

Democracy and Voting

Summary

This document covers the British political system and the importance of Muslims engaging in it. It explains the electoral and parliamentary systems, democracy's flaws and how they can be overcome, how compatible democracy is to Islamic values, and why some Muslim majority countries are not democracies.

Democracy

Discussion point: What do you understand democracy to mean?

Democracy refers to the idea that decisions are made by the people rather than by an elite. It originates from the ancient Greek term *dēmokratia*, based on the two words *dēmos* (“people”) and *kratos* (“rule”) (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/democracy/England>).

Democracy can take many forms, and its principles are not exclusive to general elections of governments, local councils and mayors in cities. Democracy is also applied in schools (school council), group decision making in charities and businesses and can also be used in families.

In the UK, our political system is a type of representative democracy. MPs (Members of Parliament) are elected every five years, in a first past the post system, in general elections to the House of Commons. This means that the candidate who receives the most votes is elected as the MP for a specific area. The political party which has the most MPs forms the government. There is also an unelected Upper House (House of Lords) which is composed of hereditary peers, bishops and life peers (the latter are appointed by the government). Bills originate in the House of Commons (from the government or individual MPs), but have to be accepted by a majority of both Houses to become laws.

Elections and Voting

General elections in the UK usually take place every five years to elect Members of Parliament (MPs). MPs have two roles, firstly to represent the issues and concerns of those who elected them, and secondly to help make laws which affect our lives.

The minimum age for voting in the UK is 18 years old. Some argue that it should be lowered to 16. Arguably, having the right to vote at 16 years old could be facilitated by preparing children for democratic citizenship prior to them reaching this age.

Why should we vote and who should we vote for?

Muslims should promote the good and endeavour to prevent harm wherever we can.

‘You are the best community that has been raised up for mankind: you order what is right and forbid what is wrong, and believe in God...’ (Quran, Surah Al-Imran, 3:110)

Voting is a method of implementing this verse from the Quran. Arguably, all the main political parties have policies that we can agree with and ones that we do not so we need to weigh these up to decide which party will best represent our values and which one is pledging to take the country in a direction that we believe to be beneficial to all those living here. Different Muslims will have different opinions on which party is the best one to vote for, so we need to respect that.

Discussion point: What do you think are the priorities of Muslims in the UK?

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Problems with Democracy

Although democracy is one of the main political systems in the world, it has weaknesses. Firstly, people can be **ill-informed** on important issues. This is not helped by a media which may be biased towards the party which serves their interests. There is very little variety in perspective in the British media. Examples of people being ill-informed are shown by a [poll by Ipsos-MORI](#): 29% of people think the government spends more on Job Seekers Allowance than pensions, when in reality we spend 15 times more on pensions (£4.9bn vs £74.2bn). This misunderstanding can lead to prejudice against the unemployed.

Voters can also be **irrational**: often voters can be tribalistic when voting by just voting for the party they have always voted for and not evaluating their manifesto. Also, swing voters (the undecided) and new voters may be influenced by the personalities of politicians rather than policy.

Political campaigns and public political discussions are often very **negative in tone**, with one party attacking another which can be socially divisive, resulting in fear and hatred amongst the populace. This could also lead to mob rule whereby the majority discriminates against minorities.

Another factor is **short termism**. Because there are frequent elections and changes of policies, democracy has sometimes been criticised for having a lack of long-term planning, which can be detrimental to the country.

Moreover, a government under first past the post system is usually **elected by a minority** of the total people who have voted in the general election. Finally, **elections can be unfair** as those with more resources can run better, wider-reaching campaigns.

Discussion point: What do you think are the benefits of democracy?

How can we overcome the weaknesses of democracy?

The problem of public ignorance is partially solved by **representative democracy**: power given to elected representatives who should be specialists.

Some argue that the political system could be fairer if, instead of the first past the post system, we adopted proportional representation (PR), whereby the number of MPs for each party is reflected proportionally to how people voted. PR rarely results in a majority government, which forces parties to work in collaborative coalitions rather than having a confrontational style of politics.

The problem of a majority making discriminatory laws against a minority can be protected by having a **written constitution**: a set of basic rights and standards that cannot be overwritten. The UK though does not have a written constitution.

Also, a successful democracy will have '**checks and balances**' to prevent individuals from becoming too powerful. This would include, for example, free elections by secret ballot and an independent judiciary which can declare government actions as illegal. In addition, the parties which have lost the election still have a continuous opportunity to openly scrutinise the government's policies.

Civil Society is another important feature of a democracy, that is, to have a democratic culture through non-governmental independent organisations: charities, lobby groups, churches, mosques, independent media, trade unions, professional associations etc. This limits the power of the government and these organisations can lobby parliament on behalf of the interests of different groups in society.

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Is democracy compatible with Islam?

Even though Islam does not specify a particular form of government, many contemporary scholars argue that there is a link between shura and democracy. Kamali for example argues that shura and democracy are equivalent. Al-Raysuni argues that it is part of the sunnah (practice of the Prophet) to borrow beneficial knowledge from others and, in the present context, this includes democratic ideas (though with modifications).

In relation to voting in elections in the UK, Amjad Mohammed has stated that this does not go against Islamic law, in fact he states that it is an important responsibility to vote for candidates/parties which will give the best benefit for Muslims here and abroad, without one having to agree with all of their policies. Muslims though should also be concerned with the benefit for the whole of society.

Shura (consultation/collective decision making) is a very important principle in Islam. Al-Tabari stated that it is one of the principles of Islamic law:

'...Consult with them about matters [of public concern], then when you have decided on a course of action, put your trust in God: God loves those who put their trust in Him.' (Quran, Surah Al Imran, 3:159)

This verse refers to the Prophet (pbuh) adopting the majority opinion of the Sahabah (Companions) to go out of Madinah to fight the Battle of Uhud even though this went against his own opinion. Another example was before the Battle of the Trench where the idea to build a ditch around part of Madinah was suggested through shura. He also regularly met up with a group of people in Madinah who represented different factions, tribes, and groups. However, as Layma Hamad points out, the Prophet did not follow the majority view if it either contradicted an Islamic principle or a command from Allah. The Treaty of Hudaibiya is an example of this. This treaty seemed to go against the interests of the Muslims, but in the long term proved very beneficial, facilitating a time of peace which allowed Islam to spread.

Other practises implemented by the Prophet which relate to democracy include the constitution of Madinah, which guaranteed basic rights to all those living there and established a system of law/justice, with no one being above the law.

Why are some Muslim-majority countries not democracies?

- **Industrialisation/Modernisation:** Democracy developed in the West over many centuries, more quickly in places experiencing an industrial revolution and increased education/literacy. Many Muslim-majority countries have not undergone this process, but some, like Turkey, have undergone industrialisation and modernisation and so have more democratic structures.
- **Foreign influence:** Colonial rule resulted in the formation of army elites (trained in Europe); colonial rule also resulted in a lack of economic development. Later after independence, in many Muslim countries, the military elites took power through coup d'états. During the Cold War, the USSR encouraged dictatorships which emphasised state control. The Arab Spring showed the power of the army in the Middle East in defeating popular demands for democracy.
- **Corruption:** Authoritarian regimes in Muslim countries are corrupt. The elites squander both the wealth of the country and the aid given to the country (by Western governments) on themselves instead of developing the country. They maintain control, through secret police and spy networks.

Finally, the lack of democracy is not necessarily Islamic: some argue that Islamic law is set in stone, so there is no need for a parliament. However, this is wrong. As explained earlier, there is no prescribed form of Islamic government: in Islamic law there is flexibility to choose what is appropriate. Also, there is



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flexibility in interpretation of jurisprudence in different contexts. Finally, Muslims can partake in the democratic process in a situation where they are a minority, based on the principle of public interest.

References

We would like to thank the Working Study Circle for allowing us to use this material. This is basically an abridgement of one of their study circle notes with some additions. The additional resources used were:

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Handout

Democracy and Elections

- Democracy means that decisions are made by the people and for the people.
- In the UK, MPs are elected in general elections which are held every 5 years.
- MPs represent issues and the concerns of the electorate and help to make laws which affect our lives.

Why should we vote and who for?

- Muslims should urge good and prevent harm. This can be done through voting, where we vote for those who best represent our values.
- *'You are the best community that has been raised up for mankind: you order what is right and forbid what is wrong, and believe in God.'* (Quran, Surah Al-Imran, 3:110).

Problems with democracy

- People can be ill informed, irrational and exploited by a biased media.
- Politicians often concentrate on short term goals rather than longer term goals to attract voters.
- Campaigns can stigmatise minorities, and those with more resources can run better campaigns.

Why are people still in favour of democracy?

- Representative democracy gives power to elected representatives who are specialists.
- A written constitution protects against discriminatory laws by protecting rights.
- An independent judiciary can scrutinise government policy to prevent individuals from becoming too powerful.

Is democracy compatible with Islam?

- Shura (consultation/collective decision making) is a very important principle in Islam.
'...Consult with them about matters [of public concern], then when you have decided on a course of action, put your trust in God: God loves those who put their trust in Him.'
(Quran, Surah Al Imran, 3:159)
- The Prophet (pbuh) went out of Madina to fight the battle of Uhud due to the majority opinion of the Sahaba (his companions).
- Muslims should vote for candidates who provide the best benefit to society.

Why are some Muslim-majority countries not democracies?

- Historical developments such as colonial rule and not having an industrial revolution.
- Corruption.
- There is no prescribed form of Islamic government in Islamic law and there is flexibility to choose what is appropriate.