

## Book Review

Asma Afsaruddin, *The First Muslims in History and Memory* (Oxford: Oneworld Publication, 2011) pp. xx + 254. Paperback: \$19.95.

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This is one of remarkably few recent books devoted to the Islamic theoretical conversation of constitutional law, by considering the genesis of polity within the Muslim community through historical, political, theological, and legal perspectives. The book provides the contentious concept of *jihad* and Islamic state which are perceived as the early Muslim' legacy in this contemporary world. Specifically, it opens a window into the way of understanding the Muslim history by contesting Muhammad's tolerant polity and the current extremism notion attached to Islam.

Beginning the chapter, Asma Afsaruddin, an associate professor at the University of Notre Dame, presents an account of the dawn of Islam brought by the Prophet Muhammad. She takes the life of Muhammad into an account of how the early Muslim community would be shaped from the age of ignorance (*Al-Jahiliyya*). The term *Al-Jahiliyya* refers to the time of recklessness and disregard for certain moral, spiritual, and social values revered by Muslims and other righteous people (p. 3).

In subsequent pages, Asma contemplates the revolutionary time in the early Muslim community through the introduction of the egalitarian document that united the people from different backgrounds. It covered the Meccan Migrant Muslims (*Muhajirun*), the Medinan Helpers (*Anshar*), and the Muslims and the Jews from the tribes of Quraysh and Yathrib to constitute a written pact. According to the pact known as the Document of Medina (*Shahifat al-Madina*), they were subjected to a single governance of the community. The Document is regarded as the early 7<sup>th</sup> century's

pioneer constitution conferring them specific rights and duties, including the guarantee of their religion and property (p. 5). However, in whole contents of the book, Asma fails to elaborate Muhammad's visionary plural constitution with the clash of clans under the Quraysh tribe. Some clans of the Quraysh tribe were known to play an important role in the lifetime of the Prophet and immediately in the period of *Khulafa Rashidun* (the Rightly-Guided Caliphate).<sup>1</sup> In the subsequent leadership after the Prophet's demise, such clash adversely influenced the political map of the Arabian Muslims, particularly at the end of the Caliphate Uthman ibn 'Affan period, bringing the civil war amongst the clans.

Nevertheless, at the last chapter of the book, she tries to contest the current extremism notion which is commonly labelled to Islam with the Prophet Muhammad's tolerant governance. Specifically, she investigates the nature of *jihad* (*al-jihad fi sabil Allah*) which is commonly related to the armed combat. Through semantic translations extracted from the Qur'an and *hadith*, it provides competing meanings on the definition of *jihad*, which is generally interpreted as striving to better oneself and contributing to the welfare of one's family and society. However, by referring a report from 'Abd al-Razzaq, she finds another signification of *jihad*. The definition according to the report refers to the armed activity by envisaging Prophet's statement on the comparison between the battle and the worship.<sup>2</sup> Such competing significations, then, are discussed by contesting the term *jihad* under the Document of Medina practised by the military defence as a shared enterprise between the Muslims and the Jews (p. 193).

In regard to the military activity which is referred to the signification of *jihad*, she concludes that at the time the military defence did not exclusively comprise Muslims, but also people of different faith as a common moral duty to prevent corruption on Earth (*al-fasad fil 'l-ard*; cf. Qur'an 5:32). It is contrasted to the extremist notion of *jihad* which has been existed in the recent phenomena referring the concept of *takfir* by branding others as unbelievers due to the assumption of doctrinal differences (p. 194).

Another Asma's challenging project is about the Islamic state by assessing both Islamist and modernist views. She starts from the argumentation of the Islamists who advocate the Islamic state by referring to the Prophetic and Caliphate periods. However, she convinces that such argumentation is ahistorical, by taking a note that none of the pre-modern sources refers to the recurrent fundamental Islamist term *al-Dawla al-Islamiyya* (the Islamic State) or *al-Hukuma al-Islamiyya* (the Islamic Government). According to the Document of Medina, in contrast, it strongly advises that the Qur'anic term *umma* did not exclusively refer to the Muslim community, but also the Christians and the Jews to be part of the single community (p. 184).

<sup>1</sup> Akbar S Ahmed, *Discovering Islam: Making Sense of Muslim History and Society* (Psychology Press, 2002) at 19.

<sup>2</sup> According to 'Abd al-Razzaq, the Prophet said, "Embarking upon the path of God or returning from it is better than all the world and it contains. Indeed, when one of you stands within the battle ranks, then that is better than the worship of a man for sixty years." Asma Afsaruddin, *The First Muslims: History and Memory* (Oxford: Oneworld Publishing, 2011) at 193.

By bringing a clear root of whether or not Islam introduces the concept of the Islamic state, Asma clarifies the term *dawla* which was first referenced to the Abbasid period and followed by subsequent dynasties. She also traces the practices of polity in the periods of the Prophet and the Caliphate with the summary that there is no legitimate reason to justify the Islamic state or the Islamic government by referring such periods.

As in Chapter 2 she has clarified, the Prophet did not appoint the successor to himself, instruct the selection of his successor, or determine the specific mode of government after his demise. It is followed by the historical evidence that the early Muslim community was confused and surprised by the death of Muhammad in Medina in 632. The appointment of Abu Bakr as the first Caliphate was extremely based on the Qur'anic concept of precedence (*sabiqa*) and excellence (*fadila*) as the general guidelines on the definition of the legitimate leadership, rather than the criterion of kinship (p. 185).

What makes this book so much more intriguing is that Asma's Islamic history does not only deal with religious studies, but also enrich the literature of political science and constitutional law under the Muslim polity. It contributes to contemporary debates on the robust idea of the Islamic state in the Muslim majority country like Indonesia to which the Muslim polity essentially offers multiple practices of governance with no normative model. Thus, she attributes the polity on the practices of the Prophet and Caliphate periods to the contemporary Islam modelled-governments.

In the context of the contemporary world, amidst complex Muslim societies, the illustration regarding the Caliphate in the book needs a critical note. As we have envisaged, the community in the early Muslims was formed in a relatively small community and followed by adversely political tensions causing the conflicts of clans under the Quraysh tribe.<sup>3</sup> Yet, irrespective of such contention after Muhammad's demise, starting between the supporters of Abu Bakr and 'Ali on the proper successor of the Prophet, which later it triggered the civil war in the fourth Caliphate of 'Ali, Asma shows evidences regarding the absence of normative model of Muslim polity. The last, but not least, she asserts that the genesis of the early Muslim community laid an emphasis on the substantial governance, instead of the formal governance, by providing a tolerant and equal treatment among multi-tribal and multi-religious society.

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<sup>3</sup> Cemil Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History* (Harvard University Press, 2017) at 19.