Conceptualizing Democracy in the Classical Islamic Tradition: *A Turāth* Literature Analysis on Sovereignty and Consultation

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Abstract

This study explores the concept of a democratic system of governance from an Islamic perspective through a critical examination of *turāth* (Islamic classical heritage) literature. While democracy centered on the principle of popular sovereignty has been widely adopted globally, including in Indonesia, its compatibility with Islam remains a subject of debate. Certain Muslim groups argue that democracy contradicts Islamic teachings and advocate for alternatives such as the implementation of sharī'ah law or the re-establishment of the caliphate. Employing a qualitative, descriptive-analytical approach through library research, this study draws primarily on the works of classical scholars (*salaf*) and relevant literature. Using content and discourse analysis, the research reinterprets foundational Islamic concepts in light of contemporary democratic ideals. Findings suggest that key democratic principles such as representative decision-making and public welfare (*maṣlaḥah*) are not only compatible with Islamic governance but also reflected in the Islamic practice of *shūrā* (consultation). In Islam, *shūrā* involves participatory deliberation by competent and trustworthy representatives of the community. Thus, this study concludes that democracy, when framed through Islamic ethical values, holds significant potential for promoting justice, welfare, and accountable governance in Muslim societies.

Keywords: Democracy, Welfare, *Shura*, *Turāth*

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi konsep sistem pemerintahan yang demokratis dari perspektif Islam melalui telaah kritis terhadap literatur *turāth* (warisan klasik Islam). Meskipun demokrasi yang berpusat pada prinsip kedaulatan rakyat telah diadopsi secara luas secara global, termasuk di Indonesia, kesesuaiannya dengan Islam masih menjadi perdebatan. Beberapa kelompok Muslim berpendapat bahwa demokrasi bertentangan dengan ajaran Islam dan menganjurkan alternatif lain seperti penerapan hukum syariat atau pembentukan kembali kekhalifahan. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, deskriptif-analitis melalui penelitian kepustakaan, penelitian ini mengacu pada karya-karya ulama klasik (*salaf*) dan literatur yang relevan. Dengan menggunakan analisis isi dan wacana, penelitian ini menafsirkan kembali konsep-konsep dasar Islam dalam konteks cita-cita demokrasi kontemporer. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa prinsip-prinsip demokrasi utama seperti pengambilan keputusan perwakilan dan kesejahteraan masyarakat

(*maṣlaḥah*) tidak hanya sesuai dengan tata kelola pemerintahan Islam, tetapi juga tercermin dalam praktik *shūrā* (konsultasi) dalam Islam. Dalam Islam, shūrā melibatkan musyawarah partisipatif oleh perwakilan masyarakat yang kompeten dan dapat dipercaya. Dengan demikian, penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa demokrasi, ketika dibingkai melalui nilai-nilai etika Islam, memiliki potensi yang signifikan untuk mendorong keadilan, kesejahteraan, dan pemerintahan yang bertanggung jawab dalam masyarakat Muslim.

Kata Kunci: Demokrasi, Kesejahteraan, Syura, Turāth

Introduction

The implementation of a sound system of governance is one of the key factors in maintaining political stability within a country, enabling it to achieve its national objectives. Systems of government vary across nations, including presidential, parliamentary, democratic, communist, and liberal models. Among these, democracy is often regarded as the most favorable system. As noted by Wilson Churchill and cited by Anwar in his book Perspektif Ilmu Politik, many regimes around the world claim to adopt democratic governance (Arifin, 2025).

Democracy, which emphasizes popular sovereignty and governance by elected representatives, is one of the most widely applied systems globally. In Indonesia, this is reflected in the Preamble of the 1945 Constitution, particularly the fourth paragraph:"...the independence of the Indonesian nation is formulated into a Constitution of the State of Indonesia, which is based on popular sovereignty." This constitutional reference clearly indicates that Indonesia adheres to a democratic system in which governance and legislation are grounded in the will of the people.

As the largest Muslim-majority country in the world, Indonesia continues to face debates regarding the implementation of Islamic law, particularly in relation to governance and political systems. The adoption of democracy has been met with resistance from certain Islamic groups. One notable example is Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), a fundamentalist religio-political movement advocating for a return to Islamic scriptural foundations. HTI was officially dissolved in March 2018 under the Decree of the Minister of Law and Human Rights No. AHU-30.AHA.01.08.2017, revoking its legal recognition.

Critics of democracy argue that it contradicts Islamic principles, asserting that governance must be based solely on sharīʿah, with some even insisting that implementing Islamic law is a religious obligation. Some Islamic groups go further by advocating for the establishment of an Islamic caliphate (Assyaukanie, 2002). A segment of these groups even label Indonesia a ṭāghūt (tyrannical state) for adopting democracy.

However, Islamic foundational texts (naṣṣ) do not prescribe a specific model of government or political structure. Abu Zur'ah notes that the Prophet Muhammad did not designate any clear textual guidance on leadership. Al-Nawawī, as cited in his commentary on Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, concurs, and this view is widely accepted among Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah (Zur'ah, 2004). Al-Zuḥaylī also explains that terms such as al-imāmah al-ʿuẓmā, khilāfah, and imārat al-mu'minīn all point to the same core meaning: the highest authority in governance. While scholars differ in terminology, the essence remains consistent: what matters is the existence of a state governed by a leader capable of managing its affairs and safeguarding it from threats (al-Zuḥaylī, 2004). This study aims to conduct an in-depth examination of the concept of democratic governance widely adopted globally through the lens of Islamic perspectives by analyzing classical Islamic (turāth) literature.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical orientation and employs the method of library research. Four main features characterize library research. First, the researcher engages in direct analysis of texts (*naṣṣ*). Second, the data sources are readily available for use. Third, the data typically consist of secondary sources. Fourth, the scope of library data is not constrained by time or geographical boundaries. The primary data in this research consist of classical works by *salaf* scholars that discuss the conceptual foundations of democratic systems of governance. These are supplemented by other relevant texts that support the aims and themes of this study. Analytical and critical, the research seeks to explore the subject matter in depth and to analyze the data through a critical lens, reflecting its analytical-critical

character. The findings are then interpreted in relation to contemporary contexts and socio-political conditions to ensure the ongoing relevance of the study. This analytical study makes use of content analysis and discourse analysis methods to uncover underlying meanings, patterns, and ideological structures within the texts under review.

Result and Discussion
The Theory of Democracy

Democracy is a term that is no longer unfamiliar in discussions of state governance and constitutional systems. Etymologically, democracy derives from two Greek words: demos, meaning "the people," and cratein or cratos, meaning "power" or "rule." Thus, in terminological terms, democracy can be defined as sovereignty residing in the hands of the people. Popular sovereignty implies that the highest authority within a state is governed by the will of its people (Rangkuti, 2018). According to Azyumardi Azra, democracy refers to a condition in which a country adopts a system of governance based on the sovereignty of the people, whereby the highest power is vested in the collective decisions of the citizenry the people rule. Governance is by and for the people (Azra, 2000).

Afifa Rangkuti, in her study, cites several scholars who offer diverse yet complementary perspectives on the concept of democracy. Joseph A. Schumpeter views democracy as an institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals gain power to make decisions through competitive struggles for the people's vote. This view emphasizes the procedural and competitive nature of democracy. Sidney Hook, on the other hand, stresses the participatory essence of democracy, defining it as a form of government in which decisions are made by majority agreement freely given by adult citizens. His definition underscores the importance of voluntary public participation in decision-making.

Meanwhile, Henry B. Mayo defines democracy as a political system in which public policies are determined by a majority through elected representatives in periodic elections. This system is grounded in the

principle of political equality and is conducted within a climate that guarantees political freedoms. Together, these perspectives highlight that democracy encompasses not only electoral mechanisms but also requires meaningful participation, political liberty, and equality in the public decision-making process.

From the above explanations, it can be concluded that democracy is a system of governance grounded in the authority and decisions of the people to determine laws, leaders, and policies either directly or through elected representatives. In other words, it is the people who ultimately decide on the rules, policies, and leadership that shape the governance of the state.

The concept of democracy itself emerged from reflections on the relationship between the state and law in Ancient Greece and was implemented in the life of the polis. The form of democracy practiced was direct democracy, whereby citizens exercised their right to make political decisions directly and collectively through majority rule. This direct model was feasible due to the simplicity of the ancient Greek city-states, which were confined to small territories and had populations of around 300,000. Furthermore, democratic rights were limited to official citizens, who made up only a small portion of the total population (Budiardjo, 1982).

In her research, Cora Elly notes that the practice of democracy varies widely across countries. Each nation and even individuals define and apply the concept of democracy differently, according to their respective interpretations and criteria (Noviati, 2013). At its core, however, the principle of democracy popular sovereignty means active public participation in the decision-making process. This ensures that all enacted laws and policies genuinely reflect the people's sense of justice.

Democracy from an Islamic Perspective

The term democracy, in its literal form, is not found in the classical works of early Muslim scholars (ulama' salaf). As discussed in the previous chapter, democracy originates from Greek political thought and

later developed in Western nations. During the golden age of Islamic civilization, most political systems were monarchical, where the head of state wielded full authority over governance. However, despite the absence of the term itself, the core principles underpinning democratic governance can be identified within Islamic thought, as reflected in the writings of classical scholars.

One such scholar is al-Māwardī, who extensively examined governance in his seminal work Al-Aḥkām al-Sulṭāniyyah. He posits that leadership (imāmah) serves as a continuation of the Prophet's role in preserving religion and managing worldly affairs. According to him, appointing a capable leader to guide the Muslim community is a religious obligation, agreed upon by consensus among scholars (*ijmāʿ*) (al-Māwardī, 2015). The duties of a leader, as outlined by al-Māwardī, include safeguarding religion in accordance with its principles and issuing legal rulings. From this explanation, it is clear that leadership in al-Māwardī's view carries a dual function: religious (as a successor to the Prophet in upholding Islamic law) and political (as the head of government responsible for public welfare).

Al-Māwardī also emphasizes that the people must recognize their leader as their representative, entrusted with formulating policies that benefit the public. This implies that the leader functions as a delegate of the people expected to govern responsibly and prioritize the public good. Such a notion closely aligns with democratic principles, where sovereignty resides with the people, and the government operates "by the people and for the people." Nevertheless, in al-Māwardī's framework, decision-making authority still primarily rests with the ruler, though it must always consider the people's welfare (maṣlaḥah).

A more direct discussion on democracy within Islamic jurisprudence is offered by the contemporary scholar Wahbah al-Zuḥaylī. In his book *Al-Qaḍāyā al-Fiqhiyyah wa al-Fikriyyah al-Muʿāṣirah*, al-Zuḥaylī defines democracy within the framework of legal-political jurisprudence as "government by the people." He echoes Abraham Lincoln's famous definition of democracy as "government of the people, by the people, and for the people." He also acknowledges that contemporary

understandings of democracy vary across nations and individuals (al-Zuḥaylī, 2006). Quoting Usman Khalil, al-Zuḥaylī notes that democracy rests on two foundational principles: political democracy and social democracy (Khalil, 1958).

According to Usman Khalil, political democracy upholds human rights and public freedoms, enabling society to guide both governance and the pursuit of the common good. In this light, democracy, as envisioned here, entails equal participation of citizens in shaping government policy for the sake of public welfare. Consistent with this, al-Zuḥaylī maintains that democracy has two core principles: first, governance by and for the people, and second, the guarantee of rights and freedoms as the ultimate ideals of democratic life.

The Islamic concept of governance bears significant resemblance to the ideals of democracy. Both prioritize public welfare (*maṣlaḥah*) as the central goal of governance. Achieving this objective necessarily involves the active participation and contribution of the people. In both Islamic governance and modern democratic systems, the governing council or legislative authority acts as the representative body of the people. However, Islamic governance holds an additional dimension. Besides being a representative of the people in state affairs, the ruler is also considered a successor to the Prophet in upholding and enforcing the Sharīʿah.

Principles of the Democratic System According to Islamic Views

The democratic theory advocates for a government by the people, meaning that governmental policies and regulations should reflect the will and aspirations of the people through a system of majority rule. The principle of majority rule here refers to decision-making based on the preferences of the majority while still upholding the rights and dignity of minority groups. This reflects the close relationship between democracy and the practice of deliberation or consultation, in which every citizen has the right to express their views regarding governmental policies, and the decision ultimately adopted is the one supported by the most potent or most prevalent opinion.

Consultation (*shūrā*) is a highly encouraged principle in Islam. The foundation for deliberation in Islamic teachings can be found in both the Qur'an and the Sunnah. One of the primary textual bases that emphasize the importance of *shūrā* is found in Surah Āli' Imrān [3]: 159, which underscores the value of involving the community in decision-making processes.

According to numerous exegetes (*mufassirūn*), the verse in *Sūrah Āli ʿImrān* [3:159] is understood as a divine command addressed directly to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, instructing him to engage in consultation (*shūrā*) with his Companions. This directive was not merely intended as a mechanism for decision-making but also served as a gesture of respect, appreciation, and emotional engagement toward the Companions. Although the Prophet was *maʿṣūm* (divinely protected from error) and received direct revelation from Allah, the command to consult others is understood as part of the prophetic etiquette (*adab al-nubuwwah*) in leadership, namely, listening to and involving the perspectives of the community (al-Ṭabarī, 2000).

Furthermore, exegetes have interpreted this verse as carrying implications not only for the Prophet himself but also for the Muslim community after his passing. Sufyān ibn ʿAṭiyyah, as cited by al-Ṭabarī, asserted that this verse establishes the precedent for Muslims to engage in consultation regarding matters not explicitly addressed by the Prophet (al-Ṭabarī, 2000). In this sense, *shūrā* becomes a vital instrument in the socio-political life of the Muslim ummah in the post-Prophetic era.

In a similar vein, al-Tsaʿlabī cites al-Ḥasan's opinion that the command to consult was intended to serve as a model for the Prophet's followers, encouraging them to emulate his practice of inclusive deliberation. Thus, the Prophet's engagement in consultation becomes a form of practical *sunnah*, providing a collective decision-making model for the Muslim community (al-Tsaʿlabī, 2002). Abū Jaʿfar, as also quoted by al-Ṭabarī, argued that Muslims who follow the Prophet's example in engaging in consultation motivated by the pursuit of truth and not driven

by selfish desires will continue to receive divine guidance and assistance. This underscores the spiritual significance of *shūrā*, which transcends its procedural function and becomes an ethical method for attaining truth that is pleasing to Allah (al-Ṭabarī, 2000). Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī further elaborated that the purpose of the Prophet's consultation was to ensure that every participant earnestly sought the most beneficial outcome (*maṣlaḥah*) in any given matter. As a result, the conclusions reached through *shūrā* are not only rational and wise but also resonate with the hearts of those involved and gain collective legitimacy (al-Rāzī, 1420 H).

This verse provides both a theological and historical foundation for the elevated status of consultation in Islam. It affirms *shūrā* not merely as a political strategy, but as a moral and spiritual method for achieving communal well-being and public good.

The previously mentioned verse directly commands the Prophet to consult with his Companions, and this clearly serves as a foundational basis for his followers to emulate him. Indeed, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was well known for frequently engaging in consultation when making decisions. As narrated by the Companion Abū Hurayrah and cited by al-Ṭabarī:

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وكان أبو هريرة يقول: ما رأيت أحدا قطّ كان أكثر مُشاورة لأصحابه من النبيّ صَلَّى الله عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّم

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Wahbah al-Zuḥaylī, in his Tafsīr al-Munīr, explains that the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ practice of consultation (shūrā) encompassed a wide range of matters, including military strategy, the treatment of prisoners of war, governance (siyāsah), financial affairs, and other policies related to public welfare (maṣlaḥah). Numerous hadiths attest to the Prophet's frequent consultation with his Companions. The Companions themselves subsequently adopted this practice in matters of policy and leadership. One notable example is the appointment of Abū Bakr as the Prophet's successor after his death, which was the result of collective deliberation. During his leadership, Abū Bakr also regularly engaged in consultation with scholars, prominent Muslim figures, and members of the community when deciding important matters. This tradition of shūrā

was likewise continued by subsequent Caliphs (Ibn Ḥajar, 1379 H). The principle of consultation is thus deeply rooted in both the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet, which is reflected in his actions and statements as a fundamental practice in Islamic governance and decision-making.

Another verse that explains about deliberation is also found in QS. Al-Syura [42] verse 38:

وَالَّذِينَ اسْتَجَابُوا لِرَبِّهِمْ وَأَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَأَمْرُهُمْ شُورَى بَيْنَهُمْ وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَاهُمْ يُنْفِقُونَ

This verse was revealed in reference to the Anṣār (the Helpers) who were invited by the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ to believe in Allah. In this verse, Allah praises them for their response: accepting the call to faith, establishing prayer, and practicing mutual consultation (shūrā) in their affairs ('Abd al-Salām, 1996). Al-Māwardī, in his work al-Nukat wa al-'Uyūn, outlines several interpretations by exegetes regarding the phrase *wa amruhum shūrā baynahum* ("their affairs are [decided] by mutual consultation") (al-Māwardī, 2000). He presents four views: First, before the arrival of the Prophet, the Anṣār already practiced consultation in their decision-making, and Allah praised them for this noble tradition. Second, they were committed to adhering to the outcome of their deliberations without dissent, and this unity earned divine commendation. Third, this consultation occurred when they heard news of the Prophet's emergence and agreed to meet at the house of Abū Ayyūb to pledge their faith and offer their support. Fourth, they were characterized by mutual consultation in all matters, avoiding authoritarianism or monopolization of decision-making.

Building on this verse, Abū Zahrah, in his tafsir, affirms that the principle of consultation remains binding for those other than the Prophet. He writes: "It is unanimously agreed that consultation remains obligatory for anyone other than the Prophet ﷺ. This is affirmed in Allah's words: *wa amruhum shūrā baynahum*, meaning that matters of public concern among Muslims must be resolved through mutual consultation, exchange of views, cooperation, and sincerity in speech." Abū Zahrah further cites a hadith in which the Prophet said: "Religion is

sincere advice." When asked, "To whom?" the Prophet replied: "To Allah, His Book, His Messenger, the leaders of the Muslim community, and to all Muslims." Thus, sincere advice for the believers is realized through consultation" (Zahrah, 2000).

Decision-making through consultation (shūrā) is highly regarded in Islam. This principle is clearly reflected in the aforementioned Qur'anic verses and their interpretations by scholars. Islam places great value on the opinions of the community in determining public policies. The practice of consultation aims to discern the will of the people and to identify the most appropriate opinion as a foundation for policy decisions that serve the public good (maṣlaḥah). It is well established in Islamic jurisprudence that matters open to consultation are those for which there is no explicit naṣṣ (textual injunction) in the Qur'an or Sunnah.

This explanation reinforces the understanding that consultation is a religious recommendation, even considered sunnah in many contexts. In democratic theory, the voice of the people is a central tenet. Public participation in governance is a fundamental concept within the democratic system. A democratic state must provide a platform for gathering public opinion and deliberating on such views in order to formulate policies and enact laws. This process is not in conflict with Islamic principles. In fact, Islam deeply values the role of public opinion and intellectual engagement in promoting the common good. Both democracy and Islam share the view that community involvement is essential in the policy-making process.

Governance by the People

In a democratic system of governance, political authority is vested in the people. This means that government officials and power holders are, in essence, representatives of the people, and the process of policy-making must also reflect the people's will. Modern democracy is predominantly representative, whereby the public elects representatives to express their aspirations, opinions, and interests in legislative deliberations and government decision-making.

Wahbah al-Zuḥaylī notes that during the early period of Islam, participation in consultation was limited. He states: "In the early Islamic era, those who participated in *shūrā* (consultation) were limited to individuals of sound opinion *ahl al-ḥall wa al-ʿaqd,* which included scholars, tribal leaders, experts, and protectors of the community's legal interests" (al-Zuḥaylī, 2000).

In classical *fiqh* literature, various examples illustrate the involvement of experts in the decision-making process. For instance, in judicial matters, al-Nawawī stated: "It is *sunnah* for a judge to consult scholars of jurisprudence in difficult matters" (al-Nawawī, 2000). This indicates that consultation by those in authority, especially judges, should be carried out with those knowledgeable in *fiqh*.

This practice is rooted in the actions of Abū Bakr, who regularly sought the counsel of experts in jurisprudence (*ahl al-raʾy* and *ahl al-fiqh*) by inviting prominent youths from both the *Anṣār* and the *Muhājirūn* to deliberate over complex matters. When consensus was reached, that decision was adopted as binding legal judgment (al-Nawawī, 2000).

Al-Māwardī elaborates on Imām al-Shāfiʿī's view that a judge should not consult those who lack competence in religious knowledge. He quotes al-Shāfiʿī as saying: "A judge should only consult in difficult cases those who are well-versed in the Qur'an, Sunnah, transmitted traditions (*āthār*), scholarly opinions, *qiyās* (analogical reasoning), and the Arabic language." Al-Māwardī affirms: "This view is sound, and it sets the criteria for those whom judges may consult on legal matters. In essence, anyone qualified to issue a *fatwā* in *sharīʿah* is also qualified to be consulted by a judge. What is taken into account is the qualification for issuing *fatwā*, not for holding judicial office. Therefore, it is permissible for a judge to consult a blind person, a servant, or a woman, provided they meet the criteria for legal expertise" (al-Māwardī, 2000).

In matters of consultation (shūrā), Abū al-Qāsim ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAwdah holds the view that ahl al-shūrā are identical to ahl al-ḥall wa al-ʿaqd individuals who possess insight and understanding regarding the affairs of the Muslim community. He writes: "Those qualified for

consultation are ahl al-ḥall wa al-ʿaqd and individuals who have a deep understanding of the issues concerning the Muslim ummah. Their number is limited in proportion to the size and condition of the community. It is not feasible for the entire population to act as consultants, as consultation should be addressed only to those who are mature and capable of offering sound opinions. A consultation is not valid unless attended by those with intellectual maturity and expertise in the matter under discussion" (ʿAwdah, 1981).

In a related discussion on ahl al-ḥall wa al-ʿaqd in the context of governance, ʿAbd al-Wahhāb Khalāf states that they are individuals chosen by the community from among those who are just, knowledgeable, intellectually capable, and widely followed in public affairs. He explains: "Ahl al-ḥall wa al-ʿaqd are people selected by the community from among those who possess justice, knowledge, intellectual capacity, and are followed by the public in general affairs" (Khalāf, 1988).

From these explanations, it can be concluded that in Islam, valid participants in shūrā are those who are just, possess substantial knowledge in the issue being discussed, and are capable of offering sound reasoning. These individuals typically include scholars, jurists, respected community leaders, and those elected or followed by the people. Consultation is not carried out with the general public en masse, as not all individuals possess the intellectual capacity or expertise necessary for problem-solving or policy formulation.

This concept aligns with the modern idea of representative democracy, where governance by the people is not exercised directly by the entire populace, but rather through elected representatives. In the Islamic model, consultation is conducted by those chosen by society to express their collective views and interests, which are then translated into policies or laws for the common good.

Nevertheless, Islam continues to uphold the right of every citizen to express opinions and contribute to policy discussions. Moreover, every individual has the right to choose their representatives or leaders

according to their preferences. The door to expression and consultation remains open to all members of society.

Conclusion

Based on research findings on the democratic system from an Islamic perspective, it can be concluded that democracy is a system of governance founded upon the principle of popular sovereignty, encapsulated in the slogan: "of the people, by the people, and for the people." In this system, public policy originates from the will of the people, is decided by their representatives, and is implemented for the welfare of the populace. Islam firmly upholds the value of public participation in decision-making. This principle is reflected in the concept of *shūrā* (consultation), whereby citizens are given space to express their aspirations and opinions on public matters. Scriptural sources in Islamic law indicate that consultation is an essential component of ideal governance in Islam. Although the practice of shūrā in Islam primarily involves individuals with expertise, integrity, and scholarly insight corresponding to the concept of representative democracy Islam also guarantees the right of every citizen to express their views as part of the broader principle of freedom of expression. Both democracy and Islam share common ground in their orientation toward maṣlaḥah (public welfare). In Islam, however, the principle of welfare extends beyond worldly benefit to include eternal salvation. Thus, democracy and Islam can reinforce one another in establishing a just and people-centered system of governance.

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