

A Critical Muslim Perspective on Liberal Democracy: Malek Bennabi, Social Justice and Religious Ethics

Abdessamad Belhaj

Institute of Religion and Society, University of Public Service, Budapest, Hungary

Email: abdessamad.belhaj@uni-nke.hu

Abstract

Malek Bennabi (1905–1973), a well-known Muslim reformist from Algeria, offered one of the most thoughtful and rational criticisms of liberal democracy within the broad framework of Muslim political theory. At the same time, he supported the political freedom that liberal democracy fostered. Bennabi identified three problems with liberal democracy. First, the theory and the reality of freedom diverge because liberal democracies both offer and deny their citizens the freedom that is guaranteed by constitutions and human rights declarations. Second, large private interest groups benefit from liberal democracies at the expense of the majority of citizens. Third, liberal democracies are vulnerable to class conflict as the divide widens between political and social principles leading to revolutions or coups that bring about socialist governments which reduce political freedoms. This article discusses Bennabi's views on Islam and democracy, including his criticism of liberal democracy for lacking social security and his view of democracy as freedom of choice and from want.

Keywords: *Islamic Democracy, Liberal Democracy, Social Justice*

INTRODUCTION

Muslim discourses on democracy can be very diverse and often controversial; yet, discussions about Islam and democracy have sparked significant contributions from various Muslim movements and thinkers. Some Muslim intellectuals and figures of authority reject all forms of democracy, some are passionate about liberal democracy, while others display more nuanced positions that may be critical of some forms of democracy but open to others. The debates about Islam and democracy that have been taking place in the Muslim world for more than a century focused on governance in general and the benefits of democracy and how well it aligns with Islamic principles in particular. These discussions are complex, with secular intellectuals arguing for or against liberal democracy from various ideological stances, politicians supporting or opposing democratization, and religious scholars supporting or discarding democratic ideals while most Muslim intellectuals endorsed the thesis of the compatibility of Islam and democracy (Esposito and Voll, 1996; El-Affendi, 2009 ; Parray, 2023).

Let us clarify here that reformist critical Muslim discourses of liberal democracy differ considerably from Islamist or traditionalist perspectives who reject liberal democracy altogether. They also diverge from liberal Muslim

*Corresponding Author

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reformists who support liberal democracy (mostly living in the West) and who have been typically the focus of research on Islam and democracy (despite that a close reading of these liberal thinkers show a combination of hostility to authoritarianism in the Muslim world and a broad belief in the compatibility of Islam and democracy without little interest in the processes of liberal democracy) (Soroush, 2000; Sachedina 2001; Abou El Fadl, 2004; Muqtedar Khan 2006).

In contrast, Muslim reformists who are critical of liberal democracy did not attract much attention. The fact that most researchers only began examining discussions about Islam and democracy in the 1990s, with the belief that liberal democracy was the only workable political system that could advance the Muslim world—Islamism and communism having failed in this regard—is a significant factor in discarding the critics of liberal democracy in research in political science and Islamic studies. Moreover, the drawbacks of liberal democracy were overlooked as the Western machine of democracy promotion, both through force and ideology, has succeeded in making liberal democracy desirable or obligatory in the Muslim world, and even among Islamists, amid the globalization of liberal democracy. This gave the impression to researchers and many activists that there was a consensus in the Muslim world in embracing liberal democracy, but in reality, resistance to liberal democracy was deeply anchored and carried out by various forces, traditionalist and reformist, that contested it.

One of the first and most persuasive opponents of liberal democracy was the reformist thinker and anti-colonialist figure Malek Bennabi (1905–1973) in Algeria. In 1960, Malek Bennabi, the celebrated Algerian Muslim reformist thinker, gave a lecture to a group of North African students in Cairo on Islam and democracy. This audience was getting ready to return to the Arab world to assist in the governance of recently established or in the process of becoming independent states, especially those that were breaking away from France. The problem of balancing Islam with modernity and democracy, was one that this audience was attentive to. However, in Cairo, these young North Africans' sensibilities were split between Arab socialism, Islamism, secular pan-Arabism and liberalism. Bennabi was conscious that most young North Africans preferred Western liberal democracy to social democracy or Islamic rule. For this reason, he endorsed a critical position on liberal democracy in this lecture and later in his other works, displaying a more receptive perspective to the notion that democracy should have a deeper social and spiritual component.

Malek Bennabi was influenced by French political culture, just like most Maghrebian intellectuals of his era (Gronhovd, 2010). However, Bennabi's critical essays on liberal democracy attest to his capacity to develop unique theories. His

approach is highly innovative in Muslim thought since it views democracy as the freedom of man. By reviving the importance and worth of human beings in the Muslim civilization, Bennabi's engagement with democracy had the implicit goal of restoring Islam's civilizational impulse, even though his avowed goal was to reconcile democracy with Islam (Parray, 2023, p. 127).

It is important to view Bennabi's critical stance on liberal democracy in light of discussions on modernization and development in Muslim post-colonial societies. Arab and Muslim nations had access to a number of models, including liberal democracy, social democracy as practiced in China and the Soviet Union, and other models. Muslim intellectuals either followed a specific European or Asian model or abandoned these models in favor of an Islamic paradigm that was no longer effective.

Some Muslim reformist intellectuals, such as Malek Bennabi, suggested a solution to the problem of governance by combining what they saw as the best aspects of Islam with modernity in ways that are appropriate for Muslim contexts. Unlike many thinkers of his generation, Bennabi did not condemn democracy as a Western system, which made his position rather distinctive. He examined liberal democracy's accomplishments and content, as well as its advantages and disadvantages. This method of discussing Islam and democracy is analytical rather than apologetic. On the other hand, unlike many Muslim thinkers, he did not exalt Islamic political institutions of the past as being superior to liberal democracy. In addition to assess their accomplishments and processes, his approach to Muslim political institutions emphasizes their spirit. He does neither reject altogether liberal democracy, nor does he revere Islamic institutions. His position is critical, which means that rather than rejecting democracy, he identifies some of its flaws that he calls to fix in a Muslim democracy.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Malek Bennabi: Life and Context

Algerian scholar, anti-colonialist, and Islamic reform theorist Malek Bennabi was born in 1905 in Constantine, the capital of the French department of the same name and the principal town in eastern Algeria. Bennabi developed an interest in anti-colonial nationalism and the Islamic reformist (*iṣlāḥ*) movement, which was led by 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Ben Bādīs (1889–1940), while studying Islamic law at the new madrasa in Constantine after 1920. Bennabi relocated to Paris in 1930 after working as a deputy prosecutor in many Islamic courts in the Oran and Algiers regions. After being turned down for political grounds by the orientalist *École des Langues Orientales*, he went on to earn a degree in electrical engineering, which he finished

in 1937. He encountered activists from North Africa and other countries in the French capital, and he developed an interest in movements like Saudi Wahhābism and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood that promised to revitalize Islam. However, Bennabi was also involved with the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in France. His experiences in Paris appear to have influenced not only his interest in pan-Islamism and Third Worldism but also the humanist universalism and ecumenism he would exhibit in his writing. He departed France for Cairo in 1956, which at the time was the epicenter of exiled Algerian nationalists. After Algeria gained its independence in 1962, he went back to work as the Director of Higher Education, a position he maintained until his passing in Algiers in 1973 (Krais, 2018).

In addition to his many essays in Arabic and French, Bennabi is the author of over twenty books, including an autobiography and a fiction. He made an effort to reconcile the Quran with scientific reasoning in his first work, *Le phénomène coranique* (1947). Later, Bennabi focused most of his efforts on developing a theory of civilizational revival that would help Muslim countries develop and be liberated from European imperialism. His main works on these subjects include *Les conditions de la renaissance* (1949), *Vocation de l'Islam* (1954), and *Le problème des idées dans le monde musulman* (1971). In particular, he was sensitive to the ways that Islam has been expressed in history and civilization, in the psychology and ethics of individuals and societies as spiritual force, and in the ways that humanism and intellectual revolution can be used to bring about change in the souls before spreading to the masses (al-Sahmarānī, 1984; Christelow 1992; Bariun 1993; Berghout, 2001; Johnston, 2004; El-Mesawi, 2006; Walsh, 2007; Işık 2009; Macías Amoretti, 2013; Seniguer, 2014; Faid, 2018; Pellitteri, 2018; El Hamri, 2020 ; Subhani, Noon, and Ahmed, 2020).

Islam and Democracy

Bennabi begins his argument on democracy by placing Muslim ethics and democracy in their own histories and contexts of emergence. He highlights the common ground between Islam and democracy: the liberation of man, even if Islam and democracy value man in different ways (Bennabi, 1979, p. 67). He distinguishes between Islamic democracy and secular democracy: he considers the former to be superior to the latter because it does not give power solely to the people but also combines social and political democracy, the religious obligation to uphold the principle of equity and the responsibility to protect human dignity (Bennabi, 1979, p. 77). His insistence on human freedom as a foundational value of societies has a strong existentialist undertone and a profoundly personalist connotation, two

philosophies that influenced him in Paris in the 1940s and 1950s (Naylor, 2006 ; Gronhovd, 2010), when he formed his opinions. This explains why his views and Iqbal's in India are so similar (Rashid 1978).

Bennabi first examines the etymology of the terms Islam and democracy. Democracy, he says, is the power of people, whereas Islam is a religious belief and practice, of submission to God and liberation from submission to man (Bennabi, 1979, p. 67). He stresses that the political process of democracy is no more important than man's desire to be free. He does, however, highlight the conflict between Islam, a metaphysical idea that emphasizes deference to God's authority in this system, and democracy, a political idea that expresses human authority in a system established by society (Bennabi, 1979, p. 68).

Bennabi believes the history of democracy in the West since the Greeks has been that of the liberation of man from servitude; an ideal that has been materialised since the Renaissance, Humanism, religious reforms and the French Revolution (Bennabi, 1979, pp. 69-71). Islam has also had its own history of liberating man from servitude. He asserts that Islam has also had its democratic spirit, that it is rooted in the conscience of the Muslim man and that it has led to the emergence of Islam and its civilization (Bennabi, 1979, p. 79). Bennabi distinguishes between three forms of democracy: popular democracy in China and the Soviet Union, liberal democracy in the West and Islamic democracy. All these models attempt to liberate people from servitude and combat the tendency of those in power to enslave people. Popular democracy provides social guarantees for the people, while liberal democracy offers political freedoms to citizens (Bennabi, 1979, pp. 76-77). On the other hand, Islamic democracy, understood as the Islamic ideal of the caliphate, has achieved a balance between the social guarantees of popular democracy and the political freedoms of liberal democracy, while emphasizing the metaphysical dignity of man, sacralized by the Muslim tradition, to protect him from abuses (Bennabi, 1979, pp. 78). For him, Islamic democracy functioned properly at the ethical, economic, social and political levels, in the first forty years of Islamic history. However, this model was corrupted after the advent of Muslim dynasties since 661, which in turn impose regimes that enslaved the Muslim man (Bennabi, 1979, p. 93). This did not, nonetheless, eliminate the desire for freedom in Muslims, and the sources of Islam, the Quran and the Sunna, have maintained this desire right up to the present day, awaiting the return of the spiritual impetus of the Muslim renaissance (Bennabi, 1979, p. 94).

According to Bennabi, the spirit of democracy is what matters the most, and civilizations, including Islamic civilization, are founded on this spirit, without which they would deteriorate. As he puts it:

The democratic spirit ceased to manifest itself in the Muslim world when it lost its foundation in the psychology of the individual, from the moment when the latter definitely lost the sense of his own value and of the value of others. One must remark, in passing, that the Muslim civilization ceased to exist from that moment, having no longer at its base the value of man. It is perhaps legitimate to believe that it is the fate of every civilization that loses the sense of the man (Bennabi, 1993, p. 167).

As for the future of democracy in the Muslim and Arab countries, he believed there was incontestably a Renaissance of the democratic spirit in these countries. But, in a general manner, "democracy will succeed only in so far as it proceeds to a new valuation of man in his very consciousness, in order to put him above the despot and the slave. Only Islam can re-make this valuation in countries where the social tradition has been formed by the Qur'anic notion" ((Bennabi, 1993, p. 167). Therefore, the unique psychology of each human being as neither an enslaving person nor a victim of enslavement, as well as the collective spirit of freedom in a particular society, are the foundation of the spirit of democracy. Human freedom can only be respected in politics and governance when it is firmly ingrained in people's and communities' actions. This democratic attitude checks the political process of administration and resists to despotism. Bennabi developed this somewhat original ethical framework for understanding democracy and interpreting Islam in the 1940s, but several Muslim philosophers have since embraced it (most notably Taha Abderrahmane in Morocco and Fazlur Rahman in Pakistan).

A Critique of Liberal Democracy

It should be noted right away that Bennabi's criticism of liberal democracy is a component of his criticism of the West, which he perceived as being morally chaotic (Bennabi, 1980, p. 185). He has witnessed the inadequacies of Western modernism as well as Western colonialism in France and Algeria. In addition to criticizing liberal democracy, he also criticizes democratic practices in China, the Soviet Union, and the Muslim world. Lastly, as was already mentioned, his concept of democracy as the emancipation of man aligns with his criticism of liberal democracy, which he evaluates based on how much it violates human freedom.

Bennabi essentially pointed out three issues with liberal democracy. First, there is a difference between the theory and the actual state of freedom, as liberal democracies both grant and deny their inhabitants the freedom that is promised in human rights declarations and constitutions. Second, liberal democracies make the population the target of massive private interest organizations. Therefore, the majority of citizens do not benefit from liberal democracy. Third, class conflict

exacerbates the gap between political and social ideals, leaving liberal democracies open to governments that provide social assurances at the price of their citizens' political liberties. Let us take a closer look at each of these objections as well as the kinds of substitutes Bennabi proposes in what he terms Islamic democracy.

Discrepancy Between Theory and Practice in Liberal Democracy

Bennabi's main criticism of liberal democracy is that it is susceptible to manipulation by despotic regimes (Bennabi, 2001, p. 117) and that most of its rhetoric is only a catchphrase by hegemonic Western powers which attempt to show a beautiful face to hide the same old imperialist policies (Bennabi, 2001, p. 33). As he states:

But the experience of political democracy in the world since the time of the French Revolution shows the weakness of individual freedoms in reality, when he is not protected at the same time by the social guarantees that ensure his material freedom. We have seen in developed countries how the "free citizen" becomes an anonymous slave to great interests that unite against him, and how much he loses because of this the expected benefits that are granted to him in theory by a declaration of human rights and a constitution that have no apparent effect on his life (Bennabi, 1979, p. 87).

Bennabi points out that the history of liberal democracies, including France, demonstrates the disparity between what is provided to its citizens and what is promised to them. We must consider here that Bennabi spent the majority of his life as a French colonial citizen (Algeria gained independence from France in 1962, and he passed away in 1973). Furthermore, in liberal democracies, political freedoms lose their independence in the absence of material freedom. Thus, liberal democracies claim to benefit their citizens, but in practice, they primarily benefit a select few. Without social guarantees, free citizens are essentially slaves of the state, and as a result, they are deprived of the freedom to choose who would govern them. Liberal democracies are therefore ill-equipped, in sustainable manner, to rule because of this contradiction between promises of freedom and actual enslavement.

Consequently, the problem with liberal democracy is that it does not deliver on the essence of democracy, which is the liberation of individuals and citizens from all forms of oppression and enslavement. Only a select few profit from riches in liberal democracies, which replicate the same circumstances as plutocracies. If not enslaved, the others are left behind. Citizens can only enjoy political rights and freedom of choice if social security frees them from poverty. In addition to freedom of choice (including freedom of expression and conscience), freedom from want is crucial, thus, to his understanding of democracy. As we shall see, he was also critical

of communism, thus his criticism of liberal democracy does not align with Marxism (in its slogan each to its own needs). However, he was undoubtedly sensitive to socialism as the state's duty to provide a minimal level of social security for its citizens (Bennabi, 1979, p. 214).

Given that liberal democracies preach human rights yet deny in reality the majority of their citizens the opportunity to exercise those rights, Bennabi may be arguing here for the moral coherence that is lacking in these systems. This critique was made in 1960, and while certain liberal democracies have undoubtedly evolved since social rights were recognized as human rights in welfare states, social security did not give people the opportunity to choose how they wanted to live their lives. Whether or not citizens can express themselves and have an impact on the highest levels of decision-making is more important than simply providing a minimal income to subsist (which leads to political reliance on the party that promotes this minimal income). Rather than calling to help the poor, Bennabi makes a point about freedom from want as a way to empower citizens against tyranny of the state.

In addition to the contradiction between freedom of choice and freedom of want, Bennabi was especially critical of the hypocrisy of referring to hegemonic policies as democratic and the difference between the standards of International relations imposed on colonized nations in the South and the standards of international relations practiced by Western states in the North (Bennabi, 1981, p. 46). This demonstrates that Bennabi was not a complete opponent of liberal democracy but rather became frustrated with the ethical hypocrisy of professing democracy while repressing and scorning those who were colonized or subjugated outside of the West. Bennabi's perspective can still be applicable in many international relations situations today, even if he was discussing the colonial environment of the 1940s and 1950s (for instance, the US invasion of Iraq under the pretext of democracy).

Elitism: The power of interest groups

According to Bennabi, democracy is an attitude toward oneself, toward others, and a set of social and political circumstances that are essential for the emergence and growth of such feelings in the individual (Bennabi, 1993, p. 151). Therefore, in a democratic government, every individual should be represented. Conversely, liberal democracy solely serves the interests of the ruling class. In his own words:

As for secular or (laic) democracy, it first grants man rights and social guarantees, but it leaves him vulnerable to two things: he is either the victim of conspiracies for certain corporations, and of huge private interest groups, or it

places others under the burden of a class dictatorship, because secular democracy has not purified within itself the motives of slavery and enslavement, since any real change in society is inconceivable without an appropriate change in souls (Bennabi, 1979, p. 79).

Bennabi's thesis is predicated on the idea that religion is essential to moral change. For him, secular democracy entails removing religion's influence on public life. However, any political structure has the potential to become corrupt and evil if human ethics are not changed (in the right direction). His idea of Muslim democracy, which can effectively influence human psychology, stems from the importance of preserving religion in specific areas of social and political systems. He believes that religion and democracy have a natural connection that goes beyond the idea of democracy as the transfer of power to the people in accordance with specific constitutional provisions. Although this may be a component of governance, good governance undoubtedly extends beyond the formalities of democracy (Bennabi, 1979, p. 80).

The psychological-ethical component of democracy is crucial to Bennabi. Since secular democracy ignores the ethical foundation of man's freedom and anti-slavery stance in favor of organizing politics and society, it is insufficient to manage human psychology. That is, the basis of democracy will be absent if humanity does not shift from its inclination toward slavery or captivity toward human dignity and freedom. In particular, without this fundamental shift, elites would take away people's rights, and democracy will merely be a formal form of government devoid of human dignity and freedom.

As a result of being a formal democracy (devoid of the psychological-ethical dimension), corporations and special interest groups will probably sway elections and other democratic procedures to their advantage under a liberal democracy. Democratic governance can quickly devolve into a dictatorship in the absence of significant ethical reform. One reason is because people have a propensity to subjugate others and establish hegemony over them, sometimes using slogans like "rule of people" or "rule of workers." Furthermore, when liberal democracies themselves disregard social guarantees, they can give rise to political parties that seek to establish a collectivist system of government, which is actually an elitist system dominated by a select few (Communist party, military junta, etc.). Since democracy is supposed to be the rule of people by people, yet in practice, certain groups effectively rule people in liberal social democracies, liberal democracy can be said to be paradoxical in this regard. Western democracies allowed capitalist elites to economically devastate people, granting man a vote while allowing him to go hungry (Walsh, 2007, p. 239)

Social insecurity

Lastly, Bennabi also criticizes liberal democracy for failing to strike a balance between social security and political freedom. As he points out "we have also seen how countries in which this difference between political values and social values occurs suffer from class conflict that may end in the establishment of a type of democracy that gives the (citizen) the necessary social guarantees, but at the expense of his political freedoms". (Bennabi, 1979, pp. 80). This may be the main thrust of his criticism of liberal democracy, which holds that it deprives its citizens of social security, rendering them helpless in political and decision-making processes. For the same reason, he sees the value of Islamic law in its spirit of social fairness and sympathizes with social democracy and the Soviet and Chinese models. However, he does not subscribe to any socialist or communist ideologies.

In order to prevent class conflict, a good political democracy should grant its people social rights in addition to freedom. In other words, a balanced system does not compromise social rights for freedom or freedom for social balance. However, liberal democracy becomes socially unbalanced because it ignores the social aspect of freedom and gradually favors elites. It should be noted that Bennabi does not use the concepts of equality, *musāwāt*; he instead discusses social rights, guarantees, and what makes up people's social security. According to him, democracy also entails distributive justice, which prevents monopoly of wealth in the hands of the wealthy. The state, not simply individuals, is responsible for upholding these social obligations and providing assurances to its citizens (Bennabi, 1993, p. 162).

Instead, his perspective carries a complementarity between freedom from want and freedom of choice. Individuals should be able to have the appropriate protections that shield them from the system's unfairness while still being able to participate in the political responsibility of public decisions, including the right of expression. Since liberal democracies do not provide these protections against injustice, they are unbalanced in this regard. For him, the issue Islam sought to address was the establishment of a political structure based on loyalty from the ruled to the ruler in accordance with explicit rules, where the ruler maintains contact with the ruled while simultaneously providing protections against the ruler's transgressions (Bennabi, 1993, p. 160).

At the level of social security, social democracy and Muslim democracy are far superior to liberal democracy. Bennabi claims that without undermining individual political rights, Islamic ethics have given special consideration to economics and social security, surpassing thus social democracy which neglects individual political freedom (Bennabi, 1993, p. 163). Islamic ethics, for instance, demonstrate the social consciousness of Muslim leadership and Muslims'

expectation that the state will take care of them by making usury illegal, making *zakāt* (obligatory religious tax) mandatory, which takes money from the rich to give to the poor, and providing maternity leave from the *bayt al-māl* (treasury). Consequently, the monopoly of finance over the economy, as well as the dominance of capital and trade, would be broken (Bennabi, 1993, p. 163). Bennabi attacks capitalism for prioritizing the unchecked power of money, which causes social unrest and occasionally bloody upheavals (Bennabi, 1993, p. 164).

Since the 19th century, critics of liberal democracy in the Global South and the West have identified this flaw in liberal democratic governance. The latter exacerbates societal issues associated with poverty by reflecting and enabling systems of dominance, exploitation, exclusion, and inequality that serve as the foundation of society. The less fortunate are marginalized in liberal democracies because the party structure allows the capitalist minority to continue holding power. These critics have included Marxist and non-Marxist thinkers of capitalism, but the growing trends of poverty and inequality have only made the critique of social imbalance in liberal democracy pertinent (though nowadays the critics rarely support the Marxist solution).

Bennabi disapproved of what he called "economism" which he perceived as an obsession with technical advancement at the expense of civilizational, or cultural values in the Muslim world. Although he was clearly anti-Marxist, he was favourable to social justice in socialist societies in general because, in his opinion, the goal of "an organic society of one-floor, without classes" was shared by Christian, Muslim, and socialist societies (Bennabi, 1986, p. 10). This democratic social justice model contrasts with the multi-floored, multi-class society that the US and Western Europe have supported in recent times (Bennabi, 1986, pp. 9–10). He believed that unless Islam and Islamic values were incorporated as guiding principles, Arab socialism in Egypt and Algeria had no hope of success (Zoubir, 1998, p. 108).

CONCLUSION

According to Bennabi, democracy encompasses social freedom (from poverty and want) as well as political freedom (of choice, belief, and expression). In light of this view, he recognized three issues with liberal democracy. First, there is a difference between the idea and the actuality of freedom since liberal democracies both grant and deny their inhabitants the freedom that is protected by human rights declarations and constitutions. Second, liberal democracies favor large private interest groups at the expense of the vast majority of citizens. Third, if the gap

between political and social ideals grows, liberal democracies are susceptible to class struggle, which can result in revolutions or coups that install socialist regimes that curtail political liberties. This imbalance between political and social freedom in liberal democracies is still pertinent to the current discussions on Islam and democracy as well as the Arab Spring in the Muslim world.

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