Consideration on Democracy in the Middle East

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ABSTRACT: *Current scholarships regarding democracy in the Middle East have tried to understand why democracy has elutes this region (Teti et al., 2019; Roberts, 2018; Rahman, 2018; Schmitter, 2017; Heydemann, 2016; Diamond et al., 2003; Carothers, & Ottaway, 2005; Liu, 2015; Cavatorta, 2009). However, there seem to be a gap in the existing scholarships as not much attention has been given to understand the complex historical and philosophical realities under societies in the Middle East operate. The present research attempts to bridge this gap by pursuing a qualitative textual analysis of salient works in classical Islamic philosophy and theology. This is done to propose that there are alternate forms of governance, other than democracy, that are more appropriate to the states in the Middle East.*
KEYWORDS: *Islam, philosophy, Middle East, democracy, freedom*

I. INTRODUCTION

Scholars have tried to understand why democracy has elutes the Middle East and numerous literature proposes how to establish democracy in this region by replacing the authoritarian or monarchical regimes in this region with a more democratic form of government (Teti et al., 2019; Roberts, 2018; Rahman, 2018; Schmitter, 2017; Heydemann, 2016; Diamond et al., 2003; Carothers, & Ottaway, 2005; Liu, 2015; Lewis, 2002; Khalidi, 2004; Cavatorta, 2009; Ottaway & Carothers, 2004; Timur, 2004; Ross, 2001; Tessler, 2002; Midgal, 1988). Leading scholarly researches illustrate democracy to be an appropriate form of governance that also accentuates economic growth and development (De Mesquita et al., 2005; Przeworski et al., 2009; Acemoglu et al., 2002; Acemoglu et al., 2001; Weingast, 1997; Putnam, 1988; Putnam, 1993; Huntington, 1968; Rustow 1970; Lipset 1959).

However, there seems to be a gap in the existing scholarships. Democratic language such as individual freedom, freedom of press, and political freedom, etc. may seem sound in Western democracies, but such rhetoric fails to acknowledge the complex historical and philosophical realities under which societies in the Middle East operate. The norms under which these societies' functions are the product of thousands of years and can seldom be ignored in favor of alien values. This became apparent during the Arab spring that began in Tunisia and soon extended to other states in the region—Morocco, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Syria, and Libya among many. The uprising that commenced with optimism about democracy is reduced to civil wars in Syria, Yemen, and Libya creating a refugee crisis for Western democracies. At the same time, the democratically elected government in Egypt after the overthrow of Mubarak was ousted by the military, while Iraq and Afghanistan nursed a fragile democracy.

Thus, this study is an effort to fill in the exiting gap in the literature about democracy in the Middle East. The present research attempts to better understand this democratic impasse in this region by pursuing a qualitative textual analysis of some salient works on classical Islamic philosophy and theology. This is done to hypothesis that perhaps there are alternate forms of governance, other than democracy, that are more appropriate to the states in the Middle East.

II. KINGDOM OF GOD

We can begin our inquiry with a basic premise about the separation of religion from the state. But such postulation contradicts what Islam stipulates. As Ibn Arabi suggests, "God made the human being His deputy in the universe and assured his success and predominance over everything" (Ibn Arabi, 1194/1997, p. 5). Likewise, the *Qur'an* preaches that God sent humans to look after His divine Kingdom and, as stewards; this Kingdom will be ruled in accordance to divine rule, that is, *Qur'an* (Ibn Rushd, 1174/1974). As such, this contradicts what democracy demands: a separation between the state and religion. Clearly, this is difficult in Islam. Religion, as alluded to in al-Farabi's *Tahsil al-sa'ada* or *The Attainment of Happiness*, is part of everyday life and state is comprised of persons whose very being is their God (Mahdi, 1962).

In Islam, it is God who gives guidance to man so that he may properly and rightly rule over the kingdom as stewards of God. Indeed, as al-Farabi indicates, the concept of steward is synonymous with the idea

of a legislator, prince, or ruler, for these are seen to the one and the same, for they are all divinely inspired (Mahdi, 1962). The divine rule through which one rules over His kingdom provides guidance and instructions; such as, "…They show how to keep order within the divine order while improving ourselves; how to guide our lives in the right way; how to protect His kingdom, which is the human being, from oblivion; how to rule it in the way that it is meant to be ruled, by the soul that the Lord has placed in it as His deputy" (Ibn Arabi, 1194/1997, p. 8). Therefore, as a steward it is not possible to rule the divine kingdom without guidance from God—which He has given to man through *Qur'an*—this scripture becomes a manual on how to take care of God's kingdom. So, it is true that, as Al-Ghazzali suggests, "…man was not created in jest or random, but marvelously made and for some great end" (1910/ 2010, p. xv). This "great end" is the ministration of God's kingdom.

To govern the divine kingdom, for instance, the *Qur'an* preaches against corruption. Sura 2:11 states, "…Do not cause corruption in the land…" (2010, p. 5). Whereas Sura 2:148 intimates, "Each community has its own direction to which it turns: race to do good deeds…wherever you are…" (2010, p. 17). It becomes apparent that the historical and contextual philosophy of Islam colors the consciousness of the society. People see their state as a God's kingdom and where guidance is given to man from God to create a harmonious community of God as mentioned in Sura 2:148, "each community has its own direction," it indicates the existence of many communities comprised of believers and non-believers alike. Yet, in order to serve Gods kingdom, one must do good, not harm those who do not believe. For *Qur'an* also suggests the believers to leave the non-believers alone and not get entangled in conflicts (Haleem, 2010).

We may perhaps propose that *Qur'an* does not teach violence; rather tolerance, generosity, humility, and other ethical virtues are encouraged. Hence, it is quite understandable why some with intimate knowledge on Islamic theology and philosophy would see this divine rule as irreplaceable. Certainly, if these rules and laws are properly understood, they may seem superior to the ideals of democracy, at least within the context of the Islamic societies in the Middle East.

Even concepts, such as liberty, suggest something diametrically different. Here, liberty signifies a person's liberation from distractions that interfere in apprehending God's grace. Ultimately, liberty implies freedom to know God (Ibn Tufayl, 1185/ 2009; Haleem, 2010; Ibn Arabi, 1194/1997). This view of liberty is diametric to what we understand to generally accept as liberty in a secular sense, emptied of any religious colorings, i.e. positive and negative liberty as proposed by Isaiah Berlin (1971). It seems imprudent to expect people in the Middle East to throw away thousands of years of norms and mores for some foreign value which contradicts the very foundation of their society. As it is mentioned in *Qur'an*, one's very existence is the essence of God (Haleem, 2010).

In the Middle East, religion has been the source of community, commerce and life that brings every Muslim under a community of God. *Qur'an* preaches not only how to live one's life but also, as stewards, how to govern the divine kingdom of God. In one sense, Hegel proposes something similar with regard to the inseparability of religion and state. As Hegel argues, "…State is based on religion, the position thus assigned to religion supposes the state already to exist; and that subsequently, in order to maintain it, Religion must be brought into it… and impressed upon people's hearts… The form of Religion, therefore, decides that of the state and its constitution" (1837/2011, p. 58). For Hegel, religion decides the kind of state and constitution a given society will have or adopt. One can perhaps conjecture that religion decides the form of governance a society assumes.

If Islam is properly understood and the veil of its misinterpretation removed, one can perhaps hypothesis the states in the Middle East to decide the forms of government most appropriate for themselves. Left on its own, this region will appropriately transform according to its conditions (Ibn Tufayl, 1185/2009; Berman, 1963). Ibn Tufayl's allegorical tale, *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*, gives an illustration of a boy brought up in the nature, alone. Here, the boy grows up learning from nature and gradually discovers the world as well as God (Ibn Tufayl, 1185/2009). This allegorical narrative, comparable to Ibn Bajjah's *Governance of the Solitary* or *Tadbīr Al-Mutawāhhid*, suggests that society left to itself gradually discovers one's true self or and as such establishes principles that best suits him and the society (Berman, 1963). Similarly, societies in this region possess the knowledge necessary to make sound judgment regarding what is in the best interest for their society. As Feyerabend argues, "Knowledge is a local commodity designed to satisfy local needs and to solve local problems…" (Feyerabend, 1987, p. 28). This is what equips them with cognitive tools and knowledge most apt to solve their own problems and satisfy their needs of their community.

In most Islamic communities, the superiority of Islam and its words, i.e. *Qur'an*, are maintained since all laws are given to man from God. The *Qur'an* contains all the instructions and rules on how to live in this world as well as take care of God's kingdom. The laws given in *Qur'an* are relevant for all and at all times. As Ibn Arabi states, "Whether in olden times or now, justice does not age; it is as it ever was, always sought-after and respected, because it is a divine balance with which all is weighed in this material realm" (1194/1997, p. 83). Ibn Arabi clearly states that law as well as justice from God can never become invalid, for He is the most perfect being; so, how can social construct rules be better than justice and law given to man from God.

The above argument illustrates incongruity between democracy and Islam. In other words, in most democratic societies, laws change according to circumstances. Novel amendments are made to the existing laws to reflect current circumstances. In Islam, however, how can imperfect human change divine laws given by God is suited for all places and for all times?

III. CONCLUSION

Analysis into the historical and contextual philosophy of the Islam in the Middle East directs us to infer the prospect about forms of governance other than democracy in this region. Inferences such as these may not seem far-fetched if we acutely expound the societal realities—such as historical, religious, socio-economic, and political conditions and beliefs. Even the euphoric Arab uprising or spring brought ephemeral changes to the region. The fragile democracies in Iraq and Afghanistan is uncertain at best regarding its longevity to function as viable democratic state; the civil conflicts in Yemen, Libya, and Syria continue to displace people, which is further supplemented by the fact that these conflicts have become a proxy war between regional and global powers. At the same time, Egypt seems to have predilection for military government.

Prudent suggestions concerning the form of governance in the Middle East ought to be left to people of this region. After all, "…suggestion should come from friends, not from distant 'thinkers'. It is time to stop ratiocinating about the lives of people one has never seen, it is time to give up that 'humanity'…can be saved by groups of people shooting breeze in well heated offices" (Feyerabend, 1987, p. 17). Indeed, any suggestions for meaningful change concerning forms of governance in the Middle East ought to come from people who know the societal conditions well; they alone ought to be given space to reflect and time to decide what works for them.

The relentless quest to spread democracy in the region where circumstances are not suitable merely creates unforeseen consequences, which we are all familiar with all too well—civil conflicts over power, refugee and mass displacement, extremism and terrorism, poverty and inequality. One ought to be also mindful of the fact that, as Feyerabend states, "It is also possible to use the most vapid slogans and the most empty 'principles' to sell or impose a coherent and meaningful view of the world. This does not encourage freedom; it breeds slavery, through slavery packaged in resounding libertarian phrases" (1987, p. 12). To shove inorganic and foreign values disassociated from ground realities of the societies in which such values are vehemently instituted can perhaps be deemed as a subtler form of subjugation. After all, these societies are asked to accept values which they are ill conditioned for. Dostoevsky, in *Brothers Karamazov*, portents this fundamental secret from the mouth of the Grand Inquisitor, "…man seeks to worship what is established beyond dispute… For the sake of common worship they've slain each other with sword. They have set up gods and challenged one another, 'Put away your gods and come and worship ours, or we will kill you and your gods!'" (Kaufmann, 1964). Every society sets up its version of the universal and equates its values and beliefs with the emblem of humanity, while at the same time, contesting against other societies over questions of universality of the same. This simultaneously reduces values, norms, and beliefs of other societies as false and their adherence as dull.

Moreover, attention must also be given to the fact that we are speaking of a region that has no history of democracy. Since their establishment as states after the First World War in this region, all had monarchies and other authoritarian form of governance. Therefore, it becomes essential to also be familiar with the history of the region. Ever since the decline of the Islamic civilization, societies in the Middle East have been adopting the ways of the West but to no avail. Lewis (2002) provides a good illustration of the how the Islamic civilization entered its stage of crisis and what measures were taken from Islamic states to compete with the West, this includes Western military artilleries, military advisors to Western societal habits and practices and so on. Perhaps with respect to their political institutions and forms of governance, the people in this region should formulate what suits them most appropriately. For it is they who gave the world the opulent Islamic civilization that planted the seed of what was to become in the West as the age of renaissance.

It will suffice to conclude this analysis with a statement by Paul Feyerabend, as he poignantly states, "I do not favor the export of 'freedom' into regions that are doing well without it and whose inhabitants show no desire to change their ways" (Feyerabend, 1987, p. 39). This statement is a striking indictment against the valiant efforts to establish democracy in the Middle East (or elsewhere in the world like in Asia or Africa). For thousands of years, Muslims have lived and survived and also gave the world one of the most magnificent civilizations. They have done all these in the absence of democracy. This basically demonstrates this region's resistance to democracy with no intensions of changing their beliefs, values, and ways of life.

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