

## Democracy and democratization in contemporary Muslim societies: A theoretical analysis

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the impact of democracy and democratization on contemporary Muslim societies. The institutional and philosophical approaches to democracy and democratization are inseparable. The paper investigates the relationship between the philosophical dimension of Western democracy and the Muslim philosophy of life and concludes that the democratization of contemporary Muslim societies leads to serious and destabilizing ideological polarization and division of Muslim societies into supporters of secularism and political Islam. The Islamist-secularists relation radicalizes: (1) when the Islamists are prevented from capturing power through democratic institutions and (2) when the advanced Western democratic states cooperate with non-democratic secular elites of Muslim societies. The destabilizing role of democracy can be moderated if the Islamists are engaged in the democratic process, and the debate between the Islamists, the secularists and the West – based on the view that the West should conceive Islam as an alternative *weltanschauung* (worldview) – focuses on issues that are human properties, irrespective of religion, ethnicity or language. The institutional approach to democracy provides a common ground for cooperation and dialogue between the Islamists, the secularists and the West.

**Keywords:** Democratization, institutional and philosophical approaches, Muslim societies, political Islam, the West

**Abstrak:** *Makalah ini meneliti impak demokrasi dan pendemokrasian ke atas masyarakat Islam kontemporari. Pendekatan institusi dan falsafah terhadap demokrasi dan pendemokrasian tidak dapat dipisahkan. Makalah ini meneliti hubungan antara dimensi falsafah demokrasi Barat dan falsafah hidup Islam*

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*dan menyimpulkan bahawa pendemokrasian ke atas masyarakat Islam kontemporari mengarah kepada polarisasi ideologi yang serius dan destabilisasi serta perpecahan masyarakat Islam kepada penyokong sekularisme dan politik Islam. Hubungan Islamis-sekular menjadi radikal: (1) apabila Islamis dihalang daripada pendapat kuasa melalui institusi demokratik dan (2) apabila negara-negara demokratik Barat yang maju bekerjasama dengan para elit sekular yang tidak demokratik daripada masyarakat Islam. Peranan demokrasi yang tidak stabil boleh dibendung jika Islamis terlibat dalam proses demokratik, dan perdebatan antara Islamis, kaum sekular dan Barat – berdasarkan pandangan bahawa Barat harus melihat Islam sebagai sebuah alternatif weltanschauung (pandangan hidup) – menumpukan kepada isu-isu yang bersifat keperimanusiaan, tanpa mengira agama, etnik atau bahasa. Pendekatan institusi kepada demokrasi menyediakan satu landasan bersama untuk kerjasama dan dialog antara Islamis, kaum sekular dan Barat.*

**Kata kunci:** *Pendemokrasian, pendekatan institusi dan falsafah, masyarakat Islam, politik Islam, Barat*

Based on the assumptions of democratic peace theory, it is often argued that Muslim societies would be better off if they democratize. This study, however, argues that democratization of contemporary Muslim societies, and the West's selective cooperation with only some elected governments of the Muslim world, have resulted in ideological polarization and radicalization of politics within Muslim societies. The relationship between democracy and the ideological divide, and violence in contemporary Muslim societies, requires investigation of the relationship between the philosophical dimension of Western democracy and the philosophy of life prevalent in the Muslim world. This study, firstly, discusses the meaning and aims of Western democracy. Secondly, it discusses the basic presuppositions of secularism and the Muslim worldview. Thirdly, the study examines the relationship between secularism, democracy and Islam. Fourthly, the study discusses the approaches to democracy and the implications of Western democracy on Muslim societies. Finally, it discusses a possible way out that could moderate the destabilizing effects of democracy.

### **Democracy: Meaning and aims**

A conceptual analysis of the term 'democracy' is essential to know its positive or negative impact on human relations. For the purpose of this study, understanding of the meaning and aims of the word democracy can set the stage for the ensuing discussion about the relationship between Western democracy, Islam/Muslim philosophy of life, secularism and approaches (philosophical and institutional) to democracy. The word 'democracy' is understood differently. 'Democracy' assumes that exercising of decision-making power by one or few over issues of public concern is not desirable. It should be transferred to the 'people'. The concept 'popular sovereignty' binds the various meanings of 'democracy' together. It emphasizes that ordinary human beings are able to rule themselves and can collectively make rational decisions about complex social matters. Academics have explored means and ways that can best ensure that people, directly or indirectly, make decisions and determine their own lives. They have used terms like direct, participatory, representative, competitive, liberal, etc. to suggest the various ways people could participate in governing and managing their affairs (Held, 1996). The usage of such terms suggests that the operationalization of popular sovereignty does not negate the idea of people being ruled. Indeed, democracy is about governing and being governed. But the ones who appear to be ruled are indeed the rulers, as all ruling elites (i.e., democratic governments) are expected to exhibit the following attributes: constitutionalism, accountability and transparency, respecting human rights, a doctrine of individualism, majority rule and minority rights, political competition, universal suffrage, popular sovereignty, rule of law, alteration of power, etc. For the implementation of these principles of popular sovereignty, states have adopted different institutions and procedures such as constitutions, elections and electoral colleges, universal franchise, consultative assemblies or legislatures, civil societies, political parties and parliamentary or presidential systems of government.

The exercise of popular sovereignty (i.e., democracy) is not an end in itself. Democratic government is rather a means to an end. Aristotle in his work, *The Nichomachean Ethics*, observes that the end of politics is happiness or a good life (McLean, 1997, p.12). Al-

Fārābī in his work, the *Ārā' al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* concludes that the end of the state is happiness (al-Farabi, 1985, pp.27-31). It is interesting to observe that al-Farabi and Aristotle, although differing in their understanding of happiness, did not see politics as an end in itself. Abdolkarim Soroush (2000), in categorizing values into (1) guiding values and (2) serving values, argues that guiding values are essential for existence of human life. These are the values “for the sake of which we live” (p.39). Promotion and protection of guiding values is therefore essential and necessary as they are eternal and “transcend social life, nationality and history” (p.39). Values essential for life are “goodness, justice, generosity and courage” (p.39). The serving values assist man in attaining the guiding values and hence “exist for the sake of living” (p.39). The primary serving values are the ones that predate the event (i.e., development or democratization of life), while the secondary serving values are the changed form of primary values generated after the event. When primary serving values are supplanted by secondary serving values, they result in the emergence of a new institution or government that can serve life better. Put differently, the new system or institution will gradually supplant the old system (p.39). Soroush’s view suggests that the serving values (i.e., institutions) can vary in time and space. What does not change is the substance and nature of the values they serve (i.e., guiding values). The above discussion suggests that the aim of exercising popular sovereignty is to achieve “one or more of the following fundamental values or goods: political equality, liberty, moral self-development, the common interest, a fair moral compromise, binding decisions that take everyone’s interest into account, social utility, the satisfaction of wants and efficient decisions” (Held, 1996, p.3).

Given democracy’s (i.e., popular sovereignty) instrumental role read together with Soroush’s analysis, a number of crucial questions need to be answered. What are the values that have guided democracy and the democratization process throughout history? Are the guiding values of Western democracy compatible with the Muslim philosophy of life? Would Muslim societies be better off by wholeheartedly introducing Western democracy and democratizing based on the values so characteristic of Western societies? Therefore, a debate on democracy and democratization of the Muslim world

essentially entails answers to the above questions. It is argued that the democratic debate takes shape within a secular frame of mind. Then, is secularism compatible with Muslim philosophy of life? This leads to the assumption that understanding the nature of the relationship or degree of compatibility or incompatibility between Islam and democracy is based on understanding the nature of the relationship between democracy and secularism.

### **Secularism versus Muslim worldview**

This section discusses the Islamic and secular *weltanschauung*. The aim is to provide a context for the discussion of the relationship between democracy, Islam and secularism. According to Ahmet Davutoglu (1994), in the Islamic *weltanschauung*, the axiological (ethics), ontological (existence) and epistemological (source of knowledge) presuppositions about life and politics differ from those of the West and the latter should perceive the former as such (pp.12-86). The origin of Western democracy is secular and opposed to the religious basis of Muslim philosophy of life and existence. Application or introduction of an essentially secular concept to Muslim societies with a monotheistic bent of mind requires one to know what secularism is and how the Muslim philosophy of life is different from the secular approach to life and existence. Secularism is a belief anchored in the conviction that God is dead, and in rationalization of life and society. While it does not deny man having faith in God, it removes the determining role of God in human affairs. Rational philosophy provides the autonomy to man to freely investigate and determine the truth or reality without help from an external or divine being. Secularism originates in the belief in humanity's ability and potential to know, discover and understand the human, metaphysical and physical spheres of life without divine help.

According to Amr Sabet (2008), secularism projects mankind as "the primary cause of not only a few instruments of production, but also of social, political, cultural and religious modes of existence contrived by its subjective and objective exertions. In this capacity, individuals become the masters of nature and therefore external to and independent of it" (p.29). Secularism relies on 'pure reason' as "standards of morality without any metaphysical sanction" (Asad,

1961, p.7). Therefore, it rejects the role of the Divine other than creating the universe and everything therein. It is often mistakenly argued that its genesis is found in modern scientific knowledge (Soroush, 2000, pp.57-68). Therefore, “scientification” or “rationalization” of social and political thought and deliberation in the Western frame of mind has existed since the existence of humanity for the simple reason that the existence of god or religion is not supported by archaeological findings. It will not be incorrect, therefore, to argue that modern Western scientific knowledge was not a result of the revival of secular tendency in the Greco-Roman intellectual and political legacy but the revival of secular tendency prevalent in the human mind at the point of man’s very existence on earth (McNeill, 1991, pp.3-240).

The political manifestation of rational philosophy is seen in the fact that it is “defined not only by what it is not, that is, a nonreligious government, but by what it is, a government susceptible to criticism, checks, and balances” (Soroush, 2000, p.60). Hence, a secular government is defined “as a regime in whose polity no values and rules are beyond human appraisal and verification and in which no protocol, status, position, or ordinance is above public scrutiny. Everything is open to critique, from the head of state to the manner of government and the direction of policy determination” (p.60). The appraisal, however, is purely human without divine help.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike secularism, the Muslim world view is centred on the belief in the principle of *Tawhīd* (all-encompassing Unity of Allah the most High), the One and only Divine Being. It is “a conviction and witnessing that ‘there is no god but God’” (al-Fārūqī, 1992, p.9). It is the conviction that He is the Creator and everything else is His creation. In Ismā‘īl al-Fārūqī’s words, the above “...negative statement, brief to the utmost limits of brevity, carries the greatest and richest meaning of the whole of Islam. Sometimes a whole culture, a whole civilization, or a whole history lies compressed in this one sentence... All the diversity, wealth and history, culture and learning and wisdom of Islam is compressed in this shortest of sentences...” (pp.9-10). The implication of *Tawhīd* for life and thought is as follows. The created world is composed of human life and the natural world which has two components: the physical and non-physical. The components of the created world are meaningfully

related to one another. They are also collectively related to the Creator in a meaningful way. He defines the relationship among the elements of the created world and between the created world and its Creator. He knows the true nature of every single element including the internal and external make-up of man. Man has the ability of making and doing, yet his capabilities are limited, bounded and incomplete. Man needs to complete this incomplete or bounded capability with another element – revelation. Revelation is part of the Divine bounty gifted to man to complete his incomplete and bounded ability. God personally does not come and preach. Revelation comes to man through a medium called prophecy. God has given man the ability to understand and interpret the revealed message. Hence the rational faculty of man and revelation are intrinsically and permanently in harmony (pp.9-10). It is only natural that revelation takes precedence over reason in that the former is divine as it has come to perfect man's understanding of social reality. Contradictions that may arise would need the redefinition of rational conclusions arrived at by reason.

It is interesting to observe that the Muslim worldview does not reject reason in search for truth. It is absurd to reject reason and at the same time employ it for understanding truth, justice, tolerance and public interest as ordained by God and provided by religious teachings. It would be difficult for religion itself, or, for that matter, God, to become a useful source if what God intends for humanity is not understood. It is important to note that while reason can help us to understand religion, it also historicizes religious teachings, reflecting the influence of specific historical conditions under which reason operates. Rational interpretation of religious teachings is human and cannot be universalized in time and space. Muslim scholars and the public are required to constantly engage in rational interpretation of religious texts, as “the appeal to religious conviction cannot and should not arrest the renewal of religious understanding or innovative adjudication (*ijtihad*) in religion” (Soroush, 2000, p.128). Reason belongs to the enlightened. Hence the public has the responsibility to elect the enlightened ones to the helm of power. In the final analysis, the dichotomy of life and politics – that things are either religious or non-religious – fails to have a place in the Muslim mind.

## **Democracy, secularism and Islam**

The preceding discussion focused on the meaning of secularism and Muslim philosophy of life. This section focuses on the link between democracy, secularism and Islam. The aim is to show when Western democracy becomes incompatible with the Muslim philosophy of life, as well as when and which parts of democracy and democratization are compatible with the Muslim view of life, to which supporters of political Islam can and should hold on without hesitation. The aim of a democratic government is to achieve Soroush's guiding values or, in Held's words, "one or more of the following fundamental values or goods: political equality, liberty, moral self-development, the common interest, a fair moral compromise, binding decisions that take everyone's interest into account, social utility, the satisfaction of wants and efficient decisions" (Held, 1996, p.3). Attainment of these values requires construction of suitable institutions and procedures. Democracy's emphasis on popular sovereignty suggests that knowledge of the contents and substance of the fundamental values that a democratic government seeks to attain, and the forms and nature of institutions for the realization of these is within human reach. "In its wider connotation, this term implies the people's unrestricted right to legislate by majority vote on all matters of public concern" (Asad, 1961, p.19). The will of the people "is free of all external limitations, sovereign unto itself and responsible only to itself" (p.19). For instance, the collective will of the people can determine what constitutionalism or common good is. It can also determine whether the laws and procedures a modern parliament legislates reflect the true spirit of the fundamental values sought by the democratic government. By adopting this humanocentric or anthropocentric approach to the definition of values and construction of institutions, democracy has "succeeded in banishing religion from the realm of politics and placing the right of legislation and government exclusively in people's hands" (Soroush, 2000, p.57). In this way, democracy and secularism are drawn closer as both emphasize rationalization of life and society. While secularism detached religion from life, democracy rejected the Divine's right to rule with what is known as popular sovereignty.



Unlike the secular approach, the Muslim approach to democracy holds that the contents and substance of the values that democratic governments seek to attain, and the democratic institutional setup in Muslim societies are divinely inspired. The fundamental democratic values are determined by God whereby the institutional framework is a human construct. Human reason plays an active role in understanding the true nature of Divine intentions but it quickly refutes the view that true knowledge of the values are within human reach. The role of the human mind is restricted to an adjudicative understanding of religion including matters that religion does not speak of or is silent about. The functions and attributes of democratic institutions and procedures such as legislature or elections of the executive are determined by humans in such a way that they ultimately lead to the attainment of values ordained by God. While the fundamental values a democratic government seeks to attain are religious and divine, and hence eternal, the interpretations of the fundamental values and the functions of the democratic institutional setup are historicized and can be placed under scrutiny, criticism and improvement inspired by God.

It is thus evident that the people have determined to live in the shade of a religious belief. This preliminary decision by the people paves the way to eternal existence under the teachings of religion. However, it also paves the way to innumerable subsequent decisions and arduous trials. From there on, it is religious understanding that needs to undergo constant examination. It will have to pass through difficult cycles of contraction, expansion, modification and equilibrium. In this way, the Muslim approach banishes humanocentrism and imposes fundamental benchmarks on the operation and functions of the principle of popular sovereignty. In this ethnocentric approach adopted by Muslim societies, religion and God become the guide and arbiter for decisions on complex social matters. A precondition for the full-scale realization of the Muslim approach to a democracy of this kind is that the democratic government is meaningful only when the society is religious. A religious society is the supporter and source of religious politics. Without a religious society, a religious democratic government will be inconceivable (Soroush, 2000, p.132). Obviously, this poses serious challenge to Muslim societies inflicted with the malaise of secularism.

### **Approaches to democracy: Implications for contemporary Muslim societies**

The preceding discussion suggests that democracy is secular and incompatible with the Muslim way of life. Yet, supporters of political Islam believe in the efficiency of democracy and hold to democratically elected governments for the realization of God's will. The supporters of political Islam do not want to be deprived of participating in the democratic processes in Muslim societies. It is necessary to raise again the question posed by John Esposito whether Islam and democracy are compatible. According to him, they are compatible (Esposito, 2004, pp.93-100). However, given the fact that the presuppositions of the Islamic *weltanschauung* are different from those of the secular *weltanschauung*, a simple 'yes' answer is not helpful to explain the issue of compatibility of Islam and democracy. Esposito is aware of this fact and rightfully observes that "democratization in the Muslim world [does] not imply uncritical acceptance of Western democratic forms" (p.97).

The relation between Islam and democracy is complex and requires analysis. According to the Islamic *weltanschauung*, some aspects of democracy are compatible with Muslim life and some are not. Knowledge of what is and what is not acceptable to them in Western democracy entails a discussion of approaches to democracy in Muslim societies. Based on the presuppositions of the Islamic *weltanschauung*, two interrelated approaches to democracy and the democratization process with implications for Muslim societies can be identified: (1) the institutional approach and (2) the philosophical approach. It is essential to note that the two approaches are interrelated in that the institutional basis of democracy cannot be separated from the philosophical basis of democracy in the Muslim mind. Put differently, the doctrine or philosophy, as Abou El Fadl (2004) argues, "is as much a part of the 'practical affairs' of human existence (for Muslim societies) as any other factor that causes... [Muslims] to think, feel and undertake particular courses of actions" (p.110) such as governing and ruling which is central to the institutional approach. "The role of doctrine or religious convictions in the lives of believing Muslims cannot be ignored because God is an ever present reality and essential frame of reference for all normative judgments" (p.110).

'Institutional approach' means evolution and introduction of institutions, procedures and laws such as a constitution, civil society, elections, consultative assemblies, election laws, rule of law (Islamic law not *Shari'ah*)<sup>2</sup> and the party and party system that will eventually lead to institutionalization of the fundamental democratic values such as freedom of expressions, freedom and autonomy of the press, constitutionalism, accountability, realization of purposes of the *Shari'ah*, universal compulsory education and political equality. A situation is then created that restricts the power of the rulers and rationalizes:

[T]heir deliberations and policies, so that they will be less vulnerable to error and corruption, more open to exhortation, moderation, and consultation; and so that violence and revolution will not become necessary.... Constant review, critiques and renewal of ideas and beliefs, followed by emendation, calibration, and transformation of the policies and decisions of rulers and their powers are among the routine responsibilities of democratic societies (Soroush, 2000, pp.134-135).

The institutional approach therefore includes both Soroush's primary and secondary serving values. The democratic values such as freedoms and accountability are the primary serving values, whereas the institutions such as constitutions and civil society are the secondary serving values. The purpose of democratic institutions is the empowerment of the people and placing restrictions and limitation on the exercise of power by the governing elite, with the ultimate aim of creating a democratic space in which the elite feels accountable and strictly adheres to the rule of law and observes human rights. The people also enjoy freedoms and are able to participate in the political process and as a result some degree of accountability and constitutionalism prevails. Hence, as Khaled Abou El Fadl (2004) argues, the core element of democratic practice is exhibited (pp.3-4).

When an actual democratic space is created, there is the feeling that the popular sovereignty is at work, as is the case with developed and advanced Western liberal democracies. It follows that the institutional approach is based on the view that citizens are the source of political power and authority. It ought to be exercised and

transferred to the ruling elites through an elaborate institutional setup such as elections, constitutions, civil society and so forth. The democratic conception of people's authority or citizens as the locus or source of political authority does not contradict with the view that God is the ultimate source of everything, for God has given the right of choosing the ruling elite to citizens and they are ordered to exercise this right with great responsibility and divine consciousness. God has made the choosing of representatives the citizens' duty, which ought to be carried out in line with His teachings and guidance. Democratic institutions become the instrument towards "fulfilling a fundamental responsibility assigned by God to" the citizens of an Islamic polity (pp.3-4). It also follows that there exists a common democratic denominator (i.e., democratic institutional setup) for operationalizing sovereignty which Islam and the West can agree on and which can draw the Muslim societies and the West closer. According to Muslim intellectuals, the institutional basis of democracy and people as the locus of political authority has been a historical fact rooted in the practices of the immediate successors of the Prophet of Islam. Muslim jurists of Abū Ḥanīfah's calibre remained critical of non-elected leadership. Abū Ḥanīfah told the second Abbasid Caliph, Maṣṣūr, that "you have become a caliph even without a couple of men from *ahl al-fatwā* (those whose opinion is respected and authoritative) agreeing to it, whereas the caliph should be chosen with the conference and concurrence of Muslims" (Maudoodi, 1963). Modern Muslim thinker, Rashid Rida upheld this authoritative determination of citizens in choosing the ruler. According to him, no obedience is due to a leader installed by force, and it is the duty of citizens to overthrow such a ruler (Kerr, 1996, pp.168-169).

The discussion above suggests that sovereignty in the Muslim *weltanschauung* is of two types: political and legal, or what Muqtedar Khan (2000) calls "sovereignty in fact (*de facto*)" and "sovereignty in principle (*de jure*)" (p.65), respectively. When reference is to the locus of political power and authority, political sovereignty is at work. All the agencies and institutions that assist in the transfer of power from the citizens to the elite become its integral properties. In this way, political sovereignty is drawn closer to and is closely associated with the institutional approach. Legal sovereignty is,

therefore, distinguished from political sovereignty when God is considered the ultimate source of moral standards and laws, and provides a framework for the exercise of political sovereignty. Legal sovereignty is closely associated to the philosophical approach to democracy and democratization.

The Muslim view does not conflict with institutional approach to democracy and democratization. Perhaps this explains the reasons for contemporary Muslim intellectuals and academics in advocating the democratization of contemporary Muslim societies. Scholars, academics and activists such as Abu 'Ala al-Maudoodi, Yusuf al Qaradawi, Abdul Kareem Soroush, Rachid Ghannouchi, Azzam Tamimi, Abdul Rahman A. Kurdi, Khaled Abou El Fadl and Abdul Rashid Moten have strenuously argued that democratization can rid Muslim societies from poverty, illiteracy, corruption, abuse of power and violation of human rights. Democracy is able to return to the people the honour, dignity and control over their destiny that they have lost. These scholars have resorted to Qur' ānic verses, prophetic traditions and practices of the early generations of Islam to suggest that Islam has always abhorred corruption, abuse of power and courted the call for justice, rule of law, equality and a constitutional frame of political activism (Qaradawi, 1998; Tamimi, 1993). While advocating democratization of Muslim societies, they also advocated that democratic governments in contemporary societies are required to function within the frame of divine justice (Maudoodi, 1980), distinguishing the Muslim approach from the Western approach and philosophy to democracy and democratization. Noah Feldman argues that “[n]one of these Islamic democrats is prepared for an Islamic state that flouts the authority of Qur' ānic verses that seem to have a relatively clear meaning in Muslim community” (Feldman, 2004, p.60). Reflecting on the constitution of Madinah, it would not be misplaced to argue that even Prophet Muhammad's political authority over the citizens of the maiden Islamic state was rooted in the consent of the Muslim immigrants from Makkah and the indigenous Muslims and the Jews of Madinah (Al-Umari, 1995).

Abou El Fadl (2004) argues that a “provisional case for democracy” (p.7) is made when the citizens have come to recognize a legitimate method of exercise of power and government legitimate. But, he says, “we have not considered the great challenge to that

case” (p.7), that is, God, and not man, as the source of law determines the legitimacy and rightfulness of the policies and actions of the government. Determining of the legitimacy of political institutions does not fall within the scope of the institutional approach. Here, Western democracy poses a formidable challenge to an Islamic polity. This challenge is doctrinal and philosophical and not institutional in character. The doctrinal character of democracy and Islam are defined in the first instance in terms of definer and originator of their underlying moral values and the attitudinal commitments of their adherents (pp.4-5). The question of whether purely popular sovereignty or men inspired by God determine the legitimacy and rightfulness of functions and actions of democratic governments constitutes the core of philosophical approach to democracy and democratization.

Hence, the philosophical approach refers to the origin, roots and foundation upon which institutional democracy is built. The philosophical approach is about who defines and determines the fundamental democratic values and their substance, and the true meaning of the actions and functions of democratic institutions. Therefore, the philosophical approach concerns the epistemology or source from which, for instance, constitutions, and the principles of equality or common good originate. According to the Muslim philosophy of life, Allah Most High is the Ultimate Being. Allah Most High is the originator, in Soroush’s words, of guiding democratic values and He determines the meaning and substance of the fundamental democratic values. Unlike the West, advocates of political Islam make a distinction between the philosophical basis of democracy from man’s reach and the realm of the Divine. “When human beings search for ways to approximate God’s beauty and justice, then, they do not deny God’s sovereignty, they honor it. They also honor it in the attempt to safeguard the moral values that reflect the attributes of the divine” (Abou El Fadl, 2004, p.9). In a way, it is a negation of the humanocentric approach to knowledge and social activity and affirmation of the Divine as the true repository of all knowledge. It is necessary to point out that God as the ultimate source means that He is the provider of what Abou El Fadl (2004) terms the “divine legislative will” or “minimal standards of moral conduct” (pp.8-9) regulating all human interactions. This divine

legislative will is called *Shari'ah*, as distinguished from Islamic law or *fiqh* (Abu Sulayman, 1993, pp.5-15; Abou El Fadl, 2004, pp.30-36). "Shari'ah ... is the divine ideal, standing as if suspended in midair, unaffected and uncorrupted by life's varies. *Fiqh* is the human attempt to understand and apply that ideal. Therefore, shari'ah is immutable, immaculate and flawless; *fiqh* is not" (Abou El Fadl, 2004, p.31).

Indeed, a point of contention between the Muslim and Western approaches to democracy is the fact that in the latter, the popular sovereignty originates from secularism. Democratic institutions and principles in the West originate from a collective will and collectively reflect the view that citizens are collectively their originator and definer. An extreme effect of secular democracy is that it challenges the psychological makeup of society. It shakes man's relations with religion or his Creator. People with a religious bent of mind always think of themselves as duty-bound to a higher source. However, democracy and freedoms insert in people the ability to think of themselves as possessors of the right to decide and determine without recourse to religion and God, implicitly elevating man a God-like character. People are transformed from duty-carriers to right-carriers, ignoring the fact that God also has rights and He reserves the right of approving and disapproving government policies. In utter indifference to God's existence or non-existence, the political struggles and deliberations are designed to satisfy human beings alone. People's satisfaction and happiness are put above that of God's. Fundamental questions, therefore, for proponents of democracy in contemporary Muslim societies, irrespective of the ideological orientations of a person, are: Does God exist? If He exists, does He have rights? If God exists and has rights, must they be upheld? Do governments in practice concentrate on God's contentment? What would governments do when God's approval and people's contentment clash? "Although secular thinkers may not be oblivious to these concerns, they seldom, if ever, raise the question of God's rights in discussing human rights, preferring to concentrate instead on securing people's contentment" (Soroush, 2000, p.123).

This secular philosophical tendency to politics and governance has created ideological rifts within Muslim polities. The ideological

divide as such has often, if not always, created uneasy and at times violent relations between different segments of society; leading to polarization of Muslim societies into proponents of Westernization and those who are anti-West. The anti-West camp, loosely known as the Islamists or advocates of political Islam,<sup>3</sup> has become engaged in a perennial and uncompromising debate with the secularists or liberals. What radicalizes the relationship between the secularists and the Islamists is the support the former receives from the advanced liberal democratic governments. It became even more disturbing for the Islamists when the West de-emphasized democracy in its relations with secular authoritarian governments and turned blind eyes on or even encouraged the military establishments in Muslim societies to manipulate the politics in their respective countries (Feldman, 2004, pp.60-61). The anti-West and anti-establishment feelings within the Islamists' camp often, if not always, have turned radical due to the feeling of being denied the right to capturing power within their own societies through the democratic process (Hashemi, 2004, pp.49-54). Modern Turkey, Algeria and the overthrow of the Hamas government in the occupied Palestinian territories in 2007 are some examples illustrating the philosophical dimension of the tensions within the Muslim societies and the predicament of democracy and democratization of Muslim societies (p.59).

*Harakat al-Muqāwamah al-Islāmiyyah* (Hamas), the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement, founded in 1987 (Tamim, 2007, pp.10-34; Hroub, 2000, pp.36-41, 292-312), adopted the institutional approach to democracy as its strategy for capturing power. It participated in the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections and won 76 of the 132 seats of Palestinian Parliament. However, Hamas's philosophy, as stated in its 1988 Charter, is to create an Islamic state in the territories it calls Palestine, and suggests that all democratic values such as justice and human rights should reflect features of the Muslim philosophy of life. Hamas's 36 articles of the Charter provide details about its founding beliefs regarding the primacy of Islam in all aspects of life. The Charter's advocacy of an Islamic state originates from the fundamental sources of the Muslim philosophy of life: the Qur'ān and Prophet Muhammad's traditions. The Charter states that the movement aims to make Allah Most High



rule over every inch of Palestine, for under the banner of Islam adherents of all religions can coexist. Hamas holds that a Western dominated free-market capitalist economy is against the teachings of Islam. Despite being committed to the institutional approach to democracy, Hamas's philosophy as such clashed with that of Fatah, allegedly a secular centre-left nationalist Palestinian Resistance Movement (Hroub, 2000, p.28; Abu-Amr, 1994, p.28). The conflict between Hamas and Fatah is both ideological and political. They disagree on issues that relate to the nature of the polity and the strategy of liberating Palestine from the occupation of Israelis. Though Hroub (2000) argues that the disagreement between Hamas and Fatah is more about the strategy of liberating Palestine (pp.87-143), there is sufficient literature to suggest an ideological dimension to the tensions between Hamas, Fatah and the West (Abu-Amr, 1994, pp.23-52). In June 2007, the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, the leader of Fatah, under pressure from Western powers, ousted Hamas's elected Prime Minister, Isma'il Haniyya, bringing out into the open the existence of tensions between the advocates of an Islamic and a secular Palestinian state. The willingness of the Western advanced democratic states such as the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, the European Union, Israel, Japan and Australia to sacrifice democracy and unequivocal support of Fatah while considering Hamas a terrorist organization, despite Hamas's democratic credentials, has radicalized the existing tense relations between Hamas and Fatah.

Similarly, Algeria's National Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) adopted the institutional approach to democracy and democratization. However, the annulment and cancellation of the 1991 elections for the National Assembly by Algeria's secular military junta, despite the rejection of violence of all kinds by FIS leaders, and its declared or expressed commitment to a Western-style multiparty democracy, free market economy, competition and a strong private sector, was a deliberate decision against the stated goal of the FIS to establish an Islamic state ruled by Islamic law and the introduction of an Islamic banking and financial system. Anwar N. Haddam, the president of the FIS Parliamentary Delegation Abroad, expressed the desire of of the FIS for progress along Western models when he argued that the West progressed because it had the

courage to defeat tyranny and observe human rights including rights to franchise, and that the FIS was willing to follow suit (Pipes & Clawson, 1996). The establishment worried about Islamists becoming a formidable force in Algerian politics and believed that the FIS would change the Constitution and democratically impose an Islamic state. Obviously, the relations between the establishment and the Islamists radicalized when the latter was denied the right to come to power through elections. Academics argue that while Algeria missed the chance of becoming a genuine democratic state, the West, by turning a blind eye on the events taking shape in Algeria, is equally responsible for the tragedy that democracy and the Algerians experienced in the 1990s.

The Democratic Republic of Turkey, despite the allegedly incumbent Islamist party being committed to the institutional approach to democracy and democratization, is yet another instance of the secular tendency to democratization, creating uneasy relations between Islamists and the secularists. Constitutionally and practically a secular state by and large (Cinar, 2005), Turkey is founded on the principle of *laicism* (state control of religion), in which no party can claim that it represents a form of religious belief. The parties accused of religious orientation banned by the Constitutional Court for Islamist activities and attempts to redefine the secular nature of the republic include: the Progressive Republican Party (*Terakkiperver Cumhuriyet Firkasi*, banned in 1925), the Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*, banned in 1998) and the Virtue Party (*Fazilet Partisi*, banned in 2001). Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party or *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP), despite portraying itself as a moderate, conservative, pro-Western party advocating a free-market economy, has often been accused of harbouring a hidden Islamist agenda. Academics and critics argue that the main factor behind the growth of AKP in Turkish politics is its Islamist agenda, even though its leader, the incumbent Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has argued that the AKP is not a political party with a religious axis. The changes the AKP has introduced have been interpreted as being non-secular or rooted in Islam. Abdullah Gül, AKP's nominee for the president of the republic, is the first president of Turkey whose wife wears a *hijāb* (headscarf). In 2008, the Turkish Parliament rejected his nomination for president on the grounds of his Islamist

credentials, forcing the AKP to seek a new mandate from the people. Erdogan has spoken out in favour of the Islamization of Turkish society. In 1999, Merve Kavakç1, a newly-elected Virtue Party woman parliamentarian was not allowed to take oath in the National Assembly due to wearing a headscarf, as women wearing headscarves constitutionally cannot work in the public sector (Demirel, 2008, pp.163-182; Human Rights Watch Country Report, 2007).

In 2005, the AKP banned the sale of alcoholic beverages in a section of Ankara. Strict licensing requirements were put into place. The AKP has also been accused of appointing anti-secular individuals in key government offices and giving out government contracts to individuals with a reputation for being Islamist. An Islamist watershed occurred when Turkey's AKP-dominated parliament, on February 9, 2008, promulgated a constitutional amendment that lifted the ban on headscarves in universities, suggesting the influence of the Muslim philosophy of life on Turkish politics and society. However, in June 2008, Turkey's Constitutional Court reversed the proposed lifting of this ban on the grounds of it being against the secular character of the Turkish Constitution. The Court also ruled that its decision cannot be appealed. After the party's attempt to lift the headscarf ban, the Chief Public Prosecutor of the Supreme Court of Appeals, Abdurrahman Yalçinkaya, backed by Turkey's powerful military establishment, on March 14, 2008, formally asked the Constitutional Court to ban the party. Though the Court did not ban the party, it considered its actions as anti-secular, cutting its funding from the Central Bank into half as a penalty, signalling the existence of authoritarian and dictatorial tendencies to maintain secularism in Turkey. Serdar Demirel (2008) argues that the 'White Turks' or the 'deep state' (i.e., the republican elite, the bureaucracy and the military), perceived as the centre in Turkey, controls public life. They are the minority. With the democratization of Turkish society, the power will shift away to the mostly religiously inclined 'Black Turks' or the periphery. According to Demirel (2008), the AKP represents this conservative periphery in Turkish politics (pp.172-173).

The above examples and numerous other cases such as the Muslim Brotherhood Movement of Egypt and the Islamic parties in Morocco, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Indonesia and Afghanistan

suggest that the advocates of political Islam in these Muslim societies have adopted the values and procedures of institutional democracy. They have decided to come to power through peaceful and constitutional mechanisms such as elections and participation in the political processes of their respective societies. Islamists have founded political parties, participate in welfare projects and services often provided by civic institutions and have expressed commitment to values of justice, freedoms, accountability, rule of law and so forth. Yet, they have faced an uphill battle in their own societies. The secularists and the military establishments within Muslim societies and the advanced Western polities have often individually and sometimes collectively resisted the Islamists' rise to power and control of the government. The institutions and agencies that might link the state and the Islamists were undermined, obliterated and abolished. "In the shadow of authoritarian rule, the Islamic actors were either muted or left only with the option of insurgency in order to make themselves heard by unresponsive rulers" (Turam, 2007, p.155).

### **Engagement: The way out**

The above discussion suggests that the institutional and philosophical approaches to democracy and democratization are inseparable. It also suggests that the seculars and the West have a genuine fear of the Islamists' agenda, that is, adhering to the fundamental principles of the philosophical approach to democracy in administration of life and society. The secularists fear that the Islamists will use the teachings of Islam found in the Qur'ān and traditions of Prophet Muhammad instead of popular sovereignty as benchmarks for the interpretation of fundamental democratic values such as justice and accountability. The secular origin of Western democracy polarizes Muslim societies into supporters of secularism and political Islam, leading to radicalization of the latter when denied democratic space. This raises a genuine concern regarding compatibility of the Muslim philosophy of life and Western democratic experience rooted in secularism (Esposito & Voll, 1996, pp.3-32). It appears that democratization of Muslim societies in the image of Western liberal democracy is difficult.

Yet, the supporters of political Islam, while opposing the secular

basis of Western democracy, hold to its institutional basis, which can moderate the destabilizing impact of democracy on Muslim societies. It can also provide room for dialogue between Islam and the West. A peaceful coexistence between Islamists and seculars, on the one hand, and Muslim societies and the West, on the other, is possible if the relations among them focus on issues that are human properties irrespective of religion, ethnicity or language such as justice, tolerance, human rights, equality, constitutionalism and the like. Focus on common denominators and human values can prevent misuse and abuse of religion to justify regime survival, authoritarian or otherwise. No one, neither Islamist nor secular, would be able to use the Qur'ān, the gospel or the bible to legitimize a malignant hold on power.

Berna Turam (2007), reflecting on Turkish experience, suggests that the Islamists, secularists and the West need to work hard to create (1) a strong civil society that can balance state oppression and (2) the various societal actors that can coexist without feeling of being threatened or obliterated by the other (pp.7-11). According to Turam, “the demise of confrontation and emergence of cooperation between Islam and [a] secular state in Turkish context” (p.8) came about when the fear of secularists being threatened by an Islamically-oriented ruling AKP disappeared through the AKP's commitment to fundamental democratic values. The decline of authoritarianism has the potential for the demise or decline of confrontation and the emergence of cooperation between the state and societal forces.

Ahmet Davutoglu (1994) rightfully argues that the dialogue between Islam and the West can be more meaningful if the West perceives Islam “as an alternative *Weltanschauung* (worldview) to the Western philosophico-political tradition, rather than from the perspective of the ideological intransigence of Islam *vis-à-vis* the Western world today” (p.2). Therefore, the effective basis for dialogue between Islam and the West can exist when the West accepts Islam as its equal and debate over democracy and democratization between the West, secularists and Islamists takes place within this frame of mind. Davutoglu's argument suggests that for consolidation of democracy in the Muslim world, the West should persuade the secularists and the supporters of political Islam to engage in a debate over how the fundamental human values can best be protected and

how the religion of Islam can best help Muslims to protect and promote human rights and human values. This approach will defeat extremism and fundamentalism in the Muslim world.

### Conclusion

This study focuses on the challenge democracy and democratization pose to contemporary Muslim societies. It discusses the meaning and approaches to democracy and the relationship between democracy, Islam and secularism. The study concludes that the factors of instability within Muslim societies also include the philosophical differences between the Muslim and Western approaches to democracy and democratization. It also suggests that the ideological divide is more serious and destabilizing as it creates an uncompromising perennial debate between the Islamists and secularists within Muslim societies, with the possibility of becoming radicalized. The relation between the Islamists and secularists becomes even more radicalized when advanced Western democratic states cooperate with the secular intelligentsia or elites of Muslim societies against the rise and participation of the Islamists in the political process of their respective countries. The institutional approach, however, has a moderating role, if the Islamists, the secularists and the West perceive Islam and secularism as an alternative *weltanschauung* with their own axiological, ontological and epistemological presuppositions and focus on issues that are human properties, irrespective of religion, ethnicity or language such as religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence, limitation of power, justice, and human rights.

### Endnotes

1. For details of the origin and nature of secularism and its impact on life and society in the Muslim World, see Esposito, J. & Tamimi, A. (Eds). (2000). *Islam and secularism in the Middle East*. UK: C. Hurst & Co.

2. Most modern Muslim such as Abu Sulayman (1993, pp.5-15) and Khaled Abou El Fadl (2004, p.31) and Western thinkers like John L. Esposito (2004) argue that *Shari'ah* has been incorrectly translated as Islamic law by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. According to Esposito (2004), Islamic law means "the body of law developed by Muslim Jurists in the past" (pp.97-98).

3. Islamists or advocates of political Islam are not a uniform or a united

movement. They differ in their interpretations of fundamental sources of Islam, understanding of the relationship between Islam and modernity and goals, approaches, policies and strategies to capturing power. They can be categorized into radicals/fundamentalists, traditionalists (conservative) and moderates.

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