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Reinterpreting Khilafah through Prophetic Islam: From The Legacy to Democratics Ethics

Mukotip
hmukotipmdi@gmail.com
State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Aziz Muslim
aziz.muslim@uin-suka.ac.id
State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Abstract

The discourse on khilafah and democracy is often viewed as two contradictory poles, a perspective that tends to be reductive since both are interpreted merely as political systems. This research aims to clarify the true essence of khilafah and to examine possibilities of reconciling it with democratic principles. The issue is significant because it contributes to the theoretical debate in Islamic political thought and has practical relevance for Muslim societies that struggle between religious ideals and democratic governance. The study employs two approaches: thematic interpretation to uncover the Qur'anic meaning of khilafah, and Kuntowijoyo's Prophetic Social Science to integrate its ethical dimensions with democracy. The findings show that khilafah is not a state system, but a divine character emphasizing imitation of God and personal responsibility. It also manifests as a movement based on knowledge rather than mere belief. The study concludes that khilafah and democracy are not inherently contradictory. Future discourse is advised to focus on developing the ethical and scientific dimensions of khilafah to enrich democratic practices within Muslim societies.

Keywords: *Khilafah, Democracy, Qur'anic Interpretation, Prophetic Social Science, Islamic Political Thought*

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INTRODUCTION

Religion and politics are central themes whose significance will persist throughout human civilization (Yıldırım & Gülengül, 2025). Politics intersects with human reality through governance and public policy, while religion provides a spiritual axis that guides and gives meaning to life. Religion offers inner peace because of its ability to touch the depths of the human heart, whereas politics operates through collective rationality and social interaction. The intersection between the two occurs in the communal dimension of human behavior, where tensions frequently arise. Such tensions, however, cannot be resolved simply by prioritizing one

over the other, since both play equally vital roles in shaping civilization (Setinawati et al., 2025).

Within Islamic discourse, the relationship between religion and politics finds its sharpest expression in the long-standing debate between Khilafah and democracy. These two concepts are often perceived as contradictory, as each is commonly understood as a distinct political system or model of governance (Ibnu Azka, Rafika, 2025). This binary perception continues to dominate academic and ideological discussions, with one camp seeking to reconcile Khilafah and democracy, while the other subordinates democracy under the authority of Khilafah. As a result, the term Khilafah has been burdened with heavy political connotations—frequently associated with Arabism, rigidity, conservatism, and fanaticism—rather than being understood as an ethical-spiritual concept deriving from the Qur'anic vision of humankind as khalīfatullāh fī al-arḍ, God's representative on earth.

In fact, many democratic principles such as equality, justice, and deliberation are in line with Islamic teachings. Therefore, Khilafah and democracy should not be seen within a binary-oppositional framework that assumes the acceptance of one necessarily entails the rejection of the other. The mainstream understanding of Khilafah remains prescriptive, focusing primarily on the establishment of an Islamic political system while neglecting the ontological dimension of khilāfah as a moral and social responsibility (Putra, 2016, pp. 17–18).

Previous studies on Khilafah and democracy tend to fall into two major orientations. The first, a defensive-political approach, is represented by thinkers such as al-Nabhānī, Sayyid Quṭb, and al-Mawdūdī, advocating for the establishment of a Khilafah-based state (Al-Nabhānī, 1994, 2001), founder of Ḥizb al-Taḥrīr, work of Sayyid Quṭb, Ma'ālim fī al-Ṭarīq (Quṭb, 1979), the works of Abū al-A'lā al-Mawdūdī, al-Khilāfah wa al-Mulk and Tadwīn al-Dustūr al-Islāmī (Al-Mawdūdī, 1978, 1981), the works of Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī, Hāżihī 'Aqīdatunā and al-Dimuqrātiyyah Dīn (AM Al-Maqdisī, nd-b, nd-a) as well as many fundamental thinkers sharing the same aspirations with them.

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Abdurrahman Wahid, Ainur Rofiq al-Amin (Al-Amin, 2012, 2017), and Nurul Ihsanuddin (Ihsanuddin, 2019), arguing that the Khilafah is no longer relevant and instead defending democracy using both scriptural and rational arguments. Despite their differences, both strands share the same fundamental assumption—that Khilafah is essentially a political system or form of state in Islam (Wahid, 2009). Many articles have been written including"Demystifying Khilafah Government and Democracy", by Ismail et al (Ismail, Mahyudin Ritonga, Irfan Ahmad, 2020), "Critique of Radical Religious Paradigm: An Epistemological Analysis from Principles of Islamic Thought" by Ade Dedi Rohayana and Muhammad Jauhari Sofi (Sophie, 2021), "Modern Extremist Groups and the Division of the World: A Critique from an Islamic Perspectives" by Mohamed Badara and Maaaki Bagatab, Azizur Rahman Patel (Patel, 1995), and many more.

Departing from this assumption, the present study proposes a different approach, called apolitical-redefinitive. This perspective interprets Khilafah not as a political or institutional system but as an ethical paradigm of human responsibility and moral governance inspired by the higher objectives of Sharia (maqāṣid al-sharīʿah). The focus is shifted from formal structures of power to the ethical substance of leadership rooted in justice, equality, and collective welfare. The study seeks to uncover the substantive meaning of Khilafah beyond its reduction to a political system and to reconstruct its relationship with democracy in a non-oppositional, ethical framework. By reinterpreting Khilafah as a principle of moral stewardship rather than political sovereignty, this work aims to bridge the perceived dichotomy between Islam and democracy, showing that both can coexist within a shared ethical horizon.

Most existing studies have concentrated on normative-political arguments, either promoting or rejecting Khilafah as a model of governance. Few have attempted to reinterpret it as an ethical and epistemological concept of social responsibility that resonates with democratic principles. Moreover, almost no major work has integrated this reinterpretation with Kuntowijoyo's paradigm of Prophetic Islam, emphasizing the moral mission of humanization, liberation, and transcendence. This study fills that gap by repositioning Khilafah within the domain of prophetic ethics rather than political formalism, thereby offering a new framework for reconciling Islam and democracy through moral universals instead of institutional competition.

The theoretical framework here is divided into two, according to the keywords of this study: Khilafah and democracy. In dissecting the Khilafah, the author will use thematic interpretation and phenomenological paradigms on language. The thematic interpretation that the author will refer to is the formulation of Muṣṭafā Muslim dividing the thematic interpretation method into eight stages (Muslim, 1989, pp. 37–39). Firstly, determine the theme of discussion. Secondly, collect verses around the theme. Thirdly, systematize the verses according to the order in which they were revealed. Fourthly, study the verses by referring to the books of interpretation. Fifthly, induce elementary parts of the theme after studying them from several verses. Sixthly, uncover moral and spiritual messages from a verse. Seventhly, orientate yourself on scientific methodology. Eighthly, intend to reveal the truths in the Qur'an. As for the paradigm of phenomenological language philosophy assessing that texts have their own world, so they do not need to be limited to the intentions of producers and audiences (Wijaya, 2020, pp. 185–186). Because of its philosophical character, this article will bring up a new meaning of the Khilafah that is significantly different from its dominant meaning. In line with the understanding of criticism according to 'Alī Ḥarb (Ḥarb, 2003, p. x), the author can delve into the unspeakable side of the verses of the Khilafah which have so far been burdened by political assumptions.

On the other hand, in reading democracy face to face sharia, the author will borrow Kuntowijoyo's Prophetic Social Science (ISP). Kuntowijoyo reinterprets the term amr ma'rūf nahy munkar, as the main teaching in Islam that plays a central role in enforcing sharia which has implications for misunderstanding and misuse of political Khilafah. Kuntowijoyo, by exploring the transformative potential of QS. Āli 'Imrān [3]: 110, initiated three discursive-practical steps of prophetic social science: humanization, liberation and transcendence. Humanization is a joint effort to maximally fulfill human needs, such as knowledge, critical thinking patterns, efficient and effective solutions or if concretized again, optimizing the fulfillment of six basic needs; clothing, food, shelter, education, health and transportation (Rahardjo, 2021). Liberation is reducing and eradicating the common enemies of humanity, such as stupidity, deviant thinking, crime, poverty, oppression and so on. Transcendence is an effort to mature the human soul so that the humanism that is aimed for does not slip into hedonism (Fahmi, 2005). This is a form of effort toward ugahari; peaceful in simplicity and simple in tranquility but with a contemporary breath. The author will use these three elements of ISP as

a foundation in reconciling the clash between sharia and democracy.

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical method, aiming to reveal both the conceptual meaning and practical relevance of the research theme within the contemporary socio-political context. The first approach applied is thematic exegesis (tafsir maudhu'i), exploring the concept of khilafah as articulated in the Qur'an and Hadith. This process involves collecting relevant verses, examining their asbabun nuzul or contexts of revelation, and analyzing them through classical and contemporary exegetical works. In doing so, the study seeks to interpret the meaning of khilafah objectively, free from ideological interests or political bias.

In addition, this research utilizes the framework of Prophetic Social Sciences as developed by Kuntowijoyo. This framework emphasizes the integration of humanization, liberation, and transcendence in order to reconstruct the understanding of khilafah not merely as a political system, but as a moral and spiritual responsibility. Through this approach, the study attempts to establish dialogue and synthesis between khilafah and democracy, often perceived as opposing concepts, by grounding democracy in principles of public participation.

The sources of data consist of primary materials, including Qur'anic verses, Hadiths, and exegetical literature, and secondary materials such as books, scholarly articles, and previous research related to khilafah, democracy, and Prophetic Social Sciences. Data analysis is conducted through processes of data reduction, textual interpretation, and comparative argumentation, aiming to produce conclusions not only theoretical but also relevant to the dynamics of contemporary socio-political life.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. Genealogy of the Khilafah Discourse and Contemporary Muslim Typology

The idea of a global Khilafah stems from the encounter between Islam and the West, aka modernity. Western colonization and their multi-sectoral progress have harmed and amazed the Muslim mind, which then has implications for the classification and multichotomy of their multidimensional attitudes toward the West. In general, Abdullah Saeed typologizes them into eight (Saeed, 2007). First, traditionalist-legalists is Muslim groups trying to maintain the heritage of Islamic law by establishing a system of schools of thought in fiqh. In Indonesia, this group is

represented by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Second, puritan-theological is Muslim groups accentuating the theological side of Islam by trying to purify it from infiltration with foreign elements which are generally divided into two: local elements and to a certain extent modern elements. Wahhabi is the main icon of this group among several other groups also representing it.

Third, militant extremists is the movement of a group of Muslims in the political sector by making Islam the ideological foundation and then reviving it in extremist, even terrorist manner. One representative of this group is ISIS and al-Qaeda, while its leading figure is Osama bin Laden. This group tends to take a rebellious attitude and is less solid in ideological struggles in the political arena. Fourth, Political Islamistsis in contrast to the third group tending to be extremist. This fourth group presents Islam as a solution to world ideologies, such as capitalism, socialism, secularism, nationalism and so on. This group believes that Islam is the most solution-oriented alternative to various damages in the world. For that reason, they entered the political realm with a reformative agenda to then realize an Islamic political order. The Muslim Brotherhood initiated by Ḥasan al-Bannā in Egypt and the Jamaat-i Islam initiated by Abū al-A'lā al-Mawdūdī in Pakistan are representatives of this group.

Fifth, liberal-secular is a group focusing on a positive and equitable public order for everyone regardless of race, ethnicity, language and religion. For this group, Islam is positioned more as a private faith in God, while in the public sector, they place their main interest in; protection of religion from state interference or vice versa, respect and appreciation for religious freedom, rejection to condemnation of misogyny, especially in the name of religion, and commitment to equal rights for every human being. For the Indonesian context, this group is represented by a group of academics and intellectuals who are liberal and feminist. Sixth, nominalist-cultural is a group of Muslims who in terms of thought, belief, lifestyle and way of life do not have much commitment to Islam. They are usually people born into a Muslim environment but living by the flow without questioning the ideas, beliefs and doctrines behind the flow. This group can generally be called lay but in apathetic ranks. If we relate it to Geertz's Muslim typology, this group in the Indonesian context is labeled abangan (Geertz, 2014).

Seventh, classical modernists is the predecessors of Islamic renewal who reformed the Islamic treasury by reactivating ijtihad as an intellectual tool of Islam that had been forgotten

because of the slogan, "the door of ijtihad has been closed". This group believes that revelation does not contradict reason and humanity so that if revelation seems contradictory, then re-reading is absolutely needed and attempted. Representatives of this group are Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, Muḥammad 'Abduh, Sayyid Aḥmad Khān and Syah Waliyullāh al-Dihlawī. Eighth, progressive ijtihad is the successors of the classical modernist group where the last group reformed classical science and developed a contemporary reading methodology for the classical heritage so that Islam has discursive power in facing the challenges of the times and answering various problems. The reformist group as explained by Boullata can be identified with this last group. The eight types of Muslims above can be a frame of reference regarding the position in which the discourse of the Khilafah develops with different measures. The following author will apply thematic interpretation reading of the Khilafah by referring directly to the verses of the Qur'an about it.

2. Khilafah and the Ethics of Divine Stewardship

The linguistic and exegetical findings suggest that the Qur'an conceptualizes khilafah as succession and stewardship, providing an ethical foundation for democratic governance rooted in divine responsibility. Across both singular and plural usages, the Qur'an consistently depicts khilafah not as a formal political institution but as a moral vocation grounded in the divine-human relationship. The recurring meanings of khalīfah, khulafā', and khalā'if in verses such as Q.S. al-Baqarah (2:30), Ṣād (38:26), al-A'rāf (7:69, 74), al-Naml (27:62), Fāṭir (35:39), and al-An'ām (6:165) reveal a consistent semantic thread: humankind is entrusted as a successor (istikhlāf) to previous generations, responsible for preserving justice, harmony, and moral order on earth (Ismail & Berghout, 2024).

This pattern shows that the Qur'an views khilafah as a theological and ethical principle, not as a political ideology. For instance, khalīfah in Q.S. al-Baqarah (2:30) refers to the continuation of divine creation through humanity — not rulership or sovereignty. Similarly, in Q.S. Ṣād (38:26), Prophet Dāwūd's khilafah represents succession in prophetic mission, emphasizing moral judgment (faḥkum bayna al-nāsi bil-ḥaqq) rather than political dominion. Even in plural forms such as khulafā' and khalā'if, exegetes like al-Zamakhsyarī, al-Rāzī, and al-Qurṭubī emphasize succession, alternation, and stewardship rather than political authority (Hadi, 2021; Jannah & Rahman, 2024; Setyarama & Erdiansah, 2024). Thus, the Qur'an

constructs a spiritual anthropology in which khilafah signifies humankind's ontological position as God's trustee — the bearer of divine attributes within historical and social reality.

The theological implication of this reading is profound. If khilafah denotes divine succession, it will follow that humanity carries within itself a reflection of God's creative and moral attributes. Ibn 'Arabī describes this as al-insān al-kāmil — the perfect human reflecting divine qualities in the world (Nasiruddin, 2024). The Qur'an's appointment of humans as khulafā' al-ard thus indicates not political leadership but metaphysical trust (amānah ilāhiyyah). In this sense, khilafah expresses the divine nature in human beings — the moral and spiritual capacity to act as God's representative in manifesting justice ('adl), compassion (raḥmah), and truth (ḥaqq) within creation.

Consequently, khilafah entails not only responsibility (taklīf) but also capability (istiṭā'ah). Humans were chosen as God's representatives precisely because they possess the potential to embody divine attributes. As Sheikh 'Izz al-Dīn ibn 'Abd al-Salām asserts, humans must imitate the ethics of God (al-takhalluq bi akhlāq Allāh) 2020, pp. 70–73), while Ḥasan Ḥanafī radicalizes this view by transforming faith ('aqīdah) into revolutionary energy that reorders social reality (Hanafī, 1988). In other words, being khalīfah is to engage in an ongoing process of moral creation — transforming divine ideals into social praxis.

At this point, the Qur'anic khilafah can be understood as a dynamic anthropology of divinity, in which humans seek the radiance of God's attributes in the universe. The pursuit of truth, justice, beauty, and welfare is therefore not merely ethical but theological — a reflection of humanity's divine origin. Even secular human endeavors such as scientific discovery, technological advancement, and the pursuit of human welfare can be seen as manifestations of the khilafah impulse: the innate drive to create, sustain, and perfect life. In this light, Yuval Noah Harari's notion of Homo Deus — humanity striving for god-like capacities through technology and science — can be read as a secular echo of this Qur'anic anthropology (Harari, 2018). The desire for immortality and perfection, though often detached from its theological roots, remains an expression of humankind's innate longing to mirror the divine (Moll, 2023).

This epistemological bridge between tafsir and modern social theory suggests that khilafah should not be confined to political restorationism. Rather, it should be redefined as a universal

ethical orientation — a continuous striving toward divine values in personal, social, and political life. The denial of this moral nature leads to tyranny and corruption, as humans act contrary to their divine mandate. Conversely, acknowledging khilafah as divine stewardship grounds all human institutions — including democracy — in moral accountability before God.

Thus, the theological redefinition of khilafah naturally opens into a prophetic-democratic framework, governance reflecting God's justice through participatory ethics and collective deliberation (shūrā). It offers a normative bridge between sharia and democracy, not through the imposition of divine law as political dogma, but through its translation into public ethics — a governance model that humanizes, liberates, and transcends, in line with Kuntowijoyo's Islam Profetik (Syihabuddin & Huda, 2024).

In conclusion, the Qur'an's depiction of khilafah as succession and stewardship provides a theological foundation for an ethical model of democracy. This model envisions governance as a shared moral responsibility rather than a contest for power — where divine attributes inspire social justice, equality, and compassion in human affairs. In this paradigm, the restoration of khilafah is not about reviving a lost political order, but about revitalizing humanity's divine vocation in a democratic age

3. Reconciliation of Sharia and Democracy

The reconciliation between sharia and democracy should not be perceived as a confrontation between divine revelation and human autonomy, but rather as a dialogical process of integrating divine attributes into public responsibility. The divine character of sharia lies in its moral objectives (maqāṣid al-sharīʿah)—justice, mercy, benefit, and wisdom (Baidhawy, n.d.). These values provide an ethical orientation for the exercise of human authority. Meanwhile, democracy, at its core, seeks to guarantee accountability, participation, and equality before the law. In this sense, sharia offers a transcendent moral compass, while democracy provides the procedural mechanism through which those values can be realized in society. Both can coexist within a model of governance that embodies divine accountability in human decision-making.

This integrative paradigm finds a strong foundation in the Indonesian political system, built upon Pancasila as its philosophical basis. Pancasila encapsulates the harmony between theistic morality and humanistic governance: the first principle, "Belief in the One and Only

God," preserves the divine dimension, while the subsequent principles institutionalize justice, democracy, and social welfare (Lumintang, 2021). The practice of musyawarah (deliberation), as mandated in the fourth principle—"Democracy guided by the inner wisdom of deliberations among representatives"—resonates with the Qur'anic concept of shūrā (consultation) as mentioned in Surah al-Shūrā [42]: 38. In essence, musyawarah represents the procedural dimension of democracy, while shūrā provides its ethical foundation, rooted in divine trust (amānah) and communal responsibility (Syarif et al., 2024).

The Indonesian experience demonstrates how Islamic values can inspire democratic processes without the coercive imposition of religious law. The madrasah education system integrates religious ethics into civic education; the National Zakat Agency (BAZNAS) institutionalizes social justice through faith-based economic responsibility; and the Interfaith Harmony Forum (FKUB) promotes dialogue and tolerance through the principle of mutual respect (tasāmuh) (Barton & Yilmaz, 2021). Each of these examples illustrates the synthesis between divine accountability and public ethics—where faith informs public policy not as dogma, but as an ethical framework guiding compassion, fairness, and collective welfare.

Therefore, rather than being viewed as oppositional, sharia and democracy should be understood as mutually reinforcing frameworks: sharia provides spiritual guidance (hudan), while democracy ensures participatory realization (musyārakah) of those values within the public sphere. This vision aligns with (Kuntowijoyo, 2001, p. 106) concept of Prophetic Social Science, emphasizing humanization, liberation, and transcendence. Within democratic governance, these three prophetic principles translate into civic virtues—humanization manifests as equality and human dignity; liberation corresponds to justice and accountability; and transcendence embodies moral integrity in leadership.

Ultimately, the reconciliation of sharia and democracy in the Indonesian context represents an ongoing civilizational dialogue—a movement from theological normativity toward ethical responsibility. The divine nature of Islam functions not as a rigid command but as a living inspiration nurturing human freedom, rationality, and justice. Through this integration, democracy becomes not merely the rule of the people, but also the rule of the people under divine trust (amānah).

CONCLUSIONS

The discussion demonstrates that khilafah in the Qur'anic sense is not a political mandate or institutional authority but rather the embodiment of the divine nature within humans (divine agency). It reflects humanity's inherent potential to mirror God's attributes—justice (al-'adl), compassion (al-raḥmah), and truth (al-ḥaqq)—in social life. Thus, khilafah is best understood as an ethical–spiritual vocation guiding human actions toward the realization of goodness and harmony in the world, rather than as a formalized political system.

This reinterpretation opens a constructive pathway toward a model of democratic governance rooted in prophetic values. Through the framework of Kuntowijoyo's Prophetic Social Sciences (Ilmu Sosial Profetik), the study bridges the normative dimension of sharia and the rational structure of democracy. The values of humanization, liberation, and transcendence provide an ethical foundation for a prophetic democracy—a socio-political order that seeking human dignity, social justice, and moral-spiritual maturity. In this sense, khilafah becomes a living ethical principle (living Qur'an) manifested in human creativity, governance, and collective responsibility toward justice and compassion.

This study remains largely conceptual and normative. It has not yet engaged with empirical data or examined the socio-political manifestations of khilafah across diverse contexts. Consequently, while the theoretical synthesis is robust, it may not fully represent the lived realities of Muslim societies. Furthermore, the application of the Prophetic Social Sciences framework remains at the conceptual level, without sufficient exploration of its operational form within institutional or policy settings.

Subsequent research is encouraged to pursue comparative analyses of khilafah-inspired democratic models in Muslim-majority countries such as Indonesia, Tunisia, and Malaysia. Field-based or qualitative studies could deepen the empirical understanding of how prophetic values—humanization, liberation, and transcendence—are embodied in governance, civil society, and education. Future scholarship should also expand the dialogue between Living Qur'an studies and Islamic Political Hermeneutics to explore how Qur'anic ethics can dynamically inform contemporary political systems while preserving theological integrity and social inclusivity.

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