



## CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC POLITICAL THOUGHT

Towards institutionalising values and  
reviving the relationship between  
religion and politics

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**T**he positive redeployment of ethical values and their transformation into controlled, purposeful, responsible political institutions poses a critical challenge to modern Islamic political thought. This study aims to examine the extent to which there is an ‘institutional dimension’ in modern Islamic political thought, as well as the questions that arise with respect to political substance, ethical content, the compatibility between political and religious content and the putative new relationship within this thought between religion and politics.

This study takes the concept of constitution in its classical sense, as defined by Montesquieu; according to this, the constitution of a people – any people – entails a group of individuals transforming their personal desires, inclinations and instincts into a social situation or state in which they recognise an authority outside and beyond their own selfish interests and preferences. In this sense the word ‘constitution’ encompasses one



of the most important criteria for belonging to the modern era, because a constitution-based society is one that successfully transforms those of its institutions that are based on personal, tribal, clan and family loyalties, ie. relationships that lack an objective character, into relationships based on the principle that all citizens are equal before a Basic Law that assigns them rights and duties in their dealings with each other, as well as equal rights to take part in the institutional organisation that governs them<sup>1</sup>.

A constitution under this definition has two distinct features – a legal foundation to guarantee its stability and a sense among members of the community that the state’s institutions are effective and actually work. According to Maurice Hauriou, this second feature is probably the most crucial in determining society’s institutions; this is borne out by the failure of numerous attempts to change the prevailing system of vested interests in various societies, since people tend to believe strongly that power-based relationships have a certain legitimacy – and this is a factor that impedes the creation of institutions that are outside, or in conflict with, those relationships<sup>2</sup>.

Moreover, despite the fact that religion provides Islamic societies with their value and belief systems, the inspiration and understanding that Islamic thought derives from religious values has always been determined by specific historical circumstances and according to the issues, phenomena and concepts it is forced to deal with, as well as its contacts and interaction with the outside world and within its own sphere<sup>3</sup>. However, the distinctive feature of this thought, where its use of religious values

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- 1 Boudon, R. and Bouricaud, F., *A Critical Dictionary of Sociology*, tr. Saleem Haddad, Al Mu’assasatu’l Jami’iyah li’l Dirasat wa’l Nashr wa’l Tawzi’ (University Establishment for Studies, Publication and Distribution), Beirut, 1986, p.479. Covering the French Revolution, as the herald of a new societal project. Values and principles of institutional thought including the distinction between the interests of kings and the interests of nation, separation of powers, breaking down the traditional social pyramid and rebuilding it on the basis of efficiency, productivity, merit and equal opportunity ... Maliki, Mohammed, *Constitutional Law and Political Institutions*, Part 2, Contemporary Political Systems, Dar Walili li’l Tiba’ah wa’l Nashr, Marrakech 1667, pp. 177-183.
  - 2 Queronne, J.L. ‘Les Politiques Institutionelles’, *Traité de Science Politique*, Les Politiques public, publie ous la direction de Grawitz M. et Leca J.
  - 3 Gibb, Hamilton, *Structure of Religious Thought in Islam*, tr. Adel al ‘Awa, University of Damascus Printing Press, Damascus, undated, p.24.



is concerned, is its lack of ‘institutional concepts’ and the fact that it is content to understand it and apply it solely within its ethical and religious context.

That is the crux of the issue tackled by this study, which deals with a subject that may be considered a challenge to contemporary Islamic political thought, ie. the positive redeployment of values, or their transformation from mere ethical and discipline-based concepts into political institutions with rules, aims and responsibilities that are both accountable and subject to controls. Briefly, the question is to what extent can the new approach to the subject along these lines be seen as a sign of the emergence of an institutional dimension in Islamic political thought?

If those values are to be related to an institutional structure, does this mean an abandonment of their ‘ethical baggage’? Or are those elements retained while, at the same time, becoming infused with political content? And what effect does this have on the new relationship established by Islamic political thought between religion and politics?

To answer these questions we shall first endeavour to identify the theoretical basis of the ideas that seek to establish a constitution founded on religious values. Then we shall examine their implications.

## **1. From Reform to Restructuring**

Although some present-day Islamic forces may be seen as an extension of the ‘awakening’ trend, their aim has been to re-establish their relationship with the concept of reform through a discourse dominated by a tendency to reconcile the idea of reform with that of ‘awakening’ by bringing together the basic elements of the two concepts – the radical expression of ‘awakening’ (which seeks to establish an Islamic project based on the Islamic nation’s own inner resources) and the reformist trend (which looks to the West and combines basic Islamic principles with those elements of modern thinking that it finds acceptable).

These approaches have revealed a major trend towards criticism of the ideas contained in classical Islamic political thinking, which includes



a frank recognition of the fact that Arab political heritage has rejected the notions of emir, *shura* (traditional-style Islamic consultation) and other concepts that are indicative of authority and the manner in which it is exercised in the form of institutions designed to develop stable, organised political practice and behaviour<sup>1</sup>. These values have continued to be religious concepts that promote moral discipline for Muslims, ie. they are purely ethical (and discipline-oriented) in nature and apply equally to the individual, society as a whole and the head of the state or community, without making a distinction between the public and private spheres (which is the cornerstone of the concept of politics in the modern world).

Looking at attitudes to Islamic thought from these two angles – the ancient and the modern – we may be led to conclude that present-day Islamic discourse seeks to restructure Islamic thought rather than reform it. In its early stages the project makes an objective criticism of various reform ideas that have emerged over the four generations of Islamists.

If the fourth generation of standard bearers of this project (Ghannouchi, al Turabi, Tariq al Bishri, Salim al Awa, Radhwan al Sayyid) are an extension of, and form a link with, all these earlier generations, then in that capacity they are also responsible for revitalising and overcoming the negative elements of the three previous generations. In general, these elements could be summed up as being ‘thought of a Utopian nature. In expressing Islamic ideas it was limited to the purely ethical and religious spheres and had not been developed, that is, it had not moved on from the margins to the heart of the cultural, social and political struggle, including the genuine adoption of the concepts of pluralism, democracy and the right to differ<sup>2</sup>.’

In the first generation (Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn al Qayyim) these negative elements consisted of ‘being limited to hasty interpretations of the era of *tashri*’ (Islamic legislation), usually leading to a study of religious texts with the aim of justifying the status quo rather than controlling or changing it. This in turn led to the appearance of books on Sharia-oriented politics,

1 Roy, Olivier, *Islam's Political Experience*, Dar al Saqi, Beirut, 1994, p. 22.

2 Source: Statement published in al Nahdha on the 15th anniversary of its foundation, al Raya newspaper, No. 211, 27th August 1992.



which were totally unconnected with reality on the ground and resulted in our present age being dominated by religious Sharia thinking. Consequently there was no constitutional vision based on any view that might be at odds with the ruling authority.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, the second generation (Mohammed Abduh and al Afghani) has been criticised for the superficial way in which it reconciled Islamic values with Western constitutional principles, using the terms *khilafah* (caliphate), *shura* and *ahl al hall wa'l 'aqd* (the people who choose and bind, ie. the people with binding authority) merely in order to apply Islamic terminology to modern concepts, leaving the 'Utopian tendency' as their chief characteristic<sup>2</sup>.

The third generation (Sayyid Qutb, al Maududi), was notable for its misunderstanding of the concept of 'all-embracingness', ie the idea that, as an 'all-embracing religion' covering every sphere of life and existence, Islam rejects gradual moves towards reform. Thanks to this view, the absolutist tendency came to dominate Islamic discourse at the expense of the relativist approach, so that issues were seen strictly and rigidly in terms of 'either ... or ...' It also introduced a conspiracy-theory element into the interpretation of events, ie. a view that everything that happened in the world was designed to destroy the Islamists, whereas this was not actually the case at all<sup>3</sup>.

Following this evaluation, a prominent thinker and supporter of 'restructuring' concluded that 'the critically weak point in both ancient and modern Islamic thinking is the incompatibility between means and ends, which has given its theses a Utopian flavour. Hence it has found itself incapable of effective action or of directing the course of history ... Consequently, major elements of the Islamic political system, such as *bay'ah* (oath of allegiance to a leader), *al amr bil ma'ruf wal nahy*

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1 Ghannouchi, Rached, *Public Freedoms in the Islamic State*, Centre for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut, 1995, p.150.

2 *Ibid.* p.150.

3 Ghannouchi, Rached, Comment on Religious Dialogue, working papers and discussions at a seminar organised by the Centre for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut, 1989, p.291.



'*anal munkar* (commanding the good and forbidding the evil), *shura* etc., remained mere concepts which in many cases could only be applied in a piecemeal, token manner.<sup>1</sup>'

To overcome these negative elements, present-day Islamic thinkers have turned to the idea of restructuring the Islamic thought of the three earlier generations. With regard to the classical approach, it was proposed that awareness should be raised about the importance of an 'institutional representation' of religious values in a way that would direct the attention of general Islamic thinking towards the field of politics, particularly where the state was concerned; this would enable an examination to be made of the origins of the state, the nature of its institutions and the way in which authority is organised within the state apparatus<sup>2</sup>. This, it is believed, would add a methodological and procedural dimension to the field's ethical and teleological context.

Similarly, efforts at restructuring should continue using the ideas of the reformers; the link with them should be reinforced, there should be a moderate approach towards *da'wa* (calling people to Islam) and people should be encouraged to become part of modern global civilisation. They should be open to other cultural influences and prepared to be influenced by – and have an impact upon – other civilisations; they should also try to promote greater harmony and more mature attitudes by adopting Western institutional and administrative organisational systems, while at the same time taking a critical view of those aspects of them that are incompatible with basic Islamic principles.

With regard to the *sahwa* (awakening) movement, it is proposed that there should be greater awareness of the importance of giving priority to

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1 Ghannouchi, Rached, *op. cit.*, p.187.

2 This can be clearly seen in the introduction, which deals with the question of the state and the ruling authority from the perspective of Islamic thought. Contrary to modern Western thought, which questions the integration of religion into social life and the state, Islamic thought asks questions about the state's need for religion, a position that uses religion as its starting point and examines what the Islamic faith has to say about the state. The early Muslims did not regard politics as a branch of knowledge that was separate from other Islamic sciences and disciplines. Instead, it was discussed and debated as being in the same category as *fiqh* (doctrine/jurisprudence) and '*ilm al kalam* (theology), ie. as a Sharia science.



the 'intellectual' or 'ideational' factor and establishing an Islamic discourse that is compatible with the changing circumstances and issues of the present day. This involves reshaping ideas and concepts and revising the approach to thinking and discussion, particularly with regard to questions of state authority, governance and institutions, as well as political thought and self-criticism, ie. the areas in which there are shortcomings in Islamic thought.

We may thus conclude that present-day Islamic thought is becoming increasingly aware of the crisis in its political thinking and of the need to improve and develop it; this will involve moving on from the stage of defending the 'eternal truths', which Islamic discourse imagines are under attack from secularist trends and rejected by the nation state, to a new stage in which it will be able to consider fresh political formulas that can coexist with the new conditions; this in turn will mean coming up with a theory of the state and authority that is both modern and compatible with the specific circumstances to which it applies.

A theory of this kind requires a level of *ijtihad* (effort and interpretative judgement) that goes beyond the mere adoption of the slogan '*Al Islam din wa dawlah*' ('Islam is both religion and state'), a level of *ijtihad* that draws a line under the traditional forms of the state such as *khilafah*, while retaining the principles without which the Islamisation of the state would be impossible. It must be receptive to the philosophy and systems of modern political thinking that emerged after the birth of the nation state in the West.

So what is the outcome of this new structure?

## **2. Institutionalising Religious Values and Restructuring the Relationship between Islam and Politics**

The fact is that today's serious Islamic cultural and political thinkers share their predecessors' view that Islam, by its nature, does not accept any separation between religion and the state, on the grounds that the unbreakable link between them is an integral part of Islamic teaching and not just a result of Islam's political experience.



However, although Islamic discourse in general is united on this point, there is disagreement over the degree of harmony between these two elements – religion and the state. In most cases the view is that they are fused together, ie. that Islam is the state’s religion and the basis of the state authority’s legitimacy, and that the state is an instrument for serving the Sharia.

Contemporary thinkers, however, believe that the relationship has begun to change. In place of a fusion between religion and the state, or a complete separation between the two, we find that they would prefer to restructure the religion/politics relationship, in view of the changing nature of the concept of politics and the fact that they have discovered that there are new dimensions in its relationship with the concept of religion.

Where the concept of politics is concerned, present-day Islamic thinking has moved closer to the position from which it is understood in modern thought, so that today it considers it from two angles:

1. From the point of view of motives, intentions and aims, politics can be seen as religious action, since it consists of a set of means that are used to achieve the major goals of the Islamic faith and fulfil its mission of providing guidance for the individual, promoting social justice and promoting the Message of Islam through jihad.
2. The second angle looks at politics from a realistic, practical and empirical point of view. This sees politics more as a field in which there are competing interests between individuals and groups.

The approach from both these two angles has led to a new definition of politics. The first angle focuses on the essence and goals of politics, which it sees as a means of fulfilling the aims of the faith within a political system, while the second sees politics as an arena in which different interests battle and compete for superiority; this means that any group wishing to enter the fray must have programs capabilities and strategies that can enable it to hold its own in the balance of power.

This shows that attempts to restructure the relationship between religion and politics are caused by a desire on the part of Islamic discourse



to introduce a 'value element' into politics in which religion is the 'value source' that provides politics with its ethical principles. Politics can only be given an ethical character, and a 'value element' can only be introduced into it if religion imbues it with legitimacy, motivation and a goal, while a separation between religion and politics empties the latter of its doctrinal, spiritual and ethical content<sup>1</sup>.

After recognising that politics is a battlefield between competing interests, Islamic discourse endeavours to ethicalise the battle 'so that the struggle for power is transformed from a mere contest for power, influence and hegemony, or revolution, to a higher spiritual and moral level which puts politics at the service of virtue.'<sup>2</sup>

It could be said that the problem in modern Islamic discourse is that it is content merely to link Islam with politics without explaining its vision of political action and the goals and legal framework of politics. At the same time, the importance attached to politics in the present day, whether as a means of regulating state authority or as a battlefield between competing interests, means that politics (as a field of either battle or harmony) is an established and independent element of Islamic discourse, whereas previously it had been an incidental, fringe, component of Islamic thought when compared with ethics as derived from Holy Writ. It is true that politics is not independent insofar as it derives its motivation and goals from religion, but its relationship with religion is a complementary, balanced one in which religion's extension into politics imbues the latter with the qualities of care, protection and guidance. Religion does not need to be directly involved with political organisation and producing final solutions; it is more appropriate for it to intervene in the political scene where it can help resolve disputes and problems affecting the community<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Ghannouchi, Rached, *Islamic Thought in Tunisia*, Dar al Qalam, Khartoum, first impression, 1992, p.135.

<sup>2</sup> Dialogue with Ghannouchi, *al Raya* newspaper, No. 29, 31st December 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Ghaliyoun, Burhan, *Critique of Politics and the State*, Arab Establishment for Studies and Publication, Beirut, second impression, 1993, p.193



In this new context, Islamic discourse now speaks about the Islamic faith as a source of individual and collective discipline that is an essential element of the political system; if the state is the engine of state authority, religion is its soul, and separating the soul from the body leads to grievous consequences including the disintegration of society.

However, there are several major stages between connection and separation, and this is the area with which present-day Islamic discourse is concerned. It has now gone beyond stressing the obvious link between religion and politics and has started to readjust the relationship between them by taking religious values and using them with a new awareness within the context of new developments in modern thought and political organisation, infusing their ethical principles and disciplines with political content and converting them into legal and institutional regulators of the relationship between the state authority and the citizens and between the state and society, and into guarantors of public freedoms.

Defining Islamic values in a way that enables the relationship between religion and politics to be restructured is a major undertaking, which is still in progress. It requires the combined efforts of all those who contribute to Islamic discourse, particularly in view of the differences that exist over the institutional aspects of those values and over scholars' readiness to criticise earlier Islamic ideas and theses on the subject.

The main focus of these efforts may be summed up as follows:

- To help promote coexistence and harmony between the different political forces while taking a critical look at the historical Islamic political experience in which the ruling power lived and thrived at the expense of religion rather than serving and protecting it. This meant that 'Islamic' applied to society's identity and allegiance, rather than its political principles and goals.
- To take a critical look at Islamic political thought and classical political theories which, through fear of social disorder and disintegration, limited the role of the ruling authority to implementing the Sharia and did not attempt to develop a direct relationship between it, ie. the ruling authority, and the state.



- To make an objective assessment of the experiences of others, particularly the European political experience, with the aim of benefiting from developments in their political systems and avoiding their mistakes.
- To look at different ideologies and identify those with which it is feasible to make alliances, even where there are differences in religious beliefs and worldviews.

So, in endeavouring to revive religious values and restore the relationship between religion and politics, one must come to terms with several differing viewpoints. Islamic discourse must come to terms with its legacy when re-evaluating its essence, while at the same time it must remain in tune with its past when reviewing the history of its political experience. It also needs to be reconciled with its own reality and deal with it as it is.

If a project of this kind should succeed, it will not only represent a step forward for Islamic discourse, it will also narrow the gap between it and secular discourse. If the latter separates religion from politics and believes that the latter has ethical principles and goals (ie. the public good) that are independent of religion and subject to changing political checks and balances, and if it sees that this separation is an essential step towards rationalising political relationships and providing them with a proper organisational and constitutional perspective, then the Islamic approach should seek to adopt a similar approach. In doing so, it should not fall into the error of separating religion from politics; instead, it should restructure the relationship between them by maintaining an unbreakable link between the religious and the political in a way that can safeguard freedoms by institutionalising religious values in a way that will ensure that there are strong, effective institutions to maintain the relationship between society and the state.

Islamic discourse does not face the problem of merely reaffirming the link between religion and politics, but rather of restructuring the relationship between them by passing through the different reconciliation stages we have referred to above.



Looking at it from this angle, we can see that Islamic thought is not in absolute and total conflict with secular thought. Rather, it is complementary, by another route, to what secularism has sought to achieve without a revolution. It is an attempt to establish a link between Islamic fundamentalism and secularism by occupying the common space shared by Islamism and secularism.

Also, looking at it from this angle, we can see that Islamic thought has no objection to political modernism, in that the latter offers scope for dialogue, criticism, and give and take. Although it (Islamic thought) may be independent in relation to other fields within the Western experience, it will not be independent of religion in the discourse that is the subject of this study. Instead, it has become a separate field all of its own, since the word 'religious' has been interpreted in a way that makes it, as an element of modern politics, a kind of new way of understanding 'religious values'. The discourse, then, represents another way of political thinking without separating politics from religion.