

Islam and Democracy

Today we talk about Islam and governance. How does Islam approach governance? Is Islam pro-democracy?

Islam is a complete way of life that ensures humans can lead a good life bearing in mind that life in itself is a test and has to be lived by God’s commands. As Islam came up with solutions to issues of concern today such as abortion, the economy, and immigration, Islam also gave guidance on governance. Islam’s approach to governance is a deeply established system based on the Quran, Prophet Muhammad’s Sunnah (teachings), and the practices of the Prophet’s early Caliphs (the first four successors). It includes values of justice, equality, responsibility, and public welfare. Unlike current political frameworks, Islamic governance is not characterized by a specific form, such as a republic or monarchy. Instead, it is a values-driven system designed to achieve Islam’s aims of preserving faith, life, intellect, and property, hence maintaining a harmonious and just community.

In Islam, ultimate sovereignty belongs solely to Allah*, the Almighty. Allah (AL-Lah) is described in the Quran as the sole Creator and Sustainer of the universe. This divine sovereignty means humans are entrusted as “vicegerents” on Earth to implement justice and uphold God’s laws. The concept of divine sovereignty fundamentally shapes Islamic governance, ensuring that any form of rule is based on obedience to God’s guid-

ance and accountability before Him. This makes sense because if the rules and laws come from the Almighty, then we, the people, will be sure they are not biased or tailored for a certain group over another.

The Quran and Sunnah (the teachings and practices of Prophet Muhammad, PBUH) are the primary sources of guidance, providing frameworks for rulers and citizens alike to conduct their affairs. This paradigm is not prescriptive for a given system or affairs. This framework is not rigidly prescriptive about a specific system but emphasizes adherence to ethical and legal principles.

Justice is a core principle in Islam, permeating all aspects of governance. The Quran repeatedly commands rulers to act with justice: **“O you who have believed, be persistently standing firm in justice, witnesses for Allah, even if it be against yourselves or parents and relatives...”** [Quran 4: 135].

Justice is for fairness, equality before the law, and the protection of individual rights. Fairness is based on another criterion, accountability. Every ruler is viewed as a shepherd who will be questioned about his flock. Prophet Muhammad emphasized, *“All of you are shepherds (responsible for), and each of you is responsible for his flock. A man is the shepherd of the people of his house, and he is responsible. A woman is the shepherd of her husband’s house, and she is responsible. A servant is a shepherd of his master’s money and he is responsible. Each of*



Guest Column

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you is a shepherd, and each is responsible for his flock.”

All these principles find their reflection in early Islamic governance through the examples set forth by the early Caliphs. They provided transparent administrations where the rulers were personally accountable before the public. One example is that Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab himself would go around the city of Medina to see whether justice was being upheld. He was questioned once about how he paid for his clothes. He was also never closed to criticism and advice from the people. Such active accountability imposed restrictions on the powers of a ruler and brought governance into conformity with Islamic values.

Then comes one of the cornerstones of governance principles in Islam, the shura, or consultation (the Rule of the Community). Shura is very similar to the concept of the town hall, or parliament, where the ruler is obliged to seek guidance, opinions, and wisdom from community members (the people). Those the ruler seeks their help are usually people with knowledge, honor, and good faith. Rulers are expected to ensure that decisions reflect the needs and welfare of the people.

It is worth noting that shura does not impose a specific political model but emphasizes the consultative process, allowing flexibility in how it is applied. The Quran encourages Muslims to conduct their affairs by mutual consultation: **“And consult them in the matter...”** [Quran 3: 159] and **“their affairs are by consultation among them...”** [Quran 42:38]. Shura serves as the Islamic equivalent of modern participatory governance.

In Islamic history, the early caliphs practiced shura in the form of a council called “The Shura Council,” where companions and elders were present to advise on matters about government. By such practice, members of the community can have a say in decisions taken at this level without any disunity and also for governance towards Islamic principles. The same notion, considered in contemporary times, is thought to be applied in advancing democratic principles whereby the community members can have a say in leadership selection and policymaking.

An essential objective of Islamic governance is the protection of individual rights and the public welfare. Islam places significant emphasis on protecting life, religion, intellect, and property, which are central to Islam’s goals. These objectives guide policies, ensuring that governance serves the common good. Islamic governance encourages the state to provide for social welfare, including the establish-

ment of institutions to care for the poor, orphans, and other vulnerable groups. Zakat (charitable almsgiving) is an institutionalized practice, requiring wealth redistribution to address social inequality and support community welfare. The early Caliphs set a precedent by establishing social welfare policies, such as stipends for families in need and provisions for widows and orphans.

The rule of law is central in Islam; everybody, including the rulers, is governed by the divine laws and principles. The Quran and Sunnah are the main sources of legislation, but jurisprudence (fiqh, which means deep understanding) gives the mechanism for interpreting the principles into application to governance.

Ethical conduct in leadership is also required, and Islamic governance sustains integrity, humility, and honesty. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said that authority is a trust and that any acts of perverting authority for personal gains are strictly prohibited. The prophet warned against bribery, corruption, and oppression, thus keeping at front moral integrity in governance.

Although Islam gives the essential elements of governance, it is not prescriptive regarding specific structures. Throughout Islamic history, the several forms in which governance evolved over the varying demands of society always showed these essential principles intact.

For example, the Muslim empires, like the Abbasid

and Ottoman, established frameworks for governance relevant to their times and geographical boundaries. They integrated administrative, legal, and welfare systems that ensured adherence to Islamic principles but were responsive to society’s needs. This flexibility is highly applicable in the present day, as many Muslim-majority countries continue in their pursuit of establishing a balance between Islamic principles and modern political systems within a framework that still respects Islamic ethics and values used democratic elements.

In the modern era, the application of Islamic governance varies widely. Some Muslim-majority countries have sought to implement Islam’s principles within their constitutions, while others operate secular systems with Islamic influences on personal and family law. Contemporary scholars and thinkers continue to study how Islamic governance principles follow modern democratic structures and human rights frameworks.

To conclude, Islam and the basic principles of democracy are almost the same, yet the ultimate goal is for humans to remember their Creator and his commands and apply them to their lives.

(* Allah is the name of God in Aramaic and Arabic. It is the name of God spoken by Jesus.)

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Appeals court orders new trial for man on Texas’ death row over judge’s antisemitic bias

SAN ANTONIO – A Texas appeals court ordered a new trial Wednesday for a Jewish man on death row — who was part of a gang of prisoners that fatally shot a police officer in 2000 after escaping — because of antisemitic bias by the judge who presided over his case.

Lawyers for Randy Halprin

have contended that former Judge Vickers Cunningham in Dallas used racial slurs and antisemitic language to refer to him and some of his co-defendants.

Halprin, 47, was among the group of inmates known as the “Texas 7,” who escaped from a South Texas prison in December 2000 and then committed nu-

merous robberies, including the one in which they shot 29-year-old Irving police officer Aubrey Hawkins 11 times, killing him.

By a vote of 6-3, the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals ordered that Halprin’s conviction be overturned and that he be given a new trial after concluding that Cunningham was biased

against him at the time of his trial because he is Jewish.

The appeals court found evidence showed that during his life, Cunningham repeated unsupported antisemitic narratives. When Cunningham became a judge, he continued to use derogatory language about Jewish people outside the courtroom

“with ‘great hatred, (and) disgust’ and increasing intensity as the years passed,” the court said.

It also said that during Halprin’s trial, Cunningham made offensive antisemitic remarks outside the courtroom about Halprin in particular and Jews in general.

—AP

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1 Peter 5:7

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