Two Iranian Intellectuals: Ayatollah Morteza Motahari and Dr. Abdol-Karim Soroush and Islamic Democracy Debate

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Abstract: *The ideological and social changes of the past hundred years and the introduction of a secular religion combating the traditions started a big portion of modernistic endeavours in Iran. It was not only seen in the field of ideas and ideologies, but also in the policies of the governments which prioritized the modernization process in Iran. The result has been so far the creation of numerous modernist ideologies in Iran. With regard to their distance from established traditions, we can categorize these ideologies into several distinctive groups. One such group is the, religiously driven, Islamic thinkers who are further divided into traditionalists, reformists and modernists. In this essay, the aim is to consider two Islamic thinkers; Ayatollah Mutahhari representing the reformists and Dr Soroush affiliated with the modernists on their views about democracy. We will try to answer the critical question of compatibility of Islam with democracy and find the relationship between Islam and democratic practice.*
Key word: *Islamic Democracy, Muslim Intellectuals, Modernists, Traditionalists, Reformists*

I.   Introduction

Today one of the challenges in the political arena is to combine faith and politics. This can be a global issue or even solution as we can see the scandals and the thirst for legitimacy and morals among the politicians around the world and the fact that faith can fill this gap very properly. Islam contains certain elements which are compatible with democratic principles. The most important of these are freedom, equality, consultation and public consent (Jahanbakhsh, 2004, p. 38) .

Along with the rise of Iran's contemporary times that is after the Persian Constitutional Revolution democracy has been a matter of controversy. This question has always been in new thinkers' mind whether democracy, as a new rule of government, is compatible with religion or not. If we consider democracy to be built around the bases of: 1. Right to choose leaders,2. Existence of social freedoms,3. Pluralism,4. Majority's rule,

5. Distribution of powers

The history of the term "religious intellectuality" goes back to the Persian Constitutional Revolution between 1905 and 1911. After that, intellectual such as Murteza Mutahhari (February 3, 1920 – May 1, 1979) was the leader of this intellectual movement. The aim of this movement was therefore adjusting the Islamic *Sharia* with the necessities of the modern life. His idea was to improve the situation and the quality of living of Muslims based on the Islamic rules and he played roles in the events of the 1979 Iranian revolution against the Shah. There are many thinkers who see it a contradiction to combine democracy with faith and many believe that power without faith is ultimately corrupt. Therefore, they were trying to adapt the two together. In this part, the aim is to discuss the ideology of three of such intellectuals in the course of the revolution and the view of Iranian Islamic thinkers about democracy in Iranian system of government. The two intellectuals under study here are Murteza Mutahhari and Abdolkarim Soroush, (Hosein Haj Faraj Dabbagh) (1945-). Mutahari was a cleric but the latter two are considered to be non cleric Islamologists. The main topic of interest in this chapter is democracy. The ideas of these two respected thinkers are basically same and that is adopting a modern look for Islamic rules. But still there is one difference; Soroush try to modernize religion, whereas Mutahhari tried to give a religious form to modernity. They were common in one idea: their emphasis on democracy in a model for government has been as strong as their emphasis on the role of religion in this model. Their model was and is a democratic, Islamic state. There are many thinkers who see it contradicting to combine democracy with faith and many believe that power without faith is ultimately corrupt, therefore trying to adapt the two together. As an ultimate realization of Islamic governance was established in Iran, we will now see the ideas of the two of the prominent contemporary Iranian thinkers: Dr Soroush and Ayatollah Mutahhari.

II.   History of Government in Iran

Since the pre-Islamic empire up to the Islamic revolution in 1979 the government system of Iran was monarchy. Practically, all the power and the means of politics and economics were in the hands of the monarch,

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giving him the power to rule as he wished. During the Qajar dynasty the inequality and atrocities from the side of the government reached to a peak and with the rising of the interactions between Iran and Europe democratic practice found its way among the thinkers in Iran.(Abrahamian, 1998, p. 38) initially it was the limiting power of the religious leaders which put a limit on the power of the king but finally as a result of the endeavours of the pro-democracy forces in Iran, a new Constitutional Monarchy was born in 1907 after a bloody battle between the revolutionaries and the monarchy today known as The Persian Constitutional Revolution or Iranian Constitutional Revolution.(Abrahamian, 1998, p. 50) This was never a fully accomplished revolution as the rules were never executed as they should have. During the Pahlavi era, a practically absolute monarchy was realized again. The events following the 1953 Iranian coup d'état led to the formation of the Islamic movement in Iran which resulted in the 1979 Islamic Revolution which ousted the monarch from Iran. During the period of time after the Islamic Revolution up to today, there has been much endeavour in forming really democratic governance under an Islamic surveillance. The Islamic republic in Iran has not only been one of a kind in its kind in the world, but it has been the first full realization of such governments in modern days. In this form of governance the ruling is based on the teachings of Islam and the choice of the rulers is upon people, making it a full mixture of democracy and Islamic governance essentially supported by public legitimacy and Islamic oversight. Ayatollah Mutahhari's insights were essential in the formation and execution of such an enormous ideological mixture which formed the backbone of the Islamic governance in Iran.

III.   The History of Critical Intellectuality in Iran

Being formed around a century ago, modern intellectual thinking has been divided into religious and pro-Western modern thinking. Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of the pro-Western thinking in Iran is the belief in separation between religion and politics [secularism]. The religious thinkers on the other hand are trying to draw a connecting line between the two. We can say that the pro-Western thinkers assume that the most important reason behind the maladies of the Islamic world in fact is the Islamic and local traditions of such societies. Therefore they introduced religion as the single most important problem in the Islamic societies and tried to decrease the role of religion in their societies so as to minimize its aspect on the society and development. Their endeavour peaked in the 19th century in Iran. On the other hand, the religious thinkers attempted to repel the impact of the modern world on the traditional societies hence some of them accepted in some ways or the other the idea of influences of the modern world. This group, known as modernists includes Dr Soroush. The other two groups of religious thinkers are traditionalist and the reformists-such as Ayatollah Mutahhari.

Traditionalists try to repel the influence of the modern world on Islamic societies altogether. They stand firmly against any attempt to introduce any Western-like influence or ideology in Islamic societies, justifying their action by saying that the products of the West are completely against Islamic teachings, rejecting any attempt to make them Islamic. Therefore they are anti-modernization and uncompromising.(Yousefi Eshkevari, 1997, p. 38) They also consider democracy, liberty and human rights as Western and therefore anti-Islamic.(Mesba Yazdi, 2000)

Reformists on the other hand are a lot more aware of the necessities and the events of the modern world and therefore they are trying hard to represent religion with its old functions in the context of the modern world. They lean against tradition and look forward to modernity. They constantly try to put a religious cap on the modern products of the west and introduce them as religious, forming a totally new social necessity. Although they believe in modernity, they still accept a vital role for tradition in Islamic societies. In other words, they try to find the new necessities and meanings of the modern world in the context of old, religious texts and imply that the new concepts, such as democracy, freedom, and human rights etcetera indeed existed in the religious context long before the Western civilization came up with them.(Kazemi, 2008, p. 119)

Modernists do not accept the position of reformist on modernity, and they reject the notion of extracting modern concepts from religious texts. They believe that it is religion which should make up its mind and be present in the modern day lives by renewing and regenerating itself, not the modern concepts. They believe that not every Western product is corrupting and in fact we can import the new, modern ideas on technology, science and philosophy without doing any harm at all to religion and traditions.(Borojardi, 1996, p. 241) In the remaining of this essay, we will concentrate on the ideas of Dr Soroush and Ayatollah Mutahhari on democracy. Ayatollah Mutahhari is the representative of the reformist religious thinkers who has the concern of reviving the Islamic tradition in the modern day by reintroducing modern concepts in a religious manner and Dr Soroush is a modernist who believes in the regeneration of society and religion based on modern concepts. They both believe at the same time in religious reforms suitable to present day necessities.

IV.   Soroush on Religion and democracy

Abdolkarim Soroush (Hosein Haj Faraj Dabbagh,) was born in 1945in Teheran, is an Iranian thinker, reformer, Rumi scholar and a former assistant professor at the Insitute for Humanities and Cultural Studies, in Tehran. In his ideology, politics and science are man-made but at the same time he believes that the existence of

religious influence is necessary in politics of an Islamic society. He constrains the religious government to the votes, and does not recognize a solely clerical religion. His reasoning is that focusing too much on the clerical and organized part of the religion will interrupt his concentration on more important discussion in the field and paralyzes his view of religion(Soroush, 1994a p. 353).He believes that religion is unable to involve in politics directly and more secular products of humanity such as anthropology should have greater influence on politics. He criticizes the silence on the discussions of politically-motivated Islamic thinkers such as Al-Farabi (aka as Alpharabius 872–951)(Soroush, 1996, p. 2).

His other argument is about the definition of religion itself as he believes that if we do not have a precise definition of religion, then talking about the religious politics is absurd. He sees religion as a personal possession and believes that a religious politics is initially materialization of religious rules and then the depiction of good deeds. Therefore, he concludes that being a Muslim is just a simple belief in the religion, and thus good deeds are a by-product of this belief(Soroush, 1994a p. 355). He believes that a good deed based on religion is mysticism:

A religious government is based more on people's understanding and experience of religion rather than on the good deeds of its people." (Soroush, 1996, p. 3)Therefore he emphasizes that "An Islamic regime is not based on clerical influence, but it's rather as a result of the people's belief." (Soroush, 1994a p. 355)And "The Islamic regime is created to allow people to worship as they wish, based on their religious experience"(Soroush, 1994a pp. 355-356) Then he comes to this conclusion that "In a religious government, everyone is free to choose the way of worship, on the other hand, in a clerical government, the clergy will use all its power to prevent people from whatever way other than his own path (Soroush, 1994a p. 356).

He has a strong opinion on the topic of clerical interference in the matters of society. He believes that in a real Islamic state, the government is surely not authorized to dictate the states of religion to its people, whereas he believes that in a clerical form of governance, it is the clerical authority which has the power to dictate his ideology to its people. In this view, belief is solely a matter of choice and should not be dictated and it is exclusively based on the love of God and therefore useless to be dictated. He believes that the role of a religious government is to prevent commitment of sin, especially in public and nothing more than that. His goal in arguing this sort of things is a relentless endeavor to transform the society and the politics to a democratic one. For this cause, he poses two questions for the leader (Soroush, 1996, p. 4):
1. Where does the right to govern come from, for the leader?
2. What is the form of government?

The answer to the 1st question needs the answer to the second. He believes that the right to govern is obtained from the form of the government. Because it cannot be a God-installed right, then government in a clerical view is controversial: "In an Islamic (clerical) government, the right to govern is said to be from the side of God." (Soroush, 1994a p. 357) His preferred role of people in government is for them to have the right to choose whoever they think is suitable to rule them. After this, all are obliged to follow his rules since he is the one who has the power to guardianship of the Islamic society. This fining process is obtained in the polls and the leader is responsible for the rules to be followed as stated in the *Sharia*, and he has the power to dictate the rules, even though people reject or fail to follow it.

On the other hand, no one is infallible, not even the Islamic leader, therefore, in the Islamic republic, there is a body called the Assembly of Experts of the Leadership which has the power to supervise, elect and remove one from the leadership of the country. He criticizes this structure and states that "the Assembly of Experts of the Leadership are indeed legitimized by the leader himself now, if there comes a case in which the leader is criticized by the members of the assembly, and at the same time the members are delegitimized by the leader, then who is to have the last say?" (Soroush, 1994a p. 377). He believes that the assembly has to be legitimized by other than the leader himself, since this causes a controversy in legitimization of the people who are installed in a body who is supposed to criticize their own legitimizer.

By having this in mind, he uses another argument to further push the limit: if people have the right to remove the leader, then they necessarily have to have the right to choose one: "If we accept that removing the supervising is the right of people, then installing is the other end of the same thing" (Soroush, 1996, p. 4). He adds:

The right to supervise necessarily changes the equation, this will add to the share of power which is given to people, which is a depiction of a democratic country. Such a democratic rule has no contradiction with Islam. But of course, such a ruling is very different from an Islamic government which is centered on the supreme leader and a clergy." (Soroush, 1996, p. 5)"If you accept the supervisory role of people in a government, then other necessities of the same idea will also be considered: being human-based and independent (Soroush, 1996, p. 5).

He is very opinionated on this limitation of power in an Islamic government and constraints it to what most other governments, whether religious or secular, are. This is also depicted in his later arguments about religion and its relationship with politics. He believes the rule of the leader in an Islamic country is not more than 'guidance' and it does not go further than observing the society as in the Islamic view the clergy are not

supposed to be involved in government or the law making process of the country. Such a rule by the clergy should not go beyond superficial aspects of personal lives.

In a democratic government, the government is obliged to prepare its people for a free religious experimentation and selection. This preparation needs to be in a certain way. This is the way which defines how a democratic country functions and whether the country is functioning in a democratic way. He asks a question in order to define the role of a democratic, and at the same time Islamic government: is the role a necessity to provide people with their material needs or is the role of a government to provide people for their religious and non-material lives: He answers:

People have material need: food, shelter, immunity, well-being, health, regulation and so on. The second step is the non-material needs including religion, art, beauty and alike. For a human to proceed from the first to the second type of needs, he needs to fulfill his material needs first. Having a good relationship with God is only accessible after the need for food and shelter is fulfilled." Then he concludes that "The rule of the government has to be limited to this fulfilment of the material needs of its people in the first place. When a government does this successfully, it has indeed helped the religion of its people (Soroush, 1994a p. 370).

As mentioned before, by this belief there is not much difference between the functions of an Islamic and non-Islamic government. The only difference is that now it is the society of the religious people and this fulfilment of needs will indirectly help them to have a better religion. It is the same law and legislation otherwise.

If we are to consider any difference between Islamic and non-Islamic rulings, it is a matter of their final destination, not the path. They both have to fulfill the needs of their people to let them choose the way they want. But one is doing this to help the people's religion (Soroush, 1994a p. 375).Needless to say, a religion-based government only finds its meaning in the suitable society; in which most of the people recognize the way of ruling.

V.   Democracy in the ideas of Murteza Mutahhari

(February 3, 1920 – May 1, 1979, an Iranian scholar, cleric, University lecturer, and politician). He was one of the first clerics who discussed religion and democracy and the relationship between them. He considered them to be compatible and believed that democracy is the outlook of the government whereas the Islamic rule is its contest, and people freely choose the government which implements Islamic laws. He believed that there is a real relationship between Islam and politics. He criticized those who believed that there is something unclear about Islamic rule and said:

Those who think Islamic rule is not clear or democratic, actually think that whoever has an ideology to rule people, is not democratic (Mutahhari, 1988a, p. 44).

He believed there are a number of criteria for a democratic government:

1. The right to choose: He believed that the right to choose is very different from the content of the government they are voting for. Therefore, they can choose Islam or any other ideology and this does not affect the democratic process which needs to be there (Mutahhari, 1988a, pp. 80-81).

2. Freedom: He believed that democracy needs freedom, as it is recommended in Islam. The idea of freedom in the West is the human freedom to choose whatever they wish whereas in the Islamic context it means the freedom to choose 'what is good':

In Western democracy, the 'animal' characteristics of human are freed, whereas in Islam, that part of humanity is oppressed and the human part is freed (Mutahhari, 1988a, pp. 78-79) .

He believed that limiting freedom is not only a good thing for individuals, but it is a good for humanity:

it is impossible to understand and to believe in Islam without accepting the nature of humanity that Islam has in mind (Mutahhari, 1988a, pp. 79-82) .

He believed that the freedom which is implemented in the West is not really human, but it is 'humanistic' and real human freedom is in Islam:

Freedom in the West is the freedom of 'animal' side of humans, whereas the real freedom of humans is implemented in Islam (Mutahhari, 1988a, pp. 100-105).

3. Rule of Law: It is very important in a democratic system of governance and thus has no controversy with Islam. Nothing can be outside the Islamic rule and law. What differentiates Islamic law from secular laws is the implementation of Islamic cannons in it (Mutahhari, 1988a, p. 83).

VI.   Mutahhari's Idea about the Compatibility between Islamic Republic and Democracy:

There is no clash between Islam and democracy in the Islamic Republic. Democracy does not necessarily mean having no ideology, there is no conflict between Islamic rule and national interests (Mutahhari, 1988a, p. 86).Therefore he criticizes those who say it is not possible to have a national, Islamic rule at the same time: Islam is a religion and at the same time an ideology to control a country. It suggests that Islamic governments take up to Islamic laws (Mutahhari, 1988a, p. 83).

Therefore he believes that Islamic rule can be implemented in the country to be used as a ruling law since it is a good way of living for its followers. He then explains that the Islamic republic is indeed an Islamic and at the

same times a democratic government. In it, people are the real authority to choose their leaders. In Islam, there is an emphasis on dialogue between the Prophet and his followers; this is a sign of respect of Islam on the role of people in government. The leaders in an Islamic government are committed to follow the rules of Islam, otherwise it is not an Islamic government. Therefore, Islamic democracy is the exact opposite of Western democracy: Secular democracy is corrupt, whether Western or Eastern. Islamic democracy is accepted (Khomeini 1961, p. 238).

7.2 Guardianship of the Jurist in Mutahhari's Opinion:
He believed in overall control of the Jurist in a society. In his opinion, the Jurist's rule is not in executive positions, but rather on overall supervision. The role of the Jurist in an Islamic government is not ruling, but rather, it is supervision. In an Islamic country in which people have accepted Islamic law, the role of a leader is to be an 'ideologue', not a boss. He should supervise to make sure that the Islamic rule is indeed implemented properly (Mutahhari, 1988a, pp. 85-86).

Anyhow, he believed in a deep and wide range of authorities for the Jurist: "People elect their leader, this is the essence of democracy" (Mutahhari, 1988a, p. 86). He strongly believed that having an ideology does not mean excluding democracy: "All countries have political parties and they necessarily follow a certain set of beliefs and ideologies" (Mutahhari, 1988a, pp. 80-81).
He explains that the leadership of the Islamic republic is actually a 'symbol' of democracy:
The leader is not installed. He is elected. This is exactly the essence of democracy. If he were to be installed, then that is against democracy (Mutahhari, 1988a, p. 86) .
Therefore, he emphasized on the Godly and people oriented characters of the leader. He considers the Islamic statehood to be impossible in case of loosing acceptance in the public. He believed that the difference starts from the point that people can only choose the 'best' candidate among the jurists, not anyone they wish (Qurbani, 2005, p. 291). He emphasized the people's role to the extent that he believed:
Even if people do not accept the leader due to lack of information, no one can obligate them to accept the leader (Mutahhari, 1986, p. 207).
He answers to the question of a clash between Islamic rule and democracy by saying:
In an Islamic state, the leader is not the executor of the laws, but he is rather an ideologue who has the role of supervision in the proper implementation of Islamic laws, not executing them (Mutahhari, 1982a, p. 86).
He also believed that there is no real difference between democracy and leadership in the Islamic Republic, the guardianship of the jurist is an ideological guardianship, which is 'elected' by the people. This is indeed the essence of democracy (Mutahhari, 1982a, p. 86).

VII.   Conclusion
The Iranian religious intellectuals have always had two major roles in Iran: (1) socio-political influence, (2) producing thoughts. Their aim has always been radical in introducing modern ideologies and updating the religion based on the teachings of the modern world, including ideas such as human rights, equality, liberty and resistance against dictators. But their most important aim has been to reform religion and make it more compatible with the modern values. Most of these intellectuals tried in one way or the other to reduce the distance between religion and modern identity. In the eyes of AbdolKarim Soroush, , the humanist values are the main resource of religious thoughts and teachings and not the other way around. That is, democracy and liberty is not a value extracted from religion, but the religion itself is extracted from human values and understanding. In other words, what Mutahhari considered 'Islamic democracy', Soroush considers 'Democratic Islam'(Soroush, 1994a p. 3). His endeavour is not to Islamize anything, but he tries to make Islamic theories compatible with modern values. In his ideology, science, equality, liberty, reality etc cannot be 'Islamized' and they have to be understood as they are. His Islamic view is not based upon Islamic values such as *"Shura"* but it is rather based on secular values such as human rights and democracy. He differentiates between religious democracy and democratic religion and writes: "it is not because of the religious government that people are religious, but it is rather because of the religious people that religious governments come to power."(A.-k. Soroush, 1994b, p. 10)
He believes that if the religious people take the power in a democratic government, the government will be religious too, but the other way around is necessarily failed. In this view, he is actually emphasizing on a religious belief without physical deeds, as an Islamic country without the proper Islamic ruling is not a complete Islamic utopia. He intends to remove the *Fiqh* from the face of government in an Islamic country although it is the backbone of religious governance. In this ideology, the supervisory positions in the Islamic country leaves no space for the governance of a jurist and limits the Islamic government to providing necessary materials for the believers to worship freely. Such an interpretation of Islamic rule is nothing but a superficially modified secularism with an essence of Islamic rule. Such a ruling is neither religiously legitimate nor it emphasizes on correct implementation of the Islamic rules. Thus it has nothing much different from a secular view point of government, with an Islamic paint on the surface.

Murteza Mutahhari, believed in some sort of revival too. He believed that all the modern day values have somehow existed in the religious text and could be therefore compatible with religion. He legitimizes the core values of the modern day world by giving to them a religious root. He believed that in order to purify religion we have to have a flexible, juristically driven evolution, but not changing the religion itself. He believed that democracy is achievable in the context of a religious rule and this right should be given to people to choose the form of government they want in this frame. He believed the first step in establishing a religious government is to accept the choice of people. Thus, governments cannot oblige people to follow them, even because of religious considerations or alike. By considering all these differences in view, these thinkers have all one concern: protecting and developing religion.

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