Islam and Democracy: Is Modernization a Barrier?

John O. Voll
Georgetown University

Abstract

The relationship between Islam and democracy is a hotly debated topic. Usually the disagreements are expressed in a standard form. In this form, the debaters' definitions of "Islam" and "democracy" determine the conclusions arrived at. It is possible, depending upon the definitions used, to "prove" both positions: Islam and democracy are compatible and that they are not. To escape from the predefined conclusions, it is necessary to recognize that "Islam" and "democracy" are concepts with many definitions. In the twenty-first century, important interpretations of Islam open the way for political visions in which Islam and democracy are mutually supportive.

Does religion represent an obstacle to modernization and democratization? Does religion pose a threat to democracy if a democratically elected govern–ment becomes a "theocracy"? Does the majority rule of democracy threaten the liberty and freedom of other members of a society? If the majority imposes its will upon minorities, is that a departure from democracy in general or form of "liberal" democracy? Does modernization strengthen or inhibit democratization and individual liberty? These broad questions are being debated in many different contexts around the world. They provide a framework for looking at the experience of Muslim societies and the relationships between Islam and democracy.

Tensions between democracy and liberty have deep historical roots and are presently visible around the world. The rise of what Fareed Zakaria calls "Illiberal Democracy" is an important product of these tensions.[1] "It appears that many countries are adopting a form of government that mixes a substantial degree of democracy with a good deal of illiberalism [restriction of individual liberties]."[2] Religion can play a role in defining and imposing this "illiberalism." These developments occur within a global context shaped by the interaction between local politics and the policies of the United States. "Countries are often deciding how best to move along the path to democracy. And the United States is constantly formulating policies to deal with countries as they move – or slip – along that path."[3] This provides an important framework for studying the case of the Muslim world, because

"[n]owhere are these tough choices between order and instability, liberalism and democracy, and secularism and religious radicalism more stark" than in the Muslim world today.[4]

Major tensions within societies and in international relations are created by different understandings of the threats and possibilities of democratic participation by religious movements. Many leaders and policy-makers who support democracy in principle, often fear that the actual operation of democratic processes could result in authoritarian rule by an elected majority. Fears generated in the West by the electoral victories of the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria in 1990–1991, and the Turkish military's ending of the government of Necmettin Erbakan in 1997 attests to this underlying ambivalence. In discussions regarding the nature of Iraq's post-Saddam government, in 2003, prominent American political leaders expressed similar fears. Senator Richard Lugar stated that the United States could not accept "a popularly elected theocracy in Iraq."[5] Implicit in all of these responses is an assumption that an "Islamic" state, even if democratically established, would be transformed into an illiberal and undemocratic "theocracy."

The underlying question in such discussions is whether "Islam" is a barrier to democracy, especially the liberal variety. Consequently, in the broader context of debates about the nature and future of democracy, the subject of "Islam and democracy" often receives special attention.

Over the last decade, a standard format has emerged in the argumentation about "Islam and democracy." In this format some definition is given of "Islam" and of "democracy," and then it is argued how those definitions are either complementary or contradictory. Depending on the interpretations of the analyst it is concluded that either Islam and democracy are compatible or they are not. It is important to understand the main outline of the "standard debate." But it must be realized that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, this debate takes place within the broader context of debates about the future of democracy. Often, discussions of "Islam and democracy" take on an insular character, as if the experiences of democracy in other societies and cultures are irrelevant to the Muslim experience of democracy. Broadening the scope of discussion to an examination of the ambiguous relationships between democracy and modernity can suggest different perspectives. One perspective is that possibly major obstacles to democratization in the Muslim world involve less "Islam" than "modernization." Modernization may have been a major barrier to democratization.

Islam and Democracy: The Standard Format

The standard format of recent discussions on Islam and democracy echo older debates within the Muslim community, and among non-Muslim scholars of Islam. In the early twentieth century, discussions of the relationship between democracy and Islam were part of the broader debates

regarding modernization, and democracy was still a contested subject in many Western societies.

Within the Muslim world, conservative[6] Muslim thinkers argued that Islam and democracy were incompatible, because of first, the Islamic concept of the absolute sovereignty of God – they believed that ideas of the sovereignty of the people in a democracy contradicted this fundamental principle; second, in Islam the law was defined and promulgated by God and that God's law, the *Shari'a*, could not be altered by elected parliaments; and third, the concept of parliaments as sources of law was seen as blasphemous.

Some less conservative, and even radical, thinkers in the middle of the century also maintained these views. Abul-Ala-Mawdudi, distinguished between the "deen" (*din*; "religion" as faith and practice) of democracy and the "deen" of Islam: "What is the meaning of *Deen* of the masses? Only this that the common people of a country are its paramount sovereign; that they should be governed by the *Shari'ah* which they themselves have framed; and that all the inhabitants of that country should affirm obedience and servitude to their own democratic authority."[7] This is contrasted with the "Deen" of Islam: "The basis of this *Deen* is that Allah alone is the Owner of the land and Sovereign of all human beings. Thus, He alone must be obeyed and served, and all affairs of man's life must be conducted according to His *Shari'ah*. This principle of Allah being the supreme authority specified by Islam has only one and no other aim that only Allah's writ must run the world."[8] Kalim Siddiqui, has identified "democracy" as one of the modern ideologies of political unbelief: "The great political *kufr* [unbelief] of the modern world is nationalism, followed closely by democracy (sovereignty of the people), socialism (dictatorship of the proletariat), capitalism and 'free will.' All political systems based on one or more of these ideas, emotions or philosophies are part and parcel of *kufr*."[9]

Some non-Muslim scholars hold similar views. Elie Kedourie wrote: "The idea of representation, of elections, of popular suffrage, of political institutions being regulated by laws laid down by parliamentary assembly, of those laws being guarded and upheld by an independent judiciary, the ideas of the secularity of the state . . . all these are profoundly alien to the Muslim political tradition."[10] Earlier in the 1950s, Bernard Lewis also wrote that: "[T]he political history of Islam is one of almost unrelieved autocracy . . . There are no parliaments or representative assemblies of any kind, no councils or communes, no chambers of nobility or estates, no municipalities in the history of Islam; nothing but the sovereign power, to which the subject owed complete and unwavering obedience as a religious duty imposed by the Holy Law . . . For the last thousand years, the political thinking of Islam has been dominated by such maxims as 'tyranny is better than anarchy' and 'whose power is established, obedience to him is incumbent.'"[11]

In short, one side of the debate in the standard format considers Islam as basically incompatible with democracy on theological grounds, because it

is in conflict with the sovereignty of God, and on the grounds of the basically authoritarian vision presented by the body of teachings developed over a millennium by Muslim scholars.

The other side of this debate asserts that Islam, rightly understood, is compatible with democracy. There were conservatives who affirmed this position. An older introduction to Islam, reprinted from "al-Azhar Official Organ," concluded a description of Qur'anic verses relating to political and social life in the early Muslim community with the statement: "Such were the principles on which the political system of Islam was grounded. It was thoroughly democratic in character. It recognized individual and public liberty, secured the person and property of the subjects, and fostered the growth of all civic virtues."[12] Ahmad Shawqi al-Fanjari, an Egyptian writer, compiled a list of democratic rights and liberties found in the major writings of earlier Muslims and concluded that "what is called freedom in Europe is exactly what is defined in our religion as justice (*ʿadl*), right (*haqq*), consultation (*shura*), and equality (*musawat*) . . . This is because the rule of freedom and democracy consists of imparting justice and right to the people, and the nation's participation in determining its destiny."[13]

They also point out other Islamic traditions such as Bay'a (pledge of allegiance to the leader), as well as the separation of the domains of the executive and legislative powers in Islam as future evidence of its compatibility with or democratic form of government.

Contemporary Muslim thinkers continue this line of analysis, leading to the conclusion that "Islamic doctrine, as embedded in the text and traditions, is conducive to democratic thought in many compelling ways," and the "greatest periods of Islamic rule have been precisely those in which Islam's structural and intellectual developments were the most democratic."[14] Some, like Rashid Ghanouchi, argue that in the conditions of the contemporary era, "pluralistic parliamentary democracy" is "the ideal instrument to put God's Shari'a into practice."[15] This principle of divine sovereignty is maintained by arguing that democracy provides a system for avoiding having a single human individual or class claim sovereignty. Such thinkers argue that "democracy is the spirit of the Islamic governmental system, even though they reject its philosophical assumptions about the people's sovereignty . . . [S]ince the Qur'an commands Muslims to conduct their affairs through mutual consultation (shura) and grants the privilege of *khilafah* [representative agency] to the entire Muslim community rather than to a single individual or a specific group or class of people, the resulting shura and selection of a ruler must be based on the free will of the Muslim masses."[16]

Some ideologically radical groups extend this opposition to hierarchical structures that claim sovereignty, and see Islam as the foundation for revolutionary populist democracy. The People's Mujahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI) argued that "[f]rom time immemorial, the Towhidi [monotheistic] Prophets have been in the forefront of the most authentic and selfless revolutionary populists of history . . . [T]he Towhidi Prophets

were the heralds of the rule of the people."[17] In this radical perspective, the rise of the "bourgeois system of class relations" created a structure of class domination of the masses even though it was called democracy. "As great anti-imperialist struggles take shape with an antiexploitative content, the true meanings of populism and democracy have become revived and these concepts have their content once again restored."[18] In this perspective, contemporary radical democracy is rooted in the teachings of the monotheist prophets.

The distinguishing characteristic of the debate about Islam and democracy is its assumption that each of these great concepts is singular in its ultimate definition. In much of this debate, these unitary definitions are tied to particular historic constructions and specific forms. In general terms, not just in relation to Islam, "[f]or people in the West, democracy means 'liberal democracy,'" a combination of "constitutional liberalism" and various forms of liberty with political democracy (the rule of the people), although the freedoms involved in "constitutional liberalism" have "nothing intrinsically to do with democracy."[19] Many in the West believe that democracy is a distinctively and exclusively Western phenomenon with specific requirements. Non-Western societies that democratize should follow Western patterns and models. Similarly, for many Muslim and other scholars, the definition of "Islam" is tied closely to the vast intellectual and societal structures developed as the historical manifestation of Muslim faith and tradition over a millennium and a half. This historic tradition becomes the norm and if that tradition is authoritarian or autocratic, then that is the definition of Islam itself. Consequently, in many ways the debates become circular because the conclusion depends more upon the initial definition than upon analysis.

Islam and Democracy: Contested Concepts

An alternative to the standard format is emerging. Its intellectual roots go back many years, but it has received more attention in the past decade. The starting point is the recognition that both democracy and Islam are not easily defined in monolithic terms.

Democracy is increasingly recognized as an "essentially contested concept."[20] Such concepts involve disputes "which are perfectly genuine: which, though not resolvable by argument of any kind, are nevertheless sustained by perfectly respectable arguments and evidence."[21] In fact, scholars (and some activists) recognize that democracy can take many apparently contradictory forms, reflected in terms such as "illiberal democracy,"[22] "semi-authoritarian democracy,"[23] and "cyberdemocracy,"[24] as well as more familiar terms like "radical democracy,"[25] "consociational democracy,"[26] and "associative democracy."[27]

Similarly, Muslim and non-Muslim scholars and observers stress that Islam is not monolithic. John L. Esposito urges that people ask the question:

"Whose Islam?" since Islam is always presented through the voices and perspectives of Muslim groups and individuals.[28] The South African Ebrahim Moosa notes that "there are many 'islams' with a small 'i,' and many Muslims with differences in terms of their practices and their understandings, since each person or Muslim community appropriates the discursive tradition differently."[29] There is a sense that the highly visible presentation of Islam by contemporary militant radicals which presents "the powerful image of a single eternal Islam" forecloses the possibility of an understanding of the full range of the way the revelation has been viewed and implemented by humans.[30]

Consequently, there has been a growing emphasis on the rich and deep repertoire of concepts and symbols presented in the Qur'an, the experience of the early Muslim community, and Islam's basic principles,[31] which allows a wide range of possible definitions of fundamental concepts and specific terminologies.

Indeed, it is possible to build, as medieval Muslim thinkers did, an edifice of authoritarian political theory. But this was not limited to the Muslim world. All medieval civilizations were non-democratic in their vision of political authority. The patriarchal forms of monotheistic theology supported the conceptualization of the human political order on the pattern of divine order, with one sovereign ruler and a hierarchical society. However, Islam contains symbols and concepts upon which a theory of Islamic democracy can be built.[32]

Some contemporary Muslim intellectuals argue that Islam should not be identified with any particular political program or ideology, because doing so places limits of time and place on its universal message. Nevertheless, it is important that Islam be maintained as the foundation for whatever programs that are advocated.[33] Within the circumstances of the early twenty-first century, this argument can mean that a democratic system is the most appropriate Islamic political system and that the old authoritarian theories and systems, even if valid in their time and place, are un-Islamic, or even anti-Islamic, options for Muslim societies.[34]

Today, democracy is advocated and supported globally and few major leaders or intellectuals oppose it. In fact, "For the vast majority of the world, democracy is the sole surviving source of political legitimacy . . . Democracy has gone from being a form of government to a way of life."[35] Yet according to many observers these trends have had only limited results in the Muslim world, thus raising the question of the relationship between Islam and democracy to one of great interest to policy-makers and scholars. This question cannot be usefully answered within the limiting conceptual framework of the old standard format.

Short Biography

John O. Voll is Professor of Islamic history and Associate Director of the Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at

Georgetown University. He taught Middle Eastern, Islamic, and world history at the University of New Hampshire for thirty years before moving to Georgetown in 1995. He graduated from Dartmouth College and received his Ph.D. degree from Harvard University. He has lived in Cairo, Beirut, and Sudan and has traveled widely in the Muslim world. The second edition of his book *Islam: Continuity and Change in the Modern World* appeared in 1994. He is co-author, with John L. Esposito, of *Islam and Democracy* and *Makers of Contemporary Islam* and is editor, author, or co-author of six additional books. He is a past president of the Middle East Studies Association and also of the New England Historical Association. He has served on the Boards of Directors of the American Council of Learned Societies, the New Hampshire Humanities Council, the New Hampshire Council on World Affairs, and the Sudan Studies Association. He was the chair of the program committee for the 1999 annual meeting of the American Historical Association. In 1991 he received a Presidential Medal in recognition for scholarship on Islam from President Husni Mubarak of Egypt. He has published numerous articles and book chapters on modern Islamic and Sudanese history.

Notes

* Correspondence address: Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Box 571027, Intercultural Center 260, Washington, DC 20057-1027, USA.

[1] Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* 76, No. 6 (November/December 1997): 22–43, and his: *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York: WW Norton, 2003).

[2] Zakaria, "The Rise . . . ," p. 24.

[3] Zakaria, *Future of Freedom*, p. 117.

[4] Zakaria, *Future of Freedom*, p. 118. Zakaria's actual final words in this passage are ". . . more stark than in the Middle East today." However, since he discusses Muslim majority countries outside of the Middle East, like Indonesia, I have used the term "Muslim world."

[5] Transcript for April 20 (2003), "Meet the Press with Tim Russert," www.msnbc.com/news.

[6] In this paper the term "conservative" refers to those people and groups who resist change in the existing social or ideological order and *not* to radical reactionaries or fundamentalists.

[7] S. Abul A'la Maududi, *Khutabat (Fundamentals of Islam)*, 2nd edn (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1977), p. 257.

[8] Maududi, *Khutabat*, pp. 258–259.

[9] Kalim Siddiqui, "Primary goals and achievements of the Islamic Revolution in Iran," in *Issues in the Islamic Movement, 1983–84 (1403–04)*, ed. Kalim Siddiqui (London: Open Press, 1985), p. 13.

[10] Elie Kedourie, *Democracy and Arab Political Culture* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Studies, 1992), p. 5, as quoted in Zakaria, *The Future*, p. 123.

[11] Bernard Lewis, "Communism and Islam," in *The Middle East in Transition*, ed. Walter Z. Laqueur (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1958), pp. 318–319.

[12] Ahmad A. Galwash, *The Religion of Islam: A Standard Book*, 5th edn (Cairo, Egypt: Imprimerie Misr, 1958), 1:105.

[13] Ahmad Shawqi al-Fanjari, *al-Hurriyat al-siyasiyyah fi al-Islam* (1973) as quoted in Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1982), p. 131.

[14] Ahrar Ahmad, "Islam and Democracy: Text, Tradition, and History," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 20/1 (Winter 2003): 35–36.

[15] "Ghanoushi on Past and Present Despotism in Muslim Countries," *Islam 21* 3 (December 1997): 16.

[16] Mumtaz Ahmad, "Islamic Political Theory: Current Scholarship and Future Prospects," in *State Politics and Islam*, ed. Mumtaz Ahmad (Indianapolis, IN: American Trust Publications, 1406/1986), p. 4.

[17] "Towhidi (Divinely Integrated) Populism vs Vulgar Populism," *Mojahed* 1/6 (June 1980): 51.

[18] "Towhidi . . ." p. 51.

[19] Zakaria, *Future of Freedom*, pp. 17–18.

[20] Jan-Erik Lane, *Constitutions and political theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 244.

[21] W. B. Gallie, *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964), p. 158.

[22] Zakaria, *Future of Freedom*.

[23] Marina Ottaway, *Democracy Challenged: The Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003).

[24] See the essays in Elaine Ciulla Kamarck and Joseph S. Nye Jr., eds., *Governance.com: Democracy in the Information Age* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2002).

[25] Chantal Mouffe, ed., *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community* (London: Verso, 1992); C. Douglas Lummis, *Radical Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

[26] See writings of Arend Lijphart. "Introduction: The Belgian Example of Cultural Coexistence in Comparative Perspective," in *Conflict and Coexistence in Belgium*, ed. Arend Lijphart (Research Series, No. 46; Berkeley, CA: University of California, Institute of International Studies, 1981), pp. 1–12.

[27] Paul Q. Hirst, *Associative Democracy: New Forms of Economic and Social Governance* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994).

[28] John L. Esposito, *Islam and Politics*, 4th edn (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998), p. xx.

[29] Ebrahim Moosa, *Islam and Cultural Issues* (Victoria, BC: University of Victoria, Centre for Studies in Religion and Society, 2002), p. 7.

[30] See: Mohammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers* (Trans. Robert D. Lee) (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), pp. 7–8.

[31] See: John L. Esposito and John O. Voll, *Islam and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). See, especially Chapter 1.

[32] See Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought*, especially, pp. 125–139.

[33] See, for example, some of the lines of analysis presented by Abdolkarim Soroush in *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush* (trans., and ed. Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri) (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[34] See the line of analysis present as "an Islamic Theology of Religions for the Twenty-First Century," in Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 40–49.

[35] Zakaria, *Future of Freedom*, pp. 13–14.

Bibliography

Ahmad, A, 2003, "Islam and Democracy: Text, Tradition, and History," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, vol. 20, no. 1, pp. 35–36.

Ahmad, M, 1406/1986, "Islamic Political Theory: Current Scholarship and Future Prospects," in M Ahmad (ed.), *State Politics and Islam*, American Trust Publications, Indianapolis, IN, pp. 1–22.

Al-Fanjari, AS, 1973, *al-Hurriyat al-siyasiyyah fi al-Islam* as quoted in Enayat, H, 1982, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* University of Texas Press, Austin.

Arkoun, M, 1994, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*, RD Lee (Trans.), Westview Press, Boulder, CO.

Enayat, H, 1982, *Modern Islamic Political Thought*, University of Texas Press, Austin, TX.

Esposito, JL & Voll, JO, 1996, *Islam and Democracy*, Oxford University Press, New York.

Esposito, JL, 1998, *Islam and Politics*, 4th edn, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, NY.

Gallie, WB, 1964, *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding*, Chatto & Windus, London.

Galwash, AA, 1958, *The Religion of Islam: A Standard Book*, 5th edn, Imprimerie Misr, Cairo, Egypt.

"Ghanoushi on Past and Present Despotism in Muslim Countries," 1997, *Islam 21*, vol. 3, p. 16.

Hirst, PQ, 1994, *Associative Democracy: New Forms of Economic and Social Governance*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, MA.

Kamarck, EC & Nye, JS Jr, (eds.), 2002, *Governance.com: Democracy in the Information Age*, Brookings Institution, Washington, DC.

Kedourie, E, 1992, *Democracy and Arab Political Culture*, Washington Institute for Near East Studies, Washington as quoted in Zakaria, F, 2003, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*, WW Norton, New York.

Lane, J, 1996, *Constitutions and Political Theory*, Manchester University Press, Manchester.

Lewis, B, 1958, "Communism and Islam," in WZ Laqueur (ed.), *The Middle East in Transition*, Frederick A. Praeger, New York.

Lijphart, A, 1981, "Introduction: The Belgian Example of Cultural Coexistence in Comparative Perspective," in A Lijphart (ed.), *Conflict and Coexistence in Belgium*, (Research Series, No. 46); University of California, Institute of International Studies, Berkeley, pp. 1–12.

Lummis, CD, 1996, *Radical Democracy*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.

Maududi, SAA, 1977, *Khutabat (Fundamentals of Islam)*, 2nd edn, Kazi Publications, Chicago, IL.

Moosa, E, 2002, *Islam and Cultural Issues*, Centre for Studies in Religion and Society, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC,.

Mouffe, C, (ed.), 1992, *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community*, Verso, London.

Ottaway, M, 2003, *Democracy Challenged: The Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC.

Sachedina, A, 2001, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*, Oxford University Press, New York.

Siddiqui, K, 1985, "Primary goals and achievements of the Islamic Revolution in Iran," in K Siddiqui (ed.), *Issues in the Islamic Movement, 1983–84 (1403–04)*, Open Press, London, pp. 1–23.

Soroush, A, 2000, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush*, M Sadri and A Sadri, (trans. and eds.), Oxford University Press, New York.

"Towhidi (Divinely Integrated) Populism vs Vulgar Populism," 1980, *Mojahed*, vol. 1, no. 6, pp. 50–52.

Transcript for April 20 2003, "Meet the Press with Tim Russert," www.msnbc.com/news

Zakaria, F, 1997, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 76, no. 6, pp. 22–43.

Zakaria, F, 2003, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*, WW Norton, New York.