Review Article

ISLAM, SECULARISM AND DEMOCRACY: THE PREDICAMENT OF CONTEMPORARY MUSLIM POLITIES

Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History. By Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi'. London: Pluto Press, 2004. pp.485. ISBN 0-7453-2169-0.

Al-Ḥurriyat al-'Āmmah fī al-Dawlah al-Islāmiyyah (Public Liberties in the Islamic State). By Rachīd Ghannouchī. Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wihda al-'Arabiyah, 1993. pp. 382.

Power-Sharing Islam? Ed. Azzām Tamīmī. London: Liberty for Muslim World Publications, 1993. pp. 192. ISBN 0-9521672-0-4

Rachīd Ghannouchī: A Democrat Within Islamism. By Azzām Tamīmī. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. pp. 268. ISBN 0-19-514000-1

Islam and Secularism in the Middle East. Eds. John L. Esposito and Azzam Tamīmī. London: Hurst and Company, 2000. pp. 214. ISBN 1-85065-541-3

Islam, democracy and secularism represent some of the major concerns in the current intellectual discourse. That this should be a subject of enquiry and research is understandable. This is so in view of a prevailing perception in the West that Islam and democracy are incompatible in terms and that secularism is a precondition for democracy. The Western tradition of intellectual hostility to Islam is very much alive and, during the past two decades, it has undoubtedly nurtured the new ideology of Islam-as-Fundamentalism. To some of the most leading Western scholars of contemporary Islamic politics, the political history of Muslim polities during the past two centuries

has been the unhappy story of endless power struggles rooted in historical Islam, which made submission to political leaders a religious duty. The net result of this was tyranny and despotism. Western scholars writing in this tradition were certain: "democracy is quite alien to the mind-set of Islam."

John Keane's explanation in Tamīmī ed., *Power-Sharing Islam* (pp.16-17), for the persistence of this impression is as follows:

> a) Systematic and deliberate distortion of Islam by its enemies and those who consider Islamic resilience and its uplifting function in many Muslim countries a threat to their dominance, control and exploitation;

> b) A tradition of scholarship where the terms of reference and the agenda for research have been defined by Western experience with either an imperial legacy that assumed a superior value system or a quasi-liberal tradition seeking knowledge of, rather than involvement in Islam – in both tradition Islam was "the other," the subsequent and in varying degrees, "the alien";

> c) Similarly, Islamists in many instances, while justifiably reactive, were either more confrontational than persuasive. A few sought acceptance by signalling readiness to be co-opted, others by assuring a posture of a defensive apologia. In the process, a coherent Islamic projection was delayed while a heightened interest in Islam became urgent.

It is against this context that the urgency arises of investigating some contemporary Islamic movements that articulate programmes which accept a pluralist and participatory political model, and at the same time investigating the positions of those Islamicists who reject such an orientation. The second major thrust of this review article is to investigate the divergent attitudes and perceptions of the Islamicists concerning the democracy-secularism nexus.

Islam, Modernity and Democracy

Modernity in the Arab world is ably dealt with by Ibrahim Abu Rabī'. His *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History* is about the Arab world's aborted modernity of the past several decades and documents and analyzes the most significant theoretical output of the post-1967 Arab intelligentsia. It

deals with intellectual history from the perspectives of critical social
thought and philosophy. It addresses the central questions debated
by the Arab intelligentsia, especially on the meaning, nature, and
methods of *naḥḍah* or renaissance, the meaning of the 1967 defeat,
the nature of the state, the position of religion in society, the nature
of popular culture, social and economic change and its impact on
the Arab personality, the role of the Arab intelligentsia and other
issues related to civil society, human rights, and democracy.

For his theoretical framework, Ibrahīm Abū Rabīʿ draws upon
the ideas of specialists in political economy, culture and intelligentsia,
ideology and pedagogy, and globalization and Eurocentrism. In
particular, he relied upon Samīr Amīn for his treatment of political
economy of the modern Arab world, its dependency on the world
capitalist system since the nineteenth century, and the interplay
between nation, class, culture, and religion in the post-independence
era. He also relied upon the European communist theoretician
Antonio Gramsci in relation to issues of culture and the intelligentsia.
Using these insights, the author distinguishes various class
formations and strands of social thought which reflect the dilemmas
of each generation. He then analyzes the interplay between religion
and change in the Arab educational system, which resulted in the
marginalization of the power and influence of traditional religious
establishment. This decline in the influence of the traditional Muslim
intelligentsia is largely due to the dominance of Western secular
education. In the domain of politics, the book addresses a number
of pivotal questions: Did Islam mandate the creation of a state, or
was it intended to be a social system of values? Why is democracy
absent from the debates of the intelligentsia both before and after
1967? What is the impact of the oil economy on generations of
Arab writers? What are the types of modernization overtaking the
Arab Gulf countries, depicted by the author as "Bedouin
bourgeoisie"?

To bring some focus to these crucial questions, the book presents
the theories of a number of distinguished Arab thinkers who represent
the most established trends of thought in the region. These thinkers
include Rachīd Ghannoushī, Moḥammad al-Ghazālī, Moḥammad
ʿĀbid al-Jabīrī, Abdallah Laroui, Constantine Zurayk, Mahdī ʿĀmil,
and others. These names represent the various ideological tendencies
of contemporary Arab Thought (Islamic, Marxist, Nationalist and

Liberal). The work of these writers illustrates not only the abundance and proliferation of modern Arab social thought but also the èlan and audacity of this class of intellectuals who challenge the forces of capitalist domination, fecund traditionalism, and strict dogmatism.

Rachīd Ghannouchī: A Democrat Within Islamism may in a sense be considered as an extension of the ideas found in the work of Ibrahīm Abū Rabī'. Here, Azzām Tamīmī attempts to refute the contention that Islam and democracy are incompatible. He begins by exploring the concept of democracy in Western literature, followed by an investigation of the position of various Muslim scholars on the subject. It is no secret that contemporary Islamic revivalist movements generally dislike ideas that originate in the West, in reaction to Western colonization of much of the Muslim world and out of fear of loss of identity under the hammer of modernization.

Writers affiliated with the school of Sayyid Quṭb, which had the greatest influence on Arab Islamic movements from the mid-1960s through the 1980s, had insisted that democracy was an ideology alien to Islam. By the mid-1980s this school started losing ground to those who maintained that democracy was not an ideology but a set of tools and mechanisms designed to control government power, which they considered to be perfectly compatible with the Islamic concepts of *bay'ah* and *shūrā*.

The major proponent of this idea is Rachīd Ghannouchī who advocates democracy and pluralism. He believes democracy to be a set of mechanisms for guaranteeing the sovereignty of the people and for supplying safety valves against corruption and the hegemonic monopoly of power. Yet not much has been written about Ghannouchī in English, and most of what has been written about him by academics happens to be part of a discussion of either the Tunisian Islamic movement or the question of Islam and democracy. This lacunae is admirably filled in by Tamīmī.

This book, a treatise in political theory, begins with a biography of the first twenty-five or so years of Ghannouchī's life. The genealogy of Rachīd Ghannouchī's political thought finds its roots in his youth when he was first attracted to Nassirism, then abandoned it for an Ikhwān-Salafi style of religiosity, and finally progressed to an Islamic activism of Tunisian specificity.

Ghannouchī is indebted to Mālik Bennabī, whose essay on Islam and democracy was Ghannouchī's launching pad. Tamīmī examines some of the core themes of liberal democracy and determines Ghannouchī's position on them. Thus, for instance, Ghannouchī rejects the widely accepted assumption in the West that secularism is a prerequisite to democracy. Ghannouchī argues that democracy is not an ideology, but a tool for electing, checking, and dismissing or replacing a system of government and for protecting the civil liberties and basic rights of citizens. He argues that democratization in the Arab world is hindered by secularism, the modern territorial-state, the new world order, and radical trends within Islamism. He advances, in response to Islamists who reject democracy, his theory of *farāgh* (space) - that Islam consists of that which is *dīnī* (religious) and that which is *siyāsī* (political).

Ghannouchī is criticized by two groups of Islamists: one, the traditionalist elite that considers him to be too concessionary to the West and, two, the class of converts from liberalism or Marxism to Islam, who criticize him for not recognizing, or acknowledging, some of the serious shortcomings of Western democracy and secularization. Tamīmī gives some consideration to the current debate in and around Ghannouchī about the adequacy, and possible limits, of his comments on secularity.

However, there are a number of gaps in Ghannouchī's thought. For instance, despite the criticism directed at the modern state, very little work has been done to suggest what the modern Islamic state would look like. Much of what has been written by Islamic thinkers, including Ghannouchī, is no more than a review of various classical Islamic opinions on state and government as they existed in the Muslim world centuries ago. Writings in this field fall short of tackling the question of power in a modern setting. In spite of his enthusiasm for an Islamic democracy, and while describing at length the obstacles precluding its materialization, Ghannouchī says very little about the process of transition itself. Many questions remain unanswered. In a period of transition toward a stable consolidated Islamic democracy what compromises would have to be made in order to prevent a society undergoing pluralization and democratization from slipping into chaos? Ghannouchī is suspicious of the modern Arab territorial state. Not only is it an obstacle facing democratization but it is also antithetical to the democratic state.

However, very little has thus far been said by Ghannouchī on how the problem of the territorial state can be resolved.

Al-Ḥurriyat al-ʿĀmmah fī al-Daʿwlah al-Islāmiyyah (Public Liberties in the Islamic State) by Ghannouchī is considered one of the most important references in contemporary Islamic political thought. In it, Ghannouchī criticizes the West for failing to live up to its declarations in the field of freedoms and human rights. He subscribes to the notion that the western conception is "formal or negative" in the sense that it endows an individual with theoretical authority but no real power to realize his rights or shield himself against despotism. "It is true that an individual has the right to think, speak, or travel the way he wishes. But how can he accomplish all of this if culture, wealth, and power are monopolized by a limited group of citizens who are supposed to be in theory his equals?"(p. 32)

Ghannouchī seeks to establish *ʿaqīdah* (Islamic faith) not only as the source but also as a solid foundation for the concepts of freedom and human rights. He conceives of Islam as a comprehensive revolution against idols and despots and a liberation movement aimed at emancipating man from all kinds of servitude except to God. It would follow in light of this that freedom is not simply a permission or license but an *amānah* (trust), that is, a responsibility and consciousness of and commitment and dedication to the truth. Ghannouchī believes that the first and the most important human right guaranteed by Islam is the freedom of belief, which he defines as the individual's right to choose his faith free from any compulsion.

Ghannouchī's treatment of *The Right To Nationality* begins with a brief outline of the essential components comprising the principles of justice, equity, security, and community and the protection granted to non-Muslims in a Muslim state as rights ordained by divine law. The first of these rights is equality, which is positive and comprehensive regardless of race, ethnic origin, colour, social status, or creed. The second right is freedom, which encompasses freedom of thought and freedom of belief including the right of non-Muslims in a Muslim state to build churches, temples, monasteries and synagogues. The third right is the freedom of movement including the right to establish schools and religious institutions. Ghannouchī also talks about economic and social rights. While the right of an

individual to own property is guaranteed in Islam, he points out that this is not considered a natural right, as in international conventions or declarations, because in the end everything belongs to God. Therefore, all that pertains to ownership, such as the methods of acquiring and disposing of property should take place in accordance with the *sharī'ah*. As for social rights, Ghannouchī states that these are taken to mean "the needs of an individual in his livelihood, of social and health-care" (p. 57). Such rights, he maintains, have not been of interest to Western constitutions and human rights declarations until recently, and only as "a reaction to pressure from socialist theories and trade unions and to banish the ghost of the Marxist revolution" (p. 63). In contrast, he insists, they had been well established in the Islamic tradition since the inception of Islam.

Ghannouchī also talks about political rights and liberties. Islam does not contradict democracy, rather shares with it several common features that constitute a firm foundation for a common ground where benefits are exchanged, mutual interests are realized, and a formula for co-existence is achieved. Ghannouchī argues that the Europeans benefited from the Islamic civilization in creating profoundly enlightened conceptions of social values whose fruit was the emergence of liberal democracy. Several other contemporary Islamic thinkers share the opinion that democracy has Islamic roots e.g., Ḥassan al-Turābī and Tawfīq al-Shawī.

Ghannouchī also discusses the principle of political pluralism. He is critical of both the Western liberal and Western Marxist conceptions of political pluralism. As to the position of Islamic political thought, he found two groups of Muslim writers, one supporting and the other rejecting the concept of pluralism. Indeed, Ghannouchī advocates pluralism for the founding of a modern Islamic political order within which parties with different *ijtihād* in political action form and compete for the confidence of the Ummah in order to serve its interest. Contrary to the view that there is no theory of Islamic state, Ghannouchī argues that an Islamic concept of a state does exist. He argues that the failure to set up an Islamic state inevitably undermines religion itself, whose laws remain ineffective and whose objectives remain unaccomplished. For a system of government to be Islamic, it would have to be founded on a set of fundamental principles, foremost among which are: vicegerency, justice, legitimacy, *sharī'ah* and *shūrā*.

Ghannouchī's main interest has been to stress the need for
democracy, to prove its compatibility with Islam, and to analyze the
obstacles hindering its success in the Arab region. He acknowledges,
however, that democracy is blemished by broken promises and the
attitude of democratic governments in the West toward other
countries. Ghannouchī hopes that an Islamic model of democracy
will arise out of the marriage between democratic tools and Islamic
values. This, he is convinced, is not impossible: "The democratic
system has worked within the framework of Christian values giving
rise to Christian democracies and within the framework of socialist
philosophies giving rise to socialist democracies. Why on earth
should it not function within the framework of Islamic values to
produce an Islamic democracy?" (p.88).

Islam and Democratic Pluralism

Power-Sharing Islam? is an anthology that describes and analyzes
Islam's stand on power-sharing, pluralism and democracy, together
with first hand insider's accounts of practical power sharing
experiences. The book contributes to the ongoing effort to bring
about an intellectual rapprochement between Islamic and Western
thinkers, to eliminate misconceptions about Islam and Islamic
movements, and to dispel the unwarranted fears by many people in
the West about the phenomenon of Islamic resurgence. John Keane
questions the dogmatic attitude of many Westerners toward Islam
and Muslims and discusses a number of historical misconceptions.
Discussing the principle of democratic power-sharing, Keane raises
questions about the capacity of some Islamists to deal with some
potential dilemmas, to accept the norms and procedures of
democracy, and to tolerate diversity and criticism of Islam itself.
Ernest Gellner analyses from a sociological perspective the factors
that have led to the twentieth century failure of Marxism and contrasts
them with the factors that have been responsible for the survival
and success of Islam. Francois Burgat focuses on the attitude of
regimes in the Arab world toward Islamic opponents and on the
attitude of the West toward the conflict between despotic regimes
and Islamic groups in the Arab world. These three contributions are
very informative and deserve close study. The rest of the
contributions are rather shallow and devoid of any creativity.

Rachīd Ghannouchī discusses the principles of power-sharing. He refers to evidence from the Qur'ān and the traditions of the Prophet (SAS) and quotes Muslim thinkers to prove that participation in a non-Islamic government may, under certain circumstances, be the only viable option. He concludes that the current crises in the Muslim world does not lie in convincing the Muslims of power-sharing but in convincing existing regimes to recognize the Other. Muḥammad Saleem al-Awa argues that political pluralism in a Muslim society is a necessity. Ḥassan al-Alkim compares modern democratic institutions and procedures with the Islamic political institutions and procedures that are based on the concept of *shūrā*. He concludes that Islam and democracy are compatible.

The compatibility between democracy and Islam is shown by case studies of three Islamic movements, which have taken part in successful democratic processes. This is despite the fact that few democratic processes have been allowed to succeed in the Muslim world and few regimes have agreed to hold fair elections. Abdallah al-Akailah, provided a brief historical background followed by description of the power-sharing process and of the accomplishments of the Islamic movement in Jordan. Nasser Sānī describes the Kuwaiti democratic process and sheds light on the approach the Islamists are adopting in order to accomplish their objective of implementing *sharī'ah*. Mustafa Ali provides a historical background followed by an account of the struggle launched by the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) to achieve its goals through parliamentary democracy, and of its achievements at local and federal levels.

The last section of *Power-Sharing Islam?* contains papers that discuss several unsuccessful experiments in power-sharing. They tell the story of aborted democratic processes in Algeria, Afghanistan, and Egypt. Anwar Haddām discusses the Algerian Islamic Movement's experience in relation with the New World Order. He includes an outline of the political agenda of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). Rachīd bin Eissā also discusses the Algerian experience but holds the West partly responsible for the failure of the Algerian democratic process. Kamāl El-Helbawī accounts for the various Afghan factions involved in the struggle for power and underline the local and international factors that contributed to the persistence of the crisis which culminated in the ouster of the Taliban regime. Finally, Essām al-Erian describes the Egyptian political situation and

the experience of the Islamic Movement in Egypt's short lived democracy. Several other locations in the Muslim world, such as Tunisia, Sudan, and Pakistan, where power-sharing system have failed are not discussed in this volume. The ones discussed are not highly rewarding to read.

Islam and Secularism

Secularism is usually regarded as a positive achievement of Western civilization. The separation of church and state, the rule of law, enhanced state power and authority, toleration of religious sects within an independent civil society, the relegation of religious belief to the private sphere – all such "secularizing trends" are perceived as benefits. In the Middle East, however, Western-inspired secularism, as implemented by Ataturk, Bourguiba and others – is increasingly cited by Islamist intellectuals as the source of the region's social dislocation and political instability.

Islam and Secularism in the Middle East contributes to that debate. It examines the origins and growth of the movement to abolish the secularizing reforms of the past century by creating a political order guided by *shariʿah*. Some of the contributors explained the Islamic rejection of secularism as a failed Western, Christian ideal. Others discuss how secularization was pioneered by those who thought Muslims could only advance politically by emulating Western practices, which included the renunciation of religion. But whereas secularism in the West led to the spread of democratic values, in the Muslim world it has been associated with dictatorship, violation of human rights, the abrogation of civil liberties, and the attenuation of civil society.

Other questions addressed in the book include: how plausible is Islam's challenge to the ideal and reality of secularism, and what are its chances of success? How significant is the rising trend of "spiritual politics" in the West? And are we witnessing the beginning of an age of post-secularism which may lead to genuine social and political reforms?

The ten contributors to the book argue, with different degrees of emphasis, that in the twenty-first century, Muslim governments will continue to struggle with issues of identity, authority, and legitimacy. Their future paths will be diverse, dependent on local context and

cultural traditions. The failures of alternative ideologies (Liberalism, Arab Nationalism, and Socialism, etc.) and of many governments will continue to require that local nationalisms be rooted in history and culture.

The contributors argue that Islamists will be challenged to demonstrate that an Islamic option can be sufficiently pluralistic and tolerant to incorporate diverse religious and political tendencies. At the same time, those who advocate a more secular orientation will be challenged to adopt and adapt a secular option that remains true to the pervasive presence of Islam in society. Both secular and Islamic paths will be challenged to develop modern forms of pluralism that foster a true and open polity which responds to the diversity of society, one that protects the rights of believers and unbelievers alike.

Conclusion

This review has demonstrated that currently there is an active interaction among Muslim intellectuals seeking to reach an acceptable formula on democratization in the Muslim World. There seems to be a minimal agreement on a number of points.

First, many Muslim intellectuals are hesitant to treat Islam and Western democracy as synonymous. The issue is not to prove or disprove the compatibility of Islam and democracy, but to find out whether Islamic principles and values could lead to a representative pluralistic, and a system of governance in which the ruler is accountable to the ruled and the citizen's fundamental rights are safeguarded. Many Muslim thinkers today accept the notion that there are common grounds between Islam and democracy.

Second, this review has established that the mainstream Islamic movements, not the extreme *salafi* ones, accept political pluralism and view it as a normal and an inevitable evolutionary process within Muslim society. There is need that this pluralism be safeguarded and nurtured by commitment to a framework of values shared by the majority of the citizens.

Third, secular movements can exist constitutionally provided they do not seek to sabotage the Islamic system. There is need in this regard to distinguish between secular groupings that might have reservations about Islamic policies and programs, and those whose

platforms are completely at loggerheads with Islam, and are generally antagonistic to religions. In the process of democratization, the former should be allowed to operate, while the latter should be outlawed.

Fourth, it is observed that there is a growing acceptance by mainstream Islamic movements of the principles of power sharing and the transfer of power. Many of these political groupings no more conceive of themselves to be the sole representatives of Islam, nor do they deny other political groupings in the society of their Islamic identity.

Fifth, the model of secularism that has emerged in the Muslim world is a counterfeit that takes from Western secularism its most negative aspects and discards the positive ones. Secularism has been an inevitable product of colonialism. It has been used to legalize authoritarianism and absolutism. Contrary to the claim of many Western writers, secularism cannot be considered as a prerequisite for the successful operation of democracy in Muslim societies, nor can it be considered a requirement of modernity. False modernity manifests itself in the deconstruction of Islamic society and then rebuilding it on a new non-Islamic basis. The supporters of the Islamic democracy thesis have been preoccupied with the problem of resolving the crisis of governance in the majority of Muslim states, namely, despotism. They believe democracy to be the best available means of curtailing that despotism.

However, there is a tension perceived in the discourse of these Islamic reformists, namely their inability to build a coherent political thought on the issues they seek to address. Their mission is aimed at assimilating specific Western civilizational values and reproducing them into the Islamic environs and its epistemological system. Democracy could not automatically become *shūrā* or vice versa, a clear analytical distinction should be made between these two key concepts. Western democratic procedures need to be absorbed and then recast in a genuine Islamic package that considers revelation to be the ultimate frame of reference. A number of gaps remain to be filled within the thought of the proponents of Islamic democracy. For instance, little effort has been made as to what the modern Islamic democratic state would look like. The scanty works in this respect are modest and say nothing about the process of transition to

democracy, nor do they highlight the risks inherent in this delicate process.

Whatever may be said about the shortcomings of this school's discourse, it remains a very important and influential one, and can be used as a launching pad for modern Islamic political thought.

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