THE DEBATE ON POLITICAL ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY IN AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract: Islam plays a pivotal role in the political system of Afghanistan, shaping governance, legal frameworks, and social dynamics. This debate examines the ongoing debate surrounding political Islam and democracy in Afghanistan, focusing on the complexities and tensions between Islamic governance and democratic principles. The discussion explores how political Islam, particularly through groups like the Taliban, has shaped Afghanistan's political structure and how this contrasts with efforts to establish a democratic state. Key issues include the compatibility of Islamic law (Sharia) with democratic ideals such as human rights, gender equality, and political pluralism. The paper also highlights the broader implications for Afghanistan's future governance and stability, as well as the challenges of balancing traditional Islamic values with modern democratic aspirations.
Key words: Political Islam, Democracy, Afghanistan, Sharia Law, Taliban, Human Rights, Political Pluralism, Islamic Governance.

Introduction

The philosopher Karl Popper argued that history lacks inherent meaning but can be given meaning by individuals (Popper, 1977: 278). This statement resonates as we must draw lessons from Afghanistan's turbulent history to prevent its repetition. Without learning from history, our knowledge holds little value, and the cycle of history will continue. Afghanistan's history emphasizes the critical relationship between religion and governance. When religion is used for political gain, the prospects for progress and prosperity diminish. We must understand the appropriate approaches for effecting societal and political change. This implies that spontaneous and revolutionary changes are not conducive to enduring success, as evidenced by Afghanistan's experiences.

The challenges faced by Afghanistan over the past forty years, particularly in the context of the relationship between religion and government, have multiple underlying factors. One significant aspect is the influence of fundamentalist and political Islamic movements. The majority of Afghans practice Hanafi Sunni Islam, which traditionally emphasizes logic and wisdom, opposing fundamentalist ideologies. However, the influence of movements such as the Deobandi Madrasas and the Muslim Brotherhood has affected Afghan society. The Deobandi movement, initially established by Hanafi Muslims in response to British influence in India, later spread to parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan, promoting radical views and opposing modernization. This ideology provided the foundation for the emergence of the Taliban movement, known for its radical interpretation of Islam. Another challenge is the lack of a standardized center for religious education in Afghanistan, leading many to seek religious education in Pakistan, where they may be exposed to radical teachings and become susceptible to extremist ideologies. The influx of fundamentalist literature and the involvement of Pakistani intelligence further exacerbated the situation, contributing to the radicalization of Afghan youth during the Soviet invasion and civil war.

Literature review
The conflicts in religious understanding and morality

A significant factor in the Afghan conflict is the differing interpretations of religion. Maley (2002) suggests that there is a disparity between the Islam followed by the educated class and that practiced by the village prayer leaders or mullahs. Moreover, there are distinctions between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Wahhabi movement, despite their collaboration in supporting Afghan Islamists against the Soviet forces with the help of the Pakistani army and ISI. Roy (1994) notes that the activities of Wahhabi and Ahle Hadith in Afghanistan have led to religious conflicts, particularly in regions where Sufism and Hanafism are deeply rooted. Currently, the influence of Wahhabi and Ahle Hadith ideologies is growing in eastern Afghanistan and border regions with Pakistan, previously inhabited by Hanafi Muslims. This shift has raised concerns about the emphasis on appearance and religious subdivisions among Afghan Islamists (Rubin, 2002). Furthermore, Moheq (2011) categorizes religiosity into two main types based on moral values. One approach prioritizes religion over morality, while the other asserts that morality takes precedence over religion, with religion deriving its legitimacy from its morality. This distinction has led to varying interpretations of Sharia, resulting in different perspectives on issues such as suicide attacks, armed jihad, and the acceptability of certain behaviors in different Islamic countries. Moheq (2011) underscores that the Quran's most important message is centered around morality, which aligns with universal moral standards. Additionally, Yusuf Qarzawi and Mawdudi have also expressed the significance of morality in Muslim societies, highlighting it as a critical aspect of the current crisis.

Political Islam and Democracy
The findings of this study investigate the relationship between Islam and democracy, particularly focusing on political Islam movements in Afghanistan in the post-World War II era. The discourse on Islam and democracy is intricate for various reasons. These two subjects are fundamentally distinct; Islam is a religion, while democracy represents a modern political system. Democracy is inherently secular, as it does not adhere to any specific faith, and is liberal in nature, promoting individual freedoms essential for a liberal society. The core assumption of democracy is that all beliefs are valid, without any judgment on who is right or wrong, and it does not recognize superiority or inferiority among people or faiths.

The discussion surrounding Islam and democracy arises from significant transformations in Muslim societies and the religious struggle to reform political systems. Some believe that Islam can coexist with democracy, citing verses from the Qur'an and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad that support their views. For instance, verse 99 of Surah Yunus, where Allah asks the prophet if he was forcing people to become faithful and says that all people would have been faithful if God wanted. Additional Quranic verses emphasize that it is an individual's choice to accept Islam, and even the Prophet Muhammad could not compel anyone to convert. The life of the Prophet also illustrates that Islam can foster societies that promote general welfare, encourage consultation, and respect human dignity. These examples suggest a potential harmony between Islam and democratic principles.

Conversely, many argue that democracy conflicts with Islam, citing verses such as verse 32 of Surah Yunus, which asserts that there is only one true path—Islam. Additionally, writings from Sayed Qutb advocate for the incompatibility of Islam with democratic governance. The discourse on political Islam, democratic governance, and the compatibility of Islam with democracy gained prominence during a time when Muslims experienced a decline in power and underwent significant changes in governance, moving away from historical systems like the caliphate.

Following the collapse of the Ottoman caliphate, Muslims faced numerous challenges, leading to the rise of political Islam as a reaction to modernity and the failures of existing political models. Political Islam has struggled to provide a stable and successful framework for Muslims in the

contemporary world. The debates on governance among Muslims have evolved dramatically since the rise of political Islam, shifting focus from general governance principles to the emergence of Islamist movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jamiat-e Islami founded by Mawdudi in India.

The Muslim Brotherhood, established in 1928 by Hasan al-Banna, began with a moderate political stance but became more radicalized through the influence of Sayed Qutb. During the rise of Islamist movements, anti-imperialist rhetoric gained significant traction, effectively mobilizing people due to the imperialist occupation of Muslim nations, particularly Egypt at that time.

Results and Discussion
The Religious Plurality and the Historical Background
Afghanistan serves as a bridge connecting various regions and has historically been a battleground for great powers due to its strategic geographic position, leading to significant suffering throughout its history. Efforts at modernization and nationalization in Afghanistan have faltered in the face of Russian and British competition and pressures (İnaç and Sada 2021: 27). Recently, intensified internal factors have made Afghanistan a battleground for different external forces to engage in intelligence operations. The intertwining of politics and religion in Afghan society has generated more conflict and instability than in many other nations. Since the early twentieth century, the role of religion in Afghan politics has increased, especially following Afghanistan's independence, with early reactions against modernization coming from Mullahs and conservative fundamentalists (Yousaf and Adkin 1992: 49). By the latter half of the twentieth century, religious groups emerged as political actors within Afghan politics. Additionally, the emergence of Pakistan as a Muslim state in 1947 and the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1978 contributed to the rise of Islamist movements in Afghanistan (Roy 1990: 71-77). Consequently, the politicization of Islam has led to a radicalization process among Islamist factions.

The year 1964 holds significant importance in Afghan history as it marked the establishment of a new democratic framework, featuring the most progressive constitution to date, although Afghanistan remained a monarchy. For the first time, members of parliament were elected through democratic processes, paving the way for a constitutional monarchy. During this period of progress, various political and social groups emerged, with political Islam and communists being the most influential, both of which posed serious threats to the nascent democratic order. The political landscape shifted dramatically with Dawood Khan's coup in 1973, after which Islamist factions became increasingly active and opposed Dawood Khan's modern and leftist policies. Seeking foreign assistance to support modernization, Dawood Khan strengthened ties with the USSR. During this time, Afghan-USSR relations reached their peak, prompting Islamists to respond with fierce opposition, including a coup attempt against Dawood Khan in 1974 and subsequent armed resistance in the provinces, marking the first instance of armed conflict between Islamists and the state in Afghanistan's history (Anwar 1998: 81).

The bloody communist coup in 1978 plunged Afghanistan into a prolonged period of instability and conflict. The Soviet occupation further enhanced the influence of religion, with resistance against foreign forces being framed as a religious duty for Muslims, leading to a global call for jihad. The decade-long occupation had a devastating impact on the country, undermining democratic institutions and causing a significant exodus of patriotic Afghans, including many of the country's elite. Although the withdrawal of Soviet forces and the reconciliation efforts of Dr. Najibullah's government presented an opportunity for rebuilding democracy, Islamist factions targeted the overthrow of Najibullah's regime through armed struggle (İnaç and Sada 2021: 89). They ultimately seized control of Kabul and the rest of Afghanistan in 1992, aided by Pakistan. The ensuing civil war was exacerbated by differing interpretations of Islam and ethnic rivalries,

but the fragmentation and selfish interests among Islamist groups were the primary drivers of conflict. The civil war, characterized by Islamist dominance, severely tarnished the image of Islamic movements and religion in Afghan politics (Anthony 2000: 78).

During this tumultuous period, Afghanistan experienced severe losses; its material and spiritual resources were devastated, and tens of thousands of innocent lives were lost due to the civil war among Islamists. Amid this chaos, a new and more radical group emerged in 1994 under the name of the Taliban, which succeeded in ousting the older Islamist factions, eventually gaining control of Kabul and the entire country by 1996.

The Sectarian Politics, Taliban and Radicalism

The Taliban Movement, being strictly Sunni, has received support from countries like Saudi Arabia, which shares a Sunni background, primarily due to regional and global rivalries aimed at exerting pressure on nations like Iran (İnaç 2017: 112-114). Additionally, Pakistan has backed the Taliban to maintain control over Afghanistan and diminish India's influence, which poses challenges to the U.S. and particularly to Pakistan's access to Central Asian resources. The period when Islamists held power in Afghanistan marked one of the darkest chapters in the country's history. After five years in control, the Taliban were ousted by the United States, leading to renewed hopes for democracy and peace, along with some positive developments, including the drafting of the most democratic constitution in the region. For the first time, Afghanistan held a direct popular vote for the presidency, and the parliament was reopened democratically after a hiatus of nearly thirty years. However, this peaceful and democratic climate shifted dramatically at the end of 2006 when the Taliban resurfaced as an armed group, gaining strength over time. Ultimately, in the spring of 2020, the U.S. and the Taliban signed a peace agreement, which stipulated that the U.S. would withdraw its forces from Afghanistan in the coming months, and that the Afghan government and the Taliban would engage in inter-Afghan peace talks shortly thereafter (İnaç 2021b: 233).

All societies incorporate an element of religion into their politics, and in some cases, this relationship is maintained through compromise, while in others, it leads to controversy and tension (İnaç and Ünal 2013: 227). This implies that no society, even the most fundamentalist secular ones, can completely ignore either element (Delanty 2013: 123). Consequently, the solution lies in fostering convergence between these elements to avoid a situation similar to that of Afghanistan. The relationship between state and religion can be rational and beneficial for Afghan society by incorporating certain democratic principles. In a country like Afghanistan, it is challenging to completely separate religion from politics, but it is possible to prevent the exploitation of religion as a political tool and instead promote democratic institutions (Berting 2018: 91).

The Conclusion: Political Islam and Beyond

Afghanistan's current situation can be attributed to several factors, notably the impact of political Islam and the politicization of religion, which has contributed to the ongoing insecurity in the country. This radicalization has emerged from the earlier politicization of religion (İnaç 2003: 344). A significant driver of this politicization has been the intervention and occupation by foreign powers, largely due to Afghanistan's strategic location. The historical relationship between political Islam and democracy reveals that Afghanistan has struggled to establish a proper link between the two, primarily due to continuous external interventions and the imposition of ideologies, including political Islam, on the society (İnaç 2021: 229). While democracy is feasible in Afghanistan, as it is in any Islamic nation, these interventions and an

orientalist perspective hinder the development of a harmonious relationship between the state and its society, preventing a conducive environment for democracy to flourish.

This adverse scenario has created a vicious cycle: foreign interventions and imported ideologies, including political Islam, have obstructed the establishment of a democratic state, and in turn, the absence of democracy has denied the people their right to choose their government. The 2004 constitution of Afghanistan serves as a significant example of a system where Islam and democracy can coexist. This constitution prohibits any law that contradicts Islam while also acknowledging the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and promoting gender equality.

One primary factor contributing to Afghanistan's instability and failure to adopt a democratic framework is the rapid and fundamental reforms enacted by those in power before society was prepared to accept them, which led to backlash and the establishment of a negative, undemocratic order (İnaç 2016: 74). Ensuring the sustainability of democracy and the establishment of order requires groundwork through cultural and social initiatives, as hasty democratization efforts can be risky and counterproductive, as evidenced in the case of Amanullah Khan. The modernization process must align with the existing social structure, and the groundwork for democratization should be established beforehand.

This principle applies to Islamists as well, as illustrated by the differing outcomes in Turkey and Egypt, where Islamists gained power democratically but had varying results. The Turkish model demonstrates that political Islam can serve as a long-term strategy coexisting with democracy. In contrast, in Egypt, President Morsi's approach was more immediate, as he attempted to consolidate power without waiting for a favorable long-term opportunity (İnaç 2003: 347).

The case of Al-Nahda in Tunisia under Ghanushi stands apart from other Islamist movements that struggled to maintain power after being elected democratically. Ghanushi accepted and advocated for democratic values, successfully appealing to non-Islamist members (Hobsbawm 2017: 52). A key aspect of Sayed Qutb's radicalism is his fundamental rejection of Western and non-Islamic systems, labeling those who adhere to such systems, including many Muslims, as ignorant. Conversely, Hasan al-Banna did not espouse such radical views; he accepted parliamentary democracy as Egypt's formal governance, provided it did not conflict with Islamic principles.

A fundamental characteristic of many Islamists is their tendency to reject other political ideologies. While they may not outright deny these ideologies, they often consider them unnecessary, asserting that similar principles already exist within Islam (Berting 2014: 66). Political Islam can positively influence Islamic countries if its advocates dissociate from radical and fundamentalist movements, as demonstrated in Turkey and Tunisia. However, the debate surrounding the compatibility of political Islam and democracy is unlikely to be resolved soon, given the vast array of differing opinions. Some Western thinkers and intellectuals have embraced aspects of Islamism, viewing it as a means to promote jihad and undermining traditional Islamic values by amplifying radical ideologies among the Islamists.

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