Islam and Democracy

Is democracy compatible with Islam? Can the Quranic principle of "consultation" sometimes find a legitimate expression within Sharia Law? How would the traditional Muslim position work out in a 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 among Muslim nations?

The subject at hand has become particularly pertinent in the light of American objectives in post-war Iraq – namely seeing a democratic regime in place as soon as possible. Does that sound as if it has 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 gone halfway towards sharing, yet not relinquishing, power.

Muslim scholars often point to the early Caliphate when the successor to Muhammad 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 Quran said to confirm the concept only two have a marginal bearing on the subject.

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

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

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

By definition democracy, in line with its Greek roots, means "people rule" or "rule by the ruled". The citizens of any democratic state either hold power directly or by virtue of their duly elected representatives. Another way of describing the democratic institution is "majority rule". In Islam governance is based on the Quran and the Sunnah which together give rise to the Sharia. Anything apart from the Sharia is not acceptable in the Islamic legal system.

Nevertheless, certain advocates of democratic Islam today are insisting on the need of ijtihad (use of independent judgement on legal or theological issues – re-interpretation) so as to make Islam relevant to the 21st-century. This struggle for the practice of ijtihad has been part of Islam from the beginning. In theory the doors of ijtihad closed in 1019. Then, after what seemed like a promising start of reform towards true ijtihad in the 20th century, the last 20 years or so have seen a strong return to a very conservative expression of Islam in the form of Wahhabi totalitarianism.

Bernard Lewis commented, **"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. In the face of such a position the outlook for democracy does seem bleak indeed."**

To further substantiate that statement it might be appropriate to quote two other authorities. **Abd al-Qadir Audah** (died 1955) who was a Muslim Brotherhood theoretician and an Egyptian lawyer said, **"Civil law is a creation of human beings, while Sharia is the creation of God. Civil law groups' temporary principles are set by the community, while Sharia is based on the principles laid down by God to permanently organise the community and create healthy individuals in an ideal society."**

Abul A'la Maududi – the famous Pakistani thinker – stated, **"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 Law is followed in the Muslim community."**

Jane Lampman in an article entitled, '**Easing into Islamic Democracy**' refers to **Radwan Masmoudi**, an MIT-trained engineer and member of the Centre of the Study of Islam and Democracy founded in 1999, as an indication that there are Muslim activists who are working towards a convergence of democratic and Islamic values. Their aim is to build bridges between moderate Islamists and the younger generation that is seriously looking into the compatibility of democratic and Islamic values.

Lampman quotes Masmoudi as saying that Muslims have the model they need in Muhammad'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. In all other matters each was simply responsible to God.

Bernard Lewis has given us a precise analysis of this whole situation in his book, **Islam and Liberal Democracy** (1993). I will itemise his five major observations.

1. The heart of the problem lies within Islam itself. Democracy has its origins in the west shaped by its double heritage: Judaeo-Christian religion and ethics along with Greco-Roman statecraft and law. No other culture has given birth to such a system.

2. Every civilisation formulates its own ideas of good government. The institutions that arose from ancient Greek politics resulted in some form of council or assembly qualified to govern. This did not happen in Islam.

3. Roman law created the 'legal person' a corporate entity that, for legal purposes, was treated as an individual with authority to own, buy, sell and fulfil legal obligations. It took the form of the Roman Senate, the Anglo-Saxon Witenagemot, the innumerable synods, chambers, councils etc. that flourished in Christendom. Islam had its Waqf (pious foundation) that existed for a moment, but never took on a governmental role.

4. 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.

5. 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. So there was no need for a legislative institution and consequently no need for representative people or any procedure of choosing representatives. Not surprisingly most Islamic history is one continuous autocracy.

In addition to the above, Bernard Lewis points to three crucial impediments to the development of democracy in Islamic nations:

- **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.

- **The failure to sustain personal ownership of property**

  Even a rich man's property was never completely safe from seizure by the state. This is symbolised in the many ways people in Muslim lands enclose themselves behind walls or in some way dissimulate their wealth. A corollary of this is the relationship between money and power. Westerners will use their money to buy power, while Middle Easterners will use power to acquire money. The impact on the political systems is obvious. In the latter case it frequently leads to intrigue and upheaval in society.

- **The 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 criticise management and corruption forces those in power to deal with their weaknesses. Islamic government does not enjoy that luxury because criticism of the government by the media is always interpreted as disloyalty. This stifling of discontent then leads on to stagnation.

If achieving democracy in Muslim lands is so problematic, what other 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 avoiding secularism as a substitute to religion. I am advocating secular government. Let people choose the religion they like, but the State should be free of religion. Freedom of speech must be guaranteed as well as the right to criticise in matters of religion or doctrine. If this course is adopted religions will eventually die out and reason will prevail."**

Dr Mohamad Shahrour wonders if 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), parliament can define the permissible (halal). The field of halal is everything that is not haram and so a parliament would have 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 Sharia Law.

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

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

Jane Lampman surveyed nine Muslim countries. She says that 87% of Muslims see democracy as the best choice for a political system.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr notes, **"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 in the next."** Nasr thinks that if parliament passed laws that were not in opposition to divine laws there would be no problem. It is strange that he doesn't see that in that case the problem simply reverts to Quranic rules.

Nasr is probably correct that most Muslims want a moderate, progressive interpretation of Islam that respects the majority. At first reading that would appear to be somewhat utopic particularly in light of present history.

As unlikely as it may seem, there are voices being raised in favour of promoting democratic thought among Muslims. **Sayf al-Dawla** in his book, **"Between the State and Islam"** thinks democracy is the only effective way for people to solve their problems and for societies to progress. His book also 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 people to rise out of cultural under-development other than 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 down and Ibrahim arrested in June 2000.

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 40 years.

I have not paid enough attention to the role of Islamic fundamentalists (Islamists) and their drive for power. They are increasingly popular in Muslim lands simply because they can't be held responsible for the current havoc. Once in power, they won't need popularity since they will find ways to hold on to 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, 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 any hope that tensions will lessen and freedom of choice in belief will prevail? We can't lose hope for our conviction remains that the kingdom of this world belongs to God and to His Son the Lord Jesus 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 for the people of the Muslim World. It is only in the true knowledge of God through the Lord Jesus that is there hope. Conflict among the nations will continue until the Lord Jesus Christ – the Righteous One – appears with healing in His wings. In the meantime let us pray that a door might open wide in Islam and that seekers for truth will find the true way.

Islam and democracy under their current terms are clearly incompatible. Only by a very profound application of ijtihad could some form of democratic system emerge. Impossible? Perhaps beyond human reach, but surely our reach of faith should exceed our grasp.