DEMOCRACY AND RELIGION; THE CASE OF INTERPRETATION

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Abstract- Religious interpretations emerged in the Islamic world more than 1000 years ago through the works the significant thinkers; the question is that how religious interpretations can play role in realization of democracy? Is there any difference between Islam and Christianity in this realm? What role can be played nowadays by political religious interpretations in developments of the Islamic world and its transition to democracy? This paper argues that in this situation, and considerably in Islamic worlds, religion played an important role, depending on the interpretations: for some, it is a barrier and for others, it could help the democratic evolutions.

Keywords- Democracy, Religion, Significant Thinkers, Democratic Evolutions

I. INTRODUCTION

It seems that democracy is now a value in most countries, even when it is just a tool and not an end. Obviously, realization of this value requires grounds for materialization of democracy components. Those grounds are both necessary and negative, that is, some things should be provided while other things should be negated. From negative point of view, it seems that Islamic countries have been facing religious interpretations when moving in this direction.

Religious interpretations emerged in the Islamic world more than 1000 years ago through the works the significant thinkers; the question is that how religious interpretations can play role in realization of democracy? Is there any difference between Islam and Christianity in this realm? What role can be played nowadays by political religious interpretations in developments of the Islamic world and its transition to democracy? This paper argues that in this situation, and considerably in Islamic worlds, religion played an important role, depending on the interpretations: for some, it is a barrier and for others, it could help the democratic evolutions.
MATH

II. DEMOCRACY AND RELIGION

In his book, A Preface to Democratic Theory, Robert Dahl has noted that there is not a single democratic theory, but there is a diversity of them (Dahl, 1965, P.1). Therefore, our goal is not simply to study components of democracy. It would suffice to say that democracy is a global value. MacPherson has written in his book, The Real Democracy, for some people and nations the will of the masses, would be evil and a threat to personal freedoms and all amenities of modern life, but during the past 50 years democracy has been praised (Macpherson, 1966, Chap.2). Fukoyama, considers democracy the final and the highest form of evolution of political institutions and regards it as the end of history. (Fukuyama, 1992)

On the other side, there are various forms of political structure in Islamic countries which are non-democratic and totalitarian, though some of them are traditional and some semi-traditional and semi-modern. Semi-modern states have elements of modernity in them, but have never accepted political modernity and democracy. As Maurice Barbier has noted on political modernity, almost none of the indicators of political modernity have been valued in the Islamic world. (See: Barbier, 2005) Although regional states have been forced by domestic and international pressures to make changes to their political structures, they have never moved toward true democracy. Reforms have been either conservative or revolutionary and the latter has been either Islamist or socialist all of which is not compatible with transition to democracy. (Badi, 2005) Therefore, political reconstruction has been faced with different cultural, religious, political, and even geographical barriers. When explaining the case, some researcher argued that the religion of Islam inherently is a barrier to democracy, while the Christianity and to some extent the Buddhism and Hinduism facilitate the democratization.

Every political system is influenced by certain values and ideas. Due to political, historical, and cultural reasons the governing ideology in the most of Muslim countries has been non-democratic and no reform has changed that political culture. (Bashiriyeh, 2005, p.29) Muhammad Abed al-Jaberi has studied “political wisdom” in the sense of an internal logic which sets direction of political actions and whose task is enforcement of power and noted that the existing political wisdom among Arabs is continuation of their past historical heritage. “That past was dictatorial and the present is still overshadowed by it.” (Abed al-Jaberi, 2004, p7) Continuation of the past political wisdom of Islamic teachings into the present is very important for these scholars. (see: Uriya Shavit, 2010) Firahi even maintains that Islamic political philosophy is totalitarian because it has been restricted by the Jurisprudence (Fegh). (Firahi, 2004, last chapter) In

line with the argumentation of this paper, it would be important that despite the objective political, domestic obstacles, democracy is not inherent to any special religion, but it is the particular interpretation which represents Islam as an anti-democratic attitude. For a religion, to be political or not, does not mean to be pro or anti democratic evolution in its history.

III. THE CASE OF INTERPRETATION

It has been argued that we have three Islam: the holly text (Quran and Hadith), the interpretations of the text, and the historical Islam in which emerged in Moslem culture and civilization. Quran and Texts are silent and it is the interpretations that make them to speak. By reviewing the works and researches among the orientalists, westerners and Muslim writers, it would be obvious that the kind of interpretation imply on the political action in society. In the contemporary world, we are facing with two kind at the each end of spectrum; one, in which represent a hostile attitude of Islam to democracy, and the second in which tries to introduce a coherent face of Islam to democracy.

As a sample Abu al-Ala Mawdudi said that Islam is not democracy; for democracy is the name given to that particular form of government in which sovereignty ultimately rests with the people, in which legislation depends both in its form and content on the force and direction of public opinion and laws are modified and altered, to correspond to changes in that opinion.(Mawdudi, 1982) For some Westerners the relationship between Islam as a revealed scriptural religion and democracy as a specific form of modern government implies that Islam promotes a specific format for politics and government, so that neither the way of life of most Muslims nor the bulk of current Islamic writings is compatible with liberal democracy. (Lewis, 1993) So the most important thing for changing the Muslim societies to democratic ones is to change our interpretation of Islamic tradition, because there is not anything inherent for totalitarianism in this tradition.

Among the fundamentalism, there is an interpretation of Islam and an identification of democracy in which both cannot be compatible to each other. These interpretation and identification causes in a noble identity.

This so-called “noble or authentic” identity has some “elements”, “requirements” and “grounds”, which stop them to move toward the democratic trends in their lands; among those elements, it can be said that the noble identity they emphasized on it is ambiguous, whether it is all classic, modern, or is it all religious or ethnic one. From another aspect it requires conflict and engaging in strife or opposition instead of cooperation and competition which is inherent to democratization, esp. in its cultural, economic and social forms.

Because of the problem of interpretation, we are not to say that this so-called noble or authentic identity is (or even, is not) inherent in Islam, but when we survey in the field of its grounds, we find, from one side, that "this identity is politically power-based and from another side, it is somehow a re-product of colonialism and orientalistic policies and works, by implying that non-western (Arabs, Muslim, …) peoples has not qualities like self-governance, intellect and so on. Muslim fundamentalists by being aware of these colonialistic and orientalistic statements, try to introduce their own identity which opposes those statements. Therefore as a “reaction” to colonialistic and orientalistic statements about politics, religion and culture, Muslim fundamentalists focus on an imaginative identity that reduces (nearly) all aspects of thinking, living, and acting in opposition to the West’s ones, and infuses that they are distinguished and separated from all over the world’s peoples. “Ours is totally different from theirs”.

This belief prevents them capturing and enjoying the human advantages, “for, those advantages (and among them, democracy) isn’t ours, but is theirs, and we should withstand to be under their influence”. Experience of most Islamic countries shows that one of the most causes of their failure in democratic process is their asserting on a noble identity that is not capable with democracy; this imaginative noble identity is anti-democratic. In the case of fundamentalism this noble identity causes conflict and it has repeatedly declared that democracy is an “imported, western, and wicked solution”.

CONCLUSION

The political interpretation of Islam in its classic and modern versions, and when it is extended to politics and political action fails to play a democratic role, yet; and proves to be an obstacle on the way of democracy; so the issue is not how Islam can serve democracy, but how the interpretation of Islamic teachings can pave the way for a political life in modern era.

From this viewpoint, a research by John Rawls and Richard Rorti on Law of Peoples and the priority of democracy over philosophy is important in that, as Rawls argued, the interpretation of Jihad to “struggle and doing the best in action” instead of “fighting in God’s way and killing the enemies” would help the world to be peaceful and nonviolent. (Rawls, 2001) Rorti asserts that democracy does not need to be supported by philosophical arguments. (Rorti, 1990) However, when implications of philosophy challenge democracy, not expecting anything from philosophy cannot mean that we must be indifferent to it. Therefore, if democracy in Islamic countries is looked upon as a value, the interpretation of Islamic teachings, as well as its implications should be analyzed.

Meanwhile, the advance of technology has a dramatic impact on all cultures, including Muslim cultures; an impact which push them to have a controversial point of view towards Islam as barrier or assistant for democracy. Briefly, in this paper, we suggest a study of relationship between Islam and democracy in a broader sphere: religion and politics.

Based on this reading, it seems that democracy is not inherent to any special religion, but it is the particular interpretation which represents Islam as an anti-democratic attitude. We need to distinct between Islam and Islamism, recognition of Islamism as a complex, and differences between democracy and liberalism.

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