

# The Contribution of Islamic Scholarship to Democracy

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Probably the most common modern understanding of democracy sees it as indirect democracy or representative democracy, in which the people elect government officials who then make decisions on their behalf. This definition tends to entail a set of political traditions, particular institutions, and cultural assumptions. But this notion of democracy runs into problems because the world is a culturally diverse place and no single culture has the monopoly on democratic ideas and practice.<sup>i</sup> Needs, expectations, aspirations and problems related to human behavior, community life, faith and culture, and law and order, vary from land to land and era to era. Since the fifth century BCE, democracy has been discussed by political theorists, philosophers and members of diverse societies and cultures. Although it is commonly accepted that democracy as a form of government originated in Ancient Greece, many other nations, groups and cultures have contributed significantly to its evolution. In view of the debates raised in recent years over the practice of democracy in Muslim countries and cultures, this article will consider the forms, theory, history and possible future of democracy, and the compatibility of Islam and democracy, in the light of the views of the Islamic scholar, Fethullah Gülen.<sup>1</sup> Gülen's intellectual contribution to the global discussion of democracy, which is determined by his adherence to Islamic values, is not limited to an analysis of its value and meaning for individuals and societies. In addition he examines the effects on democracy of the crises which people and systems undergo, as well as the complexities of life in modern industrialized societies, and the contraction in the space available for individual and collective expression of cultural, moral and spiritual values.<sup>ii</sup> I have chosen to examine the topic from the perspective his work offers because the size and extent of the Gülen Movement, which he inspires, indicate that his views are more truly representative of Muslims than a great many of the more extreme views of others often presented in the media.

## Variation in forms of democracy

It is common to discuss democracy in the Muslim world as if it is problematic. In reality democracies all over the world have to deal with a number of controversial issues about the diverse forms of government, varieties of representation, the types of freedom citizens require or demand, the unlegislated distribution of political power, uneven separation of powers, and the breach of the system of rule by the accumulated powers.<sup>iii</sup>

According to Gülen the understanding of democracy and human rights within the theoretical heritage of Islam is not dogmatic but centers around values such as compromise, stability, the protection of the life, honor and dignity of the human being, justice, equity, dialogue, and consultation. Islamic political theory is flexible and does Fethullah Gülen is a scholar and an intellectual from a

mainstream Islamic background attached to Turkish tradition, a proactive civil society leader and opinion-former. His work has inspired a transnational civil society movement which originated in Turkey as a faith-based cultural initiative. It is apolitical and altruistic and focuses on educational, inter-cultural and interfaith service-projects not bind Muslims by any rigid limits in the choice of concrete forms of government and political system.

The main principle in Islamic political theory is the implementation of three fundamental values: equality, justice and consultation. The forms and means of enactment of these are vested in the hands of the community. Thus, the actual realization of these three pillars can and must take into account the conditions of people's lives, their traditions, cultural preferences, and other factors. Gülen argues that the social, cultural, political and historical aspects of societies, should be taken into account in the development of democracy in the entire world.

However, it is clear that currently the states Muslims live in are usually not democratic states, are often military regimes, and are beholden to tiny oligarchies or family regimes. In addition, regimes commonly identify themselves as modern and secular, while the opposition identifies itself as Muslim and anti-secular. Claims seem to take a very different shape according to where they are located

As a result perhaps of this state of affairs, observers discussing the compatibility between Western and Muslim perspectives on democracy and human rights sometimes make the error of attacking "Islam" and demanding its reform, instead of commenting on the approaches or methods of particular activists, regimes or countries and reforming those. Some observers even claim Islamic principles and institutions directly contradict democratic values in their modern meaning, and so any step by Muslim societies towards the establishment of democracy must be accompanied by rejecting Islamic political and legal traditions. At the other extreme, ideologically motivated Muslims claim to have the only correct understanding of Islam, and that Islamic fundamentals of power, politics and believers' rights have nothing in common with Western democratic institutions. These extremists often argue that "the power of the people" is alien to Islam, which puts forward the principle of the supremacy of Islamic law instead.<sup>iv</sup>

In fact, the concepts advanced in this type of argumentation are taken out of the whole context of Islamic thought and its socio-political heritage in order to justify political extremism. Nevertheless, within both traditional and modern Islamic political and legal thought, there are several different perspectives on government which are more genuinely representative of the Islamic legal tradition and which do not justify extremism.<sup>v</sup> Moreover, the 2007 Survey by Freedom House argued that the steady record of progress observed represents a powerful argument against the proposition that Islam is incompatible with democracy or is an impediment to the spread of freedom and that there has been a striking improvement in the level of freedom in majority Muslim countries over the past ten years.<sup>vi</sup>

## How Islam supports democratic processes

Islamic jurisprudence embodies the divine revelation, the art of lawyers, local and global cultures, and global relationships. Islamic law and the legal system, its common principles and the majority of its concrete norms are similar to the fundamental ideas and particular provisions of other legal systems. Islamic legal culture has always cooperated closely with and been receptive to other legal cultures. In this sense, Islamic law is of benefit not only to Muslims but to the whole of humanity. Over many centuries a great variety of views on the fundamentals of the executive and the legislature have developed within Islamic culture, and diverse notions of the relations between the state and the individual have been elaborated.vii

One of the key features of the Islamic understanding of democracy is the concept of shura (collective and community consultation). Without any qualification or limitation, all members of a community are eligible to give or request consultation on any matter, except one covered by a clear-cut revelation from God. Consequently, all political matters concerning the selection of the ruler, the structure and shape of the government, the form of political system, the running of the government and of the various affairs of the state, and all other related matters are to be decided by consultation through the participation of all the members of the community.viii

In public and government affairs collective consultation is concerned with two main issues: the selection of the head of state and running of the government together with reviewing the legality and propriety of governmental and presidential actions. On the selection of the head of state, collective consultation is flexible and adopts various forms. Elections, whether direct or indirect, are considered to be an Islamic method of selecting the head of state or members of the legislative body which satisfies the consultation process. With regard to the running of the government and control over the legality and propriety of the executive's actions, Islamic law is also very flexible. The establishment of a representative body through direct or indirect elections is compatible with Islam and is a good application of community and collective consultation. In addition to their reviewing authorities, representative bodies may be empowered to legislate on different matters provided that such regulations do not violate any unambiguous and clear-cut principle or rule of Islamic injunctions. If democracy is the government of the people by the people for the people, shura is a process which guarantees that all affairs of the people are decided by the people and for their interests. So, the basics of democracy and the fundamentals of shura in the political field are not opposed.ix

This genuine Islamic idea is one of the most basic human rights and a means of protecting and preserving all other human rights under Islamic law, especially the right to equality, the freedom of thought, and the right to express oneself freely in order to correct or demand the correction of what is not right, even if it is something committed by the highest officials, including the head of state. State officials and authorities do not have political immunity while in office in Islam.x

## Law, order and, human rights

Gülen analyzes the different rights recognized in Islam, including freedom of religion and belief, thought and expression, to own property and the sanctity of one's home, to marry and have children, to communicate and to travel, and the right to an unimpeded education. He underlines that the

principles of Islamic jurisprudence are based on these and other rights, all of which have now been accepted by modern legal systems, such as the protection of life, religion, property, family life, and intellect, as well as the basic understanding of the equality of people, which is based on the fact that all people are human beings, and subsequently, the rejection of all racial, color, and linguistic discrimination.xi

Every single right must be respected in Islam. In particular, the right of an individual cannot be violated for the interest of the community. This idea is central to the concept of human rights in Islam and the interpretation of Islamic tradition with regard to this issue. Though this may sound utopian today considering the mass and “collateral” damage caused by modern nations at war, Gülen argues that the bar should be set at the highest possible level for democracy and every effort to reach that level should be attempted.xii

Gülen underlines that people everywhere always demand freedom of choice within their beliefs, that is, in the way they run their affairs and in their expression of spiritual and religious values. He stresses the separation of the eternal and the evolving judgments (ijtihad) of Islamic jurisprudence. Specifically, political affairs in general and democratic institutions and human rights in particular are covered by Islamic legislative provisions which can relate and respond to the needs of changing circumstances and times. Gülen points out that democracy will continue to evolve and refine itself in the future. Islamic principles of equality, tolerance, and justice can help in this regard, provided that the injunctions of the Qur’an and the Sunna as well as any definite judgments of Islamic law are re-examined and restored in the light of advancing knowledge and changes in societies.xiii

It is possible to envisage a kind of democracy with a spiritual dimension. It is a democracy which contains respect for and observance of human rights and freedoms, including freedom of speech, expression and religion, a democracy which prepares the necessary conditions for people to live and practice as they believe, which renders people able to fulfill their wish and need for eternity, and which deals with human beings as a whole with regard to their all material and immaterial needs. For, human life does not start and end with life in this world. The system that governs them must not ignore or neglect this crucial matter.

There is a persistent problem for definitions of democracy which insist on strict separation between Church (or religion) and state. This separation has in fact never been truly implemented in any state anywhere in the world. There remain many contrasts between the theory and practice of this separation, and therefore a gap or contradiction in the theory of separation. Some examples of this can be seen in the continued establishment of the Church of England, which contrasts with the French (and Turkish) concept of laicism as a force which opposes the expression of religion in the public space, and the constant debates about the influence of religious values (such as those of the pro-life movement) in the United States.

We therefore have to seek ways to sophisticate and humanize democracy. No such stage or democracy has been attained in the world yet, but we can aspire to and work for such an aim.xiv

# Democratic culture

It is vital to encourage the building of a strong civil society in order to have and retain a 'culture' of democracy, and in Gülen's view this can only be done through sound education. In a democracy, where people are entitled to freedom of speech, expression, religion, and the right to sell their labor, and other such rights, every individual should know what kinds of rights they have and what authority, weight and say they have in state and government affairs.xv

In all societies on some occasions, or even for extended periods, some interests will not be happy about all individuals being aware of their rights; they may see such education as an obstacle to their gaining political or economic power or even arbitrary rule. Consequently, they may attempt to limit citizens' access to information and institutions and try to guide them in directions which do not serve citizens' own true interests.xvi

However, it is impossible to enjoy and practice democracy in a society where people are unaware of their rights and freedom, where people do not know how to seek and pursue their rights, where, in short, they do not have a developed democratic culture. In such societies occasional openings or temporary freedoms might be enjoyed, but it is always possible for special interests to come up with further impositions and undemocratic interventions. In many parts of the world we see tyrannical, authoritarian and dictatorial leaders who exploit or manipulate, for example, the electoral process, the legal system or the constitution not in the name of the progress or development of the country but for the continuance of their own power or in pursuit of self-interest or the interest of a select group around them.xvii

To counteract the activities of vested interests, while individuals are being asked to fulfill their rights and duties in a democratic system, in addition to knowledge they also need to have the self-confidence and the civic courage to own and defend their rights.xviii When it comes to the exercise of executive power, based on some Islamic scholars' understanding, Esposito and Voll argue that society carries the responsibility of the caliphate as a whole and that every individual shares in its rights and powers. In this respect all individuals are equal and this is the point where democracy begins in Islam. Thus, we all share in the stewardship of democracy too.xix

Muslims' own contribution to the development of democracy and civil society around the globe lies not only in their intellectual contribution to debate, but also in their action; for example, within the Gülen Movement this practical ability has led to the development of schools, universities, intercultural and interfaith dialogue groups and other institutions throughout the world.

## Conclusions

Gülen's approach is powerful proof of the democratic ideas propagated by Islam, as he is convinced that Islamic understanding of democracy and secular political liberalization are not two separate phenomena. He points out that the dominant Islamic culture in the Muslim world co-exists with democratic arrangements on the global level. So, the concept of modernization and democratization

does not inevitably mean Westernization but can involve the possibility of adoption of many Western democratic achievements within the Islamic framework. Thus, political culture and democracy practiced among Muslims develop not by their isolation from or opposition to others but by giving of their own achievements and taking the best from others. Gülen proves that Islamic intellectual heritage and political culture must be revisited and respected and that Muslims' progress depends on the development of knowledge in Islamic sciences ('ilm) and contemporary technical education (fen). Gülen life's work has shown that there is no inherent conflict between Islamic thought and tradition and modern democracy. He has contributed positively to the understanding of democracy, civil society and human rights.xx

Finally, in the long term, the way to a better future lies through the recognition of religious pluralism, the adoption of open political systems, and the establishment of democratic governments throughout the world. It is not possible to impose this; it can only be brought about through convincing public argument and development within the community and the individual.

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#### Footnote

i Gülen in Ünal and Williams, 2000: 147–9.

ii Cetin, 2008: 226–30.

iii Diamond, 2008: 17–24, 30–33.

iv Sykiainen, 2007: 122–3.

v Gülen, 2004: 220; also .

vi See Puddington (2009).

vii Sykiainen, 2007: 119–132.

viii Gülen, 2005: 43–58.

ix Sykiainen, 2007: 110, Çetin 2008: 218; Gülen, 2004: 223; Gülen, 2005: 43–58.

x Gülen (2006).

xi Gülen in Ünal and Williams, 2000: 135–8.

xii Gülen, 2006; also personal correspondence, 08.11.2008.

xiii Sykiainen, 2007: 129–30.

xiv Gülen, 2006; Gülen in Saritoprak and Ünal, 2005: 452.

xv Cetin, 2008: 216–20; Gülen (2006).

xvi Gülen (2006).

xvii Ibid.

xviii Gülen (2006).

xix Esposito and Voll, 1996: 26–27.

xx Çetin 2008: 219; Hunt, 2007: 8–9; Barton, 2005: 43; Eickelman, 2002:4.

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