

Compatibility between Islam and Democracy

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ABSTRACT

The word 'Islamic Republic' is debatable among scholars as what meaning and role the word 'Islam' adds to the republic is still not agreed upon. Therefore, there is a need for resolving this ambiguity by explicitly defining and explaining the meaning and role of Islam in an Islamic Republic. Pakistan, too, is an Islamic Republic, which got the name 'Islamic Republic of Pakistan' for the first time in the constitution of 1956. This study intends to comprehend the mentioned issue by highlighting the similarities and differences between democracy and Islamic system of governance. In this qualitative study, iterative analysis of semi-structured interviews of ten doctorate scholars is carried out. The study comes across primary contradictions between the two systems and gives a way out for a system having characteristics of both Islam and democracy.

Key Words: Islam, Democracy, Islamic Republic, Governance, State, Ijtihad, Tolerance, Slavery, Equality, Calpih, Injunction

Introduction

After World War II, when the process of decolonization began, many new countries emerged on the world map, some identifying themselves with specific ideologies. Islam was adopted as a political ideology by Pakistan – the first Muslim majority country to adopt the nomenclature 'Islamic Republic' under the Constitution of 1956 followed by Mauritania in 1958. However, Iran and Afghanistan adopted the nomenclature in 1979 and in 1992 respectively.

Though the above mentioned countries adopted the nomenclature 'Islamic Republic' but there are some political and social aspects of Islam and democracy which apparently do not get along with each other. For example, according to Islamic scholars like Molana Maudadi and Dr. Tahir-ul-Qadri, sovereignty belongs to God (*Allah*) while democracy propagates popular sovereignty. Similarly, freedom of expression, minority-rights, rights of women, and freedom of quitting Islam as a religion have some defined boundaries in Islam in comparison to democracy. In the presence of such a dual system, the people of Islamic countries urge to find a middle way between Islam and democracy. However, this debate needs to be discussed on intellectual grounds for understanding similarities and differences between democracy and Islamic system of governance. This study has

been undertaken for finding a system having characteristics of both Islam and democracy.

Conceptual framework

Comparison between Islam and democracy is not possible without investigating the structural foundations of the two systems. Democracy offers opportunities for participation, equality in voting, and inclusion of the common people. The political institutions are necessary to pursue these goals. The fundamentals of democracy are as follows: guarantee of basic human rights, principle of equality – one man one vote, constitutionalism, regular, free and fair elections, mandate to be given by the people, religious and political freedom, rule of law, accountability, and political party system.

Similarly, for this study, the political aspect of religion Islam will be discussed which includes sovereignty, choosing of Caliph, rights of non-Muslims in an Islamic state, right of expression, rights of women and rights of slaves in comparison with that of democracy. Another important boundary that we need to draw is regarding the sources of Islam. In modern world, Islam is divided into different sects, but at the time of emergence of Islam, there was only one agreed source, and that was the Holy Quran: the words of God. This study takes this single universal source of Islamic teachings into account. For references, only the verses from the Holy Quran are included.

Methodology

As this is a comparison between the two systems of governance (Islam and democracy), therefore, qualitative strategy of inquiry is used to draw the differences and similarities between the duo. A sample of ten participants is used in this research through purposive sampling technique. Participants are selected on the basis that they have a vast knowledge of the field and should have PhD degrees as minimum level of education. Therefore, only senior scholars whose area of interest is related to the study are interviewed. Moreover, a constitutional expert is also interviewed in order to cover the constitutional aspects of democracy and Islam.

Mode of data collection is semi-structured interviews in which guided-not-directed questions are asked from the participants. On average, each interview lasted for approximately forty minutes. All the interviews with permission of the participants were recorded expect one. The interviews were conducted in English, Urdu, or Punjabi language as per convenience and comfort of the participants. Afterwards, all the interviews were transcribed into English and iterative analysis technique was run to extract different themes and sub-themes.

Discussions and analysis

Compatibility between Islam and democracy

In the contemporary world, one of the important debates is whether Islam and democracy are compatible with each other or not. There are some Islamic scholars who say that Islam and democracy are totally compatible with each other, and that the system of democracy can be adopted in an Islamic country (S. Shah, personal communication, September 4, 2017). Scholars who are of this opinion focus more on the values of an Islamic government and that of democracy. They give importance to the principles of consultation, people's will, transparency, and accountability. On the other hand, there are some scholars who raise questions on the character of the parliamentarians in the modern world and say that there must be pious people in the government otherwise democracy cannot be reconciled with the Islamic system (S. Khalid, personal communication, September 5, 2017). They believe that democracy is a system in which divine laws should not be imposed. So, if the system of democracy accepts the sovereignty of *Allah* (God); then, it is compatible with democracy otherwise not (S. Pervaiz, personal communication, September 5, 2017).

Concept of democracy

There are some Islamic scholars who are not in favor of the idea of compatibility between Islam and democracy because they give the same meaning to democracy as given by Abraham Lincoln that is "Democracy is the government of the people, for the people and by the people." They are against the very notion of 'by the people' because they believe that the power to decide legal and illegal matters lies in God's hand, not in the opinion of majority. Now, democracy has become a political religion in the West (M. Alvi, personal communication, September 7, 2017). In democracy, people decide legal and illegal matters. Democracy means popular voting; in other words, it means that all the literate and illiterate people can cast a vote to decide matters of a state, and their vote to be considered equal (M. Ijaz, personal communication, September 7, 2017).

Political system in Islam

Every political system is based on specific culture, rules, and regulations. It possesses a structure that defines the roles and responsibilities of officials and methods of their appointment and termination. Islam gives some universal principles which can be incorporated into any system, so in an Islamic country any kind of system can be adopted according to requirements of the time (S. Shah, personal communication, September 4, 2017; S. Siddiqui, personal communication, September 4, 2017; S. Pervaiz, personal communication, September 5, 2017; S. Khalid, personal communication, September 5, 2017; M.

Hussain, personal communication, September 5, 2017). Islam trusts in people and their reasoning abilities to shape their own system.

Methods to designate a ruler

The method for making a ruler has always been a matter of serious concern in every system. There are different methods which have been in practice to designate rulers. One of the important responsibilities of a state is to determine the procedure for electing or selecting a ruler. With reference to the Holy Quran, no specific method is given for the appointment of a ruler. If appointments of the four Caliphs are kept in view, no common method of appointment is seen; all the four Caliphs were appointed in different ways. However, it is interpreted that there are two common requirements which can be observed in appointment of all the four Caliphs. The first requirement is nomination of the ruler by someone else, and the second requirement is allegiance (*Baet*) which means that most of the people must agree to the appointment (S.Shah, personal communication, September 4, 2017).

A flexibility in Islam has been noted, when it comes to choosing a caliph. Any procedure can be followed according to time and circumstances (M. Ijaz, personal communication, September 7, 2017). Islam believes in the concept of a welfare state, and for that purpose any compatible system can be adopted (S.Khalid, personal communication, September 4, 2017). However, it can create a controversy. In democracy, there are clearly defined rules for electing the ruler and a mechanism for Electoral College and political parties (M. Hussain, personal communication, September 5, 2017).

Source of legitimacy

In a state, there is a supreme power that has a right to decide the legitimacy of laws. In Islam, that supreme power is concentrated in God, Who is above all. In Islam, the supremacy belongs to Allah only (S. Siddiqui, personal communication, September 4, 2017). However, in democracy, such power is derived from the people.

Justice and equality

In Islam, to deal the matters of state, there is a *Shura* (consultative body) comprised of qualified and seasoned scholars, who have the knowledge of religious as well as state matters of the time, and who could pay attention towards the matters of the state with due diligence. The system of democracy is based on the principle of equality. This principle of equality implies to all the individuals living in a state, irrespective of their caste, creed, religion, sex, education, and race. All are equal citizens of a state and entitled to all the rights of a citizen; nobody has the power to snatch away these rights from them. The principle of justice brings selective democracy in Islam, and the principle of equality brings

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popular democracy in the West (S. Siddiqui, personal communication, September 4, 2017; M. Ijaz, personal communication, September 7, 2017; S. Khalid, personal communication, September 5, 2017; S. Pervaiz personal communication, September 5, 2017; M. Hussain, personal communication, September 5, 2017).

Desire for power

In Islam, longing for power is considered as an ostracized act. None of the four Caliphs desired for power; instead after getting it, they are of the view that they have got a great responsibility to fulfill. Islam does not allow its adherents to desire for power, which is very common in democracy (S. Siddiqui, personal communication, September 4, 2017). In an Islamic system, men cannot desire for power as people do in democracy (M. Ijaz, personal communication, September 7, 2017). In Islam, the aspect of nomination is emphasized, but in democracy candidates must desire to be elected and for that matter they must fill a nomination form.

Rights and duties

Islam focuses on defining duties of the people in every aspect of their lives – be it political, social, economic, or personal. Islam believes in a system where everyone is aware of their duties. On the other hand, the system of democracy adopts an opposite approach; it makes people aware of their rights in a state. Democracy focuses more on rights of the people while Islam focuses more on duties of the people (S. Siddiqui, personal communication, September 4, 2017).

Rights of women

Islam does not restrict women from working outside their homes. However, it defines certain rules for them to follow. They need to cover themselves properly (S. Khalid, personal communication, September 5, 2017). If women wish to work outside their homes, they surely are allowed, but it is not their responsibility to earn (S. Khalid, personal communication, September 5, 2017). Islam makes the men guardians and protectors of the women.

Broadness in Islam

Islam encourages learning from other civilizations. In Islam, knowledge can be taken from anywhere; Islam is limitless (M. Ijaz, personal communication, September 7, 2017). Acceptance of new ideas and discoveries have made Islam a progressive religion, which can meet all the challenges and demands of the modern world. Islam never says not to read any book except the Holy Quran, rather it focuses on reasoning and logical skills to explore new worlds (A.H. Manto, personal communication, September 7, 2017). This idea of promoting learning makes Islam compatible with democracy; a lot of new things can be learnt from

this newly developed system in the human history. In the process of state evolution, any new system that ensures the concept of a welfare state and works for the betterment of the people and society is compatible with Islam.

Voting and baet

- ✓ If the comparison between democracy and Islam is done on a very basic level, then the thing that differentiates Islam from democracy is the difference between a vote and a *Baet*. Vote is a secret ballot, and *Baet* is an open expression.
- ✓ In voting there are various choices for voters but in *Baet* there is only one choice for voter – either to accept or reject.
- ✓ In vote, there is no commitment to the divine law but in Islam, both ruler and ruled are committed to God's law.
- ✓ In vote, there are power structures involved, and in *Baet*, there is not any such concept involved.
- ✓ Vote is sought, and in Islam, there is no desire of getting elected (M. Alvi, personal communication, September 7, 2017).

Divisions in Islamic interpretations and the quranic injunctions

Despite the fact that there is only one Holy Quran, the matter of different interpretations divides the Muslims into various sects and different schools of thought. The division also hinders reconciliation of Islam with democracy. The difference of opinions gets difficult to handle when the scholars like Molana Abdul Kalam Azad sees Islam and democracy compatible, and the scholars like Maududi and Molana Qutab consider Islam and democracy not compatible (S. Pervaiz, personal communication, September 5, 2017). These two lenses completely change the interpretation of Islamic thoughts, and its level of compatibility with democracy.

Ijtihad in Islam

Each country has amalgamated the teachings of Islam with its own peculiar culture and traditions, and thus represents a unique picture of an Islamic country. Hence, it can be deduced that Islam is a universal religion (Shafqat, personal communication, September 8, 2017).

The people who restrict religion in a specific jurisdiction do wrong. There is a need for the renaissance of Islam. It is the uniqueness of Islam that it keeps its room open for *Ijtihad* (A.H. Manto, personal communication, September 7, 2017). Islam commands its adherents to explain the principles given in the Holy Quran in the light of the logic, reason, and the newly acquired knowledge. According to Quran, Islam calls its people for scientific inquiries and encourages them to explore this universe and seek knowledge.

Situational analysis

In situational analysis similarities and differences between Islam and democracy are discussed on the basis of theoretical and practical aspects of the values and principles of both the systems. For theoretical grounds, verses from the Holy Quran are taken as references for Islam, but for democracy, articles from the United Nations Declarations of Human Rights are used. Similarly, Saudi Arabia has been taken as an Islamic role model as Islam emerged on the land of Arab, and the system of pluralist democracies – is taken as a democratic role model.

Similarities

Freedom of expression

Since Islam claims to be a universal religion, so a *Mujtahid* (the one who has the knowledge of Islamic principles and current affairs) based on his rational thinking can decide matters according to needs of the time. And if the decision is related to people, then consultation of the people is a must-to-do because Muhammad's (PBUH) majority cannot go wrong. This is the basis of democracy in Islam (Barohi, 1968, p.14). It is also stated in Quran that "There shall be no compulsion in the religion" (2: 256).

In democracy, "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers." (United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, Article 19)

In Saudi Arabia, the system of monarchy exists, where the people do not have a choice of free will, especially in the matters of state and government. Moreover, the people do not have a right to protest against policies of the King, even if the protest is peaceful. Freedom of expression is the basis of democracy, and it is a right of the people guaranteed in constitution of the United States of America and also practiced in most of the European democracies.

Consultation

In Quran, Allah says, "...So pardon them and ask forgiveness for them and consult them in the matters." (3:159) in another verse, He says, "And their system is based on their consultation." (42:38) everyone should get equal constitutional rights to decide matters in a state, and if they find it hard to agree on one point, then the matter should be decided according to the majority's opinion (Ghamidi, 2010, p.462). It is further stated, the *Allah* Almighty (God) does not say that "they are consulted in their affairs." Consulting the people in the state affairs is not an option; it is a necessity (Ghamidi, 2010, p.464).

It is mentioned in Quran "Not only that but the Apostle, while he is enjoined to trust only in God when he has made up his mind, is also advised to consult those

who are his enemies at heart.” (3:159) Keeping in view the importance of consultation, the institution of *Shura* was established by all the four Caliphs, and it is also considered as the basis of democracy in Islam (Haq, 2009, p. 202). As far as Saudi Arabia is concerned, there is also a parliament known as the *Shura* Council. This parliament is different in the sense that the members of the *Shura* Council are appointed by the King and not elected by the people.

Accountability

In Islam, the Day of Judgement is marked as the day of accountability. It is stated in Quran that “Do they not think that they will be resurrected?” (83:4) In the human history with the evolution of democracy, the principle of accountability has revived again. Islam and democracy both embrace the principle of accountability in their nature.

Saudi Arabia is a kingship, so there is no question of accountability against the ruler but in modern democracies, the elected officials are accountable to the people through media and civil society organizations and other institutions of accountability.

Religious tolerance

Democracy and Islam both have religious tolerance and give complete liberty to their people to practice whatever religion they want. Saudi Arabia is a Muslim state; Non-Muslims can live there; however, they are not allowed to practice their religion publicly. In the United States of America, there is a separation between religion and state, so there is complete freedom for the people to practice their religions.

Universal principles

The Quran says, “When his Lord said to him, "Submit", he said ‘I have submitted in Islam to the Lord of the worlds.’” (2:131) none of the basic requirements of democracy comes in clash with Islamic principles. These are as follows:

- All citizens in terms of getting rights and before law will be equal.
- The head of a country will be elected by the people.
- All the matters related to state will be discussed among the parliamentarians.
- The national treasury belongs to the people (Azad, 2013. p. 23).

These democratic values are the result of the French Revolution, but Islam is holding these values since its emergence about fourteen centuries ago (Azad, 2013, p.13).

The religion Islam is practiced in many countries in the world despite the differences of culture, traditions, language, and lifestyle. Some of these countries are: Turkey, Pakistan, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq.

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The system of democracy also has universal values and most countries of the world are practicing democracy.

Principle of practice

The Quran says, “Allah wants to make clear to you the lawful from the unlawful and guide you to the good practices of those before you and to accept your repentance. And Allah is Knowing and Wise.” (4:26) Islam is not just a set of prayers; it gives some of the principles related to personal, social, economic and political aspects of life.

On the other hand, democracy is a way of life, where everything is in individual’s control. He enjoys political freedom along with other freedoms. Similarly, in the United States of America people enjoy freedom of expression along with the freedoms in other aspects of life.

Pluralism

Pluralism means heterogeneity of cultures in a society. The people of the same religion may belong to different cultures and practices at the same time. Islam and democracy share the common grounds in this matter.

Saudi Arabia is a closed society, which does not allow pluralism. Some of its areas are restricted for the non-Muslims. On the other hand, the United State of America, the United Kingdom and other modern western democracies are multi-cultural and multi-ethnic countries.

Differences

The Concept of Sovereignty

The word ‘sovereignty’ is used in different verses in the Quran. Some of the verses are quoted below:

“Do you not know that to Allah belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth? He punishes whom He wills and forgives whom He wills, and Allah is over all things competent.” (5:40)

“My Lord, You have given me [something] of sovereignty and taught me of the interpretation of dreams. Creator of the heavens and earth, you are my protector in this world and in the Hereafter. Cause me to die a Muslim and join me with the righteous.” (12:101)

“Say, O Allah, Owner of Sovereignty, You give sovereignty to whom you will and you take sovereignty away from whom you will. You honor whom you will and you humble whom you will. In Your hand is [all] good. Indeed, you are over all things competent.” (3:26)

The concept of sovereignty shows that in democracy the sovereignty is bounded to the geographical boundaries of a state, whereas the sovereignty of God

(Allah) cannot be restricted to any geographical territory of this earth. He belongs to the whole universe.

In Saudi Arabia, still the monistic theory is working as all the powers are concentrated in the King who is an absolute sovereign of the state. He has all the powers to decide laws and matters of the state. In democracies, however, the modern concept of sovereignty, which belongs to the people, is in practice.

Rights of women

“And for women are rights over men similar to those for men over women.” The duty of maintaining her throughout her life is wholly thrown on the husband (Iqbal, 2015, p. 149). It is generally regarded that women are made subordinate to men. They do not enjoy equal status to men.

In 2011, the King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia allowed women to have the right to vote and run as candidates in the local election 2015. Thirty Saudi women are given seats in Saudi Arabia's *Shura* Council for the first time in the Kingdom's history, as they were sworn in before King Abdullah in the capital, Riyadh.

In modern democracies women do not have any restriction to take part or contest elections. “In 2017, 105 women held seats in the United States Congress, comprising 19.6% of the 535 members; 21 women (21%) served in the United States Senate, and 84 women (19.3%) served in the United States House of Representatives.”

Abolition of slavery

About slavery, it is stated in Quran “And those who seek a contract, for eventual emancipation from among whom your right hands possess - then make a contract with them if you know there is within them goodness and give them from the wealth of Allah which He has given you. And do not compel your slave girls to prostitution, if they desire chastity, to seek thereby the temporary interests of worldly life. And if someone should compel them, then indeed, Allah is to them, after their compulsion, Forgiving and Merciful.”(24:33)

Abolition of slavery is a distinguishing feature between Islam and democracy, but both have their own mechanism for dealing with slavery. In Islam, one can emancipate his slave voluntarily but in modern western democracies, slavery is prohibited by law.

Penal code of Islam

Shariah law cannot be implemented until there is an economic disparity and poverty prevailing in the country. Economic stability is the first requirement. Since most of the Muslim countries in the world are developing, so they are not in a position to implement Shariah law (Qadri, 1988, p. 139-140).

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Capital punishment is against the basic principles of democracy. In modern democracy, life of the human beings has been taken as the most precious thing. Thus, capital punishment is not fortified.

Saudi Arabia executed at least 154 people – maintaining the high-level in 2015 (158) which was the highest number recorded for Saudi Arabia since 1995. However, in most western democracies capital punishment has been abolished i.e. the number of death sentences in the USA also decreased from 52 in 2015 to 32 in 2016 (38% decrease). This is the lowest number recorded since 1973.”

Rules of succession or election

Azad says, “If the period of the first four caliphs is studied, few things are found common in choosing a Caliph:

- Through people’s election
- Through Nomination (People must accept or approve)
- The Caliph can be terminated with people’s choice

As a result, there could be no other way of choosing a Caliph except people’s choice.” (Azad, 2013, p. 37-39). He further says, “Democracy does not ensure justice, but it does establish a foundation for pursuing justice.” (Azad, 2013, p. 6). In Saudi Arabia, there is kingdom of a family whereas in the modern western democracies rulers are chosen by the people.

A State for Muslims versus a state for humans

The Quran states: “God forbids you not, with regard to those who fight you not for your Faith nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them: For God loveth those who are just.” (60:8)

For Non- Muslims, an agreement can be made with them according to International accord (Ghamidi, 2010, p. 460). The basic difference between an Islamic state and a secular state is that the authority of a secular state is derived from the people themselves. Religion plays no mandatory role in its working. The Islamic scholars say that in an Islamic state, non-Muslims do have rights, but they cannot be made as the rulers of the state whereas a democratic state is for humans and all citizens have a right to be elected and can live equally. There is no discrimination on the basis of religions or sects.

Conclusion

Within the Muslims, there are difference of opinions regarding the compatibility between Islam and democracy. This analysis of the compatibility of Islam and democracy results in the following findings

- One of the fundamental things, which differentiates Islam from democracy, is the concept of sovereignty. In Islamic republics, sovereignty is associated with religious faith and it belongs to God and it

is beyond any question and limitation. On the other hand, in democracy, sovereignty is a political concept, subject to criticism and questions. In modern democracies, sovereignty belongs to people; yet, it has institutional limitations and various legal and constitutional checks.

- Many Islamic scholars think that Islam does not give a political system but a set of broad principles which can be incorporated in any system. Moreover, the Holy Quran does not specifically mention any system; it just demands justice and welfare of the people, for which any system could be adopted but in modern democracy a system provides participation and welfare of the people.
- The political rights of women have always been questioned in Islamic countries. Saudi Arabia is considered one of the most conservative Muslim countries when it comes to women's rights. However, in modern western democracy women are free to take part in social, economic and political matters.
- The abolition of slavery from the society has always been a challenging factor. Islam encouraged setting the slaves free but did not ban it. Moreover, slavery persisted throughout the Arab and other parts of the world for a long period of time. Since the emergence of democracy, slavery has been declared illegal. Modern liberal democracies banned slave trade in the world.
- In Islam, there are punishments for certain crimes only, but in the modern world the nature of crimes has changed and Islam is silent about them. In modern world, there are complexed laws to address these challenges as we have laws related to piracy, property laws, cyber-crimes and corporate laws as well. So, for this purpose a well-defined penal code system needs to be put in place.

Despite all the above-mentioned differences identified by the Muslim scholars, they all agreed on the similarities between Islam and democracies, which are consultation, accountability, rule of law, welfare of people and tolerance. Islam and democracy are based upon these common values.

Recommendations

This study relates to a problem prevailing particularly in the world regarding the relation between Islam and democracy. Here are a few suggestions to address the difference between Islam and democracy in various countries:

- If Islam and democracy are combined, it could give a useful system to the Islamic world. The Islamic values could make the practices of democracy more effective.
- In democracy, mostly the influential or rich people can win elections. They desire for powers to safeguard their interests. This desire for power, if eliminated, as proposed by Islamic principles, could bring a better change in democracy. One could find the example in modern democracies, where the elections are held between parties rather than individuals and parties can nominate their candidates. So, parties should nominate those candidates who really want to serve the people.
- There must not be any kind of compulsion in religious and personal matters. Every citizen must be free in his faith and practices of religion.
- Islam, as propagated by one section of scholars, believes in the principle of selection rather than election and according to them this selection is based on meritocracy in Islam. If this principle is adopted in democracy, it can have a better impact. For the principle of meritocracy, a committee comprising of qualified and unbiased people could be formed. The candidates after getting approval from the committee should be allowed to contest elections.
- Due to advancement in means of communications, the world has become a global village. So, the countries should not come into conflict with each other, and focus on the peaceful resolutions of the disputes. The countries should promote the values of tolerance and pluralism within and outside their boundaries.
- Every good doer must be praised, and his efforts should be acknowledged. Rather than focusing on geographical boundaries, we should all work together to maintain peace and tolerance in the world.

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- The participation of women in all spheres of life should be ensured for the progress as half of the humanity cannot be neglected.
- Muslims need to adopt a pragmatic approach rather than living in idealism. The Muslims should redefine the laws in the modern world context by using *Ijtihad* which is a useful tool so that both religious and worldly life could go side by side.
- Muslims also need to adopt a forward-looking and accommodating approach towards other ideologies, religious, and political systems to avoid confrontation for the development and well-being of the Muslims.

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