

MANIFESTATIONS OF DEMOCRACY: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND REALISTIC APPROACHES UNDER ISLAMIC LAW, USING THE ALGERIAN EXPERIENCE AS A MODEL

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Received: 10/01/2025 Accepted: 08/06/2025 Published: 15/07/2025

Abstract:

Today, the world judges the quality of political systems by how much they rely on democratic mechanisms and tools. However, contemporary democracy emerged and flourished within Western states, so it is influenced by the cultural and social factors of these countries. Consequently, the Western model cannot be applied outside of this context without taking into account the unique characteristics of each society. Arab countries have their own philosophy and vision of democracy. Therefore, a practical approach to the Islamic model as a whole is essential, followed by an examination of the Algerian experience in this domain.

Keywords: Democracy, Islam, Freedoms, People, Shura.

Introduction

Throughout history, the world has witnessed numerous transformations in which the individual has been at the heart of developments, striving to establish themselves as independent entities with rights and freedoms that must be respected within society. In ancient times, rulers held absolute power, which often led to tyranny and oppression, particularly against the lower classes. This situation led to the idea of involving the people in governance, in order to limit the monarch's authority and protect rights and freedoms. The concept of democracy gradually evolved until it reached its modern form, as recognised in various global legislations.

It is interesting to note that the term 'democracy' originated in Western literature, where Western scholars attempted to define it within a unified framework to serve as a criterion for measuring the advancement and openness of political systems. However, while this criterion is applicable in Western countries due to their philosophical foundations and circumstances, it is applied differently in Arab countries due to cultural and social factors. Therefore, Western democracy is not the same as democracy in Arab states.

This study aims to explore various aspects of democracy. To this end, the research question is formulated as follows:

To what extent is democracy applicable to Arab legislation, and is Western democracy truly a model to be emulated? or is there an equivalent in Islamic law?

To answer these questions, we have divided this study into three main sections. The first section clarifies the theoretical and Western foundations of the concept of democracy before transitioning into the second section, which highlights the Islamic concept that parallels democracy. The third section explores manifestations of democracy in Algeria as a Muslim country.

I. The Western Concept of Democracy

"In brief, democracy is both an ideal and a set of institutions and practices. As an ideal, it is based on two principles: Firstly, members of any group or assembly should have influence over, and ultimately control, the rules and policies of that group, through their participation in discussions

concerning the common good. Secondly, that members treat one another as equals and are treated on that basis. These two principles should be applied from the smallest group to the largest state, and the effectiveness with which they are realised in practice is the primary test that demonstrates the level of democracy that any group can claim".¹

"The concept of democracy has evolved from its ancient Greek origins, where it referred to governance 'by the people, for the people', to its modern interpretation, which encompasses the right of peoples to govern themselves directly or through democratic parliamentary representation. Democracy is viewed as a method of just and virtuous governance and stands as a global principle, sharing common values among peoples regardless of cultural, political and economic differences. Democracy requires power to rotate through a free and fair electoral system under political pluralism, the rule of law and the promotion and protection of human rights".²

"The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and Democracy defines democracy as: one of the globally recognized ideals based on shared values exchanged among peoples worldwide, regardless of cultural, political, social, and economic differences. As acknowledged in the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, democracy relies on the management of people, expressed freely to determine their own systems, and full participation in all aspects of their lives. Democracy, development, the rule of law, and the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms are interrelated and mutually reinforcing".³

The United Nations General Assembly and the Human Rights Committee have sought to promote a shared understanding of the principles of democracy. In 2000, the Committee recommended a package of legislative measures to enhance democracy. In 2002, it announced the following elements as fundamental to democracy:⁴

- respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms
- freedom of association
- freedom of expression and opinion;
- Access to power and its exercise according to the rule of law.
- The conduct of periodic, free and fair elections through universal suffrage and secret voting that reflect the will of the people.
- A plural system of parties
- Separation of powers
- Independence of the judiciary
- Transparency and accountability in public administration.

Free, independent and diverse media.

"Some scholars have offered definitions of democracy. For example, Montesquieu defined the democratic system as one in which power resides in the hands of the people, encompassing all of its segments. The people choose the rulers who govern the country. In a democratic republic, the people control the government by dividing themselves into two groups: rulers and the ruled. Citizens become rulers through elections that express the will of the nation. Montesquieu advocated

¹- Al-Minbar al-Barlamani, 'Al-Barlamān wa al-Dīmuqrāṭiyyah fī al-Qarn al-Wāhid wa al-'Ishrīn' [Parliament and Democracy in the Twenty-First Century] (2005) 19 Majallat al-Fikr al-Barlamani 148,149.

²- Kitab al-Fikr al-Barlamani, 'Al-Dīmuqrāṭiyyah Mabādi' wa Mumārasah' [Democracy Principles and Practice] (2011) 27 Majallat al-Fikr al-Barlamani 233,234.

³- Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and Democracy, 'Lamḥah 'an al-Dīmuqrāṭiyyah wa Ḥuqūq al-Insān'[Overview of Democracy and Human Rights] United Nations <<https://www.ohchr.org>> accessed 14 April 2025.

⁴- 'Al-Dīmuqrāṭiyyah' [Democracy] United Nations < <https://www.un.org>> accessed 14 April 2025.

expanding the electoral base to enable individuals to participate in managing their country's affairs and accomplishing tasks beyond the capabilities of ministers and officials".⁵

"Scholar Joseph Schumpeter presents a narrow conception of democracy, viewing it as merely a mechanism for electing political leaders. According to this perspective, democracy is merely the ability to choose leaders in elections. In contrast, David Held offers a more comprehensive understanding of democracy, moving towards a participatory model. Unlike Schumpeter, Held does not limit his concept to representative democracy. Held posits that individuals should have equal rights and responsibilities in determining the political framework that creates and limits the opportunities available to them. This means that they should be free and equal when deliberating over their life circumstances".⁶

II. Democracy and Islam

Al-Tahtawi acknowledges that there is no contradiction between the democratic, constitutional political system based on justice, equality and freedom that he observed in Europe, and Islam. He stated: 'What is called freedom in Europe is the same as what is called justice, truth, consultation (shura) and equality in our religion. The government of freedom and democracy is essentially about spreading justice and truth among people and involving the nation in determining its destiny.'⁷

Democracy, as defined by the Western concept of rule by the people, is closely aligned with the Islamic concept of Shura, which involves consulting others when making important decisions and avoiding unilateral opinions. Islam places great importance on this process due to its significance in state governance. This importance is highlighted by Allah designating a chapter in the Holy Quran called 'Surah Al-Shura', in which verse 38 states:⁸ 'Those who respond to their Lord, establish prayer, and whose affair is consultation among themselves, and from what We have provided them, they spend''.

The Quran addresses this concept in various other verses too, such as verse 159 of Surah Al-Imran: 'So pardon them, ask forgiveness for them, and consult them in the matter. When you have made a decision, rely upon Allah. Indeed, Allah loves those who rely upon Him.'⁹ Addressing the Prophet as the head of state, this verse commands him to adhere to consultation (shura) and make it the foundation of the relationship between ruler and ruled, even if he is a prophet.¹⁰

"Rached Ghannouchi is one of the contemporary Islamic thinkers who view democracy as similar to Shura. He believes that the West has taken the concept of Shura and developed it, so he sees no objection to adopting democracy, as it is a concept that has been returned to Muslims. He states that democracy recognises everyone, promotes equality and the rotation of power, and affirms the people's right to choose. Democracy is not just about choosing an opposition; it is also about engaging in dialogue and fostering understanding with them. Like Shura, democracy is not just a

⁵- Tekok Khira, 'Al-Dīmuqrāṭiyyah al-Tashārukiyyah ka-Āliyah li-Tarqiyat Adā' al-Jamā'āt al-Iqlīmiyyah: Dirāsah Muqāranah bayna al-Jazā'ir wa Tūnis' [Participatory Democracy as a Mechanism for Enhancing the Performance of Communities: A Comparative Study of Algeria and Tunisia] (PhD thesis, University of Mostaganem 2024) 21.

⁶-Assas Nacer, 'Al-Dīmuqrāṭiyyah al-Tashārukiyyah ka-Āliyah li-Ta'zīz al-Tanmiyah al-Mahalliyyah fī al-Jazā'ir' [Participatory Democracy as a Mechanism for Strengthening Local Development in Algeria] (PhD thesis, Djilali Liabes University 2022) 5.

⁷- Lghars, Sohila, 'Mafhūm al-Dīmuqrāṭiyyah fī al-Fikr al-Islāmī' [The Concept of Democracy in Islamic Thought] (2023) 1 Arab Journal for Humanities and Social Sciences Research 46,50.

⁸ Qur'an, Surat Ash-Shura (The Consultation) 42:38.

⁹ Qur'an, Surat Aal-E-Imran (The Family of Imran) 3:159.

¹⁰- Rahima Ben Hamou, 'Mabda' al-Shūrā fī Nizām al-Ḥukm al-Islāmī bayna al-Fiḥ wa al-'Amal' [The Principle of Shura in the Islamic System of Governance between Jurisprudence and Practice] (2010) 24 *Al-Ma'iyar Magazine* 1,3.

method of governance for expressing the will of the majority or consensus, but also a pedagogical approach and a means of combatting extremism through dialogue".¹¹

"Adopting the principle of Shura curbs the despotism of the ruler by imposing limits on it. The Western experience has demonstrated that unchecked royal authority can lead to tyranny and oppression in the management of state affairs, creating an imbalance in society. The essence of governance is to establish justice and protect the rights and fundamental freedoms of individuals by subjecting everyone to the law. This can only be achieved by involving citizens in the governance process. Islam rejects the absolute authority of the ruler, as stated in the Quran: 'Indeed, Pharaoh exalted himself in the land and divided its people into factions, oppressing one group by slaughtering their newborn sons and sparing their daughters. Indeed, he was of the corruptors'".¹²

"In terms of how affairs are managed within the state, Abbas Mahmoud al-Aqqad believes that this should be done through the practice of shura (consultation). Regarding who should be consulted, al-Aqqad presents two viewpoints: one suggests that the consultative body should consist of specialists, while the other holds that it should involve the general populace. Al-Aqqad's stance is shared by many subsequent thinkers who sought to expand the concept of Shura to include all citizens. Thus, Shura became a means of soliciting the opinions of the nation or its representatives on matters concerning them, involving public participation in governance".¹³

While democracy fundamentally rests on the sovereignty of the people, this is insufficient unless the fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens are upheld. Consequently, modern democracies place a strong emphasis on protecting individuals from various forms of oppression, which can only be achieved by holding the ruler accountable to the law.

In Islam, Allah has organised all aspects of a Muslim's life within the Holy Quran, safeguarding the rights of individuals regardless of gender and acknowledging their freedoms. The ruler is not permitted to violate these rights, not even if they are a prophet. Muhammad (peace be upon him) conveyed the rulings of Islamic law revealed to him, as noted in the verse: 'I only follow what is revealed to me.'¹⁴ Islam is founded on the principle that governance belongs to Allah, and it is impermissible to contravene Allah's law: 'Indeed, the judgment belongs to Allah. He has commanded that you worship none but Him. That is the correct religion'¹⁵.

Islamic law was the first to affirm rights and freedoms; no right is outlined in modern legislation that is not also outlined in the Quran. Prominent rights and freedoms emphasised by Western democracies include women's rights and religious freedom, which we will compare with Islamic law.

As women are considered a vulnerable gender, the Holy Quran emphasises their protection by granting them rights and safeguarding them. Unlike Western legislation, which views women's rights as equality with men, Islamic law has a superior approach to women's rights in achieving the primary goal of justice. The Western approach seeks to treat women and men equally in terms of rights, but fails to consider gender-specific attributes. When women and men are treated equally in terms of work rights under the same conditions, it is inherently unjust, as Islamic law goes further in addressing rights.

For example, it does not require women to work; rather, men are obliged to support their wives and children, enabling women to care for their offspring at home. This arrangement aims to achieve

¹¹- Khelifa Bouzazi, *Al-Shūrā wa al-Dīmuqrāṭiyyah fī al-Fikr al-Islāmī al-Mu'āṣir* [Shura and Democracy in Contemporary Islamic Thought] (2015) 3 *Al-Shihab Magazine* 23,32.

¹² Qur'an, Surat Al-Qasas (The Stories) 28:4.

¹³- Youcef Bouras, 'Al-Dīmuqrāṭiyyah fī al-Fikr al-'Arabī al-Islāmī al-Mu'āṣir min al-Rafḍ ilā al-Taṣhīh' [Democracy in Contemporary Arab Islamic Thought: From Rejection to Correction] (2021) 2 *Journal of Social and Human Sciences* 411,432.

¹⁴ Qur'an, Surat Yunus (Jonah) 10:15.

¹⁵ Qur'an, Surat Yusuf (Joseph) 12:40.

social balance, in contrast to the Western perspective which can lead to family disruption due to women's participation in the workforce.

Thus, the Islamic perspective on affirming rights and freedoms is objective, aiming to foster positive societal goals while ensuring balance in various areas. By contrast, the Western perspective tends to be individualistic and capitalist, focusing on personal achievement without considering social factors.

Islam has elevated the status of women, making them fundamental to the structure of society. Consequently, it does not burden them with responsibilities beyond their capacity, as stated: 'Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend from their wealth.'¹⁶ This guardianship (qawamah) is a responsibility placed on men towards women. Furthermore, Islam guarantees divorced women the right to financial support for their children, especially when they require care. This indicates that women are not obliged to work. 'Mothers may breastfeed their children for two complete years, if they wish to complete the nursing period.' The father is responsible for their provision and clothing according to what is acceptable. No person is charged with more than they can bear. No mother should be harmed through her child, nor any father through his child."¹⁷

Examining the organisation of women's rights in Western legislation reveals a superficial approach that lacks the foundations needed to genuinely protect women. Instead, it often confines itself to slogans that can have counterproductive consequences. Affirming rights should align with the needs of individuals as independent beings rather than merely recognising rights that treat humans like machines.

The Islamic approach to women's rights cannot be summarised in just a few lines. The Qur'an addresses women's rights in various verses and even dedicates an entire chapter, Surah An-Nisa (The Women), to the subject. Notable rights include those relating to divorce and the prohibition of domestic violence, as indicated by the verse: 'Live with them in kindness.'¹⁸ The financial rights of women are also outlined in the Quran: 'Men have a share of what their parents and relatives leave, and women have a share of what their parents and relatives leave'¹⁹ alongside many other rights that are too numerous to mention.

Recently, there has been a significant push by Westerners to advocate for religious freedoms, particularly in Arab countries, with the claim that these freedoms are being restricted. However, the basis on which Westerners address religious freedom is contradictory. On the one hand, they defend an individual's right to belong to and practise any religion without pressure. On the other hand, they endorse secular ideas that separate religion from the state. How can an individual be granted the right to practise their religion freely while being restricted from doing so in a Western country? For example, a woman may have the right to be Muslim, but she may not be permitted to wear the hijab in some European countries, and some nations have even imposed fines on Muslims for doing so.

Thus, the Western perspective lacks logical foundations to justify the existence of a state responsible for protecting individual freedoms regardless of the circumstances. This contrasts sharply with the Islamic approach to religious freedom, which is rooted in rational principles derived from the Quran. In Islam, it is not possible to force others to embrace Islam, as indicated by the verse: 'If your Lord had willed it, everyone on earth would have believed. So would you force people to become believers.'²⁰

¹⁶ Qur'an, Surat An-Nisa' (The Women) 4:34.

¹⁷ Qur'an, Surat Al-Baqarah (The Cow) 2:233.

¹⁸ Qur'an, Surat An-Nisa' (The Women) 4:19.

¹⁹ Qur'an, Surat An-Nisa' (The Women) 4:7.

²⁰ Qur'an, Surat Yunus (Jonah) 10:99.

Individuals have the freedom to choose and practise their religion, as stated: ‘For you is your religion, and for me is my religion.’²¹ During the time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), it is reported that a Muslim had two Christian sons. The Prophet advised against forcing them to convert to Islam, after which the following verse was revealed: ‘There shall be no compulsion in religion.’ The right course has become clear from the wrong. So whoever renounces Taghut and believes in Allah has certainly grasped the firmest handhold”²²

III. The Algerian Experience and Democracy

Algeria is one of the leading countries in terms of democracy, placing the people at the foundation of governance. The Algerian political system is republican and draws its spirit from the Algerian people’s struggle against French colonialism during the liberation war. This influence is reflected in all its constitutions, from the first in 1963 to the most recent amendment in 2020.

An analysis of the constitutional amendments(2020) reveals that they are aligned with the democratic principles set out by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and Democracy. This is evident in the preamble, particularly in paragraph 14, which establishes the principle of freedom of choice for the people, guarantees the protection of individual and collective rights and establishes the idea of rotation through periodic, free and fair elections. Paragraph 15 also stipulates the separation of powers and oversight of the actions of public authorities. Furthermore, paragraph 16 reaffirms democracy by affirming the Algerian people’s commitment to the human rights set out in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international agreements.

Several articles in the constitutional amendment(2020) emphasise that the people are the source of all authority and that national sovereignty belongs solely to them. Article 8 clarifies how the people exercise their sovereignty through their elected representatives and allows the President to resort directly to the will of the people. According to Article 13, the state’s motto is ‘of the people, by the people’, and the state serves only the interests of the people.

Methods of practising democracy vary from representative to participatory democracy. The constitutional amendment(2020) adopted this approach, stating in Articles 16 and 19 that the elected council serves as a framework through which the people can express their will and oversee the actions of public authorities. The council provides a platform for citizens to participate in the management of public affairs. Participatory democracy is also practised at the level of local communities.

Methods of practising democracy range from representative to participatory democracy. The constitutional amendment(2020) adopted this approach, stating in Articles 16 and 19 that the elected council serves as a framework through which the people can express their will and oversee the actions of public authorities. The council serves as a place for citizens to participate in managing public affairs. Participatory democracy is also practised at the level of local communities.

The Algerian constitution²³ explicitly provides for the separation of powers and the balance between them, as well as the independence of the judiciary. Article 16 states: ‘The state is based on the principles of democratic representation, the separation of powers, and the guarantee of rights, freedoms, and social justice.’ Meanwhile, Article 163 stipulates the independence of the judiciary, stating that judges are subject only to the law.

The constitutional treatment of democracy in Algeria extends beyond what exists in Western legislation to include an Islamic perspective that we believe is broader than the Western view. Unlike the European idea, which limits rights and freedoms in matters of religion by viewing them through a philosophy that separates religion from the state, Islam expands respect for others, even if they are not Muslim. Therefore, the constitutional framework elaborates on the protection of citizens’ fundamental rights and freedoms in light of Islam being the state religion, dedicating an entire

²¹ Qur’an, Surat An-Nasr (The Divine Support) 110:6.

²² Qur’an, Surat Al-Baqarah (The Cow) 2:256.

²³ Constitutional Amendment (2020).

chapter to this. Women are granted special status by being protected from all forms of violence under Article 40, and guarantees are provided, such as the establishment of structures to receive and assist them.

In terms of religious freedom, the constitution protects the right to practise worship and safeguards places of worship from political or ideological influence under Article 51.

Conclusion:

If the extent to which a country applies democracy determines its prosperity and development, then the question of whether it is suitable for all peoples in different environments warrants objective discussion.

In reality, while Western democratic philosophy outwardly presents itself as empowering the people and respecting rights and freedoms, it simultaneously enacts laws that restrict freedom. Recent developments have made this evident, with an increased severity in the attitudes of Western nations towards the practice of Islam within their borders becoming apparent in the current political scene. Muslims often face restrictions in exercising their religious freedoms, contradicting the democratic principle of respecting its citizens regardless of their beliefs or backgrounds. This raises an important question about who is meant by 'the people' in the Western context.

On another note, technological advancements have significantly changed the world today by facilitating interaction and cultural exchange among nations, leading to integration. Islamic law respects this principle, as evidenced by the verse: 'We have made you peoples and tribes so that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you.'

The Islamic perspective respects the individual as an independent entity, regardless of their beliefs, and applies at all times and in all places. Furthermore, Islamic law rejects the coercion of people into adopting beliefs they do not wish to hold, even if they belong to a minority, as stated in the verse: 'There shall be no compulsion in religion.' For instance, a Muslim man may marry a Christian or Jewish woman, as the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) did, but he cannot force her to convert to Islam except in a kind manner.

Therefore, the concept of 'the people' in the Western context does not accurately reflect its true meaning. Speaking of 'the people' implies freedom, and freedom signifies the absence of constraints. This means that the law should respect the individual, regardless of their beliefs, unless the concept of 'the people' is confined to a specific group, as was the case in ancient Greece, or if it is a European pretence aimed at disseminating Western ideas and imposing them on all societies for hidden agendas. There is no justification for preventing a woman from wearing a veil if she chooses to do so, since her body is her own and she is free to decide what she does with it. Such actions are, in fact, at the core of respecting personal freedoms.

Conversely, asserting the contrary as a basis for Western thought can only be interpreted as a racist rejection of others for holding different ideas. This racism extends to ethnicity and colour: Western political trends often oppose candidates of African or Arab descent, even when those individuals have no connection to Islam. This brings to mind the words of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him): 'There is no superiority of an Arab over a non-Arab, nor of a white person over a black person, except by piety.'

Therefore, we conclude that a democracy based on human reasoning and subject to personal whims cannot serve as a reference due to the discrimination it fosters. This is in stark contrast to the Islamic approach, which is the law of the Creator for His servants. It ensures equality among them in their adherence to the rules and principles of the Quran, while respecting their differences relating to gender, social status or individual circumstances.

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