Policy Paper

"Islamic democracy"
with reference to the political thought of
Abdolkarim Soroush and Rachid al-Ghannouchi

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Religion and politics constitute a relationship around which human affairs clustered since time immemorial. Faith in one or more superior beings already existed before the very first moment that people started perceiving themselves as members of an entity, irrespectively of its level of institutionalisation of power and formality of interpersonal relations. From the first family-based nomad communities where decisions were made on the basis of the Gods-sent omens till George W. Bush's references to God and al-Qaeda's Allah-inspired mission and ideology, religion was always centrally placed in politics (Gentile, 2006; Bruce, 2003) and vice versa.

Nevertheless, few religions have influenced politics to the degree that Islam has, for Islam is at the same time politics and religion, as Sayyid Qutb (among many others) argued (Tripp, 1994). During the past two centuries, Islam's relation to politics has been redefined several times, mainly as a result of the geopolitical, economic, socio-political and ideological changes which occurred, with the Western penetration in the Islamic Umma and the collapse of the Caliphate being only two of them. These major changes resulted in the Islamic political thought emphasising the sovereignty of Allah on earth via autocratic forms of Islamic governance and in moving towards quickly constructing mighty entities neglecting any democratic principles and institutions. But these changes had another effect as well: several "Western" ideas and concepts, such as democracy, permeated Muslim political thought.

Despite the fact that "'democracy' never formed part of the pre-modern political language of Islam" (Jahanbakhsh, 2001, p. 20), that in its essence it means "rule of the man" while Islam is about the "rule of God", that it requires a form of secularism to be established and conserved (Hashemi, 2009) and that the main political, cultural, and intellectual resources of the contemporary Islamic political thought are theological (Hashemi, 2009), the two concepts are not fundamentally opposite to each other, albeit relatively disconnected in place and time. Marrying Islam to democracy constitutes a salient goal of modern Islamic political thought with many arguments both in favour of its feasibility, as well as against it. This essay will critically engage with the term "Islamic democracy" through a critical comparative analysis of Rachid al-Ghannouchi's and Abdolkarim Soroush's political thought.

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Soroush, Ghannouchi and Islamic democracy

Although both have dealt with similar issues, they have done so from relatively different perspectives: Ghannouchi needed to find his ideological place and political discourse in a society where radical Islamist elements were constantly suppressed and, therefore, gradually driven to the margins of political life and to the extremes of the ideological spectrum. Being often accused by the Islamists as the regime's lackey and vice versa and living as an exile in Europe, he needed to prove to the West that he is reliable, responsible, democratic and loved by Tunisians enough to be considered as respectable and active, yet not dangerous. Soroush on the other hand is a philosopher and an intellectual who, even though actively supported the Islamist regime of Iran at first, gradually distanced himself from it due to ideological differentiations and only after 2000 was he safe enough (since he resided outside Iran) to fully expand his ideology. In general, their approach towards Islam is interpretative, critical, contextual and deconstructive and it changed Islam's relationship with politics and ideology. Both thinkers are affected by the humanist traditions of ancient Greek, pre-modern and modern European political thought, even though they criticise them. They deal extensively with the issue of Islamic democracy, but there are several other issues in their thought, of largely metaphysical and philosophical nature, which will not be touched here.

Western democracy is not the best or the only one

Even if democracy is always perceived as the people's rule, it is a concept variously applied numerous times (either nominally or literally), it is relatively abstract and certainly not very open to a concrete definition. The fact that its Western version is so far the most successful does not imply that it is the best or the only one. Thus, the two thinkers' attempt to reconstruct the concept away from it seems in principle not only logical, but necessary as well since the role and importance of religion in the Christian and Islamic politics differ fundamentally. After all, democracy and liberalism (utterly connected in the West) are not to be necessarily blended: the former refers to "virtually universal adult suffrage and eligibility to run for office" (Plattner, 1998, p. 177), while the latter implies that a government, irrespectively of the way it has been chosen, is limited by law, constitution and human and civil rights in its powers and ways of acting (Plattner, 1998).

As Ghannouchi argues (referring to Malik Bennabi), the

liberal and secular way in which democracy has taken form in the West constitutes the crowning of the period after the Reformation and the Renaissance and a result of its unique socio-political, economic and ideological conditions, namely the clashes originating in the socio-political and economic inequalities of the mercantilist and capitalist Europe. Therefore, the concept of democracy needs to be reconstructed "in isolation from its historical connotations using terms unlimited to the linguistic derivative and free from any ideological implication" (Tamimi, 2001, p. 65) or, in other words, to be "de-westernised". This type of democracy is, Soroush argues, applicable only to the West where liberal philosophers who had raised metaphysical and religious questions alongside the political and social ones (such as Kant and Hume) have been ignored while others with no such aspects in their thought (such as Mill, Locke, Smith and Voltaire) prevailed (Soroush, 2000).

Even if it is indeed true that disenchantment (Weber, 1946) indicated science being chosen over religion, some reasons for this are clearly overlooked: religion in Europe was (used as) a constant generator of wars, a form of suppression and a source of backwardness and illiteracy. After being the one and only centre of every society and system of power for some hundreds of years, religion's complete marginalisation in favour of science would have been a natural evolution, as Ghannouchi himself admits (Tamimi, 2001). Nevertheless, one could argue that religion was rejected only as a way of projecting unlimited power. Since religious parties existed and still exist, since politicians largely refer to God, since the public presence of religious activists is quite intense and since people are not forced to abandon or change their religion or their attitude towards it, religion has not been so much casted aside as neutralised. As Ghannouchi himself claims, the church in the West is independent and "the largest institution ever of civil society" (Tamimi, 2001, p. 137). Science, nonetheless, was indeed considerably favoured. But, constituting a body of reliable knowledge which can be rationally explained (Aristotle, 2009), being comprised of objective facts and perceived in the same way by all people, science lacks the necessary socio-political and ideological dimension and structures in order to mobilise people in the passionate, active and massive way religion (can do and) has done so many times.

Consequently, this discrimination reveals that no matter how liberal Western societies want to appear, this is not the case in (at least) two levels. Firstly, they have not and never would abdicate decision making concerning proved scientific facts to popular vote (Soroush, 2000). This proves that sci-

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ence and religion are not recognised as "analogous bodies of knowledge" (Soroush, 2000, p. 137), even though religious knowledge can be as open to criticism and discussion as scientific knowledge (Soroush, 2000). Irrespectively of the level of liberalism in Western societies, the relativity and subjectivity of religion indicates its openness to different understandings, definitions and applications and in this sense each person's subjective knowledge is indeed open to criticism. Nevertheless, criticism encompasses the exchange of arguments and counter-arguments which in the case of religion cannot exist, since there are no facts to be based on. Faith, as Soroush himself admits, is not structured or objective and, therefore, there can be no criticism on it (Soroush, 2000).

Secondly, as Ghannouchi claims, even though freedom, both negatively and positively defined (McCallum, 1967), seems to prevail in the West, the restrictions imposed by the ruling socio-political and economic system (state, capitalism, media, education, entertainment) "may assume various shapes, which may be so subtle, cunning, and disguised that the victim is unaware of [them]" (Tamimi, 2001, p. 75). Seen under this prism, Ghannouchi and Soroush correctly argue in favour of the superficial liberalist character of the Western societies. This claim constitute a major proof of the diversity between the ways in which a system or a concept may be perceived and defined by different people, as well as of the fact that there can be no truly and fully liberal (free and just) social system. As Bakunin claims, as long as there is the slightest power relation between human beings, which nevertheless (as Foucault argues and Ghannouchi agrees) is a condition sine qua non for the construction of an elementary level of socio-political organisation (Heiskala, 2001; Tamimi, 2001), there cannot be true freedom and justice (Saltman, 1983). It is practically impossible to construct a system providing unlimited freedom to every aspect of everyone's life, while at the same time offering justice and safety to all as well.

In any case, whether it is judged as right or wrong, the point of Ghannouchi and Soroush could be summarised in that the Western democratic discourse and narrative (comprising of modernity, secularism, rationality and liberalism) is not the only one, it has come into existence through certain socio-political, economic and ideological paths mostly unique in Europe and that in many of its aspects is superficial and not true.

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Islam is deeply democratic in its essence

Religion in principle should not be considered as opposed to democracy. As Soroush argues, the fact that a democracy tends to constantly make decisions, choose, discuss and examine, does not mean that a religious society does not have to engage into the exact same procedure, even though it has already made the critical choice of being religious (Soroush, 2000). But this does not seem very coherent simply because it is based on the controversial concept of religious society. Considering as a religious society the one in which all (or many) of the people have a "sober and willing –not fearful and compulsory– practice of religion" (Soroush, 2001, p. 133), it can be argued that religion's opposition (or not) to democracy depends on the former's character and on how it is expressed and used by its representatives. Hinduism's relatively liberal structure (with no absolute truths, no prophets delivering Gods' messages and numerous distant Gods, out of whom each person may choose his or her "preferred" ones) did not prevent the violent Hindu-Muslim conflict in India.

Nevertheless, Soroush and Ghannouchi believe that democracy and Islam constitute an inevitable mix, since Islam is not only a religion, but a complete socio-political system and a comprehensive moral and spiritual way of life. As such, according to Ghannouchi, it encompasses the essence of democracy through universal values such as pluralism, justice, equality and freedom (Tamimi, 2001), which are obvious to those who have read the Qur'an, have learned about the Prophet and his followers and know Islamic history. The Qur'an declares that "there is no compulsion in religion" (2:256), while Umar Ibn al-Khattab, the second Caliph, has been quoted as having argued that "you (cannot) enslave people when they are born free" (Tamimi, 2001, p. 97). Freedom may be found in Islam through the concept of 'aqidah too: faith in one immensely superior and absolutely perfect, yet close and influential, God shows Islam's non-tolerance towards God's direct immanence in human affairs and, consequently, denies to any person or institution the possibility to project their power representing Him or using Him in any way (Tamimi, 2001).

In parallel, people should "be just, that is nearer to righteousness" (Qur'an, 5:8). This plainly shows Islam's connection to the idea of justice, while regarding public participation in politics, it is mentioned in the Qur'an: "… consult them in the matter. And when you have decided, then rely upon Allah…" (3:159). Equality is established directly from the Prophet in his last sermon:

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"… Know this well that no Arab shall have superiority over a non-Arab, or a non-Arab over an Arab. A white man has no superiority over a Negro and a Negro has none over a white man in their merits, excepting for their fear of God. It is certain that in the eyes of God, the most superior of you is the one who follows the principles of Islam most faithfully" (Jahanbakhsh, 2001, p. 32).

Finally, the Islamic pluralist tradition can be proved by the facts that Islam recognises that it is not the only way towards God, that there are numerous Islamic dogmas and schools of jurisprudence, and that both secular and religious Muslims and Christians have equally participated in the movements resulting in the Islamic world's liberation from the Western imperial colonialism (Tamimi, 2001).

Indeed, Islam encompasses all these concepts and values. Nevertheless, the Qur'an can be used as a basis to support almost all (usually contradicting) ways of socio-political organisation and behaviour and this can be proved by the fact that the basis of the thought of most of the Muslim political philosophers and movements tended to be the Qur'an. For example, Osama Bin Laden and Muhammad Arkoun, Muhammad Abduh and Sayyid Qutb, Ayatollah Khomeini and Malik Bennabi had the Qur'an as their initial reference point. This high rate of diversity may be explained by the fact that the Qur'an contains many universal and relatively subjective values (justice, freedom, equality and so on) which can be perceived in different ways by people with different (personal, educational, ethnic etc.) characteristics, experiences, background and aims, while the controversies of some of its verses do not help. When Bin Laden used the word "justice", it usually was to refer to a violent jihad aiming at the restoration of the Caliphate and at the punishment of the infidels who had condemned the Islamic world to backwardness. On the other hand, when Soroush and Ghannouchi use the same word, the context is entirely different.

The way they perceive meanings such as justice, equality and freedom is liberal, if one seeks for a single word to describe it. For them, equality is materialised through the justice which is the same towards every individual. Freedom is perceived as each person's right to speech, eligibility and expression, and it ends where another person's freedom begins. More specifically, Ghannouchi argued that, since all members of the Muslim community are equal and submit to the Sunnah (authority of the judiciary) and the Shari'a, then the Islamic state is executive in nature and, therefore, it favours the separation of powers (Ghannouchi, 1993; Tamimi, 2001). As Soroush claims, religious jurisprudence is not synonymous with the whole structure of Islam, while it should not

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be partly presented outside its original context (Soroush, 2000), as in that way it loses its meaning. It is a fundamental mistake not to distinguish between the political role of a government and its jurisprudential one (Soroush, 2000). It is obvious that Soroush and Ghannouchi do not just remain to what is said in the Qur'an, but use it to further elaborate on their ideas and develop coherent arguments concerning the actual politics of the state. And it has to be admitted that even though Islam has a certain tradition towards not separating the powers, Europe shares the same tradition (almost until the 20th century) and it managed to overcome it. Therefore, it is not necessary that Islam will always behave in that way.

Islamic democracy: religious or rational-secular?

Even though Islam undoubtedly contains several democratic elements, a salient practical issue remains relatively cloudy in Soroush's and Ghannouchi's system of ideas: will religion or reason dominate the Islamic democracy's politics? If religion will, then it will definitely be Islamic, but not so democratic. If it is the other way around, then it will be a democracy, albeit not an Islamic one. Their answer to that does not consist of clear statements, but of a series of arguments from which a relatively lucid answer can nevertheless be extracted and in which reason, rationality and their relationship to religion play a central role.

Being in favour of values such as civil society, pluralism, tolerance and peaceful coexistence, and declaring that they have become possible only through secularisation, which is part and parcel of reason, rationality and the process of disenchantment (from religion), Ghannouchi declares his sympathy towards reason and secularism in an indirect, albeit profound way (Tamimi, 2001). Nevertheless, he seems to remain relatively wary of secularism since it transforms human beings into selfish beasts and, consequently, renders family meaningless (Tamimi, 2001). Furthermore, having argued several times in favour of modernity, which consists of the scientific, technological and administrative outcomes of rationality and of the separation of the several sectors of social life (politics, economy, family life, religion, art), Ghannouchi indirectly argues in favour of rationality and secularism. Nevertheless, since he is always a Muslim, he thinks of Islam and reason as being combinable. Looking back to Ibn Khaldoun, he comes up with the term "Islamic rationalism", which is the dualism of reason and revelation as sources of knowledge and none of the two can (nor should) gain supremacy over the other (Tamimi, 2001).

Will religion or reason dominate the Islamic democracy's politics?

Ghannouchi has repeatedly argued (either indirectly or directly) in favour of pluralism, rationality and liberalism and since he has experienced in the worst way the hitherto deeply undemocratic Tunisian politics, one could argue that he supports the dominion of reason and rationality in the politics of an Islamic democracy. But other than that his thought remains relatively abstract and has not clarified the exact place of religion. This must most probably be attributed to his role. Being a politician in constant opposition, he has not until recently faced the need of giving specific answers. Nevertheless, even though he has been in power for a very short period of time, his decisions to form a national unity government despite his major victory in last October's elections, to cede the post of president to the secular human rights campaigner Moncef Marzouki and not to base the new constitution on the Shari'a, as well as his neither fully Islamist or fully secular policies may indicate that Islam is de facto restricted to being "just a religion" (thus a largely private and non-political issue) even though in the past he has extensively argued in favour of Islam being a socio-political ideology and way of life as well.

According to Soroush, the basis of democracy is the rule of the people and "rulers need to be designated through rational methods" (Soroush, 2000, p. 152). Under that prism, which is close to the Renaissance and Reformative spirit, reason and rationality become of central importance to his thought. Nevertheless, as already mentioned before, Soroush argues against the secular version of democracy flourishing in the West and, consequently, believes that (Islamic) religiosity and rationality (and, thus, democracy) can and should coexist (Soroush, 2000). Religious jurisprudence should not be considered as opposed to democratic pluralism, mainly because its religiosity does not change the facts that it might as well be rational and that universal (and not only religious) value systems, such as truth, justice, humanity, equality and others, might be placed above religious law and, thus, be subsequent to reason (Soroush, 2000). Always under the last precondition, religious jurisprudence is the most suitable kind of jurisprudence for a religious society (Soroush, 2000).

Nevertheless, if jurisprudence does not act in that way, power and law will automatically be synonymous to absolutism and despotism and the very essence of Islam (submission to none but Allah) will be deeply endangered. But even if it does not act in that way, this does not exclude the "dependency of human rationality on prophetic instruction and, thus, the [possible] paralysis of the collective reason" (Soroush, 2000, p. 150). Therefore, the mission of the prophets (and that of religious law one could add) should cluster around "accel-

erating human spiritual evolution, perfecting moral virtues,… augmenting justice [and] eradicating tyranny" (Soroush, 2000, p. 151). Hence, religion shall "assume a mission that excludes methods (but not values) of government" (Soroush, 2000, p. 151).

Obviously, in Soroush's perception of Islamic democracy, religion seems to abdicate ruling and moves towards setting the moral framework of democracy, which consists of the above mentioned universal values and constitutes its essence. Seen under this prism, this moral framework resembles very much the Constitution of a polity. It is above any power, it is not subjected to constant public voting and it preserves democracy, even though it is not preserved by it, as it is the case in the West. In Soroush's system of ideas, it is preserved by religion. Thus, in practical terms, he argues in favour of a quasi-secular type of Islamic democracy, since religion is limited to the realm of ethics and morality. The way proposed by Soroush and so far materialised by Ghannouchi seems to be the only true path towards democracy, since if Islam (and every other religion) is allowed to intervene in everyday politics, democracy will be in danger, because an actor outside the rational and institutional framework of the polity will be able to affect it.

Conclusion

All in all, both Soroush and Ghannouchi seem to agree on certain points: the Western version of democracy is not the best or the only one, albeit successful; Islam has many democratic elements in it; finally, the role of religion in an Islamic democracy must be relatively limited and kept away from the actual politics. The last point has two remarkably important outcomes: firstly, Islam is (in theory) limited to the moral and ethical parts of everyday life, it stops being a complete system of socio-political organisation and it ceases to play an active role in politics; secondly, the relatively indirect way in which this conclusion is extracted by the two philosophers' systems of ideas may be attributed to the strong and multidimensional presence of Islam in the everyday lives of contemporary Muslims. More specifically, whatever change may occur needs either to be legitimised by the dominating socio-political, moral and ideological system which in this case is Islam itself, or to exist against it. Given all the other interpretations of Islam which are much simpler and, thus, more understandable to the average people, it is highly likely that these people will consider illogical Islam's self-restriction. Furthermore, given the influence of Islam in the average believer's life, a possible violent imposition of this largely non-

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Islamic socio-political system might be resisted en masse by the Muslims.

Nevertheless, despite these weaknesses, this represents a huge progress in Islamic political thought, as after roughly 150 years of what could be considered as the equivalent of Renaissance (its start being marked by al-Afghani's and Abduh's thought), Islamic political thought is abundantly (if not massively) moving towards a democratic discourse. After all, one should not forget that Christianity needed almost 600 years (counting from the Renaissance onwards) to achieve the liberal, secular and pluralist structure that is today considered to be the culmination of human thought and way of democratic socio-political organisation. Islam can be condemned for everything but for failing to reach Europe in less than a fourth of the years that Europe needed in the first place to reach the point where it is now. In fact, it can be said that Islam has already covered much more distance towards democratisation in these 150 years than Europe had in the first two centuries of the Renaissance period.

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