Islamic Democratic Discourse: Theory, Debates, and Philosophical Perspectives

M. A. Muqtedar Khan, ed.
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M. A. Muqtedar Khan's (ed.) *Islamic Democratic Discourse: Theory, Debates, and Philosophical Perspectives* examines how Muslim thinkers have and are trying to formulate systems for good and ethical self-governance and the necessity, therein, for political discourse. The debates in these essays, which span a wide range of subjects and periods, are held together by a common principle: political discourse has a long standing in the Muslim world. Given that the Muslim world's conventional image is one in which autocratic regimes prevail, the significance of this argument, presented here from its theological, legal, and regional perspectives, is of great importance.

For political discourse to be meaningful – that is, for it to be an exercise in the clarification and exchange of ideas and to lead, in some instances, to action – requires that it take place both in the public and private sphere. The public sphere may be more readily recognized as the proper space for political discourse. However, the slippage of political discourse over to the private sphere is also of great value in that it indicates two things: first, political ideas are recognized as important to both a person's collective and individual sensibilities and, second, while political discourse is expounded in the public sphere, its ideas are often first worked out and subsequently reflected upon in the private sphere.

The term *public sphere* itself may be understood differently by different people at different times. Which definition is employed – the public sphere as a venue: for the discourse of governments alone (and here we continue to focus on discourse rather than refer also to actions); for the discourse of groups; or for a discourse among governments, individuals, and groups – will significantly impinge upon our understanding of the term.

Is the concept of the space in which such discourse is possible differently configured by an Islamic sensibility as averse to a western sensibility? Such a question does not argue for the intrinsic difference of peoples, but merely for their different collective histories. And in our modern period, following the Muslim-majority countries' intimate interaction with the West, does and can the principle of difference continue to hold? If the interaction has not produced a change in ideas and practices in these countries, can we say that it has, at the bare minimum level, produced a shift of expectation regarding the possibility of discourse? We see, then, that representations of space are not static, that they necessarily inform, and, one could argue, control what form of discourse a society deems permissible.

Islamic Democratic Discourse: Theory, Debates, and Philosophical Perspectives argues that there is a mental space between Islamic theocracy and western democracy. And it is here that ideas on an Islamic democratic discourse need to be developed. The creation of this space is preparatory to the creation of a social space, for as Khan says: "Once the idea exists, the form can follow" (p. 166).

This book provides a thorough analysis of the place of democratic discourse in Islamic history, in the section entitled "Classical Perspectives on Islam and Politics," as well as its significance to our own times, in "Global Discourses on Islam and Democracy." The book's middle section, "Regional Debates on Islam and Democracy," provides three area study papers: one on Malaysia, another on Turkey, and the third on Sudan. Such key terms as

shari`ah, fiqh, ijtihad, and *ulu al-amr,* an understanding of which are requisite to any finer comprehension of the historical and existing debates, are clearly brought out in a number of papers. And although this book is the product of commissioned articles rather than papers submitted to a symposium, there is an underlying synchronicity in the authors' approach to the study of political Islam.

Unlike the Islamists, for whom "literalists" is perhaps more appropriate than the more often employed "fundamentalists," the academics in this collection of essays by and large adhere to three interlinked principles: (a) interpretation of the Qur'an is possible and is to be valued; (b) given that change is the one constant in human experience, interpretation is necessary; and (c), it must be continually renewed in order to remain appropriate to new circumstances. One area of study, however, has largely been overlooked: the relation of Islamic democratic discourse to the private sphere. To ignore, or rather not to give any weight to this aspect of the discourse is, I think, to fail to see the co-dependence of these two spheres upon each other. This issue notwithstanding, much within this book is reflective and calls the reader to greater reflection.

In any collection of essays, not all papers can be equal. Papers of note are Tariq Ramadan's "*Ijtihad* and *Maslahah*: The Foundations of Governance" and Ali Paya's "Recent Developments in Shi`i Thought: A Brief Introduction to the Views of Three Contemporary Shi`ite Thinkers." Asma Afsaruddin's "Obedience to Political Authority: An Evolutionary Concept" and Özlem Denli's "An Islamic Quest for a Pluralistic Political Model: A Turkish Perspective" are, however, worth particular attention.

Afsaruddin analyses how readings of Qur'an 4:59, which states that "those who believe, obey God and the Messenger and those in possession of authority among you (*ulu al-amr*)," has often led to the misconception that the Qur'an promotes political quietism. This text has been used in our own time to explain Muslim societies' tolerance for despotic rule. Her analysis, therefore, demands a close reading. Afsaruddin contends that a correct translation should read "authority among you," rather than, as some scholars – and here she points to Bernard Lewis – have posited, "authority over you." Her analysis of the political positioning adopted by such early Islamists as Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb who, she argues, "resort to an unprecedented sacralization of religio-political authority," is equally excellent (p. 50).

Denli's paper focuses on the Turkish thinker Ali Bulac's Medina Project. For those unfamiliar with Bulac's work, Denli provides a sound intro-

duction. Bulac, inspired by the Madinah constitution signed in 622 by Muslims, Jews, and pagan Arabs, suggests a model in which the state greatly retreats from the public arena and groups move forward to occupy that space. Of the contract among the various groups, Bulac says: "Parties to the contract will be religiously, culturally, ethically, politically or philosophically based legal communities. Each legal community will have religious, cultural and legal autonomy" (p. 91). He further argues that individuals may decide whether to live within a religiously defined or a secularly defined group and that the constitution would be held in higher esteem than any religious text, including the Qur'an.

Toward the end of his paper, Denli admits that Bulac's refusal to follow the majority principle would make the Medina Project difficult to put into practice. A more thorough analysis of the fault lines inherent in his project would have been welcome. Nevertheless, this is a stirring and thought-provoking paper – as, indeed, are many of the other papers in this collection.

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