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The Possibility of the Islamic Groups' Participation in Democratic Systems – Positions and Fears

Paper Presented by Dr. Abd-al-Hamid al-Ansari, Former Dean of the College of Islamic Law at Qatar University

God created humans to be different, not only in terms of their color, sex, language, and religion, but also and most significantly in terms of their ideas, psychological tendencies, and interests. God the sublime says, "And for this did He create them," i.e., for the sake of such variation, as stated in the Qu'ran: "If thy Lord had so willed, He could have made mankind one people. But they will not cease to dispute, except those on whom thy Lord hath bestowed His mercy. And for this did He create them" (Qu'ran, 11:118-119). Variation is a fact of nature. It is innate and universal. All of existence is based on variation, multiplicity, and difference of opinion. Differences of opinion are a means to advance, develop, and renew. They are a tool for becoming acquainted and cooperating with others. They generate knowledge, discovery, and innovation. They are a source of joy, happiness, and wonder. If there were no differences or distinctions, knowledge would disappear and blindness and ignorance would spread, as stated by Ali Harb in *Hiwar [Dialogue] Magazine*, Issue no. 12. However, this entire idea is subject to the beneficial use of differences of opinion for the common interest as expressed by the Qu'ran: "O mankind, we created you from a single pair of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other. Verily, the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is he who is the most righteous of you" (Qu'ran, 49:13).

This variation is basic, essential, and constructive if we know how to use it. It is also negative, as it presages conflicting wills and interests. The result is that the majority becomes subject to the will of the strongest. Humanity had to wait for thousands of years, make major sacrifices, and undergo numerous trials to find a way to benefit from such differences and conflicts to further the common interest. Through the long practice of governance systems and models, mankind has arrived at the greatest human discovery, namely democratic rule based on the principle of the numerical majority.

The democratic solution or democratic rule is by nature not ideal or complete. However, it is the best of the three solutions available to mankind to date. These three solutions are rule by an individual backed by a god, rule by an individual backed by his tribe or camp, and democratic rule. We would not do justice to democracy if we regarded it as a mere political system. It is a lifestyle that permits society to realize its potential in a free, safe environment, so that it can continue the processes of building, advancement, discovery, and innovation in an ongoing series of actions that generate, rebuild, and create sustainable development.

This is the democracy that has been achieved by Western civilization. It has been applied in the societies of Western civilization. What about Islam? What about Muslims? Does Islam have a specific view on the regulation of society's political affairs? How do Muslims govern their societies? How do they regulate their caliphates?

We must first distinguish between Islam as a system of principles, values, and approaches and the Muslim himself as embodied in his intellect, efforts, practices, and conceptions.

Islam has general principles regarding matters of governance, including consultation, justice, freedom, equality, and responsibility. These principles served as the foundations for the constitution of the first Muslim state in the city of Medina. Through positive practices, these principles had an enormous effect on the establishment of the magnificent Islamic civilization that spanned many centuries and provided mankind with great achievements in various intellectual, economic, social, and scientific fields. However, the early consultative experience, which is the backbone of Islamic governance, suffered a setback in the periods that followed the orthodox caliphs. It is then that we begin to see a deviation from the supreme principles of the Qu'ran regarding matters of governance. From then until, the system of governance by an individual backed by his tribe or army has reigned in the Muslim world. If we go back to the noble Qu'ran, we find that the Qu'ran honors the principle of consultation in two verses. One refers to those "who conduct their affairs by mutual consultation" [Qu'ran, 42:38], and another states, "Take council with them in the affair" [Qu'ran, 3:159]. The first verse points to the well-established, ongoing communal practice of containing communal disputes. This reflects the method of collective consultation, which was an early practice in Mecca before the Muslims formed a state. This practice prepared the common ground and paved the way for the infrastructure of the political superstructure that was achieved in Medina. This is expressed in the second verse, "and take council with them," which represents the political echelon.

However, how did Muslims in subsequent periods understand consultation? How did they apply it?

The effectiveness of consultation in Muslims' lives—i.e., in the social, political, and educational spheres and in the areas of communal culture and values—weakened and retreated from the Muslim state. It was reduced to a narrow, traditional notion that consultation is good for the ruler if he wishes to adopt it; otherwise, he is free to do as he pleases. This narrow concept of consultation continued until the beginning of the last century, when some Muslim theologians, including Shaykh Muhammad Abdu, began to review this understanding and call for a different understanding to guide the affairs of government and to restrict authority. However, a new understanding did not prevail. The traditional, narrow understanding continued to prevail. Consultative councils were formed in the Arab and Islamic countries without full legislative and supervisory authorities. Current political developments in the Gulf countries are now, however, quickly moving toward the adoption of the democratic concept of consultation. This can be seen in Qatar's constitution and in Oman's experience.

In our view, Islamic consultation is synonymous with democracy regarding such basic matters as: the right of people to govern themselves by themselves for themselves; the right of individuals in Islamic society to select their ruler, monitor him, and hold him to account; and the right of individuals to select their own representatives to the legislative body. Consultation, like democracy, is a method of governance, communal culture, educational values, and humane approaches that form an essential infrastructure.

The only point of difference, in my view, lies in the extent of society's authority to legislate. Democracy grants society extensive power. Islamic consultation, by contrast, confines society's authority to legislate within the fixed teachings of the Qu'ran and the Sunna,[1] as expressed by "constants." In my view, these constants do not restrict society's legislating activity in the political, economic, administrative, and social spheres as society evolves. In general, these constants are highly flexible and thus permit broad freedom of action.

We will now become familiar with the position of the Islamic movements and currents on democracy and involvement in the political process.

It has become clear that the positions of the Islamic movements and currents differ to the point of divergence. According to Walid Nuwayhid, it is difficult to define the Islamic movements' positions on democracy for the following reasons:

a. The diversity of organizations, and differences in their circumstances and genesis.

b. Differences in the history of each organization and the development of its ideas.

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[1] [The statements and actions of the Prophet, later established as legally binding precedents in addition to the law established by the Qu'ran.]

c. The broad geographical diffusion of the activity of these organizations, and differences in their strategies from one country to another.

d. Divisions within a single organization, and the multiple origins of each faction.

e. The difficulty of obtaining documents on all these organizations, especially the secret ones (see page 25, *Al-Harakat al-Islamiyah wal-Dimuqratiyah [Islamic Movements and Democracy]*, Dar Qirtas Publishing House).

However, taking into account all of the preceding, we can categorize the general orientations of the Islamic movements and currents with respect to democracy into two groups:

1. The first group completely rejects democracy and refrains from running and voting in elections. This is the position of broad groups that resort to violence and arms as the only solution for imposing their orientations. These groups view democracy as a corrupt, Western good that makes humans, not God, the sovereign. They therefore reject democracy as well as the political systems and current conditions in their societies, regarding them as representing the state of Jahiliya [pagan ignorance of divine guidance that preceded Islam] and maintaining that they must be removed by force of arms. They do not recognize party pluralism. They believe that there is only one party, which is the "party of God." All other parties stem from Satan. This position is best represented in the writings of Sayyid Qutb, especially in his book, *Ma'alim Fi al-Tariq [Sign Posts on the Road]*, which is considered the "supreme constitution" or the "supreme authority" for all groups that espouse violence and that accuse others of disbelief. Professor Sayyid Qutb states that "the entire Islamic nation has cut off its existence since the government broke away from the rule of God's law on earth." He adds: "The world is steeped in Jahiliya … This Jahiliya is based on rebellion against God's sovereignty on earth.   It transfers to man one of the greatest attributes of God, namely sovereignty… which takes the form of man claiming the right to establish concepts, create values, legislate laws, rules, and conditions without regard to what God has prescribed." He emphasizes that "there is only one party of God. All other parties stem from Satan." (See these and other passages in "*Al-Irhab al-Muta'aslam [Islamized Terror],* by Dr. Raf'at al-Sa'id, Vol. 1, Pages 284-288).

2. The second group accepts democracy with reservations and conditions. This is the position of a broad spectrum of Islamic currents that accept political participation. Islamic organizations participate in Arab parliaments to varying degrees in Jordan, Kuwait, Yemen, Lebanon, Egypt, and elsewhere. The most prominent such organization is the Muslim Brothers, which has a presence in a number of Arab countries.

The Muslim Brothers current is the oldest current of political Islam. Initially, it opposed the idea of democracy and pluralism and even the idea that binding consultation is equivalent to the principle of majority rule. However, the Muslim Brothers' position has evolved considerably due to numerous factors, including: long political engagement, which has deepened the Brothers' experience and made them more mature; the Brothers'

analysis of the complex political situation of the societies in which they live, which differs from the analysis of the violent groups, which brand their societies as ignorant; the Brothers' ongoing rejection, especially after the 1980s, of violence as a political method; the fact that the Brothers broadly benefit from the democratic climate to garner more influence and supporters through democratic institutions, associations, unions, and committees in the popular arena and in civil society organizations; and the Brothers' correct reading of the international climate, which supports the democratic process in the countries of the region. All of these factors were essential catalysts in the development of the political thinking of most of the Islamic currents in general and the political thinking of the Muslim Brothers in particular. These currents' alignment—with reservations— with democracy and pluralism may strengthen or weaken, depending on the surrounding political conditions, the social context, and how they are treated by the authorities.

Walid Nuwayhid states, "The 1990s were no doubt decisive in shattering any possibility of a convergence between the Muslim Brothers and the violent organizations. While the violent organizations moved to escalate the violence, the Brothers' ideas matured. They issued the three most important, serious documents in their political history, which can be considered the "second establishment" of the Muslim Brothers. These documents decisively addressed three issues:

1. The concept of the citizen and equality among religious and sectarian groups.

2. The concept of the woman, her equality with men, and her right to engage in politics and hold public office.

3. This is the most important: The nation is the source of authority.

These documents are compiled in a pamphlet issued in October 1995 (see Nuwayhid, ibid., for details).

Discussion of the Islamic Currents' Reservations Regarding Democracy:

Perhaps the most salient reservations are the following:

1. Democracy grants broad authority to the people to legislate. This authority may exceed the boundaries of the constants established in Islamic law or morals, because democracy involves rule by the majority. However, this reservation ignores the fact that a majority of the people have passed a constitution whose main authority is Islam or whose main authorities include Islam. It also ignores the fact that Islam is the religion of the state. The constants of Islam cannot be violated. Such a reservation is also at odds with what many leading figures in Islam have stated, namely that the Arab peoples will choose only what is consistent with their creed and the principles of Islam.

2. Democracy is linked to ideological concepts pertaining to secularism, liberalism, and westernization. This statement, according to Nuwayhid, confuses democracy as a mechanism for regulating conflicts with ideological concepts. The source of this

confusion is a lack of clarity regarding Western democracy, which is confused with other issues.

3. Democracy means permitting multiple parties, including communist and secular parties or parties with ideologies that violate the Islamic creed. Such a reservation diminishes in importance if we recall the declarations issued by several guides of the Muslim Brothers. Tlemsani states, "I support the existence of a communist party, a Nasirist party, and any individual who wishes to express his opinion clearly and openly. I do so, because on the day when any party is prohibited from appearing, I shall sentence myself to death, and it will not be upon that party, for the Qu'ran states, 'If one wishes to believe, let him believe, and if one wishes to disbelieve, let him disbelieve." There will be a final accounting (the Kuwaiti *Al-Qabas*, November 16, 1985, quoted from Khalil Haydar's *Al-I'tidal am al-Tatarruf? [Moderation or Extremism?]*. Abu-Al-Nasr, one of the guides of the Muslim Brothers, said in an interview with the Kuwait *Al-Anba'* newspaper (March 13, 1987) that "the Muslim Brothers welcome the presence of the Communist Party."

The document "Al-Shura fi al-Islam wa-Ta'addud al-Ahzab" ["Consultation and Multiple Parties in Islam"], issued in October 1995 by the Muslim Brothers removes any confusion regarding the Muslim Brothers' choice and acceptance of political settlement and bargaining with those who differ ideologically with them (Nuwayhid, ibid., page 68).

Fears and Wariness Provoked by the Islamic Currents' Assimilation in the Democratic Process:

Finally, we come to an extremely important point in this entire subject, namely the fears and reservations of broad political and popular segments and sectors regarding the participation of political Islam movements and currents in political activity. Of the many books on this subject, none is better than the excellent paper written by Professor Ziyad Ahmad Baha'-al-Din. I will therefore rely primarily on Professor Baha'-al-Din's paper in citing and then discussing these fears and reservations.

There are six such fears, as follows:

1. The Islamic currents claim that their political programs correspond with the Islamic creed. This implies that a single political group has a monopoly on representing the creed of all Muslims, not just political concepts subject to error. It also implies that this group speaks on behalf of the Islamic masses, because it represents the only prevailing viewpoint, and whoever opposes or competes with this group's program is not merely a political competitor, but outside Islam.

2. The is a lack of adequate assurances of the Islamic currents' renunciation of violence as an option that can be resorted to whenever other channels are closed off. The Islamic current has repeatedly stressed that the violence practiced by armed groups does not express the Islamic current. However, there are certain types of relations between the Islamic current and the violent groups, and there are shades of minor violence in the behavior of student groups associated with the Islamic current as seen when such groups

destroy art exhibits, attack musical troupes, and threaten female students who violate Islamic dress or behavioral standard. The Islamic current is not helped by its assertion that violence is justified as a counterweight to the authorities' oppression of them, given that this violence is not limited to the authorities; it also extends to innocent people and children.

3. The actual behavior of Islamic groups contradicts the intellectual positions of the Islamic cultural elite, particularly regarding individual rights and freedoms, chief among which are women's rights, minority rights, and the right of expression. Although major Islamist authors and thinkers affirm these rights, the facts and the practices of the entire Islamic current indicate the complete opposite, and there are many examples of this, including the following:

   a. Despite what has been written about equality between men and women, the prevailing view in the Islamic current (based on Islamic political rhetoric and public knowledge) is that women are second-class beings.

   b. Despite the affirmation of the rights of minorities under Islam, many Islamic groups inculcate discrimination and the stripping of minorities of their citizenship based on fatwas [formal religious rulings] that ban dealings with Christians and prohibit Muslims from greeting Christians and calling them brother.

   c. Regarding freedom of thought and expression, we have the case of Dr. Nasr Abu-Zayd. Despite the moderate positions expressed by some thinkers of the Islamic current on this case, the court's ruling was preceded by another ruling issued by the Islamic current. The Islamic current judged Dr. Abu-Zayd to be an apostate and sentenced him to death. The public was incited against Dr. Abu-Zayd, even though he personally affirmed in many forums that his dispute is with the interpreters, not with the religion.

When the writer Faraj Fawdah was assassinated, his killers acknowledged that they undertook this crime after it was established that the victim was secular. The unfortunate thing, as Ziyad Ahmad Baha'-al-Din points out, is that the Islamic authors who hastened to offer condolences and declare that his murder had no grounds in Islam had themselves accused Faraj Fawdah of secularism repeatedly until this label stuck to him. They themselves did not provide any explanation as to what the meaning of the word is, explaining that it pertains to an intellectual dispute regarding the state's authority and is not necessarily a synonym for disbelief and apostasy as it is in popular rhetoric. The same thing happened in the attack against Nagib Mahfouz because of his novel *Awlad Haritina*. The nation needs modern, simplified, moderate, independent, authoritative interpretations. However, the most influential views are more extreme and less tolerant. It might be said that it is not fair to hold accountable the Islamic current for the crimes committed by a few. This is true and just. However, a political current should be judged based on its followers' public actions and daily interactions, not by the statements of its senior writers and intellectuals or its political programs. For if political parties were to be

judged solely by their political programs, the Arab governments would be the winners according to Ziyad Ahmad Baha'-al-Din.

4. The Islamic currents' commitment to the democratic option is not based on principle. Rather the Islamic currents view democracy as a temporary option for rallying the public against their governments in order to gain power. If such objectives are achieved, restrictions will then be imposed on the same political freedoms that had been demanded. However, it is not fair to exclude an opposition current from democratic competition on the argument that it has dictatorial intentions, as this contradicts the fundamental essence and spirit of the democratic idea. It also opens the door to excluding whomever the government views as a threat. This is a major, complex problem facing us. In principle, there are justifications necessitating the inclusion of the Islamic currents and permitting them to participate in constitutionally and legally legitimate political competition, including the following:

   a. The primary foundation of democracy, which provides for the right of the people to select their representatives through free competition among political parties. Therefore, no party may be banned from participating, regardless of its program. Otherwise, we will have invalidated the foundation of democracy and opened the door to the scrutiny of intentions.

   b. The Islamic political opposition in a number of Arab countries is an effective force that pressures the authorities and provides true oversight of their governments. It is not in the national political interest to marginalize and exclude this opposition. Otherwise, governments would be alone in the arena, without pressure, oversight, or accountability.

   c. Historical political experience underscores that denying any popular current an opportunity for expression and political participation causes it to divert its energies into secret, violent activity. It is well known that democracy requires tolerance, even tolerance of those who exploit tolerance. One must tolerate even one's enemies, such as the Nazis and extremist fundamentalists in Europe. That being the case, one must certainly tolerate another party that demonstrates its willingness to cooperate. Permitting participation is justified and essential. However, the Islamic currents must bear their responsibilities in removing the fears mentioned above and in acting to correct the prevailing image of many of the Islamic currents. They can do so by easing their constant attacks against democracy, which stem from their belief that democracy is part of a Western cultural invasion. They must also desist from their constant criticism of Western civilization and description of it using the terms crusaders, colonialism, Zionism, and monopolism. Such behavior gives the impression, especially to the public, that democracy is a Western tool and that the Islamic current does not really believe in democracy, as it attacks it at every opportunity.

5. The Islamic currents claim that their cause is the application of Islamic law, clearly suggesting that the legislation in Islamic societies is un-Islamic and was formulated by

colonial powers and the ruling elite in the 19th century to wipe out the national personality and the Islamic civilizational legacy and to implant Western values and concepts. There is no doubt that presenting the case in this way rallies public support for the application of Islamic law. However, the suggestion that legislation in Islamic societies is un-Islamic is mistaken. Such a suggestion does not distinguish between Islamic law as the primary authority of the legislation applied and the legislative provisions themselves. Most Arab legislation—chief among which is the Egyptian Civil Code, which is the primary source for most Arab legislation—was derived from Islamic law by the great constitutional jurist himself, 'Abd-al-Razzaq al-Sanhuri. This legislation has evolved over dozens of years. Arab and Islamic cultural and social influences have entered it in a long struggle in which national forces at all levels have participated. These laws are thus no longer considered 19th century laws. The thesis or suggestion that colonialism imposed legislation in Islamic societies ignores historical facts. Foremost among these facts is that Arab societies have been desirous or willing to accept these legal systems because of the deficiency that they perceived in their traditional legal system, which lagged behind the requirements of the state, the age, and society. If Islamic law—with its rich religious, cultural, and legal heritage—must express the values of the Arab peoples, including both Muslim and Christian Arabs, as if it is the exclusive source of modern legislation, this does not mean that we should not take advantage of other sources, such as customary law, international law, and the useful experiences of other civilizations.

6. The groups belonging to the Islamic current have political ties at the international level. There is no doubt that the groups belonging to the Islamic current are linked together at the international level. These links raise fears, because they are seen as a portal that can be exploited by foreign powers to split the national ranks and penetrate society in the security sense.

The preceding is hopefully a faithful summary of the valuable paper written by Ziyad Ahmad Baha'-al-Din on the fears and wariness provoked by the Islamic current's participation in political activity (see *Al-Harakat al-Islamiyah wal-Dimuqratiyah [Islamic Movements and Democracy]*, Dar Qirtas Publishing House).

Conclusion

Following is our conclusion:

1. As a political system, democracy employs peaceful, social disagreement to benefit the common interest. It is also a communal culture, values, and educational concepts that constitute an essential infrastructure. It is consistent with Islam's orientations and views regarding the regulation of society's affairs, the resolution of political problems, and the absorption of social differences.

2. The Islamic currents should be absorbed or incorporated in political activity based on the justifications mentioned above in this paper because no other option is open to us, despite all the reservations.

3. The participation of the Islamic current in constitutional and legal political activity should not disregard the fears and reservations put forth above.

4. The way out of the dilemma posed by the need for participation on the one hand and the fears raised on the other hand is to create a formula acceptable to all political currents and forces. Such a formula should accept the Islamists' participation in exchange for a commitment to defined, acceptable, positions that are as binding as possible on all Islamic currents, not just the elites. Even if it is assumed that it will be difficult to reach such an agreement, it is hoped—as Ziyad Ahmad Baha'-al-Din states in his paper mentioned above—that opening the door to discussion will make it possible to identify the main difficulties blocking such an agreement. Even if an agreement on the minimal acceptable terms of participation is not reached, it is important to make it clear that any reservations will be temporary and conditional, lest they evolve into a general rejection. Rather, there should be a careful screening of these currents and personalities who are ideological adherents of the Islamic current, even if they are active in a personal rather than a party capacity. Please pardon my prolixity.