Democracy in islam

According to the Encyclopedia of Islam, " one who submits to God" is Muslim and the religion of " surrender to God" (an inner action) is Islam. Islam is " to give oneself unconditionally to God" (Makdisi 262)

According to Abed Shukri, Islam is " the monotheistic religious system of Muslims founded in Arabia in the 7th century and based on the teachings of Muhammad as laid down in the Quran (Abed 128). Another definition gives necessary insight into the historical aspect of Islam and the precise meaning and purpose of it: Islam is derived from the Arabic word for peace, and it is harmony and submission to the laws of Allah and thus the teachings of Islam are based on the nature of mankind. Islam is a set of teachings that has been revealed by Allah to mankind. The revelation of Islam has taken place, at various times, through different messengers of Allah such as Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and finally Muhammad.

Defining Democracy

The word democracy is thought to have been derived from the French word democratie in the sixteenth century, which originated from the Greek word demokratie, the root meaning being demos (people) and kratos (rule). (Encyclopaedia Britannica). Defining democracy is challenging but the one most commonly used is the one by American president Abraham Lincoln that, " It is a government of the people, by the people and for the people". In this age of modernity, it is frequently claimed that democracy is necessary for modernity. Islam is often in the spotlight because of its seeming contradiction with the modern, westernized view of democracy.

Democracy is not an entirely alien concept in Islam. Something comparable existed under the Arabic name of shura ever since the Quran was revealed to the prophet Muhammad. Shura (democratic consultation) is believed to be the system by which pre-Islamic tribes in Arabia chose leaders and made major decisions. (Esposito 32). It was, however, not identical to the present-day version of democracy but it shares fundamental principles with it. The prophet Muhammad himself was required to consult his people in affairs of the state. The word itself is mentioned twice in the Quran, the holy book of the Muslims. According to the 42nd Surah (chapter) of the Quran, which is also named Shura:

" Those who hearken to their Lord, and establish regular Prayer; who (conduct) their affairs by mutual consultation; who spend out of what We bestow on them for Sustenance" [are praised]". (Quran, 42: 38).

The Quran also mentions in the 3rd surah:

Thus it is due to mercy from Allah that you deal with them gently, and had you been rough, hard hearted, they would certainly have dispersed from around you; pardon them therefore and ask pardon for them, and take counsel with them in the affair; so when you have decided, then place your trust in Allah; surely Allah loves those who trust. (Quran, 3: 159).

In a speech by the first Caliph (ruler) of Islam, Abu Bakr, where he addressed Muslims gathered at the mosque of the prophet Muhammad,

" I have been given the authority over you, and I am not the best of you. If I do well, help me; and if I do wrong, set me right." (Ahmed 57).

Misunderstanding the Concept of Democracy

O ye who believe! Obey Allah, and obey the Messenger, and those charged with authority among you. If ye differ in anything among yourselves, refer it to Allah and His Messenger, if ye do believe in Allah and the Last Day: That is best, and most suitable for final determination. (Quran, 4: 59).

Oftentimes the Quranic verse 4: 59 is (deliberately) misconstrued by dictators and monarchs to justify their undemocratic ways of ruling. The Mughal rulers of India, the Abbasid dynasty of Baghdad, the Turkish and the Spanish Muslim rulers misused this verse to justify their illegal and undemocratic coercive rule over the territories under their subjection. They were not real rulers as per the injunctions of the Holy Quran. They were mere Dynastic rulers, and the Quran shuns the idea of undemocratic dynasties.

To make sense of the verse 4: 59 in its true implication it is pertinent to bear in mind the historical context in which the verse was revealed. This verse was exclusively intended for the Arabian nomadic Bedouins. The prophet Muhammad sent representatives to inform the Bedouins to turn to Islam and reject their polytheistic ways. They violently rejected and banished the representatives and refused to acknowledge or submit to Islamic authority, while engaging in barbaric tribal wars amongst each other. This verse was revealed as a consequence, advising them to submit themselves to the ruling then-established Islamic system and to set an end to tribal anarchy.

This verse cannot be used to justify unlawfully comprised authority, as that would mean taking the Quranic verses out of context and changing their actual meaning. Looking at verse 4: 59 in conjunction with verses 42: 38 and 3: 159, one can clearly deduct that the Quran means for Muslims to obey

their democratically elected leaders. Therefore the formation of a legitimate, democratically elected authority is of fundamental significance. The idea of shura can be reinterpreted to confirm the modern view of democracy, including the creation of diverse democratic associations in which democratic appointment is obligatory.

In the lifetime of prophet Muhammad there was no institution of military dictatorship and the idea of monarchy didn't exist. It was a wholly democratic society, where the people elected leaders who made decisions in consultation with them. But that does not seem to be the case today. Many Islamic countries lack any system of democratic rule. However, Islam cannot be blamed for the democratic failure of those countries. The phenomenon can better be explained taking into consideration historical, political and cultural factors – rather than religious ones.

One example involves the Ulema (Islamic scholars) legitimizing monarchies in order to prevent anarchy. This verdict is not religious in nature, nor does it ensue in the name of Islam. Today in Islamic countries like Saudi-Arabia, the birthplace of the prophet Muhammad and Islam, Ulema have become an intricate part of the power structure. Their religious declarations are void of any Islamic authenticity and their foremost task seems legitimizing all the Saudi-Arabian rulers do.

Another reason for the great number of Muslim countries lacking democracy can be realized keeping in mind historical events. As the Islamic capital moved from Medina to Damascus it was open to Roman influence, which allowed for the unjust institution of monarch to sneak in the system of Islam. The Islamic ruler Muawiah (Lapidus 153) ascended the throne and ruling

from Damascus aggressively adopted Roman monarchical way of rule. This again goes to confirm what a significant role the cultural, political and historical outlook played in influencing today's political institutions of numerous Muslim countries. The want for popular democracy is exceptionally high in Muslim countries likes Saudi-Arabia and Egypt. Aggressive authoritarian rulers act as barriers, preventing the establishment of a just democratic system. It is rather the opposite – Islam encourages democracy and justice, even in the modern sense.

The Political System of Islam

Islam is not a religion as commonly perceived in western philosophic and religious literature. Instead, rather it is a complete way of life. All facets of human existence come under the umbrella of Islamic decree. Islam requires sincere and complete compliance of the commands of God (Allah) in all spheres of life. The Quran and the sayings of the prophet Muhammad (Hadith) are a source of guidance for all aspects of life: personal and public, moral and mundane, legal and collective, fiscal and instructive, local and global.

Some key fundamentals of the Islamic political order are:

1. Sovereignty belongs to God, Allah. He is the Creator, the Master, the Sustainer, the Law-giver and the Guard for all creation. Obedience of His commands is a source of peace, justice, bliss and prosperity in this world and it ensures real salvation in the hereafter. Quran states:

" Verily His is the creation and His is the Law". (Quran, 7: 54)

2. All people have equal status before God and are subjected to the same law from Him. The legitimacy of any system comes from its loyalty and obedience to Allah.

3. The position of the human beings on earth is that of God's vicegerents. They are expected to run all their affairs, whether individual or collective on earth, bearing in mind their responsibility to God and fellow man.

Islamic principles of governance are based on two important features;

a. God's sovereignty

b. Popular, democratic rule, which comes about as a result of mutual consensus of the community.

Those who are in authority must seek the support of the community – both men and women alike. Islam abolishes the pre-Islamic criteria of caste, colour, creed, nobility or tribe for leadership purposes and instead stresses on qualities of competence, trustworthiness, God consciousness and accountability along with popularity among the masses as key leadership competencies.

The most honourable in the sight of Allah is the one who excels in piety and heedfulness.

Islam also allows the people to speak against unjust rulers, who may compromise their God given rights.

Prophet Muhammad said:

" The best form of jihad (fight) is to utter a word of truth to a tyrannical ruler." (Abudawud, Book of Hadith)

Although sovereignty lies with God but He has entrusted the people and the state to exercise authority. Islam cannot be blamed to justify illegal authority and legitimising undemocratic governments which are not accountable to their citizens and ignore the needs of the people. God has ordained man to be fair. On one occasion, God says:

" And O my people! Give full measure and weight in justice and reduce not the things that are due to the people, and do not commit mischief in the land, causing corruption". (Quran, 11: 85).

Present Situation

During the last 200 years Muslims have been under unjust colonialism and have endured intellectual, moral, economical and cultural setbacks. The Muslims are themselves to blame for their present state of affairs, since, may Islamic thinkers argue, they deviated from the teachings of the Quran. But for the most part Muslims themselves are to be blamed for their problems since the teachings and values of Islam were ignored. Currently most Muslim countries are at a deadlock; Muslim leaders and religious authorities misuse and misconstrue the fundamental postulates of Islam for vested interest.

These dysfunctional, corrupt and oppressive Muslim countries lack the appropriate education, infrastructure, authority and individuals to bring about positive reforms. Puppet leaders are ruling most Muslim countries under sham democracy and the citizens there do not have the authority to participate in the decision making which directly or indirectly have an effect on their lives. Fanaticism results from apathy and despair and it is obvious in most Muslim countries today.

Surely Allah does not change the condition of a people until they change their own condition. (Quran, 13: 11)

Conclusion

The Holy Quran first laid the foundation of today's democracy more than 1400 years ago when the world was oblivious to the idea of peoples rule for the people, after suffering for centuries at the hands of tyrannical autocratic rulers.

The main aim of this paper was to examine whether or not the concept of democracy is present in Islam. After having studied and put forth basic Islamic injunctions pertaining to the establishment of democratic societies, it becomes evident how Islam is not only compatible but does in fact encourage democracy in the westernized sense of the word. Islam can be said to be the passageway to passive co-existence and acceptance.