

Islam and Democracy

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Abstract: In the past the link between Islam and Democracy was very much of questionable; because the main element in democracy was its anti tyrannical and popular nature. No government could gain people's satisfaction unless they could respect their cultures, customs, and believes and try to gratify their religious needs along with other requirements. Today, some thinkers try to present the above mentioned elements, they instead try to emphasize on secularism as an important basis of democracy. They face the problem of the incompatibility between Islam and democracy; such thinkers usually come to the conclusion that a religious government cannot be democratic. This article tries to show that such a problem is quite non scientific and artificial, also secularism is not basic foundation of democracy nor is religion incompatible with democracy.

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1. Introduction

Islam is one of the most lively contemporary religions, which is covering more than one fifth of the earth surface. On the other hand, democracy is one of the most desired and current methods political sovereignty in the contemporary world. The degree of development of democracy in each society is the criteria for that society development. Of course most societies in which Muslim have the majority, are not controlled in a democratic way. There is no doubt that the low degree of democracy in the above mentioned societies, is due to many reasons. One of the probable hypotheses in this regard, is the incompatibility of Islam with democracy, but we see that the study of Islamic political and social movement in the last one hundred years show that democracy is one of the demands of the Muslims along with independence and freedom. While the above mentioned movements had complete religious nature, and were supported by the Muslim exegetes. The analysis of the ideals of these political movements show that in the belief of these movement leaders, there is no contrast between Islam and democracy and we can have an Islamic and democratic society, for example, Imam Khomeini, made a revolution against the tyrannical Shah regime and established a Islamic system. On the other hand, Islamic societies in the last half centuries, face another intellectual movement which emphasize on Islam and do not have a good intention toward democracy in line with their challenge with the west. From the genius in this fundamental movement point of view, Islam is not compatible with democracy, and wanting democracy is seen as a negligence from Islamic teachings. It is a sort of lower hand in the face of western renewal movement. Meditation over these realities, shows us the importance of the

examination of the relationship between Islam and democracy. It has an additive important should not forget that this survey is also very difficult to do, because both parameters of compatibility and incompatibility of Islam and democracy, have intellectual and important opponent.

2-Democracy

Democracy is Greek word meaning the people's rule. It is known by its contrast with Monocracy and Aristocracy. It emphasizes on the rule by the people nor any specific class or group. The history of democracy shows the double aspect of its performance: direct which was fulfilled in the ancient Greece, and indirect which is the model administered today.

The tendency to democracy has not always been the same; and even up to the end of nineteenth century, it suffered from a negative look coming from the people. Plato who was among the pioneers in the criticism of democracy called it the rule by the ignorant and disagreed with it strongly. Aristotle had a suspicious and even a negative look at it. In his division of rules, he put it under unwanted types of rule which favors only the poor and does not attempt for the welfare of the whole society. This opinion returned to western political literature from the nineteenth century. A renewed tendency to democracy began when the divine right of rule became important again. Tomas Hobbs (2001) in his Leviathan made fun of this theory and rejected it. He proposed the social contract hypothesis as its counterpart and expressed that rule is people's right not that of God and the people can give it to any one they want. Hobbs (2001) made it unholy and changed to into an earthly matter. Lock and Rousseau are considered as the proponents of social contract

hypothesis; they also played important role in the development of the democratic thinking. Moreover, in theory modern liberal democracy is much in debt to John Stuart Mill and his followers. He considered representation as basic elements of democracy and theorized indirect democracy. In this system of democracy the representatives of the people play roles and perform in political areas in behalf of them.

The favor democracy has gained today is so unprecedented that few politicians or thinkers rejects it totally. Even the most tyrannical political regimes try to show off as democratic through adopting some of its institutions, including the establishment of parliament and apparently free elections. Of course the interpretation of democracy has been very varied since the ancient Greece time. David Held (1990) believes that each culture and society present a specific definition. Today English Democracy is different from that of France or Ireland. Now, different types of democracy from the view point of some well known scientists:

Helena Catt (1999: 12-13) in her book "Democracy in practice" has referred to three types of democracy:

1- Collaborative democracy

2-Direct democracy

3- Representative or liberal democracy

Guy Hermet (1997) the French writer in: Culture and Democracy: has talked about two schools of thought, in which democracy has been looked at from the view point of determining its final goal. He considers democracy as tool for governing which lacks any type of social or historical goal, and the second regards democracy as plan for a society which has individualistic and social prosperity of all the citizens. Richard Jay (1996) believes in the four models of democracy, but before mentioning his models, it should be said that he has put French democracy against American and English democracies from other points of view and has found the difference between these two democracies in the idea that in France a popular revolution caused the emergence of democracy, while in America and England democracy is under the effect of liberal constitution which stands on political power pluralism. His four model of democracy are:

1- Schaum peter which is based on oligarchic party competition.

2- Political power pluralism

3- Corporatist in which class collaboration toward the common goal of economic growth is followed.

4- Consociation which search for a stable government in societies consisting of several different ethnic and religious groups.

Hussein Bashiriyeh (2001) has classified different theories of democracy:

1- Democracy as the rule of the majority

2- Democracy as the rule of law

3- Democracy as the temporal rule of different groups of people

The majority democracy is the same as the classic view of democracy which refers to Juan Rousseau' ideas. According to this view, the majority never makes a mistake. Democracy is the demonstration of the will of the majority of the people. Some other thinkers regard the rule of law as the basis of democracy. In this view point, power is basically dangerous and should be limited by law and a good rule is a limited one. The majority will is not a constraint on the power, but it may even lead to tyranny. The majority should also be controlled by the law. Democracy is not the direct rule of majority; it is a means for the consultation with the majority. Some other contemporary thinkers have regarded the competition among different groups as the basis of democracy and in line with the preservation of persons' and minority rights. (Mesbah Yazdi, 1978)

David Held (1990: 13) had his own definition of Democracy, "approximately all the experimental thinkers, despite all the disagreements define democracy as institutional organizations which has made a political texture saturated with harmonious groups and has made the entrance of political leaders and minority groups possible."

3. Religion

Religion has different meanings including obedience, reward, and debt. In an ironical meaning it has the meaning of obedience of the rules of God. The different meanings of religion are not countable. From this point of view, the definitions can be divided into three divisions:

1- Some people have defined religion so widely that it includes any ritual even if the belief in God is not covered.

2- Other group has downgraded religion to emotions

3- Some other group have regarded religion as belief in the Day of Judgment, oneness of God, and belief in the God' prophets

According to the Holy Quran (3:19): "For God, religion is only Islam."

By religion, it is meant the ritual which has been revealed by God to the Holy Prophet of Islam and it has revealed the way for human being for the relation to himself and God, with nature and society. This religion is today available for the mankind which satisfies personal and public needs of human beings.

4. Discussion

If democracy is the rule by the people over the people, and the belief is that the only criterion for democracy is the people's will, in a way that the political system "A" is lawful in "B" time and not

lawful in “C” time. Or its lawfulness fluctuates according to time and place, so religion in contrast with democracy and their compatibility is compatibility between two opposite ideas. But if democracy means a free political system which is anti oppression in which the people’s rights are respected and the people participate in the appointment of some governmental officials, so it is not in opposition to Islam. Islamic government is a divine popular rule. It is as distant from the medieval theocratic systems as the contemporary Fascist and oppressive political systems. If we take religion in the meaning, it does not have contrast with democracy and we shouldn’t speak about the compatibility or incompatibility between Islam and democracy. They are inseparable; because an unpopular political system is necessarily non Islamic.

Rousseau in his Social Contract has proposed such an idea regarding democracy- the first definition of democracy, the rule by people over the people. Because of its especial nature, and the government with the people are strangers, and its unpractical nature, and the bad history which uncontrolled democracy has left, it has lost many of its proponents. Today the proponents of democracy support its second meaning. Democracy in this second meaning is compatible with many cultures and views.

The nature of democracy as a set of methods and ways enables it to adapt itself with many political and economic institutions. Experience shows that democracy has been compatible with republic, monarchy, bi party, multi party, socialism, and well fare states with different religious believers and educational levels and with different religious and non religious developments.

What democracy as a rule on the people by the people has been impossible and has not been found anywhere can be seen in practice in the rule on people be the minority. This small number is also the representative of the people. Or even instead of people’s rule, the largest minority may gain power. John Stuart Mill (2001:31) believes that some expressions like the people’s rule do not clearly express the issue; because the people who rule are not always the same as those who are ruled. He believes that democracy is not the type of rule that is spoken of so ideally; because the people do not have complete power their fate, rather it is a type of rule in which a person is ruled by others and his fate is determined by other members of the society. The expression people will in practice means the will of a part of the majority of the people. The majority or the ones with the higher levels of activity impose their will on others. In other words the fate of the nation is in the hands of those who consider themselves as majority.

In modern liberal democracies at the first look, democracy is regarded s the opportunity for the citizens to elect their leaders freely, not as a state rule making process for the rulers. (Arblaster, 1996).

Liberals have always had a negative look at the people and according to Arblaster (1996), they have hardly had tendency to democracy. They have tried to present some views regarding democracy in which the role of people has been very low. Liberals try to attract people to follow them instead of following the people. They wanted to determine their demands for the people. For them, democracy is reliable up to the degree at which the liberal aspect of the government is not hurt. The most important characteristic of liberalism is its free economy. Milton, the well known liberal believes that because making profit is the basis of democracy, each government which follow anti market policies can be regarded as anti democratic and the people’s support is in vain.(Arblaster, 1996)

Regarding the compatibility between democracy and Islam, we can say that democracy s a method, contrary to tyranny is quite flexible and can find suitable molds according to local cultures. Democracy in combination with liberalism makes liberal democracy. Considering liberals do not have a constant culture, we see a diversity in the worlds democracies; for example, the liberal democracy that we see in France is different from what we see in England and both of them differ from American democracy. Democracy is an unprepared dress which gets ready by the hands of that nation. (Fridman, 2001).

So democracy does not have a unified meaning. What is important is the existence of the basic criterion for democracy which changes a tyranny to a popular regime. Contrary to a tyranny, in democracy the people administer the laws with satisfaction and obey the rulers happily. It is natural that democracy is compatible with Islam and it will take Islamic color. It is clear that there is no contrast between religion and democracy. Democracy has some principles which can be observed in any society, religious or non religious.

The important elements of democracy which can be extracted from the works of some thinks are as follows:

- 1-Observance of the people’s vote
- 2- People’s entitlement of the basic freedoms in the framework of law
- 3- The existence of basic fore grounds for the people to question the criticize the rulers and their representatives regarding their deficiencies and duties.
- 4- Equality of all the people before the law and the lack of any sort of guaranty for each class of society against the law.

5- The existence of law and regulations for the change of governmental officials while they are not holding the post life long

5- The aim of the system should be serving the people not any specific class of society

These principles not as claimed in the secular democracies, but in its Islamic meaning in the best way possible have been confirmed by Islam. We can extract them in Nahjol Balaghe , only from Imam Ali's letter to Malik.

The second reply to the question regarding the incompatibility between Islam and democracy is that the subject of religion is different from the subject of democracy. The subject of religion is the spirit and the content of rule, while democracy is talking about structure and the institutions and the distribution of power. In fact to talk about democracy is to talk about its efficiency. After talking about the legitimacy of the system, it is time for talking of how we can make an efficient political system based on these principles. The answer to this question is not always the same. Based on the culture of each society and the considerations of time and place we try to find a suitable answer. It is quite probable that democracy is efficient for a community in some specific time, while it may not work well with other community in some other time. One political system cannot be prescribed for a society in all time periods. Not all cultures and ideologies do have equal capacities. For example, Islam as the most perfect religion is not compatible with tyranny, but it has compatibility with some versions of democracy. Islam observes counseling as an important principle.

5. Conclusion

Democracy can be used with some adaptations in an Islamic government. When democracy is molded in religious frames, this system can be enforced in any part of that political system. In that case it can take the frame of religion and the society observes its religious principles.

Religious democracy is enforceable in societies in which people think and agree freely that their prosperity in the world and the hereafter depends on their obedience of God. They should harmonize themselves with the commandments of religion. They should regard religion is a respectable source of prosperity if it is considered as the basis for their social and economic activities.

So, in religious democracies, people rule, but with the difference that they harmonize their activities with the commandments of Islam. They do their duties with satisfaction rather than by force. They believe that Islam will provide them with prosperity. Every free thinker who supports democracy should give the right to those societies who reject secularism

and want to live and be ruled based on the belief they have nourished .They will establish a political system which they want. Of course it should be expressed that most of the societies in which Muslims live, are not ruled democratically. Undoubtedly, the low record of democracy in the above mentioned societies is caused by different reasons, but the study of the political and social movements of the Muslims in the last one hundred years show that democracy with freedom, independence and justice is one of the demands of the Muslims; but the above mentioned movements had religious nature and have been supported by Muslim religious scientists. The analysis of the goals of these movements show that in these leaders minds there is no contrast between Islam and democracy and both can be demanded and society with Islam and democracy can be fulfilled.

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