

Religion Today

May 6-12, 2001

*Why do Muslims call for Islamic Law?*

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Recently in Pakistan, the Tanzeem ul-Ikhwan, a group led by retired army officers, threatened to take over part of the country if Pakistan's government does not introduce Islamic rule.

Since Nigeria's return to democracy in 1998, several northern states have adopted Shariah, or Islamic Law. In Somalia, regions that were subject to the deprivations of warring clans in the early 1990s have restored some order by establishing Shariah. In many other states from the Middle East to Southeast Asia, Muslim organizations have called for the establishment of Shariah. Many Muslims have argued that when Shariah is not the law of the land, then morals, and also government, become corrupt.

Demands that governments adopt Islamic law are not new, and in fact the legal codes of many Islamic states combine Shariah with laws drawn from European models. In recent years, calls for Shariah often come from groups that are locked out of political participation by authoritarian and undemocratic regimes.

Shariah finds grassroots support when governments are corrupt and incompetent. In northern Nigeria, for example, the recent adoption of Shariah followed a period of highly corrupt and entirely undemocratic military rule, followed by a transition to a democratic government that is also plagued with corruption. In Pakistan, likewise, periods of corrupt democratic rule have alternated with periods of corrupt military rule.

Shariah seems to offer an ideal alternative, a world in which Muslims will have to follow God's laws: the poor will be taken care of, rulers will consult with the people, there will be no drinking and no theft, women will dress

and behave modestly, and men will provide for their families. However, any country adopting Shariah still must make decisions: who will decide how Shariah will be interpreted and applied?

Islamic law is very complex. It is based on multiple sources: the Quran, Islam's holy scripture; hadith, or reports about the Prophet Muhammad's practices; and custom. Centuries of legal scholarship created a vast store of decisions, some of which are widely accepted, while others are accepted only in a few regions.

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, for example, Shariah is the basis for law, but legislators do not always agree about the implication of Shariah for a modern government. Iranians elect representatives to Parliament, and these representatives should be able to pass laws. However, Iran also has an unelected Supreme Judicial Council that examines all proposed laws in light of their understanding of Shariah. While both bodies claim to base laws on Shariah, in fact only the unelected body has authority to declare what is Shariah, and what will become law.

Shariah holds promise for Muslims who see a need for moral rejuvenation of their societies and governments. The governments of Afghanistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Sudan claim Shariah as their fundamental law, examples that some Muslims would like to emulate, but that give pause both to secularists and to those Muslims who want a Shariah that is compatible with democracy.

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