

## Islamic Resurgence and Fazlur Rahman's Case for Democracy

NAVIN G. HAIDER\*

### Abstract

*The period between the 1970s and 1980s witnessed the resurgence of fundamentalist Islam in a large part of the Muslim world, manifesting as calls in favor of a system of government based on an elitist rule in the name of Islam. The prominent Islamic thinker Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) was considered by many of his close associates as part of this wave. The present article is an attempt to prove that this assertion is incorrect by highlighting Fazlur Rahman's arguments in favour of the people's right to rule during a time when both the 'ulamā' and the global Muslim public at large believed the opposite. Fazlur Rahman's strong faith in democracy could not let him sit idle, and he wrote in favour of the rule of the people and the role of the ummah in the business of the state through its elected representatives.*

### Keywords

Fazlur Rahman, 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Mutawallī, Islamic resurgence, democracy, *shūrā*.

### Introduction

In the later years of Fazlur Rahman's (d. 1988) life, the issue of *shūrā* took a central place in the political debates of the Muslim world. Earlier in 1972, a book was published from Cairo by the title *Mabda' al-Shūrā fi 'l-Islām*, carrying a debate on the issue of the source and interpretation of *shūrā* in Islam between Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 1996), the then director of the Office of Public Preaching in Cairo, and Professor 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Mutawallī (d. 2019), who was then the Professor of Islamic jurisprudence at Omdurman Islamic University in the Sudan.<sup>1</sup> Following the Iranian Islamic Revolution in

---

\* Navin G. Haider, Assistant Professor, Pakistan Study Centre, University of Karachi, Pakistan.

<sup>1</sup> For instance, see 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Mutawallī, *Azmat al-Fikr al-Siyāsī al-Islāmī* (Alexandria: al-Maktab al-Miṣrī al-Ḥadīth, 1970); Mutawallī, *Maṣādir al-Aḥkām al-Dastūriyyah fi 'l-Sharī'ah al-*

1979 and the reign of the third military ruler Zia-al-Haq in Pakistan (1977–1988), it was debated if or not democracy is compatible with the Islamic system of government. It was against this background that Fazlur Rahman wrote some of his very important articles on the issue of democracy in Islam and the role of *shūrā* in it.<sup>2</sup>

Fazlur Rahman's thought revolved around two questions:

- (i) Whether the masses can participate in *shūrā* and whether it, in fact, represents them?
- (ii) Whether the decision of *shūrā* on a matter of lawmaking is binding on the head of the state or whether he can veto it.

### 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Mutawallī<sup>3</sup> as the Representative of Islamic Resurgence

Regarding the first question, Fazlur Rahman begins by presenting the conservative argument by saying,

In the case of both Maudūdī and Mutawallī, the basic reason for disallowing general public participation in electing a government is the twofold premise that the average man is incapable of arriving at a correct decision concerning affairs of public life and also that his moral faculties for choosing the right and virtuous conduct are inherently unreliable, while the conduct of state requires both to the maximum degree possible.<sup>4</sup>

Both the above-mentioned personalities had no confidence in either the intellectual or moral capacities of the common man. However, it appears that Mutawallī argues this point at two levels. At the first level, he tries to

---

*Islāmiyyah* (Cairo: n.p., 1963); Mutawallī, "al-Islām wa Mushkilat al-Siyādah fi 'l-Dawlah," *Majallat al-Ḥuqūq* 1–2 (1964–65); Mutawallī, "Mabādi' Niẓām al-Ḥukm fi 'l-Islām," *Majallat al-Qānūn wa 'l-Iqtisād* 4 (1964); Mutawallī, "al-Islām wa hal Huwa Dīn wa Dawlah," *Majallat al-Qānūn wa 'l-Iqtisād* 5 (1965). See P. J. Vatikiotis, "Non-Muslims in Muslim Society: A Preliminary Consideration of the Problem on the Basis of Recent Published Works by Muslim Authors," in *Ethnicity, Pluralism, and the State in Middle East*, ed. Milton J. Esman and Itamar Rabinovich (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1988), 55.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, see Fazlur Rahman, "A Recent Controversy over the Interpretation of *Shūrā*," *History of Religion* 20, no. 4 (1980–81): 291–301; Fazlur Rahman, "The Principle of *Shūra* and the Role of the Umma in Islam," *American Journal of Islamic Studies* 1, no. 1 (1984): 1–13; Fazlur Rahman, "Islam and Political Action: Politics in the Service of Religion," in *Cities of Gods: Faith, Politics and Pluralism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, ed. Nigel Biggar, Jamie S. Scott, and William Schweiker (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> Fazlur Rahman quotes all the references from 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Mutawallī, *Mabda' al-Shūrā fi 'l-Islām* (Cairo: 'Ālam al-Kutub, 1972).

<sup>4</sup> Fazlur Rahman, "Recent Controversy over the Interpretation of *Shūrā*," 293.

deconstruct the arguments of the populists while trying to build his own argument at the other. In both cases the source of arguments is the Qur'ān.

The first verse to which Mutawallī refers is, “And those who answer their Lord, and perform the prayer, their affair being counsel between them, and they expend of that we have provided them”<sup>5</sup> (42:38) Fazlur Rahman finds Mutawallī arguing that “there is nothing in this verse (42:38) which asks Muslims to manage their affairs through *shūrā*—as is clear—indicating a system of general elections which history has known only since the middle of the last century.”<sup>6</sup>

Another verse Mutawallī takes from the populists is 3:110, which says, “You are the best nation ever brought forth to men, bidding honour, and forbidding dishonour, and believing in God.”<sup>7</sup> However, Fazlur Rahman translates this verse little differently as, “You [Muslims] are the best community brought out for mankind: you command good and prohibit evil and you believe in God” (3:11)<sup>8</sup> Mawdūdī translates the verse as, “You are now the best people brought forth for (the guidance and reform of) mankind. You enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong.”<sup>9</sup> Fazlur Rahman argues, “Against the populist thesis that this verse speaks of the entire community and not of an elite thereof, Mutawallī, relying on traditional authorities (p. 30) and also invoking Mawdūdī (p. 24), contends that *shūrā* is restricted to certain special groups in the community that are capable of this task. Thus, the term *umma*, Mutawallī tells us, does not mean here the entire Muslim community, but only a special group or groups thereof.”<sup>10</sup>

There is another Qur'ānic verse which is often cited by modernists like Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905) and traditionalists alike as the strongest evidence

<sup>5</sup> A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 196.

<sup>6</sup> Fazlur Rahman, “Recent Controversy over the Interpretation of *Shūrā*,” 294.

<sup>7</sup> Arberry, *Koran*, 87.

<sup>8</sup> Fazlur Rahman, “Recent Controversy over the Interpretation of *Shūrā*,” 294.

<sup>9</sup> Sayyid Abul A‘lā Mawdūdī. *Towards Understanding the Qur'ān: Abridged Version of Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. trans. and ed. Zafar Ishaq Ansari (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 1988), 1:278. In his footnote explaining what God meant by “You,” Mawdūdī says, “This is the same declaration that was made earlier (see verse 2:143 above). The Arabian Prophet (peace be on him) and his followers are informed that they are being assigned the guidance and leadership of the world, a position the Israelites had been relieved of because they had shown themselves unsuitable. *The Muslims* were charged with this responsibility because of their competence. They were the best people in terms of character and morals and had developed in theory and in practice the qualities essential for truly righteous leadership, namely the spirit and practical commitment to promoting good and suppressing evil and the acknowledgement of the One True God as their Lord and Master. In view of the task entrusted to them, they had to become conscious of their responsibilities and avoid the mistakes committed by their predecessors.” *Ibid.*, 1:278–79n88; emphasis mine.

<sup>10</sup> Fazlur Rahman, “Recent Controversy over the Interpretation of *Shūrā*,” 294.

for their argument.<sup>11</sup> The verse is 3:104, which says, “And let there be among you a community calling *others* to good and commanding equity and forbidding evil. And it is these who are blissful.”<sup>12</sup> According to Fazlur Rahman, “Mutawallī, therefore, argues that the *abl al-shūrā* are a well-specified group of people with special qualifications and that not everyone can have access to that precinct.”<sup>13</sup>

This article has now shown, through the writings of Fazlur Rahman, how Mutawallī tried to deconstruct the arguments of the modernists on the basis of the Qur’ān. Going a step further, he now presents his own arguments in favour of his point that the Qur’ān has never put its trust on the common men. Fazlur Rahman puts Mutawallī argument as,

In Islam, *shūrā* is not a question of numbers as the concept behind the system of general elections would indicate. In Islamic affairs, numerical majority is not the criterion of truth, for the Qur’ān has repudiated any such idea.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, Mutawallī cites numerous Qur’ānic verses to prove his point such as “Most people do not understand,”<sup>15</sup> “If you were to follow most of those on the earth, they would lead you astray from God’s path,” “We did not find most of them any (reliability in their) pacts and we, indeed, found most of them unrighteous,” and “most of them are ignorant.”<sup>16</sup> This is why, according to Mutawallī, God commands, “Ask the people of Admonition if you do not know.”<sup>17</sup>

Mutawallī gives two other arguments against the concept of direct franchise. The first one is that, while a direct democracy “may be feasible in a geographically restricted area like a given country, it is unpractical in the case of Islam which is a global religion.”<sup>18</sup> The second reason, as mentioned by Fazlur Rahman, is that, “while ritual aspect (*‘ibādāt*) of Islam is unchanging

---

<sup>12</sup> Abdul Majid Daryabadi, *Tafsir-ul-Qur’an: Translation and Commentary of the Holy Qur’an*, 3rd ed. (Lucknow: Academy of Islamic Research and Publications, 2007), 1:252. Mawdūdī translates it as “And from among you there must be a party who invite people to all that is good and enjoin the doing of all that is right and forbid the doing of all that is wrong.” Mawdūdī, *Towards Understanding the Qur’an*, 1:276. In Fazlur Rahman’s writings, this verse changes its meaning drastically.

<sup>13</sup> Fazlur Rahman, “Recent Controversy over the Interpretation of *Shūrā*,” 294.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* Mutawallī does not give the number of any verse he quotes here. Fazlur Rahman in a footnote comments, “There is no Qur’ānic verse with exactly this wording, although words like “they do not understand” occur in different contexts.” *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 294–95; Qur’ān 6:116; 7:102; and 6:111.

<sup>17</sup> Fazlur Rahman, “Recent Controversy over the Interpretation of *Shūrā*,” 295; Qur’ān 16:43.

<sup>18</sup> Fazlur Rahman, “Recent Controversy over the Interpretation of *Shūrā*,” 295.

and eternal, Islam has left the field of public affairs flexible, so that it can make necessary adjustments with changes in society. If this field were left inflexible, this would create difficulties for the people, something which Islam has repudiated on principle.”<sup>19</sup> Mutawallī further argues that the “direct democracy can lead to dictatorship as it did several times in France and Germany.”<sup>20</sup>

Mutawallī finally takes up the question of sovereignty. He begins by criticising certain earlier Egyptian authors like ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Rāziq (d. 1966) and Muḥammad Bikhkhīt al-Muṭī‘ī (d. 1935) for holding the view that Islam espouses the doctrine of the sovereignty of the *ummah*.<sup>21</sup> Mutawallī contends that the idea of sovereignty in a state is a modern concept that was first put forward to defend the divine right of kings and subsequently to support doctrines of popular sovereignty. Thus, he concludes that it is wrong to ask this question in an Islamic context. He suggests that if an Islamic factor has to be designated as corresponding to the modern concept of sovereignty, then it is the *sharī‘ah* or the law of Islam.<sup>22</sup>

The following is a general summary of each of Mutawallī’s arguments, as cited by Fazlur Rahman:

- The verses cited by the modernists to show that the intention of the Qur’ān is in favour of a democratic political system are not conveying the message; rather they show a kind of elitism.
- On the contrary, there are numerous verses expressing the Qur’ān’s mistrust in the generality of people in leadership matters.
- The system of direct democracy is suitable to a very limited geographical area, however it is either unsuitable or even impossible for a global religion like Islam.
- Since Islam gives a huge power to the *mujtahid* in law making, democracy is not suitable for this purpose, as majority of the people are not trained as a *mujtahid*.
- There are numerous examples in history where democracy ultimately turned into dictatorship.
- Finally, in Islam there is no question of sovereignty, in its modern sense, as all the sovereign powers lay within the purview of Almighty God.

Coming to the response of Fazlur Rahman, this article shows that he takes the concept of *shūrā* as a political institution, relating it to the larger question of the political role of Muslim community.

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 296.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 297.

### Fazlur Rahman's Arguments in Defense of Democracy

To begin, Fazlur Rahman poses the question of why God required a new community in the form of Muslims? He answers this question firstly by saying that the previous religious communities, such as Jews and Christians, went to one extreme or another in their ideas and conduct. This is why God assigned the function of balancing between those extremes to the Muslim community by proclaiming them as “median community” so that it can be a “witness upon mankind” i.e., mediate their extreme positions and balance them out: “And even so have we appointed you as a median community that you may be witness over men (II:142).”<sup>23</sup> Explaining this mediating role, Fazlur Rahman says,

Most probably what the Qur'an has immediately in mind is the middle position or balancing effect of the Muslim community as between the immobility or rigidity of Jewish particularism on the one hand and the excessively “accommodating” nature of Christianity on the other.<sup>24</sup>

According to him, the term “witness” has been taken to mean “balance” by some of the Qur'an's commentators. The reference of the balance here is between two sides of a scale. Hence, the idea is that

Muslims are the scale or the judge whereby those extremes are to be determined and they are also the modifiers whereby those extremes are to be smoothed out. The former is an intellectual or diagnostic function, while the latter is an operational one.<sup>25</sup>

The second reason for creating a new community, according to Fazlur Rahman, was that the order in the world required by God was missing in the practice of the people in actuality, hence, “Those (are Muslims)<sup>26</sup> who, when We give them power on the earth, shall establish prayers, pay *Zakat*, command good and prohibit evil—and to God belongs the end of the affairs.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the Qur'an states, “You are the best community produced for the mankind for you command good and prohibit evil, and you believe in God.”<sup>28</sup> The responsibility “of the *community*,” according to Fazlur Rahman,

---

<sup>23</sup> Fazlur Rahman, “Principle of *Shura*,” 2.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Both Arberry and Daryabadi do not mention Muslims in the translation, though Daryabadi in the footnote explains “Those” as the Muslim rulers. Daryabadi, *Tafsir-ul-Qur'an*, 3:188.

<sup>27</sup> Fazlur Rahman, “Principle of *Shura*,” 2; Qur'an 22:41.

<sup>28</sup> Fazlur Rahman, “Principle of *Shura*,” 2; Qur'an 3:110.

“is to establish on the earth an order by effectively prohibiting evil and commanding good on the basis of belief in a one and unique God.”<sup>29</sup>

After identifying the reasons for the need of a new community, the next and most important question is whether the assigned tasks are for the Muslim community as a whole or to a particular group or groups. Unlike Mutawallī, Fazlur Rahman firmly believes that the whole of the Muslim community is assigned this task as shown above in verse 22:40. Indeed, according to Fazlur Rahman, in the eyes of the Qur’ān the idea of elitism is so abhorrent that it explicitly and unequivocally states that all Muslims (*mu’mins*) are the bearers of the responsibility of “prohibiting evil and commanding good,” including both men and women.<sup>30</sup> Hence, “Believing men and believing women are friends and supporters of each other; they command good and prohibit evil, establish prayers, pay *Zakat* and obey God and His Messenger—these are the ones upon whom God is going to have His mercy; God is mighty and wise.”<sup>31</sup>

From the above verses, as translated by Fazlur Rahman, it can be concluded that while verse 22:40 of the Qur’ān speaks of the role of the global Muslim community, verse 9:71 above speaks of the mutual support and friendship of Muslims. This can act as a regulatory device of the internal relationships within the community.

It is interesting to note that another important verse which the traditionalists quote as proof of their view is where the Qur’ān speaks of a particular group who has been given the authority to regulate the behavior of the community i.e., “Let there be of you a community who call (people) to virtue, command good and prohibit evil—these shall be the successful ones.”<sup>32</sup> Fazlur Rahman translates this verse differently. In his view, the words “Let there be of you a community” can mean either “Let you be a community” or

<sup>29</sup> Fazlur Rahman, “Principle of *Shura*,” 2; emphasis mine.

<sup>30</sup> However, drawing from Fazlur Rahman’s early writings some scholars tends to conclude that at the time of political exigency he approved of a strong central figure as the head of state with all the powers concentrated in his individual. Tauseff Ahmad Parray writes that “Fazlur Rahman reaches the conclusion that from the Islamic point of view, ‘there can be no harm’ in having ‘strong men’ at the helm of affairs.” Parray refers to Fazlur Rahman’s articles of 1967 and 1970. See Tauseef Ahmad Parray, “Islamic Democracy or Democracy in Islam: Some Key Operational Democratic Concepts and Notions,” *World Journal of Islamic History and Civilization* 2, no. 2 (2012), 78. The present article, however, argues that on this particular issue Fazlur Rahman’s thought evolved with the passage of time and in his later writings he never mentioned any exigency of an all-powerful head of the state. Navin Haider, “Concept of *Shūra* in Fazlur Rahman’s Political Ideas at Practical Level,” *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 8, no. 2 (2018): 110–26.

<sup>31</sup> Fazlur Rahman, “Principle of *Shura*,” 3; Qur’ān 9:71.

<sup>32</sup> Fazlur Rahman, “Principle of *Shura*,” 2; Qur’ān 3:103.

“Let there be *from among* you a community or a group.”<sup>33</sup>

Such a meaning does not exist in the translations of Arberry, Daryabadi and Mawdūdī. Fazlur Rahman’s argument is as follows:

Since in the other verses discussed above, this phrase, refers to a general socio-political function, it is hardly likely that here it refers to religious leadership. It is far more likely that this verse, like the other two, also refers to the task of the Muslim community on the globe, viz., of building an ethically based socio-political order on the earth.<sup>34</sup>

Therefore, according to Fazlur Rahman it is the whole of the community which has been assigned the function of balancing and reforming the world. He is astonished by Mutawallī’s quotation and explanation of verses of the Qur’ān “Most people do not understand” (17:89) and “But most people refused except disbelief” (25:50) as denouncing the Muslim community. According to Fazlur Rahman,

The fact, however, is that none of the verses in these words occur has any reference to Muslims. . . . One may very well contend that, for example, the present-day Muslim community has, as a whole, strayed far away from Islam; but to contend that Muslims, in general, of the Prophet’s day could have been denounced by the Qur’ān in this way is absolutely inexplicable to me.<sup>35</sup>

Once it is established that Muslims are equally responsible for the tasks discussed above, the next question is how this would be achieved and how Muslims would mutually work it out? Here also, according to Fazlur Rahman, the Qur’ān comes to guide the believer. It implores Muslims to consider that the sole basis of their mutual relationship should be good will and cooperation. “Those who believe and mutually admonish each other with steadfastness and mutual mercy” and “Those who believe, do good works and support each other by admonishing with the truth and with steadfastness” (90:17; 53:3). Regarding mutual cooperation, the Qur’ān commands believers to “Cooperate on the basis of goodness warning each other against moral peril and do not cooperate on the basis of wrong-doing and transgression.”<sup>36</sup> The Qur’ān also prohibited the existence of secret groups that scheme against others, particularly against the Prophet and his policies.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Fazlur Rahman, “Principle of *Shura*,” 2.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>35</sup> Fazlur Rahman, “Recent Controversy over the Interpretation of *Shūrā*,” 299.

<sup>36</sup> Fazlur Rahman, “Principle of *Shura*,” 4.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*



Fazlur Rahman sums up whole of this debate by stating that the Qur'an defined the task and function of the Muslim community: (1) to erect a social-political order on the earth and to balance out extremes on the globe; (2) as far as the constitution of the Muslim society is concerned, it is relentlessly egalitarian and open, without elitism and secrecy; and (3) that the basis of the internal life and conduct of society is mutual good will and cooperation. The Qur'an tolerates *no* distinction between one believer and another, male or female, in their equal participation in the life and conduct of the community and in *any* aspect thereof.<sup>38</sup>

The next question is how this equality and egalitarianism would work in political matters. The answer is obviously through the institution of *shūrā*. Fazlur Rahman reiterates that the Qur'an did not create this principle; it was the democratic principle of decision making among the Arab tribes which the Qur'an confirmed. This institution takes its existence from two Qur'anic verses 42:38 and 3:159. The first states, "Those whose affairs are decided by mutual consultation (*amrūhum shūrā baynahum*)." Explaining this verse in his own terms Fazlur Rahman states, "Let us ponder first of all the phrase '*amrūhum*,' *their* affairs(s), i.e., the affair does not belong to an individual, a group or an elite, but is '*their* common affair' and belongs to the community as a whole."<sup>39</sup> He further urges the reader to "consider the command: *shūra bainahum*, i.e. (their common affair) is to be decided by *their* common and mutual consultation and discussion—not by an individual or an elite whom they have neither elected nor sanctioned."<sup>40</sup>

In the second verse related to *shūrā* addressing the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him), the Qur'an says, "Consult them in (the decision) of affairs (Qur'an, 3, 159)"<sup>41</sup> Fazlur Rahman highlights the importance attached to *shūrā* in the Qur'an as follows: "The Qur'an considers it of such importance that, in spite of the Prophet's exercise of absolute authority, it asks him to 'consult them in (the decision) of affairs.'"<sup>42</sup> He writes against the stance of Mutawallī that the opinion of *shūrā* was not binding upon the Prophet (peace be on him) because the second part of the verse means that, after taking the advice of *shūrā*, it is the Prophet (peace be on him) who has to take the final decision with or without considering the opinion of *shūrā*. Fazlur Rahman takes support from Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ghazālī who explains that the words of the Qur'an "rather mean that after obtaining advice from the community, the

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Fazlur Rahman, "Islam and Political Action, 156.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

Prophet should determine upon a course in accordance with the advice tendered and for its practical consequences, whatever they be, he should put his trust in God. . . . Otherwise, the Qur'ānic command to obtain advice would become children's play."<sup>43</sup>

Therefore, according to Fazlur Rahman, the Qur'ānic *shūrā* includes the whole of the community and not any particular group. Once this point is established now the question is what happened to this institution of *shūrā* in Islamic history after the death of the Prophet (peace be on him)? Fazlur Rahman's main thesis is that after the Prophet's (peace be on him) death, due to one or other exigencies such as war and conquests and subjugation of territories and their people, it was not possible to formalise or institutionalise *shūrā* into anything like an assembly.<sup>44</sup> The first test of *shūrā*, according to Fazlur Rahman, came immediately after the death of Muhammad (peace be on him) over the question of succession. The *ummah* came out successful by electing Abū Bakr in the Hall of Banū Sā'idah as their temporal leader. "But this is the first and last time in Islamic history that the community as a whole," Fazlur Rahman writes, "that is, its decision-making representative elements, met and saved the community from disintegration."<sup>45</sup>

Whatever course Sunni political actions and thought took during different times and no matter how much adjustment it made to meet the need of its time, Fazlur Rahman believes that it "never gave up the twin principles of the election of the caliph and the positive acceptance of his rule by the people through the oath of obeisance (*bai'a*)."<sup>46</sup> However, he also agrees to the fact that "this situation was a far cry from the Qur'ānic ideal which demanded rule through *shura*."<sup>47</sup>

Coming to the modern times with Western democracy as the predominant political system of the world, Fazlur Rahman believes that despite its numerous weaknesses, it still is the best form of government and near to the spirit of early Islam. According to him,

In the case of the introduction of democracy, the modernist was also convinced that democracy serves the requirements of the Qur'an much better than medieval forms of Islamic rule—be it caliphate or sultanate—which he regards at best as working solutions for those days and at worst as deviations from and distortions of Islam, which kept the Muslim community backward. . . . The adoption of democracy, therefore, is not "legitimation" but a genuine rediscovery.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Fazlur Rahman, "Recent Controversy over the Interpretation of *Shūrā*," 298–99.

<sup>44</sup> Fazlur Rahman, "Islam and Political Action," 156–59.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 160–61.

On the question of the ignorance of the masses, as discussed above with reference to the conservatives, Fazlur Rahman replies on two levels. One is that the Qur'ān should not be considered as a very difficult book, which a common person cannot understand. Hence, he argues, "If the Qur'an—which calls itself 'guidance for people'—had been such a difficult technical matter, it would not have addressed humankind in general."<sup>49</sup> The matter of the fact to him is that

The essential aim of the Qur'an—which is hardly a book of law—is to create proper conscience in people, to maximize moral energy and use that energy through appropriate channels. It can be effectively argued that the more you turn the Qur'an into a technical work, the more your conscience is dulled.<sup>50</sup>

On the basis of the above analysis of the teaching of the Qur'ān, Fazlur Rahman rejects the claim of the '*ulamā*' and any other elite group or individual that it is only their prerogative to understand and interpret the Qur'ān for the common people. The best example for this elitism and the numbing of conscience is, according to Fazlur Rahman, the claims of Ayatollah Khomeini (d. 1989) during the Iranian Islamic Revolution. In the name of Islam, the Iranian revolutionary government unleashed an unconscionable and uncontrolled spree of killing on all sorts of groups among its citizens who opposed the revolution.<sup>51</sup>

We find that Fazlur Rahman's criticism of Khomeini is much severer than his criticism of the regime of Pakistani General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq (d. 1988). According to Fazlur Rahman,

The extent to which deviation from Qur'anic standards has occurred is perhaps nowhere so palpably and sensationally illustrated as in Khomeini's Iran.<sup>52</sup>

Fazlur Rahman's main criticism is on the issue of the centralisation of political power around a religious personality and the perceived infallibility of that personality. Thus he argues that since the time of the sixth Imām Ja'far al-Šādiq, all *imāms* had eschewed the pursuit of political power and regarded their function as purely religious and educational. No *imām* in actual history had ever claimed infallibility.<sup>53</sup> He further states, "Now, Khomeini's position of 'rule by the clergy' is in patent contradiction with the Qur'an and even in

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

grave violation of traditional Shi'i religio-political thought."<sup>54</sup> To clarify his stance further, he says,

This critique of Khomaini's concept of the Islamic state and of others who reject democratic participation of the community in the governance of the state in favor of some kind of elitism, whether religious or other . . . is only intended to show how difficult it is to understand and appreciate the Qur'an on its own terms and without the coloration of centuries of tradition, vested interests, wishful thinking, and so on.<sup>55</sup>

However, Fazlur Rahman agrees with revivalists and traditionalists on the point that the standard of the masses to understand very simple and clear message of the Qur'an has also deteriorated with the passage of time. He says,

Although the Muslim community is explicitly charged with performing certain tasks and certain goals, Muslim masses, by and large, are said to be ignorant of these tasks and goals, and, because of their lack of proper awareness of the meaning of Islam, have become assimilated to the condition of non-Muslim societies.<sup>56</sup>

However, he does not seem to agree that the Muslim community at large has permanently and hopelessly lost the Islamic vision of life, arguing,

If this is so, then no amount of self-styled elites, political, religious, or intellectual can save the situation for Islam, for the Qur'an has reposed its charge and its trust in the Muslim Community alone and does not talk about elites.<sup>57</sup>

Rather, he has hope and faith in the community because (i) this community in its earliest phase has in the actual history fulfilled this responsibility, and (ii) the Sunni Islam has never given up, at least ideally, the idea of *shūrā* and *ijmā'*.<sup>58</sup>

Fazlur Rahman blames the general lack of understanding Islam to the various Muslim governments and religious leaders, particularly the latter for their grave neglect of educating Muslims at large. The religious leaders are more responsible because

The Qur'an specifically states that certain people from every group or part of the community should learn the faith with understanding and insight and then teach

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>56</sup> Fazlur Rahman, "Principle of *Shura*," 8.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 8.

others, so that the whole of the community develops an adequate understanding of Islam (Qur'an, 9, 122).<sup>59</sup>

However, once the *'ulamā'* are ready with a real understanding of Islam, they can once again help the masses to understand Qur'ānic teaching better, and the result would be that "a genuine Islamic conscience is cultivated in the public mind."<sup>60</sup> The task of reconstruction of a whole, real *ummah* on the ground that Fazlur Rahman suggests is a large task. Admitting this reality, he stresses that

In the meantime, the participatory association of the Umma, through directly ascertaining the will of the Umma, in decision-making in the political and legislative life of the community can neither be rejected nor postponed.<sup>61</sup>

Therefore, according to Fazlur Rahman, Muslim countries must adopt a democratic system and simultaneously strive to create a Muslim *umma* on similar democratic grounds. Looking at the Muslim world in the 1970s and 1980s, however, Fazlur Rahman knew quite well that instead of turning into democracies these countries were turning towards fundamentalism, an even more dangerous condition. Moreover, countries that had a rudimentary type of democracy, such as Pakistan, were also turning into extremists and fundamentalists in their attitudes and autocrats in their political systems. Fazlur Rahman knew well that the present situation in which the Muslim community found itself was not only the result of its own weaknesses but also because of the stress of the international condition. Therefore, he suggests that Muslim political authorities

instead of looking at other communities and peoples and jumping to conclusions by drawing wrong analogies therefrom, must first look to Islam and to their own selves and attempt to put their own house in order. Whether or not other societies have goals and ideals and, if they do, what these goals and ideals are, is not the Muslims' concern *at this stage*.<sup>62</sup>

To another argument of Mutawallī on the weakness of the democratic system, Fazlur Rahman responds,

---

<sup>59</sup> Fazlur Rahman, "Islam and Political Action," 162.

<sup>60</sup> Fazlur Rahman, "A Recent Controversy over the Interpretation of *Shūrā*," 300.

<sup>61</sup> Fazlur Rahman, "Principle of *Shūrā*," 9.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

There is no unitary center for the Islamic world which is divided into so many countries, big and small. Should, however, the Muslim countries decide upon some effective form of unity, the parliaments or legislative assemblies in these countries can always act as electoral colleges and, since these have presumably been elected by a popular vote, this procedure should be sufficient.<sup>63</sup>

On the question that direct democracy leads to dictatorship, Fazlur Rahman's reply is that it is not democracy but democratic methods that are sometimes exploited by dictators. He still believes that

Democracy of general polls may not be the best conceivable system in the world, but it is certainly the best system working in the world and the one least exploited by any dictator.<sup>64</sup>

On another important question of the concept of sovereignty in Islam, Fazlur Rahman appreciates Mutawalli's basic stance as compared to that of Mawdūdi who considered the concept of modern popular sovereignty as polytheism (*shirk*). Mutawalli argues that "the idea of sovereignty in a state is a modern growth, that it was first put forward to defend the divine right of kings and subsequently to support doctrines of popular sovereignty."<sup>65</sup> But when he concludes from therein that "it is wrong to ask this question in an Islamic context,"<sup>66</sup> Fazlur Rahman did not agree, providing the counterargument that

It is clear that by thinking away a problem, that problem will not go away and Muslims have to decide which one—among the three visible factors or powers in the modern political structure, namely the community, the parliament, and the head of state—has the most basic or ultimate political power or effective force.<sup>67</sup>

Fazlur Rahman's own inclination is obviously to the first one, that is, "It is the community which is the repository of supreme power."<sup>68</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper has dealt with Fazlur Rahman's response to the Islamist 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Mutawalli's views on Islam and democracy. Fazlur Rahman was clearly in favour of the modern concept of democracy, with of course a touch

---

<sup>63</sup> Fazlur Rahman, "Recent Controversy over the Interpretation of *Shūrā*," 295.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

of Islam. He argued against the elitism of the Islamists when selecting the head of a state in an Islamic-democratic country. Arguing in favour of modern democracy during that period was like swimming against the tide and made oneself a target of Islamist criticism.

Free will of the common man in political matters and public affairs was central in Fazlur Rahman's concept of democracy, but he was not prepared to let go the concept of a commanding God. This was the main contradiction of modernists who were criticised since the beginning of the movement, including by observers from Wilfred Cantwell Smith<sup>69</sup> (d. 2000) to Kenneth Cragg (d. 2012).<sup>70</sup> These authors believed that Islamic modernists have grossly failed in their attempt to reconcile Western institutions with the teachings of Islam. Most of the time, one of the two slips from their hands and makes their arguments seem contradictory, a view which is not completely incorrect.<sup>71</sup> Comparing Fazlur Rahman with Mawdūdī, Jon Armajani puts forward a question about Fazlur Rahman's views. He asks,

Are there any limits to free speech within the Islamic democracy that he envisions? That is, if Rahman is asserting the importance of free speech within his democracy, would he permit the kind of speech and establishment of institutions that were anti-Islamic? And, if so, which criteria would be used to determine which ideas or institutions are anti-Islamic and which steps would be taken—within an ostensibly democratic system—to impede or punish such anti-Islamic behaviors or institutions?<sup>72</sup>

Armajani believes that Fazlur Rahman does not give satisfactory answers to these questions in his writings. However, he is convinced that however weak his arguments seem to be, it would be these very arguments which would be the centre of the debate on democracy in the Islamic world. The author of this study tends to side with the conclusion of Armajani that "while Rahman's vision may contain contradictions, Rahman's Islam-based principles related to *shūrā*, *ijmā'*, egalitarianism, and justice have had, and may continue to have, substantial impact on discourse about Islamic political structures, particularly

<sup>69</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Islam in Modern History* (New York: Mentor Books, 1959).

<sup>70</sup> Kenneth Cragg, *The Pen and the Faith: Eight Modern Muslim Writers and the Qur'an* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1985).

<sup>71</sup> The present author has written an article in which this dilemma was discussed. See Navin Haider, "Dilemma of Islamic Modernism: The Case of Dr. Fazlur Rahman's Islam," *Hamdard Islamicus* 31, no. 3 (2008): 49–57.

<sup>72</sup> Jon Armajani, "Islam and Democracy in the Thought of Fazlur Rahman and Sayyid Abu'l-A'la Mawdudi," in *Religion and Representation: Islam and Democracy*, ed. Ingrid Mattson, Paul Nesbitt-Larking, and Nawaz Tahir (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 44.

in the midst of the current political flux in significant parts of Muslim-majority world, including contemporary Pakistan.”<sup>73</sup>



---

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.