

Islam and Democracy: Some Observations

S.A.M. Pasha*

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In recent times, Islam has come into vogue in the discourse of inter-national relations. The Iranian revolution, spear-headed and brought into successful fruition by Ayatullah Khomeini, has ensured Islam's salience at the global arena. During its short career of a quarter century, Iran's Islamic state craft is still undergoing vicissitudes: the tussle between reformists and conservatives has yet to find its culmination in a decisive form. The novelty of this system has been that it is interspersed with electoral democracy.

There are vital issues that this revolution has brought in its wake. Of them, the compatibility or otherwise of Islam and democracy occupies a vital position. Western analysts who are guided by what Edward Said called 'orientalism', suggest that Arab or Muslim culture is intrinsically authoritarian and hence not conducive to democracy. This cultural essentialist viewpoint on the nexus between the two phenomena (Islam and democracy) does not aim at explanations or analysis of the said phenomena; instead, it aimed at denigration of those societies where Islam has been a living force. It is a manifestation of an ahistoricist mindset.

Of late, one finds a plethora of academic and journalistic writings on Islam in its various manifestations, notably on its 'fundamentalist' proclivities. In conformity to the cultural essentialist paradigm, the analytical credentials of the observers of the 'fundamentalist' Islam remains much to be desired. The epistemological models that hitherto informed social sciences did not accord religion a public space. Secularism, a concomitant outgrowth of the nation-state system, made a strict bifurcation of man's spiritual and temporal realms, thanks to Europe's Reformation and Renaissance. In extending the application of this paradigm, to Muslim countries, European colonialism acted as a catalytic agent. The immediate post-colonial state in the Muslim world did not dismantle this paradigm; instead, it imitated it. It did not, however, bring desired results. It did not successfully address itself to the problems besetting Muslim societies. It did not find fertile political soil in the Muslim world. On the contrary, it paved the way for a serious search towards a home-grown, indigenously rooted, and authentic paradigm: Islamism or the political manifestation of Islam.

In the discussion of interplay between Islam and democracy, some verities have to be kept in view. In Islam, the centrality of Allah constitutes an indisputable fact in the life of His believers. The latter are guided by the notion of Tawhid (Oneness of Allah) in both their personal and social life. Concomitantly, in derivative fashion, it leads to universal brotherhood of believers (Umma). Further, the principle of shura (mutual consultation) enjoins upon believers to arrive at decisions affecting them as a whole. Ijma, as a Qur'anic principle, seeks to arrive at decisions

consensually. As a guide to believers' lives, hadith (the sayings and practices attributed to the Prophet, Peace be Upon Him, PBUH) occupies the most exalted place second only to the Holy Book, the Qur'an. Taking note of the dynamic nature of human life, experts of Islamic jurisprudence (fuqaha) recognized, and resorted to istihad as a method and technique to arrive at decisions in a creative and rational fashion, on matters where the shariah is silent. Acting as an overacting principle and bringing everything under its canopy, the notion of Allah's sovereignty (al-hukumat al-Ilahi) over the universe contextualizes the subject.

Islam gives a preeminent importance to the ideas of justice (adl) and equality (Musawat) as guiding principles in human relations. In substantive terms, modern democracy too accords similar importance to these concepts, lest democracy should remain engulfed in the web of procedures, notably the electoral politics.

From the Qur'anic perspective, the Holy Book contains nothing seemingly antithetical to democracy. Cultural factors, as understood broadly, do not, indeed cannot, explain the presence or absence of democracy in Muslim societies. A dynamic system like democracy cannot be reduced to a monocausal explanation.

The Quranic notion of human dignity and the inalienable right to freedom of religion and conscience speaks about its recognition of religious pluralism.

Muslim civilization had a chequered place in world history. It gave birth to a plethora of intellectuals who produced a civilization amalgamating the ethos of reason and revelation. This unique symbioses gave rise to an Islamic vision which informed all aspects of life. Contemporary Muslims suffer hardships due to the lack of such a vision appropriating their culture, history, identity, and other affective factors. A crisis of thought (or mind) emanating from a visionless state has weakened Muslims in international affairs. The present governments of Muslim states, excepting a few, have not accorded a serious introspection to questions of contemporary nature: the place of democracy in their bodies politic, the state of human rights with particular reference to the status of women and minorities, and the phenomenon of globalization to name just the three.

No discussion of Islam-democracy interplay is complete without bringing to the fore the impact of colonialism on Muslim societies. The colonial penetration had a devastating effect on Muslim societies encroaching upon every conceivable aspect of their national life save the personal status issues, such as marriage, divorce, inheritance etc. Western statecraft models - notably the nation-state order and secularism, to name just the two-sought to inform collective life in Muslim societies reeling under colonialism. The vivisection of the caliphal state under the Ottomans during the two great wars and there after, disabled the collective abilities of Muslims to organize themselves or their cherished ethos of endogeneity. Adhering to the policy of Millet, the Ottomans displayed religious tolerance towards Jews and Christians ensuring the observance of their religious practices without hindrance.

The ideology of colonialism by itself militates against what democracy stands for and entails. If the latter had anything to do with self-governance, under-pinning its theoretical postulates, the former had put paid to it. Neither the British, the French, the Italian, nor the Dutch colonialists

introduced the structures of democratic governance in a genuine, meaningful way. Unlike the British who introduced the Westminster institutions in colonial India, such institutional apparatuses were hardly noticeable in Muslim territories. To the British, India was the jewel in the Crown, for whose control, their retention of West Asia was a prerequisite.

The aforesaid makes it clear that there is nothing in the Qur'an and the hadith which initiates against democracy. The fact that the majority of Muslim countries has been bereft of democracy is owed to factors extraneous to Islam. The inability of Muslim leadership introducing reforms toward public participation in politics and the state of human rights therein is being used as a stick to beat them with by the interested western powers. With a view to overcoming these dilemmas, these countries need to chalk out their vision encompassing their ethos of endogeneity and the realities of contemporary life.