

Pluralism and Democracy in the Contemporary Islamic Thought

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Abstract

This paper aims at highlighting of the some of the contemporary Islamic thinkers on the most heated and debatable issues like pluralism and democracy in Islamic perspective. This examines the possibilities of new thinking and ideologies in coping with the contemporary trends, thoughts and philosophies. It evaluates the writings of F.R.Faridi, M.Y.M.Siddiqi, S.Jalaluddin Umari, Esposito, M.Fathi Osman, Ghannushi and Ali Bulac in case of Islamic pluralism, and Mawdudi, Sir Syed, Arnold, Farahi and Mashriqi in case of democracy – shura debate. The paper necessitates a reconstruction of Islamic thought as a process of *tajdid* as defined in the Hadith.

Keywords: Pluralism, Hilf Al-Fudul, Abyssinian Culture, Dar al-Islam, Madinah Document, Children of Adam, Power – Sharing Islam, Dhimmi, Shura, Theo-Democracy, Ijtihad, Khalifah, Hijabaat

Cooperation to Social Reforms:

The *New Encyclopaedia Britannica* has defined pluralism a modern philosophy that advocates multiplicity and diversity of things rather than their unity as the most striking fact. William James, in his book *A Pluralistic Universe* held that it is characteristic of empirically minded thinkers to note and take into account the changeability of things, their multiplicity in being as well as in their relations with one another, and the unfinished character as the world in process. In social and political thought, pluralism is applied to the autonomy enjoyed by disparate groups within a society, such groups as religious groups, trade unions, professional organizations or ethnic minorities.¹

Muslim scholars in the contemporary world have accepted pluralism as an ideology that ensures the freedom of equality to all the different and contradictory thoughts and beliefs to the extent that every thought and belief may argue intellectually its own reasonability and beneficial position and may criticize other thoughts and beliefs beautifully and politely. This understanding of pluralism guarantees freedom of religion and thought to everyone and provides a space to inter-faith understanding and dialogue, as Dr. Fazlurrahman Faridi (1932-2011), the prominent scholar of *Jamaat-e Islami* of India has discussed.

Dr Faridi has referred to the historic accord of *Hilf al-Fudul* signed between various tribes of the Quraysh of Makkah including Muhammad (peace and blessing of God be on him) before the pronouncement of the prophethood. His book *Living as a Muslim in a Plural Society* is the most authentic source that has discussed the Prophetic accord in favour of pluralism. To him it was an agreement to fight together against evil and injustice, a concerted endeavor in which the polytheists, the atheists, and believers in the unity of God known as *hunafa* all joined. The Prophet set great value to this accord

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¹ *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Micropaedia, 15th edition, Vol. 9, 528.

and is reported to have asserted that whenever a similar accord is effected again he will readily join it.²

Dr. Faridi argues that it is not desirable to make one's participation in such an agreement subject to the condition that such an endeavor should be comprehensive and all pervasive and should address the basic ill of the society; the learned scholar clarifies the ideological misconceptions in which the Islamic movements had been involved since last fifty years. To him, even small and modest endeavors deserve our willing and active cooperation as demonstrated by the Prophet's illustrious examples.

Dr. Faridi further argues that the philosophy of governance should not be a bar to cooperation. Any distinction between government and private efforts in this respect is unwarranted. State activities to eradicate poverty and hunger, to minimize and curtail exploitation and tyranny, to reduce the scourge disease and malnutrition and removal of illiteracy are ideals shared by Islam. Whatever the nature of the state and its philosophy of governance, the Muslim community is morally bound to co-operate in these efforts fully and enthusiastically.³

Cultural Interaction:

Dr. Muhammad Yasin Mazhar Siddiqi (born in 1944AD) specially highlighted the Muslim emigration to Abyssinia as a historic event of pluralism and diversity in his book *The Prophet Muhammad – A Role Model for Muslim Minorities*. According to the biographers of the Prophet, Muslims migrated to Habash (Abyssinia) twice; the first being 615AD. when fourteen Muslims left Makkah for the new destination. After a year around eighty men and women migrated there. Thus around one hundred Muslims settled there because of the persecution they had to suffer from the Makkan pagans. Significantly, some members of the Makkan Muslim community were allowed to be the subjects of the Christian ruler of the foreign country. This historic event inspired the Muslim scholars like Dr. Siddiqi and others to seek guidance for socio-political participation of Muslims in a plural society.

Dr. Siddiqi has mainly discussed the formation of Muslim *Ummah* in the Makkan period. After a thorough examination of the Makkan Muslims, he has concluded that inspite of ideological clashes between the Makkan Muslims and the polytheists, Muslims maintained a friendly and cordial relations with the non-Muslim relatives, and "this is the right Islamic approach and the Prophet's role model which we must emulate" in a plural society.⁴

Dr. Siddiqi discussed also in length the socio-cultural interaction between the Makkan Muslims and the Abyssinian Christians that took place after the Muslim emigration to the land. In Abyssinia Muslims enjoyed the religious freedom and social justice. A section of Muslim community led a peaceful life for around twenty years. Not

² Faridi, Fazlur Rahman, *Living as a Muslim in a Plural Society*, (Chennai: Islamic Foundation Trust, May 1998), 81.

³ Ibid., p.85, The *Hilf al-Fudul* accord in the context of a plural society was thoroughly examined by other scholars also. See for example: Cyril Glasse, *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Stacey International, London, 1989, pp. 134-135; Dr. Hamidullah in: *Urdu Dariah Ma'arif Islamiyah*, Lahore, 1393AH/ 1973AD, Vol.8, pp. 512-515; Dr. Muhammad Raziul Islam Nadwi, *Hilf al-Fudul - 'Asri Manawiyat*, Quarterly *Tahqeeqaat – e Islami*, Aligarh, Vol.21, No.2, April-June, 2002, 61-82.

⁴ Siddiqi, Muhammad Yasin Mazhar, *The Prophet Muhammad – A Role Model for Muslim Minorities*, Leicester, The Islamic Foundation, 2006/1427AH, 111.

only Negus, the emperor had embraced Islam but a delegation of Abyssinian Christians comprising twenty persons when visited the Prophet at the holy Kabah after the emigration accepted Islam as the new faith under the influence of his teachings and on listening to the Quran.⁵

Dr. Siddiqi has also pointed out the influence of Abyssinian culture on the Muslims. He has quoted Ibn Khadun (1332-1406) to the effect that cultures always result in exchange and influence on each other's language, way of life, dress, food, customs and other cultural manifestations. The Muslim emigrants adopted many items of Abyssinian culture and influenced, in an equal measure, Abyssinians. To the author, Islamic civilization abounds in instances of cultural borrowing and influencing others.⁶

Legality of Accommodation:

Sayyid Jalaluddin Umari (born in 1935), former *amir* (president) of Jamaat – e Islami of India, a theologian and scholar of global repute, compiled a number of articles in Urdu and got them published in the *Quarterly Tahqeeqaat – e Islami* Aligarh.⁷ In these articles he studied in detail the Muslim emigration to Abyssinia and derived the juristic principles of plurality and accommodating the other faiths and cultures. These theological and juristic principles are as follows.

1. Emigration to Abyssinia was sanctioned by the Prophet of Islam only in unavoidable circumstances. Muslims, therefore have no legitimacy to leave their homeland and manage to emigrate in case they enjoy the freedom and the opportunities to Islamic dawah are available.
2. The emigrants were fully committed with their faith and proved their exclusive love and affection towards the religion and their sacrificing of everything in the way of God.
3. In case of severe persecution and torture due to the faith in the homeland and in the absence of a *dar al-Islam* for taking shelter and refuge Muslims may immigrate to a non-Muslim country where freedom of religion is guaranteed.
4. In case of power clash between Negus and his rival, Muslim emigrants allied with the ruling party because of the justice it ensured. Muslims today living in a non-Islamic state may show sympathy and support to the individual or group that might be proved useful and better in future for Islam and its followers.
5. Muslim immigrants were fully prepared intellectually to respond to Christianity prevailing in Abyssinia since the Makkan *Surah Maryam* had discussed the relevant issues in detail. Today it is essential for Muslims to respond masterly to the socio-political and intellectual issues of the time.
6. Jafar bin Abi Talib, the famous companion demonstrated his faithful courage in the court of Negus and delivered the most convincing speech on the fundamentals of the religion uncompromisingly. No withdrawal in Islam is thus justified nor is any incomplete or appeasing interpretation allowed. This is an everlasting model for

⁵ Ibid., 78-80.

⁶ Ibid., 83.

⁷ Umari, Sayyid Jalaluddin, *Quarterly Tahqeeqaat – e Islami* Aligarh, Vol.19, No.1,2,3, January – March, April – June, and July-September 2000. These are the series of articles on the Makkan Islam and Muslims. His book on the biographical account of the holy Prophet in the perspective of missionary work and preaching of the religion included these articles. See, *Awraq – e Seerat*, (New Delhi: Markazi Maktaba Islami Publishers, March 2015), 13-247.

the workers of Islamic mission. The determination, commitment and loyalty to the faith are the source of inspiration even for the Muslim minorities.

7. The emigrants of Abyssinia living under a Christian just ruler would not be perhaps fully aware of the Shariah ordinances and, therefore not practicing them all independently. A number of ordinances of Islam could be implemented only in a free society. The historical records hardly provide any detail of it. The principle of Shariah in this regard is just such duty a man has the ability to offer. God imposes no burden upon mankind that it cannot bear. The holy Quran clearly announces:

But those who believe
And work righteousness, -
No burden do We place
On any soul, but that
Which it can bear, -
They will be companions
Of the Garden, therein
To dwell (forever).⁸

The possibility of not pronouncing publicly his faith by an ordinary man and even by the person in power and authority does exist. Negus had accepted Islam but to what extent he was practicing it, is not reported. He certainly however, could not practice the Islamic ordinance like performing the *hajj*, emigration to Madinah, and joining the jihad under the Prophet (peace and blessings of God be on him), and also could not implement Islamic Shariah in his domain. He was however, wholeheartedly sympathetic to Islam and Muslims and tried his utmost to support the Muslims in his jurisdiction, and his great services to Islam were acknowledged by the Prophet. When Negus did in 9 A.H. the Prophet led the burial prayer managed in absentia for his favour, and asked the people to pray for him. This was an official recognition and even full appreciation to the limitations and unfavorable conditions of the Abyssinian ruler.⁹

⁸ *The Quran*, 7: 42. The scholar has also referred here Ibn Taymiyyah, *Minhaj al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyyah*, Vol. 5, 110-113.

⁹ Umari, Sayyid Jalaluddin, *Hijrat-e-Habshah* in: *Tahqeeqaat-e-Islami* Aligarh, Vol. 19, No. 4, October-December, 2000/Rajab Ramadan 1421 A.H., pp. 05-30. also included in the *Awraq-e-Seerat*, op.cit., pp. 225-231. Interestingly, S.J. Umari has provided some significant details about Makkan Muslims' attitude toward the Christian state of Abyssinia. Since the Christian ruler had ensured freedom to the Muslims it was quite natural that his strength and consolidation of power was beneficial to them and the deterioration and decay of him would have resulted in the great loss of Muslims. Sayyid Umari has cited an important narration of Umm-e Salma, the holy wife of the Prophet of Islam to the effect that during the Muslim stay at Abyssinia, another candidate for power and authority emerged on the scene and physically challenged Negus, the existing ruler in the battle field. The emigrant Muslims were naturally in support of Negus and wished eagerly his success and retaining the power. Umm-e Salma says that Zubayr bin al-'Awwām, the youngest one among the Muslims, after a mutual consultation, managed to cross the Nile river, and access to the battle field. In the meantime the holy companions used to pray for the triumph of Negus over his rival and retaining of his power. After some time Zubayr suddenly appeared while running with joy and jubilation with the flag in his hand announcing the Negus' triumph. She reports, "We did not know whether we were or not delighted before so much. We continued living at Abyssinia till we returned back to Makkah and attended the Messenger of Allah". *Awraq-e-Seerat*, op. cit., 224-225. with the original source of Ibn Hisham, *Al-Siratal-Nabawiyah*, Vol.I, 375-376.

Religious Pluralism in the Quran:

John L. Esposito¹⁰, the famous orientalist of modern times, has cited a number of verses of the Quran that support religious pluralism and diversity. The Quran says:

And dispute you not
With the People of the Book,
Except with means better
(Than mere disputation), unless
It be with those of them
Who infect wrong (and injury):
But say, "We believe
In the Revelation which has
Come down to us and in that
Which come down to you;
Our God and your God
Is One; and it is to Him
We bow (in Islam).¹¹

In the *Surah al-Nisa*, the Quran declares categorically:

We have sent you
Inspiration, as We sent it
To Noah and the Messengers
After him: We sent
Inspiration to Abraham,
Ismail, Isaac, Jacob
And the Tribes, to Jesus,
Job, Jonah, Aaron, and Solomon,
And to David We Gave
The Psalms.
Of some apostles We have
Already told you the story;
Of others we have not;-
And to Moses God spoke direct;-
Apostles who gave good news
As well as warning,
That mankind, after (the coming)
Of the apostles, should have
No plea against God:
For God is Exalted in Power,
Wise.¹²

In the *Surah al-Hujurat*, the Quran declares that mankind is descended from one pair of parents, and therefore, is equally respectable. The tribes, races, and nations are merely convenient labels by which we many know certain differing characteristics. The Quran pronounces:

O mankind! We created
You from a single (pair)

¹⁰ Esposito, John L., *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Islamic World*, Vol. IV, (Oxford: University Press, 2009), 379-384.

¹¹ *Al-Qur'an, Al-Ankabut*:46.

¹² *Al-Qur'an, An-Nisa*:163-165.

Of a male and female,
 And made you into
 Nations and tribes, that
 You may know each other
 (Not that you may despise
 Each other). Verily
 The most honoured of you
 Is (he who is) the most
 In the sight of God
 Righteous of you,
 And God has full knowledge
 And is well-acquainted
 (with all things).¹³

The Children of Adam Discourse:

Esposito has cited Mohamed Fathi Osman who has referred to the Quranic discourse of ‘children of Adam’ in this context. According to this, diversity seems to be a part of divine creation, and the Quranic discourse encourages people to learn to handle their differences intellectually morally, and behaviorally, both within a single community and among multiple communities. The following verses were cited in this regard:

We certainly gave the Book
 To Moses, but differences
 Arose therein: had it not been
 That a word had gone forth
 Before from your Lord, the matter
 Would have been decided
 Between them: but they
 Are in suspicious doubt
 Concerning it.
 And, of a surety, to all
 Will your Lord pay back
 (In full the recompense)
 Of their deeds: for He
 Knows well all that they do.¹⁴
 We certainly gave Moses
 The Book aforetime: but disputes
 Arose therein. Had it not
 Been for a Word
 That went forth before
 From your Lord, (their differences)
 Would have been settled
 Between them: but they
 Remained in suspicious
 Disquieting doubt thereon.
 Whoever works righteousness
 Benefits his own soul;
 Whoever works evil, it is

¹³ *The Quran*, 49:13.

¹⁴ *The Quran*, 11: 110-111.

Against his own soul:
Nor is your Lord ever
Unjust (in the least)
To His servants.¹⁵

Fathi Osman especially points out to the Quranic phrase of “children of Adam” given to all people as a sign that God confers honor and dignity on all of humanity. Osman believes that this honor and dignity must be assured through guarantees of freedom of faith, opinion and expression for all people. The Quran says:

We have honoured the children
Of Adam; provided them
With transport on land and sea;
Given them for sustenance things
Good and pure; and conferred
On them special favours,
Above a great part
Of Our Creation.¹⁶

Fathi Osman cites following verses also in his support:

Let there be no compulsion
In religion: Truth stands out
Clear from Error: whoever
Rejects Evil and believes
In God has grasped
The most trustworthy
Hand-bold, that never breaks
And God hears
And knows all things.¹⁷
The Apostle believes
In what has been revealed
To him from his Lord,
As do the men of faith.
Each one of them believes
In God, His angels,
His Books, and His apostles.
“We make no distinction (they say)
Between one and another
Of His Apostles”. And they say:
“We hear, and we obey:
(We seek) Your forgiveness,
Our Lord, and to you
Is the end of all journeys”.¹⁸

The learned scholar argues that the following verses of the Quran recognize ethnic and racial pluralism and this requires a mutual cooperation and understanding:
And among His Signs

¹⁵ *Al-Qur’ān, Ha Meem Sajda*:45-46.

¹⁶ *Al-Qur’ān, Bani Israil*:70.

¹⁷ *Al-Qur’ān, Al-Baqarah*:256.

¹⁸ *Al-Qur’ān, Al-Baqarah*: 285.

Is the creation of the heavens
 And the earth, and the variations
 In your languages
 And your colors: verily
 In that are signs
 For those who know.¹⁹

Fathi Osman contends that the Quran appreciates the maintenance of universal relations and global pluralism including not only Jews and Christians, but also Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists, and people of other faiths.²⁰ He cites the following verse of the Quran in this regard:

Not all of them are alike:
 Of the People of the Book-
 Are a portion that stand
 (For the right); they rehearse
 The Verses of God all night long,
 And they prostrate themselves
 In adoration.
 They believe in God
 And the Last Day;
 They enjoin what is right,
 And forbid what is wrong;
 And they hasten (in emulation)
 In (all) good works:
 They are in the ranks
 Of the righteous.
 Of the good they do,
 Nothing will be rejected
 Of them; for God knows well
 Those who do right.²¹

¹⁹ *Al-Qur'ān, Ar-Rum*:22.

²⁰ Osman, Mohamed Fathi. *The Children of Adam: An Islamic Perspective on Pluralism*, (Washington, D.C: 1996), 65.

²¹ *The Quran*, 3: 113-115. Contrary to the conclusion drawn by Fathi Osman from the verses 113-115 of the *Surah Aal-e Imrān*, Amin Ahsan Islahi (1904-1997), the famous exegete of modern India, has applied these verses to an insignificant section of the Christians who were God-fearing, the honestly believing in God and the Last Day, faithful and devotees and who always stood for the justice and righteousness. To Islahi, This section included the Christians who had embraced Islam during the Prophet period and also those who could not do so at the time of revelation but were true believers from the core of their hearts and later entered the fold of Islam. These Christians-converted-Muslims were again referred to in the concluding verse of the same chapter. The Quran says:

And, there are, certainly,
 Among the People of the Book,
 Those who believe in God,
 In the revelation to you,
 And in the revelation to them,
 Bowing in humility to God:
 They will not sell
 The verses of God
 For a miserable gain!

Power - Sharing Ideology:

Rashid al-Ghannushi, the Tunisian Islamic thinker and activist, has well theorized the power-sharing process in a plural society in Islamic perspective. This sharing is based on an important foundation of Ummah so as to prevent the evils of dictatorship and to achieve a national or humanistic interest such as independence, development, social solidarity, civil liberties, human rights, political pluralism, independence of the judiciary, freedom of the press, or liberty of mosques and Islamic activities.²²

Ghannushi while theorizing the pluralism in Islamic perspective has referred to a number of documented cases from the Quran and Islamic history. To him *Hilf al-Fudul* was an agreement to support the wronged, maintain close relations with relatives and take good care of them. Ghannushi has concluded while dealing with this accord that the Muslim community may participate in an alliance aimed at preventing injustice and oppression, at serving the interests of mankind, at protecting human rights, at recognizing the authority of the people and at rotating power-holding through a system of elections. Tracing the pluralistic trends in the emigration to Abyssinia event Sultan Ahmad Islahi (1952-2016AD), the Islamist writer on the social problems of Indian Muslims, has quoted Shaykh al-Islam Taqiuddin Ahmad Ibn Taymiah (1263-1328 AD) thoroughly. Islahi has also elaborated the Quranic story of Joseph, the Prophet in full length to prove his theorization of power-sharing with the non-Islamic elements in order to establish a just society. In this regard he has challenged the well-established theories of Sayyid Abul Ala Mawdudi (1903-1979) and Amin Ahsan Islahi (1904-1997 AD), the two distinguished commentators of the Quran in Urdu language.

Islahi views the Prophet Joseph was given plenary authority by the Egyptian king. He undertook the hardest task himself. Such a task was that of organizing reserves in times of plenty, against the lean years to come. His request to the king is quoted beautifully in the Quran:

(Yusuf) said: "Set me
Over the store-houses
Of the land: I will
Indeed guard them,
As one that knows
(Their importance)"²³

After that the Quran portrays the power and authority of the Prophet in the following words:

Thus did we give
Established power to Joseph
In the land, to take possession

For them is a reward
With their Lord,
And God is swift in account.

(*Al-Qur'ān, Al-Imran*:199)

See for detail, Islahi, Amin Ahsan, *Tadabbur-e Quran*, vol.1, (Lahore: Markazi Anjuman Khuddam al-Quran, August 1976), 765-766.

²²Tamimi, Azzam, *Power-Sharing Islam*, (London: Liberty for Muslim World Publications, 1993), Rashid Ghannushi's article "the Participation of Islamists in a Non-Islamic Government, 51-63.

²³ *Al-Qur'ān, Yusuf*:55

Therein as, when, or where
 He pleased. We bestow
 Of Our mercy on whom
 We please, and We suffer not,
 To be lost, the reward
 Of those who do good.²⁴

Political Unity and the Madinah Document:

Ali Bulac, a Turkish scholar, has mainly theorized his concept of political unity and ethnic and religious pluralism on the basis of the Madinah Document. His conceptual frame should be considered as distinct from the classical Islamic treatment of *dhimmi* law, “because the *dhimmi* status explains the legal order appropriate for non-Muslims who did not want to live amongst the Muslims and warred with them and were defeated”. His main concern in this discussion is “the conditions of non-Muslims, like those in Madinah, who wanted to live amongst the Muslims and participated as equal parties to the political organization, in the form of legal groups, free people according to the general principles of the legal contract which they signed with the Muslims.”²⁵

To Ali Bulac, the life of the Prophet in Madinah would implement the Makkan revelations on the social, legal, and institutional levels. It would transform the vision of Makkah into practice in Madinah; and this was what happened. In other words, the Prophet through the Madinah Document “demonstrated, to everyone and every community, possible ways of coexisting through the realization of a pluralist social project based on religious and legal autonomy”. Of course, the religious message would be propagated; but no one who converted would meet any opposition, as they had before in Makkah.²⁶

Ali Bulac has studied in detail the Madinah Document. To him, one of the main factors contributing to this social contract was the chaotic and insecure conditions of Madinah, which was worn out by 120 years of wars and conflicts. The document is as if Madinah awaited its savior. The second point is the fact that such a project enabled everyone to be accepted by each other as a natural reality without resorting to domination. The legalization of respect for each other’s ways of living and thinking, and protection under the law was the main features.

The third point to be noted in this Document was the concept of a social project not based on “domination” but on “participation” by all social groups. Here, Ali Bulac underlined the first constitutive principle that can be drawn from the document: “A righteous and just, law-respecting ideal project aiming for true peace and stability among people cannot but be based on a contract among different groups (religious, legal, philosophical, political etc.). During the preparation of the contract, the members or the representatives of the social groups should be present; the articles of the contract (basic principles) should be decided in a free environment, involving discussions and negotiations of the different parties involved. Since the groups in the social scene are heterogeneous, each article should reflect a common interest and should be settled democratically Communalities belong to the sphere of the covenant; differences belong to the autonomous sphere. This is a rich diversity within unity, or a real pluralism.”²⁷

²⁴ *Al-Qur’ān, Yusuf*:56

²⁵ Bulac, Ali, The Medina Document, in : Kurzman, Charles, ed., *Liberal Islam – A Source Book*, (Oxford: University Press, 1938), 177. footnote No.12

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 174.

The second constitutive principle is the selection of the concept of participation as the starting point, rather than domination, because a totalitarian or Unitarian political structure cannot allow for diversities. The Madinah Document cites Muslims and Jews tribe by tribe as well as the polytheists. Each religious and ethnic group enjoys complete cultural and legal autonomy. In other words, in such areas as religion, law-making, judiciary, education, trade, culture, art, and organization of daily life, each group will remain as it is and will express itself through the cultural and legal criteria it defines, Ali Bulac sums up the discussion.

This blueprint of an alternative social project, concludes Ali Bulac, contributes to the solution of the problem by reducing the state to executive activity and limiting the executive to the provision of common and indivisible services. However, what opens the door to real pluralism is the fact that individuals and groups can define their own identities and choose their own religion and legal systems. Experience shows that unless the realms of economy, culture, science, education, art, health, communication and so on are taken away from the controls the centralized state and transferred to groups with different religions and identities, real pluralism cannot be envisioned a verdict, the scholar arrives at finally.²⁸

Democracy – Shura Narrative:

A cross section of diverse Muslim voices and Islamic scholars from South Asia to Europe and America, traditionist, Islamist, liberal, modernist have championed new understandings and interpretations of Shura-democracy issue. A starting point for many contemporary scholars has been the interpretation of the Quranic term *Shura* (consultation), noting that the term refers to the legislative bodies in most of the cases, and to the common citizens in framing of the policy of public interest, and also differing on the point whether the head of state was or not bound to the majority decision or to the referendum if the matter was put on mass consultation and public opinion. Sayyid Abul Ala Mawdudi, the noted Islamist scholar, finally accepted the veto power of the ruler as invalid, and declared him as bound to follow the majority opinion.

Mawdudi used to advocate the veto power for ruler in his writings continuously since there was no categorical statement on the issue in the Quran and the Hadith and it was understood only by the practical examples of the first four *Rashidūn* caliphs²⁹. After sometimes Mawdudi, however, admitted that it was possible practically only in the Islamic society like that of the pious caliphate, if the ruler and the members of legislation are adamant to their opinion with rigidity and no one is convinced to any kind of withdrawal or compromise, a referendum may be managed and then following to it the differing group or individual must resign. Until such legislative body with that mindset, spirit and religiosity is found, there is no option but to make administration bound to the legislature, Mawdudi held the view.³⁰

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 178.

²⁹ Mawdudi, Sayyid Abul Ala, *Islami Riyāsat*, edited by Khurshid Ahmad, (Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1988), 331.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 332-332. Mawdudi had expressed his revised view of invalidity of veto power for a ruler in modern times in a debate organized by Karachi Bar Association on November 24, 1952. His view was elaborated more clearly and categorically in the later stage. According to him now, the two decisions of Abu Bakr, the first caliph of Islam, taken as veto power by some scholars, were essentially the result of confidence in deep understanding, insight and religious commitment of Abu Bakr the holy companions had in him. When the differing companions experienced the firm stand and truth and soundness of his views, they wholeheartedly accepted the view of Abu Bakr. *Ibid.*, 332.

Mawdudi first declared democracy an entirely western concept in clearly opposition to Islam, and therefore he opposed the ideology of democracy as well as the theocracy. He coined a new term of “theo-democracy” (*Ilāhi-Jamhūri Hukumat*) to represent the Shura-based system of governance as defined in the Quran³¹. Mawdudi also called it “democratic caliphate” (*Jamhūri Khilāfat*)³². By this new term, he has rejected the theory of Divine Rights of the Kings as well as the Muslim tradition of *zillullah* (the ruler being the shadow of God on the earth). This concept is different from the Western democracy too because in Islam, the citizens are not the absolute sovereign; they are the deputy and successor of the sovereign – God. Thus there was no scope for any despotism in Mawdudi’s concept of theo-democracy or democratic caliphate. By these terms Mawdudi meant a limited popular sovereignty given to the Muslims under the paramount of God, in which the administrative and legislative bodies would be formed and dissolved, if deemed necessary, by the Muslims. All the administrative affairs and those in which there was no categorical statement in Islamic Shariah, would be resolved by the consensus of the Muslims. The God-revealed law, if needed any interpretation, would be explained not by any specific group or race; but by every Muslim entitled to *ijtihad*. For that reason it may be called a democracy. In the cases where the ordinance of God and His Apostle was available, no ruler, legislature, *mujtahid*, theologian and even the entire Muslim population of the world would be entitled to propose any alternation in that, and keeping in view all these considerations, it may be titled a theocracy.³³

While explaining the verse no. 55 of the Quranic chapter *Al-Noor* (known as *āyat al-istikhlāf*), Mawdudi has also titled the Islamic system of governance as the ‘Islamic Democracy’ which inherits certain peculiar features:

1. In Islamic society everyone is supposed to be *khalifah* and equally partner to the caliphate. This society accepts neither any class division nor any social discrimination or any distinction by birth; everyone has equal status in the society.
2. All the individuals of the society are given equal opportunities. No individual, because of his birth, social status or professional position would be deprived of any opportunity helpful for his personal development.
3. There is no scope for any despotism or authoritarianism in Islamic society. The dictatorship or the despotic system means a negation of the popular vicegerency. The caliph or the ruler is responsible to God as well as to the people.
4. Every adult, male or female, is entitled to vote.³⁴

A part from Mawdudi, other prominent Indian scholars too like Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), Muhammad Iqbal (1873-1938), Abul Kalam Azad (1888-1958),

In November 1963, in a response to a query from a reader of monthly *Tarjumanul Quran* Urud, Mawdudi represented the stand of the holy companions in a more sound way. In both the cases of dispatching the army under the leadership of Usama, and fighting against the apostates, the stand of Abu Bakr, Mawdudi says, was based on his arguments from the Quran and the Hadith. “In case this firm stand of Abu Bakr was a veto, it was not a veto of Abu Bakr; it was the veto of the Book of Allah and the Sunnah of the Messenger of Allah. After having accepted the stand of Abu Bakr, the holy companions had convinced with him and revised their stand”. *Ibid.*, p.544. See for a better and insightful understanding of the issues, Fahad, Obaidullah. *Islamic Shura-Religion, State and Democracy*, New Delhi, Serials Publications, 2007, pp.86-161.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 130, 500.

³² *Ibid.*, 320.

³³ *Ibid.*, 500-501.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 140-144.

Muhammad Mian Mansoor Ansari (d.1946), Hamid al-Ansari Ghazi (1906-1992), Muhammad Ishaq Sandelvi (1905-1995), to name a few, all supported democratic method and mechanism in Islamic perspective, though arguing differently and forwarding certain reservations.

Obstructive to the Development:

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was a severe critic to despotism, and a champion of freedom of thought. To him, despotism is the most effective blockage to development; whether academic and intellectual, religious and social, individual and collective, it forms the most dangerous obstruction to human development. Unless freedom on individual and collective levels is ensured no group or society may progress. To him, any restriction to the freedom of expression, because of any fear from religion, community or nation, or because of any suspicion of defamation or government's tyranny and oppression, is in all the circumstances the most undesirable and offensive thing. It harms not only the individual but all the human beings are affected and even the future generation remains deprived of having benefit from his thought³⁵. Sir Syed has noted down the five obstacles (*hijābāt*) in the way to freedom:

- a. Speaking or writing anything against the prevailing customs is considered a resistance to the nation.
- b. The (popular) religious beliefs and thoughts, though in opposition to the fundamental principles of the religion itself, form the obstruction to the freedom.³⁶
- c. The public interest persuades the human beings and even the pious governments to ban the freedom.³⁷
- d. Thinking the opinion of the people by themselves as mean and valueless and considering it unnoticed and therefore having no weight in the making of public opinion.³⁸
- e. Referring to the views of dignitaries and celebrities as a criterion in all the circumstances.³⁹

Sir Syed was opposed to the *taqlid* (following blindly to anyone) which barricades the freedom of thought and shuts down the door of creative thinking and innovative reflection. Some scholars deem the *taqlid* unavoidable to the common people because they may have no detailed knowledge nor it is necessary for them. It is only the expert of theology, or intellectual who can do it. A common man may not fully understand the wrong statements of an intellectual or wise man nor is capable to refute them. This agreement is titled by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan as foolishness (*ablah farebi*).⁴⁰

Sir Syed advocates the freedom of expression to the effect that he sanctions a debate or criticism to the truth also because even a harshest critic may harm truth no

³⁵ These citations from the speech of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan are taken from Nizami, Khaleeq Ahmad. *Sir Syed Ki Fikr Aur 'Asr-e Jadeed Ke Taqāze*, New Delhi, Anjuman Taraqqi Urdu, 1993, pp. 139-140. In this speech, Sir Syed has opposed the despotic government and supported the constitutional government.

³⁶ *Maqālāt – e Sir Syed*, edited by Muhammad Ismail Panipati, (Lahore: Majlis Taraqqi Adab, 1990), Vol.V, 214.

³⁷ Ibid., 223.

³⁸ Ibid., 225.

³⁹ Ibid., 237.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 227.

more. In case the debate or criticism is invalidated, the truth becomes increasingly a mixture of exaggeration to the extent that after few generations it seems to be an utter lie.⁴¹

Justification to Despotism:

Opposed to the democrats, there are a bond of scholars who provided justification to the arbitrary and despotic system of governance in one way or the other. Sir Thomas Walker Arnold (1864-1930), Hameeduddin Farahi (1863-1930), Muhammad Idrees Kandhlavi (d.1974), Inayatullah Khan Mashriqui (1888-1936) and the like elaborate democracy as a better system of government but equally sanction to despotism provided the Islamic Shariah is implemented since Islam does not qualify any specific system of government strictly.

Arnold, the famous orientalist who stayed at M.A.O. Aligarh as a professor of philosophy till 1898 and then at Government College Lahore till 1904, could not conceal his imperialist tendency in his writings. One of his famous titles *The Caliphate*, published in 1924 from Oxford, created confusions about the political theory of Islam. His interpretation of the institution of the caliphate is an arbitrary and despotic one in which Muslim theologians and statements used the texts of the Quran and the Hadith for the support of their power. He says:

“But just as the theologians and statesmen of medieval Europe appealed to the Bible in support of both papal and imperial claims, so the theologians and jurists of the Muslim world sought for some support of the political theory of the caliphate in the revealed word of God, and for them the authority of the Quran was a matter of a still greater weight and importance, since by theory the Quran was the primary basis for law, both religious and civil.”⁴²

After having cited the two verses of the Quran dealing with the nature, scope and objective of the caliphate, *al-Baqarah*: 30, and *Sād*: 26, Arnold comments:

“It is obvious that such an interpretation could be employed to enhance the dignity and authority of the caliph.”⁴³

Then Arnold cites the traditions of the noble Prophet relevant to the theme and derives a conclusion suitable to his theorization: “for we now find an uncompromising doctrine of civil obedience taught in one Tradition after another.”⁴⁴

Finally, Arnold concludes:

“The Caliphate thus recognized was a despotism which placed unrestricted power in the hands of the ruler and demanding unhesitating obedience from the subjects.”⁴⁵

⁴¹ Ibid., 236-237.

⁴² Arnold, S.T.W. *The Caliphate*, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1924), 42.

⁴³ Ibid., 45.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 48.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 47-48. Arnold, however, admits that the caliph in Islamic history was bound to Islamic Shariah, and there were some limitations on his authority. This acknowledgement of Arnold is, however, half-hearted. He writes:

“In one respect only was the arbitrary, autocratic power of the Caliph limited, in that he, just as every other Muslim, was obliged to submit to the ordinances of the Shariah, or law of Islam. This limitation arose from the peculiar character of Muslim Law as being

This despotic and arbitrary theory of the caliphate was sanctioned by Hameeduddin Farahi, another intellectual of Aligarh movement, who was influenced by Arnold during his stay there. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Arnold and Farahi all were staying at Aligarh and friendly interacting with one another in the academics.⁴⁶

Farahi's classification of government into a free government based on mutual consultation (*saltanat hurrah*), and an enslaving government (*saltanat mu'abbidah*) based on an arbitrary system and despotic method, is more democratic, freedom-loving and participation-inspiring one. The first type of government is symbolized into the model of Umar; the later is nearer to Pharaoh and Akbar the Great Mughal emperor, as Farahi explains.⁴⁷

To Farahi, the Quranic System of governance is based on absolute freedom, mutual contract and allegiance and has no link to compulsion and violence. He sees the Quranic description of the apostles in the perspective of mutual contract and cites the Quran 2:246 in his favour. He also cites some other verses of the Quran 7: 172-173 to support his arguments.⁴⁸ He however, sanctions a despotic system of governance in the absence of a suitable and democracy – loving society. According to Farahi, the caliphate is the best form of government since it ensures the freedom and justice, but when people lose the value of freedom and are not convinced to sacrifice everything for the sake of justice, the caliphate is replaced by the monarchy and such a government wastes no time to snatch the right to franchise from its citizens.⁴⁹

Farahi sanctions a despotic government for the maintenance of law and order in the society. To him, in case the Muslims lack the fundamental qualities, therein emerges a monarch, though oppressive and tyrant, as a manifestation of God's mercy, and therefore the wise people tolerate such rulers. Farahi says:

“In a disqualified and unsuitable society a monarch appears and he sometimes does not hesitate to turn himself into an authoritarian and dictator despite of being God-fearing and pious one because the society is itself not capable and has scarified its freedom earlier, as the cases of Solomon and Zul-qarnain are defined in the Quran as the authoritarian and despotic rulers.”⁵⁰

primarily (in theory at least) derived from the inspired word of God, and as laying down regulations for the conduct of every department of human life, and thus leaving no room for the distinction that arose in Christendom between Canon Law and the law of the state. The law being thus of divine origin demanded the obedience even of the Caliph himself, and theoretically at least the administration of the state was supposed to be brought into harmony with the dictates of the sacred law”. Ibid., 53.

For a critical study of Arnold's theorization of the caliphate and his imperialist academic design, and also for Iqbal's critique to Arnold's contribution to Islam and Muslim see: Farahi, Obaidullah, *Yahūdi Maghrib Aur Musalman*, New Delhi, Islamic Book Foundation, 1434AH/2013AD, pp. 89-156.

⁴⁶ See, Professor Ishtique Ahmad Zilli's welcoming speech addressed to the delegates of international seminar on Maulana Farahi, in the proceedings, *Allama Hameeduddin Farahi – Hayāt – O Afkār (Maqālāt Farahi Seminar)*, edited by Obaidullah Farahi, (Azamgarh: Anjuman Talba-e-Qadeem Madarsatul Islah Saraimir, 1992), 11.

⁴⁷ Farahi, Abdul Hamid. *Fi Malakūt Allah* (Arabic), (Azamgarh, Daira Hameediyah, 1391 A.H.), 32.

⁴⁸ Ibid., footnotes, 30-31.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 25.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 26-27. For a detailed critic on Farahi in this respect, see Obaidullah Fahad Farahi's article in *Allama Hameeduddin Farahi-Hayāt – o Afkār*, op.cit., 473-510. This article is now included in

Farahi declared these two dignitaries of the Quran – Solomon and Zul-qarnain – as authoritarian and dictalor (*āmīr wa mustabidd* in Arabic) though they were God-fearing and pious in nature.

The despotic, and dictatorial feature of Islamic polity was strongly recommended by Ināyatullah Khan Mashriqi the founder of the *Khaksār Movement* of India in his famous book *Tazkirah*. Following the fascism in Germany as the model, Mashriqi called for a military – oriented order and discipline to be maintained in all the situations, and for following the leader of Islamic society – a dictator and authoritative in his position like that of the Prophet – willingly or unwilling. He categorically says:

“The first and the last clause of the constitution of God reads that the faith (*imān*) is equated to victory and triumph in all the circumstances, and the unbelief (*Kufr*) is similar to defeat and decline”.⁵¹

Mashriqi’s categorical statement about despotism and dictatorship in Islam is oft-repeated in his writings. He says:

“In a nutshell, the leader (*amīr*) of Muslims is the most powerful (*amīr nātiq*) and decisive in his words. He is above all the checks and balances of Muslim community. He may be compared to Allah and His Apostle only. Allah and His Apostle only can challenge him. He should consult the Muslim community but no one can share his power and authority as that of God. He is the ruler above each association and partnership. He is bound to Allah, the Shariah, the Apostle, and the Sunnah only and this boundation is due to his own discretion, and not because of the opinion of the Muslim community.”⁵²

The Process of Reconstruction and Revival:

These misunderstandings about plurality, democracy and freedom of thought penetrated the contemporary Islamic thought because of lack of a proper methodology to be applied by the researchers and writers on Islam. The Islamic thought is defined as a combination of both the ideology and philosophy. The uncompromising commitment to the revealed texts and their contemporary understanding and application in the given situation requires an insight into the religion and creative thinking and critical and innovative capabilities known in the Islamic literature as *tafaqquh* and *ijtihād*.

The Quranic *tafaqqah* (9:122) along with the *indār* requires two things:

1. An insight in the Islamic texts, and a balanced approach to combine the socialization and spirituality into Islamic fold as Shah Wali Allah of Delhi (1703-1762) reflected in his theorization of *irtifāqāt*, wherein he combined the *irtifāq* and the *iqtirāb* in his magnum opus *Hujjatullah al-Bāligha*. This is the combination, he says, that brings into existence the just and righteous society. He declares the socialization process having bypassed the *iqtirāb* (spirituality) as *hayawāniyah* (animality), and the spiritual life without socialization as

another book of the author, *Ihyā-e Dīn Aur Hindustāni Ulama-Nazriyāti Tafsir Aur ‘Amali Jadd – o Juhd*, (Kashmir: Al-Qalam Publications, IInd edition, March 2011), 28-64.

⁵¹ Mashriqi, Inayatullah Khan. *Tazkirah*, (Lahore: Tazkirah Publications, 1980), 71.

⁵² Mashriqi, Inayatullah Khan, *Maulavi Ka Ghalat Mazhab No.4*, 24. for the lack of proper methodology applied in some of the classical and modern writings because of which confusing and misleading conclusions were drawn see, Fahad, Obaidullah. *Redefining Islamic Political Thought – A Critique in Methodological Perspective*, (New Delhi: Serials Publications, 2006), 01-32.

rahbānīyah (monasticism). This was more clearly theorized in his another book *al-Budūr al-Bāzigha*.⁵³

2. Developing an education system that primarily aims at keeping the Muslims far from un-Islamic life and training their mind and soul in the perspective of teachings of Islam. It does not apply on a negation of worldly knowledge and rejection of science and technology, as Mawdudi has explained. According to him, a person who develops himself into Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and Albert Einstein (1879-1955) but is unaware of the religion and is misled by non-Islamic way of life, such an education system is cursed by Islam.⁵⁴

The word *ijtihad* used in the hadith requires an overhaul of the interpretation and application of the Islamic texts in the ever-changing world. To Muhammad Taqi Amini (1926-1991), this overhauling needs a reconstruction process which is the most complicated job when the society is crumbling in the faith and the leadership is indifferent to urgent needs and emergent interests of the community. It is convenient, however, if the society is sound ideologically and its leaders are capable and pious equally. Muhammad Taqi Amini has found the following obstacles in the way of reconstructing the Islamic thought:

- a. The representation of religiosity seems to be feudal and capitalist one, which is the remnant of the period of deterioration.
- b. Recognizing the need of the changed time and space in the society is only a paper work and has no link to the ground realities.
- c. A moderate method in accepting the modern challenges is missing by and large. It is trapped by extremism in one direction or the other.
- d. There is no effective voice of moderation, nor any impressive collective feeling to change the status-quo.
- e. Different sectarian groups and emotion-provoking stereotypes in the name of religion are so firmly grounded in the society that these may not be overlooked while taking any bold steps and moving any initiatives open-mindedly.⁵⁵

Despite of all the obstacles in the way of reconstruction of Islamic thought, Muhammad Taqi Amini emphasized on the process with the hope that any stormy future

⁵³Wali Allah, Shah. *Al-Budūr al-Bāzigha*, edited by Saghir Hasan al-M'asumi, Hyderabad, Pakistan, 1970, p.240. According to this interpretation, both the socialization and the spirituality are inherited to the nature of every human being. Ibid., p.242. See for detail, Fahad, Obaidullah. *Islāmi Umrānīyāt-Shah Wali Allah Dehlavi Ke Afkār Kā Mutala*, (Kashmir: Al-Qalam Publications, August 2011), 73-96.

⁵⁴ Mawdudi, Sayyid Abul Ala, *Tafhim al-Quran*, (New Delhi: Markazi Maktaba Islami Publishers, March 2017), vol.2, 250-251, Note no.120. Mawdudi has criticized the misunderstanding penetrated in the Muslim society by literally applying the Quranic word *tafaqquh* on the science of *fiqh* developed exclusively in the legal paradigm. The Quran applied the *tafaqquh* to an insight in to the religion and comprehension of its nature, spirit and the internal system to the extent that qualifies a Muslim to know consciously which thought and way of life was in consonance to the spirit of Islam. But the theologians applied the Quranic *tafaqquh* on the *fiqh* which formed only a part of the religion and not the religion as a whole. This persuaded Muslims to concentrate on the interpretation of the form of the religion only. This resulted unfortunately into the formal religiosity without any spirit as the ultimate goal of life. Ibid., 252.

⁵⁵ Amini, Muhammad Taqi. *Ahkām Shariyah mein Hālāt – o Zamāne Ki Ri'āyat*, (Delhi: Darul Musannifin, December 1970), 25-26.

perhaps would create some currents in the mind and heart of the scholars and thus they would be convinced to make a boat for the safety and security of Muslim community.⁵⁶

The very nature of *tajdid*, referred to in the Hadith cited by Imam Abu Dawud in *AL-Sunan*⁵⁷, requires this reconstruction of Islamic thought by re-interpreting the religion in the changed circumstances, considering the requirements of modernity while maintaining the text as was revealed, so that the people may recognize the utility, universality and relevance of the revelation. This re-interpretation of the religion is to be carried out by the scholars of Islam in order to discharge their duty of *tajdid* though without result. When the Jews, historically speaking, violated the Sabbath, a section of responsible faithful warned them of the grave result. And when they were asked the reason for this warning, they responded with honesty and sensitivity that they were discharging their duty only. The Quran portrayed the story nicely and this is the revealed justification for all the *tajdid* projects:

When some of them said:
 “Why do you preach
 To a people whom God
 Will destroy or visit
 With a terrible punishment”?-
 Said the preachers: “To discharge
 Our duty to your Lord,
 And perchance they may fear Him”.⁵⁸

⁵⁶Ibid., 26

⁵⁷Abu Dawud, *Al-Sunan, Kitab al-Malāhim*, chapter on what is described about the century, vol.2, 233. The Hadith reads:

“certainly, Allah will receive for this community at the eve of every century such people who will revive their religion for them”.

⁵⁸ *Al-Qur’ān, Al-An’am*:164