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Book Review

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by Makmor Tumin

Any study of modern politics is impertinent without the study of power, and any study of modern political power is incomplete without looking at how it has been used and abused. The question is, "Where did the power come from?", or "What is the source of the power?" Political theorists use the concept of God's sovereignty and people's sovereignty to answer these questions. The former explains that the government is only legitimate if God's law is the source of power, while the latter points to the idea of democratic government where the people's consent should be the source of government power; hence the policy must be people-driven. Such exposition implies that any attempt to understand politics requires an understanding of the law and constitution, regardless whether at times of peace or war.

The current civil wars, revolutions and counter-revolutions in some countries in the Middle East and North Africa [MINA], commonly known as the Arab Spring, invites many scholars to provide diagnosis and prognosis on the event, and Andrew March is one of them. In his book, *The Caliphate of Man: Popular Sovereignty in Modern Islamic Thought*, March explored the theory of democracy in Islam focusing, in the later part of his work, on Rached Ghannouchi's works (an intellectual and political leader in Tunisia), where he examined the concept of sovereignty of God versus sovereignty of the people or ummah in Islam.

March attempted to trace the origin and development of the concept of *khalifah* through his reading of the exegetical interpretation of the Quran and how classical Muslim scholars interpreted the concept of sovereignty, pondering on the term *khalifah* and bringing it down to the concept of "the Caliphate of Man" as per the first part of the title of the book.

He made an attempt to imply that first, people are sovereign, hence, the hypothesis of dualistic sovereignty is possible in Islam. He ended his book by foreseeing future Islamic political thought as post-sovereignty and post-state. These phrases require serious unpacking, for the reason that Muslims cannot be detached from the concept of God's sovereignty although the concept of the establishment of the Islamic State may be debatable. Hence, to review his book, it is important to explain some important aspects of Western political philosophy such as the Rawlsian and Benthamite concept of sovereignty.

Rousseau's "Take men as they are and laws as they might be" implies that sovereignty is the power of the elective people to decide and follow their will. His Benthamite pleasure-seeking and pain-avoiding are the rules that guide human decision. They are the two sovereign masters, and the only law that guides creatures. While the importance of the Rousseauian and Benthamite doctrines in guiding many Western thinkers and analysts cannot be doubted, especially the concept of the people's sovereignty and to some extent, the two sovereign masters, sovereignty in the Muslim world is sourced from the other World. It is commonly expressed as metaphysics in the West (from the God), in which this world is nothing except a test for mankind. This implies that the general will should be understood as a will to avoid making errors and the pleasure and pain should be understood as seeking the pleasure of the Almighty God and avoiding the pain for failing His tests. Hence, it is dangerously nonsensical for Muslims to succumb to the concept of people's sovereignty brought by the Rousseauian and Benthamite doctrines, to highlight a few.

Undoubtedly, March had successfully managed to provide details about the invention of what he called popular sovereignty in modern Islamic thought, mostly within the Sunni line, believing that many thinkers were already ascribed to the idea of sovereignty, mindful of

the political, historical, and institutional contexts in which Islamic political thought has developed as he navigated the concept.

But what seems to be puzzling about him is that despite admitting that the idea of popular sovereignty was largely a matter of a kind of power sharing between various elites or experts amongst people or a majority of people, he seems to also try to persuade the readers as if the idea of sovereignty in the West is potentially applied in the Muslim world. His first premise is that if popular sovereignty is an important commitment for modern Islamic thinkers, it requires inventing, which he assumes that Islam at less gradually does support a form of popular sovereignty that is understood in the West. He claims that there are indeed resources, particularly within the Sunni thought such as that espoused by Ghannouchi, that makes certain aspects of popular sovereignty easier to accept or justify.

For the purpose of this review, I shall only give focus on Chapter two and six only for a simple reason; the other chapters which touch on thinkers such as Sayyid Qutb and Abul A'la Maududi have already been discussed by others in separate works in different light or from various perspectives. His book is not only about political theory, but also on constitutional theory, in which in Chapter two, he had made a brave venture into several Qurānic verses that refer to God's appointment of a "Caliph on earth". In my opinion, since in this chapter he developed the framework of his analysis, the reliability and validity of his argument very much depends on the strength of the frame he employed. It is true that he has demonstrated his ability to dive deeper into exegetical debates, arguing the concept of *khalifah*, including bringing to the surface Hassan al-Basri's understanding over the meaning of the concept and attempted to examine how it differs from that of other scholars such as at-Tabari. However, how is March so sure that the concept of *khalifah* which he observed through the lens of analytical philosophy is similar to the ones understood by the Muslim scholars which are mostly at spiritual doctrine and metaphysical levels, let alone conforms to the meaning of metaphysicality itself?

Even within the Western philosophy itself, analytical philosophy's approach towards truth differs from the continental approach. When Kant talked about heteronomy versus autonomy, he had an idea of rationality, in which beyond this world i.e., at the metaphysical level,

there exists an independent rationality, where all human beings are rich to the point of people being the authors of their own law. Such concept is not only alien in Islam but also contradicts the religion for a simple reason; the metaphysical realm in the Islamic concept is a divine space and it is a space for those who are at their best spirituality.

Using such approach with Rousseauian and Kantian taste, he branched his analysis in Chapters three, four, and five, explaining how the concept of the sovereignty of God and popular sovereignty in modern Islamic thought echoed throughout Islamic political history in some countries as well as how the potential concept of popular sovereignty might gradually surface or emerge. Through his discussions, it can be understood that the current idea related to popular sovereignty began to emerge in the 19th century, particularly within what is sometimes referred to as the Arab "Awakening" (*al-Nahḍa*). The Young Ottoman reform movements were clouded or overshadowed by the constitutional theory during this period brought by the Ottoman caliphate. Ideological innovations were to follow this period, particularly the reinterpretation of the Qurānic verses that refer to God's appointment of a "Caliph on earth".

It is in Chapter six he discussed about his personal intellectual communication with Rached Ghannouchi, a contemporary Muslim thinker who, according to him, represents the Muslim contemporary political thought as a whole. Ghannouchi's political idea can probably be best understood by looking at his three ideal types of government: theocratic, Western rule of law and Islamic democracy. In his idea, Islamic democracy is a synthesis of dual sovereignty, in which this world must follow the primary source of law (God's law). However, it does not mean that the secondary source of law (human law) does not operate.

From his understanding of Ghannouchi's work, he came to the following conclusion:

> *Ghannouchi represents the theorization of a distinct form of regime type, Islamic democracy, and reveals assumptions that moral unity and collective virtue makes it possible to theorize a sovereign people governing itself while remaining committed to upholding God's ultimate sovereignty.*

However, I am not certain whether Ghannouchi himself agrees with such a conclusion, knowing that his strong principal of rejecting the immorality of beings that are materialistic pleasure-seekers and pain-avoiders. After all, when the Muslims talk about will, it is a will to avoid making errors to seek the pleasure of the Almighty God. This review is supplemented with another three important points:

1. I must admit that I am impressed with March's efforts and his ability to dive deeper in understanding the concept of *khalifah*, which I myself am only aware of its significance after reading his book. The concept of *khalifah* in the Quran could only be best explained with its supplementary material, which is of course the Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) sayings. In fact, Muslims would only understand the meaning of the Quran through the words, actions, and behaviors of the Prophet. To make his work more comprehensive, may be March can consider looking at how the concept of "the Caliphate of Man" is discussed in other sources of Islam as well.

2. It is quite surprising that he did not explain the concept of the divine rights of kings even though he probably does not support the claim of having two sovereign masters of pleasure and pain. At least by promoting such an understanding that in the West, the monarchs can argue on the divine sources if they can claim their lineage to King David, so that they might have a legitimacy of sovereignty to govern. Monarchs or kings are still one of the important political institutions in some Arab countries. March can perhaps expand the genre of obligation or obedience towards the ruler in Islam, which is dominant especially if we were to follow the hadith under the authority and legacy of Abdullah Ibn Umar (r.a.). The revolutions and counter-revolutions in the Muslim world is a huge tidal wave, and it must be understood that there always exist opposing sides among scholars of Islam and this dialectic must be understood.

3. In my opinion, March is Habermasian when he tried to employ a communicative rationality approach so that each claim of truth (between him and Rached Ghannouchi) can be debated and negotiated. Since we do not know what Ghannouchi's claim is, it is very hard to make a judgement on what he exactly tried to

explain when we are not a part of the communicative rationality process. If in his earlier work on the overlapping consensus March employed a Rawlsian approach, in my opinion, in the rest of this book he employed a Habermasian approach while continue to flag the Rawlsian legacy. His work could be regarded exhaustive and encyclopedic, but political Islamists might perceive his liberal visions about the future Islamic political thought as "post-sovereigntist" and "post-statist", which might carry nonsensicality. This is so partly due to the statement implying that the metaphysical elements of sovereignty, be it divine or popular, must be left out from the equation, stripping the intended idea of Islam in an Islamic democracy and giving signs that the idea of an Islamic state in the post-metaphysical era at best should be suspected.

All in all, it is an excellent book demonstrating March's knowledge in both the Western and Islamic Political Thought.