

Understanding Islam

Series Three: Building a Just Society

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Part Seven: Politics – community life under God

Islam is a complete way of life, therefore the affairs of society are to be organised according to God's guidance. This we call politics, therefore politics are part of Islam. The important thing about Islamic politics is that the organisation of society is under God's guidance. This is the same perpetual guidance that has been sent to all the peoples of the earth, which in its final and universal form is contained in the Qur'an. The problem with any book of guidance is that it has to be interpreted and applied to human society.

This task was performed by the Prophet Muhammad, who is understood by Muslims to be sinless and infallible in his interpretation of the Qur'an. The Qur'an tells us that he speaks not out of his own will but by the will of God, therefore his example is normative for Muslim political interpretation [Q. 53:3]. Muhammad himself was not above the law of God. Rather he was subject to God's guidance, like everyone else. As the prophet, he was the single leader of the Muslim community and thus set a model in Madina of the leader having spiritual, political, legal and military rule. This did not mean that he did not consult with other people in guiding the community. He followed the customary Arab practice of his time in consulting with the traditional clan chiefs and also extended this to consulting the whole community, including pointedly the women of the community. From this example, we have the Muslim practice of *shura*, seeking guidance through consultation.

The principle of *shura* is rooted in the Islamic understanding of what it is to be human. This is exercising the duty of every human being to be both the *abd* and the *khalifa* of God in society. Every Muslim has the duty to listen to, understand and put into practice the guidance of God in the affairs of society. This does not make human beings autonomous. The people are not free to do whatever the majority decide, just because it is a majority decision. Rather human laws must be worked out within the ethical guidelines laid down in the Qur'an and the *sunna* of Muhammad.

Two models after the death of Muhammad

We see this principle of *shura* at work in the election of the first four Sunni Caliphs. They were chosen by a variety of methods: council of the elders, nomination, an appointed *shura* council, and popular acclaim. In each case the chosen candidate was proposed to the community as a whole and they affirmed the choice. The Caliph was acknowledged by the community to be its leader under God. They were to follow him in all things that agreed with God's guidance and to assist him in discerning what that guidance is and how it was lived out by the earliest generation. For those Muslim scholars who speak in terms of an Islamic democracy, they see here a model of the

people exercising their individual responsibility to be the *khalifa* in discerning who are the best people to implement the guidance of God and then putting them into authority. Once they assume that authority, they are to be followed by the community.

The Shi'a have a different interpretation. The divinely-appointed Imams had a share in the inspiration of Muhammad, which equipped them uniquely to guide the community. They were able to give infallible guidance on how the message was to be put into practice. It was thus the duty of individual Muslims to hold fast to the twin sources of guidance, the Qur'an and the Imams, and to follow them. This provided the Muslim community with an additional 309 years of infallible guidance until the final occultation of the Twelfth Imam in 941. This period becomes the beacon from which guidance must be sought through the ages until the reappearance of Imam al-Mahdi, who will then assume the responsibility of direct guidance of the peoples of the earth.

Who has the duty of guidance now?

According to Shi'a understanding, in the present period, the time of the Hidden Imam, the responsibility of guiding the community rests with the highest rank of Shi'a scholars, the Grand Ayatollahs. It is the responsibility of individual Shi'a Muslims to decide, by the use of their reason, who is the most learned of these Grand Ayatollahs in every generation and, once they have done so, to follow that person's guidance.

The Sunni too recognise that not all human beings have the same level of intelligence or knowledge. The most learned scholars, the *ulama* (plural of *alim* – a scholar), have the responsibility of giving guidance to the community. This is likely to result in a variety of learned opinions. Each individual Muslim then has the task of listening to that guidance and putting it into practice. Each is accountable directly to God.

Two contemporary models

In the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, there is a body of scholars charged by the government with giving advice on how the Islamic message should be applied in modern times. The government listens to this advice and then brings forward laws. It is the duty of the electorate, the people, to put into government those who they think are best equipped to make laws that agree with God's guidance.

The role played by Islam in the Pakistani constitution has been controverted since its creation in 1947; should it be a homeland for the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent or should it be an Islamic state? Throughout its history, both tendencies have been seen in play. The idea of an Islamic state is drawn from the principle that Islam is a complete code of life and thus requires political power for it to be fully realised. The laws should be derived from Islamic principles and they will guide the people towards living fully according to Islam. In the Pakistani context, such an interpretation was pioneered by Maududi (d.1979), but the ideal also exercised other political leaders, notably Hasan al-Banna (d.1948) in Egypt. It is this ideology that is in play in various

ways in the Arab lands after the Arab Spring and its diversity can be seen in the al-Nahda party in Tunisia and in the constitution brought in by President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Another version of the same ideology was the inspiration for the Taliban in Afghanistan. The construction of a modern Islamic state must be seen as a work in progress and none of these models can be seen as definitive. Further manifestations of this tendency can be seen in various ways amongst parties in Turkey as well as other Muslim majority countries in Africa and Asia.

Following the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini brought forward a different model in that predominantly Shi'a state. He saw the need to combine democracy and democratic legislation within the parameters of the revealed text of the Qur'an. This can be seen as a new way of developing a religious democracy suitable for a people who took their Islam seriously. It required a combination of consulting with the general populace and the oversight of a Supreme Religious Leader, guided by a Board of Guardians, who are experts in Islamic law. The parliament is charged with listening to the people and formulating laws that meet their needs in a modern society. These laws are then referred to the Board of Guardians to ensure that they comply with the principles of *shari'a*. The *shari'a* is understood in a dynamic rather than a static way so that it has the capacity to evolve within the bounds of the divine law. The Board of Guardians has the right to veto proposed legislation if it is deemed to be outside these parameters; the proposed law is then sent back to the parliament for further consideration. If the parliament is unable to resolve the proposed law in accordance with the guidance of the Board of Guardians, it is then referred to a higher body, the Expediency Council, made up of people appointed by the Supreme Religious Leader on the basis of their experience in running the country and wide expertise. This body is empowered to implement the law if appropriate, if necessary after consulting the Supreme Leader, as it is then the result of the collective conscience of the people plus the wisdom of experts or it might again be rejected. It is the responsibility of the *ulama* to help the people to understand their religion better so that they can act in an informed way in the legislative process.

Political systems in history and today

The Islamic Empire grew rapidly after the death of Muhammad and remained largely united for the first two centuries. Local dynasties arose, the most important of which were the Abbasids, who ruled from Baghdad (750-1258) and later over a much smaller area from Cairo (1261-1517), the Umayyads in Spain (756-1031) and the Fatimids in Egypt (909-1171). In the last five hundred years, Empires were more geographically limited with the most important being the Ottomans based in Turkey and ruling at times much of the Middle East (1280-1924), the Mughals in India (1526-1858), the Safavids in Iran (1501-1765) and the Alawids in Morocco and West Africa (1631 onwards).

There have been many other forms of government in Muslim lands. There were regional caliphates or smaller stand-alone areas only theoretically under the rule of the Caliph. There have been many examples of hereditary kingdoms, sultanates or

emirates. In the modern period there have been various forms of presidential rule and democracies. There are dozens of modern Muslim-majority countries, some of which use the title “Islamic” as part of their names but no serious scholar would suggest that any of them fully follow the principles of Islam. Some aim to have Islamic principles as their guiding ethos. Some are established as secular states and some, like Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population on earth, are constitutionally religiously plural.

The aim of political life

The guidance of God contained in the Qur'an and *sunna* of Muhammad is universal both in time and geography. It is for all humankind and for all times, therefore it is not just limited to Muslim majority countries. All human beings are required to “command the good and oppose the evil” [Q. 3:104] as a basic human responsibility. The criteria for good and evil are to be found in the Islamic sources and need to be applied in each new context by Islamically informed people. In the modern world, hundreds of millions of Muslims live in mixed societies alongside citizens who are not Muslims. Muslims living in such societies are bound by the *shari'a* to obey the law of the land in everything that is not contrary to the law of God. Like other people of faith, Muslims ultimately answer to a higher authority than human governments and must be prepared to accept the consequences of living according to their consciences. Ultimately, if Muslims cannot live according to divine guidance in a particular country, they are counselled to migrate to some other country where they can live upright lives rather than succumb to evil [Q. 4:97].

God’s guidance is not just for Muslims but for all humankind. Muslims living in a minority situation have the duty to listen to that guidance and seek to move their society in a godly way through the normal channels of citizens: writing, speaking, campaigning, standing for election and voting in those elections. The Islamic principle is not only for Muslims *to be just* but also *to do justice* in whatever situation they find themselves.