

IIUM Journal of Religion and Civilisational Studies

Volume 6

Issue 2

2023



International Islamic University Malaysia

IUM JOURNAL OF RELIGION AND CIVILISATIONAL STUDIES
(E-ISSN: 2637-112X)

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E-ISSN: 2637-112X

Published by:

IIUM Press, International Islamic University Malaysia

P.O. Box 10, 50728 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Phone (+603) 6421-5018/5014, Fax: (+603) 6421-6298

Website: <https://www.iium.edu.my/office/iiumpress>

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Book Review

Idris Zakaria. (2019). *The Summary of Islamic Political Thought (Ikhtisar Pemikiran Politik Islam)*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

by Makmor Tumin¹

Western political philosophy in the Muslim world came by two waves. The first one was during the eighth, ninth, and tenth century, where the Greek and Roman's works were translated to other languages, particularly Arabic. Key philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle were examples those whose works were widely read by Muslims during that era. Figures such as al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā were among the earliest Muslims to emulate western influence in the Muslim world. The second influx took place in the 19th century, when figures such as al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, al-Afghānī and Muḥammad ‘Abduh began to explore works of Western thinkers, especially those from France and England. Key thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Montesquieu, Hobbes, and John Locke were among those who impacted early Muslim political thinkers during the second influx of Western philosophy into the Muslim world.

While the first group of Western philosophers introduced new forms of disciplines in Islam such as political philosophy and rationalism as a tool to derive judgment and laws, the second group instigated the spirit of liberalism in the Muslim world based on logic and reason. Idris Zakaria, a former professor who specializes in theology and political philosophy in a Malaysian university wrote a book which focuses on

¹ *Makmor Tumin* is a Professor at the Department of Political Science, Public Administration and Development Studies, Faculty of Business and Economics, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.

the first influx of Western philosophy, especially Greek Philosophy in the Muslim world. In his book, he mentions key Muslim political thinkers of the past, centering his analysis on two major figures, al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā.

In chapter one, he provides the historical development of Islamic political thought by highlighting many works in the Muslim world that garnered interest among contemporary Muslims, especially in Malaysia. The books range from al-Fārābī's *Al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* to Ibn Khaldūn's *Muqaddimah*, which he believes are extremely relevant to contemporary Muslim society. In chapter two, he then discusses in detail the political ideas of the two major figures, al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā. The former is known to be non-partisan, whereas the latter was a partisan political thinker.

Chapter Three discusses the importance of political philosophy as well as its influence in Muslim Malay society. The author highlights that there was a kind of strong rejection of the teachings of political philosophy as the Malay Muslims were more inclined towards Islamic jurisprudence-based politics rather than rational-based politics. He further explains that while *Siyāsah al-Syar'īyah* (God's law-based politics) and Philosophical *Siyāsah* (Logic-based politics) were understood generally in Malaysia, the latter was strongly opposed, especially by groups who are more exposed to strict interpretations of Islam, condemning it as heresy.

In Chapter Four, the author lists a form of advice to the rulers, by highlighting eleven aspects that the rulers in the country should emulate, including:

- The objective of living a life of peace
- God's trust above people's trust
- Close ties between scholars and leaders
- The strengthening of family institutions
- A loving society

He highlights how lessons from past thinkers, especially from al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā should be learned by the current government and society. Hence, in his point of view, there is an urgent need for

Malay Muslims to appreciate the dynamics and importance of political philosophy.

The discussion on political philosophy, both Islamic and Western is limited in Malaysia, and this is reflected by the number of university courses offered in the country as well as the limited number of books published in the local language. This book, hence serves its importance in filling up the gap. After all, the book itself was written by a former local educator with a robust experience in political philosophy. Secondly, unlike many books that only provide empirical evidence for discussion, this book is more dialectic in its approach. Not only did the author set the discussion on the historical events in Islamic political philosophy and mention the detailed account of ideas, he also then set out eleven specific advices for contemporary Muslims.

While it is true that such a book is needed, I have a few reservations. One is that we are no longer dealing with the past influx of Western influence. Although it is still important to know those ideas and concepts originated from the West, readers might be more interested to know what the Muslims should do in response to more contemporary issues, mainly surrounding the ideology of liberalism - How should Muslims deal with the morality of liberal descriptions? In fact, important books in Islamic political thought are written by others of different backgrounds either in religion or ideology, such as Andrew March, whose book, *The Caliphate of Man: Popular Sovereignty in Modern Islamic Thought* sparked a huge debate on the idea of sovereignty in the Muslim world. Nicholas Tampio (editor of *Comparative Political Theory Journal*) for instance, encouraged people to write on how Islamic political philosophy was debated and developed in the Malay world, and how they responded to the liberal ascendancy. Not only is it important to understand the internal dynamics of Islamic political thought and Western political philosophy, but Eastern political philosophy should also be linked, exploring contemporary ideas of Confucius from China, and Kautilya from India on the subject of politics.

Secondly, do the Muslims also have figures of today to refer to like how they had al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā in the past? If yes, who are they and what are their ideas? If the answer is no, why is this the case? From my readings on political philosophy, especially post-1990, nearly all major methodologies of political philosophy were influenced by an analytical

approach versus continental. Contemporary political philosophy was first engineered by John Rawls. On the other hand, continental political philosophy at a certain point was influenced by Jürgen Habermas, who later settled in the USA, and was influenced by analytic philosophers. The influence of these two figures, Rawls and Habermas was seen to be as huge as that of Plato and Aristotle in the past. Hence, we would like to know how they influenced Muslim thinkers. Instead of debating on Aristotelian or Neo-platonic Muslims, we should examine Rawlsian and Habermasian influences among Muslim thinkers, and how the thoughts developed over time.

In line with my comments, it is of great interest to explore contemporary Muslim thinkers such as Rāshid al-Ghannūshī, Ḥasan al-Turābī, Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, including those of other traditions such as Mohammad Khātāmī and ‘Abd al-Karīm Surūsh.

Finally, it is important to explain why Islamic political thought in general was rather muted after Ibn Khaldūn’s work. One might wonder why people in the West produce voluminous works on political philosophy, while the Muslims were quiet for many centuries after Khaldūn. However, some analysts such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr mentioned that while it is true that there was no interesting political development to be proud of after Ibn Khaldūn in the Sunni world, in Persia, the tradition of philosophy in general and political philosophy continued to bloom. Mullā Ṣadrā’s work was obviously one of the clear examples provided by non-Sunni groups thus signifies the continuation of both philosophy and political philosophy by Muslims.

In short, a lot needs to be done by local Muslim thinkers in Malaysia, and I think such a venture cannot be handled individually. It requires a collective effort from people involved in various disciplines and training. Idris Zakaria’s work was a good attempt to open a different side of intellectual debate in the country and it is through this kind of effort that new knowledge and spirit of becoming a greater Muslim can be further enriched.