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## Book Review

# A Political Theory of Muslim Democracy

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## BOOK REVIEW: A POLITICAL THEORY OF MUSLIM DEMOCRACY

Muhammet Derviş Mete\*

Çakır, Ravza Altuntaş. *A Political Theory of Muslim Democracy*.  
Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022. pp. 328, GBP 85.00,  
9781474479523.

*A Political Theory of Muslim Democracy*,<sup>1</sup> which is based on Ravza Altuntaş-Çakır's PhD thesis, has two main parts, six detailed and well-organised chapters along with a robust introduction and brief conclusion. The first part elaborates on the various perspectives of Muslim and multiculturalist scholars about the issues of democratic governance, pluralism and religion. The second part deals with innovative concepts that the author proposes to establish a theory of Muslim democracy, including social public sphere, pluralist secularism and constitutionalism.

In the first chapter, titled "Islamic Discourses on Governance and Pluralism," the author examines how Muslim scholars approach governance, democracy and pluralism and in which ways they differ in handling these issues. The author has divided Muslim scholars into four main schools: statist, revivalists, modernists and progressives.<sup>2</sup> These schools were formed and shaped by the emergence of various perspectives among different theorists and practitioners, depending on whether the Qur'ān imposed any form of government, whether Islam is compatible with governance mechanisms created by human beings such as democracy, whether democracy is the best possible existing political system or a system of *shirk* (idolatry)<sup>3</sup> or whether the provisions in the Qur'ān would be re-interpreted in accordance with changing needs of the societies.

While evaluating these four schools, the author has carefully placed statist at one end of the spectrum and progressives at the other end. For example, the statist school is the target of

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<sup>1</sup> Ravza Altuntaş-Çakır, *A Political Theory of Muslim Democracy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> The final group – progressives – and progressive Muslim movements should not be confused with each other. It is difficult to distinguish between progressive Muslims and progressive Muslim movements on an intellectual basis since they benefit from the same sources. Yet, when the author refers to progressives, she intends to cover intellectual and philosophical trends. In other words, progressives have hermeneutic Islamic understanding and rely on certain methodologies to interpret Qur'ān. Muhammed Talbi and Abdülkerim Sürüş are pioneers of this group. On the other hand, progressive Muslim movements – as social and political movements – are more interested in practical challenges rather than focusing on theoretical and philosophical issues. Within these movements, activists and civil society play a significant role in bringing controversial matters in Islam, such as environmental or feminist concerns, to public attention.

<sup>3</sup> Altuntaş-Çakır, *A Political Theory of Muslim Democracy*, 31.

strong criticism by the author because it endorses a sort of fundamentalist, hardcore Islamic State. According to representatives of this school – Sayyid Qutb and Mawdudi – only Allah, not his subjects, has absolute legal and political sovereignty. The natural result of this argument is that the created entity would have restricted authority to implement Sharia (God’s law).<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, if sovereignty solely belongs to Allah, the popular sovereignty understanding of democracy would amount to *shirk*.<sup>5</sup> Later in this chapter, the author continues to evaluate these four schools according to their approaches to Islam, democracy, pluralism and secularism and explains why she endorses the views of progressives. For example, the progressives argue that democracy is the best form of government at present and liberal secularism has mostly succeeded in protecting and promoting pluralism in modern societies. The author rightly adds the caveat that liberal secularism has failed to safeguard pluralism in some contexts, including Turkey and France, because of these countries’ assertive and oppressive understandings of secularism.

In chapter two, titled “Multiculturalist Discourses on Religion and Democratic Governance,” the author broadly defines multiculturalism as a conceptualisation of “inclusive and accommodative ways within the political theory.”<sup>6</sup> That is to say, the more inclusive and reconciliatory is a political theory, the more likely it is to respond to cultural and religious diversity. The author argues that classical orthodox liberalism does not sufficiently recognise and promote cultural and religious diversity and is slow in responding to the needs of vulnerable segments of society. As a response to the flaws of classical liberalism, multiculturalist thought emerged and was divided into four different schools: liberal, moral, legal and institutionalist pluralists. Unlike Rawlsian and Dworkian liberalism, multiculturalist thought has re-interpreted the concepts and institutions in a way that expands the scope of the rights and demands of cultural and religious minorities. For this reason, Dr. Altuntaş-Çakır relies on a multiculturalist account to re-interpret and re-evaluate some critical conceptions and institutions, including religion, democratic governance, public sphere, cultural and religious diversity, religious freedoms and tolerance, public debate, social contract, negotiation and civic participation, and secularism.

The author aims to develop a theory of Muslim democracy and formulate an alternative point of view on the relationship between religion and democratic organisation by relying on multiculturalism. I think the author has succeeded in integrating the multiculturalist approach into the rest of her book. For example, she allocates one chapter of the book to the legal pluralists’ thesis of jurisdictional autonomy. By relying on jurisdictional autonomy, the author presents jurisdictional pluralism as a solution because it is probably the best suitable instrument to acknowledge the diverse characteristics of religious life in today’s world. Another example is that multiculturalist political theory endorses liberal-pluralist secularism instead of philosophical, aggressive, assertive and militant secularism that advocates a separationist

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<sup>4</sup> Sayyid Abul A’la Mawdudi, *First Principles of the Islamic State*, trans. and ed. Khurshid Ahmed (Lahore: Islamic Publications Ltd, 1960), 18.

<sup>5</sup> Altuntaş-Çakır, *A Political Theory of Muslim Democracy*, 32.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

political model that excludes religion from public life.<sup>7</sup> The author allocates another chapter of the book to the liberal pluralist secularism that multiculturalist political thought espouses. Finally, inspired by multiculturalist thoughts, the author discusses how secularism can fulfil the function and duty of separating state and religion, without excluding different religious and cultural segments of the society.

In chapter three, Dr. Altuntaş-Çakır covers the compatibility-based arguments, which is basically about whether Islam is compatible with democratic values. To that end, the author examines three crucial concepts, sovereignty, *shūrā* and Sharia, and explores how the four schools she mentioned in the first chapter interpret these concepts. In that sense, some critical issues emerge in terms of “(i) divine sovereignty versus popular sovereignty, (ii) the consensus of the ‘*ulamā*’ versus public deliberation, and (iii) divine law versus human legislation.”<sup>8</sup> Since the statist school categorically opposes democracy, it sees compatibility-based arguments as meaningless. At the other end of the spectrum, progressives have no problem with democracy. Still, they insist it is pointless to legitimise religious institutions and concepts by amounting them to the principles, norms and concepts of democracy. Dr. Altuntaş-Çakır mostly agrees with the progressives in the sense that a paradigm shift from compatibility-based arguments to a Muslim democracy is necessary with the help of the “development of a non-theological, non-jurisprudential political theory.”<sup>9</sup> For this reason, the author makes it clear she is not interested in whether Islam and democracy are compatible. In other words, in her project, the author does not take the easy way out by getting into never-ending debates like whether Islam and democracy are compatible. Instead, she prefers the long and tiring journey with the hope of developing an interpretation of an Islamic tradition that embodies the norms and principles of liberal democracy.

In the fourth chapter, the author criticises liberal and republican secularism for their failure to accommodate religion effectively and for the latter’s endorsement of strict separation of religion from public life for the ostensible purpose of maintaining equality and state neutrality among citizens. For these reasons, the author formulates an alternative account of secularism, pluralist secularism, which aims to “demonstrate the possibility of an alternative inclusive and religiously-friendly secularism accommodating Muslim ways of social and public life.”<sup>10</sup> To that end, Dr. Altuntaş-Çakır offers four cumulative prerequisites for pluralist secularism: a minimalist state, the public recognition of religion, the differentiation of state and social public spheres, and collective rights.<sup>11</sup> The author’s minimalist state approach is similar to classical liberal thought’s distrust of state authority, which tends to breach citizens’ rights and freedoms in the name of morality or national security.<sup>12</sup> Thus, a minimalist state is expected to offer not only the basic state institutions such as the police, army, justice system, infrastructure and stable economy but also a large space of liberty to its citizens along with the commitment that

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 170.

it does not impose any conflicting truth claims on its citizens, whether religious, philosophical or scientific.<sup>13</sup> Throughout the chapter, by proposing cumulative prerequisites for pluralist secularism, the author aims to strike a balance between universal human rights and religious demands via her pluralist secularism understanding under the Muslim democracy framework.

In chapter five, titled “The Social Public Sphere,” Dr. Altuntaş-Çakır formulates an alternative public sphere by benefiting from the two prominent models that Muslim and multiculturalist political thought has developed: the shared public and plural public spheres. While the former is adopted to reform the state institutions so they can sufficiently accommodate the diverse and changing religious demands, the latter offers institutional and jurisdictional pluralism to meet the comprehensive religious claims.<sup>14</sup> By focusing on the potential strengths and weaknesses of these two models, the author re-evaluates and re-interprets the existing framework of the public sphere developed by Muslim and multiculturalist theorists, such as Tully, Mookherjee and Hashemi.

These scholars criticise the existing republican and liberal account of the public sphere on the grounds that the efforts of these mainstream political thoughts to transplant the theories on the public sphere to Muslim societies are highly problematic. This is because the line between public and private in Islamic societies is much more blurred than in Western societies.<sup>15</sup> The author, fully aware of the impossibility of drawing clear boundaries between the private and public spheres, proposes a new concept of the ‘social public sphere,’ which has four crucial elements: transformativeness, social Islam, democratic tolerance and institutional pluralism.<sup>16</sup> The last one deserves closer attention because it gives voice and authority to civil society and individuals alongside the state. Moreover, doing so responds to the demands of Muslims who seek to fulfil their religious obligations under their religion’s doctrines. However, the author adds the caveat that, when these people are deprived of legal and institutionalist pluralist rights and excluded from their political influence on the state, this might pose a serious challenge to democracy because they might fall into the trap of political extremism aimed at imposing their ideology on the state.<sup>17</sup>

The last chapter, titled “Pluralising Constitution,” is one of the most inspiring sections of the book because the author proposes some practical and plausible suggestions that can be applied to Muslim societies. While formulating the idea of plural constitutionalism within the context of Muslim democracy, the author examines the strengths and weaknesses of the two key schools of thought: political constitutionalism and legal constitutionalism. The former mainly focuses on the deliberative character of the constitution-building process, meaning no one should be excluded from participating in the constitutional debate, and the constitution should be the product of participatory democratic politics. In contrast, the latter is more interested in fundamental constitutional values and rights, such as the right to due process of

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<sup>13</sup> Veit Bader, “Religious Pluralism: Secularism or Priority for Democracy?” *Political Theory* 27, no. 5 (1999): 602.

<sup>14</sup> Altuntaş-Çakır, *A Political Theory of Muslim Democracy*, 190.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

law, peaceful assembly and freedom of thought and expression.<sup>18</sup> While exploring political constitutionalism, the author refers to Ergun Özbudun,<sup>19</sup> who argues that every generation has the right to make its own constitution. Yet, this idea originally belonged to Thomas Jefferson, who famously claimed it is not fair to bind future generations with the constitutions enacted by their predecessors. In other words, “the earth belongs...to the living, the dead have neither powers nor rights over it.”<sup>20</sup> Putting aside this debate, the exponents of political constitutionalism believe that immutable and “unassailable provisions and constitutional protection is meaningless in democratic politics.”<sup>21</sup> According to Dr. Altuntaş-Çakır, this is one of the weaknesses of political constitutionalism and a strength of legal constitutionalism because a system, which is more conservative and less open to change, would be more applicable to nonconsolidated and populist regimes.<sup>22</sup>

After examining these schools, the author proposes an account of pluralist constitutionalism by conceptualising three elements: incontestable legal norms, democratic law-making and jurisdictional pluralism.<sup>23</sup> In terms of the first element of pluralising the constitution, the author suggests a minimalist human rights approach that envisages a short list of human rights on which everyone agrees. These inalienable and non-negotiable human rights, which reflect legal constitutionalists’ quest for constitutional protection via unassailable provisions, include “freedom from torture, freedom from racial, gender and equivalent forms of discrimination, freedom of speech and conscience, and freedom of association and assembly.”<sup>24</sup> The author convincingly argues that adopting a minimalist and humble approach increases its potential as a legal instrument. What I understand from this approach is that if we raise expectations and add delicate and sensitive issues to the list of human rights, there is a possibility of blanket rejection of this list because of their potential conflict with Islam. For this reason, the author’s approach is a more realistic and plausible scenario to fight for fundamental rights, which are unlikely to be challenged, than to demand that all human rights be added to the list.

Overall, Dr. Ravza Altuntaş-Çakır’s *A Political Theory of Muslim Democracy* is a meticulously and richly researched work. Given the holy book-burning incidents taking place recently in Scandinavian countries,<sup>25</sup> which are at the top of the democracy indexes, it once again reveals how important and meaningful it is to think about the concepts of tolerance and diversity upon which the author often touches in her book. Additionally, perhaps the most important feature that distinguishes her book from other works is that she provides concrete suggestions on how democratic principles can be internalised by Muslims rather than never-

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>19</sup> Hülya Okur-Haberx, “İlk Üç Madde Kalırsa Yeni Bir Anayasa Yapmış Olmazsınız” [If the First Three Articles Remain You Don’t Make a New Constitution], Hukuki Haber, March 25, 2013, accessed February 3, 2023, <https://www.hukukihaber.net/ilk-uc-madde-kalirsa-yeni-bir-anayasa-yapmis-olmazsiniz>.

<sup>20</sup> Cited by Beau Breslin, *A Constitution for the Living: Imagining How Five Generations of Americans Would Rewrite the Nation’s Fundamental Law* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), 21.

<sup>21</sup> Okur-Haberx, “İlk Üç Madde Kalırsa.”

<sup>22</sup> Altuntaş-Çakır, *A Political Theory of Muslim Democracy*, 223.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>25</sup> Jyhene Kebisi, “Book Burning and the Far-Right in Sweden,” *Arena Quarterly*, February 10, 2023, accessed May 22, 2023, <https://arena.org.au/book-burning-and-the-far-right-in-sweden/>.

ending discussions on whether Islam is compatible with democracy. While doing this, the author, unlike classical Orientalists, does not shift the responsibility solely onto Muslims or shy away from criticising classical mainstream orthodox liberalism.

However, a case study would have enriched the book's argument. Since the author allocates a space to Turkey in the introduction, she creates the impression that the book would include a case study about Turkey in the following chapters. It would be eye-opening to discuss the compatibility-based arguments and concepts of democracy, religion, secularism, public sphere, diversity and tolerance by elaborating on Turkey as a case study, a country that used to implement a headscarf ban on female students at universities by resorting to the problematic understanding of assertive and aggressive secularism for many years even though a large part of its population is Muslim. It would also be fruitful to discuss the separation of public and private spheres in Turkey and how Turkish governments used to justify their anti-democratic stances by using the immutable provisions of the Turkish constitution as an excuse. In short, Turkey could have been a perfect laboratory for this project. Despite this, the book is a high-quality work and deserves to be read not only by scholars of Islamic studies but also by various disciplines including theologians and lawyers, particularly constitutional lawyers.

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