



**Western Democracy in an Islamic State:
Reconciling Ideological Framework through Real Issues**

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Abstract:

The interplay between Western democracy and Islamic governance remains a pivotal yet contentious discourse in political theory. This research examines the compatibility of Western democratic principles—popular sovereignty, secularism, and individual rights—with the foundational tenets of an Islamic state, which emphasize divine sovereignty (hakimiyyah), *Shariah*-based legislation, and the integration of religion into public life. Through qualitative analysis of scholarly works, constitutional frameworks (e.g., Pakistan, Iran, Malaysia), and historical precedents (e.g., Medina Charter, Rashidun Caliphate), the study identifies key tensions in sovereignty, secularism, theocracy, delegated legislation, and human rights. While Islamic governance shares consultative (shura) and republican values with democracy, irreconcilable differences emerge in the domains of divine vs. popular sovereignty and the role of religion in legislation. The paper concludes that democratic mechanisms, such as elected assemblies and rights protections, can coexist within Islamic frameworks if adapted to prioritize *Shariah* principles. However, secularism and absolute popular sovereignty remain incompatible with Islamic theological foundations. The findings underscore the necessity of contextualizing democracy within Islamic historical and theological paradigms to foster dialogue rather than ideological imposition.

Keywords: Islamic state, Western democracy, sovereignty, secularism, *Shariah*, human rights

INTRODUCTION

The compatibility of Western democracy with Islamic political theory has intensified as a global discourse amid post-colonial state-building and transnational ideological debates. Western democracy, rooted in Enlightenment principles, prioritizes secularism, popular sovereignty, and individual liberties (Dahl, 1971). Conversely, Islamic governance derives legitimacy from divine sovereignty (hakimiyyah), *Shariah* law, and the vicegerency (khilafah) of humans as trustees of Allah's authority (Maudoodi, 1997; Assad, 2007). These divergent foundations create tensions in modern Muslim-majority states seeking to balance democratic aspirations with Islamic identity.

This paper synthesizes arguments from such as Maudoodi, Qutb, Assad, and Bhutto, and constitutional case studies of Pakistan, Iran, and Malaysia to interrogate whether Western

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democracy can adapt to Islamic contexts without compromising theological foundations. This research establishes that Islamic governance is neither theocratic nor authoritarian but rooted in Quranic principles of justice (adl), consultation (shura), and communal welfare (maslaha) (Hameedullah, 1983). However, highlights practical challenges in reconciling Islamic statehood with secular democratic norms, particularly in sovereignty, legislation, and human rights (Esposito, 1996).

By expanding on these themes with detailed case studies, historical precedents, and critical analysis, this study aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of the ideological and practical intersections between these systems. Basically this study is an attempt to discuss these important questions, what are the real points of difference between principles of Islamic state and western democracy? and on what grounds they may accommodate each other?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing scholarship on Islam and democracy falls into three ideological camps, reflecting a spectrum of perspectives from rigid rejectionism to cautious reconciliation.

Rejectionist scholars argue that Western democracy and its secular nature has no scope in a true Islamic republic or state. Abu'l Ala Maudoodi, one of the leading Muslim political theorist of twentieth century is well convinced that popular sovereignty negates Allah's ultimate authority, leading to moral relativism. He advocated and introduced a new terminology for Islamic political theory in modern state, "theo-democracy," where elected representatives govern under *Shariah* guidance, arguing that human legislation without divinely guiding principles is enslavement of selfish human desires and hunger for lust and power (1997, 111-12). Syed Qutb, a leading Islamist and leader of Ikhwan, condemns secular governance as "jahiliyyah," he calls secularism as modern ignorance and solution to ignorance is Islamic revivalism to restore divine sovereignty (1962, 16).

These views align with traditionalist interpretations that reject secularism as a colonial imposition (Maudoodi 1976). On the other hand a group of western scholars claim that Islamic political foundations are not acceptable for western secular model. David Bukay reinforces this stance, asserting that Islam's divine mandate blocks the road for democratic pluralism. He contends that Islamic *Shariah* considers human legislation as a serious crime and sin or may be termed as blasphemous (2007, 32). Similarly, Bernard Lewis argues that Islamic political culture inherently resists democratization due to its emphasis on divine law over human agency (1996, 61-2). Reconciliatory scholars identify overlaps between Islamic and democratic values. Benazir Bhutto, former Prime Minister of Pakistan, argues that *shura* (consultation) mirrors democratic participation, citing the Medina Charter's pluralistic governance as an early democratic model (2008, 72-89). The Charter, established by Prophet Muhammad in 622 CE, granted legal autonomy to Jewish and pagan tribes, emphasizing consensus and minority rights—a precursor to modern federalism (Naazer, 2018; Zaffar, 1980).

Esposito and Voll assert that democracy's adaptability to Islamic cultures, citing hybrid models in Indonesia and Turkey where elections coexist with *Shariah*. For instance, Indonesia's Pancasila ideology integrates Islamic principles with pluralism, allowing democratic governance without secularizing the state (1996, 18-21). Muhammad Assad, a prominent modernist scholar, emphasizes **ijtihad** (independent reasoning) to reinterpret Islamic principles for modern

contexts. He argues that it is wrong to understand Islam in the light of western history and western terminologies, Islam had its own way and independent mechanism (2007, 27-9).

Reformists like Samuel Huntington (1984, 214) and Bernard Lewis (1996, 61-2) contend that Islam's holistic worldview inherently resists democratization, citing authoritarian regimes in Saudi Arabia and Iran as evidence. Conversely, Islamic scholars such as Muhammad Omar Farooq argues that critiques of Islamic governance often ignore historical precedents like the Righteously guided caliphates (khulafa-e-Rashidun), which practiced consultative governance. Farooq also highlights Caliph Umar's administrative reforms, such as establishing public accountability mechanisms, as early democratic practices (2003, 88-91). While existing works highlight ideological polarization, they often neglect nuanced constitutional experiments. For instance, Pakistan's 1973 Constitution blends parliamentary democracy with Islamic provisions (Art. 2-A), yet its practical challenges—such as balancing Hudood Ordinances with minority rights—remain understudied. Similarly, Iran's "constitutional theocracy" and Malaysia's dual legal system warrant deeper analysis to understand sovereignty in practice. This paper addresses these gaps by integrating detailed case studies and comparative constitutional analysis.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs qualitative documentary analysis to compare Islamic and democratic frameworks. The study used a comparative method to analyze the Islamic and Western political theory. The study used both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include: religious texts such Quranic verses (e.g., 6:57, 42:38) and *Sunnah* (Prophetic traditions); Constitutional Frameworks including constitutions of Pakistan (1973), Iran (1979), Malaysia (1957), and France (1958); historical text such as Charter of Madina, and modern secularization debates e.g., Turkey under Atatürk). The secondary sources include: scholarly texts such as books of Maudoodi, Esposito, Hirschl and peer-reviewed research articles. Thematic analysis technique has been used to focus areas such sovereignty, secularism, theocracy, legislation, and human rights. Data is interpreted through two hypotheses: Islamic governance requires divine sovereignty as a non-negotiable principle; and, democratic mechanisms are permissible if subordinate to *shariah* (Maudoodi, 1976; Assad, 2007). Ethical rigor is maintained by balancing Islamic and Western perspectives, avoiding cultural bias, and contextualizing historical precedents within their socio-political milieus.

IDEOLOGICAL BASIS OF WESTERN DEMOCRACY AND ISLAMUC STATE. ATTRIBUTES OF ISLAMIC STATE WITH MODERN RELEVANCY

Islamic state and western democracy are the two survived ideologies of contemporary age (Feldman 2008). Islamic political ideology is based on sovereignty of Allah, supremacy of Shariah, vicegerency of man, rule of law and justice, while democracy stresses onn sovereignty of people, rule of majority, rule of law and equality (Rehman,1982). Islamic caliphate is a republic but it should not be confused with western democracy and theocracy as understood by the West. It has a combination of theocratic and democratic features. Islam believes in the sovereignty (hakmiyyet e Ala) of Allah that will be displayed through supremacy of Shariah. However, rulers are elected and selected by the people among themselves, no class of people will claim divinity and rulers may be deposed by the people because they will be accountable to people and Allah. So Islamic Khilafat is a

unique and different system from democracy and theocracy (Maudoodi 1997). Attributes of Islamic state are derived from Quran, Sunnah, khilafat-e-Rashidah and work of Muslims scholars. Valid attributes and principles of Islamic state are Allah is sovereign, Shariah is supreme, man is vicegerent, government is trust, rule of law, justice, basic rights and welfare of the people. (Maudoodi, 1897). Despite some basic differences, modern welfare state and principles of democracy are the attributes and influence of Islamic state, examples are the principle of rule of law, Justice, public participation in state affairs, independence of judiciary, humanism and welfare for all, in short contemporary welfare democratic state is founded by following model of khilafat-e-Rashudah (Zafar, 1980).

Sovereignty of God Vs. Popular Sovereignty

The key difference between Western democracy and political theory of Islamic state lies in the question who has supreme authority to make laws. Basically this question is related to sovereign power of law making in a state, the Islamic state derives laws from the Quran and Sunnah, rendering Allah the ultimate sovereign: "Judgment belongs to Allah alone" (Quran 6:57). Constitutions like Islamic Republic of Pakistan's (1973) clearly acknowledges sovereignty of Allah in the preambles and also in the regular part of the constitution, Islam is declared official and state religion of Pakistan (Art. 2-A). While western democracies declare all sovereign powers of law making belong to people so popular sovereignty is foundation of Western model of democracy and source of sovereign powers and law making are people (1958 Constitution, Art. 2).

Maudoodi argues that the concept of human sovereignty is one or the other way is the source of enslavement and it is vague and morally relative, whereas divine sovereignty is clear just and universal (1997, 121). He argues that Western democracy relies on quantitative majority and laws are supposed to reflect will and desires of majority. The outcome is in many cases immorality and wishful laws, such as legalizing usury or same-sex marriage, which contravene *Shariah* (1997, 37-9). On the other hand, observing adjustable principles of democracy Iran has a practice to avoid laws against *Shariah* and standardized morality, where the Guardian Council—a body of selected Islamic jurists has power to examine laws which are approved by legislative assembly if laws deemed incompatible with *Shariah* then council can reject such legislation (Art. 4, Iranian Constitution).

Secularism: A Non-Starter for an Islamic State

Secularism is central to Western democracy and it is totally against Islamic code of life. Maudoodi asserts that secular state has no ethics and standardised morality, its morality is just state interests and majority desires (1997, 37-9). Islamic governance integrates spirituality into law, education and economics (Izetbegovic, 2007), whereas Western procedural democracy focuses free elections over substantive justice (Dahl, 1971). Western attitude towards religion is not because of strength of secularism, it is identical with the weakness of their church sponsored religion. Islam rejects a narrow approach and concept of religion and present correct form of religion as a code and system covering individual and public aspects of life (Maudoodi. 1997). Prophet of Islam himself laid the foundation of civil-political society at Medinah while church sponsored religion lacking such a model or precedent to follow in Europe. Secularism is not a choice in Europe but it is a need and liability (Iqbal 1934). Despite religious weaknesses, there are examples of symbolic non secular

democracies in Europe. Non-secular democracies like the UK, Ireland and Denmark retain ceremonial state religions without legislative influence. Secularism is the integral part of liberal democracy and no scope for religion as public and collective affair (Lewis, 1996). However, Islam's comprehensive role in governance—as seen in Iran's Guardian Council or Malaysia's *Shariah* courts—contrasts sharply with these models (Hirschl, 2010, 12). For instance, Malaysia's Federal Constitution designates Islam as the state religion but it provides freedom and respect for all other religions (Art. 3) while maintaining a dual legal system that accommodates civil and *Shariah* courts—a pragmatic approach to pluralism (Farooq, 2003, 91).

Theocracy Revisited: Islamic Vs. Western Models

The term theocracy as perceived by West is not applicable to Islamic state. Western theocracy was a papal rule with claim to divinity while Islam doesn't recommend any specific class or group of people for headship of state. Charter of Medina and *khilafat-e-Rashidah* established state as a human agency for all having rights and duties; where non-Muslims also retained legal autonomy (Zaffar, 1980).

Iran's system merges elected bodies (Islamic Assembly or *Majlis*) with clerical oversight (Guardian Council), ensuring *Shariah* compliance without monopolizing power (Hirschl, 2010, 2). The Supreme Leader, a religious figure, holds veto power over legislation but it is counterbalanced by elected institutions. This contrasts with Vatican theocracy, where the Pope holds absolute spiritual-political authority. The *khilafat-e-Rashidah* (632–661 CE) was based on consultation and public accountability. Caliph Umar's introduced administrative reforms and new institutions with the consultation of people which reflects that Islamic state was a political social, economic and moral structure that demonstrated adaptability to societal needs while adhering to Quranic principles (Rehman, 1982). His covenant with Jerusalem's Christians guaranteed religious freedom and property rights which indicates how Islamic state is not theocratic but humanistic for all its members (Hameedullah, 1983). The Taliban's government in Afghanistan (1996–2001; 2021–present) is not “Islamic theocracy.” It is a combination of their sectarian thinking, tribal and linguistic bias highlighting the distortion of Islamic governance in authoritarian contexts (Nasr, 2001, 134).

Delegated Legislation: The Role of *Majlis-e-Shura*

Islam allows legislation through elected *Majlis-e-Shuras* (consultative assemblies) within Quranic limits. The Pious Caliphs always consulted leaders of tribes and families as representative to tackle issues of governance (Rehman, 1982). Islamic principles are valid for all times, however, institutions are relevant with need and circumstances. During *khilafat-e-Rashidah* *shura* was not elected because all elders of their families and stake holders were the part of *shura* so their election might be a useless practice but now there is no any person who may match companions of Prophet in faith, practice, piety and status. In present time all Muslims are equal having no distinction or superiority, therefore, *shura* shall be elected as rationalized legislature with-in limits (Assad, 2007). Maudoodi warns that legislature without system of checks and balances is dangerous and may open the way to deviate from *shariah* in legislation (1997, 481). For instance, during enacting the 2006 Women's Protection Act, parliament amended the Hudood Ordinances to protect rape victims in Pakistan but faced opposition from orthodox Ulemas who deemed it against the provisions of

Islamic laws (Farooq 2006, 112). Conversely, Asad advocates reinterpretation of new issues in the light of *ijtihad* so that we can resolve problems which are the outcome of new technologies (2007, 52).

Human Rights: Islamic Universalism Vs. Western Relativism

Islamic human rights, rooted in divine decree, offer permanence lacking in Western positivist frameworks. The Quran mandates justice and equality before the law (57:25) and protects life, property, and honour (Maudoodi 1997, 573-5). Unlike Western people, Muslims were well aware about fundamental rights and concept of duties from their early history because these rights were neither expedencies of kings nor the result of historical accidents, they are granted and guarded by Quran and Sunnah (Assad 2008). The system of rights and duties is a myth without system of justice, therefore, one of the fundamental objectives of Islamic state is to establish a system of justice for all (Quran 57:25.).

Islamic state is neither socialist nor it is a secular democracy. It is an ideological state with the combination of both moral and material objectives. So believers who formed majority are willfully ready to follow Islamic way of life, therefore, western criteria for rights is not a judicious scale in this case (Maudoodi 1997). Islamic history proved from its early period that Muslims granted and protected rights of non-Muslims. For instance, second caliph Umar guaranteed religious freedom for Jerusalem's Christians (Hameedullah, 1983). Ottoman Empire legally allowed non-Muslims communities right to self-governance under Islamic rule (Lewis 1996, 45).

Critics allege gender inequality, but Islamic law differentiates roles without negating equity. Women's rights to education, inheritance, and marital consent are Quranic mandates (Izetbegovic 2007, 175-7). For example, Surah An-Nisa (4:32) guarantees women's financial independence, while the Prophet Muhammad's Farewell (last) Sermon emphasized gender equity. Tunisia's 2014 Constitution, drafted post-Arab Spring include even such liberal reforms which are against basics of Islamic concept of rights and justice. It guarantees gender equality while referencing Islamic identity (Art. 1). Reforms such as banning polygamy and ensuring equal inheritance rights is an attempt to reconcile Islam and western liberalism (Nasr 2001, 178).

Simone de Beauvoir in her critique of patriarchal structures, even condemns motherhood and love of mother for children with a plea that it is against women's freedom. This kind of feminism is totally against Islamic teachings, nature and humanism (Izetbegovic, 2007). It contrasts with Islamic equity models that emphasize complementary roles. For instance, Iran's gender quotas in parliament reserve seats for women, balancing Islamic norms with political participation (Hirschl 2010, 89). Likewise, women in Pakistan enjoy civil, political and economic rights (Constitution of Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 1973). Basic difference between Islamic concept of rights and western concept lies in the fact that reality Islam believes in justice-cum- equality while Western rights are based on absolute equality (Maudoodi 1997).

Constitutional Experiments in Pakistan, Iran and Malaysia

Modern Islamic republics blended Islamic principles of statehood with features of democracy. Pakistan's constitutional model is an attempt to combine sovereignty of God and supremacy of parliament which create a tension between both concepts and supporters of the both ideals. Where

preamble and Art-2A declares Allah's sovereignty and Article 50 establishes a parliamentary republic. The Council of Islamic Ideology (Art. 228) ensures laws align with Shariah, yet debates are there in Pakistan over the parliament's domain and supremacy. For instance, the 1985 Eighth Amendment of the Constitution shifted nature of parliamentary democracy into hybrid system where president got a supreme role (Hirschl 2010, 89).

These tensions highlight the challenges of hybrid governance in Muslim-majority states. Secularism means say no to state own religion while Pakistan is an Islamic republic and Islam is the state religion of Pakistan which means theoretically there is no scope for devil theory in Pakistan (1973 Constitution Art-1-2). Turkey's secularization under Atatürk replaced secularism instead of Islamic law or *Shariah* and prohibited religious laws and practices as public life (Lewis 1996, 67). While this model achieved short-term modernization, it alienated conservative populations, leading to ongoing tensions between secular elites and Islamist movements (e.g., the rise of the AK Party).

Sovereignty belongs to Allah but people of Pakistan are entitled to exercise delegated authority within limits of *Shariah* as a trust. Art-2A is an example of delegated legislation and authority. Malaysia is also an Islamic republic with state religion of Islam, however, freedom of all other religions is safeguarded, it has also a scope of delegated authority and legal system where two types of legal systems are in operation: legal and *Shariah* courts. For example, Article 121(1A) of the Federal Constitution grants *Shariah* courts jurisdiction over Muslim personal law, balancing modernity and tradition (Hirschl 2010, 45). Iran's system devised a midway where divine sovereignty is followed by elected institutions like elected president and an assembly to legislate within boundaries of *Shariah* under the Guardian Council's oversight (Art. 72, Iranian Constitution). This model indicates delegated authority for effective role of human institutions and agency, it helps reconciliation between theocracy and democracy (Hirschl 2010, 2). On the other hand, in leading western democracy like France a researcher may observe absolute exclusion of religion from public life (Stepan, 2011).

CONCLUSION

When one observes different political ideologies, it is revealed that no any ideology provides structure or institutions, all ideologies provide their objectives, vision and principles but structure and institutions are relevant with need of time. Follower of same ideology may have different structure and institutions in their respective states. Same is case with Islamic political aspect or state, its structure and institutions are largely dependent upon time and collective wisdom of followers. So basic difference between Islamic state and Western democracy lies in their principles not in institutions.

The synthesis of Western democracy and Islamic governance is fraught with ideological and structural challenges. While mechanisms like elected assemblies and human rights align with Islamic *shura* and justice, secularism and absolute popular sovereignty remain irreconcilable with divine authority. Successful models (e.g., Pakistan, Malaysia, Iran) demonstrate that democracy can thrive within Islamic frameworks if adapted to prioritize *Shariah*. The solution lies in mutual respect and tolerance. If Muslims want to practice their principles of *Shariah* and way to participate in state affair, then Western world should acknowledge their right. Same is the case with western

secular democracy. If Western people are happy with their political system, then Muslims must not interfere.

Future research must explore contextualized democratic practices that respect theological boundaries, fostering dialogue rather than imposition. Islam will remain individual and collective affair of Muslim societies and it is observed that contemporary Islamic republics are trying to adjust suitable aspects of western democracy but without compromising integral principles of Islam. If someone or any advocates of democracy try to deprive any nation from life of her choice, it is a violation of their own declared principles of democracy.

Islam is not dependent on western democracy, it already has all those universal principles of good state and governance which are now the part of democracy. Islam can adjust any principle which supports humanism, justice and welfare for all creatures. It, however, cannot go with western democratic principles of popular sovereignty and secularization of state in any case.

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