

Islam-Democracy Reconciliation in the Thought/Writings of Asghar Ali Engineer

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Introduction

Islam and democracy is a critical, crucial, and hotly debated topic. Although it is almost a century-long old now, it has gained prominence since the final decades of the last century and, most importantly, in the post 9/11 world it has highly intensified.

With the beginning of 2011, although humanity entered the second decade of the third millennium but there are still various challenges that are agitating humanity on the one hand, and have direct concern with the Muslim world/*Ummah* on the other and the “process of democratization” in Muslim societies/countries – a burning issue – is one of them. Islam-democracy debate has captured the mind of most of the reformist/modernist scholars – intellectuals, academicians, political analysts, and religious leaders – and they have been and are earnestly engaged in defining, discussing, and debating an “Islamic democracy” – a combination/amalgamation of some key Islamic political concepts and principles and some democratic values/notions.

In this perspective, this article explores the Islam-democracy debate in the thought and writings of one of the prominent Muslim thinkers/intellectuals of India, Asghar Ali Engineer: who is earnestly engaged in this discourse, thereby putting forward this century-long search for establishing an authentic and viable “Islamic democracy”, and the concept/theme of *Shura* (mutual consultation) is central, like most of the Muslim democrats, to him. This paper attempts to analyze the views of Engineer very briefly.

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Islam-Democracy Debate and Views of Asghar Ali Engineer

Engineer (b. 10 March 1939, Rajasthan, India) – an Indian Islamic scholar, reformist-writer and activist who leads the Progressive Dawoodi Bohra movement – is internationally known for his work on liberation theology in Islam. He is founding chairman of the ‘Asian Muslim Action Network’, director of the ‘Institute of Islamic Studies’, and head of the ‘Center for Study of Society and Secularism’ in Mumbai. Over the years, he has authored (and edited) more than 50 books and many articles in various national and international journals. Although the focus of his work is on (and action against) communalism and communal and ethnic violence in India and South Asia, and an advocate of a culture of peace, non-violence and communal harmony, he has also contributed to the theme of Islam and democracy relation to a great extent. Some of his writings on Islam-democracy theme are: ‘Is Islam compatible with democracy and modernity?’, ‘On absence of democracy in the Muslim World’, ‘What I Believe’, and ‘Islam is for democracy’.

In response to the question ‘Whether Islam and democracy are compatible?’ Engineer writes that it is true that *Shura* (mutual consultation) – a Qura’nic concept – and modern day representative democracy – merely a human concept – may not be exactly similar. However, “the spirit of modern democracy and the Qura’nic injunction to consult people is the same”. New institutions keep on developing and human beings, depending on their worldly experiences, keep on changing and refining these institutions. And in contemporary world, for Engineer, the concept of *Shura* should mean democratic process and constitution of proper democratic institutions of which elections are a necessary requirement.ⁱ The Qura’nic text not only gives the concept of *Shura* (democratic consultation) but “does not support even remotely any concept of dictatorship or authoritarianism”. For him, some people try to use the Qura’nic verse 4: 59 to justify obedience to any kind of authority including “a monarch or a caliph or a military dictator”. It is certainly not the spirit of the Qura’nic verse, he claims boldly, and one has to see it in historical background. And, if this verse is read in conjunction with the verses 3: 159 and 42: 38 it would mean one has to submit to a “properly and democratically constituted authority”.ⁱⁱ

In his ‘On absence of democracy in the Muslim World’, he argues, after making

discussion on the development of Islamic state and society by Prophet Muhammad in Medina, the Prophet had enjoyed an enormous moral authority but he never converted it into formal political power. He was succeeded by four Caliphs referred to as rightly guided Caliphs as they, in spite of tremendous problems tried to follow the vision of Islam and always consulted Muslims before taking any important policy decision. Though formally it was “not a democratic society” in the sense modern societies are, it was “democratic in spirit” during the first thirty years of rightly guided caliphs, as Umayyads, who became rulers after the first four caliphs, managed to capture power and converted “a proto-democratic society into a feudal hierarchical one”.ⁱⁱⁱ He further argues that the “Islamic democracy” as prevailed in the days of the Prophet and the four caliphs could not be “revived” and revitalized again, as all succeeding regimes in the Arab as well as non-Arab world (from Umayyads, Abbasids to Saffavids, Ottomans and Mughals) were “dynastic and had nothing to do with elective principle”, and thus “Islamic political culture became more and more feudalized”.^{iv}

In the early years of 21st century (2002-03), Engineer – while writing on the practice of democracy in Muslim countries – argued that in present times, Egypt has a resemblance of democracy today. However, it is also far from “real democracy”. Malaysia too has “limited democracy” and as there is no “real democratic freedom” in Malaysia, it is “semi-democratic, semi-authoritarian” political set up. Furthermore, Indonesia remained for long under military rule and has now come under “democratic spell” but is undergoing a great political turmoil. It will take quite some time for democracy to stabilize as powerful vested interests are out to disrupt it to re-establish their dictatorship.^v

Furthermore, in his “What I believe”, he reveals his beliefs, or what his ideology and his views are. For example, regarding democracy and pluralism, he writes:

“I strongly believe in pluralism and diversity. ... Democratic freedom has meaning only if diversity is allowed to flower. Strict uniformity can, and often does, lead to fascism. A truly democratic society can be promoted only, and only if diversity is allowed to flower. I, therefore, *believe in three 'ds' i.e. democracy, diversity and dialogue.*”

I believe that democracy, diversity and dialogue sustain and strengthen each other. *If there is no diversity, there can be no democracy* and if there is no dialogue, diversity cannot be strengthened. Dialogue is the very spirit of religious and cultural diversity. A genuine dialogue can be conducted only in the *spirit of democracy*".^{vi}

In his "Islam and Secularism", Engineer argues that the "primitive Islamic state was democratic in spirit" and the Caliphs often consulted their colleagues and companions of the Prophet while making any decision so as to conform to the Islamic values; and thus, regards the pious caliphate period as the "golden period of Islamic democracy". But, he continues, the "conquests, internal strife among the Muslims, struggle for power among different tribes, groups and personalities", and many other factors created strong pressures so much so that the "institution of Caliphate itself did not survive", and was ultimately "replaced [with the establishment of Umayyad rule] by monarchy and dynastic rule", that continued, due to failure of re-establishment of Caliphate, until the Western colonial rule took over.^{vii}

There are, at present, different political systems in different Islamic countries from monarchy to military dictatorship, and from limited democracy to democracy. But it would be naïve, claims Engineer, to blame Islam for this. One has to look into the political history of the country rather than search for its causes in to Islamic doctrines. Islamic doctrines do not cultivate any concept of absolutism as perhaps no other religion does. In fact the Qur'an's emphasis is on consultation (*Shura*), and even the Prophet used to consult his companions in secular matters.^{viii}

Lastly, in his "Islam, Democracy And Violence", he argues that it is not at all correct to say that Islam is incompatible to democracy, because Islam does not come in the way of democracy; it is dictators and monarchs who come in its way. The authoritarian societies negate all these and hence monarchy and dictatorship is un-Islamic, not democracy.

As the modern society is emphatic about human equality without any distinction and human rights and gender equality are of great significance and hence democracy is the

only way out for Qura'nic concept of just society to be realized. Thus we must properly educate Muslim masses and prepare them for acceptance of democracy in Islamic world. They should be made aware that those who oppose democracy in the name of Islam are really serving certain vested interests rather than Islam. Islam is quite compatible with democracy. It is rather interests of rulers of Muslim countries which are not compatible with democracy.^{ix}

Thus, Engineer reaches the conclusion that the absence of democracy in Muslim countries is not by means “on account of Islamic teachings or incompatibility of democracy with Islam but due to host of factors- political, historical and cultural”; and in other place he claims the same view as: “It is thus social and economic [along with political and historical] conditions which are more responsible for lack of democracy in the Islamic world and not the Islamic teachings”.^x In favor of this comment/argument of Engineer, 2003 Noble Prize winner Shirin Ebadi (Iran) also lays emphasis on this viewpoint that there is no inherent contradiction between Islam and democracy or human rights. She insistently says:

“The lack of democratization in the Islamic world does not emanate from the essence of Islam. Rather, it is due to the unwillingness for numerous of Islamic states to embrace an interpretation of Islam that is compatible with human rights, preserves individual and social freedoms, and advocates democratic statecraft.”^{xi}

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, it may be argued that there is no ambiguity or uncertainty in the argument that Islam and democracy are compatible on many grounds, because as we observe that political institutions and values, which are most in harmony with the essence of Islam, are in fact to be found in the real democratic structure, neither in dictatorship nor in monarchy or other similar political structures. But, although much has been written on Islam-democracy reconciliation, theoretically more reflection and research, and (re) interpretation is required to reconcile the modern notions of democracy, liberty, justice, equality, and human rights with the tenets of Islam, as the Islamic primary sources – the holy Qur'an and the Sunnah – throw ample light and guidance on these concepts and values.

Secondly, the need of the hour is to mould/turn this theory of “Islamic democracy” into a practical framework: as it is an amalgam of Islamic political principles (based on Quran and Sunnah) and those positive features and notions of modern (western) democracy that are neither in contradiction with Islam, its law and essence, nor contradict the limits prescribed by *Shari’ah*.

References

- ⁱ Asghar Ali Engineer, “Is Islam compatible with democracy and modernity?”, in Engineer, *Islam: Challenges in 21st Century* (New Delhi: Gyan publishing House, 2004), chapter 17, 211-21, p. 213
- ⁱⁱ Ibid., pp. 213-14
- ⁱⁱⁱ Asghar Ali Engineer, “On absence of democracy in the Muslim world”, in Engineer, *On Developing Theology of Peace in Islam* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt Ltd., 2003), Chapter 8, 81-91, p. 82
- ^{iv} Ibid., pp. 86-7
- ^v Ibid., pp. 88-9
- ^{vi} Asghar Ali Engineer, WHAT I BELIEVE, <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~rtavakol/engineer/belief.htm> (as accessed on 10/05/2011) Originally published in *Islam and Modern Age* (New Delhi) July, 1999. Italics added for emphasis.
- ^{vii} Asghar Ali Engineer, “Islam and Secularism”, in *The Blackwell Companion to Contemporary Islamic Thought* (ed) Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi' (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), Chapter 20, 338-344, p. 340
- ^{viii} Ibid., pp. 343-44
- ^{ix} Asghar Ali Engineer, “Islam, Democracy and Violence”, in *Indian Muslims*, September 4, 2008. Available online at <http://indianmuslims.in/islam-democracy-and-violence/> (as accessed on 10/05/2011)
- ^x Engineer, *Islam: Challenges in 21st Century*, p. 214; Engineer, *On Developing Theology of Peace in*

Islam, p. 89

^{xi} Shirin Ebadi, “Islam, Democracy, and Human Rights”, lecture, Syracuse University, 10 May 2004, published in *Syracuse University News*, 12 May 2004; as cited in Nader Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy*, p. 101
