DEMOCRACY AND ISLAM: CLARIFICATION OF SOME MISGIVINGS

Democracy is a commonly known word all over the world. Most of the political movements in the world have made it their goal to establish this system in their respective countries. Democracy is the most popular and accepted political system in the modern world. Yet, there exists some difference of opinion among the Islamic groups on democracy. Democracy and human rights have occupied very important position in the political agenda of many of the Islamic parties. However, some of the parties and people do not accept it, since democracy speaks of sovereignty of the people.

In this context, we need a careful and deep analysis of this issue. We need to understand the issue avoiding the minor technicalities. As we see, Islamic parties and Islamic scholars of the modern world think of a political system wherein government will run the country through parliament. They also want freedom of expression, voting right of the people, rule of law, independent and free judiciary, free press, fundamental human rights etc. These are also the pre-requisites of the democratic system. It is therefore, apparent on a deeper analysis that the concept of state and government of Islamic parties are in conformity with the principles of democracy.

Theoretically speaking, Islam speaks of sovereignty of Allah, while western democracy advocates that sovereignty belongs to people. However, all political thinkers do not share the same view of sovereignty. Some political scientists even argue that there is no need of the concept sovereignty at all. Even the concept of sovereignty is not highlighted in the books which discuss democracy, though sovereignty is discussed in great detail as a political concept in the books of political science.

In this connection, position taken in the constitution of Islamic Republic of Iran is very relevant. Heading of chapter 5 of the constitution is "Sovereignty of the Nation and the Powers Emanating therefrom". Article 56 reads as follows:

> The absolute sovereignty over the universe and man belongs to God who has bestowed upon man sovereignty over his social destiny. None can deprive man of this sovereignty, nor can he place it in the interest of certain other person or group of persons. The nation shall exercise this divine sovereignty through the ways referred to in the following articles of law.

It is apparent that sovereignty has been divided between "absolute sovereignty" and "bestowed sovereignty" (like concepts of legal sovereignty and political sovereignty in the western concepts). It is clear from above that all of us need not to take same view on the concept and nature of sovereignty.

In this context, we feel it necessary to quote from the writings of Allama Yousuf Al Qardawi, an eminent Islamic scholar of the present time. He wrote on political freedom and democracy as follows:

> The fear of some people here that democracy makes the people a source of power and even legislation (although legislation is Allah's alone) should not be heeded here, because we are supposed to be speaking of a people that in its majority has accepted Allah as its Lord, Mohammad as its prophet and Islam as its religion. Such a people would not be expected to pass a legislation that contradicts Islam and its incontestable principles and conclusive rules.

> Anyway, these fears can be overcome by one article stipulating that any legislation contradicting the incontestable provisions of Islam shall be null and void because Islam is the religion of the state and the source of legitimacy of all its institutions and therefore may no be contradicted, as a branch may not run against the main stream.

> It should be known that the acceptance of the principle that legislation or rule belong to Allah does not rob the

nation of its right to seek for itself the codes necessary to regulate its ever-changing life and earthly affairs.

What we seek is that legislations and codes be within the limits of the flawless texts and the overall objectives of Shariah and the Islamic message. The binding texts are very few, while the area of "permissibility" or legislative free space is quite wide and the texts themselves are so flexible and capacious as to accommodate more than one understanding and accept more than one interpretation, which leads to the existence of several schools and philosophies within the expansive framework of Islam. [Quoted from 'Priorities of the Islamic Movement in the Coming Phase', Chapter: The Movement and Political Freedom and Democracy]

We find many Islamic scholars accepted the idea of democracy in Islam though under certain conditions. Dr. Abu Said Nuruddin has written in his book 'Mohakobi Iqbal' (Iqbal the Great Poet) that Allama Iqbal, was not happy with the democratic system because of its secularist stance but he suggested in his writings that there was no alternative to democracy. In his speech on 'Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam', Allama Iqbal stated that Islamic state is established on the principles of freedom, equality and the absolute principles of stability. Therefore the principles of democratic rule is not only similar with the fundamental aspects of Islam rather the executing powers are enhanced in the Muslim world. [Mohakabi Iqbal (Iqbal the Great Poet) by Dr. Abu Said Nuruddin]

Iqbal observed, should the foundation of democracy rest upon spiritual and moral values, it would be the best political system. He wrote in The New Era on its 28th July 1917 issue:

> That democracy was born in Europe from economic renaissance that took place in most of it's societies. ... But Islamic democracy is not developed from the idea of economic advancement rather it is a spiritual principle that comes from the principle that everybody is a source of power whose possibilities can be developed through virtue and character. [Mohakabi Iqbal (Iqbal the Great Poet) by Dr. Abu Said Nuruddin, page -239]

That means according to Iqbal Islam prescribes democracy under the law of Allah.

We see Moulana Maududi, fifty years ago from now, in his book "Political Theory of Islam" used the term 'Theo-democracy' for Islamic state. He didn't deny the term 'democracy'. Rather he accepted democracy while this system will work under the sovereignty of Allah.

There is a misconception about Moulana Maududi's true position about democracy. Moulana Maududi initially criticized western democracy because of its secularism and popular sovereignty (in the sense that parliament can make any law even if it violates the Law of Allah). However, his later writings and political conduct proved that he believed in democracy (rule of the people) subject to the Law of Allah (sovereignty of Allah). In an interview with Akhbar-e-Jahan, Karachi which was published on 2 April 1969, Sayyid Maududi said:

> Islam and democracy are not opposed to each other. Democracy is a system where government is formed, run and changed on the basis of public opinion. Islamic political order also is of the same type. However, our democratic values are different from western values. Western democracy has no limits. ... On the other hand Islamic democracy is controlled by the Quran and the Sunnah ..." [Interviews of Moulana Maududi, (Bangla translation) published by Adhunik Prokashani, Bangla Bazar, Dhaka, 1st Edition, 1999. page 263.]

In an interview with Mujallatun Guraba, an Arabic paper from London (published in February 1969), he said:

> To make people understand now it is essential to use modern terminology. But care should be taken in their use. Some terms should be avoided such as socialism. Some terms are permitted with the condition that their Islamic and Western connotation should be clearly spelled out. Democracy, constitutional system and parliamentary system are such terms ... . [ibid, page 255]

In an interview published in The Daily Mashriq of Lahore, Pakistan (1st February 1970), in reply to a question he said that those are

good people in his view who want to establish democracy in the country. He also said that all our constitutional problems should be solved by the representative of the people. [ibid, pages 339-345].

In another interview in The Daily Hurriat in 1969 (published on 10th November), he again said that all constitutional amendments should be made in a democratic way by the representatives of the people. [ibid, P-313].

His party always supported democracy. Pakistan constitution in 1956 and in 1973 was modeled structurally on democracy and his party Jamaat-e-Islami supported these. His party fought against martial laws in Pakistan. He supported Fatima Jinnah against Ayub Khan in presidential election in 1965 because she promised to restore democracy. His party was a component of DAC (Political combination of parties), where "D" stands for democracy. So it is evident from his later writings and political conduct that he stood for democracy.

We also see that in the first Islamic constitution of the present world, the term democracy was accepted with the consent of Islamic scholars (ulema). In the preamble, the term democracy was accepted in the following manner:

> Wherein the principles of democracy freedom, equality, tolerance and social justice, as enunciated by Islam, should be fully observed. [from the preamble of the constitution of Pakistan of 1956]

In the 1973 constitution of Pakistan the same position was maintained:

> Wherein the principles of democracy freedom, equality, tolerance and social justice, as enunciated by Islam, shall be fully observed. [from the preamble of the constitution of Pakistan of 1973]

This means that democracy has been accepted within the limits of Islam so that in the name of democracy Islamic principles cannot be violated. Islamic scholars and Islamic politicians have come to accept the word democracy and what it means within these limits.

Allama Yousuf Al Qardawi in his book "Priorities of the Islamic Movement In the Coming Phase" has titled one of its chapters as "The Movement and Political Freedom and Democracy". In this book he has shown that Islam does not allow any kind of autocracy or monarchy. He also showed that Islam spreads through political freedom. He stated that Islam unlike democracy is a complete code of life, which encompasses many more vital issues of human needs. Above all, he thinks democracy is consistent with Islam and the fundamental rights of mankind prescribed in Islam can be ensured through democracy. He has advocated in favor of democratic system and political freedom. But he suggested to introduce a clause in the constitution to the effect that no law will be passed contrary to the injunctions of the Quran and Sunnah. This clause will act as guarantee against the fear of some people that anti Islamic law may be passed under the cover of democracy. Dr. Qardawi writes:

> It is the duty of the (Islamic) movement in the coming phase to stand firm against totalitarian and dictatorial rule, political despotism and usurpation of people's rights. The movement should always stand by political freedom, as represented by true, not false, democracy. It should flatly declare its refusal of tyrants and steer clear of all dictators, even if some tyrant appears to have good intentions towards it for some gain and for a time that is usually short, as has been shown by experience.

> The prophet (SAWS) said, "When you see my nation fall victim to fear and does not say to wrong-doer, 'You are wrong', then you may lose hope in them. So how about a regime that forces people to say to a conceited wrong-doer, "How just, how great you are. O our hero, our savior and our liberator!"

The Quran denounces tyrants such as Nimrudh, Pharaoh, Haman and others, but it also dispraises those who follow tyrants and obey their orders. This is why Allah dispraises the people of Noah by saying:

> But they follow (men) whose wealth and children give them no increase but only loss. [Sura Nuh: 21]

Allah also says of Aad, people of Hud:

> And followed the command of every powerful, obstinate transgressor. [Sura Hud: 59]

See also what the Quran says about the people of Pharaoh:

> But they followed the command of Pharaoh, and the command of Pharaoh was not rightly guided. [Sura Hud: 97]

> Thus he made fools of his people, and they obeyed him: truly they were a people rebellious (against Allah). [Sura Az-Zukhruf:: 54]

A closer look at the history of the Muslim nation and the Islamic movement in modern times should show clearly that the Islamic idea, the Islamic movement and the Islamic awakening have never flourished or borne fruit unless in an atmosphere of democracy and freedom, and have withered and become barren only at the times of oppression and tyranny that trod over the will of the people by force which clung to Islam. Such oppressive regimes imposed their secularism, socialism, or communism on their people by force and coercion, using covert torture and public executions, and employing those devilish tools that tore flesh, shed blood, crushed bone and destroyed the soul.

On the other hand, we saw the Islamic movement and the Islamic awakening bear fruit and flourish at the times of freedom and democracy, and in the wake of the collapse of imperial regimes that ruled peoples with fear and oppression.

Therefore, I would not imagine that the Islamic movement could support anything other than political freedom and democracy. However, the tools and guarantees created by democracy are as close as can ever be to the realization of the political principles brought to this earth by Islam to put a leash on the ambitions and whims of rulers. These principles are: shura (consultation), good advice enjoining what is proper and forbidding what is evil, disobeying illegal orders, resisting unbelief and changing wrong by force whenever possible. It is only in democracy and political freedom that the power of parliament is evident and that people's deputies can withdraw confidence from any government that breaches the constitution, and it is only in such an environment that the strength of free press, free parliament, opposition and the masses is most felt. [Quoted from 'Priorities of the Islamic Movement in the Coming Phase', Chapter: The Movement and Political Freedom and Democracy]

It is evident from the above discussion that Islamic thinkers and Muslim people want their right to vote, rule of law, and a government that is to be elected by the people. The term democracy mean all these things. Taking everything into consideration, we can say that there is no problem to accept democracy as a political structure and as a concept of freedom (except its concept of sovereignty). We find that different constitutions and Islamic scholars conditionally accepted the term 'democracy'. Muslim community can accept this term. This will help to remove misunderstanding about Islam that it is for violence and dictatorship.