

The Basics of the Political System in Islam

أساسيات النظام السياسي في الإسلام

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Introduction

The West makes a natural mistake in their understanding of Islamic tradition, assuming that religion means the same for Muslims as it has meant for most other religious adherents ever since the industrial revolution, and for some societies, even before that; that is: a section of life reserved for certain matters, and separate from other sections of life. This is not the Islamic world view. It never has been in the past, and modern attempts of making it so are seen as an aberration.

Islam: A Total Way of Life

Islam is a “total way of life.” It has provided guidance in every sphere of life, from individual cleanliness, rules of trade, to the structure and politics of the society. Islam can never be separated from social, political, or economic life, since religion provides moral guidance for every action that a person takes. The primary act of faith is to strive to implement God's will in both private and public life. Muslims see that they, themselves, as well as the world around them, must be in total submission to God and his Will. Moreover, they know that this concept of His rule must be established on earth in order to create a just society. Like Jews

and Christians before them, Muslims have been called into a covenant relationship with God, making them a community of believers who must serve as an example to other nations by creating a moral social order. God tells the Muslim global nation:

“You are the best community raised for mankind, enjoining the right and forbidding the wrong...” (Quran 3:110)

Throughout history, being a Muslim has meant not only belonging to a religious community of fellow believers but also living under the Islamic Law. For Islamic Law is believed to be an extension of God’s absolute sovereignty.

God is the Only Sovereign

God is the absolute sovereign in Islam, and is therefore the only Lord of heaven and earth. Just as He is the Lord of the physical universe, to the true Muslim believers, God is the Lawgiver for every area of human life. Just as He is the Master of the physical world, God is the Ruler of the affairs of men in Islamic doctrine. Thus God is the supreme Lawgiver¹, the Absolute Judge, and the Legislator Who distinguishes right from wrong. Just like the physical world inevitably submits to its Lord by following the ‘natural’ laws of the universe, human beings must submit to the moral and religious teaching of their Lord, the One Who sets right apart from wrong for them. In other words, God alone has the authority to make laws, determine acts of worship, decide morals, and set standards of human interaction and behavior. This is because,

“His is the Creation and Command.” (Quran 7:54)

¹ God’s existence proven by the existence of a supreme Lawgiver is called the ‘ethical’ argument by Western theologians.

The Separation of Institutional Religion & the State

As we have mentioned, in Islam God is acknowledged the sole sovereign of human affairs, so there has never been a distinction between religious and state authority. In Christendom, the distinction between the two authorities are said to be based upon records in the New Testament of Jesus, asking his followers to render unto Caesar what was his and unto God what was His. Therefore throughout Christian history until the present times, there have always been two authorities: ‘God and Caesar’, or ‘the church and state.’ Each had its own laws and jurisdictions, each its own structure and hierarchy. In the pre-westernized Islamic world there were never two powers, and the question of separation never arose. The distinction so deeply rooted in Christendom between church and state has never existed in Islam.

The Vision of an Islamic State

The vision of an Islamic state and the purpose of its political authority is to implement the divine law. Thus, the ideal Islamic state is a community governed by the Law revealed by God. This does not entail that such a state is necessarily a theocracy under direct rule of the learned men of religion, nor is it an autocracy that vests absolute power in the ruler. The function of the Islamic state is to provide security and order so that Muslims can carry out both their religious and worldly duties. The Caliph² is the guardian of faith and the community. His role is not so much checked by the *ulama* (religious scholars), but enhanced by them because they provide him religious and legal counsel. He also appoints judges who resolve disputes in accordance with Islamic Law. There is a certain level of flexibility in regards to the system of governance

2 The word Caliph is the English term for Khaleefah, or successor, for the Caliph succeeds Prophet Muhammad as political leader of the Muslims and implementation of Divine Law in society.

and its establishment in Islam, however, religion must be implemented fully into state and society.

Islam and Democracy

In order to discuss productively the topic of democracy, one must first understand the origins and meanings of the concept itself. But, for the sake of brevity, it can be said that, according to the “modern” and most rudimentary understanding of the term, Islamic thought does conform to some of its aspects. One such aspect is the fact that Muslims have a right to appoint their rulers, hold them accountable and, when need be, to remove them from office. Islam does not, however, empower the system of government with the right to absolve or change the legislation of the religion in society, nor does it leave them the right of creation of novel legislations. Rather, legislation is the right of God alone, and religion must be pivotal in deciding the validity of any new law. Bypassing this right of God amounts to the unforgivable sin of polytheism, for it from the basis of the belief in the Oneness of God that He and only He has the right of legislation. What this means is that the people or their elected officials do not have a right to make permissible what God has forbidden, or to declare forbidden what God has made permissible. Both in granting them such a right and then following their legislation is their elevation, making them lords like God, and this is what is meant by polytheism. No-one has the right to change the Law of God, and His Law is superior to and supersedes all man-made laws.

Setting the boundaries of interaction between Islam and democracy, Muslims today are debating the relationship of Islam to democratic institutions in their societies. While most Muslims wish for greater political participation, the rule of law, government accountability, freedoms, and human rights, there are many different ways to achieve these goals. To some, Islam has its own mechanisms which preclude democratic institutions. Still others

contend that Islam is fully capable of accommodating and supporting democratic institutions. Engaging in a process of reform, they argue the compatibility between Islam and certain types of ‘democracy’ by using traditional Islamic concepts like consultation (*shura*) between the ruler and the ruled, community consensus (*ijma*), public interest (*maslaha*), and scriptural based opinion (*ijtihad*). These mechanisms can be used to support forms of government with systems of checks and balances among the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches. However, rulers of authoritarian states tend to ignore, discourage, or suppress democratic institutions.

In general, one can see that Islam is a religion which not only governs the private religious life of an individual, but also mandates and regulates all aspects of public life. As the notion of worship in Islam is not restricted to mere rituals but inclusive of all deeds of obedience and goodness, so too does the concept of religion extend to all avenues of life on Earth. To a Muslim, the concepts of religion and state are inseparable. In keeping this principle respectfully in mind, whatever the form of government a Muslim society chooses to implement, all its constituents must be in direct concordance to the precepts of religion. By no means can the system of governance exclude, absolve, or interpolate any mandate of the religion, and this is yet only another example of the pure monotheistic nature of Islam, and that all rights due to God are rendered to Him alone, and none else.