

**DEMOCRACY SERIES**

# **DEMOCRACY AND ISLAM**

**BY PROFESSOR MALEH AFSHAR**

**With commentaries  
by Professor Brian Barry,  
Madeleine Bunting and  
Sir Iqbal Sacranie OBE**



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# Preface

**Philip Parvin and Declan McHugh**  
**Editors, Democracy Series**

This pamphlet is the first in the Hansard Society's *Democracy Series* – a major project which over the next 12 months will bring together parliamentarians, academics, opinion formers, and the public to debate some of the most pressing challenges currently facing British democracy.

It is sometimes a little too easy to be complacent about the health and vitality of our democratic system, and to assume that the principles which underpin it are clear and settled. But many of the most pressing and complex issues facing democratic states like the UK arise from clashes among these fundamental, core principles. Saying that a society should respect principles of freedom and equality, for example, leaves an enormous amount open as to what these principles might mean, and what we should expect our governments to do. Should a liberal democracy like ours limit freedom of speech in order to protect certain religious or ethnic groups from offence, for example? And to what extent should states be able to limit the individual freedom of their members in the interests of protecting national security? In questions like these, as with many others, the issue is not so much what values should we be committed to, but what policies and measures should be introduced in order to respect values which command common agreement.

The issue confronted by this first pamphlet could not be more important or timely, and raises precisely these kinds of profound questions. The answers are not easy or straightforward. Many British Muslims have claimed that they feel excluded and alienated from the political system, and oppressed by a widespread hostility towards them and their beliefs. Critics, however, have claimed that accommodating Islamic religious norms would seriously compromise the state's ability to ensure such things as free speech and gender equality. Some Muslims have found the situation so problematic that they have felt it necessary to choose between respecting the requirements of their faith and their duties as a citizen.

Professor Haleh Afshar's piece tackles some of the key issues at stake in this debate. Drawing upon Islamic teachings as well as the experiences of many British Muslims, she suggests that the notion of a distinct choice between being a good citizen and being a good Muslim is overstated, and that democracy and Islam are more compatible than many Muslims and non-Muslims believe. This theme is picked up in different ways by our three commentators: Sir Iqbal Sacranie (Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain), Madeleine Bunting (*The Guardian*), and Professor Brian Barry (London School of Economics and Columbia University).

We hope you find the pamphlet stimulating, and hope too that you read the forthcoming pamphlets in the series. We urge you to debate these issues online at the Democracy Series website, which has updates, news and information on this and future publications: [www.democracyseries.org.uk](http://www.democracyseries.org.uk).

**Philip Parvin and Declan McHugh are programme directors at the Hansard Society and members of the Democracy Series Editorial Board**

# Contributors' Biographies

**Professor Haleh Afshar OBE** teaches Politics and Women's Studies at the University of York. She is also the Visiting Professor of Islamic Law at the Faculte Internationale de Droit Compare at Strasbourg. She was born and raised in Iran where she worked as a journalist and a civil servant. She is a founding member of the Muslim Women's Network and a member of the Home Office's working group 'Engaging with Women'. In 2005 she was awarded an OBE for services to equal opportunities. She is the convener of the Development Studies Association's Women and Development Study Group and has edited 11 books produced by this group. She has also jointly published 15 volumes of York Women's Studies Series. She remains active in feminist Iranian politics.

**Brian Barry** is Emeritus Professor at the London School of Economics and Columbia University. He is considered one of the most important political philosophers in the world, and his work on liberalism, social justice, and equality has had a profound influence on debates among theorists, policy experts and professionals across a range of disciplines. He won the Johann Skytte Prize in Political Science in 2001, and is a three-time winner of the Political Studies Association's WJM Mackenzie Prize for best book written in the previous year – for *Theories of Justice* (1989), *Justice as Impartiality* (1995), and *Culture & Equality* (2001). His most recent book *Why Social Justice Matters* was published by Polity in 2005. He is a Fellow of the British Academy and the American Society of Arts and Sciences.

**Madeleine Bunting** is a *Guardian* columnist and associate editor. She writes on a wide range of subjects including politics, work, Islam, science and ethics, development, women's issues and social change. She was awarded the Race in the Media award in 2005 by the Commission for Racial Equality for her work on the British Muslim community. She has written *Willing Slaves: How the Overwork Culture is Ruling Our Lives* and *The Model Occupation: The Channel Islands Under German Rule*. She is the recipient of the Imam wa Amal Special Award in 2002 and the One World Trust Award in 1999.

**Sir Iqbal AKM Sacranie OBE** is Secretary General of The Muslim Council of Britain. He an accountant by profession and has been in business for nearly 20 years. He has been involved in voluntary community work at both local and national level for over 30 years. He was one of the first Muslims to be appointed to the Inner Cities Religious Council and has also served on the Home Secretary's Race Relations Forum. He was honoured with an OBE in 1999 for services to Charities and Voluntary organisations and was knighted in the 2005 Queen's Birthday Honours.

# Democracy and Islam

Haleh Afshar

*In the atmosphere of fear and distrust that has followed 9/11 and 7/7 there has been a tendency to conflate all Muslims as belonging to a single nation and aspiring to a single political aim which is different from, and not compatible with, democracy.*

*This has been done by some to accommodate Islamophobia and by others to generate a sense of inclusive unity that encloses all Muslims. In the post 9/11 and 7/7 climate of Islamophobia it is necessary to have a better understanding of the logic of the arguments put forward by some Muslims who seek to keep their faith and their British identity but also to engage seriously with those who demand their followers shun the political processes in the West and replace them with a form of caliphate.<sup>1</sup>*

*It is the contention of this paper that the demand for a return to a golden age of Islamic rule and governance by a caliph may provide a sense of unity and solidarity, but it does not stand close examination in terms of theories and practices of Islam and governments that seek to adhere to it in their political structures in the Middle East.<sup>2</sup> Both in terms of theory and practice, there are no inconsistencies between belonging to the peoples of Islam and participating fully in national democratic processes.*

In an atmosphere of fear and mutual distrust it is difficult for minority Muslims to celebrate their own diversities and enter into dialogue with one another and with the host societies in the West. The paucity of channels of communication, and a concern that the views of the Muslim community are not sufficiently well-represented at the levels of legislature and decision-making, have made democracy a hollow promise for many Muslims in the West. Political despondence and intensification of Islamophobia may have made the alternatives offered by groups such as *Hizb ut-Tahrir* appear attractive to some Muslims.<sup>3</sup> However, it is essential to consider critically what the political project of the caliphate proposed by *Hizb ut-Tahrir* means in theory and practice.

## Islamophobia

Islam as a faith and Muslims as a whole are under something of a siege.<sup>4</sup> In the battle of 'McWorld versus Jihad', many ordinary Muslims have found themselves on the wrong side.<sup>5</sup> They stand accused of being 'a threat' to the West and its national

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1 Caliphate: the name given to the dominion of Islam

2 Caliph: the spiritual head and temporal ruler of the Islamic state; the Caliphate

3 Hizb ut-Tahrir: a group calling for the re-establishment of the caliphate in Muslim lands

4 Allen and Nielsen, 2002; Cummins, 2004a

5 Barber 1995

security and insufficiently committed to the politics and values of their host communities.<sup>6</sup> In 2005, the Home Office initiated a series of task forces on *Preventing Extremism Together*, to hear the voices of the Muslim community. But it remained wedded to the term ‘extremism’ despite protests by many of the task force participants who were of the opinion that extremism was an inappropriate term and the abhorrent behaviours of particular individuals should not be seen as a shared characteristic of the entire community.

Islamophobia has created a wide gap between Muslims’ perception of who they are and the ways that they are viewed by the host societies. Groups on both sides of the divide demand that Muslims abandon either their faith or their national allegiance. Some Muslims choose to use Islam specifically as a means of creating political allegiances and solidarities. A new Islamic ideology is being constructed to provide a radical and viable political alternative. Islamist groups such as the *Al-Muhajerin* have declared that they are ‘dedicated to giving *da’wah* to both Muslims and non Muslims’.<sup>7</sup> Their posters announced ‘you are either with the Muslims or with the Kaafir’, and they paraded their ‘choice’ in London by calling a conference on September 11, 2003 to glorify the suicide bombers, calling them the ‘magnificent 11’.<sup>8</sup> Although in October 2004, *Al-Muhajerin* closed its website and announced that it was dissolving and ceasing its activities, it is not clear whether they have simply been driven underground or have really disbanded.<sup>9</sup> However, other groups such as *Hizb ut-Tahrir* retain a very high profile. They define themselves as a ‘political party whose ideology is Islam, so politics is its work’.<sup>10</sup> They too have announced that it is no longer possible for the youth in the UK to be both British and Muslim and that it was necessary to ‘choose’ between faith and nationality.<sup>11</sup>

The fears engendered by Islamophobia have led to a political backlash on both sides and can play into the politics of groups such as the far-right British National Party (BNP) who capitalise on fear of ‘the other’. At the same time, restrictive policies that specifically target Muslims are fuelled by measures such as the US Patriot Act and the UK Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001 and the French emergency measures in November 2005 that have led to wholesale arrests of Muslims. French born and bred Muslims suddenly found themselves branded as ‘scum’, ‘foreigners’ and the ‘enemy within’. A legal technicality that requires citizens at the age of 18 to make a positive decision to be French was used by the Minister of Interior Nicolas Sarkozy to order the arrest and ‘sending back home’ of rafts of ‘scum’ and ‘young hooligans’ to countries that they may not have even visited before.<sup>12</sup> Although they

6 Buruman & Margalit, 2004

7 Da’wah: inviting others to Islam. For the purposes of this article Islamist is used to refer to groups who are choosing to use Islam specifically as a means of creating political allegiances and solidarities

8 *The Guardian*, September 9, 2004. Kaafir: one who is not a believer in Islam

9 *The Guardian* October 13, 2004

10 <http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/english/>

11 *Sunday*, BBC 4, August 24, 2003

12 *The Observer* November 6, 2005



had rioted to gain equality, not Islamic laws, they were to be 'expelled from the country, regardless of whether they [we]re in France legally or illegally'.<sup>13</sup>

The plight of the French merely highlights the difficulties that Muslims are experiencing in the West. By November 2005, an estimated 800,000 Muslims were imprisoned across the world accused of 'terrorism'.<sup>14</sup> There is a suspicion that some were shifted to countries that permitted torture in order to extract information from them.<sup>15</sup> Many have no access to lawyers or entitlement to due process. It is not unusual at gatherings of Muslims to find that the majority have friends or relatives who have (or they have themselves) been stopped and searched or arrested. The assumption that it has been 'Muslims' specifically who have been the target of regressive measures in the West was intensified in February 2004 when the French government decided to ban the headscarf from schools and bar access to education to anyone wearing a religious insignia. It was perhaps unavoidable that Muslim youth would in the long run protest; as they did, not so much in defence of their faith, but to seek equal citizenship rights.

In the UK the situation became daunting after 7/7 and Muslims realised that there was now a shoot-to-kill policy that could threaten their lives.<sup>16</sup> The combination of these measures locates Muslims in general, and Muslim youth in particular, as sometimes-unwilling emblems of combative Islam at the cross fire between faith and state policies. It is at such points of crisis that some Muslims hanker back to the days of Islamic glory and find the call for the supranational identity of *umma* to be alluring.<sup>17</sup>

### The *umma*

The recent calls by *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and others for fraternity of the *umma* are specifically constructed as a reaction to a crisis. The call is primarily addressed to young men, and constructs an ideal state with Muslims of a single overriding political identity. Groups such *Hizb ut-Tahrir* call for a supranationality that, they argue, is rooted in the history of Islam. Muslims belong to the single community of the *umma* that, according to the teachings of the Prophet, recognises no divisions by race, class or nationality.<sup>18</sup> It is ruled by the laws of God and protected by a caliph who acts as vice-regent of God on Earth. In Britain, *Hizb ut-Tahrir* seeks the re-establishment of such a caliphate and defines its own politics as ones that:

work within the *Umma* and with her, so that she adopts Islam as her cause and is led to restore the *Khilafah* and the ruling by what Allah (swt) revealed ...<sup>19</sup> Its

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<sup>13</sup> *New York Times* November 10, 2005

<sup>14</sup> *The Guardian* November 18, 2005

<sup>15</sup> *The Times* December 7, 2005

<sup>16</sup> *The Guardian* September 14, 2005

<sup>17</sup> *Umma: the worldwide community of Muslims*

<sup>18</sup> Roy 2003

<sup>19</sup> *Khilafah: the name given to the dominion of Islam*

aim is to resume the Islamic way of life and to convey the Islamic *da'wah* to the world. This objective means bringing the Muslims back to living an Islamic way of life in *Dar al-Islam*<sup>20</sup> and in an Islamic society such that all of life's affairs in society are administered according to the *Shari'ah*<sup>21</sup> rules, and the viewpoint in it is the *halal* and the *haram*<sup>22</sup> under the shade of the Islamic state, which is the *Khilafah* state.<sup>23</sup>

In a recent discussion with Taji Mustafa of *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, he claimed that: 'The nature of the *Khilafah* system is a contractual one (between the people and the Khalif<sup>24</sup>), so one person can initiate the removal of the Khalif if he violates his contract.'<sup>25</sup>

However, Mustafa is sceptical about democratic systems based on majority rule:

'The will of the majority is not always right or the arbiter of what is good for society. If the majority Muslim citizens of the Caliphate wanted to start oppressing the non-Muslim citizens, or if the Sunni majority would like to oppress the Shiia, none of us would accept that the Khalif should give in to the will of this majority, and we would insist that he sticks to the Islamic rules whether the majority like it or not.'<sup>26</sup>

But such demands for Muslims to recognise themselves primarily in terms of their faith make an assumption about uniformity of the faith that is far from the truth. Though a powerful call that may be appealing in theory, from the very inception of the faith, the *umma* has been, and has remained, more of an ideal than a reality. In practice it has never accommodated a form of government that excluded people of other faiths. The millennial Islamic rule of caliphate, over three continents, succeeded precisely because it was not exclusive. Muslim caliphs had advisers (*wazirs*) that were non Muslims and the caliphate accepted and accommodated the needs of all religious groups. *Umma* was a concept that facilitated participation without imposing debilitating practical constraints. The empire of Islam did not demand its people to make a choice between their nationality and faith; indeed it accommodated a vast diversity of faiths and nations under its *melliat* governance that allowed for peaceful co-existence and respect between people of different colours and creeds. The *melliat* system recognised and respected the different faiths and national group identities and accommodated their needs.

With the end of the last vestiges of caliphate in the 1920s and the emergence of nation states it is virtually impossible to return to the idea of *umma* as a practical political

20 Dar al-Islam: Abode of Islam

21 Shari'ah: the revealed and the canonical laws of the religion of Islam

22 The halal and the haram: the lawful and the unlawful

23 <http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/english/english.html>

24 Khalif: the spiritual head and temporal ruler of the Islamic state

25 Email February 1, 2006

26 *ibid*

framework. As a matter of fact in the 1950s and 60s when countries such as Egypt, Libya and Syria envisaged the reconstruction of an Arab *umma* in terms of the creation of an Arab nation,<sup>27</sup> the project failed precisely because it was not able to accommodate diversity and build trust. *Umma* could only exist in historical contexts where the relationship between caliphs and the *melliats* were mediated by suzerains who were rooted in the communities and in contexts where the relations of power were flexible, permeable and consensual.

In Britain, the call for British Muslims to discard their nationality in favour of their faith is unifying and empowering for a group that has been marginalised and labelled as 'terrorists' by the media and too often by neighbours and acquaintances as well. However, men and women are likely to respond differently to the call for unity, not only because, by and large, terrorism is imagined to be the domain of men, but also because there is a gendered perception of Islam and *umma*. It is the contention of this paper that the demands of politicised radical Islam, in terms of the prescriptions that it makes, are not rooted in an antipathy between Islam and democracy, but rather in the failure of some democracies to meet the needs of Muslims. Furthermore, there is a highly gendered aspect to Islamic radicalism which may well be understood differently by Muslim women, including the *mohajabehs*.<sup>28</sup>

As Muslims, women from ethnic minorities, particularly the *mohajebeh*, may have more in common with their 'white' British Muslim sisters than their male cradle-Muslim brethren. Thus, though there is a shared experience of Islamophobia, for Muslim women the *umma* means that this experience is not bounded by race and ethnicity. The *umma* subsumes, without excluding, their race, ethnicity and nationalities. Nor is it impermeable to feminists' demands for active political participation at all levels. For Muslim converts the decision to wear the *hijab* in the West is a public political assertion of the right to belong to the community of Muslims, but, particularly for convert women, it is not a rejection of home and hearth and kinship relations with their non-Muslim families and parents. Within liberal democratic states and feminist contexts their decision to wear the *hijab* is a matter of faith and identity and a political act of solidarity, but not one that alienates them from their kin and communities. Hence *umma* becomes part of the fluid identity that is inclusive rather than one that delineates boundaries between Muslims and non-Muslims.

### **God as legislator**

At the core of the arguments presented by those who advocate the rule of a single caliph is the view that democracy fails humanity and its needs and the only politics that is compatible with Islam is one where God is the sole legislator. Muslims are told by

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27 Gershoni.& Jankowski 1987, Luciani & Salame 1987, Talhami 2001

28 Mohajabehs: women who wear Islamic dress

*Hizb ut-Tahrir* that they should not accept a government that places human beings at the core of the legislature. Strictly speaking, it is possible to argue that, since for Muslims God is the sole legislator and the faithful submit to the will of God, then an Islamic government has no need for a democratic process.<sup>29</sup> The peoples of Islam, the *umma*, are expected to submit to God – hence the word ‘Islam’ that embodies at its root *taslim* (submission). There is no recognition of national boundaries and far less of differing political allegiances. *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* declares that:

‘That state is the one in which Muslims appoint a *Khaleefah*<sup>30</sup> and give him the *bay’ah*<sup>31</sup> to listen and obey on condition that he rules according to the Book of Allah (*swt*) and the *Sunnah*<sup>32</sup> of the Messenger of Allah (*saw*) and on condition that he conveys Islam as a message to the world through *da’wah*<sup>33</sup> and *jihad*.<sup>34</sup>

Ideally, the peoples of Islam and the government of Islam are united<sup>35</sup> and led by a vice-regent of God who merely interprets the wishes of the Almighty as expressed in the Koran and the teachings of the Prophet of Islam, in the *Sunna* and the *Hadith*.<sup>36</sup> The vice-regent is, according to Madudi, not elected, but a person who emerges by public acclamation. Madudi argues that if and when individuals seek to be elected, then they do not deserve to serve the people, since by its very nature the pursuit of power by an individual negates the concept of submission to the will of God. Khomeini is of a similar view suggesting that to rule would be a burden that a religious leader must of necessity shoulder. Khomeini sees governing as a paternalistic duty:

‘There is indeed no difference between the guardianship of a minor and that of a nation’<sup>37</sup>

Hence the process of appointment of a religious leader to govern becomes merely a matter of recognition of the leader who emerges. There is no election and no legislation and the *Faqih*<sup>38</sup> rules and everyone obeys willingly. As in the arguments posed by *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, for Madudi and Khomeini the concept of submission is extended to include the willing submission of the believers to the ruler:

‘Islamic government is the rule of divine law over people ... Herein lies the difference between Islamic government and constitutional monarchy or

29 Ayubi 1991, Khomeini 1979, Madudi 1976, 1978, Moussalli 1999, Salame 1994

30 Khaleefah: alternative spelling of Caliph

31 Bay’ah: oath of allegiance to a leader

32 Sunnah: the second source of Islamic jurisprudence, the first being the Koran (Qur’an)

33 Da’wah: inviting others to Islam

34 <http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/english/english.html>

35 Tohidi

36 Madudi 1978

37 Khomeini 1981a: 49 & b:63

38 Faqih: Jurist: a person who is an expert on Islamic jurisprudence

republican government. In these regimes people's representatives or the king take charge of legislation, whereas in Islam this power is the prerogative of God ... Since all Muslims wish to follow God's law, Islamic government does not depend on force, but merely serves to map out the programme<sup>39</sup>

The eminent ideologue of the Iranian revolution, Ayatollah Mottahari, takes the argument further by stating that people are not necessarily the best judges of what laws should govern them and the laws of Islam are not conditioned by the socio-economic context of the Prophet's life. They are absolute and irrefutable commandments to be obeyed for ever by all Muslims:

'What do you mean by saying that laws should be subject to the needs of the times? If the laws obey the times, then who should the times obey? ... That would imply that the laws should follow the wishes of the people. But one of the functions of law is to control and conduct society... [F]ree will means that humanity is capable of making many mistakes. ... This is why we must not be submitted to the will of the times. We must rely on absolute values ... We must have faith in and rely absolutely on the knowledge that our laws and practices are eternal.'<sup>40</sup>

A central problem in the way that politics is envisaged is that Madudi, Khomeini and other advocates of Islamist politics, do not have an egalitarian view of humanity. Mottahari refers to the Koranic chapter on *zakhrof* (wealth and allurement) verse 32 and his interpretation of the verse suggests that from the beginning God wished human beings to have different talents and different status:

'We have given them material and moral means, so that some have supremacy over others in aptitude, so that some conquer them.'<sup>41</sup>

Mottahari argues that human beings are not equal though they can have complementarity. But they must be content with differing rewards, what he calls 'positive equality':

'As experienced by disciples of a just teacher who is equally kind to all. Should they provide equally good answers, they would be equally well rewarded, but should the answers be of differing quality then each is rewarded according to his ability.'<sup>42</sup>

Thus Khomeini, Mottahari and others argue that the only possible leader that could

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39 Valayateh Faqih Kayhan International April 12, 1981

40 Marx va Marxism vol 2 pp 98-104

41 Jahan Biniyeh Tohidi vol 2:100

42 Jahan Biniyeh Tohidi vol 2:99-100

properly implement positive equality and the laws of God would have to be a theocrat: 'Only those who have been raised in the heart of the Islamic culture ... only the religious leaders have the necessary quality and ability to lead the Islamic movement.'<sup>43</sup>

This analysis echoes that of Khomeini who states:

'The *foqaha*, religious leaders, are the trustees of the Prophet; this means that all tasks entrusted to the Prophet must also be fulfilled by *foqaha* as a matter of duty... just as God Almighty set him up over the Muslims as their leader and ruler, making obedience to him obligatory, so too the *foqaha* must be leaders and rulers.'<sup>44</sup>

Furthermore, Islamic government has been envisaged as being predominately, if not totally, a male affair. One of Khomeini's disciples, Ayatollah Javad Amoli, is of the view that the burden of government is one that would be too heavy for any woman to carry:

'There are many administrative works that are suited to women, but *valayat* (to rule) and *valy boudan* (being a ruler) and governing are a different category of activities... should a woman ever achieve the high rank of learning that would entitle her to be called a *faqih* (leading scholar) then she may be allowed in the consultative arena ... It is obvious that the leader of Muslims must be a man. He has to be able to mix freely with people and it is of the essence that a man takes charge.'<sup>45</sup>

However, although there is a general consensus that the *ulama*<sup>46</sup> should be in charge, there is no agreed blueprint for an Islamic form of government. Muslims are as diverse as believers of any other creed and live in diverse countries and communities. Nation states have been a reality throughout the 20th century and it would not be possible or practicable to demand of all Muslims to follow a single, or even a collection of, theocrats. The interpretations that seek to present a practical political framework for the rule of the Almighty place a major obstacle on the path of democracy. But, in practice, all the Islamic governments in the Middle East have had to develop participatory processes of government.

Even in Iran, Khomeini had to abandon the rhetoric of *Valayeteh Faqih* and concede to demands of the revolutionaries who wanted a representative form of government.<sup>47</sup> An elected Parliament, *Majlis*, was the only legitimate and, in Iran, unavoidable

43 Mottahari 1978: 76

44 Khomeini 1981:78-9 & 96

45 Zaneh Ruz August 29, 1992

46 Ulama: the learned, knowledgeable people in Islam

47 Valayeteh Faqih: rule by jurists

Islamic form of government. The revolution had been deeply embedded in Islam and its teaching. The battle against injustice was at the core of the call for democracy. Thus, despite his conviction that the people needed merely to be guided by a *Faqih*, Khomeini had no choice but to accept a representative government.

In the first instance, the Islamic Republic of Iran sought to manage its affairs by consensus, by using referenda as a means of obtaining public endorsement. The early referenda were well supported; but soon it became evident that Iranians were not willing to go to the polls for every decision and yet they did want to be consulted; the only choice was to have a Representative Assembly – *majlis* – albeit one that has to submit its bills to a Council of Guardians to ensure that they remain Islamic. Furthermore, from the very first *majlis*, women were, and continue to be, represented.<sup>48</sup>

Other nations who claim to have Islamic constitutions or governments have come up with different ways of interpreting what such a government would look like. All have, in the long run, had to accept that participation by their citizens is the only form of legitimacy that is sustainable.

After the death of the Prophet, his wife, Ayisha, was instrumental in shaping the early destiny of Islam. Using the concept of consultation – *shura* – she invited the leading companions of the Prophet to select and appoint her father Abu Bakre as the Caliph of the Muslims. There is thus a clear Islamic precedence for using consensus – *ijma* – for the selection of the vice-regent. This is the basis of the process used by the Council of Princes in Saudi. Since there is no privilege given to *prima genita*, as a matter of practice, the powerful Council of Princes in Saudi selects the future leader and has the authority to sack them, and has in the past been known to do so. Furthermore, since the Saudi government claims that its constitution is the Koran, it has had to develop means to ensure that its teachings have been translated into modern needs.<sup>49</sup> This is done through consultation with leading theologians who have the scholarly acumen to extend the laws by analogical deduction.<sup>50</sup> However, by the end of the 20th century, the process of consultation had been extended to consultative groups set up at different levels of society to ensure that there is a common understanding and agreement of policy making.<sup>51</sup> Though these councils are still in their infancy, the process looks set to continue. A similar system of consultation has been set up in Libya using the tradition of consensus (*ijma*).<sup>52</sup> The Libyans have established consultative committees, the *jamahieyieh*, where the entire community is expected to participate and agree on shared politics.<sup>53</sup> It is a system that seeks to come to a consensus through debate and discussion but without resorting to confrontational and adversarial policy making.

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48 Afshar 1998

49 Aba Namay 1993, McMillan 1992

50 Afchar 1977

51 McMillan 1992

52 Assad 1961

53 Ayubi 1991, Hajjar 1980

Thus, in practice, countries that have sought to live by the rule of Islam have, in their different ways, set up consultative and participatory means of securing their citizens' consent and commitment to the system and the legislations. Those who have sought to implement an Islamic form of governance have also come to the conclusion that they cannot demand blind obedience of their people. For the majority of Sunnis the only example of uncontested rule by religious leaders has been that of the Taliban; as a political project it is not one that *Hizb ut-Tahrir* would necessarily wish to emulate, not least because it is highly unlikely to be supported by its female members.

### **Submission**

At the core of *Hizb ut-Tahrir's* call to believers is the requirement that they 'listen and obey'. This echoes the views of Khomeini and Madudi that believers submit to the laws of God and willingly follow their leader. There are several difficulties with such assumptions – not least the reality that the Koran is addressed directly to the believers and Muslims do not have any obligation to accept any intermediaries between themselves and God.

Unlike the church, mosques and *ulema* have no sanctity and the only way that the believers may gain better understanding of the Koran and Islam is through scholarship – hence the term *ulema*, which literally translated means the learned. Historically the *ulema* have enjoyed support and respect because they were familiar with classical Arabic and with the methodologies that have been developed to analyse the text. The believers accepted a particular religious leader's interpretations and sought to live their lives according to his teachings. But the situation has changed in the 21st century.

### **Women**

Until the 20th century, scholarship had been almost exclusively the domain of men even though there is nothing in the text of the Koran that prohibits women from reading and understanding the Koran for themselves.

The absence of women from the process of interpretation of the holy text – *tafsir* – has resulted in man-made laws that have been detrimental to women and their interests. With the death of the Prophet, Muslim women lost their most important champion. The Caliph Omar (634-44) was harsh to women and promulgated a series of ordinances which included stoning for adultery and confinement of women to their homes.<sup>54</sup> Although initially Ayisha retained a degree of authority, she lost ground after the death of the third Caliph, Uthman (656). Ayisha decided to raise an army to fight against the fourth Caliph, Ali. She was defeated and this may be cited as the first step towards exclusion

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<sup>54</sup> Ahmed 1992: 60



of women from the public domain. Nevertheless, Ayisha was a close companion of the Prophet and without a doubt she remains one of the most reliable sources of *hadith*.<sup>55</sup> She has made an important contribution to shaping the building blocks of Islamic law through her reports of the decisions made by the Prophet of Islam. Nevertheless, the structures that followed firmly excluded women from the domain of law.

Whereas remarkable women such as Khadijeh – who was the first convert to Islam – and Ayisha were central to the development of the faith, women were surprisingly rapidly sidelined: the laws that were formulated on the whole did not deliver the rights that the Koranic text had given them. A major change came after the defeat of the Persians and the gradual infiltration of some of ‘the less egalitarian Persian customs’ into Islamic practices. Leila Ahmed sums up this process by arguing that:

‘The moment in which Islamic law and scriptural interpretations were elaborated and cast into the forms considered authoritative to our own days was a singularly unpropitious one for women.’<sup>56</sup>

But, though not at the forefront, women have not been absent. Elite women in particular have throughout retained a toehold in the apparatus of power. Mernissi has outlined the histories of nine forgotten Queens of Islam who ruled over the faithful.<sup>57</sup> In the case of Iran we find that even in the 10th and 11th centuries, though secluded, women of the Ghaznavid dynasty ‘were politically important and active, although this activity took place behind the scenes’.<sup>58</sup> By the 16th century, women of the political elite were ‘present and active during military campaigns’ and some royal princesses took charge of directing state affairs.<sup>59</sup> By the 19th century, Iranian women were at the forefront of rebellions and resistance and active partners in the 1911 constitutional revolution.<sup>60</sup>

With the extension of literacy and the decision of many religious leaders and eminent families to educate their daughters,<sup>61</sup> more women began understanding their own rights and in the late 19th and much of the 20th century many embarked on a quest to understand their own faith and explain the text of the Koran for themselves.<sup>62</sup> The battle for taking charge of interpretation of the holy text – *tafsir* – continues in face of strong opposition: not because it is illogical, but because feminist interpretations are feared to threaten the authority of men. However, what is certain is that it is no longer possible to ask of educated believers to blindly submit to the rule of a male caliph.

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55 Hadith: a narration about things the Prophet Muhammad said, did, or allowed

56 Ahmed 1992:100

57 Mernissi 1993

58 Scott Meisami 2003:82

59 Szuppe 2003:154

60 Afshar 1991

61 Afshar 1991, Bamdad 1977

62 Asma 2002

At the core of the arguments presented by women is the contention that Islam requires submission only to God; since God addresses the believers directly. As it is a requirement that all Muslims should pursue knowledge then it is a duty for women to become learned and scholars. Furthermore if *da'wah* is understood in its true meaning of contestation then there has to be an analysis of the texts that allows for differing understandings to emerge. The definition of contestation and debate is at the core of disagreement between some men and women and between the religious establishment and many intellectuals.<sup>63</sup> By the late 20th century, the arena and the language of the debate had moved to the West where a new flourishing discourse, conducted in English and published largely on the web, has been developing.

Muslim women have focused on several areas of contestation ranging from the well known and, for many, as yet unresolved, discussions about the veil to the practicalities of wrenching power and authority away from men in the domains of politics and law and claiming agency in the domestic sphere.<sup>64</sup> Many have rejected the limitations placed on the believers by the various man-made schools of law. The views that were formulated earlier in the 19th and 20th centuries in the Middle East are developing there and in the West.<sup>65</sup> It is argued that it would be both illogical and impracticable to ask of them to submit to any man and do what they personally consider to be inconsistent with the essence of their faith.

## Democracy

The illogicality of accepting the rule of a single man, instead of participating in the process of decision making, is at the core of the weakness of *Hizb ut-Tahrir's* political agenda. In fact most British Muslims find it hard to accept *Hizb ut-Tahrir's* demand that they should discard their British identity and become just Muslims. Though an important political statement in dealing with Islamaphobia, this is a suggestion that is almost impossible to accept uncritically. The 'Muslim community' in Britain is a multicultural community that includes African, Middle Eastern, South and South East Asian as well as white Europeans. It includes newcomers as well as second and third generation migrants. There are considerable cultural and linguistic differences between these groups and internally amongst each group. They adhere to different Sunni or Shiias schools. There are doctrinal differences on rituals such as celebrations of the Prophet's birthday and on legal matters concerning details of marital contracts – and even about the correct method of washing before prayers and the names called in the *ashahd* during the daily prayer. The main mosques often make exclusive claim to orthodoxy, but where numbers permit there are smaller mosques that meet the needs of the different cultures and smaller groups.<sup>66</sup> There are also linguistic divisions amongst

63 Shariati n.d.

64 Afshar 1998, Kandiyoti 1991, Karam 1997, Mir-Hosseini 1991 and 1999, Mirza 2000, Sardar Ali 2002. For more on the veil, see El Guindi 1998, Gole 1996, Mernissi 1975 and 1991.

65 Franks 2001 & 2004, McDonald forthcoming

66 Lewis, 1994, Vertovec, 1998

the Arabs, Persians and Pakistanis, as well as between them and Indian Gujarati and Bangladeshi Bengali speaking Muslims. Muslims are divided by their religiously and ethnically defined communities. They recreate their cultures on the basis of mutually independent cleavages of language, regional background, and national loyalties.<sup>67</sup> Kinship networks support and enhance these divides.<sup>68</sup> Most marriages and joint commercial activities usually take place within *biradari* (kinship groups).<sup>69</sup>

Politics is understood and participation secured through kin and community networks. The social and cultural divisions are often reflected in divided political allegiances. Alliances are usually made amongst specific *biradari* groups and endorsed by the community mosque. Many of the older generations are more involved and interested in the politics of their homelands and tend to accept the mosque's lead in voting in the UK. There is reluctance to vote for 'outsiders'. The moral economy of kin demands that the younger generation elect the kin groups' candidate, despite the reality that the young often have political positions that do not necessarily accord with those of their parents.<sup>70</sup> The fears engendered by Islamophobia and the dependence of many Muslims on support within their communities make it much harder for the young to resist kin pressure in matters of local politics and at times of elections. *Biradari* kin groups are able to deliver local councillors who sometimes do not even speak English, but who have the support of their community. As Muhammad Ajeeb, who was Bradford's first Asian Lord Mayor in 1985 told the BBC:

*Biradari* plays a very dominant role in Pakistani politics... Culture dictates that the elders' word is gospel. It is very difficult for younger members and women to change anything.<sup>71</sup>

There is a generational divide, in terms of political and social adherence and activities, which is not easily bridged and is becoming increasingly more pronounced. Amongst the young, Islam has become a more important identity signifier than it is for their parents.<sup>72</sup> Some argue that the faith demands that they withdraw from everyday British politics and concentrate on the faith and its teachings. Others are far less certain. Whereas young women either choose the *hijab* or adopt their hyphenated identities, young men often have difficulty in defining themselves in terms of host or kin community. Some have been described as being perched precariously between the role models of 'Lord Ahmed and Ali G'.<sup>73</sup> In West Yorkshire some young second and third generation males project:

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67 Afshar, Aitken & Franks 2005

68 Afshar 1989a, Vertovec 1998

69 Ballard 2001, Jacobson 1998

70 Afshar 1989a

71 *Biradaris*, BBC Four, August 26, 2003

72 Samad 1998b

73 Lewis 2001

a 'hard' image of tough aggressive macho men...[and claim] membership of *Hamas* and *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* ...Yet the same individuals do not know what *Hamas* or *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* represent and are unaware who the Shiias are, and how they differ from Sunnis.<sup>74</sup>

The London bomber Mohammad Sidique Khan spent most of his life as a westernised youth who did not talk about religion. As a teenager he shook off his Pakistani Muslim identity and chose to present himself as 'Sid', an exclusively westernised young man:

He used to hang around with white lads playing football. And he was very English. Some of the other Pakistani guys used to talk about Muslim suffering around the world but with Sidique you'd never really know what religion he was from.<sup>75</sup>

It is only later in his life that he became 'radicalised', not through the teachings of the mosque, but as a result of meeting with and joining a group of radical Muslim men who felt despair at the plight of the Muslims in Palestine, Chechnya and elsewhere. For this and other young Muslims, Islam as a religion has become the core of their personal and political identity. They see themselves as part of the *umma* and some think of themselves as 'defenders of the faith'. They assume the 'duty' of battling against the injustices meted out to their brethren both at home and abroad. Following the 1995 Bradford 'riot', members of the Pakistani Muslim community attributed the manifestation to the expressed frustration of 'disempowered and disenfranchised youth'.<sup>76</sup>

Given that 'identities are the product of exclusion' and constructed through difference in relation to the 'other', it may be that this particular kind of masculine youth identity needs to be considered in the light of 'compensatory masculinities' constructed by minority youth which are 'racialised', 'ethnicified' and formed in opposition to the experience of oppression and dominant discourses of masculinity and attainments.<sup>77</sup> Yet these men's interpretation of the faith is different from that of the majority of Muslims and theirs in turn is different across the generations.

### Islam and submission

The faith that many of the young Muslims brought up in Britain have is not generally based on blind submission. They are literate in English and their understanding of Islam is textual, often produced by Islamist groups in English, while their parents' mainly derives from an oral tradition.<sup>78</sup> This generational divide is countered by greater

74 Samad 1998b:434

75 *Biradaris*, BBC Four, August 26, 2005

76 Bulet & Reid 1998

77 Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman 2002, Majors 1990, Sewell 1997

78 Samad 1998b:434

proximity of views and attitudes amongst some of the younger generation of Muslims. The language divide, which separated the communities, is bridged by the young who generally are fluent in English and not in their own mother tongues.<sup>79</sup> An interviewee, who was a member of Young Muslims UK, told Myfanwy Franks how she was introduced to the Koran as a child and made to read it at the Madrasa but it was only when her brother introduced her to an English translation that she was able to connect with it and reoriented her life toward Islam.<sup>80</sup>

However there is a gender divide and some young women have very different interpretations of the teachings of Islam from their male counterparts. Indeed in the recent work on diaspora conducted by Afshar and Franks in West Yorkshire, we found that in one university where it was felt that *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (who were indeed all men) had taken over the Islamic society, the women started their own organisation. Given the gendered understanding that traditional *Hizb ut-Tahrir* supporters have, it would not have been easy for them to oppose the segregation. They had to accept that most women have different understanding and priorities. This is not to say that there are no female supporters of *Hizb ut-Tahrir*. In specific cases such as the *hijab* ban in France, there was a meeting in London, organised by Sisters of *Hizb ut-Tahrir*.<sup>81</sup> It was supported by men and women. There was also a general appeal to the French government not to ban the headscarf from schools and public sector places of work. But often, as in the case of many women who have embraced Islam and decided to wear the *hijab* as an act of solidarity with the *umma*, there are differences of interpretation, particularly in terms of the practicalities of living and working as 'Muslims'. As 'British Muslims' they do not always share the cultural ideas that their Muslim employers and parents retain. The docility required of these women as employees and as children who should accept practices such as arranged marriages has been difficult to negotiate. Not only the host community, but also some members of the faith community ascribe an Islamic identity to these women that is not one that they themselves have adopted.<sup>82</sup>

### Ascribed and adopted identities

September 11 and the subsequent intensification of Islamophobia<sup>83</sup> created a social context that constructed new meanings<sup>84</sup> that produced both solidarity and further tensions between generations and youths and young women in the Muslim community as well as between the hosts and the Muslim communities.

Though by 1993, 87% of second generation 16-24 year-olds were born in the UK, young Muslims found that they were still ascribed with an identity that defined them

79 Jacobson 1998:96-98, Samad 1998b:431-32, Lewis 2001

80 Afshar, Aitken & Franks 2005

81 Women's Seminar: 'Hijab ban in France' January 21, 2004

82 Afshar 1994, Samad 1996

83 Allen & Nielsen 2002

84 Castells 1997

as ‘migrants’ and, after September 11th and July 7th, as ‘Muslims’ who carried attributes of fear, terrorism and discord.<sup>85</sup> The host society and the media were ascribing identities to these people that distanced them from the host and connected them to a constructed notion of their faith group. The new labels of ‘evil’, ‘the enemy within’ and ‘terrorist’ allowed little room for manoeuvre. Many reacted by defining themselves as Muslims because they could not easily define themselves as British. They, their parents and grandparents are all still seen by the host society as ‘immigrants’. The Muslims live in contexts of unequal powers that disregard their understandings of who they are and categorise them as ‘migrants’, ‘terrorists’ or ‘scum’, thereby ascribing identities to them that they do not recognise and would not like to adopt.<sup>86</sup> They could choose a fluid British Muslim identity. But the boundaries created by such a label hide the complex intra- and inter-familial and local and national tensions as well as the links and friendships made across the divides.

It may be that young Muslim women with their shared concept of *umma* and their commitment to being British may be forging a new way towards social and political cohesion through fluidity. Politically active Muslims are not limited to *Muhajerun* and *Hizb ut-Tahrir*. They are able to choose from the raft of Muslim societies that reflect their views more closely. Within these societies they often initiate changes both in terms of internal politics and in terms of the recognition given to them and to their demands. There are many Islamic societies that are well supported and do not impose a ‘choice’ between Islam and democracy on their members. The Islamic Society of Britain and Young Muslims UK are active in colleges and universities. They define themselves as a national organisation that aims to bring together Muslims and help them to use their common knowledge, skills and efforts for the benefit of one another and British society as a whole, through the promotion of Islam and Islamic values.

FOSIS, The Federation of Student Islamic Societies in the UK and Ireland, defines itself as ‘the premier Muslim Student representative body’ and ‘strives hard to uphold the motto: “And hold fast to the rope of Allah, all of you together, and be not disunited”.’<sup>87</sup> Its membership includes people from Middle Eastern, African, South Asian and white European backgrounds. They told Myfanwy Franks that they were interested ‘in finding ways of being Muslim and British’.<sup>88</sup>

One respondent, the daughter of an Indian father and a white English mother talked about the problems she faced as an English Muslim who could not find a place for herself in either community. She reported how some members of the white

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85 Jones 1993

86 Bhabha 1994, Ghorashi 2003

87 Koran 3:103. [http://www.fosis.org.uk/about/intro\\_to\\_fosis.htm](http://www.fosis.org.uk/about/intro_to_fosis.htm)

88 Franks 2001

community hurled abuse whilst many Muslims, 'more influenced by their cultures than faith found it hard to "locate" an "English Muslim".'<sup>89</sup> As 'Zb' a high flying professional woman of a Sudanese mother and a British father told Afshar:

'I can never say that I am British, because if I do they always say: "but where are you from originally?" '

Despite the undoubted racism that is faced by many Muslims, particularly those women who chose to cover, there is an energy and determination by many Muslims to make an impact through the democratic processes. More and more are standing for election to Parliament and working both with the political parties and with civil society. What is needed is not an examination of whether Islam is consistent with democracy, but rather an attempt to remove barriers and allow different groups to participate on an equal par.

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89 Franks 2001:137

# Democracy needs dialogue and deliberation – not political blocs

Brian Barry

I believe that Professor Afshar's essay is not only disingenuous but profoundly threatening to the future not only of Muslims in Britain but also to the entire fabric of British society. It is disingenuous because, while lamenting the lack of 'dialogue [among Muslims] with one another and with host societies and the West' (first paragraph), the underlying conception of dialogue is a sham. What it comes down to is that the Muslims talk and the rest of us listen; the Muslims make demands and the rest of us accommodate them. This is a travesty of the true conception of dialogue, which requires each side to listen in an open-minded way to the other, with the objective of (ideally) reaching a convergence between the initial positions of the parties.

Similarly, the 'democracy' that is called for actually has nothing to do with democracy, in any sense in which democracy has value. What is here celebrated (see last paragraph) is a multiplicity of organisations whose objective is 'the promotion of Islam and Islamic values'. We are told that 'the premier Muslim Student representative body . . . strives to uphold the motto: "and hold fast to the rope of Allah, all of you together, and be not disunited".' If so, it can constitute nothing but a political bloc – a lobby for the pursuit of predetermined policies.

The 'energy and enthusiasm by many Muslims to make an impact through the democratic process' can therefore mean nothing but the attempt to impose these policies on the whole of British society by the strategic use of force of numbers. Democracy, on my understanding, is quite different from that: it entails a process of deliberation in which the only force is what Jürgen Habermas has described as 'the force of the better argument'. It presupposes the existence of a public weal to which all contributions are addressed. There will, in any free society, be competing views about the way in which this common good is to be realised. But the participants must pay attention to one another's arguments and respond to them rationally.

It does not count as a valid move to say that you are merely setting out the answer to the question (if I may adapt the American cant) 'What would Allah say?' Arguments must be couched in terms that are accessible to everybody and could in principle be accepted by anyone. There used to be a sweatshirt that said 'It's a woman thing. You wouldn't understand.' But this is, considered as a slogan, totally self-defeating. If I can't understand it, why should I pay any heed to it? Analogously, an argument that I



would be able to accept only if I were to become a Muslim has no place in democratic deliberation, because it clearly cannot form a basis of reasoned discussion.

The London School of Economics is cosmopolitan to an extreme degree, and should, if anywhere, be a place in which Muslims can reach out to the whole body of staff and students. The reality, in my experience, is that those Muslim students who are politically engaged prefer to form a coterie and, so far from reaching out to others, actively repel them. A meeting billed as a discussion of the Iranian situation was publicised a couple of months ago with posters around the School. Although it was advertised as open to all, those present apart from maybe 20 Muslims and myself consisted of two people. One, judging by the tenor of his contributions, was a member of the Socialist Workers Party. The other was Bruce Kent, who was treated with a good deal of deference but contributed only the thought that he was against nuclear weapons.

It turned out that the meeting was merely a pep talk for the forthcoming march on March 19. The objective of this march was agreed to be to promulgate the following proposition: 'Don't bomb Iran because its rulers have no intention of building nuclear weapons'. I pointed out that this was an absurd proposal for three reasons. First, it had the implication that it would be all right to bomb Iran if its rulers did have that intention. Second, establishing intentions is impossible so it would be open to any government to attribute that intention to Iran's rulers. (Moreover, it seems pretty clear that they are actually engaged in a nuclear weapons programme, which would make the question of intentions moot.) Third, I suggested, there was no need to be defensive about an Iranian nuclear weapons programme because, while Israel has a serious armoury and delivery system, the government of any country in the Middle East that did not have such a programme would be derelict in its duty to its citizens. (Those who know about these things claim that Syria and Egypt are busy acquiring the wherewithal.)

What I said was completely ignored. Let me emphasise that it is no business of mine that it changed nobody's mind. Rather, what I want to emphasise is that nobody even regarded my intervention as worth discussing. So much for this supposedly passionate desire for engagement! I may perhaps add as a postscript that an email sign-up list was circulated but I have had no communication since and am not waiting with bated breath for one.

It is not surprising that the march, when it occurred, was routinely described in the press as a 'Muslim march'. But this made it a big yawn since it invited the obvious response of 'They would, wouldn't they?' Perhaps if all the students and staff of the LSE had been invited to take part (as occurred in the more open environment of Columbia University), the composition of the march would have been more politically efficacious.

To conclude, I want to focus on one particular barrier to Muslim participation in public life, and that is failure to master idiomatic English – or in some cases, English at all. (Thus, our local G.P. practice has to divert resources to a translator for certain sessions in order to accommodate women in the area who have lived in this country for 10 or 20 years.) Manifestly, poor written English rules out most clerical and professional jobs, and this may help to explain the high Muslim unemployment rate. But also, more to the point here, poor English skills are bound to have an inhibiting effect on public participation.

Let me give you an example from my own experience. Among those eligible to belong to our neighbourhood association (which covers only one short street in central London), a good quarter are Bangladeshi. Yet meetings are attended by only one (male) member of this community. A number of women who are active in the association have consistently made personal efforts to encourage Bangladeshi women to attend, with no success. To what extent this lack of participation is cultural and to what extent linguistic I leave here as an open question: perhaps a pervasive culture of male domination and female submission will suffice as an explanation. But this factor obviously cannot be at work in the case of the men. Here, it may be that absence can be partially explained by consciousness of a lack of facility in English. I am not maintaining, of course, that this is the whole story. The problem is, however, that it looks as if any cultural explanation will simply lead us back to the roots of the self-imposed exclusion to which I referred earlier in this response.

# The Islamic tradition of democracy, human rights and secularism

Madeleine Bunting

One of the most puzzling and intriguing phenomena in the last two decades has been the growing salience of an Islamic political identity across the globe. Within Europe, this has taken a very specific form; European Muslim minorities have used the language of 70s' identity politics to assert their Islamic identity. They have taken on the concepts used by race equality campaigners, feminists, gay rights and disability activists to argue their case. Over the last decade in the UK, we have seen a shift from those using the designation of Asian to those preferring to describe themselves as Muslim.

The development of multiculturalism in the UK accommodated ethnic identities as part of a new nation, but the new designation around a faith identity raises two new challenges. Are faith and nationalism compatible or in conflict? Is a faith-based identity a threat to the concept of a secular politics? These are the two questions I want to explore in relation to Professor Afshar's helpful thinking.

The first question preoccupies a new generation of young British Muslims and has prompted a vigorous debate. On the one hand, there is a strong section of the community who have been actively engaged for over a decade in clarifying and articulating a British Islam. On the other, there is, as Haleh Afshar rightly points out, the vocal *Hizb ut-Tahrir* lobby who vehemently reject the idea of a British Islam and argue that there can be no accommodation between faith and nationalism. Afshar accurately identifies the historical inaccuracy of their nostalgia for the caliphate and their erroneous assumption of a uniformity of Islam and of traditions such as *sharia*. But I think any analysis of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* has to look as much to its context in Western Europe as to its inspiration in Islam to explain its popularity amongst young Muslims.

One of the main resources that this group is able to utilise is the apathy and disengagement that many young people of every background in many West European countries and particularly the UK feel towards political insitutions and the democratic process. Only 37% of those aged between 18 and 24 voted at the last election. Across this age group it is widely held that the political process is corrupt and that one's vote makes little difference. This view is even more pronounced

amongst Muslim young people who see that a minority thinly spread across many constituencies will always struggle to get its voice heard in the British first-past-the-post political system.

Furthermore, there is a generational dynamic within many local communities whereby an older generation has established a position on the council and the mosque which squeezes out a younger British-born generation who may have a very different perspective; the result is frustration and alienation amongst the young. As Afshar says, it makes 'democracy a hollow promise for many Muslims in the West'.

It's not hard to see then how *Hizb ut-Tahrir* can use that apathy and disillusionment to argue that democracy has no value and should be replaced by another political system entirely. Hence the popularity of this group is as much created by Western culture and politics as it is by any version of Islamic thinking.

Part of *Hizb ut-Tahrir's* appeal also lies in its identification of some weaknesses in the 'British Islam' argument. There is a contradiction between Islam and nationalism as it has been developed in Europe over the last couple of centuries, and the gloss used by those advancing a British Islam (both Muslim and non-Muslim) is not entirely convincing. Gordon Brown may now be trying to redefine nationalism in terms of common values of tolerance and respect, but it is a thin veneer over an older legacy of a nationalism in Europe which has been deeply destructive.

The Prophet rejects tribalism in emphatic terms in the Koran, and he also advocated a strong transnational identity: 'the believers are like a single body, if one part aches the whole body responds to the pain'. Nationalism has been a European creation and its history of being imposed on the rest of the world in the course of colonisation and imperialism only makes its acceptance in many parts of the Muslim world even more problematic. Furthermore, Muslims can quite legitimately mount a damning critique of the history of European nationalism and its violent record during two world wars.

So while Muslims can accommodate easily the moral framework of public service to the nation as a community of neighbours, they cannot sign up to the kind of nationalism 'my country, right or wrong' which has been a strong dimension to European nationalism. But then, nor can many others – for example, conscientious objectors. The interesting analogy is how Christianity, which has as little space for nationalism as Islam, came to accept and even endorse nationalism – but that is another story.

The second question is of much more concern to non-Muslim Britain. There is an increasing anxiety as to how this faith-based identity undermines the degree of

secularisation which Britain has achieved. For many of the non-religious, British Muslims appear like the thin end of the wedge – behind their claims lie a motley queue of evangelical Christians and Scientologists all potentially laying claim to a faith-based identity. The perception is that to the extent that Britain has secularised (and the establishment of the Church is evidence that there is plenty more to be done) it has been a hard won process and vulnerable to reverse.

Hence the anxious scrutiny trained on British Muslims: what is the nature of your faith and what then will be your political project? Democracy, *sharia*, a secular state: these are all points of anxiety to a British population whose purchase on any kind of religious belief has become very tenuous. It's not the first time Britain has experienced comparable anxieties; for the best part of three centuries, English Catholics were interrogated on the question of their loyalty to the British state or the Papacy. What is still confused is the idea that secularism is in opposition to faith whereas a religious believer can be passionately committed to a secular state and a secular public sphere.

To a non-Muslim Britain, *Hizb ut-Tahrir* articulates the worst fears of an Islam which rejects democracy and espouses God as sole legislator. A template for oppression, in short, and one seen in evidence in Afghanistan and Iran. In sharp contrast, the task embarked upon by the most interesting and creative Islamic thinkers in the West is the articulation of democracy, human rights and secularism which is rooted in the Islamic tradition. It may yet be one that ends up proving more compelling than the illusions offered by *Hizb ut-Tahrir* which Afshar has so effectively dismantled.

# Engagement and exchange of ideas are vital

Iqbal Sacranie

Professor Afshar adequately outlines the political, cultural and social landscape in which Muslims in Britain now find themselves. A narrative has developed in many a Muslim mind since September 11 2001 that calls on signposts such as the 'War on Terror', the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, retrogressive legislation 'against Muslims' and a hardening of attitudes. Since the tragic events of July 2005, these issues have only become more emotive. In addition, Muslims face alienation by being subjected to Islamophobia, the hallmarks of which include a culture of fear, a sense that Islam and Muslims are associated with terrorism and – with the ongoing Danish cartoon debate – that Muslims are fundamentally illiberal.

Younger Muslims in particular feel the intensification of Islamophobia. Just before the London bombings, the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) argued in its policy paper *Electing to Listen*, that:

'As the debate on our national identity intensifies, young Muslims, like everyone else, need the space and encouragement to formulate their own reference to Britishness. The debate as it stands – imposed by the media and certain politicians – stifles the ability to discover one's own national identity.'

In addition, the MCB pointed out that 'for many young Muslims, discrimination, exclusion and a lack of opportunities stifle their development'. Participation, beyond the merely legal method of vote casting, requires social and economic capital which at the present time is sorely lacking in the British Muslim community.

Lack of resources is a necessary but not sufficient condition to explain Muslim political despondency. The million-person march in Central London in February 2003, against the impending war in Iraq, and its failure to influence government policy on this, is also relevant. For Muslims, to avail themselves of democratic means requires that these methods be seen and understood to be consequential.

The references to the *umma* and the *Glory Days of Islam* by such groups as *Hizb ut-Tahrir* to evoke something of a more robust identity and agency are not singular or widespread expressions of the search for components in the construction of a modern day British Muslim identity.

The focus on *Hizb ut-Tahrir* in the paper neglects an alternative reading of Islamic history and concepts; one which does not presage divisions between cultures and religions but their co-operation. Such a reading does not pander to an 'us' and 'them' classification but speaks past it.

The MCB certainly agrees with the assertion that 'Muslims are as diverse as believers of any other creed and live in diverse countries and communities'. Cosmopolitanism is an innate feature of the faith, nationalism and racism being seen as too restrictive and weak.

Muslims, in the diaspora particularly, derive much of their references to political engagement from principles and not just constructs such as the *umma*. Their vocation is structured and informed by adhering to religious precepts without which the whole would make little sense. Muslims are not characterised by a faith that has specific geographic origins but by a belief that Islam is a universal religion and that Muhammad, peace be upon him, as prophet of Islam, was also sent as a 'Mercy to all Mankind'. For Muslims, the *umma*, embodying Muslims globally and being a necessary element in the construction of an identity, is not the sole arena of effort and endeavour. Islam and its teachings are not reserved for, or meant to selfishly serve, the interests of Muslims alone.

The importance and agency of this reading of Muslim identity enables a political identity and project in which Muslims are not marginalised as a self-interest group engaged in single issue politics, or for self serving ends, but as participants whose political ideals promote the pursuit of principles that are valid for all: justice, equality, fairness, transparency and accountability.

The utility of discourses which speak of firm boundaries between Muslims and others, or refer to a Muslim project which is devoid of references and contributions to the whole, is limited in application and efficacy. The vast majority of Muslims do not subscribe to a reading of their religion which posits them on the other side of the fence; defending boundaries against incursion or violation. Engagement and exchange are more likely to be the order of the day than abstention and solipsism.

This is certainly the vocation of the MCB and its affiliate organisations. Its success at home and its reputation in continental Europe is derived from the premise of its 'working for the common good'. It is a tenet to which the majority of Muslims in Britain subscribe.

Whilst the essay is entitled to focus on *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, it is puzzling why this group has been singled out for study. The paper implies that *Hizb ut-Tahrir* thrives on the alienation of young Muslims by negating British identities. The MCB would argue that the alienation is generated precisely because these young Muslims are British

and not in spite of it. Research done by the MCB's national affiliate FOSIS (Federation of Students' Islamic Societies) suggests that Muslim youth were troubled by a government, *their* government, which paid little heed to overwhelming domestic opposition to involvement in the US-led war in Iraq. This is not the voice of a minority displaced, but of one that is very much conscious of its Britishness and all that this implies in terms of attitudes towards disingenuous claims in support of war and the current crisis of stability in Iraq.

The essay also misses a step in describing the tension between migrant generations. Afshar rightly points to the ethnic and confessional diversity of the Muslim community, then, at length, describes the *biradari* kinship networks where 'alliances are usually made amongst specific *biradari* groups and endorsed by the community mosque'. It is on this assumption, of closed networks and impositions, that younger Muslims are seen to veer off at a tangent opting for a more introverted path.

This idea, foreign in many of the other British Muslim communities (those hailing from regions other than the subcontinent), does not explain, for example, the shock election result in Bethnal Green and Bow in May 2005. A certain outsider was elected, and despite the natural support for Labour candidates amongst the inhabitants of this constituency, younger British Muslims and even Bangladeshi grandmothers were moved enough to participate in the political process and abjure historical party allegiances.

Moreover, one of the July 7 bombers, Muhammad Siddiq Khan, is situated in this analysis as having been alienated by the older generation. This may be true of him, but what of Germaine Lindsay, a young convert to Islam who shared much the same sub-culture as Siddiq Khan?

His notorious video squarely links his rage to events overseas. It is also worth noting that other such young indoctrinated Muslims have often had a record of petty crime and gang involvement. This makes them easy prey to more serious criminal activity.

The focus on the generational divide is a simplification.

The essay rightly refers to new and multiple identities created by younger Muslims. Many draw their identity from various traditions of Islam and Muslim culture. The danger is to deny them the space to cultivate a hybrid of Islamic values and their national identities; to negotiate their own way through comparative British/Western values.

In the final analysis, the Muslim Council of Britain endorses Haleh Afshar's call 'to remove barriers and allow different groups to participate on an equal par'. The Muslim Council of Britain has consistently highlighted good practice of participation



in public life. Across Britain, British Muslims are participating more and at every level in our democratic traditions. The challenge for all of us is to ensure that suspicion and structural barriers that impede and restrict this development are overcome.

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