Islam and Democracy in the 21st Century

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The discourse on the relationship between Islam and democracy has been thrust into the limelight amidst the backdrop of the "War on Terror." From this ongoing dialogue, three overarching perspectives have emerged, each shedding a unique light on this complex nexus: Firstly, there is the belief that Muslim societies inherently lack the capacity to cultivate a liberal culture, thereby hindering the attainment of democracy in Muslim-majority nations. This viewpoint is often propelled by Western media narratives. Contrastingly, a second perspective asserts that democracy not only aligns with Islamic principles but contends that historical Islamic polities have exemplified democratic values more profoundly than any other system worldwide. Lastly, a third viewpoint dismisses democracy as a foreign concept, incompatible with the Islamic tradition, and inherently Western in nature. These last two perspectives find resonance within Muslim intellectual circles.

Within these currents of Muslim scholarship, Tauseef Ahmad Parray's work, *Islam and Democracy in the 21st Century*, takes center stage. The book commences with an exploration of the prevalent notion of there being a discord between Islam and the Western conception of democracy, delving into both theoretical frameworks and practical

manifestations. The book unfolds across seven chapters. Each chapter offers a unique lens through which the discourse on Islam and democracy is investigated. These chapters, aside from the introductory and concluding segments, are arranged into three sections, delineating the thematic progression of the narrative.

The first section, encompassing Chapters 1 and 2, lays the groundwork by juxtaposing democracy with key Islamic concepts. In Chapter 1, "Democracy, Democratization, and the Muslim World," Parray furnishes the reader with a conceptual primer on democracy, thereby providing a scaffold for discerning the convergences and divergences between Islamic and democratic principles. Then, Chapter 2 "Democratic Notions in Islam" delves into both historical and contemporary interpretations of key Islamic concepts, which Parray identifies as the bedrock of "Islamic democracy." These concepts, including *Shura* (Mutual Consultation), *Khilafah* (Caliphate), *Ijma* (Consensus), and *Ijtihad* (Independent Interpretive Reasoning), among others, form the crux of Parray's argument, and serve as the linchpin for understanding the relationship between Islam and democracy in the modern era.

In the second section of the book, spanning Chapters 3 to 6, Parray engages in an intricate examination of the compatibility between Islam and democracy. Chapters 3 and 4, titled "Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Muslim Intellectuals on Islam-Democracy Compatibility," evaluate the perspectives of seminal Muslim modernists from the Arab world and South Asia over the past two centuries. Here, luminaries such as Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, Muhammad ʿAbduh, and Muhammad Iqbal among others, are scrutinized for their contributions to the discourse. Continuing into Chapters 5 and 6, "Twenty-First Century Muslim Thinkers on Islam-Democracy Compatibility" (I and II), Parray presents a contemporary panorama, elucidating the viewpoints of scholars and activists from around the globe. These figures include: Mohamed Fathi Osman, Dr. Israr Ahmed, Asghar Ali Engineer, Mawlana Wahiduddin Khan, Sadek Jawad Sulaiman, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Khurshid Ahmad, Muhammad Khalid Masud, Rachid al-Ghannoushi, Abdulaziz Sachedina, Abdolkarim Soroush, Javed Ahmad Ghamidi, Abdelwahab el-Affendi, Louay Safi, Khaled Abou El Fadl, Radwan Masmoundi, Muqtedar Khan,

and Kamran Bokhari. Chapter 6 then enriches this exploration further with a comparative analysis, bridging the thought currents of the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries, thereby providing a holistic view of the evolution of Islamic thought on democracy.

In the third section, encapsulated in Chapter 7, "Democracy and its Muslim Critics: Objections and Observations of the 'Opponents,'" Parray scrutinizes dissenting voices within the Muslim intellectual landscape. Here, perspectives from "radical Islamists" such as Sayyid Qutb, Taqi al-Din Nabhani and Abd al-Qadim Zallum are juxtaposed with academics like Abdul Rashid Moten, presenting an examination of the range of objections to the compatibility thesis. Through this analysis, Parray offers readers a comprehensive understanding of the diverse spectrum of thought within the discourse on Islam and democracy.

The question of whether Islam is compatible with democracy has emerged as a pivotal challenge in contemporary Islamic political thought, and it is the central inquiry around which Parray's book revolves. Before delving into this inquiry, Parray sets out the theoretical groundwork by delineating the definitions of democracy and contextualizing it within an Islamic framework. Parray contends that democracy embodies multiple dimensions in its contemporary usage, including principles of popular sovereignty, freedom, and equality, as articulated by Axel Hadenius; "a general principle of popular sovereignty, a principle of freedom, and a principle of equality" (24). From an Islamic perspective, Parray argues that discussions on democracy and its participatory ethos do not necessitate the direct presence of the term "democracy" within Islamic texts. Instead, he posits that the Islamic tradition inherently harbors notions, values, and institutions that align with democratic principles such as "the rule of law, government responsibility, the general welfare, freedom, justice, equality and human rights" (36). These principles, Parray argues, are ingrained within Islamic political epistemology, rooted in the concept of Tawhīd and exemplified through institutions like the Caliphate and processes such as *Shura* (47). Examining the perspectives of scholars across centuries, Parray observes a concerted effort to forge an Islamic variant of democracy. These scholars endeavor to synthesize Islamic concepts and norms emphasizing equality, leadership accountability, and

respect for diverse faiths, ultimately striving to establish a consultative, democratic, and divinely-inspired Islamic governance model (268).

A notable distinction drawn by Parray lies between nineteenth and twentieth-century Muslim thinkers and their contemporary counterparts. While the former primarily addressed issues within the Muslim world, with the West and its challenges being either "new" or "emerging," the latter engage in a global discourse as these challenges are no longer new, and indeed they are navigating challenges that have persisted since the inception of colonial modernity. Parray argues Muslim modernists – from Tahtawi, Afghani and Abduh in the Middle East to Sir Syed, Iqbal and Azad in the South Asia – responded to the challenges of European colonialism by advocating for an "Islamic modernism" rooted in the compatibility between Islam and reason, rationality, and scientific inquiry (270). Their central concern revolved around reconciling enduring Islamic values with the imperatives of the modern world, embracing concepts of reform, renewal, and independent reasoning. In Parray's own words, "how can Muslims be true to the enduring values of their own past while living in the modern world?" (270).

In his exploration of democracy as a rich, multifaceted cultural phenomenon, Parray deftly unveils an interpretative evolution and renewal, illuminating the transmission and transformation of democratic ideals within the transcendent realm of Islam. Through a contextualization of canonical texts and their interpretations, he navigates the historical, cultural, social, and legal dimensions, providing readers with a nuanced understanding of the Islam-Democracy nexus. In essence, Parray's exploration navigates the terrain of Islamic political thought, offering insights into the ongoing discourse surrounding democracy and its relationship with Islam, two overarching trends emerge: proponents and opponents. Notably, the author dedicates the majority of his book to expounding upon the harmony between Islam and democracy, while allocating only one chapter to exploring potential incompatibilities. This allocation of space within the book appears to favor proponents, potentially disrupting its equilibrium. Particularly noteworthy is his characterization of scholars who perceive democracy as incompatible with Islam as "radical Islamic figures," a label that marginalizes their

perspectives and portrays them as obstacles to so-called mainstream Islam.

While Parray does not shy away from categorizing scholars as either proponents or opponents of democracy, the manner in which he scrutinizes their arguments exhibits a polarizing tone, perhaps inadvertently perpetuating colonial binaries. This approach, though common in academic discourse, may oversimplify these scholars' nuanced perspectives, and overlook the complexities inherent in their positions. Parray's utilization of binary frameworks, such as "Ultraconservative and Extremists/Secularists and Modernists" or "Muslim Democrats/Muslim rejectionists," to categorize scholars is also potentially problematic. These binaries risk oversimplifying complex ideological positions, potentially hindering nuanced understandings of the diverse perspectives within the discourse on Islam and democracy. This categorization and labeling evoke echoes of colonial patronage, as astutely noted by Edward Said in his seminal work, *Covering Islam*. Said aptly critiques the tendency of colonialists to impose their own interpretations of Islam, which seek not to understand Islam but rather to impose preconceived notions upon it.

In his foreword to Parray's book, Muqtedar Khan also presents a somewhat problematic assertion regarding Maulana Mawdudi and Syed Qutb's attempts to modernize Islam by utilizing Arabic terms for modern ideas, and critiques their usage of *Hakimiyyah* for sovereignty and *Shura* for democracy. Usaama al-Azami gives a contrasting view in his article "Locating *Hākimiyya* in Global History," in which he convincingly argues for the historical roots of *Hakimiyyah* within the Islamic scholarly tradition.[1] Al-Azami's work highlights how Islamic conceptions of sovereignty can enrich our understanding of influential Western articulations of the concept. Moreover, Khan's argument seems to be at odds with Parray's thesis, as Parray does not appear to view democracy, particularly popular sovereignty, as wholly compatible with Islam. In fact, Parray views *Shura* as an alternative or an important component of democracy, as the Islamists did.

1 See Usaama al-Azami, "Locating *Hākimiyya* in Global History: The Concept of Sovereignty in Premodern Islam and Its Reception after Mawdūdī and Quṭb," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (2022), 32(2): 355-376.

Islam and Democracy in the 21st Century guides readers through the intricate interplay of historical narratives, socio-political landscapes, and cultural backgrounds that have shaped and reshaped interpretations of democracy within Islamic thought for centuries. The book invites us to engage with diverse Islamic concepts, enriching Islamic scholarship through cross-cultural dialogue and the generation of contextualized meanings beyond conventional boundaries. While the book presents both pro-democracy and anti-democracy arguments, its primary focus lies in amplifying the voices of scholars who advocate for the compatibility of Islam and democracy. Parray's work not only enriches our understanding of the intricate relationship between Islam and democracy but also fosters a deeper appreciation for the dynamic nature of interpretative traditions within Islamic discourse.

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