Islam and Democracy

"Islam and democracy are not only compatible, their association is inevitable. In a Muslim society, one without the other is not perfect." - Abdul Karim Souroush[1]

Despite the assertions of some right-wing commentators (both Muslim and non-Muslim), **Muslims for Progressive Values believes that democracy is fully compatible with Islam and Islamic law, and indeed may in fact rise to the level of religious requirement in our modern age.** Although the Qur'an itself contains very little advice on the practical realities of government and does not specify what form of governance Muslims should aspire to, it does allude to several concepts that are basic to democracy and "undeniably proposes that the affairs and governance of the nation be based on shura, or consultation."[2] In fact, the Prophet Muhammad himself is told in the Qur'an to "consult with [the faithful] upon the conduct of all affairs," (Qur'an 3:159) and the hadith recount many instances of Muhammad consulting with his followers and implementing the decision of the majority, even when he personally disagreed.[3]

The requirement of consultation pervades the Qur'an and the hadith and was the basis of the democratic nature of the governments instituted by Muhammad and the early caliphs. The Qur'anic injunction for rulers to "consult" with the ruled is a clear order—not a recommendation, but a requirement. At the time of Muhammad's death, the caliph, his successor as leader of the Islamic empire, was chosen by majority vote: thus it came to be that the first caliph, Abu Bakr, was not a blood relative of the Prophet, for Islam does not condone succession through a royal line, or by fiat of the sitting political leader. Islam's historical literature is full of stories of the early "rightly-guided" caliphs, who allowed "even the weakest of men or women [to] reproach [them]" if they made a mistake or failed to seek the opinions of the people before implementing legislation.[4]

In time, however, subsequent caliphs would end the tradition of picking the caliph through consensus, warping the caliphate into a government of absolute rule by dynastic kings.[5] But though the deaths of the "rightly-guided" caliphs meant that "the right of citizens to criticize and to disagree with their leader was abrogated," the practices of the Prophet stand as "a clear illustration of the Islamic system of government… signif[ying] the principle of people's participation in their own affairs, their self-determination, and… national sovereignty."[6]

To be clear, MPV does not call for the reestablishment of a caliphate but instead for constitutional democracy within defined nation-states; as stated earlier, though a caliphate may have been the form that the early Islamic empire took, there is nothing in Islam that specifically dictates this as the form of political organization.

That the Muslim world today suffers from a major democracy deficit is not a result of Islamic legal concepts but of the repression exercised by autocratic leaders. The hundreds of millions of Muslims who are active and vigorous members of Western democracies can attest to that fact, as do the many millions more Muslim citizens of Turkey, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Mali, Malaysia, and Senegal—all of which are generally considered democratic states by political analysts.

MPV's position on democracy is increasingly being echoed by mainstream Muslim thinkers and citizens—even those who many consider radicals, such as the exiled Tunisian Islamist leader who is quoted above. Muslims need not choose either democracy or Islam—they can, and do, choose democracy and Islam. The two are not mutually exclusive.

[1] Quoted by Robin Wright, "Two Visions of Islam," (1994) p. 68.
[2] Mehdi Bazargan, "Religion and Liberty," in Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook (Charles Kurzman ed., 1998), p. 79.
[3] Muhammad Khalaf-Allah, "Legislative Authority," in Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook (Charles Kurzman ed., 1998), p. 40, 45.
[4] Id. at p. 44.
[5] Id. at p. 45.
[6] Barzagan, supra note 1, p. 77 – 78.