

How Political Realism Can Save Muslims a Lot of Frustration

By Abdullah bin Hamid Ali

One of the fundamental critiques directed against classical Islamic conceptions of government by Western thinkers is that this medieval order placed too much power into the hands of a single person: the caliph (Khalifa). The caliph could appoint and remove any of his governors at will, while the same governors did not possess a similar right that could counterbalance the absolute authority of the caliph. Governors, like the masses, had to somewhat trust that the caliph's decisions were wise and in the best interest of the polity. However, when that trust withered, governors and others saw violent revolution as the only option to political reform. The fact that many Muslims, especially during the 20th century, responded to Western neocolonialism with calls to reconstituting the caliphate in order to meet the challenges posed by western imperialism and "democracy", led to the reinforcement of allegations that Islam is not compatible with the modern world, and fears were stoked surrounding the looming so-called threat of Muslim theocracies.

The birth of democracy and republicanism in the West has posed a major challenge for Muslim scholars who sanctified the form and substance of classical Muslim theorizing about government. In terms of how governments were legitimated, the Sunnis developed a doctrine which accommodated violent revolution as a legitimate means to power if either the ruling aristocracy or outgoing caliph unsuccessfully transferred the office to a new caliph. Violent revolution was the exception to the rule, and the rebellion could only be legitimated if the incumbent caliph was killed in the process. Otherwise, the legitimacy of the usurping caliph remained in question.

Whatever moral value one assigns to earlier Muslim political accommodation, it is clear today that a significant number of Muslims consider the ability of the populous to appoint their leaders through democratic elections to be the preferred way to govern society. More and more Muslims now believe that freedom, justice, and progress can only be guaranteed under a democratic regime that is appointed by the people.

Unfortunately, as Athenian democracy failed to live up to its stated principles in light of power being consolidated into the hands of its affluent aristocracy, democracy in our world today has been exposed to be nothing more than a tool for the 1% to dominate and exploit the 99%. Democracy to the ruling class is totally analogous to what Febreze is to garbage. Just as Febreze does a good job in concealing the smell of garbage from a blindfolded person, democracy deftly conceals the reality that at the end of the day the same people who have always ruled society continue to do so i.e. the rich.

In reality, if more of the many Muslim autocrats in the world today were as politically shrewd as Western politicians, there would likely be much less justification for violence against their own people. Democracy understood primarily as the ability to elect one's governors is so effective because it convinces the populous that their vote really has meaning and their concerns are really being taken seriously. We, however, find ourselves time and again victims of the broken promises of manipulative politicians who exert most of their efforts to serve large interest groups with "big" money.

We can continue to lament this unfortunate situation, or we can become political realists. A political realist in my view is one who accepts that: 1) a truly egalitarian society will and can never exist; 2) there will always be some who benefit more from power than others; 3) all people like privilege; 4) people generally do not voluntarily give up privilege, especially economic and political privilege; and 5) those who enjoy the greatest political success, especially in a so-called democracy, are those who unify upon shared interests, and mobilize all their economic and cultural resources in order to secure those interests.

The proof of this is that the three most politically successful groups in American society—white Protestants, white Catholics, and Jews—have achieved that success, not because of acting as individuals putting their faith in individual votes. Rather, it has been because of their understanding of how important collective group action is in securing one's interests in this American democracy. Other groups, likewise, who came to the same realization, have been much more successful politically than those who have not yet realized this.

Governance is not a “right” of any group. It is a trust and responsibility that one undertakes for the benefit of the public. Social instability in the form of indiscriminate violence is not a justice equal to the perceived injustice committed against any given political faction. Even if Ron Paul had won the presidency and was taken seriously about drastic economic reforms to America, the electoral colleges could have barred his appointment, even if he won the popular vote, if they felt that he would be harmful for America.

Ibn Khaldun, who acknowledges Imam Abu Bakr al-Baqillani’s anomalous view permitting for a non-Qurashite person to become the caliph, validates al-Baqillani’s stance by expressing that there is no legitimate Islamic interest (maqsad shar’i) in stipulating that the caliph be a Hashimite or Qurashite as most classical scholars opined. Ibn Khaldun, like al-Baqillani, believed that the existence of an internally coherent cultural minority (‘asabiya) is necessary in order to maintain societal stability and continuity. In other words, they believed that the populous must accept to some extent that a certain type of person has greater right and privilege to political rule than others do in order for society to operate efficiently. In the United States of America, that group historically has been the Anglo-Saxon. Similarly, in every other society the principle can be identified as a universal whether or not we want to acknowledge it or if we decide to question whether or not it is just. There is at least one particular group afforded *de facto* political and cultural legitimacy in every country.

Shaykh Ibn Taymiya wisely entitles his famous work on Islamic governance and political thought, *Scripturally-Informed Governance* (al-Siyasa al-Shar’iyya), as opposed to ‘Islamic Governance’ (al-Hukm al-Islami) or ‘Rule by the Sacred Law’ (Hukm al-Shari’a). I say, “wise”, because in doing so, he is able to highlight that governance in an Islamic polity has no particular form, necessarily, beyond principles and precedents which are meant to guide the behavior of the governors and the governed. Among those principles are: 1) the use of those who are the most qualified for office; 2) the consideration of both moral integrity and educational expertise in appointments; and 3) the consultation of experts and public representatives regarding matters that affect all members of society. A governor’s most important functions are: 1) to manage the nation’s wealth for the benefit of society; 2) to guarantee public safety from the spread of crime and immorality; and 3) to protect the polity from external threats.

If this is so, there is no reason that a Muslim society cannot function as a democracy where the masses participate in the election process as long as candidates and those voting take into consideration the aforementioned principles. A Muslim democracy does not need to necessarily run in exactly the same way that it does in the US, Britain, France, or Germany. If anything, it ‘must’ accommodate the particular circumstances and needs of each individual society. On the other hand, justice is not an essential characteristic of democracies. Rather, justice, peace, prosperity and freedom can even exist under non-democratic systems where rule is determined by an exclusive group of people. What is most important to remember is that in any given situation, there will always be some who will be more privileged than others in society. It matters most that one has opportunity, the ability to prosper, and the freedom to pursue excellence.

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