

## A Re-reading of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's Political Thought and Its Relation to Religious Democracy (Mardumsālārī-yi Dīnī)

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### ABSTRACT

This article re-reads Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's political thought and its relation to religious democracy (mardumsālārī-yi dīnī). Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, a prominent Ahl al-Hadīth thinker, founded a specific Sunnī political theology emphasizing the legitimacy (mashrū'iyat) of the caliphate, the necessity of obedience to the ruler, and the authoritative position of religious scholars ('ulamā'). Religious democracy, in contrast, combines divine legitimacy with active popular participation in governance and the exercise of political power. Employing a descriptive-analytical method, this research examines the convergences and divergences between Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's political thought and the theory of religious democracy, and seeks to demonstrate its efficacy in addressing contemporary Muslim societies' problems. The main question is whether his thought can serve as a complement to religious democracy and fill its potential gaps. Findings indicate that while other readings based on religious democracy have addressed political needs of Muslim societies to some extent, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's thought—emphasizing the close bond between sacred law (sharī'ah) and political power, the public interests (maṣāliḥ-i 'ammih) of the community (ummah), and critique of authoritarian powers—offers new capacities for reconceptualizing religious democracy. Within this framework, religious democracy is defined as compatibility between the general will of society and Islam's revelatory foundations—including divine sovereignty (ḥākimiyyat-i ilāhī), popular participation in decision-making, social justice, and the protection of sacred law. Thus, a re-reading of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's thought is not only a complement to religious democracy, but also provides theoretical capacity for confronting contemporary Muslim world challenges—including the crisis of legitimacy, political authoritarianism, and the need for popular participation—and a platform for theoretical dialogue between Shī'ī and Sunnī traditions, contributing to the conceptual richness of Islamic political-scientific literature.

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## 1. Introduction

This article undertakes a re-reading of the political thought of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal—one of the most prominent thinkers of the Ahl al-Ḥadīth school—and examines its relationship with the theory of religious democracy (*mardumsālārī-yi dīnī*). The main objective of this research is to analyze the capacity of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's political thought to engage with the foundations of religious democracy and to explore the possibility of utilizing his teachings as a complement or a theoretical guide for re-reading this modern theory.

Religious democracy, as a contemporary approach in Islamic political thought, seeks to combine the divine legitimacy of governance with the active participation of the people in the decision-making process and the exercise of political power. It aims to realize social justice and accountability in governance while respecting religious values and teachings.

This research seeks to answer three key questions:

Can Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's political thought fill the potential gaps in religious democracy?

Can his teachings offer a theoretical model for enhancing legitimacy, justice, and social cohesion in Muslim societies?

What points of convergence and divergence can be identified between the Sunnī intellectual tradition—particularly the Ḥanbalī school—and religious democracy?

Answering these questions not only contributes to the development of the theoretical foundations of religious democracy but also makes possible dialogue and understanding between Shī'ī and Sunnī intellectual traditions.

## 2. Methodology

The method employed in this research is descriptive-analytical (*tawṣīfī-taḥlīlī*), based on the examination of primary and secondary sources in jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology (*kalām*), and history.

Data were gathered from:

Books and treatises of the Ahl al-Ḥadīth school;

Ḥanbalī jurisprudential texts;

Works of Muslim theologians;

Contemporary analytical sources.

The analysis of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's political thought focused on his three key components: the legitimacy of the caliphate (*mashrū'iyat-i khilāfat*), the necessity of obedience to the ruler (*wujūb-i iṭā'at az ḥākim*), and the authoritative position of religious scholars (*jāygāh-i marja'iyat-i 'ulamā'*).

Alongside this, the fundamental components of religious democracy—including the combination of divine legitimacy with popular participation, the role of the people in decision-making processes, social justice, and public

oversight (*naẓārat-i 'umūmī*)—were examined. Points of convergence and divergence with the teachings of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal were identified.

A comparative and adaptive analysis (*taḥlīl-i muqāyisih-i wa taṭbīqī*) was employed to extract the theoretical capacities of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's thought for completing or re-reading the concepts of religious democracy. Furthermore, the historical context of the formation of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's political theory—including the developments of the 'Abbāsīd caliphate, the crisis of the creation of the Qur'ān (*khalq al-Qur'ān*), and the peace of Imām Ḥasan ('alayhi al-salām)—was considered in analyzing the role of his teachings in managing the crisis of legitimacy and social cohesion.

### 3. Findings

The research findings indicate that Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's political thought possesses capacities that can be utilized in understanding and re-reading religious democracy.

#### 3.1. Legitimacy of Governance

In the domain of the legitimacy of governance, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal considers the legitimacy of the caliphate as historical and contractual (*qarārdādī*), defining it on the basis of the consensus (*ijmā'*) of elites and allegiance (*bay'ah*) to the existing ruler. Although this approach limits direct popular participation, it provides a practical framework for maintaining security and social stability, demonstrating the importance of the ruler in preventing chaos and anarchy.

#### 3.2. Political Silence

The doctrine of political silence (*sukūt-i siyāsī*) in his thought—rather than advocating absolute silence—offers a model of religious and social prudence for preventing sedition (*fitnah*) and division, contributing to the preservation of the cohesion of the Islamic community (*ummah*). This model has parallels in certain Shī'ī currents, such as the doctrine of dissimulation (*taqīyah*).

#### 3.3. Authoritative Position of Religious Scholars

The role of religious scholars as an authoritative reference in Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's thought, despite limitations in exercising direct oversight, contributes to the consolidation of legitimate governance. It demonstrates that this authoritative reference, even in conditions of relative passivity, creates a bond between sacred law (*sharī'ah*) and political power.

#### 3.4. Points of Convergence and Divergence with Religious Democracy

A comparison of these teachings with the principles of religious democracy reveals important points of convergence and divergence:

Religious democracy conceives of the legitimacy of governance as a combination of God's will and the active participation of the people—

participation that is a condition for the realization of justice and accountability in governance.

Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's thought, while focusing on preserving the unity and stability of society and limiting popular participation to implicit affirmation and allegiance, nonetheless emphasizes the consideration of public interests (*maṣāliḥ-i 'āmmih*), the critique of authoritarianism (*istibdād*), and the consolidation of security. These elements provide significant theoretical capacity for re-reading religious democracy.

From this perspective, his thought can contribute to redefining the role of the people within a religious framework—a framework that emphasizes not absolute participation but guided participation (*mushāraḳat-i hidāyat-shudāh*) compatible with sacred law.

#### 4. Conclusion

A re-reading of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's political thought, in addition to providing a framework for integrating Islamic tradition with the requirements of democratic governance, can contribute to the development of Islamic-political literature and offer guidance for managing the crisis of legitimacy, political authoritarianism, and the need for popular participation.

The findings indicate that the teachings of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal can be considered a complement to the theory of religious democracy—particularly in the reading of Imam Khomeini—and can fill the gaps in this theory concerning the interaction between Islamic tradition and popular participation.

A contemporary re-reading of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's thought, in addition to theoretical enrichment, makes possible constructive dialogue between Shī'ī and Sunnī intellectual traditions and aids the development of comparative analyses in Islamic political theology. Such dialogue can lead to the reduction of religious divisions and the strengthening of shared Islamic identity, as both traditions—despite historical differences—share common principles such as justice, public interest, the preservation of the unity of the community, and the struggle against authoritarianism.

Ultimately, the research demonstrates that integrating the teachings of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal with the principles of religious democracy can offer an intergenerational and comparative model for governance in Muslim societies—a model that both attends to the preservation of religious legitimacy and revelatory values and highlights the role of active popular participation in major political decisions. This model can help rebuild trust between government and people, increase the efficiency of political structures, and promote social justice.

Such a re-reading, beyond its theoretical and analytical dimensions, can contribute to a better understanding of contemporary challenges—including the crisis of legitimacy, the weakness of religious oversight, and the necessity of civic participation—and provide a suitable foundation for future research.

It can also inspire political and social reforms in Islamic countries facing problems such as authoritarianism and corruption.

In general, this research shows that the comparative study of historical ideas with modern theories not only increases the scholarly richness of Islamic political literature but also provides a suitable tool for re-reading concepts of legitimacy, justice, unity, and popular participation. The re-reading of Ahmad b. Hanbal's thought in the light of religious democracy is not a mere repetition of the past but a creative utilization of intellectual heritage to respond to the needs of the present—a heritage that can still inspire political and social transformation in the Muslim world in the current century.

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