ISLAM, DEMOCRACY AND TURKEY

Prof. Ahmet Arslan[*]

The rulers and intellectuals of Muslim societies have long debated and discussed the compatibility between Islam and democracy. It is generally accepted that the problems generated by this relationship also constitute a major issue to be tackled in the modernisation projects and programmes of Muslim countries.

The answers given and positions taken about the relationship fall into two or three different categories. Since the last century, during which the first serious intellectual-cultural contacts with the Western world began, some Muslim leaders and intellectuals have been suggesting that democracy, along with other similar concepts of the modern world such as constitutional administration, secularism and human rights, are not incongruous with the basic values and notions of Islamic civilisation. They claim, in fact, that these concepts are in complete harmony with it. Some groups and individuals, surfacing over the last fifty years, have asserted quite the opposite. They argued, at first with a certain shyness, lately with more self-confidence, that those concepts and institutions rooted in the West, chief among them democracy, have no place in the religion of Islam, in Islamic culture and Islamic traditions. They hold the view that democracy itself is a concept that is incompatible with Islam. Among the individuals and groups making this case one can cite Sayyid Qutb, the famous theorist of the Muslim Brotherhood; Abu'l Ala Mawdudi, the renowned ideologist of the Pakistani group of Jamaat-i Islam; another famous Islamist, the Iranian intellectual Ali Shariati; the Islamic Salvation Front which has challenged the regime in Algeria; and Ali Bulaç, who is an example of those expressing similar opinions in Turkey.

The arguments

The main arguments and theses that the representatives of the former position put forth in connection with the relations between Islam and democracy may be summarised as follows; During the period of the four caliphs, a period representing the golden age of the Islamic state, the rulers came to power through elections. A mechanism relying on the consent

[*] *Professor of Philosophy, Aegean University, Izmir, Turkey*

of the community was adopted for the first Muslim caliphs to be charged as leaders. In Islam, there are three main guides used to determine the principles to be followed in societal administration and in the organisation of relations between individuals: the Koran, the Sunna (sayings and doings of the Prophet) and the Ijma. This latter represents a consensus, a compromise first among the scholars who have the authority to interpret the religion accurately and then among all Muslims. Also, one of the most important principles of Islam is that there are certain individuals – the ulema (theologians) and the faqih (Islamic judges) – who are invested with the authority to formulate the rules relating to the problems which may arise in the social life of Muslims. These decisions must take into consideration the interests of society or general interest. This is the principle of maslahat. Furthermore, the principle of separation of powers is also found in Islam.

Besides these, the presence of some other essentially democratic principles in Islam are highlighted. For instance, as everyone knows and as Gellner draws particular attention to, one of the most important characteristics of high Islamic culture is the absence of an institution such as a church to mediate between God and man; Islam's basic egalitarian attitude which opposes every kind of hierarchy is considered to be one of these democratic principles. Additionally, Islam attaches no importance to race, nationality, wealth or poverty and class. This kind of non-discriminatory individuation fits in well with a democratic climate. The legal equality recognised by Islam for everyone irrespective of social position and class distinction is also evaluated as an element which best projects a democratic mentality.

On the other hand, those who oppose this view of good relations and theoretical harmony between Islam and democracy are quick to note other aspects of Islam. They contend that Islam does not distinguish between the religious community and political community. In other words, they remind us that Islam did not establish a careful balance between the realm of Caesar, the temporal ruler, and the realm of God. Moreover, they emphasise that Islam imposes the Shari'a as law and as the constitution, and does not allow men to make laws for themselves, by themselves. The recognition of the Shari'a as the foundational law gives those religious scholars who have the authority to interpret it, a distinct and decisive role in approving or refusing governmental policies. This is also seen as an element incongruous with the basic idea or theory of democracy.

There are, apart from the above, more particular handicaps. For instance, in terms of legal status, Islam does not recognise equality between genders or between Muslims and non-Muslims. the case, in terms of political participation, is more ambiguous. Parallel to this, Islamic tradition refuses the appointment of women and non-Muslims to executive, administrative and judicial positions, although there is no clear reference to this in the Koran. This is also a practice that is incompatible with the recognised contemporary norms of democracy.

Perhaps more importantly, it is argued that the absolutist mentality of Islam in relation to politics is diametrically opposed to the relativist notion of viewing politics as a consequence of accommodation between wilful participants. This argument refers back to a very important and profound discussion, about whether or not the will of the people is also the will of God. Using the arguments of like-minded Christian theologians, leading Muslim intellectuals and writers criticise the democratic decision-making mechanism, as being no more than the sum of the arbitrary wills of individuals. For them, such a process does not concern itself with the pursuit of absolute truth.

A reality check on these multi-dimensional discussions carried out on the theoretical plane should constitute another important dimension of the relation between Islam and democracy. A group of scholars, among them most notably Samuel Huntington, cite actual experiences with democracy in Islamic countries. Huntington, evaluating the empirical evidence, draws attention to the fact that the only country among Islamic countries that sustains a democratic political system is Turkey. He also points out, as an equally pertinent fact, that democracy in Turkey is not based on Islam, nor does it define itself by Islamic references. Rather, democracy in Turkey is institutionalised despite Islam and because it took the risk of a rupture with Islam. In short, scholars argue that the relations between Islam and democracy are not harmonious in practice, irrespective of the theoretical niceties in debates. Huntington also reminds his readers that opposition movements in Islamic countries usually betray a fundamentalist character, and those movements that seek a democratic order are relatively weak.

In fact, we must agree that, in practice, democratic development in Islamic countries are double- edged. In almost all Islamic countries, opposition movements, carry the banners of democracy, human rights, and democratic values while they oppose existing despotic,

autocratic regimes. On the other hand, enough signs exist to show that these movements or their spokesmen are not committed to democracy as a positive doctrine and a positive program.

To illustrate the point we can use some examples from Turkey. The mayor of Istanbul, a leading representative of the Islamist Welfare Party (WP) once stated that he sees democracy as just a means to reach a treasured end (Islamic rule), much as a trolley to be taken to one's final destination. We can also recall that Mr. Necmettin Erbakan often reflected on that quality of democracy that exalts the will of the majority since this was a principle that served his interests, But in his various declarations and acts, Mr. Erbakan, the chairman of the WP, displayed an almost total lack of sensitivity about the personal rights and freedoms of minority groups or individuals that are equally as important as majority rule.

Another important area for research in this context would be the attitudes of the common people toward the practice of democracy in Islamic countries. It is absolutely necessary to note the appreciation of democracy that one finds among a majority of ordinary citizens when they are given the opportunity to express themselves. This attitude, which necessarily ignores the questions of whether democracy is or is not congruent with the theory, history, culture and traditions of Islam, is highly encouraging for those individuals who appreciate or who believe in democracy, since the transition to democracy in Turkey over fifty years ago, no evidence has emerged that the people think that democracy is antithetical to Islamic theory and Islamic traditions. Nor is there any sign that they took democracy as something alien and incompatible with their beliefs, as something imported. To put it more simply, there is no serious indication that people are unhappy with the system of democracy, its practices, and its consequences. On the contrary, there is plenty of evidence that the majority sees the general will as the most effective and useful institution for arranging their life as they wish and as their interests require. Ordinary Turks who are aware that political power is also their ticket to economic empowerment generally believe that the legitimacy of an administration depends on the people's vote obtained through free, competitive elections.

The Turkish experience

Turkey's history during the last 150 years presents a successful example of the encounter between Western and Eastern civilisations. This has been the period when a society

belonging to the Muslim cultural world has encountered those institutions, values and concepts that have sprung up in the western world. During this period, a successful effort has been made to adopt and internalise attributes of the Western civilisation. This has been a regular and stable process, despite some interruptions from time to time, stretching from the Tanzimat (Reform Movement) in 1839 to Meşrutiyet (Constitutional Government) first in 1876 and then in 1908, to the Republic in 1923, and from the Republic to Democratisation in 1946. In this context, developments that have taken place in Turkey during the last ten to fifteen years should be viewed as the deepening of the Westernisation process which is penetrating a wider social strata rather than a regression from the achievements of that particular journey.

What exactly are the developments that have taken place in Turkey during the last ten to fifteen year? Economically, there has been a greater acceleration in the industrialisation process as manufacturing spread countrywide and led to the rise of peripheral actors. Small and medium enterprises have emerged as economic agents to be reckoned with, freedom of trade has expanded, the country has opened itself to the world markets, partaking in the globalisation process. The social changes accompanying these economic changes include an urbanisation process which is accelerating every day, with a rush from the periphery to the centre. The most remarkable development in the cultural domain is the shaping of a more pluralist, more polyphonic intellectual atmosphere going in tandem with the development of educational and communicational facilities and instruments. In Turkey, the development of a civil society that began with the transition to democracy has especially accelerated since the 1980's. The liberalising policies implemented by the late PM (then President) Turgut Özal in the economy, together with the enormous advances in communication, have created the basis for a more liberal, and thus a more democratic evolution in the intellectual domain as well.

Naturally, the new liberal and democratic developments have provided fertile ground for the Islamic movements that have been wishing to express themselves more freely and in a more institutionalised form since the transition to democracy. The most important consequence of this in the political domain has been the continual and regular advances that the Islamist Welfare Party has secured in the electoral front especially in the '90s. This growth allowed the party to emerge from the elections in December 1995 as the largest party and to finally attain power.

The 1980s were a period when the Islamic movement was ushered into the public sphere. Its presence expressed itself in a variety of ways. The Islamist "new women" who have made themselves visible over the issue of veiling, were situated mostly in the universities. The rising Islamist businessmen organised themselves in such associations as MÜSİAD (Independent Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association). New Islamic intellectuals have found an opportunity to spread their views to wider publics by way of large and small-scale press and media; in journals, newspapers and television. A new group of Islamically oriented engineers, physicians, governors and managers have succeeded in being appointed to high positions in state institutions, ministries, schools, and administrative post which had previously been closed to them.

It is, of course, impossible to analyse all these groups individually and in detail within the framework of this article, but I will try to make a general assessment. No doubt the WP consolidated and expanded its existence in the political domain thanks to the legitimacy and increasing strength in the legal, cultural, economic and social domains attained by the Islamic movement in the 80's. Both in terms of its social base of support and its political-cultural-economical program, this party is still in the process of defining itself. It represents a political-social movement in search of its own identity. This search for an identity is likely to continue for some time to come. In the words of a writer who closely follows the Islamic movements, this party has a political project and program which may be termed as "neither Shari'a nor democracy." On the other hand, as the same writer incisively observes, the WP is a party which negates, in quite an interesting way, the most important Islamist principle: that religious affairs and state affairs cannot be separated from each other. In the WP, the leadership consists of either good orators, good organisers and/or good propagandists, but not of religious scholars. This fact, by itself, clearly demonstrates that in theory and in practice, the tendency within the WP is to make the religious authority subservient to the political one. There has been a gradual decline in the role of the ulema (religious scholars) and religious sects in the party. All of these developments show beyond doubt that the party has appropriated the most important institution of modernity, that is, the clear separation of religious affairs from state affairs. Consequently, we can conclude that, in essence, the WP is a political party wishing to obtain political power through political means. This conclusion validates the view that the WP's identity is but a secular identity wrapped in an Islamist garb.

The matter of Islamist women that has dominated Turkey's public agenda for some time, because of the issue of veiling, seems to contain a similar dual meaning. As researchers interested in the subject have rightly pointed out, the demand to wear Islamic dress which is the most visible expression of a collective demand for rights by Islamic women, does not fit traditional image of the Muslim woman. This new female (feminist?) Islamism is comprised of elite, urban, and well-educated university students. On the one hand, this movement presents itself in radical opposition to modernity. On the other hand, it also carries attributes of being a criticism, or even a refusal of traditional Islam. Moreover, the demands for the right to wear Islamic dress are voiced with reference to, or associated with reference to, or associated with, contemporary values such as individual freedoms, rather than Islamic references. It is also remarkable that the efforts to legitimise and rationalise different Islamic demands or challenges rely on the concepts, values and the discourse of modernity; that same modernity which the movement opposes.

The same is true for Islamist writers and intellectuals who have assumed the mission of disseminating and legitimising the Islamic worldview through newspapers, journals, books and private television stations. The most influential members of this group make an effort to express their world views with references to the works of Western philosophers, writers and movements that reflect the spirit of the times. This, they do without neglecting to refer to the Islamic sources that proliferate in translation and that their readers have access to. In this context, during the last ten years, the western school of thought that has been most popular with this group was post-modernism and the famous writers and representatives associated with it. Post-modernism defends theses which postulate that cultures and civilisations are totalities closed to each other; that they could not be translated into each other; that universalistic, objectivist truth doctrines, epistemologies and world views such as enlightenment and positivism are out of fashion; that the great discourses are over; and that all stories or doctrines are equal in value. This kind of view constitutes the most valuable arsenal that Islamic intellectuals have hit upon in the last ten years. On the other hand, I must note that whether or not this cultural relativism is congruent with Islamic universalism and claims to possess the absolute truth is ignored with a telling postmodernist twist.

At this point, it will be useful to mention the structural changes that the old, traditional religious orders have gone through. In the traditional structure, the religious orders have acted as intermediaries between the individual and the state and kept a closed mürşit-mürit (spiritual

teacher-disciple) relationship. As some observers have pointed out, recently, important changes have taken place because of the enormous changes and developments experienced in education and communication. Traditional face-to-face conversations in the religious orders have given way to mass meeting, conferences, television programs and videotapes. The accessibility of all texts and sources related to the subject, for the masses has strengthened the tendency to bypass the expert knowledge of mürşit or of the ulema. Perhaps the individualist, egalitarian tendency inherent in Islam which opposes hierarchical structures will come to fruition during this process under the conditions of the modern world. Or perhaps this process will make way for new forms of puritanism and expressions of personal piety, unparalleled until now in the history of Islamic piety.

It may be useful here to reflect on the phenomenon of a peculiar Islamic community leader, Fethullah Gülen. The teachings of Fethullah Hoca, as he is widely known, are actually part of the teachings of Nurculuk (a religious order) which recognises the full implications and requirements of modernity. His message appears to be a most peaceful and conciliatory project of harmony and integration for those segment of the population who feel they are being squeezed between the official modernisation program of the state and the need or desire to revive or live according to the traditional values of society. On the one hand such people do not want to reject outright the values brought about by modernity. Neither, do they want to turn their backs on the results of a tradition and cultural sensitivity that are over a thousand years old. For them, the thesis, or, in fact, the synthesis offered by Fethullah Hoca seems to provide a most admirable project.

Prospects for an Islamic democracy

The last fifteen years which will be associated with the name of Turgut Özal were very consequential for Turkey. Islamic fundamentalist developments which grew in that period deserve greater attention and more careful evaluation than they have gotten so far. It is not enough to summarily dismiss them as reactionary. This is not to deny that they suffer from severe deficiencies and inadequacies in terms of modern and democratic politics. There are hopeful signs in Turkey pertaining to the democratisation of Islam or the emergence of an Islamic version of democratic rule. However, we cannot ignore those developments that run counter to this trend and indeed threaten it. Democracy is new to Islam. The actors in the political and social arena lack the necessary familiarity with the subject. The traditional

material that Islamic theory has at its disposal to cope with democracy is insufficient. This holds true even for the Islamic movements in Turkey which may be seen as the most experienced in democratic politics.

Ultimately, life will teach all the parties the lessons of modern life and social order. Indeed, this is partly what Fukuyama argues. In the theory that he developed based on Hegel, Fukuyama argued that all human beings are basically similar. Their basic needs and desires are comfort and ease in the physical domain, and prestige and recognition in the moral domain, and if in the moral domain the system satisfying the needs of prestige and recognition is democracy, than there is no reason for the people, the common people of Muslim societies; not to strive for these.

Finally, it is necessary to remember that it is not realistic to rely on the democratic interpretation of the theoretical-practical elements in the Islamic doctrine and traditions for the democratisation of Islamic countries. Modernity-and its important element democracy-did not spring in the West from within Christianity or because of a reinterpretation of Christianity from a democratic perspective. It arose largely despite Christianity, following certain developments. Christianity, its institutions and representatives, were forced to accept democracy in due time, after well-known bloody struggles. The same will be true for Islam. It is not very meaningful or practical to derive democracy from Islam. However, it is possible to Islamize democracy or to reconcile it with Islam. Islam, during its history, has appropriated many of the things, thought to be non- Islamic in the beginning. That is how it has secured its continued existence. Democracy has been powerful enough to demonstrate-and will continue to demonstrate in the future-that it is one of the most potent realities that Islam has the potential or the necessity to reconcile with.

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