Is islam and democracy compatible

Democracy is probably one of the issues to receive many headlines and debate of late. What really is democracy and can it be compatible with Islamic ideologies? Undeniably, the Western powers have tried several times to modernize the Middle East and impose their style of democracy.

More often than not, their attempts at this facet seem to backfire and the rejection has led to confusion whether democracy can really co-exist with Islam. Basically, democracy should be one that: is flexible to the ever-changing various patterns of modernity; exploits current cultural norms and values to create a government that is of the people; and, is amendable according to the wishes of the many. This text seeks to discuss the whole concept of democracy and address any misconceptions by looking into the main principles that dictate the separation of powers and apply them to the Middle East. It also reexamines the theories of democratic consolidation and come up with a general and holistic view of democracy that applies to the Middle Eastern culture. The collapse of the Soviet Bloc back in 1991 led to the re-emergence of American foreign policy. One thing that sticks out from this phenomenon was that democracy had trampled on communism.

Arguably, the discretion of communism left a large vacuum on the part of those who had practiced it. These events prompted for a renewed optimism regarding the probability of democratic consolidation. This was further fueled with the fact that former soviet allies were eager and ready to embrace free-market capitalism and democracy. As it appeared, democracy was the ultimate solution for modernity and freedom. This was extended to the Middle East in the hopes that the fall of dictators would lead to democratization of the whole region.

Nonetheless, the swift rejection of these democratic advances by the Middle Easter populace left many Western scholars seeking for answers. It also led to the idea that Islam can never be compatible with democracy. However, recent happenings in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt have raised this question once again. Stating that Islam and democracy is incompatible assumes that democracy is static and cannot adapt to any other culture. Such an assumption would be wrong because it shows the lack of appreciation of the evolution that embraced the democratic practices witnessed currently in the West. Undeniably, democracy had evolved slowly for it to be advanced as we see in the West.

There was much suffrage and political participation before much could be achieved. Advanced democracy came only after several acts of liberalization, revolutions, and strengthening of a number of institutions. It is crucial to discuss the impact of election and voting in finding the urge for principles of liberalization. Apparently, the synergism that embraces voting and elections creates the prospect of an instantaneous and fluid democracy. Voting and elections are the foundation of democracy; however, they are not the entire solution.

Elections will be meaningless if they are not held in a free and fair environment. Moreover, it is also vital that many people participate in the process; however, the electorate should clearly understand the true nature of democracy before they go to vote. Elections become even more complicated if the parties involved are not armed with the necessary environment in which to participate. Consequently, they will not be in a position to provide the necessary information for the electorate to make a

decision that will reflect their choices at best. There will be no hope for organized and civil political activity if there is animosity.

All these factors put in one basket would mean that holding elections and voting are not the only gateways to democracy. Writers like Charles Barry offer explanations as to what prevents the attainment of democracy in Afghanistan. He site that low rates of literacy acts as a big impediment to democracy in the country. Therefore, literacy is extremely essential for any meaningful and active participation in elections that are democratic. Political candidate can confuse and mislead illiterate voters.

Barry & Greene (2009) also site Afghan geography as an impediment, where most people live in small villages in isolation. Most Afghans understand the world to be the village that they have lived most of their years; therefore, convincing them that decisions and rules made in the city will affect their lives is hard. Most of them deal with issues that affect them locally. In discussing the theoretical application of Islam, most countries in the Middle East appear to understand, in their own unique way, the democratic process and its meaning. Many citizens across the region, if asked, would replay that democracy is certainly the best government form. Consequently, the idea of democracy is will understood within the Arabs.

It is not a foreign idea, for example, in countries like Turkey and Iran. In view of this, why has the region not democratized then? The hugest obstacle appears to come from the concern whether Islamism can really reconcile with democracy. As many in the West believe, religious attachments and orientations that surround Muslim citizens create an environment that is

hostile to democratic values. One example of such religious attachments is the Sharia Law. Debates about the compatibility of Sharia Law to democracy have been on the rise, especially from the Western perspective.

It is crucial, perhaps to understand the roles played by the Sharia Law in solving disputes amongst the Muslims before discussing the whole aspect. Sharia law, at least according to the West, is harsh and retrogressive. Some renowned Islamic scholars and leaders like Benazir Bhutto have written that Sharia Law was not used during the times after Prophet Mohammed's demise. Therefore, it calls for careful scrutiny, especially after establishing that Sharia Law was not part of Islam when it commenced. As many would argue, Sharia Law came into being from the interpretation of the Islamic law. Contrary to several modern interpretations, thereof, Sharia Law was not supposed to be static or rigid per se.

As Bhutto (2009) explains, Sharia Law was developed much later during the medieval Islam. The law was actually meant to restrict autocratic rulers from abusing the rights of their people. It acted like a system full of checks, and balances to ensure that jusice, as well as, equality prevailed. In view of this, Sharia Law was meant to be a tool that will protect the people from a retrogressive government, which is totally opposite from what people know about Sharia Law currently. Sharia Law becomes a problem when it is interpreted via the view of the Hadith, coupled with the fundamentalist elucidation of the teachings of Quran. Fundamentalists have used the Hadith and the Quran to set strict constraints in how to apply Sharia against the state and the citizens of the state.

These parameters have somehow held back the Islamic society by mediating disputes and penalizing those found guilty in instances and style that are not up to date. However, Bhutto (2009) explains that sacred texts are constant and divine, but their interpretation evolve after some time depending on the changes that have taken place in the political and social environments. Therefore, according to her, modern Muslim should do the same. She also views that Sharia's implementation was supposed to meet the political provision of the caliph's restraining power. Consequently, it today needs to go back to its natural premise of meeting all the political and social dilemmas. Sharia should not be an end to justice or equality, but a means to embrace all the principles of the society that have been stipulated.

In view of this, Sharia is not a concrete and strict set of rules that the society has to follow, it should be seen as a proper recognition of what the society thinks to be the answer to social problems that might arise. Should Sharia translate the tenets of Islam, then it is crucial to understand the fact that the Quran offers a wide range of beliefs and moral that people should adapt to. Sharia Law has been stained because of the bodily mutilation of those who have supposedly committed crimes. The stoning of adulterous women also appears to reflect interpretations that do not match the modern historical environment. However, it is perhaps important to note that this instances of Sharia Law are applies to only a handful of regions, like in Saudi Arabia, Mali, Sudan and Northern Nigeria.

The rest of the Muslim world practice Sharia Law in areas dealing with marriage, contract, banking, and inheritance. Sharia Law's true intention worked well with the establishment of legal authority; nonetheless, it failed

to live up to its standards when several entities hijacked it to enforce an unalterable agenda brought about by fundamentalists or authoritarians. Authoritarians probably wanted a method that they can use to control the masses and instill fear in them. Fundamentalists, on the other hand, sought a way to use strict rules on the populace to attain their personal ambitions. Sharia Law, therefore, should be an instrument used by the community to deliver what the people want. It should never be a tool used by a few to aid their own selfish agendas.

It is this kind of Islamism that has led to many people questioning whether it can really rhyme with democracy. Islam and democracy are compatible because both of them uphold the rule of law. It is worth noting democratic and Islamic systems emphasize on the rule of law within their areas of governance. Democracy puts in place significant principles that ensure the government adheres to the rule of law in the process of governing its citizens. The constitution outlines these principles and the government must uphold them appropriately to ensure its citizens are safe and living according to the stated standards. Notably, the principles stated in a democratic constitution guarantee mutual rights and obligations of citizens and their government, outlines the separation of powers, and support of personal laws and freedoms.

All these play an instrumental role in ensuring the rule of law is guaranteed in democracy. Islam is compatible to democracy in the sense that it also has enormous mechanisms that enable it emphasize the rule of law. It contains principles that are based on the fundamental principles of Islam and Islamic morals of right and wrong. Hashemi (2009) asserts that Islam provides for

the creation of a nation and the formulation of effective principles that would ensure the rule of law is upheld within the created state. This is done in line with the Islamic law that guarantees objectivity in governance and leadership.

Therefore, the Islamic constitution also asserts fundamental principles such as the separation of powers, which play an instrumental role in supporting personal and social rights and freedoms within the state. All these rules would be applied impartially to everyone in the state and the leadership would be ready to defend its people instead of putting them to suffering. Thus, Islam and democracy are compatible as they both advocate the rule of law by putting in place significant principles in their constitutions. This ensures that accountability and impartiality in the governance of people are upheld. Accordingly, Islam and democracy are compatible in the sense that both of them provide for the separation of powers. The separation of powers refers to an instance whereby each institution in the country such as the judiciary and the legislature work independently.

This implies that the decisions made by the judiciary cannot be influenced by the executive arm of the government or any other force because of the high level of independence that is asserted in both Islam and democracy. Ismaeilian (2006) confirms that Islamic constitutions such as the one utilized by Iran provide that there would be the legislature, the executive, and the legislature which would work under the absolute guardianship of the Imam and the Muslim Jurist of the Ummah in line with the forthcoming articles of the law. This is an indication that each of the three arms of government has the autonomy to perform their respective functions without interference from

any quarter. In a democracy, the constitution also sets a government and provides for effective separation of powers hence ensuring there is effective performance of the stated functions. The existence of the separation of powers in both Islam and democracy is indicative of the high levels of compatibility of the two systems.

In tandem with the principle of the separation of powers, both Islam and democracy promote effective decision-making among the three arms of government. This is because decisions are made without the fear of victimization or any negative happening among individuals. The separation of powers is also vital because it promotes court processes in the respective states. Judges can make decisions faster in cases where they have the advantage to make independent and rational decisions. Therefore, Islam and democracy are compatible because they recognize the separation of powers among different arms of the government hence ensuring effective operations.

More so, Islam and democracy are compatible because both of them emphasize on the promotion of fundamental rights and freedoms of individuals within the state. Rights and freedoms are key to ensuring people enjoy their citizenry in a particular state. Islamic constitutions such as the one utilized in Iran stress that equality and freedoms must be upheld within the country. Islam sets principles concerning the assurance of freedom and equality within the state. Additionally, it also puts in place significant measures that would ensure equality is upheld, and anyone found infringing on the rights and freedoms of others punished in accordance with these principles.

It is vital to note that an Islamic constitution such as the Iranian constitution recognizes private ownership and social security. The Islamic constitution also recognizes the fact that Allah has given everyone the opportunity for self-determination and action within the state. This necessitates the recognition and promotion of fundamental human rights. Democracy also provides for similar rights and freedoms by recognizing the fact that all humans are equal, and they are entitled to governance under equal rights and freedoms. Notably, democracy provides that all people within the country are subject to similar rights and freedoms and no one is superior to others.

Human beings must be governed by similar laws and given the freedom to work effectively in line with self-determination and the fundamental principles put in place. Hashemi (2009) reiterates that the observation of fundamental rights and freedoms among human confirms that Islam and democracy are compatible. This is because both of them uphold the idea that people can only be governed effectively in cases where they are also given the opportunity to enjoy their rights and freedoms, which are unlimited. Civil rights movements are permitted in both Islam and democracy hence ensuring that these rights are promoted in an effective and clear manner. Civil rights movements exist with the aim of emphasizing these rights and freedoms.

Islam is also compatible to democracy because of its provision for consensus in decision-making processes within a state. Islam encourages states to give citizens the opportunity to participate in the making of key decisions that would help in governing them. Islamic principles allow citizens to give their

pieces of ideas through the media and other vital channels that would help the government access the required information. Decisions are made after exhaustive consultations among all significant parties that are to be affected by the decisions made. Similarly, democracy gives people the opportunity to participate in exhaustive decision-making that would ensure effective and fair decisions are made and applied to everyone in an impartial manner.

For instance, Iran is governed by the Quran, which allows citizens the chance to make proper decisions before they are forwarded to other significant makers of the same decision. The participation of people in key decision-making through the media ensures that the overall system is fair and accommodative of the views of all individuals within the country. Islam is highly compatible to democracy because it allows for consensus and does not provide for the imposition of these decisions against citizens. Ismaeilian (2006) agrees that consensus plays an instrumental role in ensuring fundamental rights and freedoms of individuals are upheld appropriately within the state. More so, this ensures that rational decisions, which play a vital role for the governance and development of the state, are made.

The allowance of significant participation in decision-making ensures that successful implementation of these decisions is attained because of the popular support that is gained from group-made decisions. Thus, Islam remains compatible to democracy in a significant way because of its assertion of consensus and the significant of participatory decision-making within different states. In conclusion, it is vital to note that Islam and democracy are compatible in many significant ways. However, many Western countries have always had the perception that Islam is not

compatible some ways to democracy. Islam is compatible to democracy in various significant ways hence making it an effective form of governing people in countries such as Iran.

First, Islam is compatible to democracy because it allows for election in the election of leaders. This means leaders are not supposed to be imposed on citizens, but should be chosen according to the wish of the people. Second, Islam is compatible to democracy because it also emphasizes on adherence to law through its Sharia law. Sharia law is similar to constitutionalism that is observed in democracy. Third, democracy and Islam are compatible because they both contain elements of checks and balances.

A government can only operate in an effective manner in cases where there are checks and balances that oversee its operations. Fourth, the Islamic system is compatible to democracy because of the utilization of theoretical application of laws and effective principles. Fifth, Islam provides for the rule of law hence making it compatible to democracy. The rule of law asserts that everyone would be handled appropriately in accordance with the law. Sixth, Islam provides for the separation powers in the state organs hence ensuring it is highly compatible to the democratic system of governance. The assertion that the legislature, judiciary, and the executive are separate indicates effective compatibility between Islam and democracy.

Additionally, Islam is compatible to democracy because of the promotion of the fundamental rights and freedoms of people. Both of them recognize that all humans are equal and need to be governed with equal laws. Last, Islam is compatible to democracy because of the promotion of consensus in the

process of decision-making. Consensus ensures that effective and rational decisions that apply to everyone are made. All the significant points mentioned above underscore the idea that Islam and democracy are highly compatible.