THE ANTI-CORRELATION BETWEEN DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN THE EXPERIENCE OF THE KHULUFAH RASHIDÛN

by Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad, Ph.D.
Minaret of Freedom Institute
4323 Rosedale Avenue
Bethesda, MD 20814
301-907-0947
ahmad@minaret.org

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ABSTRACT

We consider the proposition that there is an anti-correlation between the democratic process, effectively implemented, and political violence. We focus on the issue of the election of leaders taking the cases of succession of the *khulufah rashidûn,* how each came to power and left power. We suggest that the more democratic the means of accession to power the less likely that the cessation of power will be violent.

Abu Bakr was elected to office by a vote of the acknowledged leaders of the general community. The process was clearly democratic in that is akin to the Electoral College by which the president of the United States is elected. Although there was a controversy over the nonparticipation of supporters of Ali, this defect does not disqualify the process from being considered democratic unless the dispute over the Florida electors in the American Presidential election of 2000 is seen as disqualifying that election from being considered democratic. Abu Bakr left office after two years by natural death. Umar came to power by appointment by his predecessor (a less democratic method, selection by a single elector), but after ten years in office was assassinated. Uthman came to power by selection by an advisory council (an even less democratic method in that the electors were also unelected) and was murdered after twelve years. Ali came to power through civil war and after five years was murdered. The key issues in the controversies over both Uthman's tenure and Ali's election were related to public discontent over charges against Uthman's administration. The absence of democratic methods for peaceful termination of Umar's tenure and electing his successor play a role in the violence that emerged.

The experience of the *khulufah rashidûn,* an indisputably Islamic context, indicates that while democratic means of succession and tenure are not the only ones consistent with Islamic principles, they have a demonstrable pragmatic value in reducing political violence. We conclude that Muslims should embrace democratic methods of succession and tenure in office in order to minimize political violence.

The question of whether Islam is compatible with democracy has become prominent in discussions of the Islamic resurgence and of the role of religion in the modern world. It is well established that *shûrah* (consultation) is a mandatory element of social organization under Islam, but the question remains debated as to precisely what is *shûrah* and to what degree can modern democratic mechanisms such as are practiced in the Western world be considered appropriate and viable examples of *shûrah.* This paper makes no effort to comprehensively examine all aspects of this question. We shall restrict ourselves to a single question: Do democratic forms of accession and tenure offer a practical benefit to the community, thereby qualifying under the Islamic principle of *maṣlâḥah*, the public interest? We shall seek to answer this question by examining the degree to which the presence of democratic elements as might be recognized by modern advocates of the democratic process were present or absent in the time of the *khulufah rashidûn* (the"Righteous caliphs") and the presence or absence of violence in the circumstances of those processes.

We have elsewhere argued (Ahmad 1999) that democracy has a pragmatic benefit in that it tends to reduce the amount of violence in a society by providing a peaceful mechanism by which leaders could come to power and by which their tenure might be ended. While there is no guarantee that the leaders elected by a majority (or by electors sanctioned by a majority) will be the best person for the job, yet it is certain that a leader without the support of a majority (or the natural leadership of the majority) will have his legitimacy contested. If the opposition to the established leadership is sufficiently broad and deep, that opposition will turn violent. Right or wrong, the majority will eventually have their way. As Henry David Thoreau (1848) eloquently put it: "After all, the practical reason why, when the power is once in the hands of the people, a majority are permitted, and for a long period continue, to rule is not because they are most likely to be in the right, nor because this seems fairest to the minority, but because they are phys ically the strongest."

There is no doubt that, under Islamic law, certain issues cannot be left to the majority. For example, the idea that verses of the Qur'an might be put up to a referendum for repeal or amendment is out of the question. However, there is nothing in Islamic law that prevents the election of leaders either by direct or indirect election. The first *khalîfah* (caliph, temporal leader of the Muslim community), Abu Bakr (may Allah be pleased with him) was elected to office. It has long been held by Sunni scholars of Islam that any of the methods of selection by which the first four *khulufah* (caliphs) were selected are legally permissible under Islamic law. We shall here not challenge that conclusion, but rather ask the historical question as to how these different methods fared in securing the public interest of avoiding political violence in the community.

The historical facts we examine are well known. The difference will be in our perspective. We are not primarily concerned as previous analysts have been with the wisdom of particular actions by the Muslim leadership, but rather with the trying to assess to what degree procedures were democratic and with how to quantify (albeit in a rough schematic sense) the level of political violence associated with each administration.

Further, we are not concerned with the level of warfare with neighboring states or empires, but with the level of violence internal to the *ummah*.

With the passing of the Prophet of Allah (peace be upon him) the Muslim community was faced with the problem of selecting its temporal leader. The Prophet's death had come as a surprise leaving no uncontested provisions for such a selection. This fact is attested to both by Umar ibn al-Khattab's (may Allah be pleased with him) impassioned, albeit mistaken, initial insistence that the Prophet had not died, and by the rift that followed between those who have insisted that it was the Prophet's intention that Ali ibn Abu Talib (may Allah be pleased with him) succeed him and those who have denied it.

The circumstances of Abu Bakr's election also attest to the inadequacy of any *a priori* established model for a means of succession. The Arabs were used to electing leaders, for they elected tribal leaders (MacDonald, 1926, p. 8). Electing a tribal leader, however, is a much easier task than the election of a single leader for an *ummah* that spans numerous tribes and that would come to span continents and races. There were natural divisions among the Muslims: the Muhajirun (the emigrants from Mecca, the first Muslims), the Ansar (the Medinans who had helped the émigré Muslims find refuge), the Meccans (recent converts whose commitment was suspect), and the outlying tribes including the Bedouin.

Even before the Prophet's burial, segments of the broader community became to gather around their natural leaders. Haykal (1976, p. 508) describes the process:

> Some of the al Ansar gathered around Sa`d ibn `Ubadah in the courtyard of Banu Sa`idah. Ali ibn Abu Talib, al Zubayr ibn al Awwam, Talhah ibn Ubaydullah gathered in the house of Fatimah; and al Muhâjirûn, together with the Usayd ibn Hudayr as well as Bani Abd al Ashhal, gathered around Abu Bakr. Soon a man came to Abu Bakr and Umar to inform them that al Ansar were gathering around Sa`d ibn Ubadah. The informant added that the two leaders should go out and reorganize the Muslim leadership before the division of the Muslim community got any worse…. On the way thither they were met by two upright and trustworthy Ansar men who, when questioned, remarked that the Ansar were entertaining separatist ideas.

At the meeting of the Ansar, Umar and Abu Bakr found resentment of the Ansar toward the Muhajirun seemed to be brimming over. They referred to themselves as the "army of Islam" of which the Muhajirun were but a "brigade" (Haykal, pp. 508-9) and claimed natural rights of leadership. Umar threatened to put an end to this claim with his sword, but Abu Bakr preferred to employ persuasion. His methods were democratic, but his arguments was more ambiguous. On the one hand he asserted an inherent superiority of the Quraysh in terms of lineage as well as precedence in adoption of Islam. On the other hand, he made a most pragmatic democratic argument: "All the good that you have claimed is truly yours, for you are the most worthy people of mankind. But the Arabs do not and will not recognize any sovereignty unless it belongs to the tribe of Quraysh" (Haykal, p. 509).

The Ansar rejected this semi-democratic argument. One furious member responded, "Rather am I, the experienced warrior! On my arm every verdict shall rest. And my verdict is that the people of the Quraysh may have their prince as long as we, too, may have our own." Abu Bakr's insistence that only the Quraysh could be princes and the Ansar would have to be satisfied to be viziers and that the Ansar should select either Umar ibn al Khattab or Abu Ubaydah ibn al Jarrah threw the meeting into turmoil. At this point Umar "rushed the convention," to borrow a phrase from MacDonald (p. 13), who refers to the similarity of Umar's action to modern political tactics. Umar proposed the election of Abu Bakr, appealing to the fact that it was the Prophet himself who chose Abu Bakr to lead the prayers even in his presence. Abu Bakr was nominated by acclamation of those present and his election ratified at the mosque the following day. It was from this incident that the scholars have concluded that the *bay`a*, or contract between the people and the ruler, is a necessary element of government legitimacy under Islamic law.

632 C.E., Abu Bakr was elected to office by a vote of the acknowledged leaders of the general community. The process was clearly democratic in that is akin to the Electoral College by which the president of the United States is elected. The resemblance to the Electoral College, as it was originally intended to operate–both in its strengths and weaknesses–is remarkable. The electors are community leaders who have been delegated authority from the general populace. The delegation of authority to a small group gives the electors the ability to discuss the pros and cons of the candidates in some depth. The electors are generally people with a familiarity with both the candidates and the issues. On the negative side, the electors are not necessarily representative of all sectors of the community. In the American system there is a deliberate weighting of electors to the advantage of the smaller states (and therefore to the rural community). In the case of the election of Abu Bakr there was the omission of the faction that supported the election of Ali as well as the outlying areas. Although Ali himself gave his *bay`a* to Abu Bakr, this flaw in the process sowed the seeds for later developments that have caused a major and seemingly permanent rift in the Muslim community.

We can criticize the election of Abu Bakr as a haphazard nonsystematic form of democracy, but allowances should be made for the crisis conditions under which it took place. A more trenchant criticism would be to regret that the Muslim community did not seek to take the lessons from the process to attempt to create a systematic electoral process that would build on the strengths and amend the weaknesses. A formal method of allocating electors, a formal process of nomination and ratification, and an attempt to insure fairness in the methods of representation and franchise could well have minimized or prevented the problems that arose subsequently in the period covered by the this paper as well as in the history of the Muslim community. We cannot expect such a system to be constructed in the heat of a contested election. It would be best attended to during the tenure of a leader with recognized legitimacy as a means to electing his successor.

There are really two shortcomings in Abu Bakr's accession to power that challenge its democratic credentials. One is the nonparticipation of supporters of Ali. However, this defect does not necessarily disqualify the process from being considered democratic. A

similar problem occurred in the dispute over the Florida electors in the American Presidential election of 2000. While some people to this day claim that George W. Bush is a usurper of the Presidency (as the Shi`ah claimed Abu Bakr was a usurper of the leadership of the early *ummah*) most Americans see the problems that lead to the allocation of the votes of the Florida electors by a decision of the Supreme Court as part of the friction of the machine of democracy: undesirable, but tolerable in the interests of a process that is pragmatic in nature and can never be made ideal in the real world. In other words the American Presidential election of 2000 was not perfect, but it was democratic. I would assess the election of Abu Bakr similarly.

This flaw will seem more serious if we view the gathering around three centers of leadership mentioned above as in a sense equivalent to political parties. Then, the election of Abu Bakr was a two-party system that shut out a smaller but considerable competitor. While this is a serious shortcoming, it is one we see in the American system as well, which is by design a two-party system and third-party candidates are often excluded from meaningful participation.

The main problem with the election of Abu Bakr from a democratic perspective was not the exclusion of the partisans of Ali. All the parties of Medina participated in the ratification of Abu Bakr's election. Despite the fact that lingering questions of the failure to consider Ali and his supporters would later cause a deep and long-lasting rift in the Muslim community, a bigger and more proximate problem for the nascent body politic was the fact that it was only the Medinan population that participated in the process at all. The Bedouin were not consulted at all and when many of them rejected Abu Bakr's right to collect the zakat, the community fell into its first civil war, the *riddah* wars, i.e. the wars of apostasy. The urban center had imposed its selection of leader on the outlying members of the community. While the complex reasons of the *riddah* wars are beyond the scope of this paper, it seems reasonable to believe that a sense of political exclusion would have contributed to alienation of the dissident tribes. However complex the issues, whether they be the legitimacy of Abu Bakr's accession or the necessity of centralized collection of zakat, it is a fair question to ask whether the establishment of a mechanism for democratic resolution of such issues have avoided the *riddah* wars. It is difficult to believe that such a mechanism could have made things more violent.

It seems unfair to grade the democracy of the election and tenure of Abu Bakr against the American record since the American system has the advantage of building on over a thousand years of subsequent history, including the history of the Islamic civilization itself. However, for purposes of determining the correlation (I shall say anti-correlation) between democracy and violence we need some sort of a scale, so I shall "grade on a curve," giving Abu Bakr's tenure "moderately high" with regard to his election by the urban center but "none" with regard to the Bedouin. The high grade is due to the shortness of his tenure and the relatively democratic means of his coming to power (a "simple election" in the assessment of MacDonald, p. 14) compared to his successors, and the low grade is due to the exclusion of the Bedouin from the process.

In evaluating the political violence associated with Abu Bakr's regime, we rate the violence at the political center as none. With regard to the Bedouin the violence was high, though short-lived.

In 634, Umar came to power by appointment by his predecessor (a less democratic method, selection by a single elector), but after ten years died by assassination. The appointment to office by a small committee, while less than ideal than election by an electoral college, also has its analogue in the American system. In the event of the death or resignation of a sitting President (Abu Bakr had been in office less than even a single term of an American President), the Vice President assumes office. Normally, the Vice President has been elected specifically to provide for such a succession. However, in 1973 it was Gerald Ford, appointed by his predecessor who succeeded Richard Nixon because of the resignation of the elected Vice President Spiro Agnew. This was a peculiar event due to particular circumstances. Nonetheless, the circumstances have been accepted as part of the democratic process.

Then, we shall rank the democracy of Umar's tenure as "moderate" and the political violence of his regime as "low." Let us here confess that it would be interesting to debate as to whether this classification of the degree of political violence as low depends upon the degree to which one considers Umar's assassination by a Persian slave unhappy over Umar's decision in his case was a personal act or a political act.

Note that we are here only concerned with the violence within the community. The interactions of the Muslim polity with its neighbors is a different issue. We are not here concerned with the claim that "liberal democracies" do not go to war with other "liberal democracies." For one thing, none of the Muslim community's neighbors were democracies at all. For another, the concept of "liberal democracy" speaks not only to the issue of democracy but to trade policies that are interesting and important, but beyond the scope of this paper.

In 644 Uthman ibn Affan (may Allah be pleased with him) came to power by selection by an advisory council (an even less democratic method in that the electors were also unelected) and was murdered after twelve years. One might ask why the panel that nominated Uthman should be considered less democratic than the admittedly larger assembly that nominated Abu Bakr? The committee that nominated Uthman consisted of only six people (MacDonald, p. 16). This was small enough that a group dynamic arose in which jealousy among its members resulted in the appointment of the member who was in fact the weakest candidate (Hodgson, p. 212). Despite the fact that Uthman initially received the *bay`a*, within a decade his administrative policies had led to discontent, including accusations of nepotistic tendencies. By 656 the signs of resistance were unmistakable. In Kufah the "Uthman's governor was finally refused outright" (Hodgson, p. 213). Finally Uthman was assassinated at the hand of Muhammad ibn Abu Bakr.

We rank the democracy of Uthman's tenure as "low" and the violence associated with it as "high." Although both Umar and Uthman ruled for extended periods without a

democratic mechanism for removal or re-election, it seems clear that two factors conspired against Uthman: (1) He was appointed by a very small unelected committee and (2) his tenure was longer than Umar's. It is questionable if an elected leader like Abu Bakr would have appointed Uthman, and in any case if a new election could have been held after ten years it is likely that the controversy surrounding his administration would have prevented his re-election.

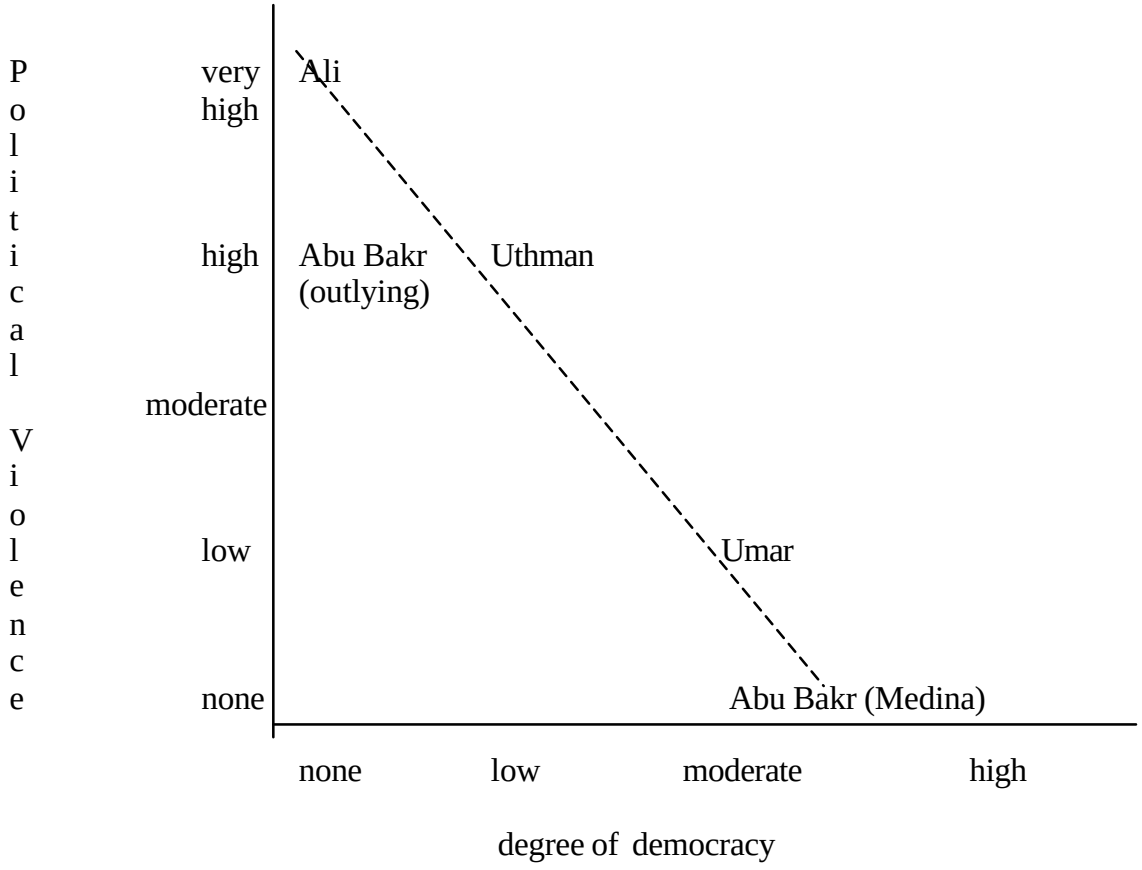
In 656, Ali came to power through civil war. For the first time the accession of the *khalîiah* to power was resolved by violence. The five years of Ali's reign was the period of the *fitnah* (trial) wars. Ali was supported by those who had rebelled against Uthman and by the Ansar and the residents of Kufah. Abu Bakr's daughter Aisha (wife of the Prophet, may Allah be pleased with her) and Muhammad's close companions Zubayr and Talhah led the opposition forces. When Ali won the Battle of the Camel near Basrah, his governors were recognized in most of the provinces, but Mu`awiyah ibn Abu Sufyan and others demanding vengeance for the murder of Uthman continued to resist (Hodgson, p. 215). Ali's agreement to submit to an unsuccessful binding arbitration alienated some of his supporters, further fracturing the community.

It is significant that throughout this period there were a large number of Muslims who, regardless of who they thought was in the right on the issue of vengeance for the death of Uthman, were opposed to fighting among the Muslims. The opinions of these peaceful Muslims could have been taken into consideration in the ongoing dispute if a democratic process had existed. If Ali and Aisha (or Zubayr or Talhah) had run against one another in an election instead of meeting on the battlefield, the matter could have been resolved without shedding of Muslim blood, and with the participation of all Muslims including those who refused to take arms against their brothers in religion. We would expect Ali to accept the outcome as he had accepted the outcome of the election of Aisha's father decades earlier and we would hope Aisha would have the reciprocal grace. While the Kharajis would be no more willing to accept the outcome of an election than they would accept the outcome of binding arbitration, they could not have opposed an outcome to which the rest of the community had acceded. Their power, like that of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the AIG in Algeria, the Gomaa in Egypt, and of the extremists in every hot spot, came from the fact that they could exploit a violent confrontation between other less extreme members of the community.

The Kharajis seceded and held their own election for commander. Ali dealt with them severely, at the cost of lost credibility even in Kufah where he could raise no army (Hodgson, p. 216). A second arbitration was attempted, this time to obtain agreement on a *khalîfah* between the partisans of Ali and Mu`awiyah, but the atmosphere was too heated. Democratic means of election are best settle in times of peace. In 661, Ali was murdered by a Kharaji.

We rank the democracy of Ali's tenure as "none" and the violence associated with it as "very high." One could almost say, both protracted and fatal. It lasted throughout his administration and ended in his assassination.

We schematically diagram the relationship between democracy and political violence in these regimes in the graph below. The dashed line is a visual fit to the data highlighting the anti-correlation between the degree of democracy and the degree of political violence.



One can point to historical circumstances to excuse the failure of the early Muslim community to develop a systematic democratic electoral process, but the modern Muslim community has no such excuse. I hope this paper has put into focus certain issues that will encourage the Muslim world to take lessons from the experience of the *khulifah rashidûn*, the body of Islamic jurisprudence, and the examples of successful democratic systems in the West, to synthesize meaningful democratic systems for the Muslim world and Muslim organizations.

The experience of the *khulufah rashidûn*, an indisputably Islamic context, indicates that while democratic means of succession and tenure are not the only ones consistent with Islamic principles, they have a demonstrable pragmatic value in reducing political violence. There is significance in the fact that Uthman was assassinated by the son of Abu Bakr and Ali's accession was violently contested by the daughter of Abu Bakr. These are persons whose commitment to the religion are beyond question and their resort to violence cannot be attributed to impiety. Rather, the absence of democratic mechanisms for contesting elections must be conceded as the villain. We conclude that

Muslims should embrace democratic methods of succession and tenure in office in order to minimize political violence.

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