# EXPLORING THE COMPATIBILITY OF POLITICAL ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY
## Leina McDermott

This paper compares and contrasts the values of Islam and democracy in order to explore the existence of a political system in which the two are compatible. The text draws upon the writings of Arab political thinkers, the Q'uran, and foundational democratic documents in order to consider the major conflicts (sovereignty and the role of the state in private life) and synergies (consultation (shura), consensus (ijma), the obligation of public allegiance (bay'a), and independent reasoning (ijtihad)) between Islam and democracy. The paper finds that while Islam is not compatible with the Western democratic model, a new model for Islamic democracy can be constructed based on universal democratic values.

Since the first interactions of the Arab world with Europe in the 17th century, the question of Islam's role in modern government and state-building has occupied the thoughts of both Arab and Western thinkers. Islam's compatibility with democracy holds particular significance as many consider a democratic political system to be the hallmark of a modern state. With the emergence of several "Islamic Republics" and the rise of Islamist political parties beginning in the mid-20th century, the question of compatibility between political Islam and democracy has taken on new relevance. Based on a review of both the theoretical underpinnings of Islam and democracy and real-world examples, this paper argues that political Islam cannot be reconciled with the "Western" or "liberal" democratic model due to fundamental issues of sovereignty and the role of the state in governing the private sphere. However, a non-essentialist interpretation of both Islam and democracy allows for the understanding of a distinct political system in which the two are compatible.

The global modernizing force that began in Europe with the Age of Enlightenment and French Revolution catalyzed a reconsideration of government and state-building in the Arab world. Early thinkers on this topic were predominantly liberal Islamic scholars who envisioned modern governments based on Islam. Throughout the following two centuries, many views on the relationship between Islam and government emerged, providing a vast pool of discourse on which the modern discussion now sits. While a significant portion of this discussion concerns secular democratic governments in majority-Muslim states, this paper is only concerned with democratic systems based on political Islam. Early liberals Rifa'ah Al-Tahtawi and Khayr Al-Din advocated for such a system, drawing parallels between Islamic and democratic values. Tahtawi writes, "what is called freedom in Europe is exactly what is defined in our religion [Islam] as justice [*adl*], right [*haqq*], consultation [*shura*], and equality [musawat]... This is because the rule of freedom and democracy consists of imparting justice and right to the people, and the nation's participation in determin-

Leina McDermott grew up in Kirkland, Washington, and studies computer engineering at Dartmouth. She has enjoyed learning about Middle Eastern political and government systems from Professor Ezzedine Fishere in his courses America and the Middle East and Arab Political Thought. Her other interests include running, hiking, and building race cars with the Dartmouth Formula Racing team.

ing its destiny" (Islam 2017, 5). Both Tahtawi and Kahyr Al-Din make clear that the principles of democracy can be adopted without violating the *Shari'ah*, and are not dissimilar to what Islam already provides. Jamal Al-Din Al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh further contributed to the discourse on the concept of Islamic democracy. Afghani strongly opposed despotic governments and viewed a republican government as "a source of happiness and pride" for its people (Islam 2017, 7). However, like their liberal predecessors, both Afghani and Abduh imagined a political system with Islam at its core and opposed the adoption of any reform that comprised the fundamentals of Islam. Yet they all acknowledged the need to modernize Islamic thought. For Abduh, modernization relied on the revival of *ijtihad*, or independent reasoning concerning the interpretation of *Shari'ah* (God's law). These thinkers and their peers laid the foundation for a modern concept of Islamic democracy, a political system distinct from the Western model of democracy.

The fundamental difference between Islamic democracy and Western or liberal democracy is the issue of sovereignty. The Quran explicitly states that the supreme sovereign power belongs to *Allah* (God) (Islam 2017, 10). Humans may exercise political sovereignty by participating in their government; however, a government that confers supreme sovereignty upon a human being or earthly institution contradicts Islam. Thus, the people or government in an Islamic political system may never contradict Shari'ah. In contrast, the Western model of democracy confers sovereignty upon the people. This popular sovereignty is closely tied with the notion of individualism foundational to liberal democracy. In liberal democratic theory, individuals enjoy the status of sovereign persons; each is self-ruling and free to make decisions to protect their liberty. The preamble of the United States constitution cements this status: "We the people of the United States… secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity" and in the French constitution: "the exercise of the natural rights of every man has no bounds other than those that ensure to the other members of society the enjoyment of these same rights." In the liberal system, human sovereignty is only limited by the law (which is determined by the people), and the necessity of protecting the sovereign status of individuals. In political Islam, on the other hand, the status of individuals is that of vice-regents to God (Benhenda 2010, 99). In other words, individuals act in the name of God, not of themselves. The contradiction between Islamic and Western conceptions of sovereignty is at the center of the political thought rooted in the ideas of the Egyptian intellectual and Islamist Sayyid Qutb. Qutb calls the conception of God's sovereignty hakimiyya and deems anything that contradicts it as *jahiliyya* (idolatrous condition). Based on these beliefs, Qutb finds that "all regimes that explicitly ratify human sovereignty are *jahili*, whether they call themselves communist, liberal, democratic, socialist, or nationalist" (Qutb 131). Though Qutb is widely considered the father of modern Islamist thought, not all contemporary Islamists maintain his extreme views, and many have shifted toward a more moderate position that embraces the idea of Islamic democracy. However, the issue of sovereignty precludes the incorporation of political Islam and liberal democracy.

        The secondary ideological tension between political Islam and Western de-
mocracy is the role of the state in governing the private life of individuals. This issue
is related to the issue of sovereignty, as it relates to the practical consequences of gov-
ernment based on *Shari'ah*. Though here we are mainly concerned with the political
aspects of Islam, these cannot be separated from its religious and moral principles.
*Shari'ah* governs aspects of an individual's private life in a way that contradicts in-
dividual rights provided by liberal democracy. For example, though a tenet of Islam
is religious tolerance, the *Shari'ah* forbids conversion from Islam (Islam 2017, 13),
which conflicts with the total freedom of religion afforded to individuals by Western
democracy. Additionally, a common point of contention when considering Islamic
democracy is the status of women in the *Shari'ah*. Common marriage laws based on
*Shari'ah* afford women fewer rights in terms of divorce, and female heirs receive half
the share of male heirs according to Islamic laws of inheritance (Islam 2017, 14).
These are only examples of the broader issue of the contradiction between political
Islam and democracy in terms of individual rights and the private life, which in turn
stems from the previously discussed issue of individual sovereignty versus God's sover-
eignty.

        These contradictions do not preclude the compatibility of political Islam
and democracy, but rather clarify the distinction between Islamic democracy and the
Western model. As previously mentioned, the basis for Islamic democracy is provided
by the 19th-century thought of Tahtawi, Kahyr al-Din, Al-Afghani, and Abduh. It
relies on finding common ground in the fundamental principles of Islam and democ-
racy and rejecting a monolithic or essentialist interpretation of either system. While
the many possible interpretations of Islam lead to corresponding interpretations of
Islamic democracy, most agree it is rooted in four aspects of Islamic political thought:
consultation (shura), consensus (ijma), the obligation of public allegiance (bay'a), and
independent reasoning (ijtihad). In addition to these, an important stipulation of
Islamic democracy is that it is a procedural democracy, and all rights are procedural
rather than individual (Benhenda 2010, 103). Procedural rights are those "constitu-
tive of the political process," such as the right to vote, as opposed to liberal or individ-
ual rights, such as the right to non-political expression (Bennhenda 2010, 93).

        *Shura*, or consultation, provides the strongest link between Islam and democ-
racy. Many thinkers have paralleled *shura* with the concept of a parliament. According
to the Quran, the Prophet was commanded to consult those around him in important
matters (Islam 2017, 12). In the context of Islamic democracy, *shura* is interpreted as
the obligation of a ruler to take into account the outcome of consultation with the
*umma* before making decisions (Benhenda 2010, 104). In a parliamentary democracy,
the *umma* is represented by elected officials who serve as a consultative body for the
executive branch. *Shura* goes hand in hand with another Islamic concept of *bay'a*, or
the process by which the public pledges allegiance to the ruler. This process resembles
an agreement between the ruler and the public through which "the ruler takes au-
thority from the umma, which is then obliged to obey him" (Benhenda 2010, 102).

*Bay'a* is similar to the democratic process of elections, with an important difference being that once the public pledges its allegiance to the ruler through *bay'a*, it forsakes its ability to make new decisions in the future (i.e., partake in future elections) as the ruler is assumed to rule for life. However, as the ruler derives authority from the public with the responsibility of upholding *Shari'ah*, if he fails to do so, he becomes taghut and breaks his bay'a. For example, if the ruler fails to consider the consultation of the umma as required by shura, his *bay'a* would be broken, and the public would be free to elect a new leader. Add to this the concept of ijma, or consensus, and a democratic procedure of elections can be constructed from principles of Islamic political thought.

The concept of *ijtihad*, or independent reasoning, is perhaps the most important concept for the legitimacy of Islamic democracy. It is the main support for Tahtawi and Abduh's arguments for Islam's compatibility with the modern world. *Ijtihad* allows for the interpretation of God's law to best serve the welfare of the people (*maslaha*) and the development of time and place. *Ijtihad* is what can allow for the survival of a modern Islamic political system by providing a method for the adaptation of *Shari'ah* to the needs and desires of a contemporary public. However, the centrality of ijtihad to an Islamic political system is also problematic and exposes one of the major limits to this form of government.

In a political system that enforces the sovereignty of God's law, an obvious limitation is the uncertainty inherent to a system in which the supreme sovereign is not human. On undisputed aspects of *Shari'ah* this does not pose a problem, but when the law is open to conflicting interpretations, Islam does not provide a definitive method for resolving such conflicts. Islam does not have a clergy, and though religious scholars may interpret the law under the principle of *ijtihad*, "this is not sufficient for the extreme case in which the arguments of all parties have been exhausted and disagreement still persists" (Benhenda 2010, 106). With *Shari'ah* at the center of a political system, "the fundamental problem comes down to the fact that no earthly institution can claim an exclusive right to interpret religious texts" (Benhenda 2010, 106). This presents not only a procedural problem, but also an opportunity for exploitation. As the Christian secularist, Farah Antun, voiced in his objections to 'Abduh's proposed Islamic state: the compromise between modernity and religion can lead to the cooption of power and resulting undue influence of religious leaders (Hourani 2013, 258–59). One could argue that this is the case in Iran, where the Council of Guardians, the body responsible for upholding *Shari'ah* by approving bills passed by the parliament, is the most influential political body in Iran despite reformist attempts to reduce its power (CFR).

Another limitation has to do with the fragility of a system so open to interpretation and so dependent on the interpretation of those in power. This dependency causes the system to be vulnerable to movement to the left or right, which could cause the system to become either not Islamic or not a democracy. For example, the Ennahda party in Tunisia rose to power as a moderate Islamist party under the leadership of Rached Ghannouchi. Ghannouchi, one of the most influential advocates for Islamic

democracy, argued strongly for the compatibility of political Islam and democracy in the wake of the Arab Spring. His party facilitated Tunisia's transformation into one of the most functional democracies in the Muslim world, and yet by 2016, the party was distancing itself from the label of Islamism and rebranding itself and Tunisia as a democracy guided by the values of Islam. Essentially, the idea of Islamic democracy was used to popularize democracy in a Muslim-majority country to achieve the ultimate goal of implementing a Western democracy. This is clear from the ways in which the Tunisian democratic model conflicts with the Islamic principle of sovereignty as shown by Ghannouchi's address to the World Movement for Democracy in Dakar, in which he stated: "the government is and must be of the people, by the people, and for the people—not in the name of God, who is sovereign and watching over all of us" (Ghannouchi 2018, 6).

On the other side of the issue is Turkey, a nominally secular democracy led by the Islamically rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP) under President Erdogan. While Tunisia has swung away from the Islamic aspect of its Islamic democracy, Turkey is undergoing a movement of increasing Islamist influence. In recent years, Turkey's government has begun to selectively enforce its interpretation of *Shari'ah* on the public without any of the democratic provisions discussed above. This phenomenon reflects concerns of secularists, modernists, and universalists that including political Islam in a democratic political system introduces an unacceptable risk due to the unpredictable degree to which the party may align itself with the extremist minority after coming to power.

Practical limitations aside, the argument that political Islam is incompatible with democracy is based on a monolithic understanding of both democracy and Islam. When the Western model of democracy is distinguished from the basic and universal principles of a democratic system, and Islamism is not reduced to its extremist minority, a new model for Islamic democracy can be constructed. Whether or not this model is the optimal one for advancing Muslim-majority states is another question, one which certainly depends on the state and its specific version of Islamic democracy. At the same time, many disagree that the universal concept of democracy can be separated from the Western model at all, in which case, the conclusion must be that Islamic democracy does not truly exist. However, a belief in the legitimacy of procedural democracy, and an acceptance of the limitations of political Islam allows one to view this hybrid system as a tool for modernization and development in the Muslim world.

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