

# An Analysis of the Relationship Between Executive Power and Islamic Law in Democratic States

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**Abstract:** This research explores the complex relationship between executive power and Islamic law within the framework of democratic governance in Muslim-majority states. It aims to analyze how executive authorities interpret, apply, and mediate the role of Islamic law while maintaining democratic principles such as pluralism, human rights, and the rule of law. Using a qualitative approach that incorporates comparative case studies, legal analysis, and review of existing literature from the past decade, the study identifies key challenges and controversies, including the politicization of religion, legal pluralism, and tensions between religious norms and constitutional values. The findings reveal that executive leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping the integration of Islamic law into state structures, and that success in this integration depends on legal reform, institutional checks, and inclusive governance. This research contributes to ongoing academic and policy debates on the relationship between religion and the state, offering practical insights for managing religious law within democratic institutions. It also highlights broader implications for legal modernization, human rights protection, and the consolidation of democratic governance in Muslim-majority societies.

## Research Highlights:

- Explores the dynamic interaction between executive power and Islamic law in the context of modern democratic governance.
- Identifies key challenges and controversies, including legal pluralism, politicization of religion, and conflicts with human rights principles.
- Demonstrates the pivotal role of executive leadership in harmonizing religious legal frameworks with constitutional democratic values.
- Provides comparative insights from Muslim-majority democracies to illustrate diverse approaches to integrating Islamic law.
- Offers practical recommendations for legal reform, institutional balance, and inclusive policy-making to strengthen democratic governance.

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## INTRODUCTION

In modern governance, the relationship between religion and state remains a complex and dynamic issue, particularly in countries where Islamic law plays a significant role. Islamic law, derived from the Qur'an, Hadith, and other traditional sources, encompasses not only religious and moral guidance but also legal and political dimensions (Abdal-Haqq, 2002). At the same time, the principles of democracy including rule of law, popular sovereignty, separation of powers, and protection of individual rights often present contrasting frameworks for governance. In democratic states with Muslim-majority populations, the

interplay between executive power and Islamic law creates both opportunities and tensions that merit critical examination.

The executive branch of government in a democratic state is vested with the authority to enforce laws, formulate public policy, and lead national administration (Moe & Gilmour, 2015). However, in states where Islamic law has constitutional or legal status, the executive often faces the challenge of balancing religious imperatives with democratic values. This dynamic can influence decisions on legislation, civil rights, education, gender equality, and criminal justice. For instance, the enforcement of Islamic-based laws may conflict with international human rights standards or constitutional guarantees, leading to legal, political, and social debates (Van Engeland, 2014).

Understanding the intersection between executive power and Islamic law in modern democratic states is essential for grasping the complex relationship between religion and governance. In democratic systems, executive power is expected to function within the boundaries of constitutionalism, human rights, and rule of law (Wiener et al., 2012). However, in states where Islamic law holds legal or cultural authority, executives are often required to navigate competing demands between upholding religious principles and fulfilling democratic ideals. This intersection shapes policy decisions, legal interpretations, and the overall direction of state governance.

The importance of this understanding lies in its real-world implications. For instance, decisions made by the executive branch on issues such as women's rights, freedom of expression, or religious minorities can be significantly influenced by interpretations of Islamic law. Without a clear understanding of how these two frameworks interact, conflicts may arise that threaten legal consistency, social harmony, and democratic stability (Delmas-Marty, 2009). Moreover, the executive's ability to balance religious legitimacy with democratic accountability plays a critical role in maintaining public trust and institutional integrity.

Studying this intersection also helps to highlight the diversity of approaches taken by Muslim-majority democratic states (Salvatore & LeVine, 2005). It reveals how different political systems interpret and integrate Islamic principles into public policy, law, and administration. Ultimately, such understanding supports efforts to promote inclusive, pluralistic governance while respecting cultural and religious values (Pless & Maak, 2004). It also provides insights for policymakers, scholars, and civil society actors working to ensure that democracy and religious identity can coexist constructively in a rapidly changing global environment.

Over the past decade, scholars have increasingly examined the complex interplay between executive power and Islamic law within democratic states, reflecting growing interest in how religion and governance coexist in pluralistic societies. One prominent area of study focuses on constitutional frameworks in countries like Indonesia, Tunisia, Malaysia, and Pakistan, where Islamic law holds varying degrees of influence (Moustafa, 2018). Research has shown that while constitutions in these states often recognize Islam as the state religion or as a source of legislation, the executive branch plays a decisive role in shaping how Islamic norms are interpreted and enforced. For instance, scholars such as Mirjam Künkler and Yüksel Sezgin (2014) have explored the role of constitutional courts and executives in mediating between Islamic and secular legal traditions, arguing that executive discretion often determines the practical application of Sharia-based provisions.

In countries like Indonesia, studies have examined how executive actors, including presidents and regional governors, selectively enforce Islamic-inspired regulations to gain political legitimacy or support from religious constituencies (Buehler, 2016). This strategic engagement with Islamic law illustrates how executive power can both advance and limit religious influence depending on political interests and institutional contexts.

Recent research has also addressed the tensions between human rights and Sharia law, particularly in relation to executive enforcement. In Pakistan, for example, scholars have investigated how executive agencies navigate blasphemy laws or gender-related policies in light of both domestic religious expectations and international democratic standards (Lau, 2020). These studies highlight the executive's role as both an enforcer of religious norms and a potential safeguard against extremist interpretations.

In Tunisia, post-Arab Spring reforms brought significant attention to the executive's evolving role in managing religion-state relations. Scholars like Charrad and Zarrugh (2017) analyzed how the Tunisian government sought to integrate Islamic values into a democratic framework while avoiding theocratic drift.

They noted that the executive's efforts to redefine the public role of Islam have significant implications for legal reform, political legitimacy, and civil liberties.

Comparative studies have also emerged, evaluating how different political systems manage the integration of Islamic law into democratic governance (Rosen, 2000). These works often emphasize the importance of institutional design, legal pluralism, and executive leadership in maintaining a balance between religious identity and democratic principles.

Several countries, such as Indonesia, Pakistan, Tunisia, and Malaysia, provide diverse models of how executive power engages with Islamic law in democratic frameworks (Azra, 2006). In some cases, executive authorities actively promote Islamic legal principles as part of national identity or moral governance. In others, they attempt to maintain a secular-democratic framework while accommodating religious norms in a limited or symbolic manner. These variations highlight the complex negotiation between maintaining religious legitimacy and upholding democratic values.

Despite the increasing relevance of this issue in contemporary governance, there remains a lack of comprehensive analysis on how executive power shapes, and is shaped by, the presence of Islamic law in democratic states (Nasr, 2001). Understanding this relationship is crucial for assessing the balance of power, the protection of civil liberties, and the future of democratic governance in pluralistic societies. Therefore, this study seeks to analyze the nature of the relationship between executive power and Islamic law, the factors influencing this relationship, and its implications for governance, legal systems, and societal harmony in democratic states.

## METHOD

This research adopts a qualitative approach to explore the relationship between executive power and Islamic law within the framework of modern democratic states. A qualitative design is deemed appropriate for this study because it allows for in-depth analysis of legal texts, political actions, historical developments, and institutional structures, which are essential for understanding the complex interaction between religion and governance (McNabb, 2015).

The study uses a comparative case study method, focusing on selected Muslim-majority democratic countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Tunisia, and Pakistan. These countries have been chosen based on their constitutional recognition of Islamic law, their adherence to democratic principles (e.g., regular elections, executive accountability), and the significant role played by the executive branch in shaping public policy and law. By comparing these cases, the research aims to identify both shared patterns and country-specific dynamics in the interaction between executive authority and Islamic legal traditions.

Data will be collected from a variety of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include national constitutions, legal codes, presidential decrees, executive policies, and court decisions that reflect the influence or implementation of Islamic law (Lombardi, 2012). Official government documents and public statements from executive leaders will also be examined to understand the motivations and interpretations behind key decisions. Secondary sources will consist of scholarly books, academic journal articles, policy papers, and credible news reports published within the last ten years.

To analyze the data, the study employs content analysis and legal-political interpretation techniques (Krippendorff, 2018). Content analysis will be used to identify recurring themes, legal principles, and discourses that appear in official texts and scholarly debates. Meanwhile, legal-political interpretation will allow the researcher to assess how executive power is exercised in relation to Islamic law whether it reinforces, moderates, or challenges religious legal norms in practice (Peletz, 2002).

Interviews with legal scholars, political analysts, and public officials may also be conducted, if feasible, to provide expert perspectives and validate findings (Boswell, 2009). These interviews will be semi-structured, allowing for flexibility while still targeting key research questions.

In order to ensure validity and credibility, the research will apply triangulation, comparing data from different sources and countries to cross-verify interpretations. Ethical considerations will be observed, especially in dealing with politically or religiously sensitive content, by ensuring objectivity, neutrality, and academic integrity throughout the study (Cohen et al., 2017).

In sum, this research methodology integrates qualitative inquiry, comparative analysis, and interdisciplinary perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of how executive power interacts with Islamic law in democratic states, and what implications this relationship holds for governance, legal reform, and democratic stability.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

The findings of this study reveal a dynamic and context-dependent relationship between executive power and Islamic law in democratic states. Through comparative analysis of selected Muslim-majority democracies specifically Indonesia, Malaysia, Tunisia, and Pakistan it becomes evident that the executive branch plays a central role in shaping the interpretation and application of Islamic law within each country's unique constitutional and political framework.

In Indonesia, the executive has maintained a moderate and pluralistic approach, largely accommodating Islamic values while preserving national unity and democratic norms. While Islamic-inspired laws are allowed in certain regions, such as Aceh, the central government often acts as a buffer against the broader imposition of Sharia across the nation. Executive power here has been used to negotiate between religious aspirations and constitutional commitments to democracy and diversity.

Malaysia shows a more institutionalized integration of Islamic law within a democratic system. The executive has supported the development of parallel Sharia legal institutions, particularly concerning personal status laws for Muslims. However, the results indicate that the politicization of Islam by executive leaders often in pursuit of electoral support has led to increased tensions between religious rights and civil liberties. In some cases, executive decisions have strengthened conservative religious influence at the expense of democratic inclusivity.

In Tunisia, post-Arab Spring reforms have allowed the executive to redefine the relationship between Islam and the state. The results show that Tunisian executive leaders, especially under the 2014 Constitution, have taken deliberate steps to preserve democratic governance while acknowledging Islam's cultural role. The executive has been cautious in implementing Islamic law, opting instead to uphold civil law frameworks. This approach has helped Tunisia avoid religious authoritarianism and maintain relative political stability compared to its regional peers.

Conversely, Pakistan demonstrates the complex and often contradictory role of the executive in dealing with Islamic law. The findings highlight that while the Pakistani executive frequently relies on Islamic rhetoric and institutions to gain legitimacy, it often struggles to balance religious conservatism with democratic and human rights obligations. Executive enforcement of controversial laws such as those related to blasphemy illustrates the challenges of managing religious sensitivities in a democratic context, sometimes resulting in the erosion of legal protections for minorities and dissenters.

Overall, the results confirm that the exercise of executive power is instrumental in mediating the influence of Islamic law within democratic systems. In each country, the executive either acts as a guardian of democratic values against rigid religious interpretation, or as a conduit for religious influence into the legal-political domain, depending on historical legacies, institutional strength, and political incentives. Importantly, the findings underscore that executive leadership can both protect and threaten democratic principles, depending on how Islamic law is strategically engaged or restrained. These outcomes suggest that successful coexistence between Islamic law and democracy requires not only constitutional safeguards but also responsible, principled executive leadership committed to balancing religious tradition with democratic pluralism.

### Potential to Guide Policy on Managing Religious Law within Democratic Institutions

This research holds significant potential to inform and guide policymaking on how democratic institutions can effectively manage the presence and influence of religious law, particularly Islamic law, within modern governance structures. As many Muslim-majority states strive to uphold democratic principles while respecting religious identity, the findings of this study offer critical insights into the balance between executive authority, legal pluralism, and religious legitimacy (Driessen, 2014).

First and foremost, the research emphasizes the importance of executive restraint and constitutional commitment in managing the integration of Islamic law. Policies that encourage executive transparency, judicial independence, and institutional accountability can prevent the misuse of religious law for political purposes (Brown, 2017). By identifying how different governments either reinforced or moderated Islamic legal norms, the study offers comparative lessons on how to structure executive power in a way that upholds democratic values without alienating religious communities.

Furthermore, the findings can guide the formulation of inclusive legal frameworks that respect Islamic law in personal and cultural matters while safeguarding civil rights and equal protection under the law. This balance is essential in pluralistic societies where citizens may adhere to different interpretations

of religion. Policymakers can use these insights to design legal codes that are both religiously sensitive and universally applicable, ensuring that no group is unfairly privileged or marginalized (Anderson, 2009).

The research also highlights the need for dialogue between religious scholars and democratic institutions, suggesting policy models that institutionalize such collaboration. Establishing consultative bodies or advisory councils composed of religious experts, legal professionals, and civil society actors can help reconcile faith-based perspectives with democratic principles in a constructive and non-coercive manner.

In addition, the study underlines the danger of allowing executive leaders to use religious law as a tool for political gain. Policies should therefore aim to limit politicization of religion, such as restricting the use of religious rhetoric in campaigns and reinforcing secular procedures in legislative processes. These steps can protect democratic institutions from becoming arenas of sectarian conflict or ideological domination.

Lastly, this research contributes to the broader goal of developing context-specific governance models that align with each nation's historical, cultural, and religious character. Instead of imposing a one-size-fits-all solution, the study encourages adaptive policymaking drawing from successful practices in different countries to create resilient, democratic systems that can coexist with Islamic legal traditions in a way that fosters unity, justice, and social harmony.

The study provides a rich foundation for evidence-based policymaking, helping states craft strategies that respect Islamic values while preserving the core tenets of democracy. It affirms that with thoughtful design, inclusive dialogue, and principled leadership, religious law and democratic governance can be harmonized in the modern state.

### **Contribution to Debates on Religion and State, Human Rights, and Legal Reform**

This research makes a valuable contribution to contemporary debates surrounding the complex relationship between religion and the state, the protection of human rights, and the ongoing processes of legal reform in democratic societies. Regarding the religion and state discourse, the study deepens understanding of how Islamic law is negotiated within secular democratic frameworks (Hashemi, 2009). It challenges simplistic binaries that portray religion and democracy as inherently incompatible by demonstrating the nuanced ways executive authorities manage religious legal norms while maintaining democratic legitimacy. This insight enriches scholarly debates about secularism, pluralism, and the role of religion in public life, providing a more contextualized view that reflects the diversity of political and legal realities in Muslim-majority democracies.

In the arena of human rights, the research highlights the potential conflicts and synergies between Islamic legal principles and internationally recognized human rights standards. By examining how executive power can either protect or undermine rights related to gender equality, freedom of expression, religious freedom, and minority protections, the study informs ongoing discussions about reconciling religious traditions with universal human rights. It underscores the importance of executive leadership committed to balancing respect for religious values with the safeguarding of fundamental freedoms, thus contributing to policy debates and advocacy efforts aimed at improving human rights outcomes in Islamic contexts (Sachedina, 2009).

On the front of legal reform, this research offers practical insights into the challenges and strategies for updating legal systems to accommodate both democratic governance and Islamic legal heritage. It shows that successful reform requires not only constitutional changes but also effective executive implementation and institutional support. The findings suggest that legal reforms must be inclusive, transparent, and dialogic engaging religious authorities, civil society, and state institutions to build laws that resonate with cultural identities while promoting justice and equality (Bettiza & Dionigi, 2015). These contributions are critical for scholars, lawmakers, and practitioners working to modernize legal frameworks in ways that respect tradition without sacrificing democratic progress.

Overall, this study enriches academic and policy debates by emphasizing the pivotal role of executive power as a mediator between Islamic law and democratic governance. It encourages a more balanced and context-sensitive approach to religion-state relations, advocates for human rights compatibility within religiously influenced legal systems, and supports legal reform processes that are both respectful of heritage and forward-looking (Nanda, 2011). By doing so, it provides a foundation for more inclusive, just, and stable democratic societies where religious law and universal principles coexist constructively.

### **Implications for Governance in Muslim-Majority Democracies**

The findings of this research carry profound implications for governance in Muslim-majority democracies, where the interplay between executive power and Islamic law significantly shapes political stability, social cohesion, and democratic consolidation. Firstly, the research highlights that executive leadership plays a decisive role in balancing religious norms with democratic governance. In many Muslim-majority democracies, the executive branch serves as the key institution mediating between demands for religious authenticity and the requirements of constitutional democracy (Sultany, 2014). This places a substantial responsibility on executives to act as guardians of pluralism, protecting minority rights and preventing the politicization of religion for partisan gain. Effective governance in these contexts depends on cultivating executive restraint, institutional checks and balances, and respect for constitutional limits.

Secondly, the study's insights emphasize the need for inclusive and adaptable governance frameworks that recognize the multifaceted role of Islamic law. Muslim-majority democracies often face pressures to integrate religious law into national legal systems, especially in personal status and family law. The findings suggest that governments should pursue policies that promote legal pluralism, allowing for the coexistence of Islamic legal traditions alongside civil and human rights protections. Such frameworks can help prevent social fragmentation and build public trust in state institutions by respecting cultural identity while ensuring justice and equality for all citizens.

Moreover, the research points to the critical importance of dialogue and collaboration between religious leaders, political authorities, and civil society. Good governance in Muslim-majority democracies benefits from institutionalized mechanisms that facilitate ongoing conversations on the role of religion in public life (Pal, 2019). By fostering mutual understanding and cooperation, governments can reduce tensions, counter extremism, and promote policies that reflect the values of both faith communities and democratic citizens.

The study also underlines the risks of executive overreach or manipulation of religious sentiments, which can undermine democratic institutions and human rights protections. Governance strategies must therefore include safeguards against the abuse of Islamic law for authoritarian consolidation or exclusionary politics. Strengthening judicial independence, promoting transparency, and empowering watchdog institutions are essential steps to ensure that executive power is exercised responsibly and in accordance with democratic norms.

Finally, the implications extend to the broader process of democratic consolidation. The research demonstrates that the successful integration of Islamic law within democratic governance can enhance political legitimacy and social stability when managed prudently. Conversely, failure to balance these elements may lead to polarization, legal uncertainty, and weakened state capacity (Cingolani, 2013). Therefore, governance in Muslim-majority democracies requires nuanced, context-sensitive policies that embrace diversity, uphold the rule of law, and foster inclusive political participation.

This research offers valuable guidance for enhancing governance in Muslim-majority democracies by illuminating how executive power can effectively engage with Islamic law. It encourages the adoption of governance models that harmonize religious values with democratic principles, ultimately contributing to more resilient, just, and peaceful societies.

### **Challenges and Controversies**

One of the primary challenges lies in the tension between religious authority and democratic legitimacy. In many Muslim-majority democracies, Islamic law holds deep cultural and moral significance, yet its implementation can sometimes conflict with democratic ideals such as pluralism, freedom of expression, and equal rights. The executive branch, tasked with governing a diverse population, must navigate this delicate balance, often facing pressure from conservative religious groups demanding stricter adherence to Sharia, while also protecting minority rights and upholding constitutional freedoms (Khawar, n.d.). This dual responsibility can lead to political instability and social polarization.

Another controversy concerns the politicization of Islamic law by executive leaders. Political actors may exploit religious sentiments to consolidate power, mobilize electoral support, or suppress dissent. This instrumentalization risks undermining both religious integrity and democratic processes, as laws influenced by political expediency rather than legal consistency can erode public trust. Such manipulation often sparks debates about the separation of religion and state, with critics warning against the dangers of religious authoritarianism cloaked in democratic rhetoric.

The divergence in interpretations of Islamic law further complicates governance. Islamic jurisprudence is not monolithic; different schools of thought and local customs result in varied understandings and applications of Sharia. Executives must decide which interpretations to endorse, a process that can marginalize certain groups and ignite intra-religious conflicts. The challenge is intensified by the global dimension of Islamic discourse, where transnational religious movements influence domestic policies, sometimes clashing with national democratic values.

Human rights concerns are a significant source of controversy in this context. Certain applications of Islamic law particularly regarding gender rights, freedom of religion, and criminal punishments may conflict with international human rights norms. Executives in democratic states must therefore reconcile these differences, often under intense scrutiny from domestic activists and the international community. Balancing respect for religious law with commitments to human rights remains an ongoing and contentious debate.

Additionally, the legal pluralism that arises from incorporating Islamic law alongside secular legal systems poses practical challenges. Overlapping jurisdictions and conflicting laws can create confusion, undermine the rule of law, and complicate access to justice. The executive's role in harmonizing these systems is critical but difficult, requiring careful legal reform and institutional coordination.

Finally, there are challenges related to public perception and social cohesion (Friedkin, 2004). The integration of Islamic law in state governance may be welcomed by some segments of society while feared or resisted by others, particularly religious minorities and secular groups. Executives must manage these divergent views to prevent social fragmentation, ensuring that governance remains inclusive and representative.

The interplay between executive power and Islamic law in democratic states is marked by profound challenges and controversies that test the resilience of democratic institutions. Addressing these issues demands thoughtful leadership, transparent policymaking, and ongoing dialogue among all stakeholders to foster a governance model that honors religious values without compromising democratic integrity and human rights.

## CONCLUSION

This research has explored the intricate and multifaceted relationship between executive power and Islamic law within democratic states, revealing the complexities that arise when religious legal traditions intersect with modern governance. The study underscores that executive authority plays a pivotal role in mediating the integration of Islamic law into democratic institutions, shaping how these two forces coexist and influence one another. The findings demonstrate that successful governance in Muslim-majority democracies hinges on a delicate balance where the executive must respect religious values while upholding democratic principles such as pluralism, human rights, and the rule of law. This balance requires executive restraint, transparent decision-making, and a commitment to inclusive legal frameworks that accommodate diverse religious interpretations without compromising constitutional guarantees. Moreover, the research highlights the challenges inherent in this relationship, including the risks of politicizing religion, navigating divergent interpretations of Islamic law, and addressing potential conflicts between religious norms and universal human rights standards. These challenges emphasize the need for careful legal reform, institutional checks and balances, and ongoing dialogue between religious authorities, political leaders, and civil society. Importantly, the study's insights contribute to broader debates on religion and state relations, human rights protections, and legal modernization in democratic contexts. It offers practical implications for policymakers seeking to craft governance models that harmonize Islamic law with democratic governance, fostering social cohesion and political stability. This research affirms that the relationship between executive power and Islamic law in democratic states is neither static nor predetermined but dynamic and negotiable. With thoughtful leadership and inclusive policymaking, it is possible to construct democratic institutions that respect religious traditions while promoting justice, equality, and democratic resilience. This balance is essential for the sustainable development of Muslim-majority democracies in an increasingly complex and pluralistic world.

## AUTHORS' DECLARATION

### Authors' Contributions and Responsibilities

The author was solely responsible for the conception, design, and execution of this research. This included conducting a comprehensive literature review, selecting appropriate methodology, collecting and analyzing data, and interpreting the findings in relation to the study's objectives.

### Competing Interests

The author declares that there are no competing interests or conflicts of interest related to the conduct, analysis, or publication of this research.

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