

# **Theocracy and the Modern Nation-State: A Muslim Perspective**

BY

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**THEOCRACY AND THE MODERN NATION-STATE:**

## **A MUSLIM PERSPECTIVE**

**PROTOCOL:** The Special Guest of Honour,  
His Eminence,  
Alhaji Muhammad Sa'ad Abubakar III, OFR, mni  
The Sultan of Sokoto and President General,  
Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA),  
The President of the Islamic Welfare Foundation,  
Alhaji Aliu Badmus,  
Distinguished Guests,  
Brothers and Sisters in Islam,  
Gentlemen of the press,  
As-Salaam Alaykunm wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuhu.

It gives me great pleasure to be in your midst today presenting this keynote address. The Islamic Welfare Foundation (IWF) has come a long way. I had known the organisation since the early 90s and I was conversant with its philanthropic activities from which many students, businessmen, artisans and market women have benefitted. I have also been one of the beneficiaries about eighteen or twenty years ago. I was therefore not surprised when I received the invitation for this programme. The antecedents of the organisation gave me the impetus to sacrifice the time not only to prepare the keynote address but also to attend personally. I therefore seize this opportunity to congratulate the President of IWF, its energetic secretary, Professor Abdul Wahab Egbewole SAN, members of the executive and the entire members.

It is, indeed, a great honour to meet our great leader, the Sultan of Sokoto, once again. He is the best Sultan Nigeria ever produced. He has been very active, very dynamic, very energetic. May Almighty Allah continue to protect and bless him.

**PROLOGUE:**

Mankind has been coming together from time immemorial. The basis has often been the need to benefit from communal living. Little hamlets grew into villages. The latter developed into cities or city-states which later grew into nations or nation states through the coming together of various nationalities. However, little consideration is given to the issue of religion in most cases. This informs the paucity of theocratic states in the world. Paradoxically, this absence of the divine correlate may have been responsible for the disintegration of several nation-states.

But what is the Muslim perspective of theocracy and the modern nation state? How viable is the Islamic system of government as enunciated in Islamic political thought? Is the Muslim world witnessing a post mortem of the *khilafah* particularly in view of post-Ottoman lacunae? In other words, is the *khilafah* dead? What bulwarks does Islam provide against the emergence of the failed state phenomenon? These and other questions are what this keynote address seeks to answer.

### **DEFINITIONS OF KEY WORDS:**

We may begin by taking a brief look at the terms in this topic, namely, theocracy and nation-state. What is theocracy?

### **THEOCRACY DEFINED:**

Etymologically, the word ‘theocracy’ is from the Greek compound word ‘*theokratia*’ or two Greek words: ‘*theo*’ meaning ‘God’ and ‘*kratia*’ meaning ‘rule’. From the perspective of the roots, theocracy will mean the rule of God<sup>1</sup>. But since God will not appear on earth by Himself to rule the world, it usually refers to some form of divine rule through human *proxies*.

*Merriam Webster Dictionary* calls it government of a state by immediate divine guidance or by officials who are regarded as divinely guided and says it was in this sense that the word was first used in 1622<sup>2</sup>. According to Wikipedia, theocracy is a form of government in which a religious institution is the source from which all authority derives<sup>3</sup>. The *Oxford English Dictionary* describes it as a form of government in which priests rule in the name of God or a god<sup>4</sup>.

While the English language form was first used in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (1622), its Greek source dates back to the first century. The term '*theokratia*' was first coined by Flavius Josephus in the first century C.E. to describe the characteristic government of the Jews. Josephus argued that while mankind had developed many forms of rule, most could be subsumed under the following three types: monarchy, oligarchy, and democracy. The government of the Jews, however, was unique. Josephus offered the term 'theocracy' to describe this polity, ordained by Moses, in which God is sovereign and his word is law<sup>5</sup>.

#### NATION-STATE DEFINED:

*The Merriam Webster Dictionary* defined the nation-state as a form of political organization under which a relatively homogeneous people inhabits a sovereign state especially a state containing one as opposed to several nationalities. This was the first known use of the term 'nation-state' around 1895 after the Ratification of the Treaty of Münster, one of the treaties leading to the Peace of Westphalia, where the concept of the nation-state was born<sup>6</sup>.

*The Learners Dictionary* defines a nation-state as a form of political organization in which a group of people who share the same history, traditions, or language live in a particular area under one government<sup>7</sup>. According to *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (1986), the nation-state has traditionally been defined as a relatively homogenous group of people with a feeling of common nationality living within the defined boundaries of an independent and sovereign state: a state containing one as opposed to several nationalities<sup>8</sup>.

In contrast, a city-state is smaller than a nation in the sense of a large sovereign country, an empire is composed of many countries (possibly non-sovereign states) and nations under a single monarch while a confederation is a league of sovereign states, which might or might not include nation-states. A nation-state comprises of a nation and a state. But while the nation is the people who make up the union, the state is a body of government with rules, laws, government officials, their titles, the physical boundaries and those who define them<sup>9</sup>.

Scholars such as Steven Weber, David Woodward and Jeremy Black<sup>10</sup> therefore engaged in academic escapism for failing to pinpoint which one came first, the nation or the state? This keynote address affirms the

precedence of the nation (or the people) over the state, for the people constitute the entity called a country while the state is just the political system.

## EARLIER FORMS OF THEOCRACY

Although they vary in form and shape, theocratic governments are of great antiquity. Examples of ancient theocracies can be found among the Assyrians, Babylonians, Cretans, Hebrews and Pharaohs. Bishops ruled for decades when no civil government existed. For instance, the cathedral at Metz was the center of the theocracy of Lorraine while the imperial cult of ancient Rome gave Roman emperors divine power.

Aristocratic systems often lay claim to divine rule. This was common in the Middle Ages when kings claimed to rule by divine right. This aristocratic system exists even today. Examples are the monastic theocracy protected by the Greek government on Mount Athos. Until 1924 the Chinese emperor claimed to possess divine mandate. Buddhist theocratic kingdoms still exist in South-East Asia<sup>11</sup>.

The example of the Yoruba of South –West Nigeria who regard their kings as *Alase Ekeji Orisa*, i.e. high authority and second in command to God, is sufficient to prove the existence of a theocratic aura around African traditional rulers<sup>12</sup>.

## CHRISTIAN THEOCRACY:

The Vatican City which was formally created and granted independence status in 1929 after the Lateran Treaty had been signed with the Italian government is today an ecclesiocracy, i.e. ruled by the church. But the difference between ecclesiocracy and theocracy is no more than what lies between six and half a dozen. The Vatican City is ruled by the Pope<sup>13</sup>.

## ISLAMIC THEOCRACY:

While Christian theocracy has been described as ecclesiocracy in this keynote address, the Islamic form of theocracy may be better called theonomy for terminological exactitude. A theonomy is a system of government in which divine revelation is adopted into law. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) had laid the foundation for theonomy

during his leadership of the Islamic Republic of Madinah from 623 A.H. until his death in 632 A.H.<sup>14</sup>.

The foundation for Islam's theonomic theocracy began with the compilation of the Glorious Qur'an during the reign of *Khalifah* Abubakr As-Siddiq (632 – 634 A.H.), its standardization during the reign of *Khalifah* 'Uthman bin 'Affan (644 – 656 A.H.) and the proclamation of both the Qur'an and *hadith* as the basic texts of the *Shari'ah*<sup>15</sup>. In essence, the *Shari'ah* legal system developed from the Qur'an and *hadith* and gave some Muslim countries their legal code.

Among such countries are Saudi Arabia and Iran. Saudi Arabia is one of the few countries in the Middle East that practices strict *Shari'ah* law in compliance with verses in the Qur'an which enjoin ruling according to the *Shari'ah*. Three verses of the Muslim scripture explicitly instruct Muslims to use *Shari'ah*. These are:

Whoever fails to adjudicate with what Allah has revealed is an unbeliever. Those who refuse to judge with (the law) which Allah has revealed are wrong-doers... Those who refuse to judge with (the law) which Allah has revealed are rebels.  
(Qur'an 5:47 – 50)

Although critics may argue that only the Qur'an is divine and that the *hadith* which is an integral part of the *Shari'ah* is not part of revealed scripture, the Glorious Qur'an appears to have prepared a ready response to convince doubting Thomases of the divinity of the sayings of the Prophet:

By the star when it goes down. Your companion is neither astray nor is he being misled. Nor does he speak of his own volition. It is an inspiration (his words) sent to him. He was taught by one mighty in power, endowed with wisdom...  
(Qur'an 53:1 – 6)

While these verses raise the *hadith* to the level of divinity, we are constrained to issue a *caveat* on generalization and the danger in accepting all *hadiths* as authentic.

The status of Saudi Arabia as a theonomic theocracy is however beclouded by its practice of hereditary rule. Whereas neither the prophet nor the four orthodox *khulafa'* ventured into aristocratic tradition, all other Islamic regimes that came after them, e.g. the Umayyads, Abbasids, Fatimids, and Ottomans donned dynastic nomenclatures.

Unfortunately only a few of them could be described as models of the Islamic political system (e.g. Umar II 717-720 C.E.). Mu'awiyah bin Abi Sufyan (661 – 680 C. E.) who started it all was the first to make his own son, Yazid, heir to the *khilafah*. He was not enthusiastic about religion. He was not a devout Muslim and he did not pretend to be one. Muawiyah was so arrogant that he delivered *khutbah* (sermon) on Fridays while sitting<sup>16</sup>.

Sayyed Amir Ali, the author of *A Short History of the Saracens*, de-marks Muawiyah in highly defamatory words:

Astute, unscrupulous, clear-headed, miserly, but lavishly liberal when necessary, outwardly observant of all religious duties, but not permitting any human or divine ordinances to interfere with the prosecution of his plans or ambitions, such was Muawiyah...<sup>17</sup>

Whereas the Glorious Qur'an enjoins rulership by *shurah* (i.e. consultation), those who ruled the Islamic empires after the orthodox *khulafa'* bastardised the system.

The Qur'an says:

Therefore overlook their faults and ask Allah to forgive them, and consult them in affairs. Then, when you have taken a decision, put your trust in Allah, for Allah loves those who put their trust in him. (3:159 See also 42:38)

If compliance with the *Shurah* system were to be the only parameter for judging post-orthodox period rulers of the Islamic empire, few of them will score above 5%. Yet as things stand today, only a compassionate assessor can give them more than 25%. The Umayyads were unrepentant usurpers, the Abbasids were religious charlatans, the Fatimids were spiritual shenanigans while the Ottomans were irredeemably myopic.

In their blind drive for power, they arrogated all the milk and honey in the empire to their own families alone. Whereas the Islamic system of government is idealistic and reforming, they turned it into a reactionary and self-seeking machinery. Whereas Islamic political thought seeks to establish an egalitarian society where the poor and the rich, the weak and the strong, the young and the old find happiness for the largest number, they widened the gap between the rich and the poor, oppressed the weak and destabilized the old. Whereas Islam cherishes, teaches and promotes unity, their tortuous policies scattered the Muslim Ummah like wild oats.

The same unIslamic hereditary rule which spelled doom for other dynasties was pursued by the Ottomans who were seen as the last bulwark of the *khilafah* until the Ottomans crumbled like a pack of cards under the crusaders' consistent attacks between 1911 and 1919. Mustafa Kamal Ataturk (1881 – 1938) had always been a secularist and he jettisoned the Islamic political system for ataturkism or kamalism. It dimmed the last hope of the global Muslim Ummah for the revival of the *khilafah* in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It was natural for Muslims around the world to turn their attention to Saudi Arabia which is host to the two great mosques (the Ka'abah in Makkah and the Prophet's mosque in Madinah. Meanwhile the country seems prepared only for hosting millions of Muslims for the rituals of pilgrimage annually. It showed no readiness to accept the mantle of leadership.

Dominated by Wahabbism (a *salafi* doctrine and movement founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab) for over two decades, Saudi Arabia today appears set for Ataturkism with the advent of Saudi Crown prince Muhammad Bin Salman Al-Saud on the Saudi political landscape. Just as Kamal Mustapha Ataturk turned the table against the *khilafah* in 1923, it appears that Saudi Arabia is already witnessing a revolution. Cinemas began showing in the country for the first time in 2018 while women also started driving<sup>18</sup>.

Iran is another good example of Islamic theonomy. Its constitution is a hybrid of theocratic and democratic elements. All its laws and institutions are based on the *Shari'ah* and Iran's 1979 revolution had all the landmarks of Islamic resurgence. Above all, Iran is articulate on matters of concern to Muslims around the world particularly where issues affect Allah-given



fundamental rights of Muslims or where the West appears to be intimidating Islamdom.

Although the Islamic Republic of Iran appears willing to lead the Muslim world, it is still not seen as a suitable alternative for Saudi Arabia. This is due to Iran's role as the global Shi'ah propagandist, the cold war between it and Saudi Arabia and the fact that Sunni Muslims who control majority of the world's Muslim population may not be willing to accept Iran's leadership.

### ISLAMIC THEOCRACY AND THE MODERN NATION-STATE:

In spite of the viability of the Islamic political system, human weaknesses keep derailing this veritable alternative. Islamic political thought which rests on four strong and reliable pillars, namely, *at-tawhid* (oneness of Allah), *al-khilafah* (vicegerence), *ash-Shurah* (consultation) and *al-akhirah* (the last day) has been described as capable of giving happiness to all mankind<sup>19</sup>.

The concept of *at-tawhid* in Islamic political thought underscores the equality of all agents of the Adamic chromosome in an Islamic political system. No one must be cheated. There must be equality before the *Shari'ah* and all must be given equal chances. The principle of *al-khilafah* ignites in leaders the consciousness of representation. It reminds leaders that they are representatives of Allah on earth, that they are expected to perform their roles with great sense of fairness, justice and equity because every representative must return to the principal (Allah) to give a report.

The doctrine of *ash-shurah* also instills in leaders the essence of consultation and team work. It discourages dictatorship. It is the divine authorization of democratic practice as enshrined in Qur'an 3:159 and 42:38. As for *al-akhirah*, it evokes the fear of Allah in the hearts of rulers and politicians, amplifies probity and accountability and reminds rulers and politicians that their stewardship does not end here on earth because there will be *mas'alah* (the interrogation) in the grave and *yawm al-qiyamah* (the Day of Resurrection) (Qur'an 18:49).

Furthermore, the principle of *al-Akhirah* is a potent endorsement of the reality of *barzakh* (the period between death and resurrection) *as-Sa'ah* (Doomsday), *al-hisab* (the record of deeds) in the Hereafter, *al-Jannah*

(Paradise) and *an-Nar* (hell). According to Abdul Rahman Doi, impunity would reign supreme in the world if there is no belief in resurrection and the Day of Judgement<sup>20</sup>. Abdalati therefore calls on all and sundry to get ready for *al-Qiyamah*<sup>21</sup>.

Compared to democracy as practiced in the modern nation-state, Islamic theonomy appears more reliable and more viable if it is practiced in its purely idealistic form. While it is generally believed that no man is infallible, the strength of the Islamic system lies in the fact that it is based on divine guidance, which is infallible.

Whereas Abraham Lincoln, the father of American democracy, put God first in his declaration of democracy, most Americans and the rest of the West today put God last. Abraham Lincoln had declared on Wednesday, 19<sup>th</sup> November, 1863:

We here are highly resolved that these dead soldiers shall not have died in vain, that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom and that this government of the people by the people and for the people shall not perish from the earth.<sup>22</sup>

Americans cherish freedom and democracy more than God today. Democracy is wrapped in beautiful semantics while the concept of God is trivialised. Thus Dorothy Pickle defines democracy as ‘dialogue between the rulers and the ruled’<sup>23</sup>. Margolis calls it ‘equal opportunity to participate’<sup>24</sup>. To Jack Lively, it is ‘a situation of equality’<sup>25</sup>.

Yet the same democracy has become a source of confusion in the West. Otherwise why are results of elections becoming so controversial in the United States? Non-Americans may find it difficult to understand how Hillary Clinton who had 2.87 million votes more than Donald Trump lost the election via the Electoral College verdict of 232/306 votes<sup>26</sup>. In the same vein, Britain’s Brexit appears to be giving the average Briton more headache than pleasure<sup>27</sup>.

Western definition of democracy is therefore narrow, shallow, myopic and parochial. The vision of the champions of Western democracy was not limited to man alone to the exclusion of his Maker. This Godless definition is too mundane, too materialistic and too dry. The West does not have to be too economical with wisdom and God-consciousness.

Islamic scholars and leaders see Islamic democracy or theonomy in a different light. Precedence is given to Allah, the Supreme Creator. Muhammad Umarah calls Islamic democracy the divine will manifesting in the rights of the citizens<sup>28</sup>. Former Libyan leader Muammar Ghadafi calls Islamic democracy Allah's divine weapon which breaks the power of the individual, class, tribe, sect or party<sup>29</sup>. Al-Fasi describes it as the general thought guided by divine will<sup>30</sup>. Thus we find that the Supreme Creator features prominently in the perception of democracy by Muslims.

## **EPILOGUE:**

This keynote address concludes that there is no political system better than Islamic political thought. It is viable, reliable and durable. The *khilafah* is not dead rather it is in a state of coma. Therefore the question of a *post mortem* for the *khilafah* does not arise. It will rise again with the *proviso* that Muslim leaders around the world, particularly Saudi Arabia, drop all distractions and renew their confidence in the Islamic system. The basic doctrines in Islamic political thought, *viz., At-Tawhid, al-khilafah, ash-Shura and al-akhirah* are the powerful weapons capable of protecting nations from becoming failed states.

Before I round off, permit me to link this discussion on nation-states with our country. Nigeria is not a failed state. It is on the rise again. We advise irredentist groups who once threatened to secede to learn from the examples of countries which had broken up. In unity lies our strength. Even restructuring is not the solution to Nigeria's problems. What we need is good governance and an end to corruption and our culture of waste.

Once again, permit me to rejoice with you on this occasion of the opening ceremony of the 6<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Islam. Thank you for inviting me. Thank you for listening.

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