

# To What Extent, if at all, does Islamism's Moral Agenda Render it Undemocratic?

Written by Adam Groves

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ADAM GROVES, DEC 3 2007

In recent years the compatibility of political Islam and democracy has been a high-profile issue for academics, Islamic thinkers and politicians alike. The importance of this theoretical debate has been amplified by the United States' apparent policy of promoting democracy in the Middle East, using force if necessary.

However, before one can analyse whether Islamism's moral agenda renders it essentially undemocratic, one must define both 'Islamism' and 'democracy'. Islamism is a political ideology that seeks to implement the principles of Muslim governance and society which are embodied in the Qur'an and *Hadith* (teachings of the Prophet). There is diversity within Islamism (for example, some Islamists justify the use of violence whilst others do not) and it is not static; by which I mean the concept of Islamism may change in the future.

Democracy is also a highly (some would say 'essentially') contested concept. I will use an expansive definition proposed by David Robertson. He has argued that by itself it 'means little more than that, in some undefined sense, political power is ultimately in the hands of the whole adult population, and that no smaller group has the right to rule' (1985: 80). Robertson himself has noted that by this definition democracy is a vague political term. However I believe that it successfully emphasizes the core importance of the people ('the whole adult population') without restricting the concept to a purely westernised understanding.

In this essay I will refer to theoretical and practical issues which could be considered to render Islamism undemocratic. Firstly, I will analyse the position of sovereignty within Islam, and specifically the question of whether democracy can exist if God is the source of sovereignty. I will also look at the Islamic principle of *shura* (consultation), and will propose that although it is by no means identical to democracy, it is a source of democratic ethics within Islam.

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Secondly, I will critically assess the argument that Islamists completely disregard notions of human rights and individual freedom which are essential to democracy. I will propose that, although important differences remain between Islamist understandings of democracy and the western concept of the word, they are not as large as is often thought.

Finally, I will place Islamism's 'moral agenda' within a socio-economic and political context to argue that, whilst some Islamists' beliefs may not necessarily sit comfortably with democracy, the realities of contemporary politics are driving Islamism along a democratic path. As they engage with democracy, there is evidence that Islamists adjust their long-term policies, and often become part of the legal and political process rather than a challenge to it.

### **Sovereignty of God and the Principle *shura*:**

The rise of Islamism in recent decades has meant that the concept of sovereignty has become central to Islamic political theory. Martin Kramer (1993) reports that in accordance with the rules of *Shari'a* (Islamic holy law) the concept of popular sovereignty is rejected by Islamists. Thinkers such as Khomeini have argued that divine law is sufficiently clear so as to render the concept of a popular vote obsolete; for Islamists sovereignty lies only in God. However, does this render Islamism's moral agenda undemocratic?

If sovereignty presides in God, and therefore not in the people 'either as a whole or a majority' (Hakim, 1987), the traditional emphasis placed on the role of 'the people' within democracy appears to be undermined. The *Caliphs* (Islamic religious leaders), as God's agents on earth, possess a degree of authority in order to 'enforce the laws of their sovereign'. However, unlike in 'traditional' democracies, this authority is not derived from the people, but rather is delegated by Allah (Kubba, Kahn, Monshipouri and Hicks, 2002: 4). As Al-Nabulsi points out, this means there is a lack of democratic accountability. He quotes the response of Othman Bin 'Affan (the third *Caliph*), to demands that he step down: 'Allah clothed me with a robe. If He wills He will take it away from me, and if He wills He will keep it on me' (2004: 2). Regardless of where sovereignty lies theoretically, in practice it lies with the leader of the state. The danger, as noted by Kubba et al., is that God becomes an 'excuse for installing and legitimizing governments that are not accountable to their citizens' and are unresponsive to their needs (2002: 5)

In itself, this does not necessarily render Islamism incompatible with democracy. Indeed many of the original Islamist leaders (for example Abul 'Ala al-Mawdudi and Hassan al-Banna) remained 'relatively quiet' in dismissing democracy's role within Islam. Their 'successors' however, often view it as the rule of human whim over the

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transcendental principles of Islam, and believe that clear Islamic values cannot be renegotiated by popular demand (Burgat, 2003: 123). These principles are regarded by many Islamists as absolute: it is impossible to separate Islam from society and governance, and it is an imperative that the 'state be based strictly' on Islamic beliefs in order to 'mold an Islamic society, informed first and foremost by religion' (Fuller, 2004: 4). At the theoretical level then, the divergence that exists between Islamist and western notions of sovereignty is clear.

However, it remains possible to reconcile the Islamist notion of sovereignty with democracy. Indeed some thinkers go on to argue that even though Islamists reject the western understanding that sovereignty lies in the people, democracy can be seen as central to the character of Islamic governance.

In a statement which has been echoed by numerous Islamists around the world, Sheikh Yousef Al-Qaradhwawi, religious leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, recently proclaimed that democracy is in the spirit of Islam. However, he appended this declaration with the comment: 'There are those who maintain that democracy is the rule of the people, but we want the rule of Allah' (in Al-Nabulsi, 2004: 1-2).

Fuller argues that 'few Muslims' see any contradiction in the assertion that democracy can exist even when sovereignty is not placed in the people (2004: 4). When the Prophet Muhammad lay on his deathbed he refused to name a successor. Masmoudi (2000) argues the Prophet's reluctance to specify a future political order was because he recognised that political systems would need to evolve and change over time and according to their location. Numerous academics (Krämer, 1993: 5; Ahmad, 2002; Fuller, 2004: 4) have noted that the majority of Islamists are less concerned with the exact political form of the state, and more concerned that it is governed in accordance with the principles of Islam which are embodied within *Shari'ah* and *hadith*. Whilst the Qur'an makes it explicitly clear that sovereignty emanates from God, it does not specify the structure of the state.

Fuller observes that until recently 'few leaders anywhere in the world derived their legitimacy from an electoral process' (2004: 4-7). Indeed, perhaps the world's most famous definition of democracy is preceded by an allusion to divine sovereignty: 'this nation, under God, shall have... government of the people, by the people, for the people' (Lincoln, 1863). One can acknowledge God as the sovereign source of law, whilst using the political system of democracy to decide how his will is best employed for the good of the population.

Those who support the concept of Islamic democracy go further than merely arguing that it can exist *despite* God's sovereignty; they believe that divine sovereignty *requires* a democracy. Abdelwahab El-Affendi (1993) points out that all Muslims accept God's sovereignty, which leads many to query how one person (the *Caliph*) can claim that

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they should have 'full, unquestioned authority'. He argues that this contradicts the rule of *Shari'ah* which states that 'all men are equal in front of God'. There is a clear resonance between this interpretation of Islam and the definition of democracy proposed by David Robertson (1985: 80). El-Affendi cites *hadith* to make the case that if Caliphs do not rule justly then they 'must be' disobeyed. 'If this is not to lead to chaos' he argues, then 'institutions which arbitrate between the ruler and the people' are 'advisable' (1993).

Islamists who seek to make the case for democracy turn to the democratic ethics embodied within the principle of *shura*. Esposito and Voll (2001) argue that the Iraqi Shi'ite leader Ayatollah Baqir al-Sadr's view was largely representative of Islamist thought when he stated that the people 'have a general right to dispose of their affairs on the basis of the principle of consultation'. However, there are debates within Islam which prevent a direct association being drawn between the principle of *shura* and democracy. If one emphasizes the verse 'and consult with them on the matter' (3:159) then consultation seems obligatory. However, should one choose to focus on the verse praising 'those who conduct their affairs by counsel' (43:38) then it appears merely desirable (Kubba et al., 2002: 4).

It is important to bear these debates in mind. Islamism is not a monolithic entity and as a result different Islamists will choose to concentrate on various interpretations of the Qur'an resulting in different conceptions of democracy. However, whilst acknowledging that there exists a broad range of perspectives, far from Islamism's moral agenda (with regards to sovereignty) rendering it essentially undemocratic, many Islamists appear to be beginning to accept democracy, at least in principle.

## **Human Rights and Individual Freedom:**

Judith Miller (1993) has asserted that 'to most Islamists, and to many Arabs' democracy merely 'translates as majority rule' and minority rights are held in 'almost total disregard'. A clash between Islamism's moral agenda and generally accepted human rights and individual freedoms could be considered to render it essentially undemocratic, especially in the eyes of western powers who promote a liberal 'brand' of democracy as the only progressive option.

It is notable that the Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights (1981) omits any mention of the right to freely choose a spouse or to change religious beliefs; entitlements which were clearly established in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 16, paragraph 2 and Article 18). NGOs have observed that religious and ethnic minorities in Iran are discriminated against both 'in law and practice' (Human Rights Watch, 1997), and as Kubba

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comments, indicators such as 'violations of human rights' expose 'the weakness of democracy in many Muslim countries' (Kubba et al., 2002). There appears to be a conflict between the laws of *Shari'a* which Islamists wish to implement, and essential components of (liberal) democracy.

However, this conflict is not as great as many think it to be, and neither are Islamists' values entirely inflexible. As we have already seen with regards to the controversy over the principle of *shura*, Islam is largely constructed according to human understandings of God's wishes. Fuller argues that this is a process which will always leave principles and traditions 'open to debate and new interpretation over time' (2004, 4). This flexibility can be seen with regards to modern thought on the *hudud* (Islamic laws and their punishments as prescribed by Allah), polygamy and, most recently, the gradual recognition and approval of political pluralism (Burgat, 2003: 134). The process of accepting many of the human rights and individual freedoms inherent in democracy has already begun.

Kubba et al. note that the suppression of human rights is being challenged by two core groups: young people 'agitating against government oppression' and women (2002: 1). Particularly in countries where some form of political representation and elections occur, Islamists are engaging with women because of the potential votes they offer. Dedicated 'women's wings of Islamist parties, and even women on central committees... are now commonplace' (Fuller, 2004: 12). Esposito and Voll (2001) argue that the influence of women and young people in Iran has seen the 'one man, one vote, one time' critique largely undermined, as women have increasingly become an important force in politics. Kepel (2003: 363) points out the 'ranks of veiled female militants' within Islamist movements are the 'first generation' of women to have a role outside of a domestic context, and both Kepel and Paidar (2001) have argued that 'Islamist feminism' is engendering the reformist movement. Kepel concludes that this 'may represent the first stirrings of tomorrow's Muslim democracy' (2003: 363).

It is also important to remember when we talk of Islamists 'moving towards an acceptance of human rights and individual freedoms' that certain rights are already inherent within Islam. Some would go on to argue that these are far more secure than many of the human rights which Islamists think of as western or colonial in origin. The Islamist Abu al-'A'la Mawdudi has contended that 'rights granted by kings or legislative assemblies can be withdrawn as easily as they are conferred; but no individual and no institution has the authority to withdraw the rights conferred by Allah' (1987). Ahmad cites David Schuman's analysis that democracy always legitimizes the successful outcome of a political struggle, which means that the definition of 'good' is reliant on an uncontrolled clash of competing interests. For Islamists this is clearly not acceptable as they are seeking to frame the governance of the state within the laws of the Qur'an, meaning only that which is in accordance with *Shari'a* is legitimate (Ahmad, 2002).

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Many academics believe that Shari'a protects essential human rights within the context of Islamic law. Because all men are equal in front of God they are all equally entitled to their freedom. 'There is a general recognition' within Islam, Krämer argues, 'that God created people to be different' and therefore 'differences of opinion are natural, legitimate and even beneficial... provided they remain within the confines of the faith and common decency' (1993: 7). Abu al-'A'la Mawdudi has asserted that non-Muslims who reside within Islamic states (known as *dhimmis*, or 'the covenanted') also have certain rights. He argues that their 'life, property and honor' must be 'respected and protected in exactly the same way as that of a Muslim citizen' (1987). The Algerian Islamist Mahfoud Nahna has stated that 'from the moment that democracy does not affect the heart of Islamic faith, it becomes the quest of the believer' (in Krämer, 1993: 7-8) and the influential Tunisian Islamist Rashid Ghannouchi has gone further still, declaring:

"If by democracy is meant the liberal model of government prevailing in the West, a system under which the people freely choose their representatives and leaders, in which there is an alternation of power, as well as all freedoms and human rights for the public, then Muslims will find nothing in their religion to oppose democracy, and it is not in their interests to do so." (In Esposito and Voll, 2001)

Whilst many Islamists supplement their comments on human rights with a qualification that they must adhere to Islamic law, as Burgat notes, many western countries also seek to limit the influence which 'foreigners' can have on their political and social systems. Germany's constitution refuses to recognise those who do not accept its principles; the Swiss and Norwegians will only appoint Christians to the most influential legal positions and the English Queen 'must also be the head of the Anglican Church' (Burgat, 2003: 135). This is not to deny that problems remain when trying to reconcile the Islamist moral agenda with human rights and the concept of individual freedom. As many academics concur, the 'liberal individualism' which is central to the western conception of democracy has fundamental differences to much Islamist thought. Krämer declares that a 'bottom line' of 'no toleration of, nor freedom for... the hypocrite, the sceptic and the atheist, the libertarian and the subversive' within Islam, leaves any hopes of democracy 'in jeopardy' (1993: 7-8).

However, Islamism and democracy are not entirely incompatible in theory, and as I shall argue in the next section, in practice Islamists are increasingly being driven towards democracy by the realities of contemporary politics regardless of their moral agenda.

### **Islamism's 'moral agenda' Within a Socio-economic and Political Context:**

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The conflicts between Islamism's moral agenda and certain democratic principles (such as equality of men and women) are sometimes difficult to reconcile. This has led Malcom Kerr to conclude that, in their attempt to expand the role of human interpretation when reading the *Qur'an*, reformists often define *shari'a* by its 'empty spaces' (in Krämer, 1993: 5). In a recent debate in the House of Commons Jack Straw was asked if there were 'any democratic states in the Middle East other than Israel'. His diplomatic response, that 'there are states in different stages of democratic development', was met with laughter (Parliamentary Weekly Roundup, 2004). In reality some states, such as Saudi Arabia, outright dismiss democracy as 'non-Islamic' (Fuller, 2004: 4). Whilst many Islamist groups practice some form of democratic ethics internally, both the theoretical incompatibilities and the realities of Middle Eastern states suggest that Islamism's relationship with democracy is weak. However, I will argue that contemporary world affairs are pushing Islamists ever closer to democracy regardless of possible problems associated with their moral agenda.

As reported by Alfred Prados, opinion of the US on the 'Arab Street' was poor even before the recent occupation of Iraq. In 2001 Prados cited several reasons for anger towards America, including: perceived US-led globalization; the 1991 'invasion' of Saudi Arabia (invited by a US-maintained elite); US support for authoritarian regimes; a perceived US-led policy of containment; and a perceived pro-Israel, anti-Islam stance (pg 2). A survey conducted in the Middle East after the 2003 Iraq invasion found that Arab anger towards the US had reached 'unprecedented' levels (Telhami, 2003: 24). In this context, Islamism is thriving, leaving Fuller to conclude that Islamists are moving towards democracy (regardless of 'convoluted arguments about the source of sovereignty') because they have recognized the reality that they themselves would be the main beneficiaries of it (2004: 7). The gains made by the Muslim Brotherhood in the December 2005 elections in Egypt are indicative of this. Consequently, F Gregory Gause III has written that 'the problem with promoting democracy in the Arab world' is that 'Washington probably would not like the governments Arab democracy would produce' (2005).

Evidence of Islamists' pragmatic attitudes can be seen in recent polls gauging Shi'a opinion in Iraq. Despite the theoretical problems which Shi'a doctrines (more so than Sunni) have with democratic principles, over sixty-nine percent of Shi'a Arabs in Iraq want a democracy dominated by religious leaders (ABC News Polling, 2004). This compares to just forty-four percent of the Sunni community, despite the fact that there are less theoretical difficulties associated with a Sunni democracy because, in contrast to the Shi'a, they agree that the caliphate should be 'based on the consensus of the Muslim community' (Krämer, 1993: 6). Whilst these results are by no means definitive, the fact that an Iraqi government would almost certainly be Shi'a dominated does support the idea propounded by Fuller (2004) that Islamists are primarily concerned with the most pragmatic route to power rather than the most religious. This has led Fuller to conclude that although the Arab world as a whole is moving 'towards greater radicalism and

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anti-Americanism, Islamist parties are entering the [political] system more vigorously in nearly every country... Anti-Americanism facilitates the integration of Islamism everywhere' (2004: 9).

Some sceptics believe that this acceptance of democratic politics is purely instrumental and that once in power the 'one man, one vote, one time' thesis will become reality. However, Malik (2005) has argued that there is the potential for 'moral movement' even when radical groups enter into discourse purely for pragmatic reasons; indeed there is evidence that once Islamists are incorporated into the democratic system they usually engage with the process, even when defeated in elections. This has been observed in Kuwait where the Muslim Brotherhood and their 'fundamentalist' rivals the *Salafis* have proven adept at forming coalitions, and also in Jordan, Turkey, Algeria and Tunisia (Fuller, 2004: 12; Esposito and Voll, 2001). Over time, as Islamists become involved with the democratic process there is evidence of groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood demonstrating a long term shift in their attitude towards political participation. Whilst Fuller observes that a cautionary note is necessary because the Brotherhood took part in a coup in Sudan in 1989 when they believed that they would not win an election (Fuller, 2004: 7), in the majority of cases, failure to win power will not result in Islamists resorting to violent means, but rather will influence them to adopt policies which are acceptable to the majority (Waterbury, 1994: 40-41). As we have seen, this is already occurring in many countries with regards to their attitudes towards women. It is also worth noting, that as groups increase in size, there is a tendency for them to become less radical (Reader, 2005). However, whether their expansion is a cause or a consequence of this deradicalisation is debatable.

As a result of the contemporary socio-economic and political situation, and specifically as a result of US foreign policy, there is much support for Islamist thinking in the Middle East. As Islamists come to appreciate that their popular support can best be mobilised through the democratic process, any problems associated with their 'moral agenda' are put to one side in a pursuit of power. Once Islamists are engaged in the democratic process their long-term thinking has, on the whole, shifted towards an acceptance of democratic principles. My argument, that Islamists' initial pragmatism is likely to be followed by an adoption of democratic practice, is supported by Rustow's transition theory (1970).

## **Conclusion:**

I have argued in this essay that despite remaining difficulties, Islamists' moral agenda can largely be reconciled with democratic practices and principles including the popular vote and human rights. Firstly, I have suggested that God's sovereignty does not necessarily render a democratic system impossible, because the popular vote can be utilised where God's word is open to interpretation. The Islamic principle of *shura* provides a starting point for such



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democratic ethics.

Secondly, human rights are often recognised and enforced by Islamists as long as they remain within the principles of Islam. It is important to recognise that the Islamist movement is neither monolithic nor static, and that over time human rights may gain a more prominent place in the Islamist discourse.

Finally, whilst there remain certain difficulties with reconciling Islamism's moral agenda with democracy, Islamists are increasingly being driven towards the democratic process as a means of mobilising the popular support which they enjoy in the contemporary socio-economic and political environment. Whilst western powers may not like the immediate consequences of this democratic shift, there is evidence that over time Islamists become part of the political and legal process rather than a challenge to it.

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