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Democracy and the Muslims

Most modern Muslims believe and claim that government in Islam is democratic in character. A government run by the Muslims may be democratic in character but an Islamic government is not.

Till the end of World War I, Muslims lived everywhere under the rule of kings and sultans. They called their kings and sultans *Zillullah* (the Shadow of God), and they were very happy to live in that "shadow" (as if God has a shadow), even though, with rare exceptions, those kings and sultans were the most despotic, autocratic and authoritarian of rulers. They exercised absolute power over their subjects, and could kill anyone who displeased them.

After the World War I, the power of the kings and sultans began to wane. In the changing perceptions of the twentieth century, the kings and sultans became "anachronistic," and the Muslims made the discovery that democracy was Islamic. They began to sing the praises of democracy, and most of them became "converts" to it. Their "conversion" to democracy means that during the first fourteen centuries of its history, Islam was "undemocratic," and it is only sometime after 1919 since when it has become "democratic."

Those Muslims who claim that democracy is Islamic, say that after the death of the Apostle of God, his companions set up the *al–Khilafat er–Rashida* (the Rightly–Guided Caliphate), and it was the best example of democratic government.

Al-Khilafat er-Rashida lasted only thirty years. After those thirty years, the Islamic democracy was supplanted by absolute monarchy. That system of government called "Islamic democracy" ceased to exist. Islamic democracy proved to be a highly perishable commodity. It lasted, in fact, less than thirty years – not even a generation!

The Islamic democracy died unclaimed, unmourned and unsung. Who killed it? The pagans? The idolaters? The polytheists? The Magians? The Jews? The Christians? No. The Muslims themselves killed it. And who were the Muslims who killed Islamic democracy? They were not the Muslims of later centuries. They all belonged to the generation of Muhammad Mustafa himself, and all of them were his "companions."

If the program of Islam comprehends the establishment of democracy as the ideal form of government for the Muslims, then what is the position of those saboteurs who destroyed it in its infancy? Islamic democracy was created by the companions of the Prophet but those men who destroyed it, were also his companions.

While one group of companions, headed by Abu Bakr and Umar, had founded the institution of Islamic democracy (as claimed by the Sunni Muslims), another group of companions, headed by Muawiya bin Abu Sufyan and Amr bin Aas, had demolished it.

A third group of companions, headed by Abdullah bin Umar bin al-Khattab and Abu Hurayra, had witnessed the struggle between Islamic democracy and its grave-diggers. They had been the silent spectators of the death throes of Islamic democracy. When no doubt was left that Muawiya was the "winner," they, being realists and pragmatists, declared that they were with him – with Muawiya – the destroyer of Islamic democracy!

Faris Glubb

Islamic government was completely undermined in the greater part of the Muslim world by the seizure of power by Mu'awiya in 40 A.H. Mu'awiya destroyed the Kingdom of God established by the Prophet and replaced it with a worldly kingdom. He substituted a just and democratic caliphate with a tyrannical hereditary monarchy... (*Article captioned "The Islamic Ideal of Ethical Government," published in the Muslim News International, London, March 1963*)

Abu Bakr, Umar, Muawiya, Amr bin Aas, Abdullah bin Umar bin al-Khattab, and Abu Hurayra, all were companions of the Prophet of Islam. Abu Bakr and Umar established Islamic democracy; and Muawiya and Amr bin Aas destroyed it. Does it mean that the builders and the destroyers – both groups – are right, and democracy and absolutist monarchy both are "Islamic?"

We can suspend judgment, at the moment, on "Islamic" democracy but the present-day Sunni jurists and scholars are not willing to extend that courtesy to monarchy as also being "Islamic." According to them, there is no such thing as Islamic monarchy. They are unanimous in billing monarchy as "unIslamic."

G. H. Jansen

The political nature of the Islamic state or order is naturally of primary interest. When engaged in the practical task of drawing up a new constitution for Pakistan that 'would be in consonance with the teachings and history of Islam,' (President) Ayub Khan asked his experts to study Islamic history and the constitutions of other Muslim countries. Two things emerged clearly from this study: *There was no place for Kingship in Islam,* and succession could not be on a hereditary basis.

The community as a whole must have the right to choose its leader and the right to remove him. (This

means that all Muslim monarchies, whatever their pretensions to religiosity, have been totally unIslamic). On these two fundamentals there is indeed agreement among our political reformers, but on every other aspect of Islamic policy there are differences of substance and of emphasis. (*Militant Islam, New York*)

The Ikhwan al-Muslimeen (the Muslim Brotherhood) of Egypt, has indicted all military regimes (dictatorships) also as unIslamic.

G. H. Jansen

The Muslim Brotherhood stressed that no government established by force can be accepted, for consultation is mandatory according to Sura 42 verse 35 of the Koran. Hence military regimes produced by coups are unIslamic. (*Militant Islam, New York*)

It is, therefore, the consensus of the Sunni scholars of Pakistan and the Sunni spokesmen of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, that monarchy and military regimes both are unIslamic.

But it is a latter-day consensus. The Sunni jurists and scholars of the classical times would not have endorsed this view. Their consensus was entirely different from this. They upheld the supremacy of brute force, as noted before.

And isn't the term "unIslamic" a euphemism for "pagan"? If it is, and if according to the Sunni jurists of Pakistan, monarchy is a pagan institution, then what is their verdict on the monarchs themselves. Can the monarchs run an unIslamic establishment, and still be true Muslims? And what is their verdict on the man who first seized the Right–Guided Caliphate in a coup, and then converted it into monarchy, viz., Muawiya bin Abu Sufyan? He often boasted that he was the first of the kings of the Arabs.

The views of the Sunni jurists of Pakistan and the views of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt on the character of monarchy and military regimes, are shared by Muhammad Asad, a modern, European, Sunni scholar. He writes in his book, *State and Government in Islam* (1980):

"...let us be clear in our minds on one point at least: there has *never existed a truly Islamic state* after the time of the Prophet and of the Medina Caliphate headed by the Prophet's immediate successors, the four Right-Guided Caliphs, Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali."

According to the foregoing judgment, the Islamic State ceased to be Islamic as soon as Muawiya seized it.

But Muawiya went beyond changing the Right-Guided Caliphate into an unIslamic, i.e., pagan monarchy. He passed on monarchy as his "legacy" to the Muslim *umma*. The Muslim *umma*, therefore, has been ruled for all these centuries, by kings, and is saddled with them even today in the 1990s – in countries like Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Morocco.

And yet, the same Muawiya is, for the Sunni Muslims, a "companion and a scribe" of the Prophet, and

oh yes, "may God be pleased with him" (for changing Islamic caliphate into a pagan monarchy).

It is perhaps an interesting exercise to ponder if Sunni scholars can see the fallacies in their own logic, and the glaring contradictions in their own consensus. If they can, then it would be interesting to see how they rationalize them.

Many Muslims look back longingly toward the thirty-year reign of the al-Khulafa-er-Rashidoon (the rightly-guided caliphs) as the "golden age" of Islam. Actually, it was not so golden as it appears to them, or, at best, it was golden for those Muslims who had amassed vast quantities of gold for themselves during those "golden" years.

There were only four of these "rightly-guided" caliphs. Three out of them met violent deaths, two in the midst of civil war. One of them, i.e., Abu Bakr, who was not killed, and who died a natural death, was khalifa for only two years.

G. H. Jansen

Yet another source for legal precedent are the traditions of the Khalifah-al-Rashidun, the 'rightly-guided caliphs,' the first four rulers to succeed Muhammad. They were Abu Bakr, Omar, Osman and Ali, and their four reigns lasted from 632 to 661 A.D. This brief space of twenty-nine years is viewed, nostalgically through the obscuring mists of time, as the 'golden age' of Islam. Why it should be so considered is debatable, for its brevity was because, of the four caliphs, two were assassinated and one was cut down by his enemies, in his home, when reading the Koran.

All the divisions that have plagued Islam and the Arab world ever since then, were born during that 'golden' age. It was certainly a glorious age, the period when the Muslim Arabs conquered the whole vast area extending from Tripolitania in the west to the frontiers of India in the east. So the 'traditions' of what these four glorious but ill–fated rulers said and did were added to the growing corpus of Islamic law. (*Militant Islam, New York*)

Two modern Pakistani historians, Professor Sayed Abdul Qadir and Professor Muhammad Shuja-ud-Deen, have quoted Abul Kalam Azad in their *History of Islam* (Lahore, Pakistan) in the chapter captioned "The Meaning of Khilafat" as follows:

"There should be a government for the guidance, welfare and happiness of mankind which would give the world deliverance from cruelty, tyranny, oppression and exploitation; and which would restore peace and security to all so that it may become possible to promulgate the Law of God upon this earth, thereby transforming it into heaven."

There was such a government – the one founded by Muhammad, the Messenger of God (may God bless him and his family), in Medina – which was transforming this earth into heaven by promulgating the Law of God upon it. But its career was interrupted by his death. After his death, new people took

charge of his government. But their aims, policy and program were not the same as his, and they, therefore, changed the character of his government.

Muhammad's government was the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth, but after his death, it became an "Aristotelian" government.

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