# Democracy and Islam: Shaping the Political and Social Landscapes of India and Saudi Arabia

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## Abstract

This article explores the roles of democracy and Islam in shaping the political and social landscapes of India and Saudi Arabia, where two nation with distinct political frameworks. While both countries share a deep cultural and religious connection to Islam their approaches to governance, legal systems and social values differ significantly due to their unique political histories and structures. In India, a secular democratic republic where Islam is one of the religions constituting a substantial portion of the muslims population. The country's democratic framework established through a constitution that ensures freedom of religion enables a pluralistic society where Islamic values coexist with diverse religious traditions. The article examines how India's democracy fosters religious diversity and how Islam, though integral to millions of its citizens operates within the boundaries of a secular state. It also analyses the influence of Islamic principles on India's political and social spheres, focusing on how muslim leaders, political parties and organizations contribute to the nation's democratic ethos. In contrast, Saudi Arabia, a kingdom with a deeply embedded Islamic governance model, provides a unique perspective on the role of Islam in shaping national policy. As the birthplace of Islam and custodian of its holiest sites, the king of Saudi Arabia is profoundly influenced by Sharia law. The monarchy of the kingdom, with its close ties to Islamic religious authorities, views Islam not only as a religion but also as the foundation of its political and legal systems. The article investigates how the Islamic state of Saudi Arabia balances religious conservatism with modernization efforts, particularly in the context of social reforms under the current leadership. Ultimately, this comparative analysis sheds light on the complex ways in which democracy and Islam shape governance and societal norms in these two countries, highlighting both convergences and divergences in their approaches.

*Keywords*: *Democracy, Islam, India, Saudi Arabia, Secularism, Social Reforms, Governance.*

## Introduction

The relationship between Islam and democracy has long been a subject of intellectual and political debate. While some argue that Islamic principles align with democratic values such as justice (*adl*), consultation (*shura*), and public welfare *(maslaha)*, others contend that theocratic elements within certain Islamic traditions pose challenges to democratic governance. India and Saudi Arabia present two strikingly different case studies in this regard, reflecting the diverse ways in which Islam

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interacts with political and social structures. India, the world's largest democracy, upholds a secular framework where Islam, as the second-largest religion, coexists within a pluralistic society. Despite being a constitutional guarantee of equality and religious freedom, the political engagement of Indian Muslims is shaped by historical legacies, socio-economic challenges and evolving state policies. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia, an Islamic monarchy, follows a system where governance is deeply rooted in Wahhabi interpretations of Islamic law, leaving limited space for democratic participation. The intertwining of religion and state in Saudi Arabia contrasts sharply with India's secular model, offering an insightful comparative perspective on how Islam influences on governance and social structures in different political contexts.

This study aims to explore the complex dynamics of democracy and Islam by analyzing the political and social landscapes of India and Saudi Arabia. By examining historical developments, constitutional frameworks, and contemporary challenges, this research will shed light on how both nations navigate the relationship between faith, governance, and public life. The intersection of democracy and Islam has been a subject of extensive academic debate, particularly in the context of diverse political systems such as those in India and Saudi Arabia. The scholars have explored the compatibility of Islamic principles with democratic governance, the role of religion in shaping political structures and the socio-political implications of Islam's influence in both democratic and theocratic states. The literature below examines key scholarly contributions on democracy and Islam, focusing on their impact on governance, legal frameworks and societal structures in India and Saudi Arabia.

### Democracy and Islam: Theoretical Perspectives

The compatibility of Islam with democracy has been explored through various theoretical lenses. The scholars argued that fundamental Islamic principles, such as *shura* (consultation), *adl* (justice), and *maslaha* (public interest), align with democratic values (Esposito & Voll, 1996). However, others highlight tensions between Islamic jurisprudence and democratic institutions, particularly concerning the role of *shari'a* (Islamic law) in governance (Lewis, 2002). The several works emphasize the diversity within Islamic political thought that is demonstrating how interpretations of democracy differ across regions. For example, Asef Bayat (2007) argues that Islamic movements have evolved to embrace democratic participation in some Muslim-majority countries, while others, such as Olivier Roy (1994), suggest that political Islam has struggled to reconcile Islamic governance with modern democratic principles.

In the case of India presents a unique instance where Islam exists within a secular, democratic framework. The scholars such as Rajeev Bhargava (2010) and Mohammad Sajjad (2018) explored how India's constitutional secularism provides a space for religious pluralism while ensuring political representation for Muslims. However, studies also highlight challenges such as communal tensions, socio-economic marginalization, and the political under representation of Muslims (Hasan,

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2019). The other research delves into the role of Muslim political organizations and movements in democratic participation. For instance, Alam (2008) examines how Indian Muslims engaged in electoral politics despite facing systemic discrimination. The works of Zoya Hasan and Irfan Ahmad (2017) further analyse the impact of state policies on Muslim identity and political mobilization in India. In the context of Saudi Arabia's political system that is grounded in wahhabi interpretations of Islam has been extensively analysed by scholars such as Madawi Al-Rasheed (2018) and Stéphane Lacroix (2011). These studies highlight how the monarchy legitimizes its rule through religious discourse, maintaining a governance system where *shari'a* is the foundation of legal and political authority. The research by Michael Herb (1999) and Bernard Haykel (2003) explores the monarchy's use of religious scholars (*ulama*) to sustain its legitimacy while controlling political dissent. Moreover, studies on political reform movements such as those by Gause (2010) and Al-Rasheed (2013), examine the limited scope of democratic participation in Saudi Arabia, focusing on the role of consultative councils (*Majlis al-Shura*) and restricted civil society activism.

**Comparative Studies on Islam and Democracy**

The comparative studies on Islam and democracy provide insights into how religious principles shape governance differently in democratic and non-democratic contexts. For example, studies by Stepan and Robertson (2003) highlighted the variation in democratic engagement among Muslim-majority states, emphasizing that Islam's role in politics is context-dependent. The scholars such as Nader Hashemi (2009) explore how historical and political conditions influenced whether Islamic societies adopt democratic practices. The works of Alfred Stepan (2000) and John Esposito (2011) further illustrate the spectrum of governance models in the Muslim world, ranging from secular democracies like Indonesia and Turkey to absolute monarchies like Saudi Arabia. The existing literature underscores the complexity of the relationship between Islam and democracy, revealing significant variations in governance across different contexts. While India represents a case of Muslim political engagement within a secular democracy, Saudi Arabia maintains an Islamic monarchy with limited democratic participation. This review highlights the need for further comparative studies to explore how historical, legal, and social factors influence the interplay between Islam and democracy in different political landscapes.

**Islamic Principles and Democratic Governance**

Islamic political thought, derived from the Qur'an, *hadith* (Prophetic traditions), and classical jurisprudence, emphasizes key values that resonate with democratic ideals. The concept of *shura* suggests collective decision-making, which aligns with democratic principles of governance. The Qur'an (42:38) encourages consultation among believers in their affairs. The classical Islamic scholars, including Al-Mawardi and Al-Farabi emphasized the role of *ijma* (consensus) as a mechanism for collective decision-making akin to democratic representation. The role of Islamic governance is meant to ensure justice and societal well-being that is fundamental goal of democratic

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systems. Despite these principles, interpretations of Islamic governance vary, influencing how democracy is implemented in different contexts, as seen in India and Saudi Arabia. India, the world's largest democracy, provides a unique model where Islam coexists within a secular constitutional framework. The Indian constitution guarantees religious freedom, allowing Muslims to practice their faith while participating in a pluralistic political system. The important aspects of Islam and democracy in India where Indian Muslims have voting rights, political representation in parliament and the ability to participate in democratic institutions. While India follows a secular constitution, it allows Muslim personal law in matters of marriage, divorce, and inheritance under the Muslim Personal Law (*Shariat)* Application Act, 1937.

Despite the constitutional protections, Indian Muslims face socio-economic and political marginalization, communal tensions and debates over secularism versus majoritarian politics. In contrast, Saudi Arabia operates as an Islamic monarchy, where governance is based on Wahhabi interpretations of *shari'a* law. Unlike India's democratic system, Saudi Arabia does not have electoral democracy and political power is concentrated within the royal family. The kingdom of Saudi Arabia follows a model where the king rules by divine legitimacy and the Qur'an and *shari'a* serve as the constitution. There are no political parties or direct elections instead a consultative council (*Majlis al-Shura*) advises the monarchy without legislative authority. The legal system is based on Islamic jurisprudence, limiting democratic freedoms including restrictions on dissent, free speech and political opposition. This comparison highlights how historical, cultural, and political contexts shape the way Islam interacts with governance, challenging the notion of a singular "Islamic" political model.

## Political and Social Landscape of Islam and Democracy

The relationship between Islam and democracy significantly shapes the political and social landscapes of India and Saudi Arabia. While both countries have a strong Islamic presence but their political structures and social frameworks differ greatly. India, as a secular democracy, allows for Muslim political participation within a pluralistic society, whereas Saudi Arabia follows an Islamic monarchy where governance is strictly based on *shari'a* law. This contrast influences various aspects of governance, legal systems, religious rights, and social structures in both nations. The parliamentary democracy allows Muslims to participate in elections, political parties, and governance. The Muslim politicians have held prominent positions, including presidents, chief ministers, and parliamentarians. However, debates over a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) highlight tensions between religious autonomy and state law. Despite constitutional protections, Indian Muslims face socio-political challenges, including communal violence, underrepresentation in politics, and economic marginalization, as noted in the Sachar Committee Report (2006). The rising Hindu nationalism has also contributed to increasing concerns over Muslim identity and rights.

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In the subject of Saudi Arabia does not have a democratic system with elections or political parties. Instead, it follows a monarchy where the king has supreme authority, advised by the *Majlis al-Shura* (Consultative Council), which has no legislative powers. There are no democratic elections and public dissent is suppressed. The state enforces religious norms, including mandatory prayers and restrictions on public behaviour. The religious police (*Mutawa*) historically played a role in enforcing Islamic morality, though their power has been reduced in recent years. The rights of Women have improved with recent reforms, including the right to drive and increased workforce participation. However, guardianship laws and restrictions on political rights continue to limit gender equality. The social modernization efforts such as allowing cinemas, concerts and sports events for women, reflect a shift towards a more open society though political freedoms remain restricted. However, limited reforms under Saudi Vision 2030 have introduced some economic and social changes such as greater women's rights and cultural liberalization has seen. As a multi-religious society, India experiences both coexistence and conflict between its diverse communities, including Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians. Indian Muslims contribute significantly to the country's cultural, artistic, and intellectual heritage. However, they also face discrimination in employment, education, and housing. The Muslim women in India have legal rights but also face challenges, particularly in personal law matters. The abolition of Triple Talaq in 2019 sparked debates over gender justice within Islamic law. While India has a history of syncretic traditions, communal riots, religious polarization, and issues like the Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi dispute have created social tensions. The political and social landscapes of Islam and democracy in India and Saudi Arabia reveal two distinct models of governance and societal organization.

The Arab Spring, a wave of pro-democracy uprisings that began in 2010 (west Asian countries), had profound effects on the Muslim world challenging authoritarian regimes and reshaping political discourse on Islam and democracy. While India and Saudi Arabia were not directly affected by the protests, the events had significant implications for both countries. In India, the Arab Spring reinvigorated discussions on Muslim political activism and democratic participation, whereas in Saudi Arabia it led to heightened state control, crackdowns on dissent and cautious reforms under the Vision 2030 initiative. The Arab Spring encouraged debates on democracy, social justice, and human rights within India's Muslim community. The Muslim organizations and scholars in India followed the uprisings closely, analysing how Islamic movements engaged in democratic struggles in the Arab world. It reinforced the importance of electoral politics among Indian Muslims, especially in states with significant Muslim populations like Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, and Kerala. The events also led to discussions on political Islam and the role of religious movements in governance with some advocating a stronger voice for Muslims in Indian democracy. The post-Arab spring period coincided with rising Islamophobia and political challenges for Indian Muslims. The rise of Hindutva politics led to increased communal tensions, with some sections of society equating Islamic political movements with extremism. The Indian government took a cautious stance on the Arab Spring, avoiding strong positions on the fall of regimes to maintain diplomatic relations with Gulf states including Saudi Arabia.

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Instead of political liberalization, Saudi Arabia introduced social and economic reforms under crown prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030. While India continues to navigate the complexities of secularism and minority rights, Saudi Arabia remains resistant to democratic change, opting for economic modernization without political liberalization. These divergent responses highlight the broader debate on the compatibility of Islam and democracy in different socio-political contexts. Despite extensive scholarly discussions on Islam and democracy, there remain significant gaps in understanding how these two concepts shape the political and social landscapes of India and Saudi Arabia. The existing literature primarily focuses on either broad theoretical debates on the compatibility of Islam and democracy or case studies of the Arab world, often overlooking the unique political trajectories of India and Saudi Arabia. While studies on democracy in the Muslim world often focus on the Middle East, limited research compares how Islam interacts with democracy in a secular democratic state like India and an Islamic monarchy like Saudi Arabia. A direct comparison of these two contrasting models remains underexplored.  However, there is a lack of in-depth analysis of how the Arab Spring influenced India's Muslim political engagement and Saudi Arabia's governance reforms, particularly under Vision 2030. The research on political Islam has mostly focused on Islamist movements in the Middle East and North Africa (e.g., the Muslim Brotherhood). There is limited discussion on how Islamic organizations in India and Saudi Arabia navigate political participation and state control in different political systems. While gender studies have examined women's rights in Islamic societies, there is a lack of comparative research on how democracy in India and monarchy in Saudi Arabia shape Muslim women's political agency, legal rights, and social mobility. The study on secularism in India often focuses on Hindu-Muslim relations but rarely examine the governance challenges faced by Muslim political leaders within a democratic framework. Similarly, research on Saudi Arabia typically addresses its authoritarian structure but neglects the internal religious dynamics, such as Shia-Sunni relations and the role of wahhabism in shaping state policies. While global research on digital activism in Muslim societies has increased, there is little focus on how Indian Muslims use democratic platforms versus how Saudi activists engage with digital spaces under state restrictions. By addressing these gaps, this study will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how Islam and democracy interact within two distinct political contexts, offering insights into governance, social change and the evolving role of Islam in the modern world.

## Research Methodology

The research on political Islam has mostly focused on Islamist movements in the Middle East and North Africa (e.g., the Muslim Brotherhood). There is limited discussion on how Islamic organizations in India and Saudi Arabia navigate political participation and state control in different political systems. While gender studies have examined women's rights in Islamic societies, there is a lack of comparative research on how democracy in India and monarchy in Saudi Arabia shape Muslim women's political agency, legal rights, and social mobility. The study on secularism in India

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**Conclusion**

The interaction between Islam and democracy in India and Saudi Arabia reflects two distinct political and social realities, shaped by historical, legal, and ideological factors. While India follows a secular democratic framework that allows Muslim political participation within a pluralistic society, Saudi Arabia operates as an Islamic monarchy where governance is deeply rooted in *shari'a* law. These differences have profound implications for governance, religious freedoms, political representation and societal development in both nations. In India, democracy provides a platform for Muslim political engagement, legal recognition of religious practices and participation in governance. However, challenges such as communal tensions, socio-political marginalization and debates over secularism continue to shape the Muslim experience within the democratic framework. The Arab Spring, while not directly affecting India, contributed to renewed discussions on Muslim political activism, secularism, and the role of Islam in public life. The post-Arab spring period saw increased state repression against political dissent, alongside controlled social and economic reforms under Vision 2030. While these reforms signal a shift towards modernization, they remain disconnected from democratic aspirations, as political participation and civil liberties remain highly restricted. The comparative analysis of India and Saudi Arabia highlights the complexities of integrating Islam with governance in diverse political contexts. Ultimately, the study reinforces that Islam and democracy are not inherently incompatible but are shaped by historical, political, and cultural contexts.

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