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Islam and Democracy: Conflicts and Congruence

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Abstract: Is authoritarianism intrinsic to Islam? Is Islam incompatible with democracy? These questions are frequently debated in the context of the study of the relationship between the Western and Islamic civilization. The debate has gained momentum since the last decade of the twentieth century, especially after the collapse of the former Soviet Union and the subsequent transition of socialist states in Eastern Europe and other authoritarian states in Asia and Latin America to democracy. The publication of *The Clash of Civilizations* by American scholar Samuel Huntington, in which he presented a controversial argument about a cultural divide and clash between the Islamic world and the West, pushed the debate even further. Apart from Muslim intellectuals, Western academics have spent a significant amount of time on these questions, with a multitude of articles and volumes examining the compatibility of Islam and democracy. In this paper, we will examine Islam's relationship with democracy from normative and philosophical viewpoints, examining how the established values and principles of Islam as reflected in the Qur'anic and prophetic traditions correspond to Western democratic norms and practices. In order to obtain a profound understanding of this subject, we have delved into, through content analysis, the thoughts of several early modernist Islamic scholars who have had tremendous impact on contemporary Islamic revivalist movements throughout the world, and interviewed a number of contemporary Islamic thinkers in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Islam; democracy; sovereignty; shura; ijma; tolerance; equality and justice; Shari'ah; Qur'an; prophet

1. Introduction

Most of the developed countries around the world practice democracy. In contrast, the Islamic countries, whose population constitutes almost one-fifth of the entire world's population, are mostly non-democratic. These countries, which are geographically located largely in Asia and Africa, are simultaneously socially backward, economically poor, and politically authoritarian. However, religion (Islam) has a predominant role within these societies. Religion matters not only in their spiritual life; it also profoundly impacts on their socio-political and cultural behavior. For Muslims, Islam represents a faith, a set of daily—or other periodical—rituals, a set of guidelines on ethics and morality, and a frame of reference or a worldview (Tamimi 2007).

The compatibility of Islam and democracy has become one of the main questions of concern in contemporary Islamic political and social thought. The debate about the compatibility between the two has been a major issue and a popular topic of serious discussion that has swept through the media and political and scholarly circles worldwide, in the West in particular (Tamimi 2007; Toprak 2005; Voll 2007). Moreover, at least two major events in recent world history have made the debate more critical. First, the fall of Communism and the collapse of the erstwhile Soviet Union in the early 1990s, and the subsequent transition to democracy of socialist states in Eastern Europe and other

authoritarian states in Asia and Latin America, which attracted worldwide attention. Second, in the mid-1990s, the publication of *The Clash of Civilizations* by American political scientist and Harvard professor Samuel Huntington, in which he presented a controversial argument about the cultural divide between the West and the Islamic world, popularized the perception that Islamic tradition and values are incompatible with democratic norms and practices (Toprak 2005; Huntington 1993). Huntington's argument further triggered scholars and political and social scientists to enter into a critical and comprehensive debate about the relationship between Islam and democracy throughout the world. In this paper, we will examine the relationship between Islam and democracy from Islam's normative and philosophical viewpoints. We will also explore the ideas of several early modernist Islamic scholars as well as a number of contemporary Islamic thinkers in Bangladesh in order to gain a profound understanding of the subject. To examine the Bangladeshi case, linking general Islamic thinking to Bangladeshi Islamic scholars' perspectives is significant.

Bangladesh is a South Asian country that achieved independence from Pakistan in 1971. The overwhelming majority of the population is Muslim. Islam is predominant in its politics, society, and culture. Since its independence, Bangladesh has continued to practice democracy—with a brief period of military rule. Islamic political thinking, alongside Western political ideas, has gained prominence in the socio-political landscape of the country in recent years. The debate about the relationship between Islam and democracy has become crucial amongst scholars, politicians, and others, particularly in the wake of the rise of political Islam alongside the growth of so-called “Islamic militancy” in the 1990s in Bangladesh. While, in Bangladesh, marginalized Islamic groups promote the idea that democracy is antithetical to Islam, mainstream Islamic scholars argue that Islamic political ideas do not necessarily conflict with Western democratic values and discourse.

Following this brief introduction, the paper in the second section highlights the methodology of this study. The third section discusses Islam and democracy in Western scholarship. The fourth section examines the thought of five 19th-century reformist Islamic thinkers on the relationship between Islam and democracy. These thinkers are Rifa'ah al-Tahtabi, Khayr al-din al-Tunisi, Jamal al-din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Muhammad Rashid Rida. The fifth section deals with the relationship between Islam and democracy with a focus of the understanding of Bangladeshi Islamic scholars on the subject. The final section summarizes the arguments and presents concluding remarks.

2. Methodology

In this study, we have employed the content analysis of secondary sources and qualitative interviews with five Islamic scholars and philosophers from Bangladesh, namely Dr. Abdullah Jahangir, Shah Abdul Hannan, Dr. Syed Sharafat Ali, Dr. Muhammad Abu Yusuf, and Dr. Ataur Rahman Miazi. The content analysis—a robust examination of relevant materials—includes credible journal articles, books, newspaper articles, and Internet documents. In our analysis, where necessary, we have used the authentic sources of Islam, such as the Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. Content analysis is significant because there has been a large amount of literature dealing with the relationship between Islam and democracy. To understand the debate on the subject, we needed to thoroughly survey this enormous body of literature.

Along with content analysis, five Bangladeshi Islamic scholars have been interviewed to examine how the Bangladeshi experience can contribute to the current debate. The following table (Table 1) shows the profile of these Islamic scholars and the socio-political significance of their scholarly insights. The table is drawn based on the primary research by the authors.

In Bangladesh, like other Muslim countries, there persists a variety of Islamic thought and traditions. In our discussion, however, we have focused on the ideas of mainstream Islamic scholars in Bangladesh. One limitation to our study is that we have not taken into account other marginalized ideas while interviewing scholars and doing our analysis. The analysis done in this paper is within the framework of the Sunni historiography and Sunni understanding of Islam. Since most Bangladeshi Muslims are Sunnis, with a meager number of Shi'is, and virtually no Shi'i–Sunni debate exists in the

country, we have directed our focus to the Sunni framework. In addition, of the four main schools (commonly called *madhab*) of Sunni Islamic thought, Hanafi, Maliki, Shafii, and Hanbali, the Hanafi School is dominant in Bangladesh. The scholars we interviewed are mainly trained in the Hanafi school of thought.

Table 1. Islamic scholars in Bangladesh interviewed.

No.	Name	Current Designation	Socio-Political Significance
1	Dr. Abdullah Jahangir	Former Professor of Al-Hadith and Islamic Studies, Islamic University, Kushtia	He died a few months ago. A great Islamic scholar with a large number of followers, he frequently appeared in different mainstream electronic media and put forward his opinions on Islam and Islam-related issues. In addition, he was a popular speaker particularly among the younger generation, who have been greatly influenced by his interpretation of Islam. Dr. Jahangir was also a popular Islamic preacher. He traveled across Bangladesh regularly and delivered speeches in Islamic gatherings commonly called <i>waz-mahfil</i> in different parts of the country. His lectures on YouTube are largely followed even these days.
2	Shah Abdul Hannan	Islamic Philosopher and Chairman, Islamic Economics Research Bureau. Former Secretary of Bangladesh government	As a renowned Islamic scholar and social scientist in Bangladesh, he is politically and intellectually aligned with the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (BJI), the largest Islamic party in Bangladesh. The BJI has a large following and has played a major role in society, politics, and culture, especially with regard to Islam's encounter with modernity in the country. Hannan's understanding and interpretations of Islam have been subscribed to by a large percentage of the population, particularly the followers of the BJI.
3	Dr. Syed Sharafat Ali	Principal, Sarsina Darus Sunnah Kamil Madrasa, Pirojpur and Secretary General, Bangladesh Jamiyate Hizbullah	An Islamic scholar and preacher, Sharafat Ali teaches in a major madrasa in the south-western part of Bangladesh. The madrasa is a vehicle to promote Islamic education based on the doctrine of the Sarsina pir (saint) tradition. This tradition has a large following across Bangladesh in general and its south-western part in particular. A large percentage of the population subscribe to the Islamic doctrinal interpretation promoted by the Sarsina tradition. Moreover, it has a vibrant Islamic organization called Bangladesh Jamiyate Hizbullah that has been working to indoctrinate people along Sarsina's line of understanding of Islam. In the socio-political and cultural life of the people of Bangladesh, the doctrinal understanding of Islam promoted by the Sarsina tradition and represented by Sharafat Ali is significant.
4	Dr. Muhammad Abu Yusuf	Vice Principal, Tamirul Millat Kamil Madrasa, Dhaka	Muhammad Abu Yusuf is a <i>mufti</i> (Islamic jurist), teacher, researcher, and preacher. He is indeed a Hanafi scholar (specialized in the Hanafi school of thought of the four main schools of Sunni Islam). The overwhelming majority of Bangladeshi Muslims are Sunnis and they are also followers of the Hanafi school of thought. As a profound scholar of Islam in Bangladesh, Yusuf's voice of Islam is widely heard.
5	Dr. Ataur Rahman Miazi	Professor, Islamic History and Culture, University of Dhaka	Professor Miazi frequently appears in the electronic media as a commentator on issues covering contemporary Islam and the Muslim world. He also frequently addresses large Islamic gatherings throughout the country. His commentaries on Islam and politics and society are widely heard and read.

3. Islam and Democracy in Western Scholarship

A number of scholars argue that Islam acts as a hindrance to democratic forms of government and/or democratic values and ideals (Fukuyama 1992; Huntington 1984, 1991, 1996a, 1996b; Lipset 1994; Lewis 1994, 1996, 1997, 2002, 2005; Pipes 1995, 2002; Kedourie 1994). These scholars argue for Islam's incompatibility with democracy on the grounds that democracy requires openness, competition, pluralism, and a tolerance of diversity, whereas Islam encourages intellectual conformity and an uncritical acceptance of authority. They also stress that the Islamic tradition does not match with democratic ideals because it vests sovereignty in God, who is the sole source of political power and from whose divine law must emanate all regulations governing the community of believers (Tessler 2002). These scholars' views, therefore, reflect the notion that an Islamic political order must culminate in totalitarianism (Lewis 1994; Choueiri 1996). Kedourie, for example, asserts:

The notion of popular sovereignty as the foundation of governmental legitimacy, the idea of representation, or elections, of popular suffrage, of political institutions being regulated by laws laid down by a parliamentary assembly, of these laws being guarded and upheld by an independent judiciary, the ideas of the secularity of the state, of society being composed of a multitude of self-activating groups and associations—all of these are profoundly alien to the Muslim political tradition ([Kedourie 1994](#), pp. 5–6).

Lewis argues that “the political history of Islam is one of almost unrelieved autocracy... For the last thousand years, the political thinking of Islam has been dominated by such maxims as ‘tyranny is better than anarchy’ and ‘whose power is established, obedience to him is incumbent’” ([Lewis 1954](#), pp. 7–8). Pipes argues that Muslims have challenged the West more profoundly than the Communists ever did, for “while the communists disagree with our policies, the fundamentalist Muslims despise our whole way of life” ([Pipes 1994](#), p. 63). Perlmutter asks: “Is Islam, fundamentalist or otherwise, compatible with human-rights oriented Western style representative democracy? The answer is an emphatic NO” ([Perlmutter 1992](#); [Ahmad 2003](#), p. 21). Fukuyama argues that “it is true that Islam constitutes a systematic and coherent ideology, just like liberalism and communism, with its own code of morality and doctrine of political and social justice... Islam has indeed defeated liberal democracy in many parts of the Islamic world, posing a grave threat to liberal practices even in countries where it has not achieved political power directly” ([Fukuyama 1992](#), p. 45).

In contrast, many other scholars, such as [Kramer \(1993\)](#), [Halliday \(1996\)](#), [Eickelman and Piscatori \(1996\)](#), [Esposito and Voll \(1996\)](#), and [Entelis \(1997\)](#) argue that Islam and democracy should not be considered mutually exclusive, and thus they are not conflicting with one another ([Salame 1994](#); [Beinin and Stork 1997](#); [Hofmann 2004](#)). They suggest that within the fold of Islam there are many trajectories, facets, and tendencies that make one-dimensional characterization of the religion highly problematic ([Esposito and Piscatori 1991](#); [Halliday 1996](#)). They also assert that there are considerable variations in the interpretations of Muslim religious law advanced by scholars and theologians in Islam and that among these interpretations are positive reflections of democracy, including some by mainstream Islamic theorists ([Abed 1995](#)). These scholars insist that openness, tolerance, competition, participation, and progressive innovation are well represented among traditions associated with the religion, and thus entirely compatible with Islam ([Esposito and Voll 1996](#); [Tessler 2002](#)). Kramer concludes that Islam has been projected to be congruent with the crucial elements of political democracy, for example, pluralism (within the framework of Islam), political participation, government accountability, the rule of law and the protection of human rights. However, Islamic mainstream has not adopted liberalism, if that includes religious indifference, Kramer adds ([Kramer 1993](#)). Esposito and Voll argue that an incompatibility between Islam and democracy becomes obvious when the terms Islam and democracy are used “in an essentialist or monolithic manner rather than acknowledging their flexibility and adaptability and the diversity of actual experience” ([Esposito and Voll 1996](#), p. 196). Referring to the Sudanese experience of Islam and democracy, Esposito and Voll take a step further and opine that even if the ideologies of the National Islamic Front, under its leader Hasan al-Turabi, are not democratic in the Western sense of the word, they may still be precisely described as ‘democratic’ in an Islamic sense, or as ‘Islamic democracy’ in other words ([Esposito and Voll 1996](#)). Eickelman and Piscatori examine Islamic perspectives on modernization and democracy and find a diversity of contemporary Islamic experience, suggesting general trends and challenging popular Western notions of Islam as a monolithic ideology and movement ([Eickelman and Piscatori 1996](#)).

In Western scholarship, scholars outside the Islamic faith and practice demonstrate sharp disagreement with regard to the compatibility of Islam with democracy. Some scholars, such as [Huntington \(1996a\)](#), [Lewis \(1996\)](#), [Fukuyama \(1992\)](#), and [Pipes \(1995\)](#), find no compatibility between Islam and democracy, while others, such as [Esposito and Voll \(1996\)](#), [Eickelman and Piscatori \(1996\)](#), [Entelis \(1997\)](#), and [Halliday \(1996\)](#) acknowledge the compatibility between the two. The following sections discuss the insights of Muslim Islamic scholars and the doctrinal analysis with regard to the relationship between democracy and Islam. Before analyzing the Bangladeshi case on the subject, we

briefly focus on the ideas of some 19th-century Islamic scholars. The contemporary Islamic movement and the debate on the relationship between Islam and democracy in Bangladesh are inextricably linked with these scholars' ideas.

4. Nineteenth-Century Islamic Revivalism Efforts

The contemporary Islamic movements and the urge for an Islamic democratic discourse have been profoundly influenced by some 19th-century Islamic thinkers, such as Muhammad Ali al-Sanusi (1787–1859) of Algeria, Rifa'ah al-Tahtabi (1801–1873) of Egypt, Khayr al-din al-Tunisi (1810–1899) of Tunisia, Jamal al-din al-Afghani (1838–1897) of Afghanistan, Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905) of Egypt, Abdurrahman al-Kawakibi (1849–1903) of Syria, and Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865–1935) of Lebanon, and also sub-continental modernist intellectuals, such as Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817–1898) and Syed Ameer Ali (1849–1928). The thoughts of five Arabian and Middle Eastern scholars, al-Tahtawi, al-Tunisi, al-Afghani, Abduh, and Rida, are briefly stated below.

4.1. Rifa'ah Al-Tahtawi

A famous disciple of Shaikh Hasan al-Attar (1766–1835)—an Egyptian eminent Islamic scholar of his time—Rifa'ah al-Tahtawi (1801–1873), beyond his education in Islamic sciences, learned Western sciences, including French history, Greek philosophy and mythology, geography, arithmetic and logic, and, most importantly, as Hourani emphasizes, the French thought of the 18th century—Voltaire, Rousseau, and others—while he was on a sojourn in France for almost five years ([Hourani 1983](#); [Tamimi 2003, 2007](#)). Al-Tahtawi became highly influenced by the liberal political philosophy of the West that includes tolerance, freedom, and democracy. In his analysis, the cause of the crisis of the Islamic *Ummah* was the lack of freedom in their society, and he, thereby, suggested multi-party democracy as a remedy. Latter-day Arab democrats recognize him as the father of Egyptian democracy ([Tamimi 2007](#)). Tahtawi is said to have been the first Islamic scholar who stressed dialogue with Western civilization and promoted the idea to borrow from it that which did not conflict with the established values and principles of the Islamic *Shari'ah*. He advocated introducing democracy to the Middle East and criticized those who opposed the idea of taking knowledge from the West, saying: "Such people are deluded; for civilizations are turns and phases. These sciences were once Islamic when we were at the zenith of our civilization. Europe took them from us and developed them further. It is now our duty to learn from them just as they learned from our ancestors" (Quoted in ([Tamimi 2007](#), p. 43); see also ([Hourani 1983](#), p. 34; [Tamimi 2003](#), p. 53; [Ahmad 1989](#), p. 34)).

In 1834, shortly after returning to Cairo from Paris, Tahtawi published his first book, *Takhlis al-Ibriz Ila Talkhis Bariz* ("Extracting Gold in Telling the News from Paris"), in which he summarized his observations of the manners and customs of the modern French, and praised the concept of democracy as he observed it in France. He tried to show that the democratic concept he was explaining to his readers was compatible with Islam ([Tamimi 2007](#)). In his words, "what is called freedom in Europe is exactly what is defined in our religion [Islam] as justice [*adl*], right [*haqq*], consultation [*shura*], and equality [*musawat*]... This is because the rule of freedom and democracy consists of imparting justice and right to the people, and the nation's participation in determining its destiny" (Quoted in ([Abed 1995](#), p. 119); see also ([Enayat 1988](#), p. 131)).

4.2. Khayr Al-Din Al-Tunisi

Al-Tunisi's (1810–1899) *Aqwam al-Masalik Fi Ma'rifat Ahwal al-Mamalik* ("The Most Straight Path to Knowing the Conditions of Nations"), authored in 1867, attracted unprecedented scholarly attention from both the East and the West ([Kedourie 1980](#); [Wasti 2000](#)). The main objective of the book was to promote reform in the Islamic world. "While appealing to politicians and scholars of his time to seek all possible means in order to improve the status of the community [Muslim *Ummah*] and develop its civility, al-Tunisi warned the general Muslim public against shunning the experiences of other nations on the basis of the misconception that the writings, inventions, experiences or attitudes of non-Muslims

should just be rejected or disregarded” ([Tamimi 2007](#), p. 44). Arguing that Europe’s current status was an outgrowth of the accomplishments of medieval Islamic thinkers, he cautioned the Muslim *Ummah* that “there is no reason to reject or ignore something which is correct and demonstrable simply because it comes from others, especially if we had formerly possessed it and it had been taken from us, on the contrary, there is an obligation to restore it and put it to use” ([Al-Tunisi 2002](#), p. 42; also quoted in ([Browers 2004](#), p. 368)). He further says that civilization knows no frontiers, and though the value systems and cultures of Islam and Europe are different, there is no reason for them not to benefit from each other. Europe has been able to achieve its power by broadening the base of education, which is why education should be the start of any reform in Islamic countries, adds al-Tunisi ([Wasti 2000](#)). A devout Muslim, a man of extraordinary ability, and an erudite scholar of his time, al-Tunisi, who rose to become Chief Minister in Tunisia and later also Sadrazam (Grand Vizier) at the Sublime Porte, where he was known as Tunuslu Hayreddin Pasa ([Wasti 2000](#)), traced the reason for the decline of Islamic civilization and provided a pragmatic solution to the contemporary crisis of the Islamic world:

The decline of the Islamic power has little to do with religion [Islam] itself, but with an ossified and unimaginative approach to the religion [Islam] which showered glory on its true followers over the centuries and provided much inspiration to Europe itself . . . If the countries of Islam are to survive and not to be taken over by the European powers, they will have to fight Europe with its own weapons of rational thought, its institutions and its technology. It is necessary to learn from Europe, for which a certain amount of assimilation of technique is inevitable. However, a prerequisite is to be able to convince the masses of the *ummah* that such modernizing measures are not only unavoidable but also sanctioned by the dynamic principles of Islam and the canonical law ([Wasti 2000](#), p. 6).

Al-Tunisi further pointed out that the decline and fall of a civilization does not depend on the climate, the fertility of the soil, or the superiority of the races that inhabit other lands. Rather, it is the political system and whether or not it is based on freedom and justice that determine the lifespan of a civilization. Both Christian and Muslim political systems, when based on justice and freedom, al-Tunisi suggests, have led to success and prosperity; when they are not based on justice and freedom, they have tended to fail ([Wasti 2000](#)). The reason for Europe’s progress and development, according to al-Tunisi, is the European system, which is founded on good representative government as opposed to a one-man rule, on the nurturing of educated public opinion, and on the fine balance between authority and responsibility. Thus, he feels that only a liberal political order will enable the Islamic community to become more educated and attain the pinnacle of progress ([Wasti 2000](#)). This early modernist Islamic scholar, therefore, opposes any absolutist rule that, according to him, will eventually lead to the oppression of nations, and finally the destruction of civilizations. He believed that by “kindling the *ummah*’s potential liberty through the adoption of sound administrative procedures and enabling it to have a say in political affairs, would put it on a faster track towards civilization, would limit the rule of despotism, and would stop the influx of European civilization that is sweeping everything along its path” ([Al-Tunisi 1972](#), p. 185; also quoted in ([Tamimi 2007](#), p. 44)).

4.3. Jamal Al-Din Al-Afghani

The most significant modernist Muslim reformer in 19th-century Islam was none other than Jamal al-din al-Afghani (1838–1897). Al-Afghani was one of the first influential figures who tried to reorient the Islamic tradition in ways that might address the growing challenges in the Islamic world emanating from Islam’s encounter with Western modernity ([Kaloti 1974](#)). Neither completely rejecting nor blindly following Western ideas, he provided a clear sense of pragmatism that could bridge the gap between Islam and the West. Al-Afghani suggests that the cause of the decline of the Muslim world was due to the absence of the core values and principles of Islam, such as justice (*adl*) and consultation (*shura*), and the arbitrary rule of political masters ([Tamimi 2007](#)). Al-Afghani promoted democratic ideas of tolerance, equality and justice, and stressed the need for democratic governance

based on equality, justice, and people's participation. In an article, published in the journal *Misr* in February 1879, "The Despotic Government," al-Afghani attributed Islam's decline to despotism, which, he stressed, was the reason thinkers in the Muslim world could not enlighten the public about the essence and virtues of a republican form of government.

For those governed by the republican government, it is a source of happiness and pride. Those governed by a republican form of government alone deserve to be called human; for a true human being is only subdued by a true law that is based on the foundations of justice and that is designed to govern man's moves, actions, transactions and relations with others in a manner that elevates him to the pinnacle of true happiness (Quoted in (Tamimi 2007, p. 45); see also (Tamimi 2002, p. 20)).

According to al-Afghani, a republican government is a 'restricted government', a government that is accountable to its people and thereby the anti-thesis of an absolutist one. "It is a government that consults the governed, relieves them from the burdens laid upon them by despotic governments and lifts them from the state of decay to the first level of perfection" (Quoted in (Tamimi 2007, p. 45); see also (Tamimi 2002, p. 20)). Nonetheless, al-Afghani was, at the same time, careful about the danger of secularism and blind following of the West. Unlike late 19th-century Arab secularists and Christian modernists, such as Shibli Shumayyil (1850–1917), Farah Antun (1874–1922), Georgie Zaidan (1861–1914), Ya'qub Suruf (1852–1917), Salama Musa (1887–1958), and Nicola Haddad (1878–1954), who praised and promoted European liberal thought, developed between the 18th and 19th centuries, and stressed that reason should set the standard for human conduct, al-Afghani campaigned for reforms but not at the expense of what he called the 'Islamic fundamentals.' He provided sharp critique of those secularists who believed in aping the European model without modification or reservation, accusing them of posing a threat to the sovereignty of the *ummah* (Tamimi 2007).

Unlike other reformers of his age, al-Afghani "did not confine his activities to one country; the whole world of Islam and even Western Europe and Russia, which held political sway over Muslim lands, became the theatre of his unceasing and revolutionary activity" (Kaloti 1974, p. 43). He traveled across the world and particularly Muslim lands, relentlessly presenting ideas that were opposed to prejudice, conservatism, *taqlid* (blind following), autocracy, and foreign penetration and intervention. His notion of pan-Islamism¹ was a "leading precursor of contemporary Islamist activists. He was a pioneer in terms of using the vocabulary of Islam to mobilize Muslim populations against colonial domination" (Ayoob 2007, p. 631). However, al-Afghani's liberal ideas, both in religion and politics, brought him into conflict with, and earned the hostility of, both conservative and authoritarian circles around the Muslim world. Several governments in the Muslim East and in Europe dreaded his revolutionary ideas and audacious preaching (Kaloti 1974). Browne has commented that al-Afghani was a man of force of character, prodigious learning, untiring activity, and eloquence both in speech and writing (Browne 1910). He was an eminent reformer and a founder of liberationist, constitutionalist, and intellectual movements in several centuries (Kohn 1929). There is perhaps no other scholar quite like al-Afghani, who was able to arouse the sleeping Muslim *Ummah* against the foreign domination and had enormous influence on later Islamic revivalist activism.

Jamal al-din al-Afghani has had a massive intellectual and political influence in drawing the modern political agenda that is still more or less the backbone of intellectual and political

¹ "A term of European origin, *pan-Islamism* denotes the intellectual and institutional trends toward Islamic unity that emerged among Muslim peoples, starting in the mid-nineteenth century and continuing throughout the twentieth century" ("Pan-Islamism." Encyclopedia.com (Encyclopedia.com n.d.)). The Orientalists' understandings suggest that the ultimate objective of pan-Islamism was the realization of the Islamic ideal, the unity of the world in Islam, the central direction under a leader (*imam*) of the world Muslim community. Jamal al-din al-Afghani is largely credited with the notion of pan-Islamism as he called for the unity and solidarity of the greater Muslim *Ummah* on the basis of the established values and principles of Islam, and for an end to the colonial domination from the Islamic territories. Although al-Afghani was not the first man with regard to this effort, he was regarded as the leading ideologist of it.

reform. He was ready to think over and adopt into Islamic thought any new intellectual, political, or scientific knowledge that might trigger the progress of the Islamic nation . . . He was ready to adopt those institutions and systems that could serve the Islamic world and save it from its crisis ([Moussalli 2003](#), p. 290).

4.4. Muhammad Abduh

Al-Afghani's disciple and later colleague, Abduh (1849–1905) of Egypt, played a significant role in 19th-century Islamic revivalism. Abduh felt a pressing need for the reorientation of the Muslim society to meet the challenges of the time. Influenced by al-Afghani's ideas, Abduh's strategy involved a bottom-up approach, and he stressed the need for educational reform first to reorganize the society, and reconcile Islamic principles with modern ideas. He continued to invest his maximum effort to establish a modern Islamic education in place of a traditional mere job-oriented parochial education system in Egypt until his death. His bad experience of schooling in Egypt motivated him to study, apart from Islamic sciences, Western scholarship on sociology, ethics, history, philosophy, and education. Abduh became impressed with the liberal philosophy of modern Western scholars. He visited the English philosopher Herbert Spencer in England,² and translated Spencer's work on education from French into Arabic in order to benefit from Spencer's views in drafting his plans for the reform of Muslim schools³ ([Kaloti 1974](#)). However, Abduh's interest in Western knowledge was vehemently criticized by the contemporary traditional *ulama* (scholars) at al-Azhar. The *ulama* objected:

What kind of a sheikh is this who translates their writings and quotes from their philosophers and disputes with their learned men, who gives *fatwas* of a kind that no one of his predecessors even did, and takes part in benevolent societies and collects money for the poor and unfortunates? ([Kaloti 1974](#), p. 139).

However, Abduh was nonchalant to his critics. For him, Western ideas are compatible with Islamic sciences. He suggests that *maslaha* (public interest) in Islamic thought corresponds to *manfa'ah* (utility) in the Western thought. In the same vein, he equated *shura* with democracy and *ijma* with consensus. In terms of authority, there is no place for theocracy in Islam according to Abduh. He insists that the authority of the *hakim* (governor) or the *qadi* (judge) or the *mufti* is civil. He argues that *ijtihad* should be revived because emerging priorities and problems, new to Islamic thought, need to be addressed ([Ahmad 1989](#); [Tamimi 2007](#)). Abduh rejected authoritarianism and championed parliamentary democracy. He defended pluralism and refuted the claims that it would undermine the unity of the *ummah*. He argues that pluralism did not divide the European nations. "The reason," he concluded, "is that their objective is the same. What varies is only the method they pursue toward accomplishing it" (Quoted in ([Tamimi 2007](#), p. 46); see also ([Al-Salam 1978](#), p. 28)).

4.5. Muhammad Rashid Rida

Like his predecessors al-Afghani and Abduh, Rashid Rida (1865–1935) believed in the compatibility of Islam and reason, science, and modernity. He was a strong advocate who stressed returning to the original sources of Islam and the reinterpretation of the Qur'an to meet modern demands ([Rida 2002](#)). Rida constituted a bridge between the reformist ideas of al-Afghani and Abduh and revivalist thought of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab of Arabia. In his opinion, the reason for the backwardness of the Muslim *Ummah* lies in the loss of the truth of Islam by the Muslims. The autocratic rulers, he contends, have encouraged such loss. True Islam, Rida argues, involves two things—*tawhid* (the creed of monotheism) and *shura* (council) in matters of governance. However, the autocratic rulers, he laments, tried to make Muslims forget the

² Although Spencer was at that time an old man and had given up meeting people, he was induced by Wilfred Blunt, the English poet and writer, to consent to a meeting with Abduh, who went to England for that purpose.

³ Earlier Muhammad Abduh learned French with a view to having firsthand knowledge of Western science published in French.

second by encouraging them to abandon the first (Hourani 1983; Tamimi 2007). However, unlike Abd al-Wahhab, he was conscious of the impact of European modernity upon his fellow Muslims. Mostly influenced by his teacher Abduh, Rida did not suggest blindly rejecting the West, nor did he propose blindly following it. He equated *shura* in Islam with democracy in the West. He added that “learning how government should operate and replacing tyranny with a *shura* regime was the greatest benefit the people of the East gained from their interactions with Europeans, a benefit that might not have been achieved were it not for these interactions” (Shavit 2010, p. 351). Rida vehemently opposed the tyrannical rule. He edited a periodical called *al-Manar* that was extremely critical of the tyrannical regime of Sultan Abdul Hamid II, then the Ottoman sultan, and advocated for democratization. In 1907, he wrote in *al-Manar*: “Was not it the secret political societies which cleansed Europe of the tyranny of kings and popes, eliminated the governments of the nobility, and replaced them with republican and monarchic governments limited by laws and the supremacy of the members of the nation council [*shura*, i.e., parliament]?” (Tauber 1994, p. 196). His political ideas are reflected in his book *Al-Khilafah* (“The Caliphate”), in which he advocated for democracy in Islamic lands:

As for the socio-civic policy, Islam has laid its foundations and set forth its rules, and has sanctioned the exertion of opinion and the pursuit of *ijtihad* in matters related to it because it changes with time and place and develops as architecture and all other aspects of knowledge develop. Its foundations include the principles that authority belongs to the *Ummah*, that decision-making is through *shura*, that government is a form of republic, that the ruler should not be favored in a court of law to the layman—for he is only employed to implement *Shari’ah* and the will of the people, and that the purpose of this policy is to preserve religion and serve the interests of the public (Rida 1988, p. 9; also quoted in (Tamimi 2007, p. 47)).

The nineteenth-century Islamic reformers suggest that Western democracy has not necessarily been in conflict with Islamic ideals. Muslim countries have no reason to reject Western science and modernity just because they are Western. These reformist thinkers argue that the reason for the underdevelopment of Muslim countries has been the absence of the practice of democratic ideals, such as tolerance, the rule of law, equality and justice, and people’s participation in their social and political affairs. Instead of authoritarianism, which, according to them, contradicts Islam, Muslim countries should opt for establishing a participatory democratic order to attain prosperity in their societies.

5. The Compatibility between Democracy and Islam

When Islam is understood as a monolithic religion, it becomes incompatible with modern democracy. In the same vein, when democracy is conceived to be uncontested, it becomes unmatchable with Islam. The fact is that neither Islam nor democracy is monolithic or uncontested in terms of its meaning and understanding. Islam’s fundamental concepts, such as *tawhid* (monotheism), *khilafah* (vicegerency), and *akhirah* (hereafter), do not necessarily contradict democracy. Islam’s established values and principles, such as *shura* (consultation), *ijma* (consensus), *adl* (justice), equality, tolerance, and accountability are attributed to the concept of democracy. Many scholars have pointed out that the Qur’an and the *Shari’ah* have provided an elaborate socio-moral framework rather than a detailed blueprint for an economic or political order (Ahmad 2003). The Qur’an envisions a society rather than a state. The Qur’an is concerned with morality rather than polity (Engineer 2003). Islam is a faith that, as the tradition claims, encompasses all aspects of human existence, including politics. Democracy is a form of government that has nothing to do with faith. While Islam is compared with democracy, it takes the latter as a means, not an end. Democracy itself is a way, not an object. From this viewpoint, democracy is not antithetical to Islam.

Unlike democracy, the Qur’an does not confer sovereignty upon people. Even in an absolute sense, human beings cannot be sovereign because they have plenty of shortcomings. People are politically sovereign, meaning that a government will be based on people’s consent, and will be sustained as long

as the consent remains. Parliament being sovereign does not permit it free rein. There is a common saying about the British parliament that ‘the British parliament can do everything but make a woman a man and a man a woman.’ However, in practice, the power of the British parliament is not unrestricted. This represents a kind of restricted sovereignty, one that does not resemble the sovereignty of God. Professor Abdullah Jahangir, a noted Islamic scholar in Bangladesh, argues:

Sovereignty means ownership. This is simple that sovereign means owner. For example, I am the owner of this land which is true. I can erect building here, I can demolish it, I can make partition, and I can sell it. I have this ownership. Again, this land belongs to Allah. This is also true. And the fact is, according to Islam, with this land I can do many things, but I cannot make a brothel here. People’s ownership is limited; Allah’s ownership is the supreme over all other sovereigns. My ownership is worldly, and if I put it over Allah’s ownership, I will be offender to Allah. In the same vein, people are the owner of the country, it is a simple word. Those who say it is anti-Islamic to say people are sovereign and they are the source of all powers, I do not agree with them. Here by power, it does not mean power regarding storm-rain, or disease, it means the power of ministers, prime minister and above all state power. This power actually belongs to people. In Islam, power will be attained by the consent of the people. If in a society the chiefs of tribes consent and the mass people agree to it, it is ok, this is democracy. People’s participation and share is mandatory in Islam which is democracy. Therefore, people are the owner of the state, and people are the source of power is not contradictory to Islam. However, if anyone thinks this ownership means that anyone can do anything; can make a *haram* (prohibited) a *halal* (legitimate), and a *halal* a *haram*, then obviously it is anti-Islamic.⁴

Therefore, people have limited sovereignty that is subject to the sovereignty of God. God’s sovereignty is absolute and unlimited. In reality, in a democratic society where Muslims are the majority, it is very unlikely for any law contrary to the fundamentals of Islam to be enacted. Furthermore, the authority of the state is a trust (*amanah/wilayah*). The government is a trustee (*al-amin/al-wali*), not a sovereign over people. Muhammad Yusuf Musa, a prominent scholar of the *usul* (fundamental source principle of religion), writes:

The source of sovereignty is the *ummah* alone and not the caliph, because he is a trustee over matters of religion and in directing their affairs according to the *Shari’ah*. Thus, he derives his authority from them, and they have the duty to advise him and counsel him in case he errs. They also have the duty to remove him from the office to which he has been entrusted by their choice should they consider it to be necessary (Howeidy 2010, p. 302).

Eminent jurist Uthman Khalil also opines that Islamic *fiqh* (jurisprudence) does not consider the trustee (*al-wali*) as possessing a right to sovereignty; rather, he sees that sovereignty is the right of the *ummah* alone, which the *wali* exercises as an employee or a trustee of it, so it can remove him if necessary (Howeidy 2010).

Shah Abdul Hannan, in an interview with the authors at Dhaka on 11 May 2014, argues that “the most crucial issue is sovereignty when anyone refers to the relationship between Islam and democratic political order. Many people even in Islamic faith are confused about the issue of sovereignty in Islam. The Qurán is explicit about sovereignty that the sovereign power belongs to Allah. People and particularly the rulers can exercise this power according to the dictation of Allah. The will of the human being is subject to the will of Allah. With this limitation, human beings can be sovereign provided they do not pose any challenge to the sovereignty of Allah which is higher. Allah’s sovereignty cannot be challenged,” Hannan asserts.

⁴ Prof. Abdullah Jahangir of Islamic University, Kushtia, Bangladesh, in an interview with the authors at his home (Jhenaidah) on 2 April 2014.

Dr. Syed Sharafat Ali, interviewed by the authors at Sarsina Madrasa on 10 April 2014, referring to a verse of the Qur'an that reads "To Allah belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is on the earth" (Qur'an 2:284), argues that "this verse clearly provides that Allah is the owner of the earth and the sky. Allah's power is beyond human assumption. He is the sovereign." Referring to another verse of the Qur'an, "Behold your Lord said to the angels: 'I will create a vicegerent on earth'" (Qur'an 2:30), Ali maintains that "human beings in a limited way exercise Allah's power as His vicegerent. The rulers as well as the masses are under the sovereignty of Allah Whose power is supreme. Our understanding of democracy does not necessarily require excluding the sovereign status of Allah," Ali adds.

Apart from the issue of sovereignty, the established values and principles in Islam, such as competition and consultation, openness, tolerance, equality, rule of law and justice, accountability and transparency, and consensus are congruent with democracy and pluralism. Classical Islam suggests that the Prophet did not appoint his successor. After the death of the Prophet, the people of Medina demanded Saad ibn Ubada, a companion of the Prophet and the chief of the Khazraj tribe in Medina, to be the Caliph. The *Ansars* (people of Medina) argue: "We are the legion of God and you *Muhajirin* [the people of Mecca who migrated to Medina] are few in number." Abu Bakr, a leading companion of the Prophet and later the maiden caliph, replies: "It is true, but in noble birth and influence, the Quraish are paramount, and to none but them would Arabia yield obedience." The *Ansars* then argue that whenever the Prophet sent a *Muhajir* on any mission, he had also sent an *Ansar* with him, so there should be one chief from the *Ansars* and one from the *Muhajirin*. Umar, a companion of the Prophet and later the second caliph, strongly opposed the idea on the ground that it would divide power and weaken the administration. Saad also agreed on this. Abu Bakr then stepped forward and, pointing towards Umar and Abu Obaida, said, "You see these two; choose you now whoever of them you will, and salute him as your chief." However, both Umar and Obaida declined and said to Abu Bakr, "You have already, at the Prophet's bidding, led the prayers; you are our chief. Stretch forth your hand."⁵ Abu Bakr did so and the people shook their hands with him as a token of allegiance ([Husain 2002](#), p. 7). Prior to his death, Abu Bakr had nominated Umar as his successor and the appointment was accepted by the majority of the people, including the House of the Prophet ([Ali 2010](#)). While Umar was suffering from a mortal injury inflicted on him by a Christian fanatic, he appointed an electoral committee consisting of six eminent companions of the Prophet to select his successor. Their choice fell on Uthman, a descendent of Umayyad and son-in-law of the Prophet, who was installed as caliph with the approval of the people ([Husain 2002](#)).

Accountability of the ruler to the masses is reflected in the inaugural address of Abu Bakr. While assuming the charges of caliph, he is reported to have said:

O people! Behold me charged with the cares of government, I am not the best among you; I need all your advice and all your help. If I do well support me; if I mistake, counsel me. To tell the truth to a person commissioned to rule is faithful allegiance; to conceal it, is treason. In my sight, the powerful and the weak are alike; and to both I wish to render justice. As I obey God and his Prophet, obey me; if I neglect the laws of God and the Prophet, I have no more right to your obedience (Quoted in ([Engineer 1996](#), p. 40); see also ([Husain 2002](#), p. 19)).

Professor Ataur Rahman Miazi, in an interview with the authors at Dhaka on 15 May 2014, opines that "in an Islamic polity, the ruler cannot be a dictator. What we learn from the life-examples of the Prophet and his companions is that the rulers are, in each and every aspect of their rule, accountable to the ruled. A ruler is a *khadem* (service provider) of the masses, not a master to them according to Islamic philosophy," Miazi notes. Dr. Muhammad Abu Yusuf, who was also interviewed by the authors at Dhaka on 7 August 2014, holds that "although in Islamic system of governance, power is

⁵ Abu Bakr was instructed by the Prophet to lead the prayer while the latter fell ill. Abu Bakr led the prayer 17 times when the Prophet was still alive, and once the Prophet even performed his prayer under the leadership of Abu Bakr ([Husain 2002](#)).

centralized and the head of the state and government holds plenty of power, his power is checked and balanced by the very idea of accountability to Allah first, and the accountability to the people second. The sense of accountability to Allah and to the people makes the ruler more democratic in an Islamic administration than in Western democracy itself,” Yusuf asserts.

Democratic implications are underscored in the Qur'an. One of its chapters is referred to as ‘consultation’ (*Shura*). The Qur'an proclaims that the only people close to God are those who, among other things, “conduct their affairs by mutual consultation (*shura*)” (Qur'an 42:38). Sometimes this phrase is interpreted as referring to consultation only among a select group of learned individuals (*ulama*), advisors, or cabinet members. However, the verse itself contains no such limitations (Ahmad 2003). In another verse, God has instructed: “And consult them (i.e., those around you) in (important) affairs. Then when you have taken a decision, put your trust in Allah” (Qur'an 3:159). This verse suggests that the Prophet Muhammad did not establish a theocratic state, as he has been commanded to consult people around him in important matters. Scholars, considering this verse, argue that nothing can be more misleading than the concept that the state founded by the Prophet was a theocratic state (Islam 2012). Asad argues that the Qur'anic injunctions on the principle of consultation imply the government by consent and council (Asad 1961). Islamic *shura*, according to al-Qaradawi, “approaches the spirit of democracy, or if you will, the spirit of democracy approaches the spirit of Islamic *shura*” (Quoted in Yakub 2004, p. 285). Al-Qaradawi also notes that the *Shari'ah* protects against abuses of power and prevents arbitrary rule by effectively institutionalizing the process of consultation (Yakub 2004). Celebrated Islamic jurist al-Ghazali opines that consensus is necessary for the passage and enactment of new legislation. New legislation, he continues, agreed upon by the majority of society, in turn, permits an Islamic state to adapt and respond to changes in the modern world in the absence of specific Qur'anic injunctions (Moussalli 2001; Yakub 2004). Al-Ghazali further maintains that “despotic, non-consultative decision-making, even if from a wise and learned person, is objectionable and unacceptable” (Quoted in Yakub 2004, p. 285; see also El Fadl 2001, p. 86). Professor Abdullah Jahangir, in the interview with the authors at Jhenaidah on 2 April 2014, holds that “an Islamic government is a ‘*shura* government.’ The name of the parliament, in Arabic, is called *Majlis-e-shura* (consultative assembly). Arbitrary decision-making is alien to Islamic system of administration which resembles democracy,” Jahangir adds. Dr. Syed Sharafat Ali, interviewed by the authors at Sarsina Madrasa on 10 April 2014, also acknowledges that “Islamic governance requires the accountability of the rulers at all levels in the administration.”

Ijma or consensus not only has a Qur'anic basis, but is also sanctified by the *Sunnah*. The Prophet practiced this principle in his private life and instituted it in the public sphere. He frequently sought the advice of his companions and family members, occasionally followed their suggestions, and apologized for any mistake he may have made (Ahmad 2003). After migrating to Medina, one of the Prophet's first acts was to venture into a consensual agreement, a written charter commonly called the Charter of Medina (sometimes referred to as the Constitution of Medina) “in an attempt to establish a transtribal and suprareligious ‘corporatist structure’” (Ayubi 1991, p. 6). “Even though the arrangements with the Jewish tribes became strained later on, the very attempt to institutionalize a political order through a written agreement allowing diverse entities to function with some degree of cooperation and autonomy displayed high political maturity and democratic tendencies” (Ahmad 2003, p. 26). The Charter of Medina, consisting of 47 clauses, out of which 23 clauses governed the relationship between Muslims—Ansar and Muhajirin, while the remaining 24 clauses governed the relations of Muslims with non-Muslims, Jews, and others (Efstathiadis 2013), was drafted almost six centuries before the documentation of the Magna Carta in 1215, showing the Prophet's profound statesmanship and inclination to democratic pluralism. Shah Abdul Hannan, interviewed by the authors at Dhaka on 11 May 2014, contends that “the Medina Charter is the world's first ever written constitution and a document to draw peace, harmony and progress to combine and create a pluralistic community.” The obligation to strive for consensus in administering affairs of the state is found from the fact that

the Prophet did not select his successor. Instead, he deliberately left the choice (of leadership) to the community at large.

With regard to tolerance, the Qur'an suggests, "Let there be no compulsion in religion" (Qur'an 2:256). Once the Prophet said to a man, "You have two qualities which God likes and loves: one is mildness and the other is toleration" ([Islam 2012](#)). From the Qur'anic viewpoint, the mission of the prophets and messengers of God was not to forcefully impose their teachings on the people but to guide them and ask them to accept God. God says to the Prophet Muhammad: "If then they turn away, We have not sent you as a guard over them. Your duty is but to convey (the Message)" (Qur'an 42:48). The Qur'an further proclaims: "And had your Lord willed, those on earth would have believed—all of them entirely. Then, [O Muhammad], would you compel the people, against their will, to believe?" (Qur'an 10:99). The Qur'an has also prohibited abusing the religiosity of others: "And insult not those whom they worship besides Allah, lest they insult Allah wrongfully without knowledge" (Qur'an 6:108). Thus, the Qur'an is quite explicit about religious tolerance or freedom of religion: "[Say, O disbelievers] for you is your religion, and for me is my religion" (Qur'an 109:6). However, freedom of religion also includes the right to change one's religion. The *Shari'ah* encourages conversion to but disallows conversion from Islam. In interviews with the authors, Dr. Syed Sharafat Ali and Dr. Muhammad Abu Yusuf at Sarsina Madrasa and Dhaka respectively argue that, from an Islamic viewpoint, an individual's salvation is guaranteed only in Islam. Therefore, Islam does not want an individual to be ruined by leaving it. Nevertheless, they claim, if any Muslim leaves his/her faith, he/she will be counseled, and if he/she still apostates, he/she is free to do so as long as his/her acts do not threaten the community or the *ummah*.⁶ Dr. Ataur Rahman Miazi, during his interview with the authors at Dhaka on 15 May 2014, argues that "Muslims generally do not change their religion. Many of them may not practice Islam wholeheartedly, still, they remain within the fold of Islam, for they know that Islam is the only true religion." Although these scholars speak of tolerance in Islam, in the recent past in Bangladesh, a number of atheist writers and bloggers were killed or injured at the hands of a militant Islamist group that claims to be the real followers of Islam. However, this group seems to be a tiny fraction of the entire population of Bangladesh and has hardly any support base in the society.

In terms of interfaith marriage, Islam has separate sanctions: a Muslim man can marry a Jewish or Christian (*ahl al-kitab*) woman, but no Muslim woman is allowed to marry a Jewish or Christian man. With the husband as the head of the family, this provision ensured that children of mixed parentage were raised as Muslims. Secondly, marriages between Muslims and polytheists, such as Hindus, are generally prohibited ([Bielefeldt 1995](#)). Farrag justifies the *Shari'ah*'s restrictions on interfaith marriage by arguing that a Muslim woman would not receive due respect for her religious beliefs from a non-Muslim husband. Again, a marriage, he continues, between persons of completely different faiths, such as Islam and polytheism, would eventually break down ([Farrag 1990](#)). Interfaith marriage, particularly between Muslim men and Hindu women, and between Hindu men and Muslim women in Bangladesh, is not an uncommon phenomenon. Without changing their respective religions, these kinds of couples are in most cases living successful lives.

Equality, rule of law, and justice are central to Islamic philosophy. The Qur'an has eliminated all sorts of human distinctions: "O humankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (s/he who is) the most righteous of you" (Qur'an 49:13). The Prophet, in his farewell address delivered on his last pilgrimage to Mecca in 632 C.E., declared: "An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over a black nor does a black have any superiority over white except by piety and good action" (Cited in [Mazrui 1997](#), p. 128). When a woman of high rank was

⁶ Noted jurist Yakub also notes that when apostasy causes social discord, impinges on the rights of Muslims to practice their religion, and threatens their unity of the *ummah*, then it is treated as an act of sedition to be given the severest penalties ([Yakub 2004](#)).

brought for trial for being involved in a theft, and it was recommended that she be treated leniently because of her rank, the Prophet replied: “The nations that lived before you were destroyed by Allah because they punished the common man for their offences and let their dignitaries go unpunished for their crimes; I swear by Him (Allah) who holds my life in His hand that even if Fatima, the daughter of Muhammad, had committed this crime, then I would have amputated her hand” (Quoted in [Williams and Zinkin 2010](#), p. 525). In numerous verses, the Qur'an has enjoined to render justice (Qur'an 5:8; 4:58,135; 16:90; 57:25; 7:29; 11:85). Ruthven, while comparing Christianity with Islam, observes that while the former is primarily a religion of love, Islam is a religion of justice ([Ruthven 2005](#)). Professor Abdullah Jahangir, during the interview at Jhenaidah on 2 April 2014, argues that “where there is no justice, there is no Islam. In the history of Islam, even the mighty rulers appeared in the court of the *qadhi* (judge) as ordinary individuals for the sake of justice.”

It is often argued that women in Islam are not treated equally with men as far as marriage, the dissolution of marriage, and inheritance are concerned. Although forced marriages are occasionally practiced in Muslim societies, Islamic social laws require the consent of both bride and bridegroom to validate a marriage ([Hannan 2010](#)). In Bangladesh, Professor Abdullah Jahangir holds, “marriages are commonly arranged with the consent of the intending spouses. Forced marriages are occasionally held particularly in the rural areas and the poorer families.” Islamic laws do not allow a wife to repudiate her husband unilaterally unless this is allowed in the marriage contract. The wife can only demand a divorce; if her request is not met, she can go to the court to terminate the marriage ([Anderson 1976](#)). Professor Ataur Rahman Miazi of Dhaka University, interviewed by the authors at Dhaka on 15 May 2014, argues that

The *Shari'ah* is primarily concerned about the order and stability of the society. From the Islamic perspective, men are the guardians of women, the heads of families. The women are a motherly nation; by nature, they are generally more compassionate, tender-hearted and emotional than their male counterparts. Revolving around a trivial issue in the conjugal life, these qualities may contribute to the disintegration of marriage leading to a multitude of broken-families which would eventually and adversely affect the society.⁷

However, Nazeem refutes the argument that the wife has no independent right to divorce her husband. Referring to a Qur'anic verse that reads “and women shall have rights similar to the rights (men have) over them, according to well-known rules of equity” (Qur'an 2:228), he argues that the right to divorce is also given to the wife, according to the Qur'anic foundation of the principle of gender equality ([Nazeem 2001](#)).

According to the Islamic law of inheritance, a male heir receives twice the share a female heir ([Schacht 1964](#)). This exhibits gender discrimination. However, “if the whole system of Islam is considered,” Professor Abdullah Jahangir argues, “the law is perceived as just, not discriminatory towards women.” He elaborates:

Islam has assigned male with all kinds of responsibility to take care of family. In the Islamic economic system, a woman has no financial responsibility. Even if she is a millionaire, her clothing will be provided by her husband. If her husband is dead, she is responsible for taking care of herself. The man is responsible for all matters—looking after and taking care of parents, wives and children, maintaining social relationship, and so forth. On the other hand, a woman has the right to property of her parents and husband, and she also receives bride price from her husband, but she shoulders no responsibility to spend a single penny. Thus, if we make a balance sheet of this responsibility and right, we will see Islam has

⁷ Islam encourages marriage but discourages divorce. When a marriage is in danger, couples are advised to pursue all possible remedies to rebuild the relationship. Divorce is allowed as a last option, but it is highly discouraged. The Prophet said that “of all lawful acts, divorce is the most detestable to Allah” (Cited in ([Nazeem 2001](#), p. 202)).

given a woman more share than that of a man. Islam is, in fact, more concerned about equity than mere equality.⁸

In Bangladesh, for Muslims, according to the existing law of inheritance, a male heir receives twice the share of a female counterpart. However, women's organizations have been actively working for the revision of this law so that a male and female heir could receive their share equally. Mainstream Islamic groups and organizations continue to oppose this idea and brand it as anti-Islamic.

6. Conclusions

Islam is not democracy, nor is democracy Islam. Islam is perceived by many to be neither just a religion, nor a fundamentalist political movement. It is perceived as a civilization and a way of life that varies from one Muslim country to another but is animated by a common spirit that is essentially more humane than most Westerners realize (Mazrui 1997). Islamic doctrinal philosophy based on divine origin contrasts with Western discourses based on secular philosophical doctrine. Nevertheless, the basic ingredients of democracy, as a methodology to strive for a peaceful and harmonious society, resemble Islamic doctrinal philosophy. Islamic history has not always been marked by democratic ideals, such as openness, competition, tolerance, egalitarianism, and upholding the interests of the masses. Yet, Islamic political philosophy is conducive to democratic processes in many compelling ways. The obligation of public allegiance (*bay'a*), the insistence on the equality of all believers, the emphasis on individual responsibility, the encouragement of consultative rule (*shura*), the stress on consensus (*ijma*), the open doors of independent reasoning (*ijtihad*), the requirement of establishing justice and pursuing public interest, and the persistence of tolerance toward other faiths are all strongly indicative of democracy and pluralism (Ahmad 2003). Considering the democratic ideals pertaining to Islam, early modernist scholars, such as al-Tahtawi, al-Tunisi, al-Afghani, Abduh, and Rida, as well as contemporaneous Islamic scholars, such as al-Qaradawi (Al-Qaradawi 1993, 1997, 2002), al-Turabi (Al-Turabi 1983), Ghannouchi (Ghannouchi 1994), Gulen (Gulen 2001), Ramadan (Ramadan 2009), Khan (Khan 2005), Masmoudi (Masmoudi 2003, 2006), and Safi (Safi 1991, 2003a, 2003b) are all in agreement that Islam and democracy are not incompatible. Egyptian-born al-Qaradawi vociferously argues that "he who says democracy is disbelief neither understands Islam, nor democracy" (Quoted in (Khan 2006, p. xi); see also (Rahman 2002, p. 6)).

Although the Qur'an has not prescribed a certain political order, its established values and principles, along with examples from the life of the Prophet Muhammad and his immediate followers, suggest a political system of the kind that we call democracy today. Without an essentialist and monolithic understanding of both Islam and democracy, it is evident that these two concepts are compatible with one another. However, compatibility does not mean identicalness. Islamic values and codes of morality are not always identical to Western values and ethics. Therefore, scholars of political Islam have reconciled Islam and democracy with the evolving concept of 'Islamic democracy' (Esposito and Voll 1996) or 'spiritual democracy' (Iqbal 2012). Many Muslims may perceive democracy to be disbelief (*kufir*), and abhor the word 'democracy' itself. This perception is, in all likelihood, the outcome of Western colonial and imperialist policies, and to some extent the result of 'double standard of morality and ethics' typically practiced by Western governments and institutions towards Oriental and especially Muslim societies. There is also a tendency to perceive the notion of democracy itself as entirely 'Western' phenomenon. However, contemporary Muslims' concern for an Islamic democratic discourse based on their values and aspirations and their contempt towards transplantation from the Western world is increasingly gaining momentum in the context of the longstanding heated debate about the relationship between Islam and democracy. The voice of legitimate authority and justice defined by democratic norms is increasingly gaining strength in contemporary Muslim societies (Eickelman and Piscator 1996). Arbitrary and authoritarian rules are not intrinsic to Islam and Muslim

⁸ The authors interviewed him at his home (Jhenaidah) on 2 April 2014.

societies. Instead, Islam and true democracy are two sides of the same coin. Democratic processes and Islam go hand in hand. If democracy is exemplified through the rights of the people to self-determination and self-fulfillment, that is what Islam and the Muslims have been striving for ([Ahmad 2000](#)).

In Bangladesh, Islam and democracy go hand in hand. The overwhelming majority of the population is Muslim. Constitutionally, the country is a secular one. Still, Islam has been named as the state religion in the constitution. Since its inception as an independent state in 1971, Bangladesh has been practicing democracy, with a brief period of military rule. Mainstream Islamic scholars have hardly found any tension between Islam and democracy. Indeed, Professor Abdullah Jahangir, in the interview with the authors, notes that "Islam can be best practiced in a democratic polity. The elements of democracy best suit with the established values and principles of Islam. In Bangladesh, the democratic ideals have been harmonized with Islamic principles which has introduced the country as a 'moderate Muslim one' globally." However, recently, the emergence of several Islamic militant groups that oppose democracy and use violent means to establish what they call "true Islam" has posed a considerable challenge to democracy in Bangladesh. Nevertheless, both general Islamic thinking and mainstream Islamic ideas in Bangladesh suggest that Islam and democracy are not incompatible. Muslim societies around the world are diverse in history, culture, and civilization. Still, they can embrace democracy. For example, Albania is another Muslim-majority country that shows a converging consensus among politicians, intellectuals, Islamic authorities, and the Islamic majority on democracy as "the only rule in town" ([Elbasani 2015, 2016](#)).

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