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# Popular Sovereignty and Religious Authority in Contemporary Islamic Political Thought: A Comparative Analysis of Rached Ghannouchi and Ali Khamenei

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**Abstract**

**Background:** The relationship between Islam and democracy raises fundamental questions about popular sovereignty and religious authority, particularly when electoral preferences conflict with religious interpretations. Rached Ghannouchi and Ali Khamenei represent contrasting approaches to political legitimacy within contemporary Islamic thought.
**Objective:** This study compares their respective conceptions of popular sovereignty and religious authority, as well as the institutional location of final political decision-making authority.
**Methods:** A qualitative, library-based comparative approach to political thought was employed. Ghannouchi's primary writings and relevant secondary scholarship, including scholarly reconstructions of Khamenei's political thought, were examined through thematic textual analysis, focusing on political legitimacy, popular participation, religious authority, and constitutional decision-making.
**Results:** Ghannouchi's conception of Muslim democracy emphasizes the reinterpretation of *shura*, popular authorization, constitutional participation, and pluralism without an institutional clerical veto. In contrast, the guardianship-based framework associated with Khamenei situates elected institutions within the constitutional authority of *wilayat al-faqih*. Although both approaches recognize Islamic principles and popular participation, they differ in how they define the institutional boundaries of electoral authority.
**Conclusion:** The principal distinction concerns the sources of political legitimacy and the institutional location of final decision-making authority. This comparison demonstrates that Islamic democracy encompasses diverse arrangements of popular participation and religious governance rather than a single institutional model.

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## INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Islam and democracy remains a fundamental issue in contemporary political thought, particularly with regard to the sources of political legitimacy and the distribution of authority within political institutions (M. N. and M. S. I. Islam, 2020; Kadivar, 2020). Discussions of Islamic democracy frequently focus on whether Islamic principles are compatible with democratic governance, political pluralism, and popular participation (M. N. Islam & Islam, 2017; Mubarak, 2016; Parray, 2023). However, this perspective does not fully

address the underlying question of how political authority is established, exercised, and constrained when religious norms and popular preferences intersect (Gangopadhyay, 2023). Popular sovereignty generally refers to the principle that political authority derives from the collective will of the people Duke (2024), whereas religious authority concerns the role of religious interpretation and institutions in defining the legitimacy and boundaries of political power (Hemmet Abdullah, 2026; Markoff & Regan, 2020; Rubin, 2025). Although these principles are sometimes presented as competing foundations of governance, contemporary Islamic political thought demonstrates that their relationship can be understood through different normative and institutional arrangements (Ilhamni et al., 2022; Rohid et al., 2025; Sholichuddin et al., 2023). Understanding these interpretations is essential to examining the diversity of political models associated with Islamic democracy (Taufiqurrohman et al., 2024).

A central problem emerges when political preferences expressed through democratic institutions conflict with authoritative interpretations of religious obligations. In such circumstances, the fundamental question concerns which institution possesses the legitimate authority to determine the final political decision. This issue is particularly relevant to the political thought of Rached Ghannouchi and Ali Khamenei, who represent contrasting approaches within contemporary Sunni and Shi'a political traditions.

Ghannouchi's later conception of Muslim democracy emphasizes constitutional participation, political pluralism, and the reinterpretation of *shura* as a foundation for popular political authorization. By contrast, Khamenei's conception of Islamic or religious democracy operates within the framework of *wilayat al-faqih* (guardianship of the Islamic jurist), in which political participation is constitutionally situated within a system of religious guardianship. Both approaches acknowledge the significance of Islam in political life and recognize forms of popular participation, but they differ in how they determine the institutional boundaries of popular sovereignty and the location of final political authority. Consequently, examining their differences requires more than comparing their acceptance of elections or their commitment to religious principles; it requires an analysis of how each conceptualizes the relationship between political legitimacy, popular sovereignty, and religious authority.

Previous scholarship has examined the relationship between Islamic political thought and democratic governance from several perspectives. March (2019), in *The Caliphate of Man*, investigates the development of popular sovereignty in modern Islamic political thought and provides an important theoretical foundation for understanding how Islamic political concepts have been reinterpreted in relation to political legitimacy. Ghannouchi's own writings, particularly *Public Freedoms in the Islamic State* Ghannouchi (2022) and *On Muslim Democracy* Ghannouchi & March (2023), provide the principal textual basis for examining his interpretation of political freedom, consultation, and democratic participation.

Grewal (2020) examines Ennahda's transformation during Tunisia's democratic transition, highlighting the institutional and political circumstances surrounding the movement's development. Bahlul (2021) critically evaluates the relationship between Islamic conceptions of the *umma* (community of believers) and the normative requirements of popular sovereignty, questioning whether a religiously constituted political community can fully accommodate democratic self-government. Meanwhile, Altuntaş-Çakir (2022) situates Muslim democracy within a broader political-theoretical framework that examines the relationship between Islamic commitments and constitutional democratic institutions. These contributions demonstrate that Ghannouchi's political thought involves not only the acceptance of electoral participation but also a broader reconsideration of political legitimacy, religious interpretation, and the role of the political community.

More recent theoretical developments further illuminate the changing relationship between sovereignty and religious authority. March (2024) develops a post-sovereigntist interpretation of Islamic political thought that emphasizes pluralism, political contestation, and alternatives to exclusive claims of final political authority. This perspective provides an important basis for understanding Ghannouchi's later approach to Muslim democracy, in which religious commitments remain relevant to public political deliberation without necessarily establishing an independent clerical institution empowered to override democratic decisions. In contrast, scholarship concerning Khamenei has concentrated more extensively on the institutional

development of *wilayat al-faqih* and its implications for political authority in Iran. Mahdavi (2023) examines the historical foundations, institutional consolidation, and continuing significance of juristic guardianship, particularly the relationship between constitutional authority and the political institutions supporting the Supreme Leader. Studies addressing Iran's electoral arrangements also highlight the tension between popular participation and the constitutional authority of religious institutions, including developments surrounding the 2024 parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections (EST, 2024). These studies provide relevant perspectives on the institutional environment associated with Khamenei's political thought, although institutional practices must be analytically distinguished from normative arguments directly attributable to him.

Despite these contributions, the literature discussed above largely examines Ghannouchi and Khamenei within their respective intellectual traditions and political contexts. Studies of Ghannouchi frequently emphasize the reinterpretation of Islamic political principles, pluralism, and democratic participation, whereas research on Khamenei primarily addresses religious guardianship, constitutional authority, and institutional consolidation. Consequently, a direct comparison employing a common conceptual framework remains insufficiently developed within the literature considered in this study. This limitation creates a specific theoretical problem because the two approaches cannot be adequately distinguished merely by identifying whether they support elections or recognize the political relevance of Islam. Both acknowledge these elements, although they assign different positions to popular participation and religious authority within the political order. A comparative analysis is therefore necessary to determine how each approach constructs the source of political legitimacy and identifies the institution authorized to make final political decisions when popular preferences and religious interpretations diverge. Addressing this issue can provide a more systematic understanding of the conceptual differences underlying contemporary models of Islamic democracy.

The urgency of this research is reinforced by the continuing relevance of political legitimacy, institutional authority, and constitutional constraints in contemporary Muslim societies. Political developments in 2026, including Khamenei's death and the subsequent leadership succession in Iran, as well as reports of Ghannouchi's life sentence amid his continued detention in Tunisia, have renewed attention to the relationship between political authority, institutional continuity, and democratic participation (Amnesty International, 2026). Although these developments occurred under different political circumstances, they demonstrate the importance of examining the institutional conditions within which competing interpretations of Islamic political legitimacy operate. Nevertheless, these events cannot independently establish the validity or failure of either thinker's normative arguments. Their relevance to the present research is therefore contextual rather than evidentiary. The principal urgency lies in clarifying the theoretical foundations of political authority and identifying how different interpretations of Islamic principles may establish distinct boundaries for popular participation and religious governance.

The novelty of this research lies in its systematic comparison of Ghannouchi's and Khamenei's political thought through a shared analytical framework that distinguishes the source of political legitimacy from the institutional location of final decision-making authority. Rather than approaching Islamic democracy as a uniform political model or evaluating the two thinkers exclusively against external liberal-democratic criteria, this study reconstructs their respective arguments within their own conceptual traditions before examining their similarities and differences. The analysis focuses on five interconnected dimensions: the source of political legitimacy, the position of the people in political decision-making, the authority of religious scholars, the limitations imposed on majority decisions, and the resulting conception of democratic governance. Through these dimensions, the study identifies how Ghannouchi's reinterpretive and pluralist conception of Muslim democracy differs from the guardianship-based conception of Islamic or religious democracy associated with Khamenei. The principal conceptual contribution is to demonstrate that the distinction between these approaches concerns not simply whether political participation is recognized but also where ultimate political authority is institutionally located when democratic decisions conflict with authoritative religious interpretations.

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the respective conceptions of popular sovereignty and religious authority in the political thought of Rached Ghannouchi and Ali Khamenei and to explain how their relationship produces different understandings of Islamic democracy. The research contributes to comparative Islamic political theory by providing a conceptual framework for distinguishing forms of political legitimacy and religious authority without reducing them to a binary opposition between Islam and democracy. Its academic contribution lies in strengthening the conceptual precision of comparative political thought, particularly in analyzing the relationship between normative religious commitments and institutional decision-making authority. The study also provides a foundation for subsequent research examining other Islamic political traditions and their approaches to sovereignty, constitutional governance, and political participation. By clarifying the similarities and differences between the two thinkers, the research supports a more differentiated understanding of Islamic democracy as a range of political arrangements rather than a single, fixed institutional model.

The theoretical implications of this study concern the importance of distinguishing between the normative justification of political legitimacy and the institutional authority to determine binding political decisions. This distinction enables comparative analysis to move beyond general debates about the compatibility of Islam and democracy toward a more precise examination of how religious and popular authority are organized within political systems. From an institutional perspective, the findings may inform academic discussions concerning constitutional limitations, political participation, the role of religious scholars, and the distribution of decision-making power in religiously informed governance. However, because the research is based on textual and conceptual analysis rather than empirical evaluation of political institutions, these implications should be understood as analytical contributions rather than evidence of the effectiveness or durability of particular systems of government. Ultimately, the study seeks to enrich contemporary discussions of Islamic political thought by explaining how different interpretations of sovereignty and religious authority shape the possibilities and limitations of democratic governance.

## METHOD

This study employed a qualitative, library-based comparative political thought approach to examine the conceptual relationship between popular sovereignty and religious authority in the political ideas of Rached Ghannouchi and Ali Khamenei. The unit of analysis consisted of the political concepts, normative arguments, and institutional interpretations associated with the two thinkers rather than the political systems of Tunisia and Iran as empirical cases. The analysis drew on primary writings and relevant secondary scholarship available in English. For Ghannouchi, the principal sources included *Public Freedoms in the Islamic State* Ghannouchi (2022), *On Muslim Democracy* Ghannouchi & March (2023), and his essay on the transition from political Islam to Muslim democracy (Ghannouchi, 2016). For Khamenei, the analysis relied primarily on scholarly reconstructions of his political thought and institutional interpretations of *wilayat al-faqih*, particularly Mahdavi (2023), alongside contextual literature addressing the constitutional and political arrangements of the Islamic Republic of Iran. These sources were distinguished according to their evidentiary status, with primary writings used to reconstruct arguments directly attributable to their authors and secondary scholarship used to interpret doctrinal developments and institutional practices. Because the accessible source materials consisted predominantly of English-language publications and translations, the study did not claim to provide an exhaustive analysis of original Arabic or Persian texts. This limitation was taken into consideration when interpreting the conceptual meanings and institutional implications of the two approaches.

The collected texts were examined using thematic textual analysis within a comparative political thought framework (March, 2019). The analysis focused on five interconnected dimensions: the source of political legitimacy, the position of the people in political decision-making, the authority of religious scholars, the limits of majority decisions, and the resulting conception of democratic governance. Relevant concepts, including *shura*, *umma*, sovereignty, legitimacy, elections, pluralism, and *wilayat al-faqih*, were used to organize the interpretation of the selected literature. The analytical process comprised four stages: first, establishing an

understanding of each thinker's conceptual context; second, reconstructing the principal arguments within each intellectual tradition; third, comparing their similarities and differences; and fourth, explaining the implications of these differences for Islamic democracy. Within-case analysis was conducted before cross-case comparison to minimize the risk of imposing a single normative framework on both perspectives. The interpretation distinguished between normative claims made by the thinkers and institutional practices described in secondary literature. As the research involved publicly available textual materials and did not include human or animal participants, institutional ethical approval was not required.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

*Popular Sovereignty in Rached Ghannouchi's Thought*

Ghannouchi's conception of popular sovereignty is closely associated with his reinterpretation of *shura* and the political role of the *umma*. In his political thought, consultation is not confined to a limited group of religious scholars but is connected to the broader participation of the Muslim community in determining legitimate political authority. This interpretation provides a conceptual basis for understanding popular authorization within an Islamic political framework (Ghannouchi, 2022). March (2019) situates this development within a broader transformation of modern Islamic political thought, in which the political community increasingly assumes an active role in authorizing government. Ghannouchi's intellectual development also reflects a shift in emphasis from accommodating political freedoms within an Islamic state toward a conception of Muslim democracy grounded in constitutional participation and political pluralism. His 2016 discussion of Ennahda's political transformation and subsequent dialogues with March illustrate the increasing importance attributed to democratic institutions, freedom of conscience, and political participation (Ghannouchi & March, 2023). Within this framework, elections and constitutional procedures are understood as mechanisms through which the political community participates in the exercise of legitimate authority, while Islamic ethical commitments continue to inform public political deliberation (Altuntaş-Çakir, 2022).

*Religious Authority in Rached Ghannouchi's Thought*

In the institutional sense used in this comparison, religious authority in Ghannouchi's later thought is de-institutionalized. This denotes the absence of a constitutionally designated clerical veto over decisions made by elected institutions, not the disappearance of the *ulama*, Islamic norms, or religious interpretation from public life. Rather than assigning religious scholars a constitutionally established veto over legislation, Ghannouchi's later conception of Muslim democracy locates political decision-making within institutions authorized by the political community. Religious interpretation remains relevant to public deliberation, but its influence is primarily expressed through ethical argumentation and democratic participation rather than through an independent clerical authority empowered to override elected institutions (Ghannouchi & March, 2023).

This is precisely the point at which critical readings of Ghannouchi diverge from more affirmative interpretations. March's post-2019 work treats this de-institutionalization as a genuine and consequential departure from the “sovereigntist” imaginary that dominated earlier Islamist political theory, recasting Muslim democracy as a form of post-sovereigntist agonistic pluralism in which religiously motivated actors pursue their goals through, rather than above, democratic institutions (March, 2024). Bahlul (2021) critical review of March's *The Caliphate of Man*, however, argues that the *umma* Ghannouchi has in mind is not a value-neutral, procedural *demos* of the kind required for popular sovereignty to be democratically desirable in the modern sense. Because the *umma* is still conceived as bound by and constituted through Islamic norms, Ghannouchi's conception of popular sovereignty remains substantively, if not institutionally, delimited by religious commitment. The two readings nevertheless agree on the underlying empirical point most relevant here: in Ghannouchi's model, no cleric or juristic office possesses the institutional power to overturn decisions reached through the *umma*'s authorized political processes. Religious authority operates as an ethical horizon internal to the political community rather than as a superordinate check on it.

*Popular Sovereignty in Ali Khamenei's Thought*

Khamenei's conception of popular sovereignty must be understood within the constitutional and doctrinal framework of *wilayat al-faqih*, originally developed as a central principle of the Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini. The doctrine assigns a governing role to qualified Islamic juristic authority during the occultation of the Twelfth Imam, establishing a political arrangement in which religious guardianship occupies a constitutionally superior position (Mahdavi, 2023). Khamenei's political leadership operated within and reinforced this inherited institutional framework rather than originating the doctrine itself. Popular participation remains formally recognized through presidential and parliamentary elections and through the Assembly of Experts, which is constitutionally responsible for selecting the Supreme Leader. Nevertheless, electoral participation takes place within institutional boundaries established by the constitutional authority of the Supreme Leader and the Guardian Council. Consequently, the relationship between popular sovereignty and religious authority differs from a model in which the electorate possesses unrestricted final decision-making authority. The 2024 parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections provide institutional context for understanding this arrangement, particularly with regard to candidate selection and the limitations on electoral participation (EST, 2024). These institutional observations support an interpretation of popular participation as constrained, but they should not be treated as direct textual evidence of Khamenei's individual normative arguments.

*Religious Authority in Ali Khamenei's Thought*

Religious authority occupies a constitutionally central position within the framework of *wilayat al-faqih*. Article 5 of the Iranian Constitution establishes the principle of juristic guardianship during the occultation, while Article 107 provides for the selection of the Supreme Leader by the Assembly of Experts. The constitutional changes introduced following Khomeini's death also modified the religious qualifications associated with the office, providing important institutional context for Khamenei's leadership (Mahdavi, 2023). Mahdavi's analysis indicates that the exercise of religious guardianship under Khamenei was closely associated with the consolidation of political, administrative, and security institutions.

This development illustrates the distinction between the Supreme Leader's formal constitutional authority and the broader question of religious and social legitimacy. The 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom protests provide contextual evidence of political contestation surrounding the governing system, although they do not independently establish the meaning or coherence of Khamenei's political doctrine. Similarly, the leadership succession following Khamenei's death in 2026 raises questions about the relationship between juristic qualifications, institutional continuity, and political authority (TRENDS Research & Advisory, 2026). These developments are relevant to understanding the institutional setting of religious guardianship but should be distinguished from the normative arguments attributed directly to Khamenei.

**Table 1**

*Comparative Summary of Popular Sovereignty and Religious Authority in Ghannouchi's and Khamenei's Thought*

| Dimension | Ghannouchi | Khamenei |
|---|---|---|
| Source of legitimacy | The umma, authorised through Islamically informed constitutional democracy | God, exercised through the qualified jurist during the occultation |
| Position of the people | Final political authority via elections and constitutional process | Constrained participants within boundaries set by juristic guardianship |
| Position of religious scholars | Ethical / persuasive influence; no institutional veto | Formal, constitutionally entrenched final authority (wali al-faqih, Guardian Council) |
| Limits on majority will | Set by constitutional pluralism and rights, not by clerical veto | Set by juristic determination of conformity with Islamic law |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Resulting conception of democracy | Muslim democracy (post-sovereigntist, agonistic pluralism) | Islamic / religious democracy (guardianship-bounded participation) |

Table 1 summarizes the five dimensions along which the two thinkers' constructions of legitimacy were coded and compared. These dimensions are discussed in detail below.

Despite this divergence, the findings also reveal two noteworthy similarities. First, both thinkers explicitly reject a purely secular, religion-free public sphere, treating Islam as a legitimate and even necessary source of political norms. Second, both accept some form of institutionalized popular participation as a permanent feature of legitimate governance rather than as a temporary concession. This convergence helps explain why both projects have historically been described, albeit loosely, under the umbrella term "Islamic democracy," despite resting on incompatible theories of final authority.

## Discussion

*Two Models of Reconciling Islam and Democracy*

The comparative findings converge on a central argument that constitutes the principal contribution of this study. Ghannouchi and Khamenei do not fundamentally disagree over whether Islam permits popular participation, as both affirm its legitimacy, or whether religion should inform political life, as both recognize its role. Rather, their fundamental disagreement concerns the location of ultimate authority when the expressed will of the people conflicts with an authoritative religious interpretation of Islamic requirements. In Ghannouchi's later conception of Muslim democracy, conflicts between political preferences and competing religious interpretations are addressed through constitutionally established and democratically authorized institutions rather than through a formally designated clerical veto. By contrast, the guardianship-based framework associated with Khamenei places elected institutions within constitutional arrangements that preserve the superior authority of the Supreme Leader and other religiously constituted bodies.

This distinction concerns the institutional allocation of final decision-making authority and should not be interpreted as evidence that either model eliminates the continuing influence of religious norms or political participation. This explains why the two thinkers, each defending a conception of "Islamic democracy" on his own terms, arrive at institutionally incompatible arrangements: a reinterpretive and pluralist model in Ghannouchi's case and a religious-authority or guardianship model in Khamenei's case. The value of distinguishing these as two models, rather than ranking one as more genuinely democratic than the other, is analytical rather than evaluative. It disaggregates "Islamic democracy" from a single essentialized referent into a family of arrangements distinguished by a precise and comparable variable—the locus of final authority—rather than by the vaguer and more normatively loaded question of how democratic or how Islamic each project is judged to be.

*Theoretical Implications and International Relevance*

This finding extends March (2024) reframing of Muslim democracy as post-sovereigntist agonistic pluralism by showing, through direct comparison with a guardianship model, precisely what has been surrendered and what has been retained in this post-sovereigntist move. Ghannouchi's project relinquishes any institutional claim that religious authority can override a popularly authorized decision while retaining the claim that Islamic norms legitimately shape what citizens argue for within that process. Khamenei's project, by comparison, retains precisely the institutional claim that Ghannouchi's project relinquishes. Read together, the two cases suggest that the analytically decisive variable separating models of Islamic democracy is not, as much of the earlier "Islam and democracy" literature implied, the presence or absence of elections, pluralism, or religious rhetoric—all of which appear in both cases—but the constitutional location of final authority when these elements conflict.

This refines Bahlul (2021) skepticism toward treating Ghannouchi's popular sovereignty as democratically sufficient. The relevant test is not whether the *umma* constitutes a perfectly value-neutral *demos*, which no real-world *demos* does, but whether any office external to

the *umma*'s authorized political process possesses a standing power to override its decisions. By this criterion, Ghannouchi's and Khamenei's models remain genuinely, rather than merely rhetorically, distinct.

The theoretical implications of this argument extend beyond the two cases examined. Understanding political legitimacy in modern Islamic thought through two analytically distinct dimensions—namely, the source of legitimacy, whether divine command, popular will, or a combination of both, and the locus of final authority, whether institutional and electoral or juristic and clerical—provides a clearer framework for comparative political theory. This approach helps disentangle the conceptual complexity often subsumed under the broader debate on Islam and democracy and enables more systematic comparisons of how different Islamic political traditions conceptualize legitimacy, popular sovereignty, and religious authority.

This framework is relevant well beyond Tunisia and Iran. Movements and states elsewhere in the Muslim world that claim an Islamic warrant for their institutions, including Muslim-democratic parties active outside the Arab world, can be more precisely located on this two-axis map rather than assessed against a single, often implicitly liberal-democratic, external benchmark. Such an approach reflects the caution consistently urged in comparative political theory (March, 2019). Positioning the framework in this way also speaks to a global audience beyond specialists in Middle Eastern or Iranian studies, since the same two-axis logic—who is sovereign and who has the final say when sovereignty and religious interpretation conflict—recurs wherever a polity's legitimacy is partly grounded in a comprehensive religious or ideological doctrine rather than in procedural liberalism alone.

*The 2026 Convergence and Its Limits*

The events of 2026 give this comparison an additional and somewhat sobering dimension of relevance. Khamenei died during the February 2026 airstrikes, after which his son succeeded him as Supreme Leader (TRENDS Research & Advisory, 2026). These developments may be interpreted in light of Mahdavi (2023) argument that institutional and security consolidation had increasingly sustained *wilayat al-faqih* even as its broader socioreligious legitimacy weakened. The succession therefore raises questions about the relationship between juristic qualifications and the practical operation of supreme authority; the events alone, however, cannot establish a definitive causal explanation. Ghannouchi's reported life sentence and serious health crisis during detention illustrate a related limitation of reinterpretive and pluralist Muslim democracy.

Such a project remains institutionally vulnerable when the constitutional order on which it depends is undermined by an authoritarian executive, even when religious authority has been largely de-institutionalized within the movement's own doctrine (Amnesty International, 2026). Neither case should be interpreted as an empirical verdict on the relative coherence of the two political theologies. Rather, both highlight how the viability of Islamic democracy depends on institutional conditions that cannot be guaranteed by either thinker's textual arguments alone. Addressing this limitation lies beyond the scope of the present text-based comparative analysis. Future research could therefore combine textual reconstruction with institutional and empirical investigations of succession crises and authoritarian backsliding in Muslim-majority states to examine how these conditions shape the durability of competing models of Islamic democracy.

Several limitations of this study should be stated explicitly. First, reliance on English-language translations and secondary scholarship limits not only access to nuance but also the reliability of conceptual equivalence across languages. Terms such as *shura*, *umma*, *hakimiyyat*, and *wilayat al-faqih* may carry semantic and doctrinal implications that cannot be fully established through their English renderings alone. Accordingly, claims about the precise meanings, development, and relative emphasis of these concepts should be understood as provisional interpretations of the accessible corpus rather than as definitive philological findings. Second, the comparative method used here privileges textual and doctrinal reconstruction over ethnographic or survey-based evidence concerning how ordinary citizens in Tunisia and Iran actually receive and contest these doctrines. This complementary line of inquiry falls outside the scope of the present study. Third, both cases were still unfolding at the time of writing. Ghannouchi remained in detention amid reports of serious health concerns, while Iran's political trajectory under its new Supreme Leader remained uncertain. Interpretations of these 2026

developments are therefore provisional and warrant reassessment as new evidence becomes available.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Rached Ghannouchi and Ali Khamenei represent two distinct approaches to the relationship between popular sovereignty and religious authority in contemporary Islamic political thought. Ghannouchi's conception of Muslim democracy emphasizes the reinterpretation of *shura*, popular political authorization, constitutional participation, and pluralism without a formally established clerical veto over elected institutions. In contrast, the conception of Islamic or religious democracy associated with Khamenei operates within the constitutional framework of *wilayat al-faqih*, in which popular participation is recognized but remains subject to the authority of religious guardianship. Although both approaches acknowledge the relevance of Islamic principles and democratic participation, their principal distinction concerns the location of final political authority when popular preferences conflict with authoritative religious interpretations. These findings demonstrate that Islamic democracy cannot be understood as a uniform institutional model but instead encompasses different arrangements of political legitimacy, popular participation, and religious authority.

The principal contribution of this research lies in developing a comparative understanding of Islamic political thought through two interconnected analytical dimensions: the source of political legitimacy and the institutional location of final decision-making authority. This framework clarifies the conceptual differences between pluralist and guardianship-based approaches without reducing their relationship to a binary assessment of Islam's compatibility with democracy. The findings contribute to comparative political theory and provide a conceptual basis for examining constitutional authority, religious interpretation, and political participation in other Islamic political contexts. Nevertheless, the study is limited by its reliance on English-language sources and secondary reconstructions, particularly in interpreting Khamenei's political thought, as well as by its focus on textual rather than empirical institutional analysis. Future research should incorporate original Arabic and Persian primary sources, investigate how these political conceptions are interpreted and implemented in institutional practice, and extend the comparative framework to other Muslim-majority contexts. Such research would help evaluate the applicability of the proposed conceptual distinctions and their relevance to the institutional conditions shaping democratic governance.

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## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

All authors contributed to the development of this research. Nur Saadah Khudri, as the first author, was responsible for initiating the research concept, developing the research framework, collecting and analyzing the data, interpreting the results, and preparing the initial manuscript draft. Syamsul Bahri contributed to the development of the research ideas, academic supervision, methodological refinement, validation of the research findings, and final revision of the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication and take responsibility for the integrity, accuracy, and transparency of all aspects of the research.

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