

THE DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES OF THE QURAN

By Neil Maybanks

Considering the political state of the Sunni and Shia countries in the world today it would be very easy to suggest that Islam doesn't promote democratic principles. We would expect that if Islam did promote democratic values then Muslims would be putting these principles into practice. I suggest though that it would be a very grave injustice to simply decide that Islam is not democratic based on this criteria. The criteria I suggest for judging whether Islam is democratic or not is the Quran. After all 'the Criterion' is one of the names of the Quran. So a clear distinction will be made between what is actually on paper and what is unfortunately practiced. At the very least I hope that by quoting Quranic verses I can convince you that the Quran does promote democratic principles. Then it will be up to you to decide how you judge Islam: by its book, or by the actions of those claiming to follow it.

Whatever you have been given is but an enjoyment of this world. That which is with God is better and more lasting for those who believe, and place their trust in their Lord, and those who avoid the great sins and obscenities, and when they are angry they forgive, and those who respond to their Lord, and maintain prayer, and AMRUHUM (their decision, command, order, decree, authority) is by SHUWRA (consultation, deliberation) between themselves, and they spend from what we have provided them. (42:36-38)

This verse is not about an elite group deciding amongst themselves for everybody else. The they of AMRUHUM is everybody who has an interest in the issue being decided. The AMRUHUM of the rulers would be about things such as which restaurant they decide to dine at. This is because such a decision only concerns them. The final decision regarding issues is made through the process of SHUWRA between the interested parties. Elections, referendums and representative parliaments are particular manifestations of SHUWRA because these methods facilitate the process of consulting with the interested parties. SHUWRA can be seen to be of great importance as it is mentioned along with other important traits of the believers. The system which most consults people in the process of making decisions about issues which concern them is the system recommended by Islam. The Quran lays down principles universal in time and space. We have the flexibility to adapt the system to a changing environment to meet the requirements of the general principle of SHUWRA.

O you who believe, when it is said to you, 'TAFASSAHUW (make room, clear a space, provide an opportunity) in the MAJALIS (conference rooms, parliaments, councils, committees, gatherings)' then make room. God will make room for you. And when it is said to you, 'ANSHUZUW (get up, be elevated)' then get up. God will promote in rank those of you who believe, and those of you who UWTUW AL-'ILM (possess knowledge, information). God is aware of what you do. (58:11)

So we know that decisions are arrived at through SHUWRA. The MAJALIS are places where SHUWRA can take place. It must be noted that the Quran talks about a plural of MAJALIS which tells us that all decisions shouldn't be monopolized in one MAJLIS. This verse represents the right of people to be provided an opportunity to participate in the decision making process. People wanting democratic space say to those already occupying the MAJALIS, 'TAFASSAHUW so we can also participate in SHUWRA.' According to the Quran we must make room for aspiring participants. Establishing the principle of TAFASSAHUW for others reinforces our rights to participate under the same principle. Interested people will want to participate when it is AMRUHUM. Elections, referendums, representative parliaments, freepress, freedom of political association and protest all encompass the principle of TAFASSAHUW by providing a platform for people to make their views known. In a broader sense the MAJALIS don't exist only in particular buildings. They exist wherever people want to express their views for consideration. The street is a MAJLIS for protest and other activities. The media is a MAJLIS for views to be transported. God willing, Muslim democrats find inspiration in this verse despite the defiance of those with other agendas.

Those in the MAJALIS are also told to ANSHUZUW, to get up and speak on behalf of themselves and also people who want them to give a voice to their views. Examples of this are members of parliament truly representing the aspirations of their electorate or people who prominently stand up for special causes eg. Princess Diana on land mines. ANSHUZUW also suggests some structure to the process of SHUWRA in

which participants become elevated to indicate that it is now their time to capture the attention of the audience and express their views.

During SHUWRA people will be promoted in rank according to their contribution towards finding the most appropriate AL-AMR. Believers and the UWTUW AL-ILM will shine through as being worthy of promotion because of the strength of their arguments in an open competitive environment where everyone is given an opportunity to present different views. Promotion is not based on family connections or wealth or threat of force. Indeed the Quran states:

'There is no compulsion in the system. Good reason is already distinctly clear from error..' (2:256).

It's important to add that while belief and knowledge are complementary, UWTUW AL-ILM can also include non-Muslims who happen to be knowledgeable in the issues being discussed. Muslims as fallible individuals certainly won't possess all the knowledge on every relevant topic. They should let what good reason comes from the non-Muslims be promoted above any incorrect ideas that Muslims may produce. A government that wants to produce the best results for its people shouldn't deny their society the benefits of the knowledge of the non-Muslims. After all, let us remember that all knowledge originates from God. All knowledge is holy, regardless of who is the transporter of it.

And among them are those who annoy the Prophet and say, 'UDHUNUN (he is all ears, lending his ear to everything)'. Say, 'UDHUNU (his listening) is best for you. He has faith in God, and has faith in the believers, and is a mercy to those of you who have faith.' And those who annoy the Messenger of God, there is a painful punishment for them. (9:61)

It was because of the mercy of God that LINTA (you were gentle, flexible, moderate) towards them. If you were FAZZAN (blunt, crude), GHALEEZ AL-QALB (hard hearted, inconsiderate) they would have LAANFADDUW MIN HAWLIKA (broken away, disassociated themselves from around you). FA'FU' ANHUM (so pardon, exempt, release, free them) and ask forgiveness for them, and SHAAWIRHUM (consult, deliberate with them) concerning AL-AMR (the decision, command, order, decree, authority). Then when you have made your decision, then put your trust in God. Certainly God loves those who trust. (3:159)

From these verses we get an indication of the example of the Prophet Muhammad when it comes to governing. He was not a dictator. He was moderate and 'all ears,' listening to all of the contributions made in the SHUWRA process to reach a decision that was best for the people. Some people who were disrespectful of the right of people to have their views heard didn't like the extent of Muhammad's listening to the people. Because of Muhammad's consultative and moderate style of governing people didn't withdraw their support from him.

Despite any 'perceived' faults of any people we are to FA'FU' ANHUM to allow them to be able to participate in the SHUWRA process. Firstly people are freed to participate and then they are actually consulted. The number of groups that need to be pardoned to participate are as many as have been the subject of discrimination and denial of participation in the past. People and parties can't be disqualified because we don't agree with them. We are to ask for the forgiveness of people at least to the extent of having their right to consultation protected.

There is always some doubt about whether the AL-AMR that is reached is the correct one. We can't always be certain that the alternative choices are as simplistically different as black and white. We have to have an element of faith to just let the decision take effect. 'God willing.' We are told to put our trust in God. We do this by implementing the conclusions reached.

Certainly, believers are those who believe in God and His Messenger, and when they are with him concerning AMRIN (a decision, command, decree) , JAAMI'IN (comprehensive, broad, general, universal), they don't hold a view until they are informed about it. Certainly, those who inform you are those who believe in God and the Messenger. So when they inform you about some of their concerns then listen to whoever you will of them and ask forgiveness for them. (24:62)

And don't make the summons of the Messenger amongst you like your summons between each other. God knows those of you who sneak away covertly. So let those who stay away from AMRIHI (his

decision, authority) beware that an affliction may befall them, or that a painful punishment may befall them. (24:63)

24:62 is talking to us about the correct frame of mind we should take to SHUWRA. We shouldn't have already made up our minds about important JAAMI'IN issues. We should delay final judgement until we are informed by all of those who are present to inform us about their concerns. No matter how alarming the information is, we shouldn't hold back any relevant information in the SHUWRA process. From 9:61 we know that Muhammad did sit and be informed of the concerns of the people. There should be full exposure and then careful consideration of information.

24:63 tells us to take a summons to participate in SHUWRA even more seriously than our invitations between each other. Some people refused the summons of the Messenger and didn't acknowledge his authority. People who refuse to reply to the invitation to participate in SHUWRA and don't acknowledge the authority of the leader through SHUWRA are more vulnerable to afflictions happening in their lives because they don't take full advantage of the system to protect their interests. These people are not hunted down. They just can't count on the surrounding society to come to their aid when they aren't interacting with the recognized authority. People should take advantage of the opportunity to vote, lobby and express their views.

And don't consume your wealth with futility and be suggestive with it to AL-HUKKAAM (the decision makers, legislators, judges) in order that you knowingly consume a part of the wealth of the people with transgression. (2:188)

This verse makes a clear statement against corruption of the democratic process by financial donations. Suggestive donations can prevent participants from true ANSHUZUW (getting up) on behalf of what they should. Bribes should neither be offered or accepted. The rights of all of the people shouldn't be usurped by selfish narrow financial interests. Decisions must be made on their merits. They shouldn't be bought and sold.

O Prophet, when believing women come to you and pledge to you that they won't...nor disobey you concerning MA'RUWF (that which is good, beneficial, suitable), then accept their pledge and ask God to forgive them (60:12).

This verse indicates that a pledge of obedience to the Prophet was not unconditional. It is not 'nor disobey you' without further clarification. The Prophet only had to be obeyed when what he asked for was MA'RUWF. The Prophet was a human like all others, capable of making mistakes as observed in various places in the Quran (80:1-12), (66:1). This verse allows for conscientious objection based on a personal value judgement as to what is MA'RUWF. God told Muhammad that he could not accept pledges of unconditional obedience.

God knows best.

My Lord increase me in knowledge.