

Muslim Politics Review

Vol. 3 No. 1, 2024, 216-219

<https://doi.org/10.56529/mpr.v3i1.252>

Book Review

Is the Modern State Compatible with Islam?

The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's

Moral Predicament by Wael B. Hallaq

(New York: Columbia University Press, 2012)

Nawal Zemoura

Master Program Graduate, the Faculty of Islamic Studies (FIS),
Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia (UIII), Depok, Indonesia
nawelzemoura22@gmail.com

This book examines compatibility between the modern state and Islam. The author, Wael B. Hallaq, argues that the modern state, which are the result of the European enlightenment project, is incompatible with Islam because it lacks the moral and ethical standards sanctioned by Islam.

Hallaq substantiates his main argument with an in-depth exploration, particularly in chapters one and two, in which he compares and explains the significant differences between Islamic governance and the paradigm of the modern state. He argues that Islamic rule rests on moral, legal, political, social, and metaphysical foundations that differ dramatically from those sustaining the modern state. Hence, harmony between these two paradigms is unattainable since there is inherently self-contradiction.

In chapter three, the author highlights the source of sovereignty and the rule of law and discusses the constitutional frameworks and structures of the modern state and Islamic governance in practicing the separation of powers. The nation-state is mainly based on the doctrine of separation

between the three powers: the legislative branch which is in charge of making legislation; the executive branch implements laws; and the judicial branch amends and interprets these laws. Modernity claims that the separation of powers theory is the backbone and foundation of democratic rule that prevents the concentration of power and contributes to the creation of homogenous entities. Yet, the practice of this principle appears more problematic as various interest groups challenge and compete with one another. On the other hand, jurists have legislative power in constructing Islamic law, which contains moral norms that govern the entire society in Islamic governance. Drawing on this comparison, the author proves that the modern state's unity does not meet Islamic governance standards. So, the modern state can no more be Islamic, and, in comparative terms, the system of Islamic governance seems more suitable for justice and democratic rule.

To emphasize this, the writer discusses the legal, moral, and political differences between these two systems in chapter 4. He explains how *shariah* constitutes the Islamic paradigm's law, moral, and political source. However, modernity considers the state's will and its sovereignty as the only sources of the law, leaving no place for a moral entity. That's why the author argues that the legal and the political in the modern project are incompatible with the Islamic mode of governance: they contradict the minimum degree of the moral fabric that must exist in Islamic governance. If Muslims today adopt this law, they must accept a law made by men who change their ethical and moral standards as modern conditions require.

However, in chapter 5, the writer narrows his study to the political subject and moral technologies of the self. He proves that since, historically, the modern state is the product of the European experience and Islamic governance is the product of Islam, they have profound differences. This contributes to the formation of particular subjects with two different types of moral, political, epistemic, and psychosocial conceptions of the world. It implies the incompatibility of subjectivities. Therefore, the writer wonders if the modern state could fashion new

subjectivities with certain qualities compatible with those produced by Islamic governance.

As for the last two chapters, the author focuses more on the ethical side. He compares the principles of the global economic system and the Islamic moral economy that emerged with the Qur'ān. Indeed, the globalization system stands on political, military, economic, and cultural dominance, while the Islamic economy is based on moral values. These two economic systems have incompatible goals. Hallaq believes that if Islamic rule emerged, it would face the challenges of a globalized world, such as power monopoly, dominance, and pragmatism. Hallaq ends his writing by inviting Muslims to experience new forms of governance that place morality as the primary domain, and asking the West to open its heart and mind to the Islamic model that places morality at its center.

However, such a project seems either inauthentic or doomed to failure. No one can deny that the Impossible State is an audacious and controversial book published after the Arab spring, in which Muslim people attempted to re-shape their historical, political, and Islamic identities. This book focuses more on moral issues than political and legal issues because it considers Islam from its civilized perspective. However, it is claimed that its main targets are modernity, the West, and the state.¹

In addition, although the writer provides in-depth analysis, integrating Islamic and Western references, Hallaq's writing is difficult for students to understand because it contains many analogies, deductive conclusions, complex sentences, and overlapping ideas. As a result, he has been criticized for his limited understanding of Islamic thought.² Moreover, it is claimed that this book attracts political and historical scientists in a modest way because the writer is neither a politician nor a historian.³

¹ Brown 2014: p. 1.

² Abu-Odeh 2013: p. 4.

³ Brown 2014: p. 1.

Furthermore, Hallaq frequently relates paradigm with Islamic governance and rarely relates it to the modern state. Indeed, this reflects his sympathy for *shariah* even though he criticizes the Islamist project adopted by Islamist political movements.

To sum up, although the writer criticizes modernity deeply because it relies on monopoly, pragmatism, and domination ideology, he does not propose real solutions to this dilemma. Nevertheless, this book is still an intriguing and interesting reference for those concerned with political and Islamic issues.

References

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