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Islam's Approach Towards Democracy

Shaikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi

It is the duty of the Islamic Movement in the coming phase to stand firm against totalitarian and dictatorial rule, political despotism and usurpation of people's right. The Islamic Movement should always stand by political freedom, as represented by a true, not false, democracy. It should clearly declare its refusal of tyrants and steer clear of all dictators, even if some tyrants appear to have good intentions towards the Movement in order to obtain some gains and only for a time that is usually short, as has been shown by experience.

The Qur'an denounces tyrants such as Nimrudh, Pharaoh, Haman and others, but it also dispraises those who follow tyrants and obey their orders. This is why Allah dispraises the people of Nuh saying : And (they) followed one whose wealth and children give him no increase but only loss.

Allah says of the people of Hud: And (they) followed the command of every proud obstinate (oppressor of the truth, from their leaders) (11:59) Allah also says of the people of Pharaoh: But they followed the command of Pharaoh, and the command of Pharaoh was no right guide. (11:97) And they obeyed him. Verily , they were a people who were rebellious (against Allah). (43:54)

A closer look at the history of the Muslim Ummah and the Islamic Movement in modern times should show clearly that the Islamic Ideology, the Islamic Movement and the Islamic Awakening have never flourished or borne fruit unless in an atmosphere of democracy and freedom , and have withered and become barren only at the times of oppression and tyranny that trod over the will of the people which clung to Islam. Such oppressive regimes imposed their Secularism, Socialism or Communism on their people by force and coercion, using covert torture and public executions, and employing those devilish tools that tore flesh, shed blood , crushed bones and destroyed souls.

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We saw these practices in many Muslim countries including Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Iraq South Yemen, Somalia and North African States for varying periods of time, depending on the age or reign of the dictator in each country.

On the other hand, we saw the Islamic Movement and the Islamic Awakening bear fruit and flourish at the times of freedom and democracy, and in the wake of the collapse of imperial regimes that ruled people with fear and oppression. Therefore, I would not imagine that the Islamic Movement could support anything other than political freedom and democracy. The tyrants allowed every voice to be raised, except the voice of Islam; and let every trend express itself in the form of a political party or a body of some sort, except the Islamic current which is the only trend that actually speaks for this Ummah and expresses its creed, values ,essence and its very existence.

However, some Islamists still have their reservations on democracy and are even wary of the word 'democracy' itself. What I wish to stress here is that Islam is not democracy and democracy is not Islam. I would rather say that Islam is not attributed to any principle or system. Islam is unique in its means, ends and methodologies, and I do not wish that Western democracy be carried over to us with its bad ideologies and values without us adding to it from our values and ideologies in order to integrate it into our comprehensive system.

However, the tools and guaranties created by democracy are as close as can ever be to the realization of the political principles brought to this world by Islam to put a leash on the ambitions and whims of rulers. These principles are : shura , nasihah (advice), enjoining the good and forbidding the evil disobeying illegal orders, resisting unbelief and changing wrong by force when possible. It is only in democracy and political freedom that the power of parliament is evident that people's deputies can withdraw confidence from any government that breaches the constitution. It is also only in such an environment that the strength of free press , free parliament, opposition and the masses is most felt.

The fears of some people here that democracy makes the people a source of power and even legislation (although legislation is Allah's alone) should not be heeded, because we are supposed to be speaking of a population that is Muslim in its majority and has accepted Allah as its Lord, Muhammad as its Prophet and Islam as its Deen. Such a people would not be expected to pass a legislation that contradicts Islam and the incontestable principles and conclusive rules of Islam.

In any case, these fears can be overcome by one article stipulating that any legislation contradicting the incontestable provisions of Islam shall be null and void because Islam is the religion of the State and the source of legitimacy of all its institutions and therefore may not be contradicted, as a branch may not run against the main origin.

It should be known that the acceptance of the principle that legislation of rule belong to Allah does not take away from the Ummah its right to seek

for itself the codes necessary to regulate its ever changing life and worldly affairs.

What we seek is that legislations and codes be within the limits of the flawless texts and the overall objectives of the Shari'ah and the Islamic Message. The binding texts are very few, while the area of 'permissibility' or legislative-free space is quite wide and the texts themselves are so flexible and capacious as to accommodate more than one understanding and accept more than one interpretation. This leads to the existence of several schools and philosophies within the expansive framework of Islam.

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