

Islam and Democracy

By Abe Wiebe

Is democracy compatible with Islam? Can the Qu'ranic principle of 'consultation' somehow find a legitimate expression within *Shari'ah* Law? How would the traditional Muslim position on theocracy fare in so-called 'islamocracy'? Has Islamic history over the past 200 years given us any reason to believe that liberal democracy, as an accepted form of government, is progressing amongst Muslim nations?

The subject at hand has become particularly pertinent in light of American objectives in post-war Iraq, namely, seeing a democratic regime in place as soon as possible. Do they stand a reasonable chance of succeeding? Of the 46 Islamic states in existence today, only the Turkish Republic can be described as a democracy in western terms. Several others have taken half-way steps towards sharing, yet not relinquishing power.ⁱ

Muslim scholars often point to the early Caliphate, when the successor to the Prophet was chosen on the basis of consultation among his closest followers. This idea is expressed in the Arabic word *shura*, meaning 'taking counsel or advice'. Of the three verses in the Qu'ran that contain the concept, only two have a marginal bearing on the subject. Here are the Qu'ranic quotations.

They have broken away from about thee: so pass over their faults (the timid in battle), and ask for God's forgiveness for them; and consult them in affairs of the moment. *Surah* 3:159

Those who hearken to their Lord, and establish regular prayer; who conduct their prayers by mutual consultation, who spend out of what we bestow on them for sustenance. *Surah* 42:38ⁱⁱ

According to Sunni doctrine, and as practiced in the naming of the first Caliphs, an elective process after consultation may take place amongst those qualified to make the choice. However, there never has been any defining of who could participate or how the electing procedure should operate. In subsequent centuries, the ideal merely remained part of Sunni jurisprudence without being implemented. So, this small trend toward democracy in Islam was simply stillborn. Of course, common affair consultations did take place between the ruler and the *ulama* (Islamic scholars), but the principle was never institutionalised. We will see later why this was so.

Democracy, by definition, in line with its Greek roots, means 'people-rule', or 'rule by the ruled'.ⁱⁱⁱ The citizens of any democratic state either hold power directly or by virtue of their elected representatives. Another way of describing the democratic institution is 'majority rule'. In Islam, governance is based on the Qu'ran and the *Sunnah*, which together give rise to the *Shari'ah*. Anything apart from the *Shari'ah* is not acceptable in the Islamic legal system. Nevertheless, certain advocates of a democratic Islam today are insisting on the need for *ijtihad* (use of independent judgment on legal or theolog-

ical issues— re-interpretation) so as to make Islam relevant to the 21st century.^{iv} This struggle for the practice of *ijtihad* has been part of Islam from the beginning. Paul Balta says that the doors of *ijtihad* closed in 1019.^v Then, after what seemed a promising start through reform in the twentieth century toward true *ijtihad*, the last twenty years have seen a strong return to a very conservative expression of Islam in the form of *Wahhabi* totalitarianism. So we have Bernard Lewis commenting, 'Traditional Islam has no doctrine of human rights, the very notion of which might be seen as impiety. Only God has rights—humans have duties.'^{vi} In the face of such a position, the outlook for democracy does seem dim indeed.

To further substantiate that statement, it might be appropriate to quote two other authorities. Abd al-Qadir Audah (d. 1955) who was a Muslim Brotherhood theoretician and Egyptian lawyer says,

Civil law was a creation of human beings, while *Shari'ah* was a creation of God. Civil law groups temporary principles set by the community while the *Shari'ah* is based upon principles laid down by God to permanently organize the community... and... create healthy individuals in an ideal society.^{vii}

Abul Ala Maududi, the famous Pakistani thinker states,

The central principle of the Islamic State is that sovereignty rests solely in God, and not in people, hence Islam is theocratic. The Caliph is to be the head of state as God's vice-gerent to ensure that God's Law is followed in the *Ummah* (Muslim community).^{viii}

Jane Lampman of *The Christian*

Science Monitor, in her article 'Easing into Islamic Democracy', refers to Radwan Masmoudi, an MIT trained engineer and member of the CSID (Centre of the Study of Islam and Democracy, founded in 1999), as an indication that there are Muslim activists who are working toward a convergence of democratic and Islamic values.^{ix} Their aim is to build bridges between moderate Islamists and the younger generation that is seriously looking into the compatibility of Islam and democracy. Lampman quotes Masmoudi as saying that Muslims have the model they need in the Prophet's approach in Medina. The fourteen groups of non-Muslims who lived in the city, including Jews, Christians and others, were to be treated equally in all worldly matters. And in matters of religion, each was simply responsible to God.

However, the most precise analysis of the whole question comes from Bernard Lewis. For clarity's sake, I will itemize his five major observations.

i) The heart of the matter lies with Islam itself. Democracy has its origins in the West, shaped by its double heritage: Judeo-Christian religion and ethics along with Greco-Roman statecraft and law. No other culture has given birth to such a system.

ii) Every civilization formulates its own idea of good government. The institutions that arose from ancient Greek polity resulted in some form of council or assembly qualified to govern. This did not happen in Islam.

iii) Roman law created the 'legal person', a corporate entity that for legal purposes was treated as an indi-

vidual with authority to own, buy, sell and fulfil legal obligations. It took the form of the Roman Senate, the Anglo-Saxon *witenagemot*, the innumerable parliaments, synods, chambers, councils etc., that flourished in Christendom. Islam had its *waqf* (pious foundation), which existed for the moment, but it never took on a governmental role.

iv) In the vast majority of cases, Muslim government was intensely personal. In principle, there was no state, only a ruler; no court, only a judge.

v) Since the Islamic state was, in fact, a theocracy, legitimate authority came from God alone. The ruler derived his power, not from the people, but from God and his holy law. Hence, there was no need for a legislative institution, and consequently, no need for representation or any procedure of choosing representatives. Not surprisingly, therefore, most Islamic history is one continuous autocracy.^x

In addition to the above, Bernard Lewis points to two crucial impediments to the development of democracy in Islamic nations. I shall not expand on these, but they are significant enough to mention. First is the failure to liberate and empower women. Granting women certain freedoms is not the same as empowering them to play their part in the development of their society. Secondly is the failure to sustain the personal ownership of property. A rich man's property has never been completely safe from seizure by the state. This is symbolized in the many ways people in Muslim lands enclose themselves behind walls

or else dissimulate their wealth. And a corollary to this is the relationship between money and power. 'Westerners will use their money to buy power, while the Middle Easterners will use power to acquire money.'^{xi} The impact on the political systems is obvious. In the latter case, it frequently leads to intrigue and upheaval in society.

Perhaps we should add the important role of self-criticism^{*} in Western society. Because citizens are free to speak their mind and work for improvement rather than fight the opposition, problems receive the attention they deserve. In one way, the freedom to criticize mismanagement and corruption forces those in power to deal with their weaknesses. Islam does not enjoy that luxury, because criticizing the government via the media can be interpreted as disloyalty. The stifling of discontent then leads to stagnation.

If, therefore, achieving democracy in Muslim lands is so problematic, what options might exist? Dr. Ali Sina, writing from Iran, takes a strong position in favour of pluralism, stating that the imposition of any religion or doctrine including atheism is a huge mistake. He goes on to say,

I am not advocating secularism as a substitute to religion. I am advocating secular government. Let people choose the religion that they like, but the state should be free of religion. Freedom of speech must be guaranteed and the right to criticize any religion or doctrine. With that, religions will eventually die out, and reason will prevail.^{xii}

Dr. Mohammad Shahrour wonders whether the new concepts such as

pluralism, civil society, democracy and opposition can be introduced into Islamic tradition. He believes that a nation bounded by the limits of God can exercise the process of legislation through a parliament. Since God has defined the forbidden (*haram*), a parliament can define the permissible (*halal*). The field of *halal* is everything that is not *haram*, and therefore, a parliament has the task of regulating the rest, which, by extension, might include the system of government. What he seems to overlook is that, once functioning as a system, democratic principles will inevitably clash with *Shari'ah* law.^{xiii}

Rafiq Zakaria in *The Struggle within Islam* underlines that, according to the Muslim worldview, religion and politics are inseparable and that secularism is the enemy of Islam and the *Shari'ah*. He argues strongly for separation of church and state as the only way out. Zakaria believes that the secularist-leaning Muslims have contributed much to Islam in the past and are the only real hope for Islam in the future.^{xiv}

What, then, are the prospects for democracy in the Middle East and other Islamic regions?

Jane Lampman, who surveyed nine Muslim countries, says that 87 percent of Muslims see democracy as the best choice for a political system. And Sayyed Hossein Nasr notes that 'in Islamic countries, people want more freedom, but at the same time, the vast majority want to live according to God's laws, which they believe will bring them happiness in this world and the next.'^{xv} Nasr thinks that if parliament passed laws that were not in

opposition to divine laws, there would be no problem. Strange that he doesn't see that in that case, the problem simply reverts to Qu'ranic rule. Nasr is probably correct, however, that most Muslims want a moderate progressive interpretation of Islam whereby the will of the majority is respected and the rights of the minority are protected. At first reading, that would appear somewhat utopic, particularly in light of present history.

As unlikely as it may seem, however, there are voices being raised in favour of promoting democratic thought amongst Muslims. Sayf al-Dawla, writing in *Between the State and Islam*, thinks that democracy is the only effective way for people to solve their problems and for societies to evolve.^{xvi} The same volume mentions the creation of centres for the study of Arab unity and democracy in places like Beirut, Cairo and Rabat. Saad Eddin Ibrahim holds that there is no way for a people to rise from cultural under-development other than by education, knowledge and experience with the democratic process, leading to true human rights. He established the Ibn Khaldun Civil Society in Cairo, but predictably, the centre was closed and Ibrahim arrested in June 2000.^{xvii}

In recent history, Lebanon presented a notable experience as an open political system and as a functioning Arab democracy. But civil war closed off Beirut, and many Lebanese fled to Cyprus, London and Paris. Surely, the experience bears investigation, since it made Lebanon the envy of the Middle East for forty years.

I have not given enough attention to the role of Islamic fundamentalists (read Islamists) and their drive for power. They are increasingly popular in Muslim lands, simply because they cannot be held responsible for the current havoc. Once in power, they will not need popularity, since they will find ways to hold onto power. A recent Al-Muhajiroun rally in Trafalgar Square, London, illustrates their position well. At the rally, signs were held up saying 'Democracy and the West are the disease... Islam is the answer.' If their number continues to grow, the future prospects for democracy will slowly fade from the scene.

How might all this affect the work of the Gospel in the Muslim world? Is there hope that tensions will lessen and freedoms of choice in belief prevail? We cannot lose hope, for our conviction remains that the kingdoms of this world belong to God and to his Christ.

It has always been true that when the skies are the darkest, God rides his chariots to his greatest victory. Ultimately, democracy is not the long-term answer to the people of the Muslim World; only in true knowledge of God through Christ is there hope. Conflict amongst the nations will continue until the Righteous One appears with healing in his wings. Nevertheless, let us pray to the end that a door might open in Islam and that seekers for truth will find the way.

Islam and democracy, under current terms, are clearly incompatible. Only by a profound application of *ijtihad* could some form of democratic government emerge. Impossible? Per-

haps beyond the human reach, but surely our reach of faith should exceed our grasp.

Footnotes:

- i Bernard Lewis, 'Islam and Liberal Democracy,' *Atlantic Monthly* (Feb. 1993).
- ii Abdullah Yusuf Ali, trans., *The Qu'ran* (Elmhurst, New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qu'ran, Inc., 1987).
- iii *Webster's New World Dictionary* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1984).
- iv Ali A. Mazrui, CSID Chair (Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy)
- v Paul Balta, 'L'Islam' (Paris: Le Monde Editions, 1995).
- vi Lewis, *Atlantic Monthly*.
- vii Abd al-Qadir Audah, *Government and Politics in Islam*. Tareq Y. Ismael and Jacqueline S. Ismael. (London: Frances Pinter, 1985), 44.
- viii Abul A'laa, Maududi, 'Political Theory of Islam,' *Islam: Its Meaning and Message*. Kurshid Ahmad & Salem Azzam, Eds. (Leicester, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1980), 147-171.
- ix Jane Lampman, 'Easing into Islamic Democracy,' *Christian Science Monitor* (May 29, 2003).
- x Lewis, *Islam and Liberal Democracy*.
- xi Ibid.
- xii Dr. A. Sina, 'Are Persians Ready to Leave Islam?' Email response. (Sept. 30, 2002)
- xiii Dr. Mohammad Shahrour, 'Reading the Religious Text,' *The Book and the Qu'ran* (1990).
- xiv Rafiq Zakaria, *The Struggle Within Islam* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988).
- xv Lampman, 'Easing into Islamic Democracy,' *Christian Science Monitor* (May 29, 2003).
- xvi Charles E. Butterworth, I William Zartman, *Between the State and Religion* (Cambridge, U.K. Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001) 141.
- xvii Ibid. 141.