



Review of the habilitation thesis of Dr. Gökhan Bacik

Introduction

The Birth and Evolution of Islamic Political Theory: Political Rationalism from Ibn al-Muqaffa to Ibn Khaldun constitutes Dr. Gökhan Bacik's habilitation thesis. It provides a comprehensive exploration of Islamic political theory, tracing its evolution from the religious origins to a rationalist perspective.

But what is Islamic political theory? In the author's opinion, it is a category of Islamic political thought, distinct from two others: the religious view of politics and the Islamic political philosophy. In practice, Islamic political theory is defined as the intention to explain and justify politics by invoking social, economic, and political dynamics completely or partially independent of religious and philosophical norms. In this sense, political rationalism represents the unifying element of Islamic political theory.

The author examines key historical developments, figures, and ideas that have shaped Islamic political theory over centuries. These dynamics are illustrated by the study of five political thinkers across a wide time span, from the eighth to the beginning of the fifteenth century: Ibn al-Muqaffa, al-Mawardi, Nizam al-Mulk, Ibn Tufayl and Ibn Khaldun. Furthermore, from a geographical point of view, they represent the three main regions of the medieval Muslim society: Ibn al-Muqaffa and al-Mawardi represent the Muslim East, particularly the Arab-Persian cultural zone; Nizam al-Mulk also represents the Muslim East, but the Turkish-Persian cultural zone; Ibn Tufayl and Ibn Khaldun represent the Muslim West.

This review will analyse the thesis's structure, content, and contributions to the understanding of Islamic political theory, focusing on its historical depth, analytical rigor, and relevance to contemporary discourse.

Historical Context and Evolution of Islamic Political Theory

The thesis begins with a vivid account of the origins of Islamic political theory, highlighting the political vacuum created by the death of Prophet Muhammad in 632. The Saqifah meeting, where tribal representatives debated the election of a new leader, is presented as a pivotal moment that marked the transition from divinely inspired leadership to a political competition driven by tribal customs and power dynamics. This sets the stage for the thesis's central argument: Islamic political theory has evolved to incorporate rationalist perspectives that explain politics outside the realm of religious norms.

The author effectively uses historical examples, such as the election of Abu Bakr as the first caliph and the Abbasid revolution, to illustrate the interplay between religion, tribal power, and political interests. The analysis of figures like Ibn al-Muqaffa, al-Mawardi, Nizam al-Mulk, Ibn Tufayl, and Ibn Khaldun provides a chronological narrative of how Islamic political thought transitioned from its early religious foundations to a more empirical and rationalist approach.



Key Figures and Their Contributions

1. Ibn al-Muqaffa:

- The thesis identifies Ibn al-Muqaffa as a pioneer of Islamic political theory, emphasizing his non-religious perspective on politics. His work, *Risala fi al-Sahaba*, is analysed as a response to the political challenges of the Abbasid regime-building phase. Ibn al-Muqaffa's focus on loyalty, military organization, and the separation of political and religious realms is highlighted as a significant departure from earlier religiously driven political thought.

2. Al-Mawardi:

- Al-Mawardi's contributions (primarily *al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyya*) are contextualized within the Abbasid decline and the rise of the provincial order. His pragmatic approach to political authority and his definition of the caliphate as a spiritual leadership are examined in detail. The thesis underscores his ability to adapt political theory to the realities of a fragmented Islamic world, where power was distributed among local states.

3. Nizam al-Mulk:

- Nizam al-Mulk's *Siyasatnama* is presented as a state-centred treatise that reflects the Saljuq era's political dynamics. His emphasis on the autonomy of the state and the instrumentalization of religion for political purposes marks a significant shift in Islamic political thought. The thesis underlines his empirical approach to governance.

4. Ibn Tufayl:

- The thesis interprets Ibn Tufayl's *Hayy bin Yaqzan* as a work designed to propagate the Almohad doctrine rather than a purely philosophical text. The analysis of the plot and themes reveals how Ibn Tufayl used fiction as a pedagogical tool to communicate the Almohad perspective on the superiority of their *tawhid* (unity) over traditional religious practices.

5. Ibn Khaldun:

- Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddima* is considered as a proto-modern work that incorporates sociological dynamics into political rationalism. His concept of *'asabiyya* is analysed as a social law that explains the emergence, evolution, and decline of human organizations. The thesis highlights his rejection of religious and philosophical norms as primary determinants of political events, emphasizing his focus on empirical observation and general causality.

Analytical Rigor and Methodology

The thesis employs a rigorous analytical approach, using historical evidence and primary sources to support its arguments. The author demonstrates a deep understanding of the complexities of Islamic political history, providing nuanced interpretations of key events and figures. The use of primary texts, such as *Risala*, *Ahkam*, *Siyasatnama*, *Hayy bin Yaqzan* and *Muqaddima*, adds credibility to the analysis and allows for a detailed exploration of the evolution of Islamic political theory.

The thesis also excels in contextualizing the contributions of each figure within their historical and political settings. For example, the analysis of al-Mawardi's thought is enriched by a discussion of the provincial order and the Abbasid-Buwayhid cohabitation. Similarly, Ibn Khaldun's ideas are framed within the post-Almohad Maghrib's political realities.



Relevance to Contemporary Discourse

One of the thesis's strengths is its ability to connect historical Islamic political theory to contemporary debates. The author argues that while classical Islamic political rationalism provides a foundation for non-religious reasoning, it does not offer a basis for popular sovereignty, a cornerstone of modern democracy. This observation is particularly relevant in discussions on the relationship between Islam and democracy.

The thesis also challenges popular historical narratives that often distort the complexities of Islamic political history. By emphasizing the importance of addressing these distortions, the author calls for a more critical engagement with history to inform contemporary Islamic political movements.

Conclusion

Dr. Gökhan Bacik's habilitation work is a brilliant contribution to the field of Islamic political theory in the Middle Ages. Its focus on political rationalism, contextual analysis of key figures, and relevance to contemporary discourse make it an innovative and remarkable study, providing a nuanced understanding of the interplay between religion, politics, and society in Islamic history.

Bacik's scholarly expertise, methodological rigor, and clarity of exposition make him a very strong candidate for university teaching and research. His work not only enriches academic discourse but also has the potential to inspire and educate both scholars and students.

In conclusion, I can recommend without any reservation Dr. Gökhan Bacik's thesis as a basis for proceeding with his habilitation process.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Claudio Cressati
Professor of History of Political Thought
Department of Law
University of Udine