

## Article

# Beyond Fixed Political Models of Religion–State Relations

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**Abstract:** Some of the dominant academic approaches to Muslim politics continue to assume the centrality of Islam on the question religion’s relationship to the state and the possibility of successful democracy in Muslim-majority states. On the one hand, based on findings from large N-surveys, some scholars have argued that most Muslims in many Muslim-majority states desire a political ‘third model’ that is neither secular nor theocratic. Instead, they want democracy and a public role for shari’a and Islam. However, this literature does not fully explain what such a third model would mean for certain individual rights in practice. It also assumes a normative position that tends to favour one or another version of ‘Islamic’ democracy. On the other hand, some other scholars have argued that one or another form of a secular Muslim democracy is possible. Both views assume that the reinterpretation of religious resources is crucial to achieve the desired ends. This ‘reformist Islam approach’ to Muslim politics does not seriously consider the implications of servicing Islam, even in its more reformist forms, for political ends. Through a combination of theoretical and normative arguments and in-depth interviews conducted in the Maldives, this article argues that the plurality of viewpoints and underlying reasonings for those viewpoints among ordinary people suggest the necessity to move ‘beyond Islam’. As such, an alternative discursive democratisation approach that considers this plurality and takes discourses more neutrally without privileging religious discourses can be more capacious. Instead of fixating on a particular model of the religion–state relationship and a particular type of discourse (e.g., reformist Islamic), a discursive democratisation approach points to democratic possibilities and how the religion–politics and religion–state nexuses may be shaped and reshaped through discourse contestations within public spheres in Muslim-majority states such as the Maldives.



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## 1. Introduction

Some of the dominant academic approaches to Muslim politics continue to assume the centrality of Islam on the question of the religion–state relationship and the possibility of successful democracy in Muslim-majority states. This article focuses on what I have elsewhere called the ‘reformist Islamic approach’ (Zahir 2021) to Muslim politics, which assumes that ‘reformation’ (An-Na’im 1990), ‘reformulation’ (Hashemi 2009, p. 12), ‘re-orientation’ (Hefner 2005, pp. 6–7), or ‘reflexive elaboration’ (Casanova 2001, p. 1076) of Islam is necessary for successful democracy in Muslim-majority states. In other words, it suggests ‘liberal’, ‘civil’, ‘enlightened’, or what we may call ‘reformist Islam’ is not just a positive but even a necessary force for democracy in Muslim-majority states (An-Na’im 1990, 2008; Abou El Fadl 2007; Hashemi 2009; Hefner 2000, 2001, 2005, 2012; Kurzman 1998, 2011; Stepan 2000; also see Zahir 2021). While contesting the essentialism of the so-called ‘civilisational approach’ à la Huntington (1996), which assumes Islam is inherently inhospitable to democracy and secularism, it still assumes the centrality of ‘Islam’—Islamic scholars, Muslim intellectuals, and especially Islamic discursive resources—for democratic possibility.

This article does not reject the importance of religion in politics in Muslim-majority states. However, it suggests the need to go beyond ‘Islam’ by seriously considering what

the pluralisation and contestation of discourses within contemporary Muslim societies in a globalised context can mean for democratisation and Islam–state relations. Drawing on in-depth interviews conducted in the Maldives, this article shows that, on closer examination, there are a variety of viewpoints as well as background reasonings for those viewpoints among ordinary people on religion–state relations and democracy even in as homogenous society as the Maldives. Some of these viewpoints and background reasonings go ‘beyond Islam’ but are still supportive of democracy and varying levels of distance between religion and the state, including secularism. What does this plurality of viewpoints and background reasonings mean for religion–state relations and democratic possibility? I propose that, notwithstanding path-dependent influences, religion–state relations and regime type would continue to be shaped and reshaped through contestation across multiple discourses, both religious *and* non-religious. Consequently, I argue that a ‘discursive democratisation’ approach that does not necessarily privilege religious discourses as opposed to others but posits the possibility for democratisation and re-working of religion–state relations through contestation across multiple discourses is more capacious both normatively and empirically.

After providing an overview of the methodology and the empirical context of the research, this article delves into the theoretical limitations of the reformist Islamic approach. It subsequently illustrates the diverse range of viewpoints and underlying rationales concerning the relationship between Islam, democracy, and the state in the Maldives. This, in turn, leads to the argument for a discursive democratisation approach that challenges the privileging of religious discourses by demonstrating how the plurality of discourses undermines any fixed notions of democracy and the relationship between religion and the state and instead creates possibilities for democratisation.

## 2. Methodology and Context

This article makes a theoretical and normative argument towards making sense of the plurality and contestation of discourses within contemporary Muslim-majority states. However, to make this argument, it draws from analyses of 32 in-depth interviews exploring how ordinary Maldivians view the relationship of Islam to democracy and the state conducted in the Maldives. Participants for these interviews were recruited based on purposive sampling to maximise variety and different demographic backgrounds (see Table 1). I also used the snowballing technique to recruit participants to increase the chances for capturing different viewpoints. However, the purpose of the research was not to generalise the viewpoints across the population, but to capture a variety of viewpoints that existed among ordinary people. While it was extremely challenging to recruit willing participants to talk about religion and politics, having worked in the civil society sector in the Maldives helped me in reaching out to potential interviewees.

**Table 1.** Background characteristics of the participants.

Interviewees	Gender	Age	Education Level	Self-Designated Political Ideology	Self-Designated Religious Ideology	Location
1.	Male	54	University	Liberalism	Islam	Urban
2.	Male	55	Basic	Democratic	Islam	Rural
3.	Male	27	Secondary	-	Islam	Rural
4.	Male	48	Basic	Democratic	Islam	Urban
5.	Female	24	Secondary	Democratic	Islam	Rural
6.	Male	30	Secondary	Democratic	Islam	Rural
7.	Female	51	University	Conservative	Islam	Urban
8.	Male	59	Basic	Democratic	Islam	Rural
9.	Male	30	Primary	Liberalism	Secular	Urban

Table 1. Cont.

Interviewees	Gender	Age	Education Level	Self-Designated Political Ideology	Self-Designated Religious Ideology	Location
10.	Male	32	University	Democratic	Islam	Urban
11.	Male	31	Secondary	Democratic	Islam	Rural
12.	Female	51	Basic	Democratic	Islam	Urban
13.	Female	30	University	Democratic	Islam	Urban
14.	Female	45	University	Democratic	Islam	Urban
15.	Female	33	University	Democratic	Islam	Urban
16.	Female	54	University	Democratic	Islam	Urban
17.	Female	50	University	Democratic	Islam	Urban
18.	Female	31	University	Democratic	Islam	Urban
19.	Male	40	University	Democratic	Islam	Urban
20.	Male	30	University	Liberalism	Secular	Urban
21.	Male	26	University	Liberalism	Secular	Urban
22.	Female	31	University	Liberalism	Secular	Urban
23.	Female	44	Basic	Democratic	Islam	Rural
24.	Female	27	University	Democratic	Islam	Urban
25.	Male	35	Secondary	Democratic	Islam	Rural
26.	Female	31	Secondary	Democratic	Islam	Rural
27.	Female	33	Secondary	Democratic	Islam	Rural
28.	Male	49	University	Liberalism	Islam	Urban
29.	Female	22	University	Democratic	Secular	Urban
30.	Male	36	University	Democratic	Islam	Urban
31.	Male	41	University	Democratic	Islam	Urban
32.	Male	32	University	Democratic	Islam	Urban

Fieldwork for the interviews was conducted in the capital Male and Maafushi island in 2015 and 2016. Interviews were recorded and transcribed in Dhivehi. Analysis was performed using NVivo through an inductive coding process but guided by the research objectives of understanding how ordinary people viewed Islam's relationship to democracy and the state and the types of reasoning they provide for their viewpoints.<sup>1</sup>

Even though the Maldives has a small population of about 378,114 people ([National Bureau of Statistics 2018](#)), as a case study, the country is particularly interesting and valuable for the purpose of this research. This is so especially given the country's relatively homogenous linguistic and largely mono-religious nature. Islam, in its Sunni variety, has existed in the Maldives as the sole recognised religion for more than 800 years. Yet, the country underwent an impressive political liberalisation process from late 2003 to 2009, transitioning to an 'electoral democracy' for the first time in 2009 under a new constitution ([Freedom House 2010](#)). The constitution, however, institutionalises Islam in many ways: Islam is enshrined as one of the main bases of all laws and no laws shall be contrary to any tenet of Islam (Article 10 (a) and (b)). The judges are required to consider Islamic shari'a in matters on which the constitution and law are silent (Article 142). The constitution also explicitly limits citizenship only to Muslims (Article 9 (d)), effectively rejecting religious freedom. Similarly, since 2009, democratisation has also faced major setbacks. [Freedom House \(2013\)](#) has delisted the country as an electoral democracy since its 2013 in its annual reports. Given the democratic challenges and limitations, it may be tempting to lay blame on 'Islam' and to suggest reformist religious reinterpretations as the way forward. This article seeks to challenge this view through theoretical and normative arguments as well as by showing its limitations based on the variety of viewpoints and background reasonings for those viewpoints among ordinary people even in a relatively homogenous society such as the Maldives.

### 3. Limits of the Reformist Islam Approach

The civilisational approach has been one of the dominant approaches to Islam's relationship with democracy and secularism. While this approach has come under wide-

ranging critique, as [Hefner \(2012, p. 85\)](#), points out that ‘there has been surprisingly little progress toward a new consensus on democracy and Muslim politics.’ However, the reformist Islam approach assumes one or another version of reformist Islam is crucial and even necessary for successful democracy in Muslim-majority states and has increasingly become a dominant alternative. At least two related views have emerged through the reformist Islam approach on the questions of democracy and religion–state relations. The first, which I would call the ‘Islamic democracy’, view has been a long-standing argument by influential scholars of Muslim politics, including [Esposito and Voll \(1996\)](#), that there is the possibility for a non-secular Islamic democracy. Theoretically, they argue that the case for an Islamic democracy assumes the necessity of reinterpretation of Islamic resources:

A major issue in democratisation in Muslim societies is whether or not scholars and leaders have successfully made the transition from listing ‘democratic doctrines of Islam’ to creating coherent theories and structures of Islamic democracy that are not simply reformulations of Western perceptions in some Muslim idiom. ([Esposito and Voll 1996, p. 31](#))

This argument for Islamic democracy, therefore, assumes the centrality of religious resources and their systematic reinterpretations for the viability of democracy.

The theoretical case for a non-secular Islamic democracy has been buttressed by the findings of large-N surveys on Muslim opinions on these questions. Survey literature on Muslim public opinions suggests that most Muslims in many Muslim-majority states desire democracy ([Esposito and Mogahed 2007](#)). However, these findings suggest that most Muslims desire shari’a and Islam to play a public role. Thus, they want a ‘third model’ that is neither secular nor theocratic ([Esposito and Mogahed 2007](#)). However, the empirical case for a third model does not explain what exactly such a third model would entail in practice, especially for women, non-Muslims, and Muslim nonconformists ([Hefner 2012](#)). The challenges around these issues are at least partly assumed to be due to ‘the influence of certain religious authorities and ethico-legal legacies peculiar to the Muslim world’ ([Hefner 2012, p. 93](#)). How may a limited ‘third model’ then lead to deepened democracy? Here again, the reformist Islam approach assumes it is through reformation or reinterpretations of religious resources that such a deepening of democracy could be viable.

While such reinterpretations are possible and may exist, another question is as follows: could a third model or Islamic democracy ensure individual rights such as religious liberty and democracy without a certain secularism? Even though democracy may not require separation of religion from the state as assumed under mainstream secularism in democracies such as the United States or France, democracy arguably requires at least a certain religion–state ‘distance’ or what [Stepan \(2000\)](#) called ‘twin tolerations.’ The second strand, under the reformist Islam approach, or what I would call the ‘Islamic secular democracy’ view, takes up this challenge. It posits the possibility and even the desirability of certain secularism. However, this view too says that for such a possibility, reinterpretation of shari’a is crucial and even necessary ([Hashemi 2009](#); [An-Na’im 1990, 2008](#)). The scholars who subscribe to this strand, in fact, point out that reformist Islamic discourses espoused by Islamic scholars that support a ‘religious secularity’ ([Ghobadzadeh 2013](#); [Ghobadzadeh and Rahim 2012](#)) or ‘Muslim secularism’ ([Hashemi 2009](#)) do exist in some Muslim contexts, including in places such as Iran and Indonesia. Some scholars who subscribe to this view also buttress the possibility of religious secularism based on comparative historical lessons. [Hashemi \(2009\)](#) specifically refers to seventeenth-century England, where, he argues, the liberal philosophy of John Locke, using theological arguments, helped in the emergence of liberalism. [Casanova \(2001\)](#) argues that the current transformations within Islam are similar to the Catholic aggiornamento, which facilitated the third wave of democratisation. As a whole, both strands within the reformist Islam approach assume that the reformation of shari’a or reformist Islamic discourses is essential and even necessary for the potential realisation of democracy and an appropriate relationship between Islam and the state.

Besides the centrality given to religion and privileging of religious resources, I propose the reformist Islam approach is not reflexive enough of the possible implications of

centralising religious resources for politics, even when such resources may be ‘liberal’ or reformist. The centralisation of religious resources, even if they are reformist, could lead to the ever-embedding, not the retreat, of religion as a discursive frame of reference in the public spheres. While this may not be problematic, embedding religion as a discursive frame of reference means the outcomes that the reformist Islamic approach assumes and desires become paradoxically less deterministic. This is so because, especially under the contemporary condition of communicative abundance, it is ever more difficult to fix the substantive content of religion that inevitably has political implications. In other words, the ever-embedding of religion as a discursive frame of reference provides a language of politics that nourishes all sorts of strands of religion, which, instead of settling questions of religion vis-à-vis the state and individual rights, could open up controversy and conflict, impeding democracy and associated individual rights. Hence, the assumption that because religious reforms played crucial roles for liberal democracy in the West, so would reformist Islam play a similar role in Muslim-majority states does not seriously account for the very different historical contexts in which reformist religious actors and resources now exist.

The abovementioned theoretical points on the reformist Islam approach do not obviously reject the importance of religion in politics. Still, they suggest the approach’s limitations and the need for alternative approaches that do not automatically privilege religious resources for democratic possibility and appropriate religion–state relations that could sustain democracy. Going beyond theoretical, normative arguments for democracy based on the plurality within Islam (specifically reformist Islam) and the survey literature positing a third model, what exactly do ordinary people think about the relationship between Islam and democracy and Islam–state relations? What are the background reasonings they offer for their viewpoints?

#### 4. A Variety of Viewpoints and Background Reasonings

The interviews conducted in the Maldives showed that the viewpoints of ordinary people on Islam’s relationship to democracy and the religion–state relations are complex and multiple and cannot be reduced to a singular model of the religion–state relationship. They ranged from those supporting democracy with secularism to those that supported comprehensive enforcement of shari’a, as well as viewpoints that fell between these two. That is, there is no fixed model, including a fixed third model, as far as the views of ordinary people are concerned. Second, ordinary people also offered a variety of background reasons for their viewpoints. These reasonings included religious and secular reasonings that presupposed religious or secular ideological underpinnings, respectively. However, crucially, they also included reasonings based on lived experiences and certain religious discursive motifs that do not necessarily assume subscription to a comprehensive reformist Islam as such. For heuristic purposes, I discuss the variety of viewpoints and background reasonings that emerged from the interviews under the following labels:

1. Strong Secular View (SSV);
2. Religious Secular View (RSV);
3. Islamist State View (ISV);
4. Demotic Politics View (DPV);
5. Islamo-Nationalist View (IND).

##### *Strong Secular View (SSV)*

Three of the interviewees strongly resonated with this viewpoint, with at least four others leaning towards this viewpoint in some key aspects. The Strong Secular View (SSV) is most distinguished by its strong support for the privatisation of religion and support for secularism. Its general suspicion towards shari’a in politics also sets this viewpoint apart. It is characterised by strong support for (i) separation of religion at the institutional, personnel, and legal/policy levels of the state; (ii) privatisation of religion; (iii) freedom of religion; and, (iv) democracy. While SSV does not support religion being part of democratic politics, it nevertheless strongly supports religious freedom. This religious freedom includes the



freedom to believe in no religion and, in fact, believes there is no need for a single religion for co-existence. Those who held this viewpoint suggested that Islam does not necessarily contradict democracy, but only so if Islam is privatised. Hence, they are suspicious of religious freedom under an Islamic state.

Strikingly, those who held this viewpoint provided a variety of reasonings for their perspectives. Some who identified their religious faith as 'Islam' defended their view, though not through reformist Islamic reasoning. They simply downplayed what they saw as contradictory elements of the religion, which suggests a *de facto* 're-working' of religion in practice. One of them, interviewee-1, who identified Islam as his religious faith, nevertheless, argued there were '*laainsanee*' (inhumane) *hadd* punishments in shari'a that contradict democratic values. There was, he continued, no solution to this except not implementing shari'a because, as shari'a was divine, it could not be reformed. He concluded religion was a personal matter, not a matter for the state. Thus, his view was based on a selective rejection of aspects of shari'a through an intrinsic appeal of liberal motifs, not through reformist Islamic reasoning. Others resorted to comprehensive secular worldviews, including liberalism, to explain their positions. Interviewee-13, who identified herself as religious and worked for a civil society organisation, evidently upheld the global human rights discourse. She argued that democracy was not just about majority, but also about 'equal rights for minorities'. She believed there were aspects of Islam that contradicted democracy, but she simply rejected those aspects.

Beyond these reasonings, interviewee-16, who identified as very religious, provided reasoning based on her everyday lived experience. She prayed regularly, donned a veil, and was a Western-educated psychosocial support worker. She argued the following:

Religion should be a personal matter. The state can't impose religion. It's my core belief. I came to this conclusion through my experience ('*thajuriba*') with vulnerable groups I have worked with. The state doesn't provide adequate services to these minorities because of non-Islamic label or the second-rate citizen status given to them . . . At the moment, I have three young men who are gay and two young women who are lesbian and two clients who are female sex workers. One of the three gay men is also a drug user. There is another who freely says he is an atheist. There is another struggling with his religious beliefs. They could be you or me . . . They are very skilled. They are suffering a lot because of government policies. But it is not just them [who suffer]. They live with families. We value families. So, their situation is affecting their families too. So, I came to the conclusion that religion should be separated from the state.

This reasoning based on her experiences with real people from diverse demographic, sexual, and ideological backgrounds clearly transcended the Islamic/secular binary, those experiences serving as rationales for upholding this particular viewpoint. Strikingly, the sociality of religion as opposed to any fixed shari'a precept in her everyday lived-experience as a psychosocial worker shaped her views whereby she supported the separation of religion from politics. This conclusion is similar to that reached by Ismail (2006, p. viii) about how religious positions could vary based on the social and everyday context.

#### *Religious Secular View (RSV)*

A total of five interviewees strongly resonated with RSV, with seven others leaning towards it in some key aspects. All of them identified either 'democracy' or 'liberalism' as their political ideology. However, in terms of religious background, they varied from identifying as 'Islamic' to 'secular'. RSV is a complex view, but it is most distinguished by its strong support for religious freedom, diversity, and its belief in the compatibility of Islam and democracy. It is also characterised by (i) support for the separation of religion from the constitutional level, (ii) being open towards Islam's role at the level of law and policy, and (iii) strong support for religious freedom and diversity in the public sphere.

While the RSV approach seeks the de-establishment of Islam from the constitution, at the level of law and policy, it is agreeable to apply shari'a if the latter does not contradict

human rights and democracy. All agreed shari'a should be, in principle, implemented, but not under the prevailing conditions in the Maldives.

The interviewees who associated with this viewpoint provided complex and varied background reasonings, including reasoning based on Islamic modernism, contemporary reformist Islamic discourse, human rights discourse, lived experience, and secular political liberalism. Interviewee-31, who identified his political ideology as 'democratic' and religious faith as 'Islam', for example, argued that there was no 'fundamental disagreement' between democracy and Islam, and that the Qur'an and Sunna stressed religious freedom. He argued while Islam is a perfect and complete religion and shari'a is divine, there is also room for different interpretations in applying specific rules. Thus, he argued, shari'a should be accommodated, and shari'a law should be part of the state and enacted through parliament. Similarly, at least two interviewees (14 and 24) appealed to the motif of '*shura*', while interviewee-32 argued the fact that the Prophet accepted non-Muslims under his rule showed religious freedom existed in Islam. This reasoning is similar to Islamic modernist views about the possibility for reinterpretation under Islamic *fiqh* (see Saeed 2007). Interviewee-9, who identified his political ideology as 'liberal' and religious background as 'secular', explicitly cited the contemporary reformist Islamic scholar, Khaled Abou El Fadl. Similarly, interviewee-21 also appealed to contemporary reformist Islamic discourse, while interviewee-29 argued that while 'shari'a is divine, interpretations are human', a view similar to the views of reformist Islamic scholars such as El Fadl and An-Na'im.

While these individuals clearly appeal to religious reasonings, there were others who provided different set of reasonings for this viewpoint. Interviewee-4, who identified his political ideology as 'democratic' and religious background as 'Islamic', provided reasonings that showed contextual religious adjustment under lived experience without explicitly reformist Islamic- or secular-based ideological reasonings. His viewpoint was deeply shaped by experiences running a tourism business under a new economic initiative in 2008. Under this initially controversial policy, guesthouses for tourists were, for the first time, widely allowed in inhabited islands in the Maldives. Until then, tourism was predominantly confined to uninhabited islands. This man explained how the initial reservation of local people towards local tourism was waning away under a thriving industry. He argued 'respect towards diverse people was necessary for local tourism to thrive' and suggested that locals 'no longer believe local tourism will negatively impact their Islam'. The beach area for tourists, who were allowed to wear bikinis, was initially fenced as per the rules, but when this research was conducted on the island, the fence had already started to fall down, and anyone walking near the area could see tourists in bikinis. This did not cause any apparent concern among the local community, who would welcome tourists with great fanfare. Tourists indeed freely roam around the island, which has guesthouses built throughout residential areas. His views, to be sure, had allegiance to Islam but were now shaped by the experiences in a fast-urbanising environment. This experience, combined with reasoning based on contextual issues of politicisation of religion and inconsistencies shown by religious leaders, more than any textual reinterpretation of religion, provided him with the reasons to believe there should be some de-partisanisation of religion and a separation between religion and politics. Hence, reasonings shaped by the sociality of religion (as opposed to specifically explicit religious discourses or reinterpretations) could support different viewpoints on religion vis-à-vis the state and democracy.

#### *Islamist State View (ISV)*

There were at least three interviewees who upheld this viewpoint, with one strongly resonating with this viewpoint. ISV strongly favours the implementation of a comprehensive shari'a by the state. It strongly rejects religious freedom and secularism. It does not believe shari'a can be reformed (as it believes shari'a is divine), but it supports a certain limited procedural democracy.

Interviewee-19, who identified his political ideology as 'religious democracy' and religious background as 'very Islamic', strongly criticised secularism and the West, blaming secularism and the West for the 'turmoil' in Muslim-majority states. He provided religious

reasonings, along with an appeal to lived experiences, for his views on the state and democracy. He criticised democracy but argued voting can be acceptable ‘because it is, in effect, giving witness as in Islam. You are saying this person is better than that person. In Islam giving a witness statement is obligatory (*‘wajib*’), but not doing so is a sin (*‘faafa*’). Scholars say voting amounts to being a witness’. However, he argued that ‘the majority rule [under democracy] has its limitations. Look at President Yameen. He was elected through a majority. And now [under him] social development is regressing so much.’

It is, therefore, clear he accepted democracy in its procedural sense with caution:

There are clashes between Islam and democracy, but *shura* exists in both democracy and Islam. But there is no *shura* on issues of *ibadat*. Even in democracy, there are matters that cannot be negotiated, for example, we cannot have a serious discussion to sell the country.

This viewpoint and the background reasonings, therefore, seem to be relatively straightforward in their close alignment with Islamist and Salafi ideologies in the Maldives. The leading proponents of Islamist and Salafi views in the public political domain particularly include Maldivians who had received their religious education in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Some of these actors are based in political parties such as the Adhaalath Party, state institutions such as the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, and civil society organisations such as Jamiyyathul Salaf, the most active Salafi organisation. They have increasingly become dominant voices in the public political domain within the context of political liberalisation since around 2003 and as a counter-current to more liberal or reformist viewpoints.

#### *Demotic Politics View (DPV)*

Seven interviewees strongly associated their views with what I consider a DVP, with at least two others aligning their views with key aspects of a DPV. Most of these individuals did not fully articulate explanations for their views beyond references to certain lived experiences. Hence, this was a viewpoint based on demotic lived experiences and based on dissatisfaction with the status quo of Islam vis-à-vis the state. One prominent theme these individuals talked about, in fact, was their dissatisfaction with the partisanisation of religion for political purposes (*dheen siyaasee kurun*). De-partisanisation of religion for them is not about the dis-establishment of Islam, much less privatisation; rather, they believed de-partisanisation could be achieved through an independent Islamic commission to adjudicate on religious matters and issues as opposed to a government institution such as the Islamic Ministry. This view stresses stronger enforcement of shari’a more than any other viewpoint except the Islamist State View. Unlike the ISV, however, it does not demonise secularism but seeks a certain de-partisanisation of Islam. Overall, however, it accepts democracy mainly as a procedure within ‘Islam’. Interestingly, while it supports shari’a, it also believes shari’a should not be codified. Their lived experiences may explain this. These individuals believed that the Maldivian parliament was a partisan institution and its decisions were politicised.

While this viewpoint does not support full religious freedom, it de facto accepted the status quo, where it assumed some Maldivians were already not Muslims. In short, this viewpoint believes there should not be legally provided religious freedom, nor should citizenship be restricted by Islam, but the status quo in which non-Muslim Maldivians existed could be tolerated. This again shows the demotic lived experience that was shaping this viewpoint.

The political affiliations of those who associated with this viewpoint perhaps shed further light on the experiences that may have shaped their reasonings. Most of the interviewees with this viewpoint supported the Maldivian Democratic Party, which spearheaded activism for political liberalisation since around 2003, and was in power from 2008 to 2012. During this period, the political opposition deeply demonised the party and its leader, Mohamed Nasheed, as anti-religious (*laadheenee*) and anti-nationalist. They mobilised sections of the population and security apparatus to protest against the MDP government, finally forcing Nasheed to resign in 2012, mid-way in his tenure. Nasheed’s forcible resignation



angered a large number of his supporters, who believed the opposition exploited religion for political ends to incite sections of the population. Hence, it appears everyday lived experiences, such as the partisanisation of Islam, shaped the views of the interviewees who associated with DPV and aligned with MDP.

#### *Islamist-Nationalist View (INV)*

Two interviews strongly associated with an INV with at least six others aligning with some aspects of INV. INV is a conservative political view. It rejects secularism, but it is not based purely on religious reasoning as it is shaped by non-religious constructions about the nation and what it means to be a Maldivian. While it draws from religion and culture, it most importantly draws from the notion of the 'nation'. It may indeed trump religion in its protection of the nation. It supports democracy and individual rights but is qualified by its fidelity to national identity based on belonging to Islam and based on the protection of 'tradition', 'community', and 'nation'. It stresses the uniformity of belonging to Islam but not the enforcement of comprehensive shari'a.

This is partly justified by appealing to a constructed non-religious narrative about the nation, while at a personal level, this view may support religious freedom. Interviewee-28 pointed out the following:

When the whole system, tradition or how things have been in the country are taken into account, or from a collective societal point of view, it is not a problem to stipulate in the constitution that to be a Maldivian, one has to be a Muslim. If it is only my own opinion, I believe there should be freedom [of religion]. As a nation, if we give full freedom, there will be extremism.

Yet, in theory, INV accepts that Islam allows religious freedom. It, therefore, disagrees that Islam requires 'chopping off the head' of someone who left Islam and believes there is no compulsion in Islam. Thus, the main motive for restricting religious freedom is contextual.

This view supports democracy as a 'procedure' and as a political system but believes it must be limited by 'community' and 'national' interests. Interviewee-28 summed up this position as follows: 'the view from my own conscience is not the same view I want to promote to maintain this nation as a nation'. He argued the following:

From my own personal view, I have no problem if someone is not a Muslim, if they did not pray, if they practised another religion, or even if they had no religion at all. But to maintain this nation as a nation, only one religion has to be practised publicly. So I have no problem with democracy in other respects, especially as a process or a system.

As with other viewpoints, the lived experiences of some also shaped their reasonings. Interviewee-5, who identified 'democracy' as their political ideology and 'Islam' as the religious background, pointed out, 'although religion should be a big part of democracy, the politicisation of religion was a major problem'. She continued, 'when one [politician] does something, it can be bad [for religious scholars], but when another does exactly the same thing, it is not bad'.

In sum, it is clear from the interviews that going beyond large-N surveys and the elite level of Muslim intellectuals and religious scholars, ordinary people have multiple viewpoints as well as a variety of background reasonings on religion's relationship to the state and democracy. To be sure, some of these viewpoints presuppose comprehensive world-views and fully formed ideological or theological positions. Explicit religious discourses and reasonings are part of the public sphere. However, it is also abundantly clear that the sociality of religion and everyday lived experiences are important for their positions and background reasonings. In other words, there are non-religious reasonings and reasonings that even go beyond the secular/religious binary even in a relatively homogenous society such as the Maldives. What, then, may be the implications of the plurality of viewpoints?

## 5. Towards a Discursive Democratisation Approach

Given the plurality of viewpoints and background reasonings, I suggest that instead of an a priori privileging of any one viewpoint or background reasoning, as assumed, for example, under the reformist Islam approach, an alternative approach that takes discourses and actors more neutrally could better account for democratic possibilities. In this respect, I propose that the discursive democratisation approach, as proposed by scholars such as Dryzek (2000, 2006), is arguably a more capacious approach, both empirically and as a normative approach.

Discursive democracy is a version of deliberative democracy which, in general terms, is concerned with political deliberation on the part of citizens in order to increase the quality and legitimacy of democratic politics (see Dryzek 2000; Habermas 1996). Dryzek (2000, p. 2) stresses engagement across discourses prevailing in the public sphere as a way of increasing the authenticity of democracy, which is ‘the degree to which democratic control is substantive rather than symbolic’. As stated in these terms, deliberative democracy or discursive democracy assumes the existence of democracy along with certain individual rights. In other words, deliberative democracy has largely been theorised for democratic contexts as a normative approach towards making democracy more authentic.

However, at the heart of discursive democracy is the premise that democracy is an ‘open-ended project’ (Dryzek 1996, p. 4; Dryzek and Holmes 2002, p. 13), and, as such, what it offers does have relevance for certain contexts (such as the Maldives) even though limited democratic conditions prevail in them. Dryzek and Niemeyer (2010) has, in fact, attempted to extend the idea of discursive democracy to authoritarian contexts). For the purpose of this article, what the roles of discourses, when they are taken more neutrally with respect to their normative orientations, may mean for democratisation and religion–state relations is important. The roles that discourses play in this respect could come in many forms, including the following (Dryzek 2000, pp. 101–3):

- Discourses condition the way people think about issues;
- Discourses set the terms and vocabulary and framing of common issues;
- Horizontally, discourses can cause a cultural change in more democratisation directions.

Engagement across multiple discourses in the public sphere can therefore affect democratisation and religion–state relations by changing the terms of (dominant) anti-democratic discourses and negotiating existing religion–state relations.

Applying these insights to the Maldives, for example, what may be the possibilities for the deepening of democracy and re-working religion–state relations? Clearly, the mere plurality and contestation across multiple discourses do not automatically mean democratisation and re-working of religion–state relations. However, the relative weight of discourses matters and could impact not only vertical democratisation within the state and religion–state relations but also horizontal democratisation across society. Strong Secular View (SSV)-type discourses have increasingly become prominent with their polarised contestation with Islamist State View (ISV)-type discourses. However, in terms of their social bases, these discourses appear to be limited to individuals largely operating through social media, often based in ideologies of liberalism, socialism, or the international human rights regime. With SSV’s strong secularist positions (such as the privatisation of religion) and lacking religion-based rationales, it may currently not be resonant with the larger population. However, the future potential of SSV-type discourses with non-religious background reasonings should not be discounted.

More importantly, their limitations do not mean discourses that appeal to religion, including reformist religious reasonings, are particularly more advantaged either. Certain civil society actors, such as the NGO Maldivian Democracy Network, have tried to promote individual rights such as secularism based on reformist Islamic interpretations. In the Maldives, so far this has not been a religious scholar-led discourse. While only a few local religious scholars may support such attempts, given that the domestic public sphere is porous to external and global discourses, local actors behind these attempts have appealed to prominent global religious figures and have directly benefited from prominent global

religious voices. Hence, the renowned reformist Muslim scholar Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, for example, made a strongly worded comment in 2007 on the Maldives' attempts at codifying shari'a in a penal code by pointing to 'the incoherence and illegitimacy of attempting to codify shari'a' (An-Na'im 2007, p. 54). Tariq Ramadan, another reformist Muslim scholar, visited the Maldives in 2015 on a government invitation and was particularly vocal on the issue of attempts at the death penalty by the Maldivian government (Maldivian Independent 2017). Local civil society actors have also attempted to forge relations with overseas and international NGOs subscribing to reformist Islam. Examples of such overseas groups that local actors linked up with include Musawah and Sisters in Islam in Malaysia, who use reformist Islamic discourses to promote gender equality and other human rights values.

However, when the calls for democracy, human rights, or secularism have been accompanied by reformist religious reasonings, they seemed to have only further fuelled controversy and polarisation in society by bringing religion to the centre of public discourse and by making religion an ever more relevant language of politics. Consequently, Islamist State View (ISV)-type narratives promoted by Salafi groups have increasingly become more relevant and the more dominant voices on the questions of religion and religion's relationship to politics and the state. Further, civil society actors attempting to promote human rights, democracy, and secularism based on reformist religious reasons have come under increasing backlash and security threats. A case in point is the brutal murder, in 2013, of a reformist Islamic scholar, Afrasheem Ali, who had advocated for women's rights and music based on more reformist Islamic interpretations. Another example is a local NGO, Maldivian Democracy Network, who had used reformist Islamic reasonings for its campaigns, including the promotion of narratives supporting secularism. Under pressure from Salafi groups and conservative sections, the government de-registered the NGO in 2020.

Given these experiences, democracy-supportive discourses and types of reasoning should be taken more seriously. One such possibility includes democracy-supportive discourses based on reasonings based in demotic lived experiences. As shown in the interviews, such reasonings, for example, include ordinary people's experiences of crises in which partisanisation of religion is seen as the source of increasing polarisation in society. Some of the participants who supported the Religious Secular View (RSV), for example, pointed to their dissatisfaction with the partisanisation of religion as a reason for democracy with a certain distance between religion and the state. One individual forcefully pointed out that his 'recent experience with political parties, who have exploited religion as a political weapon has convinced me we should separate religion from the state', being an example of a demotic lived experience that could play an important role in democratisation. These views are linked to negative lived experiences rather than ideological and religious reasons.

## 6. Conclusions

Most observers of Muslim politics seem to agree that 'Islamic tradition in the very recent past has undergone an unprecedented process of pluralisation and fragmentation of religious authority' (Casanova 2001, p. 1059; see also Hefner 2005, pp. 1–36; Eickelman and Piscatori 1996). As Fox (2015) argues, essentially in every contemporary society, there is, in fact, a struggle between advocates of secular and religious ideologies to shape policies related to religion. Advocates of political-religious ideologies seek to increase religion's influence on state policies, and advocates of secular ideologies seek to decrease such influence. Fox rightly points out that secular and religious ideologies are not monolithic and they come in varieties, and, as a result, there are intra-ideological contestations too (Fox 2015, p. 36). This perfectly illustrates the situation even in the relatively more mono-religious and homogenous society of the Maldives. In this regard, SSV- and RSV-type discourses in the Maldives fall into the camp that supports political secularism. Yet, they have different visions for how political secularism should look. While ISV, INV, and DPV do

not support political secularism, they do not have an agreement among themselves either. In other words, there are both intra-camp disagreements and inter-camp disagreements.

There is no academic consensus on what the pluralisation of discourses means for democracy. However, in their rejection of the triumphalism of secularisation theory and essentialism of the civilisational approach, as Zubaida (2011) suggests, many scholars seem to have taken the side of the assumptions of the ‘multiple modernities’ thesis, which critiques the Western-centrism of the concept of modernity (see also Zubaida 2012). The talk of ‘pious democracy’ (Menchik 2017), ‘Islamic democracy’ (Esposito and Voll 1996), or ‘third model’ democracy (Esposito and Mogahed 2007), for example, arguably underpins the normative assumptions of the multiple modernities thesis. While, admittedly, democracy varies according to specific cultural and social contexts (Keane 2009), given the plurality of discourses, the views of those scholars (e.g., Dryzek 1996, p. 4; Dryzek and Holmes 2002, p. 13) who suggest democracy must be taken as an open-ended project merit attention. As an open-ended project, a critical approach to democracy applies as much to secular liberal democracies (thus to the assumptions of secularisation theory and civilisation approach) as to other forms of democracies. This means while a particular model of democracy and religion–state relations may have the dominant public preferences behind them at a given point in time, contestation across multiple discourses has the potential (while difficult) to modify them, especially in critical junctures. There is, in this sense, no point in a fixation on current, imperfect models, a claim that applies to Western democracies as it does to Muslim states.

Some other scholars, who see the limitations of a third model, have suggested that secularism is possible and desirable for Muslim-majority states. However, just like those scholars who assume reinterpretation of Islam is crucial for even Islamic democracy while rejecting the essentialism of the civilisational approach, these scholars also centralise and prioritise reformist religious resources and actors. In this, they point not only to the existence of reformist Islamic discourses supporting religious secularity but also to the experiences of the West. Yet, I have argued that the centralisation of religious resources, even when they are reformist or liberal, could further embed religion as a political discursive frame of reference. While this may not be an issue in itself, this could further fuel, instead of settling controversy over religion vis-à-vis the state and democracy, precisely because we cannot determine the substantive content of religion, especially in contemporary contexts. A comparatively more homogenous case of the Maldives precisely points to this predicament.

Consequently, this article proposed a discursive democratisation approach that takes discourses more neutrally and that does not a priori privilege religious discourses and religious reasonings over others can serve as a more capacious approach both empirically (accounting for the plurality and contestation across discourses) as well as in terms of the normative possibilities for democratisation and the re-working of religion–state relations.

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## Note

- <sup>1</sup> These interviews were conducted as part of a larger Q methodological for my PhD thesis completed in 2018. The analysis and interpretations of the interviews therefore draw from this Q study, which can be available upon request.

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