Abstract: Islam-democracy discourse, a hotly debated topic and a burning issue, has highly intensified over the last few decades and throughout the world with several Muslim thinkers/intellectuals having taken strides to shape Muslim understanding of “Islamic democracy”. To offer a new direction and advance this discourse some steps further, this paper seeks to address this issue in the thought and writings, by way of a comparative study, of two prominent intellectuals of Iran: Abdulkarim Soroush (b. 1945), who sees no contradiction between Islam and the freedoms inherent in democracy, and Hasan Yousuf Eshkevari (b. 1949/50), who is at the forefront of articulating the relationship between Islam and democracy. The essay argues that (i) the efforts of Soroush and Eshkevari, along with those of many other religious reformist intellectuals and political activists, have collectively given rise to a vibrant, intellectually sophisticated, and expansive discourse of Islamic reformism; (ii) although, theoretically, there is no doubt in the argument that Islam and democracy are indeed compatible (on many grounds), there is lack and scarcity of literature on the practical framework/implementation of this envisioned formula of “Islamic democracy”—a challenge still
faced by Muslim political theorists especially in the 21st century.

Key Words: Islam-Democracy Compatibility; Iranian Intellectuals; Abdulkarim Saroush; Hasan Yousuf Eshkevari; Islamic Democracy

I. Introduction

In the first half of the 20th century, when the Muslim world freed itself from European colonialism, it faced two significant challenges: “how to govern” and “how to face/handle modernity”. Although it has been about six decades since then, the Muslim world has failed to produce a viable and appreciable model of self-governance. This essay attempts to address the first challenge by presenting the views and arguments of prominent Muslim thinkers towards an authentic formula for good and ethical self-governance. Several Muslim scholars throughout the world, both students of Islamic political thought and political philosophers have taken strides to shape Muslim understanding of “Islamic democracy”. Hoping to offer a new direction and take the conversation on Islam-democracy discourse some steps further, this essay is a humble attempt in this direction. This is not a new initiative, but a continuation of a century-long search for an “Islamic democracy”. It discusses the Islam-democracy discourse (compatibility thesis) with special reference to the thought and writings in a comparative perspective of two prominent and influential intellectuals of Iran: Abdulkarim Saroush and Hasan Yousuf Eshkevari.

This paper examines some of the most salient themes in the discourses on Islam-democracy compatibility as articulated by two of the Iranian most renowned religious intellectuals, namely Abdolkarim Soroush and Yusuf Eshkevari. Each of these individuals comes from a different background, approaches the topic differently, and concentrates on a different aspect of Shi'a jurisprudence. Nevertheless, they both share certain fundamental beliefs regarding the proper role of religion in society and politics and the need to rid Islam of the barnacles it has accumulated throughout history. Therefore, the
outcome of their thinking has been the articulation of a vibrant discourse that is decidedly “reformist” in its orientation and is democratic in its essence and its agendas, one that seeks to fundamentally transform the way religion is understood, knowledge of it is produced, accumulated, and socially and politically utilized. Along with other intellectuals, who argue and write on the same lines, they are articulating the broad contours of an Islamic democracy; and, in the process, wittingly or not, they are pushing Iranian Shi’ism further afield along the path of historic change (Kamrava, 2011: 60). Before discussing the main theme of this paper, it is necessary to deal with the Islam-democracy discourse in the 21st Century in a general historical and also in a global perspective.

II. Islam-Democracy Discourse in the 21st Century

Religion—both in Muslim belief and history—has occupied an important place in public life, in its ideology of the state, its institutions and in the conduct of Muslim politics from the beginning of the 7th century. History itself confirms Islam’s dynamic force, as its principles are dynamic and were/are able to support society’s political life: not due to change and at random, but as per its norms and directions. Moreover, at certain times, it even reformed existing political systems and transformed the city-state of Medina (and others) into numerous empires and sultanates; for example, the ‘three great empires’ that existed at the beginning of the modern era were the Ottoman (in Europe and Middle East), the Saffavid (in Persia/Iran) and Mughal Empire (in India) – all rooted in “Mongol-Turkish synthesis”. These states faced the challenges of the sociopolitical changes of the modern transformation; but, the relationship between Islam and politics has been a major theme in these transformations of the past two and a half centuries. From the final decades of the 20th century to the present, “religious resurgence” and “democratization” are two of the major developments. The debate over democracy and democratization in Muslim societies, its definition and fundamentals,
as well as its impact on governments’ domestic and foreign policies has been ongoing for a long time, but, as it has acquired an impetus in recent years, this debate has now highly intensified.

Nowadays, the relationship between Islam and democracy is a hotly debated and discussed topic, with many scholars examining democracy and its Islamic heritage, the process of democratization in Muslim societies, and other related themes. In other words, the relationship between “democratization and the Islamic resurgence is complex” and is a very important element in the political dynamics of the contemporary Muslim world. Many different ways of advocating both the reaffirmation of Islam and the democratization of the politics is seen throughout the Islamic world. Both in the East and the West, from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Indonesia in South and Southeast Asia to Egypt, Iran, Syria, Tunisia, and Oman in the Middle East and from Algeria, Sudan and Morocco in North Africa, to Europe and America, Muslim thinkers undertake this effort of reconciling – at least on theoretical grounds – Islam and democracy, working within and cooperating with the existing political regimes and authorities—from “republics, monarchies, and authoritarian dictatorships, in pluralistic and in relativity homogeneous societies” (Esposito and Voll, 1996: 16, 17). As the desire for democratization, along with the resurgence of Islam, exists in a dynamic global context, the demand and desire for democracy is widespread in contemporary global affairs.

From the final quarter of the 20th century to the present, “religious resurgence” and “democratization” are two of the major developments. The debate over democracy and democratization in Muslim societies, as well as its definition and fundamentals, has continued for a long time. However, it has acquired an impetus in recent years. The Muslim world at present is the most diverse as various political systems exist. It has traditional and constitutional monarchies, dictatorships, an Islamic republic, secular and some liberal democracies, and other forms and governing systems. These diverse governing models from monarchy to democracy are made
possible due to the diverse interpretations of Islamic law, the sources, and the intellectual and ideological resources that Islam possesses.

Today the Muslim world boasts a diversity of regime types—dictatorships and sham democracies in Egypt, Sudan, and Tunisia, secular democracy in Turkey, monarchies in the Middle East, pluralistic democracies in Bangladesh and Malaysia and an Islamic state (a sort of theo-democracy) in Iran (Khan, 2006; Khan, 2005: 42). At the same time—and in spite of this dynamic character—Muslims have failed to produce a viable and appreciable model of self-governance. Some of them are changing due to the recent uprisings and revolutions in the Middle East—the so-called “Arab Spring”, which still continues to unravel so many certainties there. In the cases of Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, this “Arab Spring” has resulted in the change of governmental forms and political systems. It is, however, important to note that neither the Holy Quran nor the Hadith/Sunnah (Prophetic traditions/practices) prescribe any particular form of government nor elaborate a constitutional theory; it is for the Muslims of every period to discover the most suitable form of government to address their needs – on the condition that the form and the institutions they choose are in full agreement with the explicit, unequivocal Islamic laws (Shari‘ah).

In response to the argument that Muslims are free to devise the most suitable form of government many scholars, such as Abdul Rashid Moten (of Malaysia), Sayed Khatab (of Australia), and Muhammad Asad (1900–1992; previously, Leopold Weiss, who lived in Pakistan and Spain), Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari(1) (of Iran), etc. share almost similar views (Moten, 1996; Khatab and Bouma, 2007; Asad, 1961; Eshkevari, in Izadi et al., 1998). For example, Eshkevari (1998:

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(1) Throughout this essay the references of this article/chapter of Eshkevari (in Izadi et al., 1998) are made from Mir-Hosseini and Tapper, 2006 (especially Chapter 3, pp. 63-100) which provides the English translation of this essay of Eshkevari, originally a lecture, delivered at the seminar series organized by the Islamic Association of Engineers, 1995. References are also from Kamrava, 2011, who has translated and given the references from the original.
299, 300; see also Mir-Hosseini and Tapper, 2006: 63-100; Kamrava, 2011) in his “Hokumat-e Demokratik-e Eslami” (Democratic Islamic Government) argues that “never in Islam has the act of governing been mandated as a function of religion”; government, instead, is a “purely human endeavor”, and it is not possible to have one form and one type of government at all times, and is contextually dependent on the times and conditions. As Asad, in his The Principles of State and Government in Islam, argues:

The Shari‘ah does not prescribe any definite pattern [of governing model] to which an Islamic state must conform, nor does it elaborate in detail a constitutional theory. The political law emerging from the context of the Qur’an and Sunnah is, nevertheless, not an illusion. It is very vivid and concrete inasmuch as it gives us the clear outline of a political scheme capable of realization at all times and under all conditions of human life. … [T]here is not only one form of the Islamic state, but many; and it is for the Muslims of every period to discover the form most suitable to their needs – on the condition, of course, that the form and the institutions they choose are in full agreement with the explicit, unequivocal shar‘i laws relating to communal life (Asad, 1961: 22-3).

It is well known that (even today) there is no single definition that can adequately account for the evolution of “democracy” and its development throughout history. It is equally true that although as a concept “democracy” is universally accepted, there is not a universally accepted model/form. Democracy has been described as an “essentially contested concept” (Gallie, 1964: 158). It has changed and developed in the shade of a variety of social, economic, and political developments, and has meant different things to different people at different times – from ancient Greece to modern Europe and America, from direct to indirect democracy, liberal to representative, and parliamentary to constitutional. In the discourse of the relationship between Islam and democracy, the questions generally raised are: Is democracy compatible with Islam? Is there any relation between Islam and democracy? If they are compatible, and have a relationship with
one another, then what elements are present in the Islamic tradition in
the service of democracy? And, what are the bases of democracy in
Islam?

The active discourse on democracy in Islam and the notion of
democratic participation does not imply that the word ‘democracy’ is
a Quranic term explicitly explained in the Holy Quran or in the
Sunnah. What it really means is that the Islamic heritage contains key
concepts, values and principles that are the foundations for the Islamic
perceptions of democracy. It also means that the notions or positive
features and values that come with democracy are compatible with the
Islamic teachings based on the Holy Quran and the Sunnah (Khattab
and Bouma, 2007; Esposito and Voll, 1996). These principles, and
many others, are inherent in the Islamic political order. In this regard,
for example, Pakistani Islamic scholar, Professor Khurshid Ahmad
argues:

The Islamic political order is based on the concept of Tawhid and
seeks its flowering in the form of popular vicegerency (Khilafah)
operating through a mechanism of Shura [mutual consultation, based
on two Qura’nic verses: 3: 159 and 42: 38], supported by the
principles of equality of humankind, rule of law, protection of human
rights including those of minorities, accountability of the rulers,
transparency of political processes and an overriding concern for
justice in all its dimensions: legal, political, social, economic and
international (Ahmad 2000: 2).

Muslim scholars vary in their views and opinions while
discussing and debating this issue; that is, they belong to a broad
spectrum of perspectives, ranging from the extremes of those who
argue that Islam requires a democratic system and/or is compatible
with democracy to those who deny a connection between the two,
arguing that both are totally incompatible. A majority of them
throughout the world favor the compatibility thesis and are earnestly
engaged in developing, defining and establishing an authentic and
viable “Islamic democracy” by drawing from Islam’s long-standing
traditions and conceptualizations of Shura, Khilafah, Ijma, and Ijtihad
(and especially *Shura*).

**III. Vision of Soroush and Eshkevari on Articulating an “Islamic Democracy”**

As the theme of this essay is to examine and outline an “Islamic democracy” as articulated by two major influential and prominent Muslim intellectuals of Iran, namely, Abdulkarim Saroush—who sees no contradiction between Islam and the freedoms inherent in democracy, that is, Islam and democracy are “not only compatible, their association is inevitable”—and Hasan Yousufi Eshkevari—who has been at the forefront of articulating the relationship between Islam and democracy. The two intellectuals come from different backgrounds and approach contemporary issues and topics differently, including the various aspects and facets of Islam-democracy debate. Nevertheless, both share certain fundamental beliefs and opinions. In other words, despite the great dynamism and diversity among them in terms of political views, there are core concepts that are central to the political positions of all of them. What varies is the “definition [as well as perception] of the concepts - not recognition [and essence/spirit] of the concepts themselves” (Esposito and Voll, 1996: 23). Together these two intellectuals – articulating the broad contours of the Islamic democratic discourse/debate – are thus pushing forward—of course, not a new initiative, but a continuation of a century-long search for an “Islamic democracy”.

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① For example, in the Indo-Pak sub-continent, from the early 20th century many scholars—like Mawlana Abul Kalam Azad (d. 1958) Muhammad Iqbal (d.1938)—explored the prospectus of establishing an “Islamic democracy”. Azad used the term “Islamic democracy”, basing his views on the Qur’anic concept of *Shura* or mutual consultation (Qur’an, 3: 159; 42: 38), while as Iqbal termed it “spiritual democracy” laying emphasis on *ijma* (consensus) and *ijtihad* (personal reasoning). Presently the majority of the intellectuals discussing, debating, and writing on this issue use this phrase. For details, see Azad, 1956; Iqbal, 1996; Esposito, 1983.
IV. Abdolkarim Soroush (b. 1945, Tehran, Iran)

Abdolkarim Soroush (the pen name of “Hossein Dabbagh”) is the most well known intellectual figure of Iran today, a pharmacologist and philosopher, and one of the prominent speakers of Iran. He sees no contradiction between Islam and the freedoms inherent in democracy. Islam and democracy are “not only compatible, their association is inevitable”. In a Muslim society one without the other is not perfect (Wright, in Diamond, et. al., 2003: 224; Wright, 1996: 64-75).

For Soroush, the only form of government that does not transform religion into an ideology or obstruct the growth of religious knowledge is a democratic one. He does not identify democracy with a particular Western culture as a foreign force to be resisted. He considers democracy as a form of government that is compatible with multiple political cultures, including Islamic ones. ①

He believes that the will of the majority must shape the ideal Islamic state, and that Islam itself is evolving as a religion, which leaves it open to reinterpretation: the sacred texts do not change, but their interpretation is always in flux and instability because the age and changing conditions in which believers live influence understanding. He offers philosophically the compatibility of Islamic rationality with freedom and democracy, laying more stress on the concept of freedom (Kamrava, 2006: 4).

In an interview with Sharq newspaper (December 2003), he said that “when I speak about democracy is democracy as the rejection of tyranny. In other words, my proposed democracy is an anti-tyranny theory. It is about what politics we should opt for that will allow us freedom of choice. This is my main intention when I speak about democracy”. ②

① The sources of this viewpoint are many; for example: Sorouch, 1993; Mutahhari, 1995; Vakili,1996; Vakili, in. Esposito &. Voll, 2001.
In another interview with the same newspaper in 2004\(^\circ\), in reply to a question regarding the ‘elections process’, he answered:

*Democracy is not summarized in the elections and democracy has its own constituents. Democracy is not realized merely with a high voter turnout. Democracy is made up of the legislature, judiciary and the executive powers. We need an efficient, neutral and powerful judiciary in order to have clean elections’* (Soroush, 2004: 4).

For Soroush, democracy is both “a value system” and “a method of governance”. As a value-system, it respects human rights, the public’s right to elect its leaders and hold them accountable, and the defense of the public’s notion of justice. As a method of governance, democracy includes the traditional notions of separation of powers, free elections, free and independent press, and freedom of expression, freedom of political assembly, multiple political parties, and restrictions upon executive power. Soroush argues that no government official should stand above criticism, and that all must be accountable to the public. Accountability reduces the potential for corruption and allows the public to remove, or restrict the power of incompetent officials. Democracy is, in effect, a method for “rationalizing” politics (Soroush, 1994: 4; Vakili, in Esposito & Voll, 2001: 161).

**V. Hasan Yousofi Eshkevari (b. 1950, Iran)**

Hojjatoleslam Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari is an Iranian cleric, researcher and journalist, director of the Ali Shariati Research Centre and contributing editor of the newspaper *Iran-e Farda*, banned in April 2000.\(^\circ\) For Eshkevari, in terms of doctrinal system, religion has three interrelated components: a worldview, ethical (value) or ideological


\(^\circ\) The biography of Hojjatoleslam Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari is retrieved from http://www.englishpen.org/writersinprison/writersinexile/hojjatoleslamhasanyousefieshke/.

Among the contemporary religious intellectuals of Iran, Eshkevari has been at the forefront of articulating the relationship between Islam and democracy. Although Eshkevari regards democracy as a “controversial concept”, he argues that two features are inseparable from the spirit and essence of democracy; they are: (a) the worldly and popular origin of state, government and power; and (b) pluralism and the widest possible distribution of political power among people (Mir-Hosseini & Tapper, 2006: 82).

He maintains that “the democratic method is the most religious and the most appropriate manner to administer Muslim societies” (Eshkevari, 1998: 296; Kamrava, 2011: 63). If the essence of religion is, he further comments, the spread of peace and justice, and if the guiding logic of democracy is checks and limits on political power and the right of all to participate in the political process, then undoubtedly, “religious justice is not possible without resort to democratic methods” because, at the very least, “democracy is the most appropriate method for ensuring justice”. (Eshkevari, 1998: 296; Kamrava, 2011: 63-4). He goes further to argue that not only are “Islam and democracy not incompatible”, in the fields of state/politics and government, but, on the contrary, “Muslim government cannot be undemocratic”, because a truly Islamic government is a democratic one. That is to say, “despotism, authoritarianism and, more specifically, ruling people without consent, are in contradiction with the essence of religion, human free will, and Islamic texts and sources” (Eshkevari, 1998: 298; Kamrava, 2011: 64; Mir-Hosseini & Tapper, 2006: 86).

In his article, “The Green Movement and the Role of Ruhaniyyat”①, Eshkevari advocated a secular governmental system in Iran; he suggests that the original draft of the 1979 Constitution could

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serve as a blueprint. He maintains that a reform in the existing system towards a “more democratic system is the most viable, most appropriate, and the least costly way that is foreseeable for the near future”. Such reforms, he adds, will gradually convince the public and the democratic-leaning groups committed to ruhaniyyat of not only the benefits, but also the necessity of a secular system compared to the current theocratic rule, because in the case of failure to the reform and the future collapse of the regime, it seems that the most viable option would be a moderate Islamic regime without the central doctrine of wilayat al-faqih. This would be an alternative system of governance, he argues, that is “committed to the basic principles of democracy, akin to the one that was promised by Ayatollah Khomeini when he was in exile in Paris. The early draft of the constitution that Ayatollah and his aides actively pursued early on to be put to a national referendum could provide a common ground for the initial level”.

In his “Ta’amollat-e Tanha-ee” (Thoughts of Loneliness), Eshkevari (2003: 147-8; Kamrava, 2011: 64) makes an important distinction between religious democracy as a political construct and religious pluralism as a theological notion. Rejecting the argument of Soroush that all religions are equally just and righteous, Eshkevari argues that Islam, is indeed, the only right and just religion, as enunciated by the Qur’an and demonstrated by the deeds of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). While commenting on the relation between religion and democracy, he is of the view that just as religious guidance and worship has nothing to do with government, so also this dimension of religion has no connection with democracy. This is so, he claims, because “guidance and devotion are matters” that give direction and motivation to an individual’s ethical and spiritual perfection, but democracy is “a method of running society, a type of social conduct and a way of collective living; and these two are not dealing with the same subject matter” (Mir-Hosseini & Tapper, 2006: 85).

While making this whole discussion on religion, government, and democracy, Eshkevari neither wants to draw an “idealized and utopian picture of a democratic society and government”, nor does he
argue and make claim that “democracy is the ultimate human ideal and has absolutely no flaws or shortcomings”. He even goes further, as is demonstrated in the following long passage, to claim that democracy, although a great invention in human history, with its various forms and variants has not attained the stage of becoming error free and flawless; and as such Muslims too are free to devise a model of democracy, say “Islamic democracy” or “Shurocracy”, of their own:

This is never the case. Democracy is a great invention in the history of humankind, because people have finally, by trial and error, come up with a means of – in Aristotle’s words – lessening the evils of governments and powers and organizing themselves [of their affairs] in a more rational and less harmful way. But it is natural that human work is always flawed and imperfect, and as a rule, the flaws of democracy too will gradually be overcome and someone will try out new ways in democracy.

... There exists no fixed and eternal form [of democracy]. The invention of liberal and parliamentary democracy was a significant step, but basic flaws still exist; and incidentally, Western thinkers have been more aware of these flaws than others and have addressed them. To overcome them, and in the hope of reaching a true and flawless democracy, ‘social democracy’ was devised... but ... it [too, like other variants/models] failed. We Muslims [keeping in view this development] can devise a new model of democracy that is free from the flaws of liberal and social democracy; in that case, of course, all freedom seekers and democrats of the world would employ our model (Mir-Hosseini & Tapper, 2006: 93-4).

But at the same time, Eshkevari warns that his model cannot be free of flaws and errors so he prescribes and provides three important conditions that will and can make it more righteous. These are: that (a) we accept the validity of the experience; (b) we do not grant sanctity and eternity to a special model of governance; and finally (c) we do not forget that freedom, choice, the growth of consciousness and the
achievement of people’s freedom are Islamic ideological principles (Mir-Hosseini & Tapper, 2006: 94).

The most important basic and fundamental arguments and claims made by Eshkevari can be summarized as:

- The “democratic method”, in contrast to other forms and models of governance, has so far been “more effective, the most logical and the most Islamic way” of administering society;

- As Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) acted (in the capacity of being the political head of the community at Medinah), like any ruler, within the context of the “possibilities, conditions and known and tried traditions of Arabian Peninsula”; so in the present times, we, the Muslims, too are “obliged to act in the light of the experience, possibilities, and needs of our era and to create a better political system”; and

- The “ideal of democracy” manifested in three principles, viz., the principle of human choice and responsibility, of the worldly basis of political power, and of pluralism and popular participation – is “validated and emphasized” in the Holy Quran and Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) (Mir-Hosseini & Tapper, 2006: 85).

With regard to the first point that currently democracy is the best way, he argues that if we object to the existing democracies, we must redress their shortcomings and reach newer and more “Islamic forms of democracy”. He also challenges those Muslims who oppose democracy, when he says:

Truly, those who categorically reject democracy and depict it anti-Islamic must say what their recommendation is. What political system are they offering in its place? If not the caliphate, whether the Abbasid, Ottoman, or Saudi Arabian styles, what model of government do they have in their mind? (Mir-Hosseini & Tapper, 2006: 95).
It is in this context and perspective that he proposes to call the Islamic system of government an “Islamic democratic government”, which, Eshkevari thinks, is the “most suitable title”, because:

“Islamic”, because of the content, philosophy, viewpoint and doctrinal mission; and “democratic” because of its worldly and civil character, and its use of popular elections, public opinion and free will, and people’s supervision of, and at times direct involvement in, all matters in accordance with laws and regulations (Mir-Hosseini and Tapper, 2006: 99).

VI. Theory and Practice of “Islamic Democracy”: The Challenge(s) Ahead

The above assessment of the Islam-democracy discourses in the 21st century, the process of democratization, and views of the two most influential and prominent Muslim modernist thinkers/intellectuals and political activists of the 21st century reveal that the Muslim thinkers are engaged in a quest to develop an Islamic form of democracy. They are attempting to develop it by drawing from some Islamic concepts, institutions, values, norms and ideals that emphasize the equality of people, the accountability of leaders to community, and the respect of diversity and other faiths. These are ideals fully compatible with modern conceptions of democracy. They agree that the principle of Shura – mutual consultation or consultative decision-making process based on two Qura’nic verses (3: 159 and 42: 38)—is not only the source of democratic ethics in Islam, but also that these verses express clearly the view that an Islamic government cannot help but be consultative, democratic, and divinely inspired; and the concept of majority and the utilitarian aspect of the Western system are somewhat similar to Islamic principles of Ijma (consensus) and al-maslahah (public interest). In a nutshell, what they argue, in theory, can be summarized in a single statement, that Islam and democracy are, on many grounds, indeed compatible.
Theoretically, there is no doubt about this argument, but here arises an important question: If the envisioned Shura system (“Shurocracy” or “Islamic democracy”) is established as an alternative to democracy in an Islamic country, what will be the structure and practice of this system? The problem is that there is a lack and scarcity of literature on the practical framework/implementation. Scholars have, no doubt, been sincerely engaged in discussing the Islam-democracy compatibility on theoretical grounds, but at the same time, they have paid either less or no attention at all to the practical aspect of this compatibility or alternative system of government. In other words, while coming to the practical aspects, one finds no guidance. There seems to be a missing link in turning “political theory” into a “political program”, or rather in turning conceptualizations of the ideal government into details. There are also crucial questions that are obscured or are not addressed at all. One such issue is the structure of the Shura body. Should it be comprised of experts or of anyone elected through universal suffrage? And once it exists, what should be the mechanism of its operation? These questions need to be answered by these and other scholars, policymakers/political analysts and activists, who have spent much time in debating Islam-democracy discourse in theory.

It is now time to offer a practical framework for this theory: how an “Islamic democracy” will work in a Muslim country? This is still a challenge to political scientists of Islam in the 21st century.

Hasan al-Turabi (born c. 1932 in Kassala, Sudan), a religious and Islamist political leader in Sudan, is the only scholar in whose political thinking, the concept of Shura has played a central role and his political activity in Sudan has required him to develop concrete proposals about how Shura should be implemented. In one of his works, he distinguishes between four types of Shura: a) universal Shura, which is also the highest and strongest one, such as in referendums and general elections. This type of Shura constitutes ijma’ – a consensus within the nation, which is legally binding so long as it does not contradict the Holy Quran and the Sunnah; b) Shura based on the people’s
representatives in government; c) \textit{Shura} based on experts; and d) \textit{Shura} based on opinion polls (al-Turabi, 1997: 117–8; Shavit, 2010: 356). Al-Turabi seems to describe here the decision-making mechanism of Western democracies, although without committing himself to technicalities, such as the frequency of elections or the balance of power between legislators and the head of state. But elsewhere he states that the principle of \textit{Shura} is governed in accordance to knowledge, because he, who possesses more knowledge, sees things more clearly. Thus, he leaves the door open to both a theocratic and a republican form of government (al-Turabi, 1993: 87; Shavit, 2010: 356).

The most vital issue remaining obscure and ambiguous goes to the heart of the distinction between \textit{Shura} and democracy. Scholars caution there is no room for \textit{Shura} on issues where \textit{the Holy Quran} and the Sunnah have ruled, but they do not stipulate who should determine what these issues are and who will hold the authority to revoke legislation deemed un-Islamic. Should this authority be a high court, or perhaps a council of scholars? How should the authority be selected? A body entrusted with this delicate task would be the ultimate power in the envisioned Muslim state based on \textit{Shura}. Yet no indication is given as to its desired structure (Shavit, 2010: 356). Mishal Fahm al-Sulami in his book, \textit{The West and Islam} (2003) analyzes the relationship between Western and Islamic political ideas and focuses on the similarities and differences between Western liberal democracy and \textit{Shura} with special reference to the views of the Sudanese Islamist leader Hasan al-Turabi. One of the main arguments al-Sulami makes is that the term ‘\textit{Shura}’—a contested concept, having no universally accepted definition—has acquired at least two different interpretations throughout Islamic history: as ‘a system of government’, and as ‘\textit{al-Nasiha}’ (advice), i.e., the ruler’s merely asking other people, particularly religious leaders, tribal leaders or influential people, for advice. In modern times, he maintains, moderate Islamist movements and thinkers have endeavored to develop an Islamic political order, a process in which it could take on board the experience of \textit{Shura} in the
early Islamic period and shape it to cope with modern Muslim political needs. They have found their “aspirations in democracy and, therefore, have accepted the equality of the notion of democracy to the Islamic political order”. The new Islamic political order can embrace democratic ideas and institutions, but only after they are subjected to reinterpretation and reformulation in the light of Shari’ah values and norms (Al-Sulami, 2003: 198-9). Al-Turabi, like other leaders of moderate Islamist movements and moderate Islamist thinkers, has accepted the centrality of the notion of democracy to Shura in modern times. For him, it is surprising that:

seven – out of eight – of the main elements and mechanisms of the Shura system (civil liberty, ijma (consensus), election of the president of the state and members of the Shura council, division of powers, political participation, competitive elections and multi-party or trend system), as identified in the discourse of moderate Islamist movements and prominent Islamist thinkers, are similar to their counterparts in Western liberal democracies) civil liberties, majority rule, elected representatives, separation of powers, political participation, competitive elections, and the political party system and interest groups) (Al-Sulami, 2003: 199).

Another reason for ambiguity is the pretentiousness of equating Shura and democracy. There is, in fact, nothing in the Holy Quran or the Sunnah that directly supports the claim that democracy is Shura. Shura implies consultation, and its interpretation as a directive to hold elections and structure a political system resembling that of Western societies is, at the very least, somewhat of a “stretch”. To commit that interpretation to specific mechanisms would be “another stretch – perhaps one too many”. Uriya Shavit\(^1\) while discussing this point in his essay, states:

Illustrating this fragility is the story of Queen Sheba’s reaction to a letter she received from King Solomon [Prophet Sulaiman] (27,

26–35). [Muhammad] ‘Imara as well as [Yusuf] al-Qaradawi, invoke it as an example for the application of shura. In this story, the Queen of Sheba asks her ministers how she should respond to King Solomon’s letter, telling them she would not make up her mind before they gave her their opinion, only to be told that the decision is hers. This tells nothing more than of a traditional monarch who holds monopoly on strategic decisions – a far cry from the type of political participation ‘Imara and al-Qaradawi depict in their writings on shura (Shavit 2010: 356).

VII. Conclusion

The efforts of Soroush and Eshkevari, along with those of the many other religious reformist intellectuals and political activists, have collectively given rise to a vibrant, intellectually sophisticated, and expansive discourse of Islamic reformism. Although similar discourses in the past have been a part of the mainstream of Islamic thought, this latest incarnation stands out for several reasons. To begin with, the current discourse is, using the phraseology of Mehran Kamrava (2011: 76), being articulated in a radically new context that features a heritage of “Islamic revolutionism, a theocratic political system, a politically backed discourse of religious conservatism, and unprecedented levels of and speeds in the flow of information and knowledge”. Equally significant is the relatively new focus of the current discourse as compared to its previous incarnations, with themes relevant to, and often a product of the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries—civil society, democracy, civil liberties, and the like.

Furthermore, given the problems persisting in the Muslim world and the neglect of practicality in the literature, two concluding remarks can be made: (i) theoretically more reflection and research, and (re) interpretation is required to reconcile the tenets of Islam with the modern notions of democracy, liberty, justice, equality, and human rights as the Islamic primary sources—the Holy Quran and the Sunnah—throw ample light and guidance on these concepts and
values; and (ii) practically, as we have now completed two years of the second decade of third millennium, it is imperative to mould this theory into a practical framework. By the implementation of this “Islamic democracy”, Muslims will lay the foundations of a political order and form of government that will be 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, nor contradict its law and essence.

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