

Islam's philosophical divide

Dreaming of a caliphate

Though conflict between God's law and man's continues to puzzle the Islamic world, Muslim thinkers have been imaginative in seeking reasonable compromise

THE statistics do not look very encouraging. Of the 50-plus countries where Muslims are in the majority, only two (Indonesia and Mali) enjoy political liberty as defined by Freedom House, a New York-based monitor of human rights and democracy. The Democracy Index, run by the Economist Intelligence Unit, adds Malaysia to that shortlist, rating the three countries as "flawed democracies"; other Muslim lands are put in a lower category.

With every year that has passed since al-Qaeda's attacks on America in September 2001, it has become more fashionable to argue that something about Islam makes it hard to reconcile with full-blown liberal democracy—in the sense of a political system where all citizens have an equal right to vote, and are equal in other basic ways. And with equal vehemence, Muslims have retorted: there is nothing in their faith which precludes a liberal democracy, and much which works in its favour.

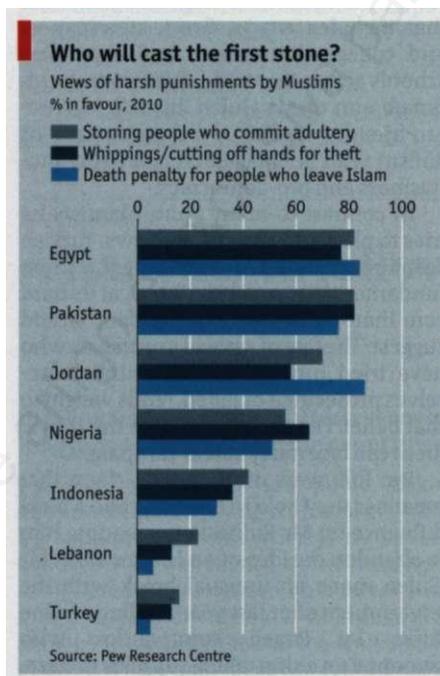
For the Islamosceptics, there are several lines of argument. First of all, they say, devout Muslims will always, in their hearts, see a global caliphate—a seat of religious-cum-political authority, holding sway over the whole Islamic world—as the ideal form of governance. If that is the case, liberal democracy, in which authority flows from the people regardless of faith, will always be regarded as a compromise at most.

It is true that the dream of a caliphate is held dear by several categories of Muslim. They include followers of al-Qaeda, bent on war with the "Jews and crusaders" of the Western world; many supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, who believe in active participation in politics but still see Islamic governance as a long-term goal; and Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation) which, in places that range from British universities to Uzbek slums, propagates the idea that secular elections are sacrilege.

But is the caliphate a religious doctrine—something central to Islam—or just a detail, however important, of history? In all readings of Islam, especially the ones that now dominate in the Middle East, there is huge reverence for the first four caliphs who succeeded Muhammad as leaders of the emerging Muslim community. All subsequent Muslim empires had caliphs and the abolition of the last caliphate—by Turkey's new rulers in 1924—sent shock waves through the world of Islam.

But as Mustafa Akyol, a Turkish writer, notes in a new book, "Islam Without Ex-

trems", the appointment of the first four caliphs is ultimately seen—at least in Sunni Islam—as a political decision, albeit a very wise one, and not a theological one. Though Mr Akyol empathises with global Islam's dismay over the caliphate's abolition 13 centuries later, that too, he says, is a political matter, not a theological one. Even in Shia Islam, where succession to Muhammad is seen as a sacred mandate,



the authority handed down was spiritual, not temporal; in that sense the power now held by Iran's clergy is an anomaly.

A second line of argument about Islam and democracy concerns law. More than most other religions, the founding texts of Islam include very specific injunctions about crime, punishment and family law. By modern standards these commands are anything but liberal. The Koran mandates flogging for unlawful sex, and a strongly held tradition ascribes to Muhammad the view that adulterers should be stoned to death. Over inheritance, the Koran is also specific—a daughter is entitled to have half as much as a son—and the various legal schools of Islam are even more so, setting out with absolute precision the entitlement of each distant relative.

In most understandings of liberal democracy, penal and civil codes are a matter for the people's freely elected representa-

tives to decide, within the confines of a humanly drafted constitution. How can that possibly be reconciled with the notion that such questions have been settled for ever by divine revelation?

Contemporary Muslims acknowledge that the issue is a tricky one. If the Koran is a revelation of God, then its prescriptions cannot simply be dismissed as irrelevant or outdated. Some believers (see chart) would still like to apply Islamic penalties to the letter. But a distinction can be made between commands that were given in a certain context, and those which hold good for all time. And modern Muslims, including rather conservative ones, have been quite imaginative in rereading some of Islam's legal and penal traditions.

Tariq Ramadan, an influential figure among Western Muslims, has suggested that it may sometimes be right for families to opt out of Koranic rules on inheritance—unless men are prepared to shoulder all the obligations that go with their privileged rights. Maulana Maudoodi, the father of Pakistani Islamism, said amputation should not be practised on those who are driven to steal by poverty or famine; in other words, a just society was more important than harsh punishment.

Beyond the legal details, some still see a deeper problem, concerning the very nature of political authority, and the ability of different ideas on this subject to coexist. John Rawls, an American theorist of liberal democracy, showed how people who differ over metaphysics—say Catholics and atheists—can coexist politically on the basis of a deep compromise, on certain conditions. They must believe in reason, and see the political system as reasonable in their own terms.

Mohammad Fadel, an Egyptian-born political scientist at the University of Toronto, has argued that Islam—even in conservative readings—can find a happy place in a Rawls-style democracy. In medieval times, he recalls, Islamic thought divided between the Mutazilites, who stressed human reason, and the ultimately victorious Asharites who thought that God alone could adjudicate right and wrong. But even within the latter school, there is some place for human reason—enough to make it possible for conservative Muslims to live quite comfortably in a Rawlsian world.

That will only happen if Muslims want it to and see an interest in doing so. Will they? Vali Nasr, an American political scientist, thinks Western Islam-watchers put too much stress on philosophy and not enough on social and economic factors. In his view, wherever the middle class is strong (as in Turkey), it will re-emphasise the moral rules of Islam—over honest trading, say—and downgrade Islam's real or imagined prescriptions for politics and law. In many Muslim countries that moment still seems a long way off.