. They do not understand that political system is subservient to the norms of the society.

Political interpretation of the Quran

The political interpretation was based on misinterpretation of some Quranic verses but it found fertile soil in Muslim world and great number of Muslims adopted this as a final solution to regain their political glory. Let me take an example of some of the verses that this concept is falsely derived from. A verse in the Quran reads

All power belongs to God alone (12:40)

The word “power” (hukm) is interpreted to mean “political sovereignty of God.” They could not understand that God cannot be a sovereign in political sense. Only a man can become a political sovereign and being capable of succumbing to corruption, man will degenerate and get corrupted.

“Hukm” here is in supernatural sense that God oversees the entire system of nature. This verse is a part of the narration of Prophet Yusuf’s incident in the Quran, which further tells that Prophet Yusuf himself agreed to supervise the food department under the polytheist Hyksos king of his time. It therefore means that the Prophet Yusuf did not do this in the political sense but to mean that it is God who oversees the system of the world. Unfortunately, the thinkers falsely interpreted the above to mean that political sovereignty is for God and since Muslims represent God, they have the right to rule.

It is also important to understand that even law is not absolute in Islam. According to a tradition in Al-Bukhari, Hazrat Ayesha said that the initial verses in the Quran pertained to Paradise-Hell and not to the Do's and Don'ts. It was only after people became prepared minds that they were introduced to the concept of halaal and haraam (Islamic and unislamic). If during the thirteen year period in Mecca, alcohol and other malpractices were forbidden, people would have refused to abide by it. This means that in Islam, belief is absolute but social law is not. Social law is subservient to the society.

The conflicts in Muslim countries are a result of the reversal of this principle. Instead of leaving political system on democracy and faith on individual, both were considered to be the same. They failed to understand that faith could be taught in mosques and social system was required to be governed by democratic process.

Doing so was a clear deviation from Islamic teachings. While there existed a tribal parliament in Mecca, the Prophet Muhammad never made sovereignty his aim. Even when the tribal parliament offered the position of head of state to the Prophet Muhammad but he refused because the society was not prepared.

Let me take another example from the recent past. *General Muhammad Ziaul Haq* claimed to establish the complete system of Islam in Pakistan. When he came to power and did not do so, the clergy, feeling deceived asked him why he did not fulfill his promise. He replied saying, “*Give me 200 non-purchasable men; I will bring Islam.*” Bewildered, they asked the President, “*Wherefrom can we get them?*” General Haq retorted, “*If you can’t get me such men, I can’t establish Islam?*”

Towards the end

In order to render a political interpretation of Islam, the thinkers misinterpreted the Quran and Hadith so as to prove that in Islam, political system is as absolute as faith. The obsession in the minds of these thinkers prevented them from thinking objectively. For example, Syed Qutb, a famous scholar of Egypt wrote the commentary of the Quran, entitled “*Fi zilalil Quran*”. While discussing the arguments that took place between Moses and Pharaoh, Qutb writes that Moses wanted to snatch the keys of power from Pharaoh and set up an ‘Islamic state’. He deduced this from the following verse of the Quran which is a remark that Pharaoh made to his courtiers after meeting Moses. It reads

**They (Moses and Aaron) want to drive you out of your land by their magic,
and destroy your best traditions. (20:63)**

Moses was the Prophet of God and was ordained to propagate God’s message to Pharaoh; which he did. Pharaoh in order to buy the allegiance of his courtiers said to them that Moses wants to expel them from their land and establish his superiority. Referring to these words of the Pharaoh, political interpreters of the Quran deduced that the role of Moses was to expel Pharaoh and establish his rule in Egypt. They however failed to understand that the mission of Moses could only be derived from the words of Moses and not from the words of Pharaoh. Secondly, when God caused Pharaoh and his men to drown in the sea, Moses left for Sinai, instead of staying on in Egypt and establishing what Qutb called an ‘Islamic state’. Surely, if this ‘Islamic state’ was the basic and most central aspect or teaching

of Islam, as Qutb claimed, Moses should have stayed back in Egypt and established such a state. But he did not do so.

This obviously indicates how unfounded was Qutb's argument, and his totally unwarranted reading of non-Quranic concepts into the Quran. He misinterpreted this verse to convey the meaning contrary to that which Moses preached.

Similarly, another Quranic verse urges the Muslims to adhere to justice and states,

Believers, be strict in upholding justice (4:135)

The above verse exhorts the Muslims to fully internalize the demands and principles of justice, which should also be reflected in their personal dealings. Departing from this widely-accepted notion, Maulana Abul ala Maududi claimed that the above verse in the Quran actually urges the Muslims to establish an 'Islamic state' that would impose Islamic law on its subjects. Clearly, this is not what the Quran calls for in this verse. After all, in the Quran, God tells the Prophet that he has been sent to guide people, to invite them to the faith, to love, fear and serve God. Nowhere does it say that he had been sent to establish an 'Islamic state'. If the 'Islamic state' and the struggle to establish it had indeed been the central pillar of Islam, as Qutb and Maududi claimed, why is it that there is no direct reference to this in the Quran? The following verse of the Quran was revealed upon the Prophet Muhammad after he attained Prophethood. The verse reads thus,

Arise and give warning (74:2)

If God sought to establish His religion on Earth, he would have given a direct commandment to that effect. But it is not so. Nowhere does the Quran or Hadith talk about implementing or enforcing Islam. All the arguments that these two ideologues provide are merely their own personal inferences, drawn from their personal reading of the Quran and Hadith, which actually do not have any sanction from these sources, if these are studied in a dispassionate manner.

The process of democracy did not face such ideological hurdles in Europe and it therefore progressed unhindered. The Muslim countries on the other hand, remained engaged in conflicts between the ruler

and the ruled. The thinkers should have invested on inculcating individual with right thinking so that the desired changes can be brought about in the society.

Often, I am blamed for segregating religion and politics, like Christians did it. This was a realistic approach. It is important to understand that while individual character is governed by a person himself, the social system is governed by democracy. Practically, government is the rule of majority.

An individual can strive to be ideal in his personal life and conduct but to expect ideal in case of a society is not a practical proposition.

Islam is comprised of two aspects – real and relative. Faith is the “real” aspect and social system is the “relative” aspect of the society. Islam is very flexible in this regards, which can be understood by the following two principles in fiqh. The first principle reads

Halaat badalne se, ehkaam badal jaate hain

(When situation changes, the application of the principle also changes)

The second principle pertains to the law of necessity and reads

Zarurat hukm ko badal deti hai (Situation changes the application of the principle)

This means that while pork is UnIslamic, if a man is dyeing and he eats it to survive, it will not be considered unislamic. Therefore implementation cannot be regarded as a total reality. People who propagate such ideas Islamise the UnIslamic. Islam must therefore be seen in the light of the Quran and Hadith.

Once an Arab scholar asked me, “*What is the starting point for Muslims?*” I told him that the starting point was to educate the Muslims. Now, the Muslims need to revise their thought. They must get rid of negative thinking towards the West. They must adopt democracy as a political part of Islam. The Prophet of Islam has said:

Wisdom is a lost property of a Muslim, wherever he finds it, it is his.

So, if they adopt the principle of democracy it will only mean following this Prophetic advice.