

## ***How Islam and Democracy are reconcilable?***

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### **Abstract**

*The paper discusses in detail different ways how Islam and democracy can be reconciled and highlights the importance of democratic values for Muslim dominated societies, which is the need of modern times. It also discusses how Islam which stands for global peace and security and bound Muslims to be more responsible regarding the implementation of justice, peace and to stand for the fundamental humanitarian values which go in parallel with the concept of democratic principles. The paper also converses, the scenario in which the beautiful religion for entire humanity has been attempted to be hijacked by a radical mindset which prevailed in every civilization ever existed.*

***Keywords:*** Islam, Democracy, Global peace.

The paper debates different approaches through which the concept of democracy can be utilized for the enrichment and enlightenment of Muslim civilization, under the theme which Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto narrated in her book. Although, the term democracy appears to be a western terminology, in essence, the values for which it stands had very much been part of the state of Medina, has been discussed and analyzed with respect to the contemporary world.

In an environment, where many religious organizations are working towards anti-democratic form of government or better say in favor of dictatorship/caliphate under the label of Islam, and trying to hijack the state after stagnating the thinking process i.e. Ijma for the

past 500 years, by selling hollow dreams based on past glory, it's indeed a great achievement for me to write this paper.

We first have to define what is meant by democracy and democratic values, since "to define is to limit". There are several definitions of democracy, according to the Oxford dictionary; it's defined as:

*"A system of government in which all the people of a state or polity ... are involved in making decisions about its affairs, typically by voting to elect representatives to a parliament or similar assembly." (Oxford Dictionary)*

But the more important thing is to know for what democracy stands for and what does it offer to Muslim dominated societies where traditions have been confused with religion. Democracy is a source to reach to an end, not an end itself while keeping this in mind, let's find answer what is the meaning of democracy in the modern nation-state system and whether it collides or goes parallel in line with Islam.

We must remember that from values, a system emerges which regulate the public lives of the individuals. While, a democratic system is a tool to effectively run the state machinery, in the modern state system, and to ensure the basic rights of its citizens, but it cannot function effectively if there are no democratic values in our lives.

And if we examine the Islamic values then we understand that it stands for the core democratic values, i.e. maintaining peace and security, to stand for the rights of those who are subjected, to consult amongst issues before taking decisions for collective good, to liberate one from slavery whether mental or bonded labor, to protect the rights of women, to safeguard the rights of minority, pluralistic values, protection of fundamental individual rights and tolerance.

Islam and democratic culture both encourage thinking process which is the soul of any civilization, once the thinking process stops down; the civilization eventually has to collapse. Benazir Bhutto reminds the notion when 'creative minority' simply stops producing good ideas and becomes satisfied to rule in an unjust manner. (Benazir Bhutto, 2008)

Democracy is not just about holding regular elections rather it is an evolving process where every single entity/individual of society is consulted to contribute and to have a chance in determining his/her own will. The concept of "democracy which emerged in Athens in 508

B.C," being going-concern is very much different from modern-day democracy. (Dunn John, 1994) The modern democratic principles which are inspired by Federalist papers played a vital role in the emergence of new nations and are a source of law-making in the USA. Similarly, modern democracy has transformed into advocating human rights, liberty, equality, fraternity, and no superiority of one race over another.

The UN General Assembly resolution which was passed in 2004 by the General Assembly highlights 7 essential elements of democracy, which are as follows:

Separation and balance of power, independence of the judiciary, Pluralistic nature of organizations and political parties, Rule of law, Accountability and transparency, Free, independent and pluralistic media, Respect for human and political rights. (Michael M. Resende, 2011)

‘While shattering the illusion that Islam and democracy are incompatible’ as discussed by the Stephan and Robertson, the writer strengthens the narrative that democratic principles does not contradict Islamic values (Benazir Bhutto, 2008). Rather, anti-democratic forces, sometimes under the umbrella of religion mix up the religion with traditions, and other times under the banner of nationalism used by dictators’ for the continuation and consolidation of their power misinterpret democracy.

The gradual hijacking of political offices by forces after the shifting of Medina which was the capital of first Islamic state, after the assassination of Uthman ibn Affan (R.A.), by the same mindset which stands for tyranny, constraints on freedom, subjugating the voices which rise against dictatorship continues in Muslim dominated states till today. In the context of the Muslim world, and especially with the case of Pakistan, the forces which stand for the fundamental humanitarian values and advocates for democracy, but against dictatorship are tried to be labeled as modernists fighting against Islamists. Rather they should be labeled as reformers versus traditionalists. Considering the fact that all the traditionalists’ practices are not wrong but some of them which are still rampant in our society. Neither Islam nor democracy stands against some of the values being practiced in the name of tradition.

The crisis of Muslim dominated societies is that, they are still in search of their identity, which leads the young minds to fall for radicalization in frustration, thanks to unaccountable media and hatred based narrative being sold on the name of religion. The anti-west hysteria had made the Muslim fanatics to appeal to people to boycott the products made in West after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. (Dawn, Oct 22, 2001)

Islam advocates Muslims for taking decisions on the basis of consensus, which is related to their collective interests as mentioned in the Quran, which is the essence of democracy.

*"They (the Muslims) decide all their collective issues through mutual consultation." (Al-Shura-32:38, Quran)*

Similarly, the actions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as a statesman of Medina also speaks about taking decisions on mutual consultation as Hazrat Salman Farsi (R.A.) proposed to dig the trench as a tactic of defensive strategy in the "Battle of Khandaq" (trench).

Since the democratic culture cultivates an environment in which new ideas grow which helps towards the betterment of society, that's why in Quran all humanity especially those who believe in it are encouraged to ponder over the universe and to think.

*"Most certainly the worst of animals in Allah's sight are the deaf, the dumb who do not use their brains." (Al-Anfal-8:22, Quran)*

Similarly, Islam acknowledges the men of intellect higher in superiority than those who do not possess intellect. As mentioned in

*"None will grasp the message but men of intellect?" (Al-Baqarah- 2:269, Quran)*

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) didn't become the ruler of Medina by takeover or by any other undemocratic means; rather it was a consensus among the representative of the state of Medina, at that time, which led the keys of ruling the city into Prophet Muhammad hands. Even after becoming the ruler, he led the city under a written constitution, accepting Jews as a distinct group of state enjoying all the fundamental rights just like other Muslim counterparts. When Prophet Muhammad died, his armor/shield was mortgaged for 30 Sa'ah of wheat to a Jew (Bukhari), which shows that Prophet Muhammad was leading through a model of integrating the minority into society; this

example of economic interdependence has a lesson for democratic societies like Pakistan.

Respect for individual choices and freedom to choose is encouraged in Islam and is a fundamental pillar of democracy. Neither in private life nor in the public sphere, had Prophet Muhammad imposed his will on any individual.

For any community which has a distinct identity, Islam respects that identity and encourages the policies which lead the assimilation of such groups towards one greater identity as happened in case of Medina, where all Jews of Medina and Muslims were one entity against Qur'aish.

According to the Charter of Medina, Jews were liable to fight for the state along with Muslims, against an external enemy, which shows that when it comes to the security of the state, all the groups have to be united to maintain the sovereignty of the state and to fight for one cause.

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) had founded a confederal state as the non-Muslim tribes governed themselves in accordance with their own laws and were fully autonomous in their own regions. (Javed Iqbal, Iqbal Review) The permission to settle the disputes among Jews according to their religious laws points towards the acceptance of customary law in the state of Medina.

Islam encourages women to be active in both in household and the public sphere, women along with men were ordered to maintain the Salah system, and during the times of prophet, women used to pray regularly in Masjid e Nabwi, which empowered the women in real sense. If we look in the current situation in our country, in many areas, women are not even allowed to participate in the democratic process and discouraged to cast their own votes, in the name of religion. The forces which discourage the women to cast their vote are actually the same forces which used to bury the infant girls alive during the dark ages of Arab. These forces are responsible for social decay as they silence the majority segment of the country.

As far as the rights and responsibilities of women are concerned, the state of the medina was more democratic than the current state of Pakistan and the majority of the Muslim world. As the first time in recorded history, women were constitutionally allowed to keep their own property; on the contrary, if we look in some parts of Sindh,

women are married to Quran in order to keep them away from their due share in the inheritance. Similarly, women are given a due share in the inheritance, which according to some critics is unequal. It must be noted that Islam, doesn't differ on the basis of gender rather on social roles.

The difference of distribution of inheritance between daughter and son is not because of gender rather it's because of the social structure of society. As the male is held financially liable custodian of their female counterparts.

Similarly, the critics argue that women are given half testimony in comparison to men, in "Qanoon e Shahada". They forget that it narrates the scenario in which women participation and representation enhance. As it implies, that to counter one man, two women witnesses are necessary to balance him, which makes up a picture in which if 100 men are present, then it will be countered by 200 women dominance. Since being a witness is a responsibility; the Quran encourages women to bear the responsibility and to be more social.

In the eyes of the state, for every crime, there is a penalty, irrespective of gender. Hence, criminal women will not bear half punishment in comparison to criminal men.

Since democracy talks about the participation of every segment of the society, so does the Quran which is the basis of Medina Charter, as it provides a sense of ownership of the state. Since debate and dialogue culture is the essence of democratic culture, and it is a sign of healthy society, Quran welcomes the people of other holy books to have debate and dialogue to better understand each other and to agree on common points for the collective good.

*" Say [O Mohammad]: O people of the book, come to a common understanding between us and you, that we shall worship no one except One God that we shall take no partners with Him and none of us shall take others for Lord beside One God" (Al-Imran- 3:64 Quran)*

Since liberty and equality are two key fundamentals of democracy, but at some point, the latter contradict the other. So, when unaccountable liberty causes inequality then there is a need for balance which is maintained in democratic societies through legislation. In democratic countries, the over-riding demands of equality will result in centralized government, as proposed by French political philosopher

Tocqueville in his book *Democracy In America*. (John Dunn, 1994) Considering this narrative democratic structure of governance strengthens the Islamic point of view of centralization of authority. Hence, we can conclude that democratic structure encourages the demand for equality which in result strengthens the centralization of power.

Islam frees the people of the world from mental and physical chains by making them answerable only to one supreme authority. The encouragement of liberation of slaves in Muslim societies, led to the gradual end of slavery, much earlier from other parts of the world. Modern democracy and Islam both encourage the abolition of slavery, which had rusted the leadership capabilities and the ability of critical and creative thinking.

Another key value for which Islam stands is Justice in society. In the state of Medina, all individuals were equal in the eyes of law, and Islam forces Muslims to speak for justice, neither to please someone nor to antagonize anyone.

*"O you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even as against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether it be (against) rich or poor: for Allah can best protect both. Follow not the lusts (of your hearts), lest ye swerve, and if ye distort (justice) or decline to do justice, verily Allah is well- acquainted with all that ye do." (Al-Nisa-4:135, Quran)*

Similarly, Islam forbids Muslims to do injustice even to opponent nations. As it's mentioned in the Quran:

*O You who have Believed! Those who stand out firmly for (the cause of) Allah (as) Witnesses for justice; and must not direct you enmity and hatred of a nation to a state that you may not do justice. Be just that (is) nearer to piety, and be obedient to Allah. Verily, Allah (is) All-Aware with what you do. (Al-Ma'idah-5:8, Quran)*

Democracy stands for justice and the primary focus of democratic societies is to do justice to all the segments of societies, for this purpose, sometimes, the concept of liberty is even compromised. But, in the era of modern nation system, the myopic view leads the nation states to do away with justice and sometimes powerful countries like the USA, even supported the tyrant dictators, in the Muslim world

and supported the military regimes for their own interests. This global trend of supporting dictators who are curbing the local population's globally acknowledged humanitarian rights should be condemned and West should formulate a clear policy of supporting the democratic norms and values to take roots in this part of the world as well, without mala fide intentions for global peace and security.

Since, the extreme right-wing political government or extreme left-wing government both are hazardous for true democracy, as happened in case of Nazi Germany, the importance of independent judiciary must be acknowledged, to counter the extremist government high-handedness.

No democracy can grow without vibrant judiciary; it is a fundamental need of the country to have an independent judiciary which is under the approach of all segments of society.

It's basically the democratic culture in society which is necessary for sustainable democracy, the culture of listening and understanding each other, culture of tolerance and culture of protecting the weaker segments of society.

Islam ensures peace in the society and orders to refrain from fighting until they are forced to retaliate or as a measure of pre-emptive strike.

To maintain the peace in the region, Prophet Muhammad proved through his action that there is no aggressive war in Islam, as all the battles he fought, the battle of Badar, the battle of Uhud, and the battle of Khandaq, all were defensive in nature.

"Fight for the sake of God against those who fight against you, but do not be aggressive' which expression clearly implies that war is not to be initiated but resisted for the sake of self-defense only. (Dr. Shiv Sharma, Philosophy of Islam)

Secondly, the commandment of Allah forbids Muslims to fight for 4 months out of 12 months, around which makes 33% of the calendar year, i.e., Peacetime.

Thirdly, Prophet Muhammad signed the treaty with Quraish on terms which were not liked even by his companions, as Sulah e Hudaibiyah was providing an upper hand to Quraish just for the sake of peace.



Similarly, it is historically been witnessed that true democracies do not go against each other in war, as the focus of representatives of these states is to serve the people who voted for them. "The term zone of peace is often used in political circles, to describe geographical areas in which countries do not go to war with each other because they share democratic values." (Robert Jackson, Global politics in the 21st century)

Interestingly, Islamic values and 'true democracies', both have much in common regarding the external security policy of the state is concerned.

As far as pillars of Islam are concerned, there are five basic principles on which both major schools of thoughts agreed upon, that is;

- Shahada - Faith
- Salah -Prayer
- Zakat –Charity
- Sawm- Fasting
- Hajj- Pilgrimage to Mecca

When an individual accepts with his/her own will without any compulsion to enter into the fold of Islam, by saying the words that:

"No God, but Allah and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah"

Interestingly, for becoming Muslim, one first has to say, "No GOD" which depicts that without liberating oneself from idolatry chains the procedure of entering into the sphere of the Muslim community cannot take place. The individual is entitled to enjoy all the rights like other Muslims, with responsibility which he/she has to perform that is to take stand for justice, developing tolerating behavior, not to do inequality in the personal or public sphere.

If we examine one of the most important pillars of Islam that is the establishment of Salah, we can easily deduce that believers are prompted to remember the sense of accountability, and like other pillars of Islam, it also speaks about equality among believers irrespective of posts, power, and prestige.

In a similar manner, another pillar of Islam that is fasting during the month of Ramadan, the 9th month of Lunar Calendar, gives a message to Muslims. The message whether one is rich or poor, or whether one is laboring the responsibility of heading the state or is a simple day to day labor, by not eating and drinking throughout the day,

instigate a thought to realize that all the citizens are "equal" irrespective of post one is holding. This whole exercise of one month every year reminds every Muslim that how much the hunger or lust one can have, at the dusk of sunset, one cannot eat or drink more than a specific quantity, inculcating the sense of "simplicity which is the key of good governance. The exercise of fasting encourages the society to be tolerant towards each other, boosts the sense of equality, strengthens the belief in fraternity and liberates one from becoming a hostage of desires.

Similarly, another pillar of Islam, which is Zakat, is obligatory on every Muslim individual who continuously keeps a specific amount of wealth, which shows Islamic advocacy regarding the rotation of wealth and also encourages the distribution of wealth among the people who are at low social strata of society. This small step of empowering poor people by rich classes not only helps them to be more economically free but also facilitates both the segments of society to have positive interaction which benefits the society as a result. The spirit of this whole economic exercise is to cause economic equality and economic justice, which are the fundamentals of democracy.

Hajj, one of the five pillars of Islam, is a perfect example, which Prophet Muhammad performed like a legitimate ruler along with companions. During Hajj, no matter how rich one can be what social status one enjoys, no matter what race one belongs to, irrespective of color, all individuals whether men or women have to perform all the rituals. The exercise of Hajj also provides an opportunity to Muslims that whoever submits his/her own self-centered desires is equal like any other Muslim, which develops a sense of fraternity- a sense of belonging to common interests. The yearly exercise of Hajj stands for global brotherhood.

The dilemma of the modern democratic world is that there is a dearth of a global leader who can address the challenges being faced by the humanity, especially in the Muslim world, where there is a scarcity of leadership due to imposition of incapable democratic leaders who protect the western interests in return of support to their regimes. It is unfortunate to see that the Muslim societies succumbed to intolerance, injustice, and slavery of traditions in disguise of religion. One of the major reasons behind all these social evils is the lack of political institutions. The practice of becoming a hostage of history has

caused fissures in Muslim societal structure and has stagnant progressive growth.

In the era of the modern nation-state system, no country can survive and stand among the league of the nations with pride without having proper delivering state institutions, including-judiciary, legislative bodies. The state institutions, including the judiciary, military, academia, think tanks, mass media, NGOs, legislative bodies, academia, financial and health sector if work incoherent manner, with synchronization then the result can be outstanding for all the inhabitants of the state. However, it does not narrate that democratic process advocate's centralization of power in few hands; rather it advocates the good governance, with no institutional intervention in other institution's affairs rather keeping in loop all the significant institutions. This will not only strengthen the democratic culture in society but will also improve the delivery of each institution.

The role of civil societies in modern democratic societies is significant; Islam directs the believers in this regard that:

"Let there be a group among you who call others to good, and enjoin what is right, and forbid what is wrong: those who do this shall be successful." (Al-Imran-3:104, Quran)

In fact, through this verse, Muslims are obliged to take care of collective good and stay away from the acts which are harmful to society.

Since, present-day democracy has been the result of social changes which took place in Western Europe, while in the Muslim world it was considered as a western instrument of subjecting Muslims, which was facilitated by radical mindset filled with religious fanaticism. It is pertinent to note that there is no ideal democratic form of government, each type of democracy has its own pros and cons, but the essential thing is the political stability which it provides in the long run while ensuring the political will of the people.

In the context of Pakistan, which was founded through a democratic process; there is no way forward for the society to get stability and move towards enlightenment without having democratic values to be inculcated at the local level. Local Bodies government should be reformed in such a way, that the local population starts taking ownership in the decisions regarding their collective good. Along with this, the participation of all the segments of society should

be encouraged and incentives should be given to increase the electoral turn out which is one of the lowest in Pakistan with respect to its neighbors.

The traditional society like Pakistan where every western product or idea is first objected and then accepted, the seed of vibrant democracy has to be sown at domestic level and more importantly, the democratic values have to be encouraged to replace the values of patriarchal society.

In the era of a modern democratic state, the implementation of democratic values in tribal and patriarchal culture appears to be a challenging task, similarly, the execution of social justice and working towards the emancipation of women from tribal culture are the areas for which society should work.

To voice for policies which constrain the flow of wealth among a few hands, this is the democratic value which Islam advocates. Similarly, Islam and democracy stand for formulating such policies which provide equal opportunities to all the social classes, so that together the society can grow and every individual can get benefit from it. Neither democracy and nor Islam at any point advocate the dominant of any specific group in any sphere of life, both talks about the concept of pluralism.

In short, democratic values are the fundamental traits for which Islam stands for, ensuring women rights, rights of the minority, making a decision with mutual consultation and, independent judiciary, equality of every individual in the eyes of law, acceptance of communities who want to maintain their individual identities and standing for universal peace.

The current democratic system which is a result of continuous evolution spread over centuries, does have flaws in it, and it will further evolve as long as the intellectual capacity of human mind works, and it might be possible some better form of government replaces after the demise of democracy, just has happened throughout history. But, the need for universal values for which the concept of modern democracy has emerged will prevail as long as, a single free human being exists. Since Islam is a universal religion; whatever system in coming centuries do modern nation-states acquire, if the values of that system adhere the universal needs of humanity that

system will survive unless some better governance structure overpowers it.

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