# Democracy in Islam: The Views of Several Modern Muslim Scholars

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## Abstract

From the early twentieth century onward, many Muslim thinkers have explored the prospects for establishing an "Islamic democracy" by defining, discussing, and debating the relationship and compatibility (and similarity) between "Islamic political concepts" and the "notions and positive features of democracy." They interpret the Islamization of democracy on the basis of a modern reinterpretation of several key Islamic political concepts – mainly *khilafah and shura* – to provide an effective foundation for understanding the (contemporary) relationship between Islam and democracy. The majority of scholars in the Muslim world continue to throw light on the "modern reflection on democracy," thereby pushing this century-long search ever forward.

## Introduction

As the Muslim world was freeing itself from European colonial domination in the first half of the twentieth century, it faced two significant challenges: how to govern itself and how to face modernity. This paper, which focuses on the form of governance only, explores the attempts of several contemporary Muslim intellectuals to discover an authentic formula for good and ethical self-governance. A galaxy of intellectual stars throughout the Muslim world is striving to shape a Muslim understanding of "Islamic democracy." Hoping that this will offer new direction and move the conversation forward, I hereby present my own contribution.

## The Process of Democratization

The relationship between Islam and democratization is a very important element in the contemporary Muslim world's political dynamics. How this aspiration is defined reveals the great diversity within this vast region, as well as the many ways of working toward democratizing its polities. From Africa to Southeast Asia, Muslims pursue this effort by cooperating with the

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existing authorities – republicans, royal families, and authoritarian dictators – found in societies that are pluralistic and relatively homogeneous as well as in states that are either wealthy or poor. As the desire for democratization, along with the continuing resurgence of Islam, exists in a dynamic global context, so will the demand and desire for democracy remain widespread in global affairs.

The traditional heartlands of Islam contain the world's most diverse ruling political systems: traditional and constitutional monarchies, dictatorships, secular and (at least some) liberal democracies, and Islamic republics. Such diversity shows that Islam has enough intellectual and ideological resources to justify a wide range of governing models. History itself confirms Islam's dynamic force, as its principles are dynamic and were/are able to support society's political life. This is not due to change, but as per its norms and directions. Moreover, at certain times it even reformed existing political systems and transformed the city-state of Madinah (and others) into numerous empires and sultanates.

But this dynamism has a drawback: the Muslim world has failed to produce a viable and appreciable model of self-governance, for the frequent shifts of regime type reflects the unsettled nature of its political structures. But the fact that the Qur'an and Sunnah neither prescribe a particular form of government nor elaborate a constitutional theory also has to be mentioned. As a result, Muslims are free to discover the most suitable form of governance – on the condition that both it and the accompanying institutions are in full agreement with the Shari`ah.

In response to the contention that Islam provides no viable governing model, M. A. Muqtedar Khan, in the "Introduction" to his *Islamic Democratic Discourse: Theory, Debates, and Philosophical Perspectives*, argues that today's Muslim world can boast of several regime types: dictatorships and sham democracies in Egypt, Sudan, and Tunisia; secular democracy in Turkey; monarchies in the Gulf; pluralistic democracies in Bangladesh and Malaysia; and an Islamic state in Iran (a sort of theo-democracy).[1]

As regards Muslims being free to devise the most suitable form of government, Muhammad Asad, Abdul Rashid Moten, Sayed Khatab, and many other scholars share the same or (almost the same) view. For example, in his *Principles of State and Government in Islam*, Asad makes the case that the Shari`ah does not prescribe a definite governing model or detail a constitutional theory. The political law emerging from the context of the Qur'an and Sunnah is, nevertheless, not an illusion; rather, it is very vivid and concrete inasmuch as it outlines a political scheme that can be realized at all times and under all conditions of human life.[2]

Although the Muslim world's debate over democracy, as well as its def-
initions and fundamentals, has gone on for a long time, it has acquired an
edge in recent years. Over the past two decades or so, in fact, it has emerged
as a highly influential and debated discourse/issue among some prominent
Muslim scholars/thinkers all over the Muslim world. These people represent
a vision of Islam and its role in the human polity, a vision that has attained
so much certainty and loudness that it has recently come to dominate the
face of Islam.

Huge struggles continue within Islam over various political aspects:
their essence and nature, role and significance, relevance and importance,
and compatibility. But the most burning issue is the process of democratiza-
tion itself. In the following pages, I present the arguments, viewpoints, and
opinions of several influential Muslim thinkers in order to unfold the issue
of democratization and its compatibility and consistency with Islam's key
political concepts of *khilafah* (vicegerency) and *shura* (consultation). Their
views on "Islam, democracy, and their compatibility" are nearly the same
and represent significant contributions to the ongoing debate.

No definition of democracy can adequately comprise the vast history
underlying this particular concept. Some see it as a form of government; oth-
ers consider it a way of social life, a form of organization, or a philosophy.
It is equally true that there is no universally accepted definition, as *democ-
racy* itself means different things to different peoples at different times, from
ancient Greece to modern Europe, from direct to indirect democracy, from
majority rule to majority vote.

In Islam, speaking of democracy and the concept of democratic partici-
pation does not mean that the word *democracy* is a Qur'anic term explained
in the Qur'an or the Sunnah. What it really means is that (a) the Islamic her-
itage contains key concepts and images that are the foundations of Islamic
perceptions of democracy and (b) its positive features and values (e.g., the
rule of law, government responsibility, the general welfare, freedom, justice,
equality, and human rights) are compatible with Islamic teachings.

These principles (and many others) are inherent in an Islamic political
order, as Khurshid Ahmad argues:

> The Islamic political order is based on the concept of Tawhid and seeks its
> flowering in the form of popular vicegerency (Khilafah) operating through
> a mechanism of Shura, supported by the principals of equality and human-
> kind, rule of law, protection of human rights including those of minorities,
> accountability of the rulers, transparency of political processes and an
> overriding concern for justice in all its dimensions: legal, political, social,
> economic and international.[3]

# Islamic Voices of Democracy

**ALLAMA IQBAL (1877-1938).** This poet, philosopher, lawyer, Muslim reformer, great political ideologist, outstanding man of letters, and one of the twentieth century's most distinguished and dominant figures explored the prospects for establishing Islamic democracy. Considering Islam an egalitarian faith with no room for a clergy or an aristocracy, he recognized the importance of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and called for its democratization and institutionalization in a proper legislative assembly to bridge the theoretical gap between divine and popular sovereignty.[4] A strong advocate of freedom, individuality, and equality, as well as fraternity and unity, all of which are necessary ingredients of liberal democracy, he stressed the last three and thus concluded that democracy was Islam's most important political ideal.[5]

His recognition of democracy was Islamic, however, for he believed in the representation of God on Earth. As quoted by Abdullah Anwar Beg in his *Poet of the East*, Iqbal asserts: "Divine vicegerency is the representation of God on earth as revealed in the holy Quran and aims at the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth – the democracy of unique individuals."[6] He also favored "spiritual democracy," a principle based on the assumption that every person in a centre of latent power, the possibilities of which are to be developed by cultivating a certain type of character. Discussing this topic in his *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam,* Iqbal wrote that contemporary Muslims should be allowed to "appreciate his (or her) position, reconstruct his (or her) social life" in the light of ultimate principles and evolve that "spiritual democracy which is the ultimate aim of Islam."[7]

Here it may be remarked that Iqbal was both an admirer and a critic of the West. He held its dynamic spirit, intellectual tradition, and technological advances in high regard, but condemned European colonialism, capitalist exploitation, Marxist atheism, and the moral bankruptcy of secularism and western democracy. About western democracy, at least the variant practiced at that time, he writes:

> The democratic system of the west is same old instrument
> Whose chords contain no notes other than the voice of Kaiser,
> The demon of despotism is dancing in his democratic robes
> Yet you consider it to be the Nilam Peri of Liberty.[8]

**SYED ABU A`LA MAUDUDI (1903-79).** This prominent South Asian figure made a significant contribution to Muslim revivalism. An Islamic ideologue, a leading twentieth-century interpreter of Islam, an activist, a writer, and politician, a scholar *par excellence* and a major contributor to the promotion

of *al-Islam din wa dawlah*, his writings give strong expression to the themes that are basic to the ongoing Islamic resurgence. Rejecting the separation of religion (*din*) and state (*dawlah*), he envisioned the establishment of "theo-democracy" as the basis of the utopian Islamic state.

Although he criticized western democracy, he never rejected it. Rather, he insisted that it be framed within *tawhid* on the grounds that if democracy was understood as a limited form of popular sovereignty, one restricted and directed by God's law, then there is no incompatibility between it and Islam at all. To describe this alternate view, he used the term *theo-democracy* (a divine democratic government) and the concept of *khilafah* as a basis for his interpretation: "If I were permitted to coin a new term, I would describe the system of government as a 'theo-democracy,' that is to say a divine democratic government, because under it the Muslims have been given a limited popular sovereignty under the paramountcy [suzerainty] of God."[9]

Describing the real significance of *khilafah* in his *Islamic Way of Life*, he argues that the caliphate's authority is bestowed on the people, the community as a whole, which is ready to fulfill the conditions of representation after subscribing to the principles of *tawhid* (God's unity) and *risalah* (messengership): "This is the point where *democracy* begins in ... Islam."[10] Here it may pointed out that Maududi utilized *khilafah* as the basis for his interpretation, while most of the other prominent scholars used *shura*.

**KHURSHID AHMAD (B. 1932).** This prominent Islamic scholar, leader, activist, ideologue of the contemporary Islamic revival, versatile writer and preacher is at the forefront of this effort. His views and arguments about democracy are very rational and explicit. For example, he opines that the term *democracy* indicates both a set of ideals and principles as well as a political system, a mechanism for governance, and a political legal culture. But at the same time, he distinguishes between democracy as a "form of organization" and democracy as a "philosophy." The rule of law, the equality of everyone before the law, the supremacy of the Qur'an and Sunnah, and the resort to *ijtihad* in matters not covered by them, he asserts, were the main principles of the political system that existed under the Prophet (saw) and the Rightly Guided Caliphs.[11]

He goes even further, saying that Islam has no sympathy with arbitrary and authoritarian rule and that such practices are more a product of colonialism and westernization than of Muslim ideals, history, or contemporary aspirations. In his "Islam and Democracy: Some Contemporary and Conceptual Dimensions," he remarks that

[t]here is no contradiction between Islam and the essence of democracy. …
Islam and true democratization are two sides of the same coin. As such,
democratic processes and Islam would go hand in hand. … [D]emocrati-
zation is bound to be a stepping stone of Islamization. The fulfillment of
Islamic aspirations would become possible only through the promotion of
democratic processes.[12]

Within the context of Islamic faith, culture, history, and contemporary
experience, he finds clear guidelines that suggest a unique and distinct polit-
ical framework; one that can be described as truly participatory, both in sub-
stance and spirit; and one that can establish a political order committed to
the twin goals of `adl (justice) and *shura*, the real substance of operational
democracy.

FETHULLAH GÜLEN (b. 1938). This most influential figure in Turkey and
Central Asia explains in his "A Comparative Approach to Islam and Democ-
racy" that in order to analyze religion, democracy, or any other philosophi-
cal system accurately, one must focus on humanity and human life. In his
view, democracy is a system that undergoes continual development and revi-
sion, a system that varies according to the places and circumstances in which
it is practiced. While describing its system of political order, he asserts that
Islam neither proposes a certain unchallengeable form of government nor
attempts to shape one. Instead, it establishes the fundamental principles that
orient a government's general character, thereby leaving it to the people to
choose the most appropriate type and form according to their own times and
circumstances.[13]

While describing democracy's development through different stages, he
argues that this process will continue in the future: "Democracy has devel-
oped over time. Just as it has gone through many different stages in the past,
it will continue to evolve and to improve in the future. Along the way it will
be shaped in[to a] more human and just system, one based on righteousness
and reality."[14]

And while defining Islam with reference to democratic values, he writes
that the duties entrusted to a modern democratic system are those that Islam
gives to society and classifies, in order of importance, as "absolutely neces-
sary," "relatively necessary," and "commendable to carry out." The Qur'an
includes the following passages: "establish, all of you, peace" (2:208),
"spend in the way of God" (2:267), "observe justice as witnesses respectful
to God" (4:35), and "reconcile between the two fighting parties" (49:9). To

sum up, it addresses the entire community and "assigns it almost all [of the] duties" entrusted to modern democratic systems. He regards these duties as a government's fundamental principles, including the free elections held during the rule of Rightly Guided Caliphs: "Especially during the rule of first four Caliphs (632-661), the fundamental principles of government mentioned above – including free elections – were fully observed."[15]

In conclusion, he maintains that democracy could reach its peak of perfection and bring even more happiness to humanity if people would only consider the spiritual dimension of their existence without forgetting that all people have a great craving for eternity. The Islamic principles of equality, tolerance, and justice can help us realize this future.

SADEK JAWAD SULAIMAN (b. 1933). This Omani intellectual, a former ambassador to the United States (1979-83), accepts the compatibility of democracy and *shura* on the grounds that it, as a concept and a principle, does not differ from democracy. In his "Democracy and Shura," he very rationally argues that "equality" – the affirmation that all people are equal – is democracy's core principle. In other words, any discrimination among people on any basis (e.g., race, gender, religion, or lineage) is inherently invalid. Democracy, literally "rule by the people," is based on certain characteristics, among them freedom of speech, press, and assembly; the free exercise of religion; free elections; majority rule and minority rights; separation of the legislature, executive, and judicial branches; constitutional authority (i.e., supremacy of the rule of law); and freedom of action for individuals and groups. These democratic principles, although recognized as universal human principles since ancient times, continue to demand a more complete fulfillment in the experience of all nations.[16]

He argues that both democracy and *shura* arise from the central belief that collective deliberation, rather than individual preference, is more likely to lead to a fair and sound results for the social good. As principles, both of them proceed from the core idea that all people are equal, in terms of their rights and responsibilities, and affirm that a more comprehensive fulfillment of the principles and values by which humanity prospers cannot be achieved in a non-democratic, non-*shura* environment.[17]

Sadek views the Qur'anic term *shura* as neither rejecting or being incompatible with the basic elements of democratic system, nor as being a specifically ordained system of governance. Instead, he sees it as a principle governing the Muslims' public life and holds that the more any system can

constitutionally, institutionally, and practically fulfill the principle of *shura* or, for that matter, the democratic principle, the more Islamic it becomes.[18] Leaving aside the differences in how they are applied, he regards both terms as synonymous in conception and principle on the basis that the logic underlying *shura*, like that underlying democracy, rejects hereditary rule because wisdom and competence are never the monopoly of any one individual or family. Both reject government by force (any rule sustained by coercion is illegitimate), as well as any political, social, or economic privileges claimed on the basis of tribal lineage or social prestige.[19]

Democracy and Islam are consistent because *shura* and democracy are one and the same concept, a concept that prods us to find better and better realizations of the principles of justice, equality, and human dignity in a collective sociopolitical experience. Thus it seems that Sadek is one of the primary proponents of "*shura* as democracy."

## Conclusion

Muslim thinkers from North Africa to Southeast Asia, from Central Asia to the Middle East, are doing their best to develop an Islamic program of democracy based on such key Islamic political concepts as *shura* and *khilafah*. *Shura*, regarded both as an alternative for and as synonymous with democracy, is located in the historical context by presenting examples from the prophetic and pious caliphate periods as well as with modern reinterpretations in order to lay the foundations of "Islamic democracy." In other words, democracy is being asserted largely by emphasizing *shura*, which is interpreted as allowing or actually requiring the expression of the popular will in matters of state.

As practiced during the early Islamic period, *shura* clearly signifies the principle of the people's participation in their own affairs, namely, their self-determination. Both Qur'an 3:159 and 42:38, not to mention the prophetic hadith that "everyone of you is a shepherd of the community, and all are responsible for their dependants and herd," express the view that an Islamic government cannot help but be consultative, democratic, and divinely inspired.

Lastly, I contend that while there may be, at least in theory, a number of ways to increase the people's participation in government, the most widely accepted one is to demand democracy. By using several important concepts and images from within the Islamic heritage, Muslims are trying to lay the foundations for the various Islamic perceptions of democracy.

## Endnotes

1.  M. A. Muqtedar Khan, "Introduction: The Emergence of an Islamic Demo-cratic Discourse," in *Islamic Democratic Discourse: Theory, Debates, and Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. M. A. Muqtedar Khan (UK: Lexington Book Inc., 2006), 12.
2.  Muhammad Asad, *Principles of State and Government in Islam* (Berekley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1961), 22-23.
3.  Khurshid Ahmad, "Islam and Democracy: Some Conceptual and Contem-porary Dimensions," *The Muslim World* 90 (2000): 2.
4.  Khan, "Introduction," xiii-xiv.
5.  John L. Esposito, "Muhammad Iqbal and the Islamic State," in *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 180.
6.  Abdullah Anwar Beg, *Poet of the East* (Lahore: Qaumi Kutub Khana, 1939), 298.
7.  Allama Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 2d ed. (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan and the Institute of Islamic Culture, 1986), 142.
8.  Beg, *Poet*, 339.
9.  Syed Abu A`la Mawdudi, *Islami Riyasat* (Islamic Sate) (New Delhi: Islamic Book Foundation, 1991), 130.
10. Syed Abu A`la Mawdudi, *Islamic Way of Life*, tr. Khursheed Ahmad (Delhi: Markazi Maktaba Islami, 1967), 42-43. Italics have been added for emphasis.
11. Ahmad, "Islam and Democracy," 2.
12. Ibid., 19.
13. Fethullah Gülen, "A Comparative Approach to Islam and Democracy," in *The New Voices of Islam: Reforming Politics and Modernity – A Reader*, ed. Meh-ran Kamrava (New York and London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 100.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 102.
16. Sadek J. Sulaiman, "Democracy and Shura," in *Liberal Islam: A Source Book*, ed. Charles Kurzman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 97.
17. Ibid., 98.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.