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## **DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE OF RELIGION THE ABDUL KARIM SOROUSH MODEL**

**Kiki Muhamad Hakiki**

UIN Raden Intan Lampung, Indonesia

*kiki.hakiki@radenintan.ac.id*

**Ratu Vina Rohmatika**

IAIN Metro Lampung

*ratuvina23@gmail.com*

**Zaenal Muttaqien**

Politeknik Negeri Media Kreatif, Jakarta

*muttaqienzet@polimedia.ac.id*

### **Abstrak:**

*The encounter between the concept of democracy and religious teachings, especially Islam, is interesting to discuss. This raises several relevant questions: Can democracy be considered within the framework of Islamic teachings? Are democratic values in line with Islamic teachings? Can Islamic principles be juxtaposed with democracy? In addition, what are the views of Islamic scholars, such as Abdul Karim Soroush, on the issue of democracy? Through a literature review, we can find some unique thoughts from Abdul Karim Soroush that are interesting to listen to. One of them is his concept of religious democracy, which also tries to redefine the meaning of religion and the understanding of religion itself. According to Soroush, democracy is currently an established idea. He also argues that democracy is not a monolithic concept, and neither is Islam. Although originating from Western culture, democracy can adapt to local conditions when it*

*interacts with the local cultural context. Therefore, Soroush emphasized that there is no need to be afraid of democracy.*

Keywords: *Islam, democratic religion, syūrâ; Abdul Karim Soroush*

## A. Introduction

Soroush's name is not well known in Indonesia. This is because publications of translations of Soroush's works or studies of Soroush's thoughts in Indonesian are still rare.<sup>1</sup> This may be because most of Abdul Karim Soroush's works were written in Parsi rather than Arabic or English. In Indonesia, we mostly find translations of these works from Arabic and English. Therefore, it is not surprising that Soroush's works available in Indonesian are few.

If you refer to the product of his thought, it is truly brilliant. He is known as a pharmacologist and philosopher who was educated in Iran and England. He is one of the leading speakers in Iran.<sup>2</sup> This paper aims to introduce the thoughts of Abdul Karim Soroush as one of the outstanding Islamic intellectuals. Of course, it will be very beneficial if Soroush's works can also be enjoyed by academics and readers in Indonesia.

The theme examined in this article is related to his views on democracy. The issue of democracy remains an interesting topic to

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<sup>1</sup>Based on the search results, several writings were found that reviewed the thoughts of Abdul Karim Soroush, including; Abdul Karim Soroush, *Menggugat Otoritas dan Tradisi Agama, The Translation of Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam*. Bandung: Mizan, 2002; Tedi Kholiludin, "Abdul Karim Soroush: Potret Santri Liberal Iran", *Majalah Syur'ah*, Januari, 2004; Tedi Kholiludin, *Studi Analisis Pemikiran Abdul Karim Soroush Tentang Kritik Sistem Wilayah Al-Faqih*, (Fakultas Syariah IAIN Walisongo Semarang); M. Heri Fadoil, *Konsep Pemerintaban Religius Dan Demokrasi Menurut Abdul Karim Soroush Dan Ayatullah Khomeini*, AL-Daulah: Jurnal Hukum Dan Perundangan Islam Volume 3, Nomor 2, Oktober 2013; ISSN 2089-0109. Valla Vakili. *Abdulkarim Soroush dan Diskursus Kritik di Iran*. In John L. Eksposito and John O. Voll. "Tokoh-kunci Gerakan Islam Kontemporer." (Jakarta: RajaGrafindo Persada, 2002), 195

<sup>2</sup> Farhang Rajae, "Islam and Modernity: The Reconstruction of an Alternative Shi'ite Islamic Worldview in Iran", in Martin E. Marty dan R. Scott Appleby (ed.), *Fundamentalism and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 111. Charles Kurzman (ed.), *Wacana Islam Liberal; Pemikiran Islam Kontemporer tentang Isu-isu Global*, (Jakarta: Paramdina, 2003), 411.

discuss today. Many works have been produced that discuss democracy, both by thinkers from the Islamic world and the West.<sup>3</sup> The choice of this theme is interesting because the ideas presented by Soroush in his day - in Iran - were bold and controversial. Even Soroush's ideas are still very contextual today. Soroush's ideas, in this case about faith-based democracy, can be inspirational or at least a reference for religious elites and democracy fighters in Indonesia today.

## B. Abdul Karim Soroush

Abdul Karim Soroush was born in South Tehran, Iran, in 1945. The day of his birth falls on the Asura day of 1324 AH in the Hijri calendar. His parents named him Soroush with Husayn Haj Farajullah Dabbagh based on the day of his birth.<sup>4</sup> Abdul Karim Soroush is the name he uses as his identity whenever he writes and publishes his works.

Judging from his family environment, Soroush has lived in a family environment that is concerned with education, especially religious education. Therefore, it is natural that Soroush has mastered several disciplines compared to his peers.<sup>5</sup>

After completing his education within his family, Abdul Karim Soroush continued his formal education at Qa'imiyah School, South Tehran, for his primary education. After six years at the elementary school, Soroush continued his secondary education at Mortazavi High School, before moving on to Alavi High School.

After completing his secondary education, Soroush was selected to continue his education at the university level at the

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<sup>3</sup> Kiki Muhamad Hakiki, *Islam Dan Demokrasi: Pandangan Intelektual Muslim Dan Penerapannya Di Indonesia*, (Jurnal Wawasan, Vol. Vol. 39, No. 1, 2016), 1

<sup>4</sup> Laura Secor, *The Democrat Iran's Leading Reformist Intellectual Tries to Reconcile Religious Duties and Human Rights*, artikel online dalam [http://www.drSORoush.com/English/On\\_drSORoush/E-CMO-20040314-1.html](http://www.drSORoush.com/English/On_drSORoush/E-CMO-20040314-1.html).

<sup>5</sup>This biography can also be found on Abdul Karim Soroush's website, [www.drSORoush.com](http://www.drSORoush.com). Haidar Bagir in his introduction to the Indonesian edition of Soroush's work, *"Menggugat Otoritas Tradisi dan Agama"*, Bandung: Mizan, 2002. Tedi Kholiludin, *"Abdul Karim Soroush: Potret Santri Liberal Iran"*, *Majalah Syir'ah*, Januari, 2004, 46-49.

University of Tehran. He chose to major in physics and pharmacy and was accepted into both majors with satisfactory grades. However, on Rouzbeh's recommendation, Soroush eventually chose pharmacy.

What is interesting about Soroush's educational career is that although he studied pharmacy, his reading went far beyond that. While at Tehran University, Soroush took a course in Islamic Philosophy taught by Muthahari. Soroush's interest in Muthahari arose after reading Muthahari's commentary on Allamah Thabathaba'i's "Ushul-e Falsafe wa Rawish-e Realism." For Soroush, Muthahari's writings enlightened him. Likewise, when he read Thabathaba'i's "Tafsir al-Mizan", Soroush found it very inspiring.<sup>6</sup>

During his time at Tehran University, Soroush showed great interest in the study of Islamic Philosophy and respected his teachers, especially Muthahari. However, their relationship did not last long as Muthahari did not have sufficient time to teach Soroush directly. Nonetheless, as a sign of the close relationship between Muthahari and his talented student, Muthahari introduced Soroush to one of his students, a young cleric who was also the imam at one of the mosques in Tehran. Soroush then studied Islamic Philosophy from the imam for several years. During this time, Soroush also completed his pharmacy studies at Tehran University for six years.<sup>7</sup>

After graduating with a bachelor's degree in pharmacy, Soroush was required to undergo two years of military service, by the country's policy at the time of requiring participation in national defense. This led Soroush to a different life experience as an Iranian citizen.

Although Soroush participated in military service, he still utilized his knowledge as a pharmacy graduate in the military. After his military service, Soroush was appointed head of a laboratory at an institution conducting research on food products and medical devices in Buhsehr. However, he only worked there for fifteen months. After that, Soroush returned to Tehran and started working

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<sup>6</sup> Abdul Karim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom And Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). 4.

<sup>7</sup> Soroush.

in a health control laboratory. Soroush's scientific passion did not seem to be enough in Iran, so he moved to Europe and stopped in London to continue his studies. The choice of London as a place of study certainly has its reasons. It was in London that Soroush hoped to become more familiar with the modern world.

Europe was a new chapter in Soroush's life and scientific career. In Europe, he discovered many new things, especially the freedom of thought. While studying at the University of London, he received an MSc degree with a specialization in chemical analyst studies. After completing his studies at the University of London, he then continued his education at Chelsea College in London, for five years. Uniquely at this University, the focus of study he chose was different from before, he explored more about the history and philosophy of science.

While at this University, he joined other Iranian movement activists studying in the UK and joined the Muslim Youth Association (MYA) organization whose focus of activity was campaigning against the Shah's regime that was in power in Iran at that time.

The Muslim Youth Association (MYA) was a gathering place for activists of the Iranian revolution. It was in this forum that he developed much of his knowledge. In this forum, the leaders of the revolution usually gather and transmit the virus of their movement. Great figures and activists from various parts of Europe and Iran, came and gave lectures in this place, including Ayatollah Khomeini, Behesti, Ali Shari'ati, and Murtadha Muthahari himself.

During his time in the UK, Soroush often expressed his controversial ideas and protested against the injustices in Iran. Soroush's speeches were later printed in pamphlets and books. The first lecture he delivered was titled "Dialectical Antagonism" (Tazad-Dialektiki). In an attempt to counter the influence of leftist currents, especially that of the Mujahideen Khalq which was able to captivate many young activists with its Marxist ideology, Soroush published his first book in Iran titled "Dialectical Antagonism." This book was a collection of lectures by Soroush and his colleagues. The book is a

collection of lectures he delivered at Imam Barah, a gathering place for Iranian intellectuals, while he was still in London.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, Soroush wrote a book entitled "The Restless Nature of the World" which deals with "substantial motion" (Harkat-e johari). In this book, Soroush attempted to present the foundations of Islamic philosophy, including monotheism and the day of resurrection, from the perspective of substantial motion. He also presents Mulla Sadra's thought as a strong philosophical foundation for the objects of faith.<sup>9</sup>

Soroush is known as a Muslim reformer who is popular in both the Islamic world and the West. The combination of his Islamic education in Iran and his doctorate from the UK has made him known as a devout and authentic Muslim with a progressive-modern vision. He is skilled at uniting faith and freedom and integrating Islam with democratic principles.<sup>10</sup>

After completing his education in Europe and being active in the forums of the Iranian revolutionary movement, Soroush returned to Iran after the revolution and immediately published his book entitled "Knowledge and Value". This book seems to have been prepared in England before his return to Iran. After his return, he joined a teacher training college and began to devote himself there. Less than a year after joining the college, a movement emerged demanding the closure of some universities because they were suspected of being influenced by Western educational models. Soon after, the Institute for Cultural Revolution was formed, with seven members directly appointed by Imam Khomeini, of which Soroush

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<sup>8</sup> Tedi Kholiludin, *Studi Analisis Pemikiran Abdul Karim Soroush Tentang Kritik Sistem Wilayah Al-Faqih* (Semarang: Fakultas Syariah dan Hukum IAIN Walisongo Semarang, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Kholiludin.

<sup>10</sup> Jeffrie Geovanie. *Mendamaikan Islam dan Demokrasi*, Accessed from [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/islam\\_alternatif/message/2104](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/islam_alternatif/message/2104), on August 1, 2023. M. Heri Fadoil, *Konsep Pemerintahan Religius Dan Demokrasi Menurut Abdul Karim Soroush Dan Ayatullah Khomeini*, AL-Daulah: Jurnal Hukum Dan Perundangan Islam Volume 3, No. 2, Oktober 2013, 5.

was one. The Institute was tasked with designing a curriculum model to prepare for the reopening of the universities.<sup>11</sup>

After returning to Iran, Soroush's name grew in popularity. He was often invited to give lectures. He continued to travel from one academic stage to another. His fans continued to grow. This turned out to be a dangerous situation. A group calling themselves Anshar-e-Hizbullah attacked Soroush and shut down his lectures because they accused Soroush of harassing religion in his lectures.

According to Soroush, in Iran, three groups consider him an enemy, apart from academics and political scholars, including Anshar-e-Hizbullah. The first group is those who oppose religious principles and religious beliefs; they disagree with the way Soroush treats religious questions. This group included writers from the Tudeh party. The second group is those who see religion as a path to heaven. The third group was those who saw religion as an ideology for revolution, strengthening government and politics.<sup>12</sup>

Three years after the attack on him, Soroush was undeterred and became even more active in giving lectures, including at Imam Sadiq Mosque in North Tehran. Despite frequent intimidation, especially by those loyal to Ayatollah Khomeini, Soroush remained persistent in spreading his ideas. In 1990, Soroush and some of his colleagues founded the monthly magazine *Kiyan*, which became a platform for those with a constructive vision in developing religious and intellectual discourse. Through the magazine, Soroush publicized sensitive themes such as religious pluralism, hermeneutics, civil society, tolerance, and democracy in Iran.<sup>13</sup>

Soroush attracted the attention of many in Islamic intellectualism. For Western scholars, Soroush is an example of a liberal Muslim intellectual. His works of thought reflect a unique combination in which he remains true to the basic principles of his

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<sup>11</sup> Abdol Karim Soroush, *The Story of Cultural Revolution: Right to the End They Didn't Know Where They Were Meant to Be Going*, dalam [www.seraj.org/cultural.htm](http://www.seraj.org/cultural.htm).

<sup>12</sup> Abdol Karim Soroush, *Soroush Among Those for and Against*, (Jameah Morning Daily, 1998), 12.

<sup>13</sup> Kholiludin, *Studi Analisis Pemikiran Abdul Karim Soroush Tentang Kritik Sistem Wilayat Al-Faqih*.

religion while trying to avoid the pitfalls of tradition and religious authority.<sup>14</sup>

With his outstanding academic abilities, since 2000, Soroush has been a Visiting Lecturer at Harvard University, teaching courses on Islam and Democracy, Qur'anic Studies, and Philosophy of Islamic Law. In addition, he has also taught Islamic Political Philosophy at Princeton University and the Wissenschaftkolleg Berlin, Germany. As an activist and scholar, Soroush has not only proven himself through various quality papers but has also received recognition in the form of awards from various reputable organizations in Europe.

Soroush was honored in April 2004, along with Sadik Jalal al-Azm (Syria) and Fatima Mernisi (Morocco), as recipients of the Erasmus Prize organized by the Praemium Erasmianum Foundation. The award recognizes individuals or institutions that have made a significant contribution to developing and adapting European culture, society, and social science. Each of the three Muslim intellectuals was entitled to a prize of 150,000 Pounds, which was presented in person by Prince Bernhard in Amsterdam, Netherlands. Soroush won this award for his ingenuity in combining religion with modernity.

In addition to receiving the Erasmus Prize, Soroush was also recognized as the "Muslim Democrat of the Year" for 2004 by the Centre for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID) in Washington DC, USA. In his speech after receiving the award, Soroush stated that the concept of justice is the key to formulating a notion of democracy that is not only compatible but also compatible with Islamic teachings.

In April 2005, Soroush was selected as one of the 100 most influential individuals in the world by TIME magazine, a remarkable recognition. This award is given to individuals who can change the world. TIME called Soroush the "Democratic Voice of Iran".

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<sup>14</sup> M. Heri Fadoil, *Konsep Pemerintahan Religius Dan Demokrasi Menurut Abdul Karim Soroush Dan Ayatullah Khomeini*, 445.



### C. Works of Abdul Karim Soroush

If you look at Soroush's works, almost all of his thoughts are expressed in Parsi. Some of his famous works include "Sonnat va Secularism" (Tradition and Secularism) (2002-08), "*Akhlâgh-e Khodâyân*" (Morals of God) (2001-04), "*Áeen-e Shabriâry va Dindâry*" (Urban Rituals and Religious Beliefs) (2000-10), "*Ghomâr-e Áshghâneh*" (English title: Amorous Gamble) (2000-04), "Serât-hay-e Mostagheem" (Straight Path) (1999-09), "*Nahâd-e Nâ-Árâme Gabân*" (World-Enthusiast Character) (1999-08), "*Bast-e Tajrobeh-yi Nabavi*" (Expansion of Prophetic Experience) (1999-04), "*Siyasat-Nameh*" (Political Letter) (1999-03), and "*Modera va Modiriyyat*" (Administration and Tolerance) (1996-06).<sup>15</sup>

Besides his works in Parsi, Soroush also has several works written in English or translated into English, in the form of books, articles, interviews, and abstracts of his speeches. Some of his works in the form of books and articles are:

1. The book "*Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam*" is a collection of Soroush's articles edited and translated into English by Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri. The book was first published in the UK in 2000 by Oxford University Press. The book has been translated into Indonesian under the title "*Menggugat Otoritas dan Tradisi Agama*", translated by Abdullah Ali and published by Mizan in 2002.
2. The article "*The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge*" was originally a paper delivered by Soroush during a lecture at the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, on April 13, 1995. The paper was later published as part of the book "*Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*" edited by Charles Kurzman. In some versions, this article is also known by the title "*Text in Context*". The book "*Liberal Islam*" was translated into Indonesian and published by Paramadina in 2001.
3. The paper "*Reason and Freedom in Islamic Thought*" was delivered by Soroush as a speaker at the 2nd Annual CSID

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<sup>15</sup> Abdul Karim Soroush, *Menggugat Otoritas dan Tradisi Agama*, (terj) *The Translation of Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam*. Bandung: Mizan, 2002; Tedi Kholiludin, "*Abdul Karim Soroush: Potret Santri Liberal Iran*", *Majalah Syir'ah*, Januari, 2004.

Conference at Georgetown University on April 7, 2001. This paper has been translated into Indonesian under the title "*Searching for the Ideal Format of the Relationship between Islam and Democracy*". This article is also published in the book *Islam: Liberalisme dan Demokrasi* published by the Paramadina Foundation in 2002.

4. The article "*Types of Religiosity*" was published in *Kiyan Journal* No. 50 of 1378 (Persian calendar, circa 2000 AD). The article discusses the different types of Muslim religiosity and is a translation from Persian.
5. The article "*The Saviour and Religious Revival*" is a translation of an article entitled "*Mahdaviyat va Ehya-ye Din*" which appeared in the January-February 2002 issue of *Aftab Journal* No. 12.
6. The article "*Tradition and Modernism*" is about the relationship between Islam and modernity. This article is a manuscript delivered at the Seminar at Behesty University in May 1999 and was also published in *Kian Monthly Review*, Vol. 10, No 54, October-November 2000.

Soroush's works, both oral and written, are often referenced. This shows that Soroush is recognized as an influential Muslim intellectual in the world.

#### **D. Islam (*Shûrâ*) and Democracy in Debate**

Is democracy compatible with Islam? This is one of the issues in Islam that is still being debated. Muslim intellectuals have different opinions on the matter. Some of them consider that democracy and *Shûrâ* (deliberation) are the same concept; while others view them as different or even contradictory concepts. Some opinions attempt to reconcile the two views by stating that although democracy and *Shûrâ* have similarities, they also have differences with Islam.<sup>16</sup>

Democracy and *Shûrâ* (deliberation) are two different concepts. In *Shûrâ*, there is not always a voting mechanism, and vice versa. Religious ideas also cannot always be found in democracy. Therefore, these two concepts must be understood and interpreted according to their respective internal contexts, so that the essence

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<sup>16</sup> Kiki Muhamad Hakiki, *Islam Dan Demokrasi*, 3.

contained in them can be understood and harmonized. One way to reconcile Islam and democracy is to see democracy as a system of ideas that is very pluralistic, which means that democracy must be seen as a value system that can adapt to the surrounding context.

Democracy has always been a central issue in the history of human civilization and is the only issue and discourse that can unite human ideals around the world because the discourse of democracy can transcend geographical, ethnic, religious, and cultural boundaries. In responding to this issue, Muslim intellectuals have various opinions. Citing the classification made by John L. Esposito and James P. Piscatori, Muslim intellectuals' responses to democracy can be grouped into three categories.<sup>17</sup>

First, some Muslim intellectuals regard democracy and *Shûrâ* (deliberation) as identical concepts, despite the differences between them. One Muslim intellectual who holds this view is Imam Khomeini. He argued that Iran recognizes God as the absolute ruler whose commands must be followed, but as a republic, it also encourages popular participation in the political, economic, social, and cultural spheres, such as through elections to choose their representatives in parliament and the president. The Iranian government is seen as a government based on God's law over man as the ultimate sovereign, but it also involves parliament in drawing up programs for various ministries, with ultimate power held by a *faqih*.<sup>18</sup> Another Muslim scholar who belongs to this group is Taufiq al-Syawi, who in his book "*Fiqh al-Syûrâ wa al-Istisyarah*" states that democracy is the European version of *Shûrâ*. However, democracy is not the same as *Shûrâ* because it is not based on Islamic law. Al-Shawwi argues that conventional democracy is highly prone to authoritarian behavior, as it allows rulers to make certain efforts to seize and influence legislative power, as well as create laws aimed at expanding their power. Therefore, he asserts that the *Shûrâ* system is

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<sup>17</sup>John L. Esposito dan James P. Piscatori, "Islam dan Demokrasi?", in *Islamika, Jurnal Dialog Pemikiran Islam*, No. 4 April-Januari 1994, 19-21. Kiki Muhamad Hakiki, *Islam Dan Demokrasi*, 4.

<sup>18</sup>Riza Sihbudi, "Masalah Demokratisasi di Timur Tengah", in M. Imam Aziz dkk, *Agama, Demokrasi, dan keadilan*, (Jakarta: Gramedia, 1993), 174. Riza Sihbudi, "Bahasa dalam Kelompok Syi'ah, Kasus Vilayat Faqih, dalam *Islamika, Jurnal Dialog Pemikiran Islam*, No. 5, 1994, 47-48.

more advanced than the modern democratic system. The *Shûrâ* system obliges the rulers to abide by the sharia or a divine source higher than them, which does not allow them to interfere with it, even in issues that are not explained, because such authority belongs to the scholars.<sup>19</sup>

Secondly, others view *Shûrâ* (deliberation) and democracy as two contradictory concepts that should be rejected. Some Muslim scholars who fall into this category are Shaykh Fadlallah Nuri, Sayyid Qutb, al-Sya'rawi, Ali Benhadji, and Abû al-A'lâ al-Maudûdî.

According to Shaykh Fadlallah Nuri, democracy is the concept of equality of all citizens, which he says is not possible in Islam. In a democracy, significant unavoidable differences are bound to occur, such as differences between believers and non-believers, between the rich and the poor, and between the jurist (*faqih*) and his followers. In addition, he rejected the concept of legislation by humans. Nuri argued that Islam has no flaws that require refinement, and in Islam, no one is allowed to legislate. Therefore, he stated that democracy is opposed to Islam.<sup>20</sup> Sayyid Qutb criticized democracy by stating that it violates God's rule and is a form of tyranny by some over others. For him, recognizing God's authority means opposing human authority as a whole in all forms, systems, and conditions. According to him, aggression against God's authority was a sign of *jahiliyyah*. Qutb believed that the Islamic state should be based on the principle of deliberation because according to him, Islam as a legal and moral system was perfect. A similar view was expressed by Mutawalli al-Sya'rawi, a great Egyptian scholar, who stated that Islam and democracy are incompatible, and that deliberation is not the same as majority in democracy.<sup>21</sup> Ali Benhadji, a leader of FIS (Front Islamique du Salut), criticized the concept of democracy by stating that democracy is a Judeo-Christian concept that should be replaced with the leadership principles inherent in Islam. Benhadji adds that Western political thinkers themselves are beginning to see democracy

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<sup>19</sup> Taufiq al-Syawi, "*Fiqh al-Syûrâ wa al-Istisyrâh*", (Translator) Djamaluddin ZS, "*Syûrâ Bukan Demokrasi?*", (Jakarta: Gema Insani Press, 1997), 21-23.

<sup>20</sup>John L. Esposito, *Islam dan Politik*, (Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1990), 118.

<sup>21</sup>Sukron Kamil, *Islam dan Demokrasi; TelaahKonseptualdanHistoris*, (Jakarta: GayaMedia Pratama, 2002), 48.

as a flawed system. According to him, democracy is only considered good if it benefits the West more than Islamic countries.<sup>22</sup> John L. Esposito and James P. Piscatori state that some Muslims are concerned about the Western model of democracy and the system of government introduced by the British. This negative reaction is part of a radical rejection of European colonialism, as well as an attempt to defend Islam and reduce Muslim dependence on Western countries. This rejection of European colonialism led to the rejection of Western democratic systems.<sup>23</sup>

Third, some have attempted to reconcile the opposing views by arguing that *Shûrâ* (deliberation) and democracy have some similarities. Among the scholars who belong to this group are Muhammad Hussein Heikal, Fahmi Huwaidi, Mohammad Taha, Abdullah Ahmad al-Na'im, Bani Sadr, Mehdi Bazargan, Hasan al-Hakim, and Amin Rais.

Fahmi Huwaidi argues that democracy is very close to Islam and its principles are in line with Islamic teachings. His arguments are as follows: First, several traditions show that Islam favors a government that is approved by its people. Second, Islam rejects dictatorship. Third, in Islam, elections are a form of adult testimony to the worthiness of a candidate, as commanded by the Qur'an. Fourth, democracy is an attempt to restore the *Khilafah* system that gives freedom to the people, which was lost when the Islamic system of government switched to a monarchical system. Fifth, an Islamic state is a state that applies justice and equality before the law. Sixth, a majority vote does not necessarily mean misguidance, disbelief, or ingratitude. Seventh, legislating in parliament does not mean opposing legislation that comes from God.<sup>24</sup>

Muhammad Husein Heikal stated that the principles of freedom, brotherhood, and equality that are the watchwords of democracy today are also the main principles in Islam. According to

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<sup>22</sup>John L. Esposito and John O. Voll, *Demokrasi di Negara-negara Muslim*, (Bandung: Mizan, 1999), 214.

<sup>23</sup>John L. Esposito and James P. Piscatori, "Islam and Democracy", Middle East Journal, Vol. VI, Nomor III, 1991; Fahmi Huwaydi, *Al-Islâmwa al-Demuqrâtîyah*, (Kairo: Markaz al-Ahram, 1993), 153.

<sup>24</sup>Fahmi Huwaidi, *Demokrasi, Oposisi, dan Masyarakat Madani*, (Translator) M. Abd Ghofar, *al-Islam wa al-Dimuqratiyah* (Bandung: Mizan, 1996), 193.

him, the rules applied in the concept of democracy today are also the rules in Islam.<sup>25</sup> Mohammad Taha, a Sudanese thinker, states that democracy is parallel to socialism and that they are two necessary wings of society. For him, socialism is the process of seeking better social prosperity, while democracy is the process of power sharing that must occur beforehand. Taha believes that democracy is not an end in itself, but rather a means to the end of realizing human dignity. Democracy, according to him, is not just a view of government, but also a view of life, and is the best approach to achieving human dignity. While recognizing the imperfections in democracy, Taha considers that these imperfections are lesser than in Marxism. Taha also criticizes the concept of *Shûrâ*, which he believes is not an original teaching of Islam but rather an additional teaching. For him, *Shûrâ* is not democracy, but rather the rule by which adult individuals prepare the state for democracy. He emphatically states that democracy is precisely the original concept of Islam.<sup>26</sup> Mehdi Bazargan, an Iranian politician, stated that democracy is an unquestionable universal truth.<sup>27</sup>

However, new problems have arisen regarding the compatibility of Islam and democracy. Saiful Arif argues that democracy can ultimately produce new forms of authoritarianism.<sup>28</sup> Democracy, while promoting fairness in competition, is not always fair when faced with anti-democratic groups.<sup>29</sup> Democracy can also give rise to an anarchic political culture. Hence, democracy is still a subject of debate. In classical political theory, there are what are known as the Plato Cycle and the Polybios Cycle.<sup>30</sup> Plato's Cycle Theory states that initially power is held by aristocrats. If the aristocrats were too ambitious in power, the government could turn theocratic. If the leaders are too fixated on the luxurious life of the palace, the government can turn oligarchic which oppresses the people and monopolizes. This practice will then anger the people and

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<sup>25</sup> Muhammad Husein Heikal, *Pemerintahan Islam*, (Translator). PustakaFirdaus (Jakarta: Pustaka Firdaus, 1993), 95.

<sup>26</sup> Sukron Kamil, *Islam dan Demokrasi*, 61.

<sup>27</sup> Dawam Rahardjo, "*Syura*", *Ulumul Qur'an*, No. 3, Vol. 1, 1989, 34.

<sup>28</sup> Saiful Arif, *Ilusi Demokrasi* (Jakarta: Desantara, 2003).

<sup>29</sup> Arif.

<sup>30</sup> Muhadjir Effendy, *Masyarakat Equilibrium* (Jogjakarta: Benteng Budaya, 2002).

lead to unchecked democratic governments, creating anarchy and allowing the establishment of tyrannical rule. The tyrant will then re-establish aristocratic rule. This cycle seems to go on and on.

In Polybios' *Cyclus* theory, the cycle of government begins with monarchy turning into tyranny, which then triggers noble discontent and the overthrow of the king. This leads to aristocratic rule, which in turn can evolve into oligarchy as rivalries between nobles occur, causing chaos among the elite. This chaos then triggers a popular backlash against the government, which eventually gives birth to democracy.<sup>31</sup>

The two classical theories above show that, although democracy is considered an ideal political conception, it has great potential to give birth to anarchism. Hence, criticism of democracy continues to emerge, as expressed by Sheikh Abul A'la al-Maududi, a charismatic cleric from Pakistan. From this fact, Bassam Tibbi highlights that democracy is often contrary to Muslim beliefs.<sup>32</sup>

Yusuf al-Qardawi also expressed a similar criticism. For him, although democracy is considered a solution, it is not as good as a solution that comes from Islam (*al-hall al-Islami*). For al-Qardawi, democracy is seen as a solution imported from the West (*al-hulul al-mustawrada*).<sup>33</sup> Al-Qardawi states that democracy is a Greek term referring to the rule of the people, and adds that democratic liberalism came into the lives of Muslims through the influence of colonialism. According to him, democracy is one of the most dangerous influences of this colonial legacy.<sup>34</sup>

Muhammed Abed al-Jabiry states that Muslims generally associate *Shûrâ* (deliberation) with democracy for certain reasons. First, this association was not based on a clear understanding of the similarities or differences between the two, but rather as an attempt to appease fanatical religious leaders, including the rulers of the time, by assuring them that democracy was not trying to introduce heresy into Islam. Secondly, this relationship was meant to evoke elements

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<sup>31</sup> Effendy.

<sup>32</sup> Bassam Tibi, *Ancaman Fundamentalisme: Rajutan Islam Politik Dan Kekacauan Dunia Baru*, trans. Imron Rosyidi Et.al (Jogjakarta: Tiara Wacana, 2020).

<sup>33</sup> Tibi.

<sup>34</sup> Tibi.

within the Islamic tradition and be the basis for the modernization of that tradition, so that all problems could be solved through a reinterpretation of the Islamic tradition.<sup>35</sup>

Equating democracy and *Shûrâ* is an overly simplistic approach. When viewed from a historical and doctrinal perspective, democracy is different from *Shûrâ*. Khalil Abdul Karim highlights this difference and argues that the *Shûrâ* cannot possibly replace or even perform the functions of Western-style democracy, including nomination processes, elections, parliaments, and other democratic mechanisms, under any circumstances.<sup>36</sup>

Mohammed Talbi, a Tunisian thinker cited by Ronald L. Nettle, provides a more methodology-based solution to the difference between *Shûrâ* and democracy, in contrast to Khalil Abdul Karim's opinion that the two concepts are incompatible.<sup>37</sup> For him, understanding *Shûrâ* and democracy must be done by two methods. First, not by comparing historical precedents and phenomenological similarities, but by exploring their internal meanings and distinguishing how the two terms and institutions were realized historically.<sup>38</sup>

With this approach, we can see that democracy, as an idea and reality, has not always brought happiness. It can and has been expressed as a form of tyranny, as is the case with the concept of "*proletariat democracy*". For example, in 1960, the French government violated the basic democratic principles of respecting human rights by massacring millions of Algerians, while claiming that their actions were by international law.<sup>39</sup>

Second, this problem should be addressed by trying to develop a concept of government in Islam that can realize the highest goals of society, whatever its name, whether *Shûrâ* or democracy.

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<sup>35</sup>Muhammed Abid al Jabiry, *Syura: Tradisi, Partikularitas dan Universalitas*, (Jogjakarta: LKiS, 2003), 24-25.

<sup>36</sup>Khalil Abdul Karim, *Syari'ah: Sejarah Perkelabian Pemaknaan*, (Jogjakarta: LKiS, 2003), 139.

<sup>37</sup>Ronald L. Nettle, "Gagasan Mohamed Talbi tentang Islam dan Politik: Gambaran Islam bagi Dunia Modern", In John Cooper (ed), *Islam dan Modernitas: Respon Intelektual Muslim*, (Bandung: Pustaka, 2004), 174-176.

<sup>38</sup>Nettler

<sup>39</sup>Nettler



Today, however, we face two opposing groups. On the one hand, there is the '*Conservative Islam*' group that still holds fast to *Shûrâ*, and on the other, there is Western society and its cultural supporters who still see democracy as an integral part of their identity. If the battle between these two poles continues in the absence of a historically critical analysis appropriate to the workings of history, then the ultimate goal of building a civilized society will be difficult to achieve. Therefore, Talbi believes that the most important thing is to place democracy and *Shûrâ* in their internal conceptual and historical contexts. Although with a rather methodological explanation, in the end, Talbi shares the same view as Khalil Abdul Karim.

Many argue that Islam and democracy are difficult to combine because traditional religious institutions such as the caliphate do not provide enough space for popular political participation and democratic institutions. However, the history of religions shows that religious traditions can have varied interpretations and relationships with the state, as John L. Esposito explains in his book *Unholy War*.<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, Islam, throughout its history in the context of its understanding, has always experienced dynamic developments. Islam has been interpreted dynamically to legitimize various forms of government, ranging from absolute monarchy to democracy. Democracy and Islam are two concepts that can be interpreted by considering their universal values. Thus, it can be concluded that there is no conflict between democracy and Islam.

## **E. Democratic Governance Of Religion The Abdul Karim Soroush Model**

The book titled "*Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam*" is Soroush's "*handiwork*" that specifically reviews democracy. In the book, Soroush formulates the term "*Religious Democratic Government*". Soroush's idea is unique because he seems to force two entities (religion and democracy) into two different areas and merge them into one thought.

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<sup>40</sup>John L. Esposito, *Unholy War*, (Jogjakarta: LKiS, 2003), 148-149.

Discussing Soroush's vision of democracy is very interesting. For him, to understand democracy from an Islamic perspective, a reinterpretation of the concept is required. According to Soroush, democracy can be interpreted in two contexts, namely as a value system and as a method of governance. As a value system, democracy must reflect the principles of human rights, freedom in the selection of the best leaders, accountability of leaders, and maintaining justice in society. As a method of governance, democracy should operate through free elections, media independence and freedom, free expression, political representation, political party diversity, and limits on executive power.<sup>41</sup> In this perspective, Soroush argues that there is no substantial contradiction between Islam and democracy.<sup>42</sup>

In an interview with Shargh Newspaper, Soroush said that it is important to create a democratic and religious government. For him, the concept of a democratic government that takes religious values into account is something to strive for. In such a system, religious values can play a role in public life that is recognized by religious communities.<sup>43</sup>

Soroush's views on the reinterpretation of democracy pave the way for reconciliation between Islam and democracy. This is because he believes that democracy is not monolithic, just like Islam. Although democracy originated from Western culture, when adapted to its local context, it can function according to its local uniqueness.

However, to adopt democracy as a system of government, it must be based on the normative goals of the system of government itself. The ultimate goal of implementing a particular system of government is to create an egalitarian society. Sholahuddin Jursyi formulated some minimum standards for the creation of an ideal Islamic society. First, the general principles of Islamic jurisprudence should be an inspiration in making the necessary laws in various

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<sup>41</sup> Valla Vakilli, "Abdolkarim Soroush and Critical Discourse in Iran", in John L. Esposito and John O. Voll (ed), *Makers of Contemporary Islam*, (Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>42</sup> Abdul Karim Soroush, *Reason, and Freedom in Islamic Thought*, Papper on Seminar in Georgetown University, 2001.

<sup>43</sup> Abdul Karim Soroush, *Democracy and Rationality*, Shargh Newspaper, 2003.

aspects of community life. Second, Islamic societies must see human beings as creatures of dignity, regardless of origin, color, gender, language, or religious beliefs. They must also view human beings as agents of change who have the freedom to choose faith and disbelief and accept or reject the political system. Third, social or societal orientation. Although Islam does not provide detailed rules, it has provided a legal philosophy that supports the collective interests of society and limits itself to the public good. In other words, Islamic society in Jursyi's view is a community that prioritizes the interests of the majority without being trapped in a majority dictatorship.

From this perspective, it can be said that an Islamic society will not form by itself. It takes a democratic process to create that Islamic society. In this context, Georg Sorensen's opinion is interesting to note. According to him, democracy will succeed if it fulfills four prerequisites: First, the economy must be managed in a modern way to create public welfare. "*The richer a nation is, the greater its chances of practicing democracy.*" Second, political culture as a reflection of the value system and beliefs of society must be supportive. Third, there must be a supportive social structure, and the last is the independence of a country. The more dependent a country is on other countries, the more difficult it is for that country to achieve democracy.<sup>44</sup>

Soroush states that the concept of *wilayat al-faqih* is incompatible with the spirit of modernity. According to him, this concept of government became outdated due to the lack of adequate knowledge in the field of politics (political theory).<sup>45</sup>

If you think about it, Soroush's idea of religious democracy is almost similar to the term liberation theology. The two terms are two elements that have no compatibility. Just like when we talk about Liberation Theology. Theology talks about beliefs that are part of the creed of a religion, to which humans must be bound. That attachment is what makes humans not free. Meanwhile, the word

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<sup>44</sup>Georg Sorensen, *Democracy and Democratization: Processes and Prospects in a Changing World*, (Translator) I. Made Krisna, *Demokrasi dan Demokratisasi: Proses dan Prospek dalam Sebuah Dunia Yang Sedang Berubah*, (Jogjakarta: Pustaka Pelajar dan CCSS, 2003), 43-45.

<sup>45</sup> Tedi Kholiludin, *Studi Analisis Pemikiran Abdul Karim Soroush Tentang Kritik Sistem Wilayat Al-Faqih*, 145-146.

liberation requires the opposite, to be free from various shackles and attachments. Both cultural and structural attachments, including attachments from certain beliefs and rules.<sup>46</sup>

In terms of etymology, Soroush's idea of religious democracy is similar to the idea that Abul A'la Al Maududi (a Pakistani cleric) once put forward, namely about Theo-Democracy. The terms Theo and democracy are two contradictory things, similar to the terms religion and democracy.

However, it would be good to elaborate and understand further the idea of democracy that Soroush is referring to, when he juxtaposes it with religion. And vice versa. We try to interpret what is meant by religion in Soroush's perspective, through which religion can coexist with democracy.

Of Soroush's many ideas about democracy, some are important and central to Soroush's thinking and can be used as supporting elements, which make democracy compatible with the religious breath of a society. The important elements that can be mentioned here are pluralism and secularism. These two things can help explain democracy in a religious society.

First, pluralism. Soroush's idea of pluralism came out during a debate with an Iranian cleric named Mohsen Kadivar. Soroush said that the question of pluralism is a quest to explain the actual existence of plurality in the world and therefore, plurality is inevitable, real, and sometimes contradictory.<sup>47</sup> We live in a world that has many faces, be it religious plurality, language, culture, skin, color, or racial plurality. Thus, the external world is a world of plurality.<sup>48</sup>

He further stated that in a religious society, explaining religious plurality is very important, because every religious believer believes in his religion and looks at other religions, comparing with

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<sup>46</sup> Rumadi, *Teologi Kemanusiaan: Refleksi Kritis Teologi Aswaja*, Tashwirul Afkar Edisi 18 Tahun 2004, 151-152.

<sup>47</sup> Abdul Karim Sorouh, *Religious Pluralism: Kadivar, Soroush Debate*, in [www.drSORoush.com](http://www.drSORoush.com)

<sup>48</sup> Abdul Karim Sorouh, *Religious Pluralism: Kadivar, Soroush Debate*, in [http://www.drSORoush.com/English/By\\_DrSorouh/E-CMB-19980409-Religious\\_Pluralism-Kadivar-Soroush\\_Debate.html](http://www.drSORoush.com/English/By_DrSorouh/E-CMB-19980409-Religious_Pluralism-Kadivar-Soroush_Debate.html).

his religion which he considers to be true and other religions cannot be true. This plurality is different from differences in language or color in which there is no debate about right and wrong.<sup>49</sup>

To explain religious plurality, several important things must be considered. First is the question of divine guidance. Philosophically, we have to resolve the issue of divine guidance and the fixity in what we see as God's guidance. Religious plurality can only be explained when we look back at what we call divine guidance and the person who receives that guidance. Second, religious plurality can be explained when we successfully answer the question of human intellect. The conversation about pluralism must begin with the acceptance and substantiation of plurality. If one believes that diversity, as said in mysticism, is illusory, contradictory, and not true, then plurality is false and not an issue.<sup>50</sup>

Religious plurality therefore cannot be separated from human intelligence or scientific development capabilities. Religious plurality can thus be understood when we see that the domain of religion is the domain of truth-seeking. When the domain becomes a domain of truth-seeking, then it is an area of plurality and this plurality is needed and necessary to seek the truth.<sup>51</sup>

This idea of pluralism would not work without tolerance. Soroush revealed that tolerance in Iran has reached a nadir. Soroush further said that the level of tolerance in his country is seen more as a vice than a virtue.<sup>52</sup> Previously, the Iranian people had long lived under a secular, undemocratic, and intolerant government. Therefore, developing a tolerant attitude towards differences must soon become part of the lives of the Iranian people.<sup>53</sup>

Second, secularism. Secularism has always been viewed simplistically. Secularism is also often considered a pejorative vocabulary, as it seeks to separate religion from state power. In

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<sup>49</sup> Tedi Kholiludin, *Studi Analisis Pemikiran Abdul Karim Soroush Tentang Kritik Sistem Wilayah Al-Faqih*, 205-206.

<sup>50</sup> Kholiludin

<sup>51</sup> Abdul Karim Soroush, *Religious Pluralism: Kadivar, Soroush Debate*.

<sup>52</sup> Abdul Karim Soroush, *Treatise on Tolerance*, (Translator) Nilou Mobasser, Papper in Erasmus Foundation, 2004.

<sup>53</sup> Tedi Kholiludin, *Studi Analisis Pemikiran Abdul Karim Soroush Tentang Kritik Sistem Wilayah Al-Faqih*, 208.

Soroush's view, secularism in politics is a form of government that is open to criticism, scrutiny, and adjustment. A secular government can thus be defined as one that has no values and rules that are beyond human judgment and verification and no protocols, statuses, positions, or ordinances that are not subject to public scrutiny.<sup>54</sup>

Regarding the union or separation of religion and state, Soroush sees many possibilities. It all depends on how the two are understood. Soroush says "*Naturally, when politics is desacralized (that is, when it becomes rational and scientific) while religion remains sacred, the two are separated. This is the meaning of and the reason for the separation of religion and state in secular societies.*"<sup>55</sup>

However, they can coexist on the condition that politics is combined with religion when a non-sacred understanding of politics is combined with a non-sacred understanding of religion.<sup>56</sup> This is the meaning of secularism that is often forgotten because there is often a misunderstanding in understanding the sacredness of religion and the profanity of politics. Because religious people who hold the basic principles of Islam, need scientific thinking patterns to ensure their survival. Meanwhile, rationalists who think demonstratively, progressively, logically, and dynamically will inevitably face ontological reality.

An understanding of secularism that is limited to the separation of religion and state is only held by militant secularists. According to Muhammed Arkoun, they are the ones who discard religious attitudes and regard them as archaic. From this, a militant attitude is born that is anticlergic and experiences a radical disconnect with all that conditions religious attitudes and determines them.<sup>57</sup> It quickly assumes that the obligation of God or the existence of God is not a necessity for life.

In addition to explaining the significance of the elements that are the foundation for the establishment of democracy, Soroush also

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<sup>54</sup> Abdul Karim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom And Democracy in Islam*, 60.

<sup>55</sup> Soroush

<sup>56</sup> Soroush.

<sup>57</sup> Muhammed Arkoun, *Al-'Almanah wa al-Din: al-Islam, al-Masib, al-Gharb*, (Translator) Sunarwoto Dema, "Islam Agama Sekuler: Penelusuran Sekularisme dalam Agama-agama di Dunia", (Jogjakarta: Belukar Budaya, 2003), 119.

explained how Muslims should understand religion. This is so that religion does not only become an institution that functions to provide "theological entertainment" in the form of heaven, eternal rewards, and favors. Furthermore, Soroush wants religion to be responsive and move along with the changes that occur in society. However, it needs to be understood that it is not the religion that needs to be revised, but the understanding of religion that is reformed.

To achieve this goal, Soroush proposed three key ideas that he conveyed in his short paper entitled "*Rationalist Traditions in Islam*," which he delivered in Heidelberg in 2004. In the paper, he states that three ideas must be developed to embrace religion and modernity and to achieve interfaith harmony.<sup>58</sup>

First, the minimalist idea of religion. We are now in the era of compatibility. This compatibility means that religious people live in a democratic realm. Such conditions allow all religious communities to live and mingle in the region. This is an unavoidable fact. It is unlikely that religious people will close themselves and will only socialize with people of the same religion. Diversity is a matter of fact, and we cannot avoid it. On the one hand, our interaction with people of various religions is a necessity, while at the same time, we must also strengthen our faith.<sup>59</sup>

In this context, it is not problematic if religion also tries to adjust to the flow of modernity. However, these efforts should not mean that religion is defeated by modernity. The adaptation of religion to modernity is currently a major issue in religious discourse. However, this does not mean that all products of modernity are compatible with religious teachings.

The opposite of religious minimalism is religious maximalism. This idea suggests that all life behavior must be derived or sourced from religion. Those who hold this idea usually find it difficult to develop criticism within their religious tradition. Because they feel that religion has become so perfect, criticizing religion is the same as fighting God. This maximalist idea is a product of an excessive love

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<sup>58</sup> Abdul Karim Soroush, *Rationalist Traditions in Islam*, "International Conference Islam-Religion and Democracy", Heidelberg Jerman, 2004.

<sup>59</sup> Soroush

for religion. They see all that is good and beautiful in their religion. Religious maximalist ideas are often the enemy of democracy and modernity.

The second idea that needs to be developed to understand religion within the framework of democracy is the extra-religious idea.<sup>60</sup> The challenge that comes and makes it difficult for these ideas to flourish is the sociological facts that exist in religious societies. It is undeniable that the biggest challenge when starting to think and write ideas about religion in a religious society is talking and writing about religion itself. Talking about religion in a religious society like Iran, according to Soroush, requires caution, more wisdom, and foresight to minimize resistance. This is the tremendous challenge that arises in such societies when trying to speak and develop extra-religious ideas.<sup>61</sup>

The third idea that must be realized is the idea of rights in religion.<sup>62</sup> Of course, the rights referred to here are not unlimited, but rights that are within the normative fences of religion. The development of the language of rights is very important because in many religions the language that is often proposed is the language of obligation. So that whatever is behind religious claims, must be obeyed as an obligation to religion, even though it has nothing to do with religion at all.

The God that Muslims believe in is certainly not despotic. For, a despotic God cannot possibly be reconciled with the idea of rights.<sup>63</sup> The God we understand is the God who has given spirit to humans to walk towards His majesty through the signs He gave. That path then diverges into many varieties. In this context, according to Soroush, it can be used as a development of ideas about rights in religion. We can demand this right as a way to expect God's pleasure. These rights include the right to think, create, speak, and the right to dissent as principle values taught by democracy.

Understanding rights in this framework does not mean ignoring obligations. Rather, it means that obligations can be

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<sup>60</sup> Soroush

<sup>61</sup> Soroush

<sup>62</sup> Soroush

<sup>63</sup> Soroush



reconciled with rights when both are on a proportional scale. These are the three ideas that Soroush believes can bring religions - such as Islam - to adapt to the modern world.

## **F. Conclusion**

The final word that concludes this article is that the ideas outlined above will never be realized without an effort to reform the thinking about the meaning of religion. According to Soroush, closedness to ideas outside religion will certainly make the development of religious thought more difficult. And in the end, religious people remain an exclusive community and find it difficult to accept change - including democracy. What Soroush has done by offering the idea of religious democracy as well as redefining religion and the understanding of religion is quite an inspiring new idea, although it cannot be said to be a truly solutive offer. Soroush, indeed, once said that one of the keys to the success of reform is when the people can realize it as a democrat and remain faithful Muslim. Because according to him, democracy today is an established idea.

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