

## **Book Review**

### **Ali Salman, Mohammad Hashim Kamali and Mohamed Azam Mohamed Adil (Editors) - Democratic Transitions in the Muslim World (2018)**

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Among Muslim-majority countries in the world today, only a handful can be said to be democracies. This puzzling fact has been investigated and written about by countless scholars in the past decades such as Olivier Roy, John Esposito, Asef Bayat and Daniel Brumberg, just to name a few. Following the tragic end of the 2010 Arab Uprisings (tragic for the current state of civil unrest and war ongoing in the Middle East), scholars from the East are now trying to make sense of this enigma regarding the relationship between Islam and democracy. To the writers in this edited book, Islam and democracy are not intrinsically antagonistic. The world around these authors seems to have accepted democracy, if not substantially, at least instrumentally as a peaceful mechanism to choose persons into power.

In order to provide a diverse discussion on Islam and democracy, the editors were able to put together writings from leading and emerging authors across the globe and from various backgrounds. Some of the authors include Alim Yilmaz from Turkey, Nehad Khanfar from the United Kingdom, Fida Ur Rahman from Pakistan, Saeed Nariman from Iran, Syed Farid Al-Atas from Singapore, Rafiullah Azmi from India, Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf from Indonesia and Zain Al-‘Abidin ibni Tuanku Muhriz from Malaysia. The authors range from academicians to activists and current politicians. Based on their observations, these writers presented their ideas at a conference that was held in

Kuala Lumpur in November 2017 and from that discussion came this book, a compilation of selected papers.

Ali Salman, one of the editors and CEO of Islam and Liberty Network, provided a short introduction that lays out questions to be answered by the book and the subsequent structure of the chapters. Instead of presenting an overarching theoretical framework and narrative, the in-troduction makes it clear that the book is meant as a buffet of information on the general topic of Islam and democracy. The five main sections of the book are as follows: ‘Muslim Political Theory’, ‘Narrative on Islam and Democracy’, ‘History of Democratic Transitions’, ‘Islamic Political Parties’ and ‘Future Agenda’. Ali claimed that we are now past discussing the compatibility between Islam and democracy, concluding that religion and the state are undeniably ‘twin brothers’ that cannot be separated. He further argues that future discourse should continue to be on understanding the effects of combining religion with democracy in Muslim societies. This review, however, will counter that from the different arguments found in the various chapters of the book, it appears that the debate is yet to be over and that is not necessarily horrible.

While the edited book covers a wide range of topics, the most significant chapters, perhaps, are in the first two sections titled ‘Muslim Political Theory’ (which contains only one chapter) and ‘Narrative on Islam and Democracy’ because the authors of these chapters provided theoretical backgrounds to the argument at hand which is that Islam is compatible with democracy instead of just regurgitating information on different Muslim countries’ experiences with democracy as is the case in later chapters. In discussing such a heavy topic, there is no running away from going back to history. As most authors in the book pointed out, with only the Quran and Hadith being authoritative sources in Islam, we are left to scour through history to understand how the understanding of liberal democracy - freedom of speech, rule of law, respect for minority rights - have been practiced in Muslim history for centuries. For example, using al-Juwayni to make his argument, Muhammad Khalid Masud wrote, “While the prophets were chosen by God, Imams are chosen by the community, making wider society the source of legitimacy for *Imamah*” (p. 18).

*Imamah*, here refers to the rulers who are to lead Muslim societies following the end of prophethood. In short, he is making the argument that without God's direct intervention, the people have the power to confer or to withhold authority - that is the basis for democracy.

Furthermore, as has been discussed elsewhere, the current absence of democracy in the Muslim world, specifically in the Middle East, was highly dependent on past experiences of colonisation and the resulting westernisation and modernisation effects (Alkadry, 2002; Ayoub, 2007; Springborg, 2007). Due to the fast-changing nature of the post-colonial world, dictators such as Gamal Abdel Nasser, Hafiz al-Assad, and Saddam Hussein took advantage of rising Arab nationalism to entrench their footing in countries that were looking to carve out their own modern identity. Unfortunately, their secularisation project did not include democratisation as well. Since these countries have a Muslim majority population, one is susceptible to make the conclusion that Islam is the problem. However, practicing Muslims in countries such as Egypt were crying, "Islam is the solution" (the Muslim Brotherhood's most frequently used slogan). This conundrum, and the eventual debate on secularism within an Islamic country, may not be understood if one fails to acknowledge the multifaceted forces at work. Alim Yilmaz wrote, "In modern times, that separation [between religion and public institution] works in favour of the state at the expense of the religion" (p. 30).

The authoritarian regimes in Muslim majority countries advocated secularism only as a means to control the masses as opposed to secularism's real meaning, which is to return the rights of practicing one's religion to the people. Therefore, Yilmaz argued that when Muslims call for a return to Islam, they are calling for the end of dictatorships, and not necessarily the interweaving of religion and politics.

To have a book on democratic transitions in the Muslim world would entail chapters discussing the lived experiences of Muslims, both today and in the past. In the sections 'History of Democratic Transitions' and 'Islamic Political Parties', various countries were discussed including Malaysia, Iran, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Turkey, Palestine and Egypt. While this provided a wide range of examples for the reader looking to understand the phenomenon known as political Islam, the inclusion of

such varied cases is also, unfortunately, one of the book's weaknesses. There appears to be a lack of cohesion on what the book is attempting to do. The chapters move from discussion on history and society to the judicial system and to political parties. Even for specific chapters on Islamic political parties, there does not appear to be an argument that the book is making except to prove that there is no monolithic experience of Islamism, but the unique experiences of different Islamic political parties. An example of this incoherence can be seen when M. Shahadat Hossain wrote, "Islam...is a religion that spans beyond personal worship and rituals...therefore, reject the concept of secularism" (p. 163) whereas earlier chapters have been suggesting that "secular democracy cannot be reduced to the institutional separation of religion and state but shows the degree of democratic toleration and civility towards religion as a political culture (p. 78).

Despite the editing issues, if one is to go through the different chapters, there are definitely those that splendidly complement one another. For example, in his lengthy discussion on the evolution of PAS as an Islamic party in Malaysia, Wan Saiful Wan Jan discloses the behind-the-scenes event that took place in 1999 when members of the PAS central committee met with Islamic scholars such as Yusuf al-Qaradhawi and Rached Ghannouchi to discuss the possibility of working with a non-Muslim party and having a woman as the opposition leader. While conservative leaders within PAS initially opposed the suggestions, they eventually relented after being told that "these were Islamically-justified and necessary" (p. 194). Similarly, in Nehad Khanfar's chapter on Hamas democratic transformation, there is a belief that, "Building partnership with them [secularists or communists] is something religiously justified, based on the Shari'ah principle of balancing between interests" (p. 249). From these two examples, it becomes clear that the debate on the place of democracy within the struggle of Islamic political parties are far from concluding. We can only hope that democracy is not just a means for power with no intention by parties to respect the ideals of liberal democracy. If these Islamic political parties backtrack on pluralism, freedom of speech and rule of law, what hope is there for the grassroots who look upon these parties for guidance in choosing the next national leader?

In a nutshell, this book may best be considered as an introductory literature to those who are beginning to dip their toes into the debate on

Islam and democracy. Otherwise, there is not much substantive value to it as many of the arguments put forth have been written in detail by other scholars in the field. On a whole, the book reads more like a conference proceeding given the lack of a clear argument or even a new understanding on the subject. Nevertheless, the book may be lauded as proof that we may never come to a definite conclusion on the matter - and that is not necessarily a bad thing. The discourse on Islam and democracy may take different forms depending on where the author comes from, the power relation in the country and even the geopolitics of the Muslim world as a whole. If democracy is the final aim, there should also be a democratisation of knowledge. For, as long as we agree to respect each other's view on the matter, there is nowhere else to go but to flourish and to make Islam the great religion of intellectual discourse it once was.

## References

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