

ISLAM AND POLITICS¹

Lily Zakiyah Munir²

In order to understand the relations between Islam and politics, it is important that we understand Islam's basic values of humanity and how politicization of the religion has prevented the manifestation of these humanitarian values. The phenomenon of 'political Islam' characterized by the formalization of sharia has sparked debates in the last few decades. The main question is "Should Islam be uplifted by enforcing the sharia, understood narrowly by political Islamists as a set of laws codified a millennium ago with barely significant transformation, or should its humanitarian values be internalized and reflected in the Muslims' political behavior?"

This paper argues that Islam basically is a source of ethics and morality and not a political force. None of over six thousand verses in the Qur'an and the Prophet's tradition (*Hadith*) mentions about Islamic state or political Islam. The Qur'an is clear that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was a bearer of the Message and had no rights over his people except that of delivering the Message. He was not granted with sources of legitimation for kingship as mentioned in the Qur'an, "*I am only a bearer of warnings and bringer of happy news for those who believe*" (QS 7:188). When Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) established and ran the Medina state he consulted his followers on worldly matters and said that "You know better about your worldly matters". The Prophet did not consult his followers on matters of religion. The Prophet clearly saw Islam and the state as separate. It is extremely important especially for us in this turbulent and pluralistic world today to separate the divine message from the earthly action of the Prophet.

Similarly, the five pillars of Islam (*al-arkan al-islam*): *shahadah* (the declaration of faith), prayer, fasting, zakat (alms), and hajj, are directly related to individual's relation with the Creator. None of them is political and as a matter of fact detach Islam from the machinery of State. If Islam firmly stands on those pillars, Muslims' faith remains a personal, private matter of their duty to God and the community.

This does not mean that Muslims should avoid politics. Not at all. Muslims' voices must be heard in deciding what kinds of laws they want, and what kinds of priorities the governments should have. It is equally important to recognize the rights of those of other faiths, or of none, who may have different views. Even within Muslim societies, there are differences of political and doctrinal nature, as Islam is never a monolithic religion. The solution to these differences is not to fight, to brand others as infidels, or even to kill them, but to find ways in which we can all live peacefully together.

Islam, morality and formal sharia

Generically, Islam is a religion bringing the mission of liberation and salvation. It brought new morality for social transformation because of its metaphysical and

¹ Paper presented at the International Seminar on "Islam and Universal Values: Islam's Contribution to the Construction of a Pluralistic World," convened by the Embassy of Switzerland in Jakarta, 18 March 2004.

² Director and founder, Center for Pesantren and Democracy Studies (CePDeS), Jombang, East Java.

humanitarian characters. It is a religion deriving from God and oriented toward humanity, giving importance to both transcendental and social dimensions.

Islam's high respects for humanity and moral and ethical values can be observed in its achievement to transform pre-Islamic Arabic nomads into civilized communities. These communities, being used to living in open deserts and highly susceptible to inter-tribal wars and conflicts, became sensitized to values and morality. The Qur'an has manifested itself in a language laden with esthetics, which has the power to influence the nomads' emotion and awareness in shaping society's humanitarian vision.

Linguistically, Islam is a metamorphosis of a three-letter root word (*tsulatsi*), i.e. *salima-yaslamu-salaaman*, meaning safe and peaceful. The four-letter root word (*rubā'i*) namely *aslama-yuslimu-islaman* means to save and to bring peace. Thus, Islam has a very fundamental concern for peace, justice, and *maslahah* (well-being). These traits should be internalized at personal level in the first place before one can radiate them to the surrounding environment. This is the mission of Islam, i.e. to bring blessings to the whole universe (*rahmatan lil alamin*). Therefore, personal and social piety should coexist in a synergic manner, because they are inseparable. This complementary synergy of personal and social piety is important; otherwise, religion will be trapped at personal, symbolic and ritual level and fail to touch the more pluralistic public sphere.

At the public sphere, religion is challenged by its politicization. Political Islam with shari'a as an instrument to seek control over the Muslim world has drained enormous amount of scholarship, emotion and energy of the Muslims. Formal sharia as it is practiced today in Islamic states has demonstrated a strikingly different image of Islam as it is supposed to be. Its imposition of theocracy over democracy, its abuse of human rights, its institutionalized discrimination (against women and non-Muslim minorities), and its severity in punishment are in contrast to the mission of freedom and equality Islam has brought and the goal of sharia itself, which is *maslahah* (well-being) for all.

If the goal of sharia (*maqasid al shariah*) is well-being, then why can't the current practice of sharia reflect it? Imam al-Syatiby in his masterpiece *Al-Muwaffaqat* argues that sharia should not be understood narrowly as a legal system per se because it contains variants, i.e. its main purpose (*maqasid al-shari'a*), legal proof (*dalil*) and *ijtihad* (exerting ratio to deduce laws). Laws cannot exist in a rigid way because they need to be backed up by thorough *dalil* and *ijtihad*. The current sharia was developed in the first three centuries of Islam, incorporating not only Qur'anic texts but also many pre-Islamic Middle Eastern misogynist and tribal customs and traditions. The sharia reflects the social and economic conditions at the time of the Abbasids and has become further and further out of touch with later social, economic, technological, cultural and moral developments. Imam Syatiby also contends that religion should not emphasize ritual aspects only, but should promote humanitarian mission for the whole humankind as well. Islam is not just a 'heavenly' religion, it is also a religion to deal with humanitarian problems and seek to provide spiritual morality.

Islamic values in politics, not political Islam

Islam, in its original texts of the Qur'an and Hadith, did not introduce a comprehensive system of government. This is understandable, given the fact that Islam is the last Message from God and is meant to last till the end of the world. Politics, on

the other hand, by its nature is dynamic and keeps changing following the conditions of certain times and places. Had there been a comprehensive arrangement of government in the Qur'an or Hadith, it would have been difficult to apply because it lacked flexibility to adjust to the continuously changing political situation.

The Prophet's State of Medina is often considered as the best model of an Islamic state, but there is no basis for comparison between this early city State with the present-day complex States with diverse populations. The Medina State ruled over a very small population who lived in direct inter-personal contact under the immediate guidance of the Prophet and his closest followers. It had no institutionalized organs, system of public administration, or security forces to protect the State interest within its territory. This form of political organization can hardly be found in the world today as a form of a State.

At the same time, Islam did not ignore political matters because the religion is meant to guide humanity on all aspects of life. So what Islam did, instead of giving a rigid and comprehensive direction in politics, is to introduce a number of principles to guide the political life of the Muslims. These principles are binding to all Muslims at all times and all places. These principles were best applied during the Prophet Muhammad and the rightly guided caliphs according to the conditions of their time. Thus, Muslims at different times and places may create their own model of government as long as follow the basic principles of Islam in politics. In other words, there is no Islamic system of government, but there are many systems of government which become Islamic because they follow the Islamic principles. The great Islamic scholar Abdul Aziz Sachedina stated that

“An Islamic ‘state’ is not part of the faith. What is required by faith (iman) is working towards justice and equity in (the) public space. There is no concept of ‘nation state’ in the classical formulation of political theory. We have the concept of Dar-al-Islam and Dar-al-harb. The first, ‘sphere of Islam’ means any part of the earth where Muslims predominate and create a government, even when they do not necessarily spread the message of Islam. The opposite is the ‘sphere of war’, which must be brought under the dominance of Muslims. These two concepts are absent in the Qur’an or Hadith. They are part of the Fiqh formulations. Hence, it is living with Taqwa and working for justice everywhere that is required by our faith in God and the Prophet.”

Similarly, Hasan Hanafi made the point that *‘An Islamic state is not one that advocates only the application of the penal code or the observance of external rituals, but the state that implements the spirit or intent of the law (maqasid al-sharia)’*. The Muslim advocate of the universality of human rights, Abdullahi A. An-Na'im, firmly maintains that from a strictly Islamic perspective, an Islamic state as a political institution is *‘neither conceptually possible, historically accurate, nor practically viable today’*. He argues that enforcement through the will of the State is the negation of the religious nature of those precepts which is supposed to be the rationale of their binding force in the first place.³

³ On Abdullahi A. An-Na'im's arguments against Islamic State, see his article “The Position of Islamic States Regarding The Universal Declaration,” in Peter Baehr (et.al), *Innovation and Inspiration: Fifty Years of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Amsterdam: Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, 1999.

Thus, the issue is not how to enforce Islamic states but how Islamic guiding principles can be materialized in the government system. Some of these principles will be briefly discussed below.

- **Shura** means deliberation by the concerned parties in reaching consensus to make a decision. The Qur'an mentions the word *shura* two times, one of them as an attribute of the believers that they conduct their affairs by *shura* (QS 37:38); the second a clear instruction to the Prophet himself that he should consult with them upon their affairs (QS 3:159). This principle takes for granted the individual freedom to deliberate over issues and be able to formulate an opinion on them. The principle of *shura* can relate equally to the political and economic affairs of the community just as it can to the family affairs and business concerns of individuals (Kamali 1999). The principle of *shura* is meaningless without the granting of freedom of expression to individuals, and hence both are closely related. The Prophet practiced *shura* widely that Imam Abu Hurairah described him as the most consultative person. The people consulted with included everybody, tribal chiefs on behalf of their people, experts on matters related to their expertise, and persons of opinions and wisdom on various issues.
- **Justice (al-'adl)** is the ultimate goal of the revealed messages and justification of political authority. The literal meaning of 'adl or 'adalah is placing something in its rightful place where it belongs; it also means according equal treatment to others or reaching a state of equilibrium in transaction with them. 'Adl thus signifies a sense of moral rectitude and fairness in that things should be where they ought to be.⁴ The Qur'an commands justice in one of its verses: "*Allah doth command you to render back your Trusts to those to whom they are due; and when ye judge between man and man, that ye judge with justice...*" (QS 4:58). Justice is to be implemented even if it is in favor of a bitter enemy or against a close relative, or it goes to a weak person and against a noble one. Muslim glorify *Khilafah Rashidun* because of their high standard in applying justice.
- **Freedom (al-huriyya)** or liberty is viewed in Islam as natural and inherent in every human being as declared by the Prophet, "*Every child is born in the natural state of freedom.*" Islam considers every human being equal and that they are servants of God. None has a merit over the other except if he fears God more and that does not involve a world benefit. According to Islam, the most valuable thing in life is belief in God (*iman*); but that should not be imposed upon anybody. The Qur'an says: "*Say, it is the truth from the lord of you all. Then whosoever will, let him believe, and whosoever will, let him disbelieve*" (QS 18:29). This verse vividly illustrates Islamic principle of freedom of religion. If a person is free to choose his religion, he cannot be dictated upon in other matters which are less important than faith in God. Muslims are enjoined to show respect to the religions of other people and not to abuse their gods. Islam's affirmative position on freedom is clearly expressed in the writings of many commentators on the subject.
- **Equality (musawat)** is another principle that has clear references in the Qur'an and Hadith. Islam considers all human beings as descendants of Adam, and Adam was created from clay, so nobody has a distinction by right of birth over others. The following Qur'anic verse is often cited in support of the general equality of all human

⁴ See further Hashim Kamali, *Freedom, Equality, and Justice in Islam*, Jointly published by Ilmiah Publishers, Malaysia, and The Islamic Foundation, UK, 1999.

beings regardless of divisions of races, language, religion, or social status: “*O mankind, surely We have created from a male and a female, and made you tribes and nations that you may know each other. Surely the noblest of you in the eyes of God is the most pious among you*” (QS 49:13). This verse, in Ibn Kathir’s commentary, is addressed to all humankind in general and not to Muslim in particular. The main purpose of the division of humankind into groups, tribes and nations is to facilitate recognition which will invite familiarity, cooperation and friendship among people. Equality before the law was well established in theory and historical practice. The Prophet said: What destroyed people before you was that they used to forgive a noble when he committed a theft but when a modest person did the same they implemented upon him the prescribed punishment. The Prophet enjoined Muslims to be kind to the weak members of the society: slaves, orphans, women and children.

Status of Non-Muslims

History notes that Islam has a long tradition of recognizing and accommodating non-Muslim communities. This tradition originates from the early Islam’s existence as a coherent society in Medina, established by the prophet Muhammad. In this society, Jews and Christians were granted equal status with the Muslims, accorded autonomy in language, costumes, laws, and the like. The Islamic umma was not composed exclusively of Muslims, but of many communities bound together by a treaty of non belligerence and mutual respect.

Nowadays, the concept of Christian and Jews as *dhimmi* has acquired a derogatory meaning, that of second-class citizenship. The etymological sense of this term is in fact moral commitment. *Ahl dhimma* means those with whom a moral commitment is made to protect and defend them against all forms of injustices and aggression, as allies and brothers. In the old law, they have to pay extra tax (*jizya*) in return for the defense and protection, since they are exempted from military service. They have their own courts, customs and manners, and their own cults. But as members of larger Islamic society, they are entitled to the social services provided by the state. They are entitled to all the rights and privileges like other community members on an equal basis.

Unfortunately, this early Islamic tradition of religious tolerance and inclusiveness is now being threatened. Many false images of the classical law have been circulating which view Jews and Christians as second-class citizens, living in isolation from the larger Muslim communities. Those who believe in this Muslim-non Muslim inequality justify their attitude using Qur’anic verses which ‘should be seen as circumstantial developments that may have been prompted under the pressure of prevailing conditions’ (Kamali 1999). The current conditions in which we are living are strongly supportive of universal equality that is in harmony with the spirit of fraternity and promotes cooperation among various groups of society. Many contemporary Islamic scholars have advocated this fresh approach in understanding the Qur’an and Hadith on equality, be it between Muslim and non Muslim and between men and women.

---***---