

Constitutional Interpretation Within Islamic and Western Legal Frameworks

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Abstract: This study examines the mechanisms of constitutional interpretation within Islamic and Western legal traditions, focusing on their foundational principles, interpretive tools, and institutional actors. Western constitutional systems are typically grounded in secularism, liberal democracy, and popular sovereignty, where interpretation evolves through judicial reasoning, often guided by theories such as originalism, textualism, or living constitutionalism. In contrast, Islamic constitutionalism draws legitimacy from divine revelation, with the Qur'an and Sunnah forming the core sources of law. Interpretation in Islamic legal frameworks involves *usul al-fiqh*, *maqasid al-shariah*, and *ijtihad*, aiming to preserve divine intent while addressing contemporary realities. Using a library research method, this paper analyzes key differences and points of convergence between the two systems. It finds that Western systems grant primary interpretive authority to courts, while Islamic models often involve religious scholars alongside state institutions. The flexibility of interpretation also varies, with Western systems emphasizing legal evolution, whereas Islamic systems emphasize preservation of ethical and theological principles. This study contributes to the discourse on legal pluralism, highlighting challenges and opportunities in integrating Islamic and constitutional norms. It offers insights for legal scholars, policymakers, and constitutional drafters working within or across pluralistic legal environments in Muslim-majority countries.

Keywords: Islamic Law, Usul Al-Fiqh, Living Constitutionalism, Legal Pluralism, Islamic Constitutionalism.

INTRODUCTION

Constitutional interpretation plays a fundamental role in shaping how a legal system functions, as it determines how constitutional texts are understood and applied across time and context. It defines the distribution of state powers, delineates the scope of civil rights and liberties, and establishes institutional mechanisms to resolve legal disputes. In Western legal systems—especially those grounded in liberal democratic traditions—constitutional interpretation is often driven by principles such as the rule of law, individual freedoms, and checks and balances among branches of government. Courts, particularly constitutional or supreme courts, serve as the primary

bodies responsible for interpreting constitutional provisions. These interpretations are frequently influenced by theories such as originalism, textualism, and living constitutionalism, each providing different approaches to reading and applying constitutional text (Barber, 2018; Strauss, 2010).

Conversely in Islamic legal traditions, constitutional interpretation is rooted not only in legal reasoning but also in theology and ethics. The Qur'an and Sunnah represent the highest sources of authority, and any legal framework must be in accordance with their principles. Interpretation in Islamic contexts is conducted through established methodologies such as *usul al-fiqh* (the principles of Islamic jurisprudence), *maqasid al-shariah* (the higher objectives of Islamic law), and *ijtihad* (independent reasoning). These tools aim to preserve the divine intent while also providing mechanisms for adaptability in diverse and changing socio-political environments (Kamali, 2008; Auda, 2007).

As Muslim-majority states increasingly codify constitutions that reference Islam—sometimes even declaring it as the source of law—complex questions arise regarding the coexistence of divine and popular sovereignty. In some systems, Islamic law is symbolically acknowledged, while in others, it holds binding constitutional weight. This duality presents a significant interpretive challenge: how can jurists and judges balance between divine revelation and modern constitutional values such as democracy, human rights, and equality under the law? The question becomes even more pressing in pluralistic societies with religious and ideological diversity (Lombardi, 2006).

The field of comparative constitutionalism offers a useful framework to explore this tension. While Western constitutionalism assumes the primacy of secular law, it often finds resonance with Islamic constitutional thinking on issues such as justice, accountability, and moral governance. However, foundational differences remain in terms of epistemology, sources of authority, and interpretive methodology. This paper aims to examine and compare these approaches, with particular attention to how interpretive authorities function, the legal tools employed, and the overarching values that guide constitutional interpretation in each system. The study contributes to the ongoing discourse on legal pluralism and the possibility of mutual accommodation between Islamic and Western constitutional frameworks.

One notable distinction lies in the location of interpretive authority. In Western systems, interpretation is primarily judicial, with constitutional courts issuing binding rulings that affect national policy. These courts often function independently from other branches of government and are tasked with safeguarding constitutional rights. In contrast, Islamic legal systems may involve multiple interpretive authorities, including religious scholars (ulama), state jurists, and consultative bodies. The relationship between state and religion further complicates the division of authority, particularly in countries where Islamic jurisprudence is constitutionally entrenched (Sultany, 2013; Feldman, 2008).

Another important divergence is the nature of the constitutional text itself. Western constitutions tend to be human-authored, amendable, and often limited in scope to governance and civil rights. They may evolve through judicial interpretation or legislative reform. Islamic constitutional systems, however, treat the Qur'an as a divinely revealed source that is immutable, though its interpretation can vary across time and schools of thought. Therefore, Islamic constitutionalism requires a dual approach—one that respects the sacredness of scripture while allowing human reasoning to address modern complexities through *ijtihad* and *maqasid* (Kamali, 2011; Hallaq, 2009).

The issue of rights interpretation also shows marked differences. Western systems emphasize individual rights such as freedom of speech, religion, and equality before the law. Islamic systems acknowledge many of the same rights but often frame them within a broader ethical and religious structure that includes duties and responsibilities. For instance, freedom of expression in Islamic law is balanced with respect for moral boundaries and social cohesion, leading to different thresholds for acceptable speech (An-Na'im, 1990).

Despite these differences, several points of convergence have emerged. Notably, the modern use of *maqasid al-shariah* has opened new pathways for interpreting Islamic legal principles in a manner that aligns with contemporary constitutional goals such as justice, public welfare (*maslahah*), and human dignity. Scholars argue that *maqasid*-based reasoning provides a bridge between tradition and modernity, allowing Islamic legal systems to remain faithful to divine guidance while engaging constructively with constitutional norms (Auda, 2007; Bassiouni, 2003).

Hybrid legal systems such as those in Malaysia, Egypt, and Pakistan provide fertile ground for comparative inquiry. These countries incorporate both secular and Islamic elements in their constitutional design and often wrestle with conflicts between civil court decisions and religious authorities. Yet they also illustrate how legal pluralism can be operationalized, albeit with ongoing challenges (Lombardi, 2013; El Fadl, 2001).

The comparative study of constitutional interpretation in Islamic and Western frameworks reveals both significant divergences and emerging areas of synergy. While differences in foundational sources and authority structures persist, the evolution of interpretive methodologies particularly through *maqasid al-shariah* indicates a potential for convergence in values such as justice, dignity, and public welfare. This comparative approach not only enhances scholarly understanding but also supports practical efforts toward harmonizing legal traditions in multicultural and multi-religious societies.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative library research methodology, which is widely recognized in legal and constitutional studies for its depth of theoretical exploration and normative analysis. Library research, often referred to as doctrinal legal research, focuses on the systematic examination of legal principles, texts, and interpretive frameworks. This method is particularly suitable for studies that compare legal traditions across different cultural and philosophical contexts, such as Islamic and Western constitutional systems (Chynoweth, 2008).

The primary sources of data in this study are secondary legal materials, including constitutional texts, scholarly books, journal articles, and classical jurisprudential works. For Islamic legal interpretation, the study draws upon foundational sources such as the Qur'an, Sunnah, and jurisprudential tools like *usul al-fiqh*, *maqasid al-shariah*, and *ijtihad*. These sources are examined alongside constitutional theories from Western traditions that emphasize principles such as originalism, textualism, and living constitutionalism. This comparative lens allows for the identification of both convergence and divergence in how different legal systems interpret their constitutional foundations (Hutchinson & Duncan, 2012).

The data collection process was carried out by identifying, selecting, and reviewing academic literature relevant to the theme of constitutional interpretation. Sources were accessed through academic databases such as JSTOR, HeinOnline, Google Scholar, and Scopus. A purposive sampling approach was used to select literature that provides both theoretical depth and practical insights into the functioning of constitutional interpretation within Islamic and Western legal systems. Specific attention was given to jurisdictions such as the United States, France, and Germany for Western perspectives, and countries like Egypt, Malaysia, and Iran for Islamic constitutional practice (McConville & Chui, 2007).

The study applies content analysis as its primary analytical tool. Through this approach, the selected texts were examined for recurring concepts, interpretive methodologies, and institutional roles in constitutional interpretation. The content analysis focused on four key comparative aspects: (1) the source of constitutional authority; (2) the interpretive method used; (3) the institutions responsible for interpretation; and (4) the philosophical orientation toward rights and sovereignty. This analysis aims to uncover the underlying epistemologies and values that shape each system's approach to constitutional meaning (Salter & Mason, 2007).

By adopting this library research method, the study does not seek to measure empirical data but rather to engage with normative legal reasoning and theory. The strength of this approach lies in its capacity to trace the intellectual traditions behind constitutional interpretation and to provide a platform for critical reflection on the possibilities of harmonization in pluralistic legal contexts. Furthermore, the methodology allows for a conceptual and jurisprudential comparison that highlights not only differences in practice but also shared goals such as justice, legitimacy, and social order (Yin, 2016).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Constitutional Interpretation in Western Legal Systems

Constitutional interpretation in Western legal systems reflects deep philosophical and jurisprudential traditions rooted in human reason, the rule of law, and democratic values. These systems whether based on common law or civil law traditions emphasize the centrality of written constitutions as the supreme law of the land. In countries such as the United States, France, and

Germany, constitutions provide not only a legal foundation for governance but also a moral and political framework that defines the rights of citizens and the limits of governmental power. The process of interpretation, therefore, becomes essential to maintaining the integrity, adaptability, and legitimacy of constitutional governance (Barber, 2018).

In common law systems, such as that of the United States, constitutional interpretation is often driven by judicial reasoning through the courts, particularly the Supreme Court. Here, multiple schools of interpretive thought have emerged. One of the most influential is originalism, which holds that the meaning of constitutional provisions should be grounded in the intent of the framers or the understanding of the text at the time it was ratified. Originalists argue that this approach preserves democratic accountability by restraining unelected judges from imposing their own values (Scalia & Garner, 2012). However, critics of originalism argue that rigid adherence to historical intentions can result in outdated or unjust outcomes in a modern context.

The living constitutionalism school of thought views the constitution as a dynamic document whose meaning can evolve alongside society. Proponents argue that because societal values, norms, and challenges change over time, constitutional interpretation must also adapt to ensure relevance and justice. This approach was exemplified in landmark U.S. Supreme Court cases such as *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), where the interpretation of the Equal Protection Clause expanded beyond the original intent to address contemporary issues of racial segregation (Sunstein, 2005). Living constitutionalism, therefore, promotes flexibility but is often criticized for allowing excessive judicial activism.

In civil law systems, such as those of France and Germany, constitutional interpretation operates within a more codified and structured legal framework. While these systems also rely on constitutional courts—like the French Constitutional Council or the German Federal Constitutional Court (Bundesverfassungsgericht)—their interpretive practices are typically more textual and systematic. Judges in civil law countries are generally more constrained by legal codes and doctrinal principles developed through academic scholarship and legislative intent, rather than judicial precedent (Kommers & Miller, 2012). However, even within civil law systems, constitutional courts wield significant influence in shaping national jurisprudence, particularly when adjudicating issues of fundamental rights, proportionality, or constitutional identity.

A common feature across Western legal systems is the central role of judicial review, a mechanism through which courts assess the constitutionality of laws and government actions. Judicial review functions as a check on legislative and executive power, ensuring that all branches of government operate within the boundaries set by the constitution. In this sense, constitutional courts do not merely interpret the law—they actively contribute to the evolution and coherence of constitutional principles (Stone Sweet, 2000). The authority of such courts often stems from their perceived neutrality, independence, and adherence to the rule of law.

Western constitutionalism generally embraces the idea of secularism, meaning that law and governance are grounded in rational public reasoning rather than religious doctrine. This allows for legal systems to be pluralistic and inclusive of diverse belief systems, while maintaining a unified legal order. However, debates persist over the limits of constitutional interpretation, especially when courts are called upon to resolve contentious social and moral issues, such as abortion, freedom of religion, or same-sex marriage (Dworkin, 1996). These debates underscore the inherently political nature of constitutional law and the tensions between democratic majoritarianism and judicial protection of minority rights.

Constitutional interpretation in Western legal systems is multifaceted, combining textual fidelity, historical context, evolving values, and institutional checks. Whether through the lens of originalism or living constitutionalism, or whether in the context of common law or civil law, the process is guided by a commitment to uphold constitutional supremacy, protect fundamental rights, and ensure that law evolves in tandem with the needs of society.

Constitutional Interpretation in Islamic Legal Frameworks

Constitutional interpretation within Islamic legal frameworks is deeply embedded in a theological and jurisprudential tradition that views law not merely as a human construct, but as a system of divine guidance. The foundational legitimacy of Islamic constitutionalism is derived from sharia—a term encompassing not only legal norms but also moral and ethical obligations as revealed through the Qur'an and the Sunnah. In many Muslim-majority countries, sharia is constitutionally recognized as either a source or the principal source of legislation, thereby placing divine law at the center of legal and political life (Kamali, 2008).

Unlike Western systems where constitutional interpretation is primarily conducted by courts through secular reasoning, Islamic interpretation involves a more complex network of actors and methodologies. The central interpretive science is *usul al-fiqh*, which outlines the principles and methodologies used to derive legal rulings from scriptural sources. *Usul al-fiqh* includes tools such as *qiyas* (analogical reasoning), *ijma'* (consensus), and *istihsan* (juristic preference), all of which have been developed and refined over centuries by Muslim jurists to ensure that Islamic law remains applicable across different contexts (Hallaq, 2009).

In addition to classical jurisprudence, *ijtihad*, or independent reasoning, plays a critical role in constitutional interpretation. *Ijtihad* allows qualified scholars (*mujtahidun*) to derive new rulings in cases where direct textual evidence is absent or insufficient. This tool has become increasingly relevant in modern governance, where new social, economic, and political challenges require fresh interpretations of Islamic legal principles (El Fadl, 2001). However, *ijtihad* is not free from controversy, especially in more conservative legal cultures where the closure of the gates of *ijtihad* is still debated. Nevertheless, many contemporary scholars argue for its revival as a mechanism to adapt *sharia* to the demands of modern constitutionalism.

A more recent development in Islamic legal interpretation is the emphasis on *maqasid al-shariah* the higher objectives or purposes of Islamic law. *Maqasid* provide a values-based framework that seeks to preserve essential human interests such as life (*nafs*), intellect (*'aql*), religion (*din*), property (*mal*), and lineage (*nasl*). This approach enables jurists to move beyond literal or isolated readings of scriptural texts toward interpretations that serve the broader public interest (*maslahah*) and justice. As such, *maqasid* has become an important bridge between Islamic legal reasoning and constitutional principles such as human rights, equality, and the common good (Auda, 2007).

The institutional actors involved in Islamic constitutional interpretation vary widely depending on the legal and political structure of the country. In countries like Iran, the authority to interpret the constitution lies significantly with religious institutions such as the Guardian Council, which ensures conformity of laws with Islamic principles. In contrast, Saudi Arabia lacks a written constitution but is governed by royal decrees that must conform to *sharia*, with the Council of Senior Scholars (*Ulama*) playing a key interpretive role (Vogel, 2000). Meanwhile,

Malaysia and Indonesia offer examples of hybrid systems, where secular legal institutions coexist with Islamic councils or courts, and constitutional interpretation must accommodate both democratic and religious legitimacy (Salim, 2008).

One of the central challenges in Islamic constitutional interpretation is balancing divine sovereignty with popular sovereignty. While Islamic law views ultimate authority as belonging to God, modern constitutionalism often operates on the principle that legitimacy derives from the will of the people. This creates interpretive tension, especially in drafting or applying constitutional provisions that deal with rights, freedoms, and gender equality. However, scholars and legal practitioners have made strides in developing interpretive frameworks that align divine objectives with constitutional values, particularly through the use of *maqasid* (An-Na'im, 1990).

Constitutional interpretation in Islamic legal systems is dynamic and multifaceted, drawing upon classical jurisprudence, modern legal theory, and institutional diversity. While rooted in religious texts, the use of tools such as *ijtihad* and *maqasid al-shariah* enables Islamic constitutional thought to engage meaningfully with contemporary legal and political realities. The pluralism of interpretive authorities and methodologies, while occasionally contentious, reflects the adaptability and richness of Islamic legal tradition in the constitutional domain.

Comparative Insights

A comparative analysis of constitutional interpretation in Western and Islamic legal traditions reveals foundational differences shaped by historical, philosophical, and theological orientations. These distinctions manifest most clearly in the authority of interpretation, sources of legal text, degree of interpretive flexibility, and the balance between rights and duties. Understanding these points of divergence and occasional convergence helps illuminate the challenges and possibilities of legal pluralism in constitutional contexts.

In terms of interpretive authority, Western constitutional systems place the power of interpretation primarily in the hands of secular courts. In common law countries such as the United States, and civil law countries like France and Germany, constitutional or supreme courts are tasked with upholding constitutional norms and resolving disputes through independent judicial reasoning (Barber, 2018; Kommers & Miller, 2012). These courts are perceived as neutral arbiters of constitutional meaning, deriving their legitimacy from the constitution and the democratic

process. In contrast, Islamic legal systems often distribute interpretive authority across a range of actors, including religious scholars (ulama), legal professionals, and political institutions. For example, in Iran, the Guardian Council is responsible for ensuring that legislation conforms to both the constitution and Islamic principles (Sultany, 2013). Similarly, in Malaysia and Indonesia, a combination of secular and religious institutions plays a role in constitutional interpretation, reflecting a hybridized legal structure (Salim, 2008).

Regarding textual sources, Western systems rely heavily on codified constitutions and statutory laws, which are regarded as the highest legal authority. These texts are products of human authorship and are subject to revision through democratic means. In Islamic legal traditions, however, constitutional texts coexist with divine sources such as the Qur'an and Sunnah, which are viewed as eternal and infallible (Kamali, 2008). Therefore, interpretation in Islamic contexts involves harmonizing state constitutions with sacred texts, often requiring jurists to draw upon classical jurisprudence to ensure that legislation remains within the bounds of sharia. This dual textual reliance complicates legal interpretation but also enriches it with deep moral and theological significance.

With respect to interpretive flexibility, Western systems permit considerable adaptability in constitutional interpretation. The doctrine of living constitutionalism exemplifies this approach, arguing that constitutional meaning should evolve in line with societal change (Sunstein, 2005). Courts may reinterpret rights and principles to reflect new social realities, such as changing norms around privacy, gender equality, or digital freedoms. Islamic legal systems, by contrast, emphasize continuity and fidelity to divine intent. However, flexibility is introduced through interpretive tools such as *ijtihad* and, more recently, *maqasid al-shariah*—the higher objectives of Islamic law—which provide a normative framework for adapting Islamic principles to modern governance. *Maqasid*-based reasoning enables scholars to prioritize values like justice, public welfare, and human dignity while remaining anchored to traditional sources (Auda, 2007).

In the realm of rights and duties, Western constitutional traditions prioritize individual autonomy and personal freedoms. Rights such as freedom of speech, religion, and equality before the law are codified and protected through judicial enforcement mechanisms. These rights are often framed in opposition to state power, emphasizing a clear boundary between public authority

and private liberty (Dworkin, 1996). In Islamic constitutionalism, while rights are recognized, they are typically embedded within a broader moral structure that emphasizes not only entitlements but also obligations to God, society, and family. Rights are therefore contextualized within an ethical and communal framework, where individual freedoms may be limited by considerations of moral order, religious duty, and social harmony (An-Na'im, 1990).

Despite these divergences, points of convergence are increasingly apparent. Both traditions aim to ensure justice, uphold order, and protect human dignity, albeit through different epistemological paths. The growing use of *maqasid* in Islamic legal interpretation has opened new avenues for engaging with universal human rights principles and constitutional norms. Similarly, Western systems are gradually incorporating more pluralistic understandings of law, especially in multicultural societies where religious norms influence legal behavior. This convergence offers potential for dialogue and cooperation, particularly in countries seeking to reconcile Islamic heritage with modern constitutional governance.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that while both Islamic and Western legal traditions possess structured methods of constitutional interpretation, their foundations, objectives, and institutional dynamics differ significantly. Western systems are grounded in human rationalism, emphasizing judicial interpretation and social progress. Islamic frameworks are rooted in divine guidance, drawing upon classical jurisprudence and ethical objectives. However, contemporary scholarship and jurisprudence reveal possibilities for convergence, particularly through interpretive tools like *maqasid al-shariah* that support human welfare and justice—principles also central to Western constitutionalism. The study encourages further cross-cultural dialogue on constitutional values, especially in pluralistic societies seeking to harmonize religious identity with modern legal governance.

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