

Democracy and Islam

The debate starts once again, “Should Muslims participate in politics in a democracy or not, since ‘democracy’ is itself not an Islamic form of government?” Let me try to put this in perspective. Before I begin let me state that I am not talking about the philosophy of democracy i.e. Supremacy of the People instead of Supremacy of Allah ﷻ. Let me state also that in terms of Islam, the only one worthy of worship and obedience is Allah ﷻ and that only Allah ﷻ has the right to make laws which He did and His Messenger ﷺ conveyed to us. Anyone who considers laws opposed to the laws of Allah ﷻ as being superior or even permissible, has committed Shirk. This Khutba is about the issue of Muslims living in democratic countries, often as minorities. What must they do? What options do they have and what are the consequences of these options?

To the question, “Should Muslims participate in politics in a democracy or not, since ‘democracy’ is itself not an Islamic form of government?” I would like to state that first of all, there is no specific form of government that is ‘Islamic’. If anyone disputes that statement and says that the ‘Khilafa’ is the only form of government that is permissible in Islam, then we have to ask why it is that ever since the ascension of Yazid bin Muawiyya, monarchy has been accepted as ‘Islamic’ even by Sahaba who lived under Yazid and supported his rule? This continued even though the terms, ‘Khalifa’ and ‘Khilafa’ continued to be used off and on, until the institution of Khilafa was finally abolished in 1923. For the record, the Ottoman rulers called themselves ‘Sultan’ and not ‘Khalifa’, though the government itself was called ‘Khilafa’. How does that work? So, what is the Islamic form of government?

Islam is concerned with the nature of the government and not necessarily its form. Consider this: the Khilafa Rashida itself followed three different processes to choose a successor in the case of the first three Khulafa.

In the case of Abu Bakr Siddique (R) it was an election of the Supreme Leader by lesser leaders in Madina. This was the usual way of the Arabs when electing a new Ameer or Chief of their clans where the decision would be taken by a few significant and powerful elders/leaders and everyone else would accept and support it. So also, in this case, it was not one-man-one-vote involving the entire population of Madina. Even if it had been, hypothetically speaking one could have argued that the people of Makkah, Ta’aif, Najd and all the tribes of the Hijaz had not voted. Yet, the leader being chosen would

have authority over all Muslims. Abu Bakr Siddique (R) was elected by the people who had gathered in the Saqifa Bani Sa'ada and was later ratified by the rest of the community in Masjid An-Nabawi when other people gave him the Baya (Oath or Pledge) of Allegiance. In the election in the Saqifa Bani Sa'ada, which itself was not planned but was impromptu, many of the important Sahaba of Rasoolullah ﷺ including Sayyidina Ali bin Abi Talib (R) were not present and neither was their opinion sought.

This was not deliberate or by design but because Ali bin Abi Talib (R) was busy with the burial of Rasoolullah ﷺ, he was not disturbed, and he gave his pledge the next day. Since Abu Bakr Siddique (R) was already accepted as the foremost among the Sahaba and was their leader, nobody objected and they all, including Ali bin Abi Talib (R) gave him their Pledge. They remembered that Rasoolullah ﷺ had always sought his advice and used to give him precedence over everyone else because of him having been the first man to accept Islam and for his service to Islam and to Rasoolullah ﷺ.

They remembered that Abu Bakr (R) was Rasoolullah ﷺ's companion in the cave during their Hijra from Makkah to Madina. People remembered that Rasoolullah ﷺ had given him Imamat of Salah from the Thursday before the Monday when he passed away. For the Sahaba, that was a clear sign that Rasoolullah ﷺ preferred and had thereby nominated Abu Bakr Siddique (R) as his successor. Having said that, there are people to this day, fourteen centuries later, who differ and say that the Khilafa should have gone to Ali bin Abi Talib (R).

The fact that Ali bin Abi Talib (R) himself never said this nor did he object to the leadership of Abu Bakr Siddique (R) and gladly gave his Baya (oath) of Allegiance with sincerity (what else do we expect of Ali bin Abi Talib (R)?) cuts no ice with them. We will put that dispute aside as it is not relevant to this discussion and look at what happened two years later, when Sayyidina Abu Bakr Siddique (R) was dying.

Abu Bakr Siddique (R) took the advice of the Asharum Mubashshara (the 10 Sahaba who had been given the good news of Jannah by Rasoolullah ﷺ) about his proposed choice, Omar ibn Al Khattab (R), as his successor. All of them except one (Zubair bin Awwam (R)) accepted this choice and so Abu Bakr Siddique (R) called Omar ibn Al Khattab (R) and nominated him. This action of Abu Bakr Siddique (R) was in keeping

with the informal but clearly understood and accepted hierarchy among the Sahaba in which the Asharum Mubashshara came first followed by the Badriyyeen (Sahaba who participated in the Battle of Badr) and then everyone else.

Ten years later when Omar ibn Al Khattab (R) had been stabbed and was dying, he called the rest of the Asharum Mubashshara and told them to choose one among them to succeed him. Some of them declined to accept the role of Khalifa. There were two contenders who remained. Abdur Rahman ibn Awf (R), who was a scholar among the Sahaba and one of the wealthiest businessmen of the time was himself from the Asharum Mubashshara and who had declined to be considered for Khilafa, was chosen to pick between them. He decided to consult the Sahaba who had participated in the Battle of Badr and other significant leaders in Madina and at the end of this consultation, he borrowed the Amama (turban) of Rasoolullah ﷺ and wearing it, he ascended the Minbar of Masjid An-Nabawi and announced Othman ibn Affan (R) as the leader who had been chosen to succeed Omar ibn Al Khattab (R). Everyone accepted this choice, including Ali bin Abi Talib (R) who had also accepted Omar ibn Al Khattab (R) as Khalifa and worked under him as a judge.

Othman ibn Affan (R)'s Khilafa ended in war and Ali bin Abi Talib (R) was forced to accept the Khilafa to put an end to the worst turmoil and violence that the Muslims had ever seen. However, this was also contested, and we have a history of ever more complex conflicts thereafter. Once again, I am not going into details here as they are not relevant. What is relevant however, is that twenty years later, when Muawiyya bin Abi Sufyan (R) was dying, he nominated his son Yazid bin Muawiyya (also called Yazid I) as Khalifa, thereby dispensing with the entire selection/election process and converting the Khilafa into a hereditary monarchy.

This became the default Muslim (Islamic) form of government all over the world, from the Banu Umayyah who started it, to the Banu Abbas, Fatimi, Ayyubi, Saffavid, Mughal, Uthmani (Ottoman) and other rulers right down to our modern times, who all accepted hereditary monarchy as the way Muslim lands were to be governed.

Before we blame the kings however, let us reflect on the fact that none of their subjects, including Sahaba, all the Imams of Fiqh, all the Ulama of the Tabiyyin and their followers including to this day, have ever criticized or refused to accept hereditary

monarchy, calling it 'unislamic' nor called for the establishment of the Khilafa. One reason could be that the Khilafa Rashida itself was established in three different ways. So, which of them would one choose?

The point that I want to make is that it appears from reading our history that Islam is more concerned with the nature of government than its form. Our great classical and modern scholars seem to be agreed upon this and this seems to be the majority view. Islam is concerned with how the government is carried on; whether it establishes the laws of Allah ﷻ as mentioned in the Qur'an and Sunnah, whether it establishes justice or not, whether the poor and weak are taken care of, whether there is corruption or not, and whether law is enforced so that crime is minimized, if not eradicated. It is not concerned with how the government itself came into being or its structure, if that government does what all good governments are supposed to do i.e. good governance. Therefore, different forms of governments were accepted as valid and legal if they provided good governance.

Of course, from the Islamic point of view, for a government to be considered Islamic, whichever form of government it may be, it must follow the Divine Laws of the Shari'ah and must not legislate against the Laws of Allah ﷻ. Governments are free to legislate and pass laws to ensure the best for all people, without denying, altering or going against Divine Laws. For example, laws of taxation, zoning of cities, regulation of road traffic and so on can be made because they don't contradict the Laws of Allah ﷻ. However, laws which make Halaal what Allah ﷻ prohibited, for example, interest-based banking, consumption of alcohol and other addictive substances and so on, are not permissible and any government that makes such laws would be unislamic even if the government was run by Muslims.

I am not claiming that democracy is the best form of government from an Islamic theological or philosophical perspective but that it is the best among all that exist today. There are some clear issues about parliamentary democracy which must be borne in mind. A parliamentary democracy is the rule by political parties, where the party which gets the most votes rules the country. This means that independent candidates, no matter how good they are, have no chance to be effective or to be able to form a government. Candidates who stand on tickets from any political party must

necessarily follow the party line in all matters, no matter what their own opinion may be. The party is run, not always by elected representatives but often by its ideologues and leaders, who need not be elected at all but who direct all policies and actions of the party.

It is in this context that we must look at democracy today when some people say that Muslims must not participate in democracy because it is not 'Islamic'. My contention is that there is no such thing as an 'Islamic' form of government. What is 'Islamic' about a government, lies in its actions of governing. Obviously, there is great misunderstanding about forms of government which is exacerbated by our general lack of knowledge of history so that we have no perspective or decision-making ability. We must correct this urgently.

What is the role of Muslim citizens who live in democratic countries? Should they participate in government, from voting, to standing for election to discharging their responsibilities in different capacities in Parliaments and Senates? Or should they abstain from doing any of these things. And if they should abstain, then how are they to ensure that their rights, needs and issues are represented and addressed by a government that they didn't elect or show any interest in?

My contention is that democracy, like monarchy is simply a form of government; in terms of governance. Citizens of democratic countries must participate in democracy for the simple reason that all change can only be initiated and implemented from within. As a matter of interest, if we take the very first form of government of the Muslim State after Rasoolullah ﷺ passed away, it was a 'democratic' decision. As I mentioned earlier, it was different from our present form of universal suffrage leading to universal suffering (except for politicians) but it was democracy, nevertheless.

The argument that most if not all, modern democratic countries are not Muslim (meaning that the rulers are not Muslim) is met with two arguments:

1. How 'Islamic' is a government where the rulers are Muslim but permit interest-based banking in their realms, when they know perfectly well that Allah ﷻ not only prohibited it but declared war on behalf of Himself and His Messenger ﷺ on those

who participate in interest-based banking? How can a government, which is classified as an enemy of Allahﷻ by the definition of the Qur'an, be called Islamic?

2. In the Shari'ah we follow the principle that if you can't do (have) everything, you don't reject or stop doing everything.

So, if we can't have the perfect state of government that Rasoolullahﷺ provided when he was the ruler, we will live with and support rulers (and governments) who provide justice, safety, law & order, economic development and general protection of rights and privileges even if they do other things which are not perfect. We don't support them in things which are against Islamic law (e.g. we will not participate in interest-based banking, even if it is allowed in the country) but we will support them in everything that is for the benefit of everyone.

Authority can be delegated. Not responsibility. Responsibility remains with the original person. Meaning that if the one to whom authority was delegated fails to perform, it is the one who delegated it, who will still be responsible. Often there is confusion between authority and responsibility. Authority is the permission to act. Responsibility refers to the consequences of the action. That is why training is very important, before delegating authority. The ruler delegates authority to various officials, but the responsibility remains with the ruler whether they succeed or fail. It will be called the success or failure of the ruler. So also, the CEO, Head of Family or whatever; delegates and should delegate authority, because he or she can't do everything themselves. But the responsibility i.e. accountability, remains with them. If they delegate authority without preparing their subordinates or delegate it to people who are incompetent, then it is their rule or tenure or performance which would have failed.

We, the people of the nation, through the ballot box have delegated the responsibility of running the nation to those we elected. Hence, we retain the responsibility for their success or failure. It comes back to my favorite political quote: "We get the government we deserve". We should realize that we have delegated authority. Not responsibility. So, if those to whom authority was delegated, failed, we need to take back the authority and realize that to give ourselves good government is our responsibility, not anyone else's.

In conclusion I would like to state clearly and unequivocally that Muslims living in democratic countries must participate in government in every way knowing that it is entirely in keeping with Islam to do so. They must participate because Islam orders them to support all that is beneficial for everyone, Muslim or otherwise and to do that in a way that showcases Islam for the rest of the world. Muslims must participate in democracy, because it is only by participation that can we ensure that our interests are addressed, and our needs met. We have seen many examples of what happens when we don't participate.

The first thing to do therefore is to ensure that your name is listed as a voter.

1. Go to <http://ceotelangana.nic.in>
2. Enroll online by filling form 6 and attach your photo ID and address proof.
3. You will get an acknowledgement. After a month check the status.
4. It may be better to submit hard copies of your documents to the Booth Level Election Officer and get an acknowledgement, as the site is very glitchy.

Photo ID and address proof are essential without which you can't get enrolled as a voter. Once you get enrolled you will get a Voter ID card which you must present at the booth when you go to vote. That is the key. **YOU MUST GO TO VOTE.** Whether it is raining or not, whatever be the situation, you **MUST GO AND VOTE.**

Remember this is the only opportunity that you have in a democracy to be heard, to influence your own future and to protect yourself from those who wish to hurt you. Finally, **a party is elected not by the majority of the population of the country but by the majority of those who cast their vote.** This last line is the key to modern democracies and the reason why you must vote. If you don't enroll yourself and don't go and vote, then don't blame anyone else for the result.

You are responsible, and you will pay the price.