

Political Interpretation of Islam

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Introduction

The political interpretation of Islam, which is so much talked-about today, is, we must recognize at the very outset, a twentieth century invention and not something that is intrinsic to Islam as such. Political interpretation means '*rendering the explanation of Islam in political terms*'. This interpretation never existed before—neither at the time of the Prophet Muhammad and his successors, nor later. This is clearly evident from the fact that the very first book on Islam and governance was penned in the eleventh century, in the later Abbasid period. This was Abul Hasan al-Mawardi's *Al-ahkam-al-sultaniyya-fil-vilayatil-deeniyya*. But even this book was not about what we understand today as Islamist politics or a political interpretation of Islam. Rather, it simply provided rules for governance that the author believed a Muslim Sultan must follow. It is striking to note that prior to this there existed no such text—at the time of the Prophet, his successors and even in the period of Umayyad rule. It can, therefore, be safely concluded that the political interpretation of Islam is a political innovation, which has no basis in the Quran and the Hadith.

Inception of the idea of political interpretation

How and why this political interpretation of Islam arose in the early twentieth century is a very crucial question. This was a time when socialism, in its many varieties, and communism were powerful and very attractive ideologies for many people, particularly in the non-Western colonized world. The political interpretation of Islam can be seen, in a sense, as both a response to socialism/communism as well as an effort to imitate it, by presenting Islam as an ideology and system in the same manner as socialism/communism in order to make it more acceptable and attractive at a time when the majority of intellectuals were influenced, by these ideologies. This, to my mind, was totally unwarranted from the Islamic point of view. In fact it will be quite apt to say that this interpretation was actually an imitation of the practice of communism. This has been described in the Quran as *vuzahaat*, which means 'to imitate'.

They imitate the assertions made in the earlier times by those who deny the truth. (9:30)

It is observed that the practice of "imitation" penetrates an *ummah* during the days that mar its decline.

The notion of 'complete system'

It was Marxism that, for the first time, developed the notion of a complete system. In such a system, the individual has little worth or value. He or she is seen as a product of the system. The focus of social transformation for Marxists was the system, rather than the individual. This was quite in contrast to Islam, whose principal or real focus is the reform of the individual. However, imitating Marxist discourse about systems and revolutionary changes in systems and the centrality of capturing state power, some Muslim ideologues invented the notion of a totalitarian 'Islamic system', based on their own political interpretation of Islam, which had no precedent or warrant in the Islamic tradition.

Two key ideologues were responsible for the invention of this political interpretation of Islam: the Egyptian Syed Qutb, and Syed Abul Ala Maududi, in the Indian subcontinent. I can say without any hesitation that this political interpretation of theirs was totally baseless, and cannot be proven from a proper reading of the Quran and Hadith. The arguments that these two ideologues offered are not at all convincing or coherent, and represent unwarranted reading into the Quran and Hadith of concepts that are totally foreign to these two basic sources of Islam.

A major blunder committed by the proponents of the political interpretation of Islam was to claim that this interpretation was actually nothing less than an integral aspect of Islamic faith or belief or what is called *aqidah*. Such a claim is entirely fallacious. It is instructive, however, to understand the history and the politics behind this claim. In the wake of the establishment of European imperial control over almost all Muslim countries, it was but natural that numerous movements rose among Muslims as a reaction to colonial domination and in order to regain their lost political power. Thus, for instance, the pan-Islamist Jamaluddin Afghani sought to mobilize Muslims to shake off the European yoke with his rallying cry, 'The East for the Easterners!' This was a political slogan to exhort Muslims to regain their lands from foreign control. Afghani failed in his mission, but his work was later taken up by proponents of a political interpretation of Islam—by people such as Maududi and Qutb—who went further and sought to project such political slogans as an integral part of Islamic *aqidah*, as a matter of Islamic belief, in the hope that it would attract even larger numbers of Muslims to their cause. In effect, what they argued was that the notion of an 'Islamic state' was something demanded by Islam itself, and that those who did not engage in the struggle to establish such a state would be held accountable to God. The arguments that they sought to provide from the Quran and Hadith for this absurd claim have no legitimacy, however.

References used to support the political interpretation of Islam

Maulana Abul Ala Maududi propagated his political interpretation of Islam in the numerous books that he penned. A key work in this regard was his book *Quran Ki Char Buniyadi Istilahen* ('Four Basic Concepts of the Quran'). Here he projected four central terms in Islam—*rab* (Sustainer), *ilah* (God), *ibadat* (worship) and *deen* (religion)—as essentially political concepts, draining them of their profound spiritual import. He even went to the extent of claiming that three-fourths or more of the actual teachings of Islam had been obscured over the centuries since the Prophet's demise. He presented himself as the one who had, at last, uncovered all these missing teachings through his political interpretation of Islam! His claim was, however, totally baseless. God has taken it upon Himself to safeguard the Quran, so how could it be that for centuries three-fourths of the teachings of Islam were veiled or covered-up until Maududi arrived on the scene and then salvaged them?

Like Maududi, Syed Qutb also sought to read politics into the Quran in a wholly unwarranted manner, which is why his interpretation of Islam, like that of Maududi, is wholly untenable. For instance, in his commentary on the Quran, when discussing the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh, Qutb writes that Moses wanted to snatch the keys of power from Pharaoh and set up an 'Islamic state'. This has been cited in the Quran thus,

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

All the arguments of these interpreters are based on fallacy, which is evident also from the fact that when Moses was told to convey God's message to Pharaoh, he did so and he also showed some miracles. Then Pharaoh said addressing his courtiers "see this man, that is Moses, this man wants to expel us from our land and establish his own superiority", referring to these words of Pharaoh, political interpreters of the Quran say that- Moses wanted to expel Pharaoh and establish his rule in Egypt, but this is a great fallacy for the mission of Moses will 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' there. Surely, if this 'Islamic state' was the basic and most central aspect or teaching of Islam, as Qutb and Maududi claimed, Moses would have stayed back in Egypt and established such a state since that Pharaoh was no more. But, the Quran says he did not do so.

This obviously indicates how unfounded is Qutb's argument, and his totally unwarranted reading of non-Quranic concepts into the Quran.

Let me cite another case to illustrate the erroneous readings of the Quran of these self-styled Islamist ideologues. The following verse of the Quran urges Muslims to follow the *deen* or faith. It reads:

Remain steadfast in religion (42:13)

Most of the classical Quranic commentators opine that this means that one should strive to lead one's life in accordance with God's commandments and guidance. Departing from this generally accepted view, Maududi claimed that this verse meant that Muslims must enforce the commands of religion on others. That is, they must struggle to establish an 'Islamic state', where the laws of the *deen* would be imposed through the coercive force of the state. This is a totally baseless argument.

Similarly, another Quranic verse exhorts Muslims to adhere to justice and states,

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

What this means is that in their lives Muslims must seek to fully internalize the demands and principles of justice, which should also be reflected in their personal dealings. Departing from this widely-accepted notion, Maududi claimed that what the Quran meant in this regard was that Muslims must 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.

According to a Hadith, a person came to the Prophet to seek an advice. The Prophet said to him,

Say! My Lord is God and adhere to it (Al-Bukhari)

The Prophet did not tell him to say that 'My Lord is God and I must establish the rule of Islam'. Saying so is distorting the very essence of Islamic teachings. Adherence in the above Hadith refers to leading a God-oriented life. A Quranic injunction in the similar vein reads:

Be devoted servants of God (3:79)

This means that Quran implores its proponents to make God as the prime concern of their lives and the pivot of their existence. One's thoughts and actions should be in tandem with this idea.

The ideology based on the political interpretation of Islam draws upon totally wrong readings of certain other Quranic verses and Hadith reports. For instance, some self-styled Islamists refer to a Quranic verse about the Prophet Joseph (Yusuf), which quotes him as saying while in prison that all *hukm* or rule is for God alone. It reads

All power belongs to God alone (12:40)

This verse is interpreted to mean that political power is God's alone, and that because they claim to be the sole true representatives or champions of Islam they alone are entitled to rule. This is a completely bogus interpretation of this Quranic verse. Most classical Quranic commentators maintain that what this verse refers to is the supernatural power of God. This is totally in contrast to the notion of the 'Islamic state' that Islamists take this verse to refer to. If the Islamists' claim were at all legitimate, why was it that after the Prophet Joseph was released from imprisonment he was appointed by the ruler of Egypt (who was not a Muslim) as what we would today call him Minister of Agriculture. If, as Islamists insist, Muslims must constantly wage war to end what they brand as 'un-Islamic' rule and establish the 'Islamic state' of their dreams, why did Prophet Joseph not do just that? Why, instead, did he choose to become part of the polity headed by a non-Muslim ruler? Why did he not struggle to dethrone the king and establish an 'Islamic state' instead? This obviously means that the Prophet Joseph's statement simply means that all supernatural power is God's. It was obviously not the endorsement of the notion of an 'Islamic state' that self-styled Islamist ideologues claim it to be.

Proponents of the political interpretation of Islam misinterpret yet another verse of the Quran in order to seek legitimacy for their theory of the 'Islamic state'. This verse calls upon Muslims to enter and abide by the faith in its entirety. It is as follows;

Believers, surrender yourselves totally to God (2:208)

They take this to mean that if Muslims do not struggle to establish the 'Islamic state' by working to destroy existing regimes, their faith in Islam is incomplete. This is a wholly unacceptable rendering of this verse. What the verse actually conveys is that individuals must seek to follow God in their lives as far and as possible, and that this commitment should be reflected in their attitudes and behaviour. It is certainly not a call for establishing an 'Islamic state' or for destroying other existing political systems.

Advocates of the political interpretation of Islam cite a *hadith* report according to which the Prophet declared that he had been ordered to fight people until they confessed faith in one God and in his Prophet. They argue that this means that Muslims must forever be at war with others. This is a completely wrong and unacceptable interpretation of the *hadith*. It is not a license to kill all non-Muslims. It is certainly not a general or absolute command. Rather, it relates only to the contemporary Quraish pagans who stiffly opposed, and launched wars against the Prophet. Had it meant what some radical self-styled Islamists take it to be, why was it that the Prophet never launched wars to compel people to accept Islam? Why were all his wars defensive? Obviously, therefore, the argument that radical self-styled Islamists draw from this *hadith* is wholly incorrect.

The notion of an 'Islamic system' or 'Islamic state', which is the pillar of the political interpretation of Islam as invented by people like Maududi and Qutb, is, as I have suggested absent in the Quran and Hadith. The essential focus, or target of Islam is not the state or the system, but, rather the individual. Islam aims at creating truly spiritually-oriented individuals, seeking to mould individuals' minds, hearts, character and behaviour. It desires to prepare individuals who are truly worthy of bliss in the life after death. Obviously, this task is essentially one of individual reform. It is, of course, true that if a sufficient number of people become truly God-oriented, a God-oriented society and, slowly, even a God-oriented system and state, might come into being through democratic means and according to the will of the people. Yet, such a system or state apparatus is not the immediate or real focus of Islam. In any case, God gives political power to whom He wills. It is not, contrary to what the proponents of the political interpretation of Islam believe, something to be hankered after or fought for.

On the other hand, self-styled Islamists focus not on individuals, but, rather, on the state, the system and the capture of state power. But this is totally contrary to what the Quran teaches. If the self-styled Islamists were right in their claims, surely the Quran would have provided us with detailed instructions as to how we should elect leaders and form governments. Because it does not, this obviously suggests that their obsession with the state and with the capture of state power is not at all warranted in Islam. The fact that the Prophet did not leave behind instructions as to how the temporal leader of the community after him should be elected clearly suggests that political power is not the major concern in Islam that people like Qutb and Maududi make it out to be. The fact that the four rightly guided Caliphs of were all appointed or chosen in different ways should also make it amply clear that the claim that the notion of an 'Islamic state' as being integral to Islam is quite unwarranted. Had this indeed been the case, surely the Quran would have provided a set of detailed instructions for this purpose.

Because the Quran is silent on it, it is obvious that the structure of the polity is for humans to decide according to the prevailing social context, which changes over time. This is obvious from the fact that the four 'Righteously-Guided' Caliphs were elected or nominated in different ways and not according to any pre-determined pattern. According to a *hadith* report, the Prophet said that the sort of rulers people get depends on how the people themselves are.

As are you, so would your rulers be. (Mishkat)

This can be seen as a warrant for people to democratically elect their rulers or leaders.

The notion of the ideal polity has always been a deeply-contested issue. Bloody wars have been fought throughout the history of humankind over this question. And this still continues, even today. According to Islam, the ideal polity can never be realised on earth. This is simply because this world is a testing ground, and God has given all humans the freedom to choose between good and bad. This freedom can easily be misused, which is why an ideal state or ideal system can never be fully actualized or implemented. Islam's concept of politics is, therefore, eminently practical. It is true that the Quran promises the believers that if they lead lives in accordance with the will of God, they would be appointed by Him as *khalifas* or trustees. The verse reads,

**God has promised to those among you who believe and do good works that He
Will surely grant them power in the land (24:55)**

This is a divine promise that God will grant them political power if He so wills. Yet, even this power, and the polity and system through which this power is expressed, can never be ideal.

I do not deny the importance of a good political system. The fact of the matter, however, is that it is not the major focus of Islam. To repeat a point I made earlier, it is the reform of individuals, rather than of systems and polities, that is the real target of Islam. The reform of the system or polity can be said to be secondary or relative, for it can only happen if individuals are first suitably reformed. Only then can a government that is based on Islamic values of justice and goodness come into being.

The political interpretation of Islam—or any religion for that matter—is bound to generate strife, conflict and violence. If one's aim is the capture of power, even in the name of religion, one is bound to confront existing regimes that do not wish to relinquish their hold on power. The end result is, quite inevitably, violence and bloodshed on a massive scale. This is what has happened in all the many Muslim countries today where self-styled Islamist groups, fired by zeal to establish what they call the 'Islamic state' or 'Islamic system', have come into conflict with existing rulers. This is a certain recipe for permanent war.

Why is it that almost all Muslim countries are dictatorships? Why is it that no Muslim country is a democracy in the true sense of the word? One reason for this is that in these countries adherents of the political interpretation of Islam wrongly believe that (their version of) Islam demands that they should confront their governments, whom they regard as un-Islamic or not sufficiently Islamic. Naturally, faced with this challenge, existing governments in Muslim countries seek to completely crush opposition, clamp down on democracy deny them even basic freedom. This state of affairs has led to seemingly endless violence in many Muslim lands and beyond.

The horrendous blunder

On the basis of this, it can be safely said that the political interpretation of Islam has proven to be a horrendous blunder, even for Muslims themselves. It represents a total deviation from the principal focus of Islam, which is the reform of individuals and *dawah* or inviting people to the path of God. The basis of the mission of all the prophets, including the Prophet Muhammad, was *dawah*, calling people to surrender themselves to God and to lead God-oriented lives. They related to others with love and

compassion, being deeply concerned for their welfare. Love for others is thus the spirit that guides the true Muslim in his capacity of *dai*, or one who invites others to the path of God. In contrast, political Islamists regard others as rivals, who, they believe, should be fought against, defeated and destroyed or, at least, subjugated. Thus, while Islamic *dawah* calls upon Muslims to work for peace, love, dialogue, good relationships, the political so-called Islam preaches hatred, violence and perpetual confrontation.

Towards the end

The political interpretation of Islam represents a total reversal of the focus of Islamic *dawah*, which is the individual, rather than the state or system. While *dawah* calls for us to cultivate love and compassion, and to seek to lead a God-oriented spiritual life by cleansing our inner selves, the political interpretation of Islam leads people to targeting others (other Muslims as well as non-Muslims as well as existing governments), not stopping even at shedding the blood of innocents, and easily degenerates into terrorism. True Islamic *dawah* demands that we focus on the reform of our own selves, while the political interpretation of Islam seeks to turn our attention in the opposite direction—against systems, state power, other Muslims and people of other faiths. This is a complete distortion of Islam.

Dawah, inviting others to the path of God, was the basic duty of all the prophets, and should also be the principal concern of Muslims. The mounting influence of the political interpretation of Islam has had the most seriously deleterious consequences for our duty and responsibility of *dawah*. This interpretation is based on hatred of others, on considering others as enemies, who must be fought against. How can one engage in *dawah*, which requires love and concern for others, if one hates them and considers them enemies who need to be vanquished, silenced, subdued or even killed? This sort of intolerance is endemic to the political interpretation of Islam, and, needless to say, has become the major hurdle to *dawah* work today. It has helped reinforce deeply-held misconceptions about Islam in the minds of millions of non-Muslims.

The political interpretation of Islam also spells doom for true spirituality, which is based on love for God and all His creatures and kind behaviour towards all, Muslims as well as people of other faiths. This erroneous interpretation of Islam has, in recent years, managed to reap cheap popularity because it blames others for all the problems and plight of Muslims, absolving Muslims themselves of the need for self-introspection. Needless to say, this attitude cannot, in any way, be conducive to self-reform, humility and genuine spiritual consciousness.

In short, the political interpretation of Islam has no sanction in Islam itself. It has brought nothing but destruction to the Muslims themselves. It is nothing less than a wholly unacceptable and illegitimate political innovation, or what can be called in Urdu a *siyasi biddat*. I would go so far as to assert that it is the biggest *fitnah* or strife that Muslims have witnessed in the last 1400 years.