

British Values in light of Islam

- 1. Democracy**
- 2. Rule of law**
- 3. Individual liberty**
- 4. Mutual Respect**
- 5. Tolerance of those of different faiths and beliefs**

Democracy

The idea and principles of democracy have always been promoted in Islam. Infact, Prophet Muhammad SAW laid down the principles of democracy, freedom and collective rule within the Constitution of Madina. The Constitution of Madina was a legal document which guaranteed basic rights such as freedom of religion, equality, justice and protection of body and wealth.

In a democracy, the opinion of an individual counts and it is expressed by voting. Similarly, in Islam the opinion of each individual counts and is expressed in a multitude of ways including voting, collective decision-making, empowering the individual and guaranteeing individual liberty.

Mashwarah (collective decision-making) is an important part of Islam. Prophet Muhammad SAW was informed by Allah SWT to consult the companions and ask them of their opinions and involve them in the decision-making process. In another part of the Qur'an, Allah SWT praises the companions because their affairs and matters are decided collectively through consultation. There is no dictatorship in Islam. We are all equal and we are advised to decide matters collectively. Islam teaches that decision-making should not be an individual exercise, rather Islam argues that decision-making should be a process in which everybody is involved. This is because the opinion of each individual counts as expressed in the Qur'an. Prophet SAW, and the subsequent Caliphs in Islam all participated in Mashwarah (consultation and collective decision-making). Umar R.A created a body which resembled, in a British context, the Houses of Parliament and the House of Lords. This group comprised of senior companions who were experts in the Islamic legislative process. Just like in the Houses of Parliament and the House of Lords, legislation is debated, discussed and refined, similarly the body set-up by Umar R.A. undertook the same process of debating, discussing and refining.

Not only does the opinion of an individual count in Islam, Islam empowers the individual to the extent that his value is equal to that of the king. Hence, an ordinary citizen can take the king to court. Others can testify against the king. This is not the case in many countries including Britain, where the sovereign cannot be taken to

court by a citizen. Another example is that, in Islam, each citizen can give sanctuary to any foreigner and the authorities must respect this right of this ordinary citizen. This shows active participation in Islam and individual liberty

Another example of democracy in Islam is that, no one can simply step forward and assume leadership without the consent of those he wishes to lead. One day, a companion of the Prophet SAW, step forward to lead the people in prayer. Afterwards, he apologised because he had not sought their consent and he regretted not involving them in the decision making process. He then said that the Prophet Muhammad SAW said whosoever leads a people and they disapprove of him, then such an individual's prayer (and leadership) will not be accepted.

Islam encourages micro-democracy and collective decision making even in private matters. We are advised to elect a leader even during travelling. Prophet SAW said that when a group sets out on a travel, they should appoint a leader amongst themselves. This clearly demonstrates that democracy is an important part of Islam which should be upheld.

Another significant element of democracy is accountability. The second Caliph of Islam, Umar R.A. demonstrated this throughout his life. Constituents had a right (which, as history records, they exercised frequently) to complain of their governor and seek his removal. Umar R.A. would listen to their grievances and, where necessary, replace the official about whom the people had complained. In fact, even Umar R.A. despite him being the Caliph, was also held accountable to the people. He once addressed the people saying that if Umar was guilty of misconduct, what would they do? They responded that they would hold him accountable and take action to make amends. After hearing this response, Umar .R.A commended them and reinforced the message of accountability. Umar R.A. demonstrated that the voice of the public is to be heard and valued. In a dictatorship, the public have no hope of holding their leaders to account. On the contrary, Islam empowers the public to hold officials to account; and Islam promotes active participation in the recourse to justice and accountability.

The Rule of Law

When one chooses to live in a particular country, one effectively agrees to adhere to the rules and regulations of that country. This is considered to be a covenant, agreement and trust, which a Muslim is obliged to fulfil. This obligation to uphold the covenant is the same regardless of whether it is contracted with a friend, enemy, Muslim, non-Muslim or a government. Prophet Muhammad SAW and his Companions always stood by their word and did not breach any trust or agreement, as it is clear from the books of Sunnah and history. Thus, to uphold the rule of law is

to uphold the covenant and trust. And to break the rule of law is to break a promise and to breach a trust which is totally prohibited in Islam.

The Constitution of Madinah was a “rules and regulations” document which was signed by the Muslims, Christians, Jews, polytheists and other faith groups. All were bound by the rule of law and Prophet SAW enforced it upon the Muslims of the time.

Allah SWT says in the Qur’an that **“fulfil the promise, indeed (you) shall be asked about the promise.”**

There are other verses in the Qur’an and there many sayings of the Prophet SAW which reflect this same message. The scholars have inferred from such texts that a citizen must uphold the rule of law as it is a covenant which must be fulfilled.

The directive to obey the rule of law extends to each Muslim regardless of rank and status. In Islam, no one is above the law. Prophet SAW and the noble companions demonstrated this throughout their lives. On one occasion, when Prophet Muhammad SAW was arranging the rows for prayer, he found one companion to be slight out of line. So Prophet SAW gently prodded him in order that the companion positions himself correctly. The companion said to Prophet SAW that he prodded him and he was not permitted to prod him. The companion asked for the stick so he could prod the Prophet SAW back. The companion actually wanted to kiss Prophet SAW so he devised this plan. The companion never intended to prod Prophet SAW. This incident shows how Prophet SAW did not consider himself to be above the law. When Prophet SAW would travel with the companions and there was only one camel between them, he would also take turns to walk on foot whilst the other companions rode on the camel. When the first Mosque was being built, Prophet SAW joined the companions in clearing the area, fetching the bricks and generally building the Mosque. Prophet SAW done this to set an example to Muslims that we are all equal and we are all bound by the same rules.

One day, Prophet’s SAW grandson took a date which belonged to charity and he put it in his mouth. Prophet SAW rushed and took it out of his mouth and reminded him that this belongs to the beneficiaries of the charity. Prophet SAW wanted to remind his grandson that everyone, including him, must uphold the rule of law and that we all must behave equally.

When Umar R.A. became the Caliph, it was suggested to him that he should increase his stipend from the public treasury. He refused by saying that it is not right for him to take anything extra to his needs. He set an example for all rulers that the wealth belongs to the public and rulers are also bound by the rule of law. Hence, it is not permissible to treat the public’s wealth as one’s own. There are countless examples of how the noble companions upheld the rule of law and they never considered themselves to be above the law.

Individual Liberty

Individual liberty and personal freedom are highly valued Islamic concepts. Islam recognises that a “nanny state”, where the government is regarded as unduly interfering with personal choices and freedoms, is in conflict with the requirements of individual liberties. Hence, Islam has protected the freedom of individuals in their private lives and prohibited undue government interference. Islam has guaranteed the security of private property, freedom of opinion and expression subject to the rights and freedom of others.

In order to emphasise each individual's liberty, Islam empowers the individual to the extent that his value is equal to that of a king. A peasant's liberty is in no way curtailed to make room for kings and aristocrats. Hence, a king will not be given preference over a peasant in any scenario; the peasant's liberty and dignity is always protected. The king must wait in a queue, he must arrive first if he wants the most sacred place in a Mosque, and he must stand at the back if he comes late for the congregational prayer. This demonstrates the respect and freedom Islam accords each citizen. Furthermore, an ordinary citizen has the power and liberty to take the king to court, others may testify against the king. This is not the case in many countries where the sovereign cannot be taken to court by a citizen.

Another example of individual liberty is that, in Islam, each citizen can give sanctuary to any foreigner and the authorities must respect this right of this ordinary citizen. This shows active participation in Islam and individual liberty. At a time when in other parts of the world, only the male aristocracy were permitted to own land, Islam upheld the individual liberty of each person and validated land ownership. Men and women from all levels of the social hierarchy were at liberty to buy, sell and engage in all types of business transactions. These examples demonstrate how Islam gives value and importance to each individual, and everyone has the authority to engage in dealings and activities in a manner most suited to them.

Islam celebrates the concept of a free market and liberty in trade. Hence, in line with modern economic practice, Islam prohibits the government from fixing a rate for a service or a commodity as that would result in limiting the liberty of traders. Once Prophet SAW was asked to set a price for a commodity and he refused on the basis that it would infringe upon the individual liberty of the traders. When Prophet SAW and the Muslims wanted to build the first Mosque, the land they had identified belonged to two orphans. Prophet SAW recognised the freedom of the orphans to reject the sale and only acquired the land after they had happily consented. The price paid for the land was to the advantage of the orphans. Prophet SAW did not, as many rulers would, usurp the land; rather he set an example of how the liberty and freedom of even the most vulnerable must be protected.

Another element of individual liberty, which is also a part of Islam, is freedom of opinion and expression. As a Muslim, one has a right to have their own opinion and hold political opinions. These must all be respected. After the assassination of the third Caliph of Islam, many noble companions of the Prophet SAW were on opposite sides; yet each one respected the opinion and stance of the other. The four schools of thought also bear testimony to this fact that each individual is at liberty to choose a school of thought, and others may not change his opinion. Although the four schools of thought differ in jurisprudence and practice of faith, Muslims are obligated to respect each person's choice and opinion in such matters.

Islam does not allow the stifling of expression and hence, that is why the public never felt any qualms in expressing their dissent in front of the ruler. Once, whilst Umar R.A. was delivering a sermon, a woman stood up and expressed her disagreement with the Caliph. He accepted and changed his stance. This illustrates how both men and women, were at liberty to express their opinions and disagreements with the ruler.

Respect & Tolerance of Different Faiths and Cultures

Allah SWT says in the Qur'an that "there is no compulsion in religion". He also states that "And do not abuse those whom they call upon besides Allah". **Allah SWT also instructs Prophet SAW to say to those who do not wish to believe in Allah that "for you is your faith and for me is my faith"**. These verses of the Qur'an clearly demonstrate the stance of Islam which is that, one must not force his beliefs on anyone; one must not insult other faiths and one must be tolerant to all faiths and cultures. In addition to such verses, there are countless narrations of the Prophet SAW, and countless legal edicts all of which reiterate that freedom of religion is an important part of Islam.

In a famous Hadeeth recorded by Abu Dawud, Prophet SAW says ***"Beware! Whoever is cruel and hard on a non-Muslim minority, or curtails their rights, or burdens them with more than they can bear, or takes anything from them against their free will; I (Prophet Muhammad) will complain against the person on the Day of Judgment."***

This narration of Prophet Muhammad SAW is explicit in that non-Muslims must be treated with respect and their rights must be fulfilled.

One of the most fundamental clauses of the Constitution of Madinah is the liberty of each individual to practice his or her faith. The Constitution declared all inhabitants of Madinah to be part of one unified society regardless of religion, race, or ancestry.

Prophet SAW even maintained this good conduct with non-Muslim captives who had come to attack the Muslims. After the battle of Badr, more than seventy disbelievers

were helped captive by the Muslims. Prophet SAW instructed the Muslims to treat the captives well. Subsequently, the Muslims would go out their way to look after the captives. In one incident, the Muslim captors remained hungry so they could feed the non-Muslim captive. This good conduct with the non-Muslim captives resulted in many of them embracing Islam.

Islamic history bears testimony to the fact that Islam has always welcomed and protected people of different faiths. The tolerance and protection the Muslim Ottoman empire offered to non-Muslims was the precise reason that Jews and Christians flocked to Muslim countries during the various Inquisitions. It is estimated that approximately 400000 Jews fled to Muslim countries during the Portuguese Inquisition in the 15th century.

When Jerusalem was handed over to Caliph Umar in the year 637, Umar R.A. invited the Jews to Jerusalem so that they may worship in peace and safety. Prior to that, Jews had been barred from Jerusalem. Umar R.A. prepared a treaty known as "The Pact of Umar" in which he guaranteed religious freedom for all inhabitants of Jerusalem. During Muslim control of Jerusalem, all faiths lived and worshiped in peace and harmony.

The famous Muslim historian Ibn Jareer al-Tabari records the "Pact of Umar" as stating:

"In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. This is the assurance of safety which the servant of God, Umar, the Commander of the Faithful, has given to the people of Jerusalem. He has given them an assurance of safety for themselves for their property, their churches, their crosses, the sick and healthy of the city and for all the rituals which belong to their religion. Their churches will not be inhabited by Muslims and will not be destroyed. Neither they, nor the land on which they stand, nor their cross, nor their property will be damaged. They will not be forcibly converted.

This pact actually drew from the Constitution of Madinah for indeed, the Constitution of Madinah was a blueprint for religious freedom and tolerance. Subsequently, all of the Muslim treaties which followed were based on the Constitution of Madinah and the Pact of Umar.

This is why, the holiest and sacred of all places in Christendom- the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is guarded and opened on a daily basis by two Palestinian Muslims. Two Jerusalem Palestinian clans have been the custodians of the entrance to the Holy Sepulchre since the 12th century.

These are only a few examples which illustrate the importance of religious freedom and tolerance in Islam. Islam recognizes that there are a multitude of religions on this earth, and gives the right to individuals to practice whichever religion they want.

Religion is not to be forced upon an individual against their will. Allah SWT declares in the Qur'an: **“there is no compulsion in religion”**.

A Muslim must live in peace and harmony with adherents to other faiths. A Muslim must fulfil all the rights of members of other faiths. A Muslim must not insult other religions as Allah SWT says “And do not abuse those whom they call upon besides Allah”.