

## *Conference Reports*

# The International Symposium on Islam and Democracy

The Foundation for Research in Islamic Sciences, (known as ISAV in Turkish) has organized over thirty academic, national, and international conferences on the issues facing the Muslim world today and has published the proceedings of these conferences. ISAV organized the last international conference in this series on November 27–29, 1998, on “Islam and Democracy.”

At the outset of the symposium, Ali Özek, the current president of ISAV, and Ali Bardakoglu, the coordinator of the symposium, made opening speeches. The representatives of some political parties and institutions made protocol speeches on behalf of their parties and institutions.

Mehmet Aydın, former Dean of the School of Religion, Dokuz Eylül University, Izmir, gave the first talk, titled “Religion, Politics and Democracy,” which set the tone for the conference. He dealt with three conflicting orientations on the issue. The first orientation claims that there is an intimate relationship between religion and politics; therefore, Islam requires establishment of an Islamic state. The second orientation argues that there is no relationship between religion and politics, nor should there be one. The third orientation argues that the religious may be involved in politics, that is, they may represent the moral and religious values in the political arena; analogous to the Christian Democrats in some Western countries, politics should be carried on while protecting “Muslim-Democrat” identity.

According to Aydın it is not appropriate to defend the first thesis because it reflects the tendency to legitimize, as the historical experience shows, an intolerant and rigid ruling system. The existence of the social demands of Islam weakens the second thesis. Likewise, the argument that Islam is incompatible with democracy because absolute rule belongs to Allah is similarly weak; it harms Islam and hinders a healthy development of democracy in Muslim societies within the framework of the rule of law because it reduced Islam to the level of secular ideologies. Similarly, it is observable that secularism has been misperceived by the two extreme

groups. A liberal concept of religion and the world will bring clarification to these issues and help our democratic culture to take root.

Hans Koechler, professor of philosophy from Austria, gave a talk on the evolution and philosophical background of Western democracies in which he discussed the philosophical roots of the Western concept of democracy and the inconsistencies between theory and implementation in the West from an analytical point of view. He also expressed the need for a critical assessment of the Western doctrine of democracy concerning logical consistency, normative reliability, and practical applicability.

Ahmet Davutoğlu from Marmara University gave an analysis of the process of globalization and its impact on the philosophy and institutional mechanisms of democracy. He underlined that the philosophical questions related to the ontological consciousness of the individual and the political questions related to the powercentric character of the international and national political systems create a tension between leading forces of this process and its passive followers.

According to him, the intracivilizational and intercivilizational crisis of the individual in the process of globalization produces three major responses, namely, stoic, cynical, and epicurean, which manifest themselves in the attempts to reinterpret democracy. The stoic's response is to develop a universally valid set of values for democracy as a legitimizing political system of the New World Order, while the cynic's response emphasizes the pluralistic character of democracy within the framework of postmodernism based on relativism of intratheoretical truth. The epicurean's response, on the other hand, identifies the spread of democracy with the spread of a consumerist culture and its symbols of "McWorldism."

He concludes that the philosophical and institutional aspects of democracy are in a multidimensional process of transition and that Islam as a belief system based on an ontological consciousness can neither merely be reduced to nor presented in absolute contrast to a sociopolitical system. The issue of Islam and democracy should be re-evaluated from the perspective of the crisis of self-perception of the individual human being who feels a deep alienation due to the impersonal and mechanistic character of the process of globalization.

On the second day of the symposium (November 28, 1998), speakers explored several aspects of democracy in the Western and Muslim worlds. For instance, Tariq al-Bishri from Egypt addressed the questions of political participation, legitimacy, and pluralism in Islamic political thought. He

focused on the possibility and method of democracy and political participation using the example of Egypt. Richard Falk, who is a prominent scholar in the field of international relations, made a presentation on the ideals and realities concerning democracy in the field of international relations. Falk claimed that the West sees democracy as the sole source of legitimacy. He also demonstrated the problems of democratic discourse in international relations and explored how democracy is portrayed as a symbol of peace and Islam as a threat to the peace and incompatible with democracy. In his analysis, Falk claimed that the only way for actually democratic international relations to develop on peaceful soil based on dialogue is to ground them on healthy political culture and education.

Lebanese scholar Es'ad Sahmerani and Azzam Tamimi explored the problems of democracy in the Arab world on theoretical and practical levels and dealt with the obstacles facing democratization. In particular, Tamimi drew attention to the attempts of democratization and the development process of free intellectual movements in North Africa and the obstacles to this process emerging from the structure of Arab states, their international relations, and approach to religion.

Mumtaz Ahmad, on the other hand, used the Pakistan experience to highlight the problems in the concept of politics and democracy in the Muslim world during the last century. In his speech, Ahmad demonstrated some basic differences between Muslim and Western understandings of the concept of democracy. He also analyzed Pakistan's efforts to establish a more stable democracy.

On the third day (November 29), speakers analyzed the Turkish experience of democratization. Atilla Yayla talked about the relationship between liberalism and democracy while Hüseyin Hatemi emphasized the relationship between rule of law and democracy. Both of the speeches included significant messages, as they initiated a discussion on the theoretical foundation and cultural ground of the question of democracy in Turkey. Cezmi Eraslan provided a historical survey about the political transitions in Turkey since the late Ottoman times from monarchy to constitutional monarchy and finally to democracy. Ali Yasar Sarıbay highlighted the problems of the democratic experience in Turkey since the transition to a multiparty system.

A discussion by experts followed each presentation, which included contributions, critiques, new analyses, and questions to the presenters.

Presenters were allowed to respond to the questions and critiques which increased the usefulness of the symposium.

ISAV has already planned to publish the papers along with the follow-up discussions, in Turkish and then in English. It maintains that this publication will provide a significant contribution to the Muslim public and politicians in making further progress concerning human rights, democracy, religion, and politics.

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