Political Authority in Islam

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THE NATURE OF POLITICAL AUTHORITY

The two main sources of Islam are the Quran and the Sunnah (the Prophetic precedent). Whether we look at each of them separately or together, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that Islamic values are not limited to what we delineate in the modern era as the private sphere. Islamic values extend their sway over the public sphere too. Additionally over the centuries, Muslim thinkers and scholars have developed a sophisticated discourse and culture of Islamic law, anchored around the idea of Shariah, often understood as divinely revealed legislative commands. The existence of this vast and deep corpus of legal tradition has created a strong culture of accepting Islam as a normative force in the public sphere. Whether it is the realm of spirituality, economics, culture or politics, many Muslims instinctively look to Islam for guidance.

There are enough scriptural sources to defend this claim scholastically, and the history of the last ten years of the life of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and the era of the first four Caliphs also cement the idea that secularism is not an Islamic virtue. As a result of this inheritance, both political authority and political legitimacy in Muslim kingdoms, empires and countries have always come from Islamic sources. In the modern age, in the Muslim world as it emerged after decolonization from Western colonial influence, political authority splintered, especially after the demise of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924, into three types, dictatorial, semi-democratic and monarchical. But, even in these countries, the dictators like Saddam Hussein and Anwar Sadat, monarchs like the kings of Saudi Arabia and Morocco, and elected presidents and prime ministers in Pakistan, Malaysia and Iran have all used Islam as a source of political authority and legitimacy. The Arab Spring, which has ended dictatorship in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya and reformed monarchies in Morocco and Jordan, has strengthened and not weakened Islam as a source of political authority through the electoral victories of Islamist-leaning parties in Tunisia and Egypt.

Since the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, which established the Islamic Republic of Iran, the idea of an Islamic state has become an important if not a contentious issue in world politics (Esposito, 1990). Before the
Iranian revolution the idea of an Islamic state was merely rhetorical and theoretical. Its potentiality as a transformative agent – transformative of the global regime through a radical foreign policy and of domestic society through an aggressive socio-political campaign – remained unrealized. But after the Iranian revolution most Islamists appreciated that this dream of acquiring a coercive instrument for socio-political change was possible, and their activism became more purposeful and even more fruitful. Since then several states have claimed to have become Islamic, including Sudan and Afghanistan (Esposito and Piscatori, 1990).

As Islamic revivalist movements, primarily Jamaat-e-Islami (Islamic Society) in South Asia and Ikhwan al-Muslimeen (Islamic Brotherhood) in the Arab world, gained momentum and led to a greater awareness of Islam in Muslim societies, the call to create Islamic states gained more and more momentum. Islam became the alternative to the cold war dichotomy which presented the world with only two alternatives, the capitalist West or the communist East. For Muslims seeking authenticity the slogan ‘Islam is the solution’ had great appeal. Just embracing this concept was liberating in experience, as it implied that by advocating Islam one was not only free of Western global ideologies of capitalism and communism but also free from the internal colonization by secular Westernized elites who used authoritarian means to subjugate Muslims in their own countries (Ayubi, 1991; Esposito, 1997).

The key to understanding the antecedents to the concept of political authority in Islam is the multiple roles of the Prophet Muhammad as religious founder, political leader, head of state and spiritual guide, and his unparalleled success in establishing his religion as the foundation of a state and society in a little over a decade. His state was based on a treaty or social contract referred to as the Dastur-Al-Madinah (Constitution of Medina), establishing the importance of consent and cooperation for governance and treating Muslims and non-Muslims as equal citizens of the Islamic state, with identical rights and duties. Communities with different religious orientations enjoyed religious autonomy, which amounted essentially to a choice of legal system based on their religion. Jews were judged by the Torah, Christians by the Gospel and Muslims by the Quran. This idea of freedom was much wider in scope than the modern idea of religious freedom. The Constitution of Medina established a pluralistic state – a community of communities. It promised equal security to all, and all were equal in the eyes of the law. The principles of equality, consensual governance and pluralism were upheld by the Compact of Medina.

This prophetic precedence has made the inseparability of religion and politics an enduring aspect of Islamic political thought and practice. The status of Muhammad as the Prophet of God as well as the ruler of Medina...
has established the significance of religion in statecraft and the role of religious identity in shaping the character and identity of the political community. The objective of forming a political community is also seen in terms of religious needs and religious obligations. Thus when contemporary political theorists talk of an Islamic state they envisage it as an ideological instrument designed for the explicit purpose of advancing an Islamic religious agenda, even though the very objectives of the Islamic constitution (maqasid al-Shariah) are widely understood as those guiding principles which enable the individual and the community to live a virtuous life in a society determined to establish social justice and public welfare (Chapra, 1992; Osman, 1994).

The idea of an Islamic state is a highly contested and even nebulous conception within contemporary Muslim political thought. It needs historical as well as analytical clarification. There are at least two prominent types of discourses about the Islamic state: one from classical thinkers who lived and wrote when Islamic civilization was dominant and before much of the Muslim world was colonized; and the other in the postcolonial era when the pain of subjugation was still felt strongly and the power and influence of former imperial powers were still palpable. The two can be distinguished by calling pre-colonial theories Islamic theories of the state and postcolonial theories theories of the Islamic state.

Islamic theories of the state are basically the discussion of the nature of the state in the limited political theory developed by Muslims prior to the colonial era. There are primarily four major theorists of this era, and they are Al Farabi (870–950), Al Mawardi (974–1058), Ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328) and Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406). Theories of the Islamic state are contemporary attempts at imagining the utopian ideal of the just and dominant Islamic state, and the major contributors to this discourse are Jamaluddin Afgani (1837–97), Maulana Maududi (1903–79), Ayatollah Khomeini (1902–89), Syed Qutb (1906–66) and Taqiuddin an-Nabhani (1909–77).¹

**ISLAMIC THEORIES OF POLITICAL AUTHORITY AND THE STATE IN THE CLASSICAL AGE**

While Islamic thought is multilayered and rich, the tradition of political theory and philosophy remains underdeveloped (M.A. Muqtedar Khan, 1997). Perhaps this could be explained by the hegemonic nature of Islamic legal thought, which has always sought to colonize Islamic thinking at the expense of metaphysics, mysticism, philosophy and literature (M.A. Muqtedar Khan, 2001). Even contemporary Islamic legal
scholars often tend to equate Islam itself with Islamic legal thinking as if there is nothing outside law (and the study of Shariah). Nevertheless the pre-colonial era did witness several political thinkers, of whom Al Farabi, Al Mawardi, Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Khaldun remain prominent. Al Farabi’s approach was philosophical, Al Mawardi’s legalistic, Ibn Taymiyyah’s theological and Ibn Khaldun’s sociological.

PHILOSOPHY, GOVERNANCE AND DEMOCRACY

In his Mabadi ara ahl al-madinat al-fadilah [Opinions of the citizens of the excellent city], Al Farabi develops his ideas linking metaphysics and cosmology with social ethics and political community. He develops a typology of polities and discusses how a sense of collective purpose, informed by a consciousness of the divine, can enable human beings to develop virtuous cities and polities, which will not only be governed in a just and noble fashion but will also enable their citizens to work toward the perfection of self (al-Ma’sumi, 1963; Deborah L. Black, 1996; al-Farabi, 1998).

When reading Al Farabi one is immediately struck by the contemporary relevance of his theories. Al Farabi conceived of the possibility of establishing ideal polities at three levels – global, national and city. He actually thought that political unity and ethical governance were possible not only at the level of a city state but also on a global scale. Three elements can be identified as crucial to Al Farabi’s vision of an ideal state – a knowledgeable population, the presence of choice and freedom, and the role of a philosopher or philosophers. Al Farabi clearly believed that, whatever a city became, virtuous or ignorant or even wicked, it must do so through the free choice of its people. Thus freedom of conscience, or rather the freedom to choose or eschew an ethical path, was important for Al Farabi, and it is a lesson that contemporary Islamists must not ignore. A state where citizens are coerced into pursuing an ethical path would be meaningless, since the value of virtue is in its independent realization as a result of knowledge and communion with the divine (in Al Farabi’s terms with the active intellect).

Al Farabi imagined the state as a cooperative effort of free and willing citizens seeking a common purpose – ultimate happiness through contact with the active intellect. The state, for Al Farabi, whatever the collective goal (existence or perfection), was an instrument to solve collective action problems. In his discussion of the nature of a state he previews two important contemporary theories, namely, the systems theory and the Weberian conception of the modern state as a product of rationalization, division of labor and specialization. Al Farabi compares the state to
a human body and argues that, just as each organ through perfecting its own function and integrating with the whole creates a functional body, so should various elements of society perfect their roles and integrate to create the state. It is in the rationalization of the state and in treating it as a system that Al Farabi sneaks in his Platonic Republicanism by talking of hierarchical individuals and hierarchical roles from the noble to the ignoble, placing the philosopher or philosophers on top of the hierarchy. He argued that their knowledge, wisdom and nobility were necessary for any city to achieve a virtuous status.

Unlike contemporary political theorists with their emphasis on perfecting structure and process, Al Farabi concentrates on the nature and character of the governors in arguing the possibility of realizing virtue in society. When virtuous individuals govern, we have a virtuous society. Social virtue for Al Farabi is a personality effect and not a systemic effect. Needless to say, contemporary theorists, who live in far more complex societies, would disagree with this premise. But we must remember that Al Farabi’s work was only the beginning of Islamic political theorizing.

Al Farabi was the first Muslim thinker to explore the virtues of democracy. He placed democracy in the category of ignorant cities – those cities that collectively are not aware of God (the First Cause). They do not have a single purpose. In free societies there will be multiple objectives that the citizens of a democracy will seek. He makes a very interesting observation, perhaps the most important lesson contemporary Muslim thinkers can take from him. Al Farabi suggests that, because democracies are free societies and are also non-homogeneous, there will be people who will excel in good as well as people who will excel in evil. But because one can find the pursuit of perfection present within a democracy, it has the best chance of all ignorant cities of becoming a virtuous city. This is a cautionary but powerful endorsement of democracy when the options available to societies largely fall in the ignorant category (monarchies, dictatorships, etc.).

**ISLAMIC JURISPRUDENCE AND THE POLITICAL AUTHORITY OF THE CALIPH**

Al Mawardi, a prominent Islamic jurist, wrote his famous *The Ordinances of the Government (Al Ahkam as-Sultaniyyah)* (Watt, 1968) between 1045 and 1058, a crucial time when there appeared the possibility that, through an alliance with the rising Seljuks, the Abbasid Caliphate could regain its past glory and power. Much of Al Mawardi’s work is empirical and deals mostly with practical aspects of governance and public administration. But a part of his work deals with the theory of the Caliphate. It is a mixture
of legalistic manipulation and political theology with the clear objective
of assigning exclusive religious legitimacy to the Caliph and working to
restore his socio-political status and legal authority (Qamaruddin, 1963).
In trying to legitimize the Caliphate on religious grounds, Al Mawardi tied
political authority to religious sources in such a tight knot that Muslims
have as yet failed to untie it.

Al Mawardi’s *Ahkam* is essentially not a theory of the state in any
sense of the term. It does not offer any conception of what the ultimate
purpose of political community is or why the state exists and what are
just and good states. His entire focus is advancing a theoretical argument
to legitimize the claim of the Abbasid Caliphate to legitimate power over
the entire Muslim community and especially to the exclusion of all other
rulers, regimes and claims. In one sense his theory of the Caliphate is a
repudition of the Shi’ite claims. This political objective becomes clearer
in one particular claim that he advances with regard to who can be the
Caliph. Al Mawardi argues that if there is more than one person quali-
fied to become the Caliph then it is not necessary that the best one should
become the Caliph. It is acceptable for anyone to be chosen as the Caliph,
and the electoral college, which can consist of even one individual (thus
he does not advocate universal franchise as advocated by the Kharijites,
for example), does not need to offer an explanation as to why it chose
the inferior candidate over the superior candidate. This is clearly a Sunni
defense against the Shi’ite claims that no one was more superior to the
descendents of the Prophet when it came to religious legitimacy. This gift
from Al Mawardi and other Sunni jurists to this day remains an excuse for
the scores of incompetent rulers who have plagued the Muslim world (see
M. Qamaruddin Khan, 1963).

Al Mawardi’s methodology was rather simplistic. He basically studied
the history of the early Caliphate and based his theories on this early
Islamic period. The first four Caliphs are considered to be the rightly
guided Caliphs by Muslims generally, and even though this claim is not
based on the Quran or any explicit tradition of the Prophet it is so widely
accepted by Islamic scholars that it has become a religious canon. Since
the early Caliphs were considered righteous, many of their practices and
actions are also taken as principles. Thus Al Mawardi’s theory of the
Caliphate is an articulation of selective historical episodes as theoretical
principles of Islamic government (Brown, 2000; Al-Mawardi, 2000).

Al Mawardi also insisted on some somewhat dubious criteria in his
theory of the Caliphate. For example, he insisted that only a member
of the tribe of Quraish could become a Caliph. This stipulation was to
exclude the Buwayhids, the Fatimids and the Seljuks from usurping the
title of the Caliph. It did not matter to him that it was completely in
contradiction to the universalism characteristic of the message of Islam. It also did not matter to him that he was reducing Islamic political theology to crass tribalism and parochialism. After all, he was a court scholar and he served his master the Abbasid Caliph in exemplary fashion. It is apparent from his other works in the field of jurisprudence and even in sociology that Al Mawardi was an excellent thinker and scholar, but his inability to rescue his political theology from his partisan politics demands that his contribution, regardless of its popularity with contemporary Islamists, must be viewed with caution.

**SIYYASAH SHARAIYYAH: SHARIAH-BASED POLITICS**

Ibn Taymiyyah lived at a time when the Muslim world was experiencing some degree of insecurity. The Tartars and the Crusaders were threatening the integrity of Muslim lands, and many new religious practices inspired by eclectic mysticism and Neoplatonic philosophers were, in Ibn Taymiyyah’s view, threatening the integrity of Islam as a faith. Just as Al Mawardi’s theory of the Caliphate was inspired by the threats to the Caliphate, Ibn Taymiyyah’s ideas of the state were inspired by a deeply felt insecurity of the future of Islam as a faith and Islam as a civilization or empire. It is important to remember that, while Al Farabi and later Ibn Khaldun’s attempts to theorize the state were inspired more by intellectual curiosity than temporal politics, the theories of Al Mawardi and Ibn Taymiyyah were firmly embedded in the politics of their time and were clearly designed to advance their partisan positions. While Al Mawardi sought to restore the glory of the Caliphate, Ibn Taymiyyah sought to restore the global dominance of the Islamic civilization and domestic domination of Islamic Shariah.

Ibn Taymiyyah’s approach was a significant departure from traditional scholarship. His methodology was a mixture of selective use of tradition and past scholarship and a direct use of the Quran, unlike say Al Mawardi, who relied primarily on the traditions and historical narratives about the early period of Islam. One of the reasons why Ibn Taymiyyah’s rather ideological and stark conceptualization of the purpose of the state has so much appeal for so many is the raw nature of his discourse. He relies on direct and literalist use of the Quran, and his selection of Quranic verses gives a quality to his discourse which his followers find compelling. After all, if he is using so many words of God then it stands to reason that his discourse must be more authentic than that of others whose discussions are corrupted by their reason and interpretation. Ibn Taymiyyah
also makes the most systematic analysis of the need, the nature and the ideological objectives of the state, and this clarity of discourse adds to his appeal and influence even today. While Al Mawardi’s limitations are easily apparent, Al Farabi’s and Ibn Khaldun’s analysis have an erudite quality which easily alienates simplistic readers. The two make intellectual demands of their reader, especially Al Farabi, whose writings are complex and philosophical. But Ibn Taymiyyah is clear, dogmatic and simple.

Ibn Taymiyyah was convinced that Islamic duties such as encouraging good and forbidding evil could not be fulfilled without state power. He also felt that several Islamic obligations such as Jihad (struggle) against sin and disobedience to God, enforcement of Islamic law and even fulfillment of collective obligations such as establishing social justice needed the power and machinery of the state. Arguing that religion needed the state to realize itself, Ibn Taymiyyah provided for the first time the argument for a religious necessity of the state. Unlike previous Muslim thinkers such as Al Farabi who believed that religious knowledge was necessary for political excellence, Ibn Taymiyyah argued that political power was necessary for religious excellence (M. Qamaruddin Khan, 1982).

Ibn Taymiyyah’s enduring and to some extent problematic characterization of the Islamic state as one that enforces the Shariah is his most distinct contribution to the conception of the Islamic state. Today this aspect has become the defining characteristic of the Islamic state for most thinkers and nearly all Islamic movements. Present-day Muslim states and politicians use the symbolic application of the Shariah (which is often operationalized as the application of stringent Islamic laws known as hudud laws against adultery, theft, murder and apostasy) along with the banning of interest as a litmus test to determine the Islamic nature of states.

Ibn Taymiyyah also emphasized the importance of the security and military functions of the Islamic state. It is in this arena that he departs considerably from the Quranic injunction that ‘there is no compulsion in religion’ (Quran 2:256), and essentially sees the state as a coercive means to expand and spread Islam beyond its borders and maintain the doctrinal purity of how Islam is practiced within its borders. He brought a severity to the business of establishing Islam, and this approach to religion without compassion has become the trademark of neo-conservative movements such as the Salafi movement and the Wahhabi movement, who see Ibn Taymiyyah as a great reviver and resuscitator of purity in Islam. Clearly Ibn Taymiyyah’s Islam is one which is deeply motivated by insecurity and fear that the faith and its polity are under siege and about to be destroyed. This insecurity more than anything else is the cause for his imagination of the state as an Islamic leviathan that exercises absolute power within and ferociously attacks threats from without.
IBN KHALDUN AND THE NECESSITY OF
POLITICAL AUTHORITY

Ibn Khaldun’s approach was unique and far more empirical than any of
the three theorists that we have considered so far. While Al Farabi, Al
Mawardi and Ibn Taymiyyah were all normative and prescriptive, Ibn
Khal'dun was empirical, historical and descriptive in his analysis of the
origin and decline of states and societies. He is the only one who to some
extent provides a secular justification for political authority by focusing
on its social necessity and its cultural advantages. He was less interested in
describing desirable qualities in states and was instead occupied in under-
standing the natural laws that shaped the origin, growth and declines of
cultures and civilizations.8

Ibn Khaldun’s key concept was the idea of asabiyyah or solidarity. He,
like Al Farabi, saw the state as an expression of a group’s collective desire
to achieve a singular goal, and the necessary convergence of interests that
leads to the recognition of a common goal comes from the emergence of
group solidarity or tribal kinship – asabiyyah. Ibn Khaldun argued that
the development of the state had five stages: 1) emergence of solidarity in
tribal and nomadic people, leading to territorial conquest; 2) the capture
of territory and the establishment of the state with the tribal head as the
leader; 3) consolidation of power and sovereignty and the establishment
of cities; 4) emergence of culture, civilization and the state of content-
ment as citizens of the city enjoy the fruits of civilization and conquest;
and 5) growth of corruption and the collapse of solidarity and the state.
While tribal identity and kinship may work as asabiyyah in the formative
and rural stages, religion was the only cement that could keep a civiliza-
tion alive and thriving. Ibn Khaldun, like Al Farabi, posits religion as a
necessity for the state.

It is important to note that all the four prominent classical Muslim
political thinkers saw religion as playing an important role in the forma-
tion, maintenance, governance and sustenance of the state. For Al Farabi,
religion brought a foundational and epistemological quality to the polity,
for Al Mawardi it was a legitimizing principle, for Ibn Taymiyyah the
state was necessary for religion itself, and for Ibn Khaldun religion was
the cement that kept the state and society intact.9 Needless to say none of
these theorists have advanced a definitive treatise on the state. They are
all remarkably similar in one way, and that is why their approaches are
all formative approaches to studying the state from different perspectives:
political, socio-cultural, legal and theological. It is one of the limitations of
Islamic political thought that very little work has been done subsequently
to pursue the philosophical and sociological approaches to the state that
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were initiated by Al Farabi and Ibn Khaldun. It is also an indication of the insecurity of contemporary Muslim thought that Al Mawardi and Ibn Taymiyyah play such a prominent role in the theories of the Islamic state that are being advanced in the postcolonial era.

POLITICAL AUTHORITY AS THE ISLAMIC STATE

Many Muslims, intellectuals and lay people believe that it was the departure from the ‘Islamic way’ which was the cause of the decline of the Islamic civilization and that a return to this path would once again herald the reawakening of Islamic civilizational glory. The Islamic state is envisioned as the vehicle of change that would realize these aspirations (Asad, 1981; Mumtaz Ahmad, 1986; Ayubi, 1991; Enayat, 1991). There have been four distinct theoretical directions that Muslim thinkers have sought to shape the Muslim world’s postcolonial reality. The first and the most dominant one was by secular Muslims who basically sought only political freedom while culturally and intellectually embracing the West. Many of these Westernized secular elites replaced foreign colonization with internal control and in effect continued with the same regimes as the past. These secular elites over the years have proven to be corrupt, more inclined to sell out national interests in pursuit of power and wealth and, in spite of their Western intellectual allegiance, extremely authoritarian and undemocratic. Today this Western secular authoritarian elite rule much of the Muslim world. The limits of their vision and the poverty of their commitment are perhaps among the major causes of the present crisis in the Muslim world. The Arab Spring has liberated Egypt and Tunisia but, at the time of writing (May 2013), Syria remains in chaos.

The second and third directions that Muslims are pursuing are both Islamic and non-secular in nature. They are the efforts either to establish an Islamic state or to revive the old institution of the Caliphate. The Islamic state and the Caliphate though similar are actually mutually exclusive ideas. It was the recognition by leading Muslim thinkers such as Rashid Rida that the possibility of reinstituting the Caliphate was impossible which led them to settle for a limited Caliphate accepting the postcolonial order of nation states and advancing the idea of the Islamic state. The theory of the Islamic state in principle accepts the world of nation states and is also an abandonment of the utopian goal of global political integration of the Muslim world.

The most prominent theorist with some contemporary influence in advocating the revival of the Caliphate was Taqiuddin an-Nabhani, the founder of the political Islamist movement Hizb ut-Tahrir. An-Nabhani
(1996) has provided the Caliphate (*Khilafah*) movement with the intellectual framework for their ideology. He produced a grand narrative about the virtues of the Caliphate that are far removed from historical reality, for he maintains that until the British and the Turks destroyed the institution of the *Khilafah* the entire Muslim world was under one rule. Details such as the presence of three simultaneous Caliphs, the Abbasids in Baghdad, the Fatimids in Egypt and the Ummayyads in Spain during the tenth and eleventh centuries, or the long wars between Muslim empires and the presence of numerous dynasties such as the Mughals in India or the Safavids in Iran, do not matter to his claim that a unified Caliph ruled uninterrupted from Prophet Muhammad’s first successor until 1924. He seems to be laboring under a belief that all Muslims have to do is declare the *Khilafah* and Islam and Islamic civilization will regain its lost glory. He does not bother to explain how, if *Khilafah* alone is the panacea of all problems, this glory was lost in the first place even while the *Khilafah* existed.

An-Nabhani’s book *The Islamic State* is full of historical inaccuracies and confusion between description and prescription and is more an expression of anger and frustration at the Muslim condition than a systematic theory of an Islamic polity. His usage of the term ‘Islamic state’ interchangeably with ‘global Caliphate’ further heightens this confusion. However, he does advance a sample constitution. This itself is a departure from the practice of the original Caliphate, which was never a constitutional polity, and is a confused mixture of liberal democratic ideas and Islamist rhetoric. The idea is now advanced by mostly disenfranchised and disgruntled Muslim youth, who use it to express their frustration with modernity and the powerlessness of the *Ummah* in the face of Western domination.

**CHARACTERISTICS OF POLITICAL AUTHORITY IN THE ISLAMIC STATE**

The third and the most enduring and partially successful response must be understood within the context of the Muslim self-conception and Muslim political aspirations under colonial occupation. Jamaluddin Afghani, whose most important goal in life was to decolonize Muslim lands and Muslim culture, raised the first modern call for a political revival of the Muslim community. He wanted Muslims to become independent of the West politically as well as culturally, and he envisaged an Islamic polity that would act as this beacon of freedom from Western occupation. Even though Afghani did not actually theorize about an Islamic state, his ideas of political independence from the West remain key foundations for the
subsequent call for an Islamic state made by Maududi and Iqbal in South Asia and echoed in Egypt by Rashid Rida, Hassan al-Banna and Syed Qutb (Rahnema, 1994; Voll and Esposito, 2001).

Afghani and his disciples such as Muhammad Abduh were basically Islamic modernists. They accepted several aspects of modernity such as the importance of rational thought and science. Afghani and Abduh succeeded to some extent in reviving the rationalist tradition of the early Mutazzalites. But Afghani’s most important impact was his ability to incite Muslim nationalism and awaken the desire for political freedom. However, even at this time, in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, Muslim intellectuals were still talking of the Ummah, the Muslim community, as one global political entity, and they hoped to unite them all under one banner. This call for a global political unity became temporarily more urgent and popular in the late 1920s after the British forced the Ottomans to dissolve the institution of the Caliphate. Until then the Caliphate had served as a symbol of Muslim political unity, and its dissolution ended the dream of a unified free Ummah.10

The earliest articulation of the Islamic state was made in South Asia by Maulana Maududi, the founder of the Jamaat-e-Islami movement seeking to revive Islamic civilization through the establishment of an Islamic state, and Muhammad Iqbal, who is considered the intellectual architect of Pakistan. The independence movement in India had generated a sense of insecurity among Muslims, who feared that they would be marginalized and dominated by the Hindu majority in the region after independence. This insecurity and the mishandling of Muslim fears by India’s Hindu leaders led to the call for a separate state for Muslims in South Asia. Pakistan was thus conceived as a safe haven for Muslims – a Muslim homeland. Both Iqbal and Maududi, however, hoped not just to create a Muslim homeland but also an Islamic state (see Esposito, 1983).

For Iqbal, an Islamic state was the expression of the Muslim spiritual self that sought to excel morally in all spheres including the political arena. He envisaged the Islamic state as a culmination of the Muslim pursuit of perfection and also submission to the will of God. He saw it as a vessel of Muslim identity and manifestation of Islamic civilization. Maududi, however, imagined the Islamic state as an ideological instrument that sought to establish the ‘sovereignty of God’ (Al-Hakimiyyah) on earth. This was the first and also the most sophisticated theorization of an Islamic state. For Maududi the objective of the Islamic state was to enforce the will of Allah, and this was to be operationalized by applying Shariah as the law of the land. Both Iqbal and Maududi accepted the territoriality of the Islamic state as opposed to the globality of the Ummah, and they also were in favor of democracy with some adjustment. Iqbal
sought to limit the franchise to those who were intellectually developed and knowledgeable, and Maududi sought to make democracy ultimately subordinate to *Shariah*. In essence they were willing to embrace the democratic process but not the democratic spirit.\(^\text{11}\)

There are five important characteristics that are common to all these theorists. First, they saw the Islamic state as an ideological actor seeking to rescue the Muslim *Ummah* from Western domination. For most of these theorists the concept of a malevolent, imperial, Judeo-Christian and anti-Islamic West was the threat which the Islamic state was expected to emerge against and resist. Second, for the first time Islamic political theorists felt the need to assert that religion and politics were not separate. Thus the Islamic state became a vehicle to reject secularism and secular humanism. Third, the Islamic state was represented as a political arrangement wherein God and God alone was sovereign and the legislator. Once again this idea was conceived in opposition to the approach of Western democracies, where it was assumed that the human will was sovereign, thus denying the possibility of determining politics within moral absolutes. Fourth, the ideological purpose of the Islamic state was seen as applying the *Shariah* within its borders and a commitment to *Jihad* (struggle) to spread Islam abroad. Finally, nearly all theorists of the Islamic state, including Maududi, Qutb, Iqbal, Rida and Khomeini, notwithstanding their criticism of democracy, advocated democratic procedures in selecting rulers and legislators and even in collective decision making (M.A. Muqtedar Khan, 2002b).

It is obvious that except for an-Nabhani, who is a modernized replica of Al Mawardi, most other theorists of the Islamic state are modern versions of Ibn Taymiyyah in their conception of the application of the *Shariah* as the defining characteristic of an Islamic state. They too, like Ibn Taymiyyah, were living in times when Muslims felt insecure about their borders from Western imperialism and the dilution of their Islamic identity from the globalization of Western culture. The added dimension that in an Islamic state God alone is sovereign is merely another way of registering their resistance to Western domination, which still continues. When Islamist theories say God is sovereign what they basically mean is that *Shariah* is applied and Western influences must be resisted.

**DEMOCRACY AND ISLAMIC POLITICAL AUTHORITY**

The fourth approach is that which maintains that democracy is indispensable for Islamic governance and striving for democracy and striving for
Islamic governance are one and the same thing. Therefore Islamists would better serve their cause and the cause of global harmony by working to strengthen democracy wherever they are than by seeking separation for the sake of separation from and conflict with democracy.

The democracy deficit in the Muslim world has been mitigated by efforts at democratization in Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Turkey, and now after the Arab Spring in Libya, Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen. Nevertheless, democracy is glaringly absent from most of the Arab world and, with the rise of political Islam in the region, the compatibility of Islam and democracy has become an important issue (Feldman, 2003). There are commentators in the West and in the Muslim world who share common interests in asserting that Islam and democracy are incompatible. Some Western scholars argue that Islam is incompatible with modernity, and in particular democracy, and insist that Muslims must either abandon Islam or reform Islam in order to join the ‘modern world’ (for example, Lewis, 1993). Some Muslim scholars and militants reject democracy, arguing that it is contrary to the way of God (the Islamic Shariah), and in their eagerness to reject Western cultural and political domination they also reject democracy, falsely believing that democracy is something uniquely Western (El-Affendi, 2006). Fortunately, these arguments have been soundly rebutted. Many scholars have systematically demonstrated that Islam can co-exist with the democratic process and, by highlighting the presence of democracy in several Muslim countries and the presence of Muslims in the West and in other places like India where democracy is well established, have drawn attention to the fact that Islam and Muslims can thrive in democratic societies.12 The courage that the Iraqis and the Afghans have shown when they voted under fire from extremists to give democracy a chance to take root in their societies is testimony to the compatibility of Islam and Muslims with democracy.

The challenge for Muslim theorists today is to go a step further and show how an Islamic democracy may be conceived and what its constitutive principles and architectural features will be. For this purpose, we need to approach democracy from within Islamic thought and describe the broad principles of Islamic governance. In the debate on the compatibility of Islam and democracy, the idea of democracy has often been taken for granted and treated as a stable and uncontested idea; it is Islam that is approached from outside in with a view to interrogating it to ascertain its ability to conform to democratic principles. It is preferable to adopt an inside-out approach, and articulate key elements of Islamic governance. Readers will be able to recognize their fundamentally democratic nature.

Muslims can define good governance either on the basis of universal norms or through a parochial paradigm based on Islamic terminology.
The end product is the same, since there is not much disparity between universal norms and Islamic values. The difference is in politics. If Muslims use contemporary universal language to seek self-determination and good governance, then their political activism may be received with less hostility from the rest of the world, but may have more difficulty in gaining legitimacy at home. But if they use Islamic language for seeking self-determination and good governance then they will enjoy instant legitimacy at home but will inspire insecurity and even opposition abroad, since non-Muslims worldwide have developed a fear and dislike of Islamist governments, primarily because of the world’s adverse experience with the Taliban in Afghanistan and the clerics in Iran and Saudi Arabia.

KEY ELEMENTS OF ISLAMIC GOVERNANCE

Muslim theorists of the state argue that the essential Quranic principle of *Amr bil marouf wa nahy anil munkar* – ‘Command good and forbid evil’ – is the Islamic justification for the creation of an ideological state that is geared toward establishing the Islamic *Shariah*. This principle is essentially drawn from the Quran (3:100; 3:104; and 9:710). ‘You are the best of the nations raised up for (the benefit of) humanity; you enjoin what is right and forbid the wrong’ (Quran 3:110). Since what is good and what is evil, they insist, are articulated in the *Shariah*, in order for Muslims to fulfill the duty to enjoin the good and forbid evil Muslims must ‘establish the Islamic *Shariah*’. This is the standard justification for the Islamic state and was essentially articulated by Ibn Taymiyyah (M.A. Muqtedar Khan, 2003). While one can always dispute whether the text of the Quran necessitates the creation of a state, the fact remains that a large segment of the Muslim population believes in it.

The question, then, that becomes paramount for Muslim political theorists concerns the nature and consequences of the Islamic state. Will this state created to institute good and penalize bad become a tyranny of those who claim to know what the *Shariah* is, or will it become a collective human endeavor in pursuit of the virtuous republic that will facilitate the ‘good life’ and will also foster a culture of tolerance and compassion for different and even multiple understandings of what that good might be.

The key features of Islamic governance found in Islamic sources, the Quran and the Prophetic precedence (*Sunnah*) and contemporary Muslim discussions on the Islamic state, are constitution, consent and consultation. Muslims who seek to implement the *Shariah* are obliged to emulate the Prophet’s precedence and, given the rather narrow definitions of *Shariah* and *Sunnah* that most Islamists operate with, there is no escape
for them from the three key principles identified. While these principles need to be explored and articulated in the specific socio-cultural context of different Muslim societies, it is important to understand that they are essential.

**Constitution**

The Compact of Medina that the Prophet Muhammad adopted provides a very important occasion for the development of Islamic political theory. Muhammad did not rule over the non-Muslims of Medina by divine decree because he was the messenger of Allah. He ruled over them by virtue of the compact that was signed by the Muhajirun (Muslim immigrants from Mecca), the Ansar (indigenous Muslims of Medina) and the Yahud (several Jewish tribes that lived in and around Medina). It is interesting to note that Jews were constitutional partners in the making of the first Islamic state (Haykal, 1988).\(^\text{13}\)

The Compact of Medina can be read as both a social contract and a constitution. A social contract is an imaginary agreement between people in the state of nature that leads to the establishment of a community or a state. In the state of nature people are free and are not obliged to follow any rules or laws. They are essentially sovereign individuals. But through the social contract they surrender their individual sovereignty to a collective and create a community or a state.

The second idea that the Compact of Medina manifests is that of a constitution. In many ways the constitution is the document that enshrines the conditions of the social contract upon which any society is founded. The Compact of Medina clearly served a constitutional function, since it was the constitutive document for the first Islamic state. Thus we can argue that the Compact of Medina serves the dual function of a social contract and a constitution. Clearly the Compact of Medina by itself cannot serve as a modern constitution. It would be quite inadequate, since it is a historically specific document and quite limited in its scope. However, it can serve as a guiding principle to be emulated rather than a manual to be duplicated. Muslims worldwide today can emulate the Prophet Muhammad and draw up their own constitutions, historically and temporally specific to their conditions.

**Consent**

An important principle of the Constitution of Medina was that the Prophet Muhammad governed the city state of Medina by virtue of the consent of its citizens. He was invited to govern, and his authority to govern
was enshrined in the social contract (Siddiqui, 1991). The Constitution of Medina established the importance of consent and cooperation for governance.

The process of bayah, or the pledging of allegiance, was an important institution that sought to formalize the consent of the governed. In those days, when a ruler failed to gain the consent of the ruled through a formal and direct process of pledging allegiance, the ruler’s authority was not fully legitimized (El Fadl et al., 2004). This was an Arab custom that pre-dates Islam but like many Arab customs was incorporated within Islamic traditions. Just as the Prophet Muhammad had done, the early Caliphs of Islam too practiced the process of bayah after rudimentary forms of electoral colleges had nominated the Caliph, in order to legitimize the authority of the Caliph. One does not need to stretch one’s imagination too far to recognize that, in polities that have millions rather than hundreds of citizens, the process of nomination followed by elections can serve as a necessary modernization of the process of bayah. Replacing bayah with ballots makes the process of pledging allegiance simple and universal. Elections therefore are neither a departure from Islamic principles and traditions nor inherently un-Islamic in form.

The Quran too recognizes the authority of those who have been chosen as leaders and in a sense extends divine legitimacy to those who have legitimate authority. ‘O you who believe! Obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority from among you’ (Quran 4:59).

Consultation

The third key principle of Islamic governance is consultation, or Shura in Arabic. This is a very widely known concept, and many Islamic scholars have advanced the Islamic concept of Shura as evidence for Islam’s democratic credentials. Indeed many scholars actually equate democracy with Shura (Esposito and Voll, 1996):

\[ \ldots \text{and consult them in affairs (of moment).} \]
\[ \text{Then, when thou hast taken a decision put thy trust in Allah. (Quran 3:159)} \]

\[ [\text{righteous are those}] \ldots \text{who conduct their affairs through [shura baynahum] mutual Consultation. (Quran 42:38)} \]

Muslim scholars dispute whether the Quranic injunction for consultation is advisory or mandatory, but it nevertheless remains a divine sanction. Pro-democracy Muslims see it as necessary, and those who fear democratic freedoms and prefer authoritarianism interpret these injunctions as divine suggestions and not divine fiats. The Prophet himself left
behind a very important tradition that emphasized the importance of collective and democratic decision making. He said that ‘the community of Muhammed will never agree upon error’. Consultative governance therefore is the preferred form of governance in Islam, and any Muslim who chooses to stay true to his faith sources cannot but prefer a democratic structure over all others to realize the justice and wellbeing promised in Islamic sources.

CONCLUSION

Islam remains intertwined with politics in the Muslim world. Perhaps there will be pockets of secularism and mysticism, which will try to keep religion and politics separate, but the political Islamic constituency will always remain, since political authority has for long sought religious legitimacy. For a brief moment it appeared as if Muslims had found a new source for political authority – the civil state or Daulah Madaniyyah. But the speed of writing and ratifying the new constitution of Egypt ended the debate, which was raising very interesting questions about locating political authority in civil society and in the principle of the equality of all citizens. It can be easily stated that, with the legitimization of markets using Islamic law and the growing size and scope of Islamic economics, Islam as a primary source of authority in Muslim societies will remain for the foreseeable future.

NOTES

1. For a broad overview of the history of Islamic political thought and practice see Watt (1968); Mumtaz Ahmad (1986); Enayat (1991); and Antony Black (2001).
2. While it remains beyond the scope of the discussion in this chapter it must be noted that in an era of globalization it is really exciting to find a classical philosopher who conceived not only of the possibility of global governance but also of establishing a global ethical polity.
3. For a discussion on the two paths to good governance, through good systems and/or good leaders, see ‘Good Governance’, in M.A. Muqtedar Khan (2002a).
4. For an excellent discussion of Al Farabi’s understanding of democracy see Mahdi (1987, 2001); and al-Farabi (1998).
5. In his last sermon, which is considered a will and testament that Muslims must uphold, the Prophet specifically instructed his followers not to distinguish between an Arab and a non-Arab. Making tribal distinctions for the purposes of legitimacy was clearly self-serving (for the Quraish and the Abbasids who belonged to the Quraish tribe) and antithetical to the Message of Muhammad. See Siddiqui (1991).
9. For a sense of how Ibn Khaldun’s ideas are still relevant see Cox (1992) and Akber Ahmad (2002).
10. For an understanding of Afghani’s work and its impact see Keddie (1983).
13. For the entire text of the Compact of Medina, see Haykal (1976).
14. See the Hadith collection Imam Al-Tirmidhi (4:2167).

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