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Trends in Muslim Political Thought: Redefining Islam in the Socio-Political Context

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HALIM RANE, APR 16 2010

Since the second half of the 20th century, Islam has been reasserted as a socio-political force across the Muslim world. The past few decades have seen Islamist parties win elections in a number of Muslim countries, including Algeria, Palestine, and Turkey, and form the strongest opposition to Western-aligned ruling regimes in a host of others such as Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco. Moreover, Islamist parties have won significant proportions of the vote in numerous other Muslim countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia, and Pakistan.

These successes, however, have come amid discussion about the failure of political Islam. The two central counts concerning the failure have been political Islam's inability to provide an effective blueprint for an Islamic state based on the *shariah* and the abandonment of the pan-Islamic or caliphate model and contentment with a world order based on nation-states.[1] However, this is largely a failure only to the extent that it has not met the vision of such post-colonial Muslim thinkers and leaders as Abul A'la Maududi and Sayyid Qutb. The real failure is that political Islam has not met the basic Islamic vision of a just and equitable social order.[2]

The implementation of *shariah* is not the central challenge for political Islam. Even when *shariah* (in its modern conventional conception) is fully or near-fully implemented, as in the case of Afghanistan under the Taliban, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, or Sudan, the state is not closer to Islamic ideals in terms of establishing a just and ethically-based social order. Such states are among the poorest in term of performance on key social economic and political measures. No positive correlation is observable between a more full or comprehensive implementation of *shariah* and progress towards a more just and equitable social order in terms of political stability, good governance and government accountability and transparency, economic advancement, equitable distribution of wealth, educational attainment, and national power.[3] In large part, the problem is that these values, goals and standards are not the emphasised priorities of the modern conventional conception of *shariah*. Rather, they are often associated with the West, devalued, dismissed by Islamists and not included as part of the Islamic agenda.[4]

The first generation of Islamist political parties that based their political program on issues of public morality, the implementation of *hudud* laws, and establishment of Islamic states have lost the confidence of the Muslim electorate across the Muslim world due to their lack of effective response the major social, political and economic problems of Muslim countries; their inability to connect with non-Muslim minorities and secularists; and the suspicion and concern they evoke among Western powers. Today, Muslims do not necessarily vote on the basis of religious identity but according to their values and interests. If Islam is to contribute positively at the social and national levels in Muslim countries, an alternative approach is needed that is inspired by or derived from Islam but integrates Western democratic political institutions.

Since the turn of the century an emerging trend has been towards the adoption of a *maqasid*-oriented approach, which focuses on the higher objectives of Islam. This approach establishes justice, human rights, education, pluralism, government accountability and transparency and economic progression as 'Islamic' priorities. It emphasises public interest and well-being, rejects literal readings of sacred texts, and gives priority to the spirit of the message. As opposed to reading verses of the Quran in isolation, the *maqasid* approach required a comprehensive reading of the text as an integrated whole in order to identify the higher objectives.

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A *maqasid*-oriented approach can be observed in a number of parties around the Muslim world including Turkey's AKP, Malaysia's PKR and Indonesia's PKS. It should be highlighted that the AKP does not regard itself as Islamic or Islamist but rather a conservative democratic party. However, Islamic beliefs and values are a deeply important part of the identity of most Turkish people and the success of the AKP in Turkey is due to the fact that this party and its leadership respects and reflects the beliefs and values of the people. Its political program is not focussed on the issues of implementing *hudud* laws or establishing an Islamic state in the modern conventional sense, but issues of greater substance and centrality to Islam. In this sense it exhibits a *maqasid*-oriented approach, although the party does not and cannot use the term. Individual members of the party acknowledge the consistency between their party's policies, Islam's higher objectives, and what have become universal norms and ideals.[5]

Certain political parties in other Muslim countries that do not face the same constitutional constraints as Turkey's AKP are more overt in their commitment to a *maqasid*-oriented approach. Parties such as Malaysia's PKR and Indonesia's PKS are deeply committed to policies that advance justice, human rights, education, government accountability and transparency and economic development, which they regard as the *maqasid* or higher objectives of Islam. According to Dr Muhammad Nur Manuty, head of the PKR's Bureau for Religious Understanding, an Islamic state is one in which 'people have full equal rights, there is democracy, plurality, human rights are respected, and there is education for people, health care, and welfare services.' He contends that the PKR's commitment to *maqasid* is central to its identity and is what distinguishes the party from the first generation of Islamist parties in Malaysia.[6] Similarly, the *maqasid* approach is central to the politics of the PKS in Indonesia. In the words of Lutfi Hasan Ishaq, president of the party, 'the international community is now concerned about the [issues] similar to the *maqasid*, the universal values. It's time to declare the original objectives of Islamic teaching...the *maqasid shariah*. We are now moving to that...' He goes on to explain that the main priorities of the PKS are education, public service, health-care, income levels, and the standard of living.[7]

Both the PKR and PKS have not only established themselves as major opposition parties in their respective countries but have become instrumental in promoting an Islamic democracy based on the *maqasid* approach. Through a *maqasid* approach, they have not only demonstrated the consistency of Islam with good governance and socio-economic development but have shown that such an approach is attractive to a broad constituency that includes non-Muslims and Islamists. Manuty contends that the *maqasid* is gaining ground as the preferred approach to Islam among Islamist political parties because 'the traditional approach has failed and the second pressures from the realities of non-Muslims where we are now living in a very globalised world and it is inter-connected with other parts of the world'.[8] Similarly, PKS president Ishaq is critical of such countries as Sudan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan that adopt the title of 'Islamic state' and argues that 'it is not necessary to have the name [Islamic state] but move to develop, to serve the interests of the communities of the nation....Just serve the nation, the basic needs should be fulfilled, the services should be provided. This is Islam'.[9] On this point, Syed Husin Ali, deputy president of the PKR, adds that for an Islamically-oriented political party in a pluralistic society, the *maqasid* 'is the best approach because I think it can be easily understood not only by the Muslims but by the non-Muslims alike. If you approach from a fundamentalist angle then it becomes very difficult to explain'.[10]

In addition to providing the PKR and PKS the scope and flexibility to effectively operate amidst diverse and competing internal social forces, the *maqasid* approach also allows these parties to avoid attacks from external forces that generally hold pejorative views and are suspicious of Islamically-oriented parties. PKS president Ishaq acknowledges that Western countries such as the United States and Australia are better able to identify with Islamist party such as the PKS that adopt the universal values enshrined in the *maqasid* than the first generation Islamists that retain literalist views of *shariah* and an Islamic state. The Islamic values derived from a *maqasid* perspective, he explains, as '*al-Ma'ruf*, the acceptable values [that] everybody will accept even if they don't believe in God'.[11]

In sum, the AKP, PRK and PKS demonstrate the viability of Islamic democracy; they show that Muslim political parties can uphold both the principles of democracy and Islam while maintaining positive relations with both the Muslim world and the West. While Turkey's AKP has proven itself through democratic ascension to power and re-election without reference to Islam or Islamic concepts, other parties, namely Malaysia's PKR and Indonesia's PKS, are following on this path but define their approach more explicitly in terms of the *maqasid*. Collectively, these parties represent a second generation of Muslim political parties that are inspired by Islam and committed to advancing

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justice, human rights, education, good governance and economic prosperity in the interest of their respective people. They are not only redefining the concept of Islamic democracy and political Islam but also the fate of Islam itself in the socio-political context.

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[1] Roy, Olivier, *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*, p.1-2.

[2] Rahman, Fazlur, *Major Themes of the Quran*, p.62.

[3] Fuller, Graham, *The Future of Political Islam*, p.198.

[4] Fuller, Graham, *The Future of Political Islam*, p.198.

[5] Interviews conducted with senior members of the AKP in Istanbul in February 2010.

[6] Interview with Dr Muhammad Nur Manuty in Kuala Lumpur on 5 February 2010.

[7] Interview with Lutfi Hasan Ishaq in Jakarta on 9 April 2010.

[8] Interview with Dr Muhammad Nur Manuty in Kuala Lumpur on 5 February 2010.

[9] Interview with Lutfi Hasan Ishaq in Jakarta on 9 April 2010.

[10] Interview with Syed Husin Ali in Kuala Lumpur on 3 February 2010.

[11] Interview with Lutfi Hasan Ishaq in Jakarta on 9 April 2010.