

Original Research Paper

Gerechtigkeit als Grundlage des Weltfriedens: John Rawls und die Idee einer anständigen muslimischen Gesellschaft

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Zusammenfassung:

Traditionell prägen drei dominante Perspektiven die Rolle der Gerechtigkeit in Theorien der internationalen Beziehungen. Der Realismus lehnt die Relevanz normativer Prinzipien ab und betont Machtpolitik und das anarchische internationale System. Der kosmopolitische Egalitarismus entwirft eine globale Ordnung, in der Individuen und nicht Staaten die primären moralischen Akteure sind, und befürwortet universelle Prinzipien der Gerechtigkeit. Im Gegensatz dazu steht der kulturelle Relativismus, der skeptisch gegenüber universellen moralischen Standards ist und argumentiert, dass kulturelle Überzeugungen in ihren spezifischen Kontexten verstanden werden sollten. In "The Law of Peoples" bietet John Rawls einen Mittelweg zwischen Realismus und kosmopolitischem Egalitarismus und vermeidet gleichzeitig kulturellen Relativismus. Er betont Gerechtigkeit zwischen Gesellschaften und respektiert gleichzeitig ihre unterschiedlichen Identitäten und politische Autonomie. Rawls schlägt einen prinzipiengeleiteten Rahmen vor, der auf Gerechtigkeit, Zusammenarbeit und gemeinsamen moralischen Verpflichtungen basiert und der Machtdynamiken mit universellen Normen in Einklang bringt, während er kulturellen Pluralismus anerkennt. Dieser Artikel untersucht zuerst Rawls' politische Konzeption internationaler Gerechtigkeit als Grundlage für globalen Frieden und erforscht dann seine Vision einer anständigen muslimischen Gesellschaft als wichtiger Partner bei der Förderung internationaler Gerechtigkeit und des Friedens.

Schlüsselwörter: John Rawls, Internationale Gerechtigkeit, Globaler Frieden, Kultureller Pluralismus, Normative Prinzipien, Anständige muslimische Gesellschaft

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عدالت به مثابه بنیاد صلح جهانی: تحلیلی بر نظریه جان رالز و ایده یک جامعه موجه مسلمان

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چکیده:

درباره فلسفه سیاسی معاصر، سه دیدگاه رایج در باب ماهیت و نقش عدالت در روابط بین الملل مطرح شده است که عبارتند از نخست، رئالیسم که اهمیت اصول هنجاری (مانند عدالت) در این زمینه را انکار می کند و - در غیاب یک مرجعیت نهایی - بر سیاست قدرت و نظام بین الملل آنارشیست تأکید دارد. دیدگاه دوم، برابری خواهی جهان وطنی که نظمی جهانی را متصور است که در آن افراد، نه دولت ها، بازیگران اخلاقی اولیه هستند. این دیدگاه از اطلاق اصول عدالت در افق جهانی و در تمام جوامع بشری قطع نظر از بستر فرهنگی و تاریخی آنها دفاع می کند که این امر غالباً به مداخلات نظامی قدرت های بزرگ در ملل دیگر انجامیده است. در مقابل، دیدگاه سوم، یعنی نسبی گرایی فرهنگی نسبت به اطلاق معیارهای اخلاقی واحد در بستر جهانی بدبین است و استدلال می کند که اصول عدالت باید در زمینه های فرهنگی خاص خود درک شود. در کتاب قانون ملل، جان رالز درعین اجتناب از نسبی گرایی فرهنگی، نظریه ای در باره عدالت بین المللی (یا عدالت جهانی) ارائه می دهد که حد وسط بین رئالیسم و برابری خواهی جهان وطنی است. او بر عدالت بین جوامع و با رعایت حقوق و هویت متمایز و استقلال سیاسی آنها تأکید می کند. رالز چارچوبی اصولی مبتنی بر عدالت، تعامل و تعهدات اخلاقی مشترک را ارائه می دهد که ضمن تصدیق کثرت گرایی فرهنگی، پویایی قدرت را با هنجارهای اخلاقی جهانشمول متعادل می سازد. این مقاله ابتدا به تحلیل و دفاع از ایده تصور سیاسی رالز از عدالت بین المللی به مثابه بنیاد صلح جهانی می پردازد، سپس دیدگاه او را از یک جامعه اسلامی معقول - موجه به منزله بازیگر اخلاقی کلیدی در تعمیق و ترویج عدالت و صلح بین المللی بررسی می کند.

واژگان کلیدی: جان رالز، عدالت بین المللی، صلح جهانی، کثرت گرایی فرهنگی، اصول هنجاری، جامعه موجه مسلمان

Original Research Paper

Justice as the Foundation of Global Peace: John Rawls and the Idea of a Decent Muslim Society

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Abstract

Traditionally, three dominant perspectives shape the role of justice in international relations theories. Realism rejects the relevance of normative principles, emphasizing power politics and the anarchic international system. Cosmopolitan egalitarianism envisions a global order where individuals, not states, are the primary moral actors, advocating universal principles of justice. In contrast, cultural relativism is skeptical of universal moral standards, arguing that cultural beliefs should be understood within their specific contexts. In *The Law of Peoples*, John Rawls offers a middle ground between realism and cosmopolitan egalitarianism while avoiding cultural relativism. He emphasizes justice between societies while respecting their distinct identities and political autonomy. Rawls proposes a principled framework based on justice, cooperation, and shared moral commitments, balancing power dynamics with universal norms while acknowledging cultural pluralism. This article first examines Rawls's political conception of international justice as a foundation for global peace, then explores his vision of a decent Muslim society as a key partner in promoting international justice and peace.

Keywords: John Rawls, international justice, global peace, cultural pluralism, normative principles, decent Muslim society

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I. Introduction

In theories of international relations, three dominant perspectives shape the understanding and role of justice. These perspectives offer competing views on how justice should be applied globally, influencing debates on international law, human rights, and global order. They address fundamental questions about the nature of international obligations, the legitimacy of state sovereignty, and the ethical principles guiding international cooperation and conflict resolution.

The first perspective is realism, which rejects the relevance of normative principles for resolving international disputes. Realism emphasizes the anarchic structure of the international system, prioritizes power politics, and assumes the absence of overarching moral or legal obligations between states (Mearsheimer, 2001). The second is cosmopolitan egalitarianism, which envisions a global order where individuals, rather than nation-states, are the primary moral and political actors (Beitz, 1999). This “monistic” approach to political morality asserts that a single set of fundamental principles of justice applies universally to all individuals, regardless of their cultural or social contexts (Barry, 2000). The third perspective is cultural relativism, which is skeptical of universal principles of rationality and morality. Advocates of cultural relativism argue that moral and cultural beliefs are shaped by social context and should be understood within their own cultural framework (Gray, 2007).

In *The Law of Peoples* (Rawls, 1999), John Rawls presents a novel perspective on international justice, positioning his theory as a middle ground between realism and cosmopolitan egalitarianism, while avoiding the pitfalls of cultural relativism (Brown, 2002). He prioritizes justice between societies while respecting their unique identities and political autonomy. Rawls argues for a principled approach that emphasizes justice, cooperation, and shared moral commitments among nations, offering a balanced alternative to the power dynamics of realism and the universal individualism of cosmopolitanism, also seeking to reconcile the tension between universal norms and cultural pluralism.

Rawls asserts that his idea of the Law of Peoples presents “a particular political conception of right and justice that applies to principles and norms of international law and practice” (Rawls, 1999, p. 3). Through this

conception, Rawls explains a distinct approach to international justice, challenging the views of Rawlsian cosmopolitans who seek to extend the principles of justice as fairness, originally designed for domestic societies, to the global stage. In particular, Rawls argues that the global context requires a separate and context-specific idea, as elaborated in *The Law of Peoples*. This distinction underscores Rawls's commitment to respecting the pluralism of political and cultural traditions while outlining a normative basis for peaceful and just relations among societies.

In *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls, 1971), one of the most influential works in contemporary political philosophy, Rawls argues that justice is the primary virtue of social institutions. A just basic structure is a cooperative arrangement among free and equal individuals. In an initial situation, known as the "original position," representatives of free and equal individuals are placed in a fair setting to negotiate the terms of social cooperation.

According to Rawls, delegates in the original position would choose two principles of justice. The first is the principle of equal basic liberties, which guarantees fundamental rights such as liberty of conscience, freedom of expression and association, personal integrity, and political participation. The second principle addresses social and economic inequalities, permitting them only if two conditions are met: fair equality of opportunity and the difference principle, which mandates that inequalities must benefit the least advantaged members of society (Rawls, 1971, pp. 60-90; Rawls, 2001, pp. 42-49).

Rawls calls his theory "justice as fairness," focusing on the institutions of domestic society. However, Rawlsian cosmopolitan egalitarians, such as Charles Beitz (1999) and Thomas Pogge (1989), argue that this theory should be extended to the global context. They advocate applying the two principles of *justice as fairness* at the international level. Beitz asserts that "it is wrong to limit the application of contractarian principles of social justice to the nation-state; instead, these principles ought to apply globally" (Beitz, 1999, p. 128). They propose the existence of a global basic structure—a network of political and economic institutions binding individuals across nations into a worldwide scheme of social cooperation, effectively making them citizens of the world (Wenar, 2006).

Beitz argues that not all states can claim a right to internal autonomy; only those whose institutions adhere to appropriate principles of justice can legitimately demand respect as autonomous entities. Consequently, a state's internal autonomy is both limited and conditional, with its boundaries defined by liberal principles of justice. Therefore, he maintains that intervening in the affairs of another state to uphold liberal justice is morally justifiable.

The problem with this perspective is its incompatibility with ethical and religious pluralism in today's world. Its conception of international justice cannot be universally accepted by diverse and incommensurable reasonable ethical and religious traditions. Additionally, by equating international justice with a liberal conception of justice, it provides a rationale for military interventions. Such interventions, often carried out by American and European governments, are rarely motivated by a genuine concern for the justice of the affected populations. Even in morally compelling cases – such as the Rwandan genocide in 1994 or the ongoing Israeli genocide in Gaza – Western governments have frequently failed to act responsibly or effectively.

Critics argue that external interventions may worsen the situation from a justice perspective. External actors are often less invested in and less familiar with the public interests of the countries they intervene in than the people who live there, making it unlikely that such interventions will genuinely promote justice (Cohen & Sabel, 2006).

David Miller (2002) explains the fundamental divide between cosmopolitan egalitarians and their opponents as follows: cosmopolitans advocate for global principles of distributive justice, arguing that resource distribution should be addressed on a global scale. In contrast, non-cosmopolitans contend that principles of distributive justice apply only within nations or smaller communities. According to the latter perspective, global principles of justice are not distributive in nature; instead, they might outline a minimum level of entitlement applicable to all human beings or establish procedures governing relationships between political communities, such as principles of reciprocity or mutual aid.

In essence, cosmopolitans emphasize comparing the distribution of resources across individuals in different regions, while their opponents prioritize other aspects of the global order – typically ensuring that basic rights and interests are protected and that political communities interact under fair terms. For cosmopolitans, global inequality is a concern in and of itself. For non-cosmopolitans, however, global inequality is troubling only when it results in poverty, exploitation, or other non-distributive forms of injustice.

It is worth noting that some of Rawls's cosmopolitan critics, such as Charles Beitz and Thomas Pogge, who initially defended accounts of global egalitarianism, have subsequently modified their theoretical claims. Beitz (2001) emphasizes "the derivative rather than intrinsic arguments for greater global equality," while Pogge grounds his case for a global economic shift in the principle of non-violation of human rights.

Unlike cosmopolitan liberals, Rawls argues that justice as fairness applies only within liberal democratic societies and cannot be extended to the global arena. In *The Law of Peoples*, Rawls seeks to develop a "political conception of international justice" suitable for a culturally plural world (Rawls, 1999). This conception establishes normative standards that any "decent" society must meet, outlining the minimal and necessary requirements of justice essential for creating and sustaining a just and peaceful global order.

According to Rawls, political philosophy should be "realistically utopian" (Rawls, 2001, pp. 4-5; Rawls, 1999, p. 4). This concept emphasizes the need to envision an ideal political order that harmonizes moral aspirations with practical feasibility. Rather than withdrawing from society and the world, political philosophy should aim "to reconcile us with our social world" (Rawls, 1999, p. 45). This approach involves identifying the limits of what is politically achievable while staying grounded in the realities of human nature and social conditions. By combining normative ideals with real-world constraints, political philosophy can help design just institutions that are both aspirational and attainable.

In this article, I begin by examining Rawls's political conception of international justice as the foundation for global peace. I then explore his

vision of an ideal, “decent Muslim society” as a “realistic utopia,” highlighting its role as a vital agent and collaborative partner in advancing international justice and peace.

II. The Political Conception of International Justice

Rawls describes the two fundamental motivating ideas of *The Law of Peoples* as follows:

One is that the great evils of human history – unjust war and oppression, religious persecution and the denial of liberty of conscience, starvation and poverty, not to mention genocide and mass murder – follow from political injustice, with its own cruelties and callousness. ... The other main idea, obviously connected with the first, is that, once the gravest forms of political injustice are eliminated by following just (or at least decent) social policies and establishing just (or at least decent) basic institutions, these great evils will eventually disappear (Rawls, 1999, pp. 6-7).

Rawls’s conception of the Law of Peoples includes three essential features: the idea of people, the liberal and decent peoples, and the idea of global public reason.

1. The Idea of People

The idea of a people has three “basic elements”: institutional, cultural, and moral.

The first element, the institutional, shows that a people has a government with a set of legal and political institutions that represent its people’s interests—a reasonably just government that serves their fundamental interests by protecting their territory, preserving their political institutions, culture, independence, and self-respect as a corporate body, and ensuring the safety, security, and well-being of their citizens (Rawls, 1999, pp. 34-35).

The second element, the cultural condition, indicates that peoples are culturally united by what J. S. Mill called “common sympathies”; this is an idea of nationality, generally based on a common language and shared historical memories (Rawls, 1999, pp. 23-25). Finally, the people have a

moral nature, meaning that the political society is regulated by a conception of justice and that the people are prepared to cooperate with other peoples on reasonable terms (Rawls, 1999, pp. 23–25, 61–68).

Peoples with these three elements differ from societies that Rawls refers to as states:

How far states differ from peoples rests on how rationality, the concern with power, and a state's basic interests are filled in. If rationality excludes the reasonable (that is, if a state is moved by the aims it has and ignores the criterion of reciprocity in dealing with other societies); if a state's concern with power is predominant; and if its interests include such things as converting other societies to the state's religion, enlarging its empire and winning territory, gaining dynastic or imperial or national prestige and glory, and increasing its relative economic strength – then the difference between states and peoples is enormous (Rawls, 1999, pp. 28–29).

Rawls also argues that peoples are not merely rational but also reasonable (Rawls, 1999, p. 25). This idea challenges the realism theory of international relations, which views states as rational agents pursuing self-interest. Furthermore, Rawls asserts that peoples have a significant interest in being respected by other peoples and in the recognition of their equality, beyond concerns for territorial security (Rawls, 1999, p. 35).

According to Rawls, each citizen of a well-ordered society ideally has two moral powers necessary for social cooperation: a capacity for a sense of justice and a capacity for a rational conception of the good (Rawls, 1993, pp. 19, 81, 103–104). In a well-ordered democratic society, citizens assume all members are free and equal moral persons with the same basic political and legal rights. Similarly, a people, as described in *The Law of Peoples*, is well-ordered by a conception of justice and is also a non-expansionist, non-aggressive society that participates in fair cooperation among other well-ordered societies (Reidy, 2004).

2. Liberal and Decent Peoples

The second essential feature of the Law of Peoples is the distinction between liberal and decent peoples. A liberal people believe that citizens have equal personal and political rights, while a decent people follow a

"common good idea of justice" that emphasizes community membership rather than individual equality. Although a common good idea of justice ensures basic rights for all members, it does not guarantee all individuals the same rights as found in liberal democracies.

Despite the aforementioned difference, Rawls uses the idea of the original position to argue that parties representing both liberal and non-liberal (but decent) peoples would endorse the proposed principles of the Law of Peoples. These principles, he suggests, form the moral foundation of international law and apply to international relations among all societies (Rawls, 1999, pp. 10, 32-33, 39-43, 58).

Rawls outlines eight principles of international justice:

1. Peoples are free and independent, and their freedom and independence are to be respected by other peoples.
2. Peoples are to observe treaties and undertakings.
3. Peoples are equal and are parties to agreements that bind them.
4. Peoples are to observe the duty of non-intervention.
5. Peoples have the right of self-defense but no right to instigate war except for self-defense.
6. Peoples are to honor human rights.
7. Peoples are to observe specified restrictions in the conduct of war.
8. Peoples have a duty to assist other peoples living under unfavorable conditions that prevent a just or decent political and social regime (Rawls, 1999, p. 37).

Rawls argues that the fundamental interests of free and democratic liberal peoples give them reason to seek the benefits of social cooperation among peoples:

Liberal peoples have a certain moral character. Like citizens in domestic society, liberal peoples are both reasonable and rational, and their rational conduct, as organized and expressed in their elections and votes, and the laws and policies of their government, is similarly constrained by their sense of what is reasonable. As reasonable citizens in domestic society offer to cooperate on fair terms with other citizens, so

(reasonable) liberal (or decent) peoples offer fair terms of cooperation to other peoples. A people will honor these terms when assured that other peoples will do so as well. This leads us to the principles of political justice in the first case and the Law of Peoples in the other (Rawls, 1999, p. 25).

He also argues that decent non-liberal societies are “well-ordered: and the parties representing these societies – placed in an original position – are “rational and moved by appropriate reasons” (Rawls, 1999, p. 63). They “do not engage in aggressive wars; therefore, their representatives respect the civic order and integrity of other peoples” and thus would “accept the symmetrical situation (the equality) of the original position as fair” (Rawls, 1999, p. 63). By virtue of their common good idea of justice, “the representatives strive both to protect the human rights and the good of the peoples they represent and to maintain their security and independence” (Rawls, 1999, p. 63). Furthermore, the representatives “care about the benefits of trade and also accept the idea of assistance among peoples in time of need” (Rawls, 1999, p. 69).

Some societies may lack the capacities necessary for participating in a Society of Peoples or may commit crimes; these are referred to as “burdened societies” and “outlaw regimes.” “Benevolent absolutisms” seem to be an intermediate case, insofar as they pose no threat to other states and secure human rights domestically, yet are not well-ordered societies (Rawls, 1999, pp. 92-93).

Well-ordered Peoples may pressure the “outlaw regimes” to observe the Law of Peoples and have duties of assistance toward “burdened societies” (Rawls, 1999, p. 93). Rawls argues that well-ordered peoples have a duty to assist burdened societies in building institutions that allow them to manage their own affairs reasonably and become members of the Society of Peoples. Once this “target” of assistance is achieved, further aid is not required (Rawls, 1999, p. 111).

3. The Idea of Global Public Reason

The third essential characteristic of the Law of Peoples is the idea of public reason: “The society of peoples is guided by reasons that can be shared by different peoples, and its content is provided by the principles of the Law of Peoples” (Rawls, 1999, pp. 55-57, 121).

To establish how the ideal of a peaceful world could be realized, Rawls rejects the idea of a world state:

I follow Kant's lead in *Perpetual Peace* (1795) in thinking that a world government—by which I mean a unified political regime with the legal powers normally exercised by central governments—would either be a global despotism or else would rule over a fragile empire torn by frequent civil strife as various regions and peoples tried to gain their political freedom and autonomy (Rawls, 1999, p. 36).

Rawls envisions a just order of politically independent peoples that is realistically achievable. His vision is of peaceful relations among peoples, each well-ordered by its conception of justice and motivated to treat other peoples justly. He refers to this as the "Society of Peoples." In their relations with each other, they would use the principles of the Law of Peoples as the basis of public political reasoning.

Rawls considers a Society of Peoples where all societies are liberal-democratic peoples and addresses whether just and stable relations among such societies are realistically possible (Rawls, 1999, pp. 11, 124-126). He presents two arguments in support of this claim.

The first argument—known as the democratic peace theory—focuses on empirical and historical facts explaining why well-established democracies have not gone to war with each other and likely will not. The second argument demonstrates that liberal peoples have reason to support international justice and peace by adhering to the principles of the Law of Peoples. This argument appeals to the idea of public reason as a basis for political reasoning shared by all.

Rawls considers his political conception of justice (justice as fairness) as one of many viable forms of public reason in a constitutional democracy. A reasonable conception of justice represents political values that can be shared by all free and equal citizens. A citizen can deliberate within a conception of justice, believing its political values can be approved by others (Rawls, 1999, p. 140).

The Law of Peoples offers a form of public reason for a Society of Peoples, which can be called "global public reason" (Cohen, 2006). The presumed just social world here is not a constitutional democracy but rather an order

of politically independent peoples. These peoples meet moral standards referred to as the criterion of decency (Rawls, 1999, pp. 23-25). Decent peoples are motivated to fulfill the ideal of a Society of Peoples by following its public reason and respecting basic human rights.

The idea of global public reason implies several key points. First, liberal peoples must tolerate non-liberal but decent peoples and not impose liberal principles on all societies. Second, global public reason must rely on shared grounds of argument. Finally, global public reason requires treating peoples—liberal and decent non-liberal—as equal cooperators guided by the principles of the Law of Peoples.

In a morally acceptable global order, war may be waged only against another state in self-defence or to secure the human rights of the peoples as violated by their own state. Therefore, wars cannot be justified in the interests of preserving military dominance, gaining access to economic resources, or expanding national territory, which have historically been the primary reasons for warfare (Rawls, 1999, pp. 94-97). Accordingly, Rawls assigns human rights three key roles in the Law of Peoples:

1. Their fulfillment is a necessary condition for a society's political and legal order to be considered decent.
2. Their fulfillment excludes justified intervention by other peoples, except in severe cases.
3. They set limits to the pluralism among peoples (Rawls, 1999, p. 80).

Rawls excluded certain moral rights from his definition of human rights, acknowledging that peoples ensuring only basic human rights—but not all liberal rights—meet his criterion of decency, even if they fall short of full justice from a liberal moral perspective (Rawls, 1999, pp. 78, 83; Cohen, 2006). For Rawls, decency holds significant moral value, as it guarantees peoples the rights to self-determination and non-intervention (Rawls, 1999, p. 83). This implies that the Society of Peoples can be just, even if some of its members do not fully align with liberal justice standards (Rawls, 1999, p. 70). The Society's primary responsibility is to secure basic human rights for all, rather than “enforce the liberal rights of democratic citizenship among all peoples.” Rawls maintains that

achieving democratic justice should be left to the self-determination of each politically independent society (Rawls, 1999, pp. 61, 85).

As noted earlier, the central aim of *The Law of Peoples* is to minimize war while safeguarding basic human rights through legal frameworks and promoting representative governance. Rawls argues that lasting world peace can be achieved only if societies uphold a political conception of international justice that meets what he terms the “criteria of decency.”

III. Criteria of Decency and a Decent Muslim Society

In the remainder of this article, I will first analyze the criteria Rawls uses to define decency as a core element of his political conception of international justice. To further clarify this concept and illustrate a viable model for a decent social order, I will then examine his portrayal of a decent Muslim society.

i. Criteria of Decency

Rawls defines two criteria of decency as follows: “First, the society does not have aggressive aims, and it recognizes that it must gain its legitimate ends through diplomacy and trade and other ways of peace” (Rawls, 1999, p. 64). A society meeting this first criterion “respects the political and social order of other societies.” Either it does not seek to increase its power relative to other societies, or if it does, “it does so in ways compatible with the independence of other societies, including their religious and civil liberties.” This condition entails that if a society has a comprehensive doctrine, whether religious or secular, which influences the structure of its government and its social policies, this doctrine should support “the institutional basis of its peaceful conduct” (Rawls, 1999, p. 64).

The second criterion of decency has three parts:

(a) The first part is that a decent hierarchical people’s system of law, in accordance with its common good idea of justice, secures for all members of the people what have come to be called human rights.

(b) The second part is that a decent people’s system of law must be such as to impose bona fide moral duties and obligations (distinct from human rights) on all persons within the people’s territory.

(c) Finally, the third part of the second criterion is that there must be a sincere and not unreasonable belief on the part of judges and other officials who administer the legal system that the law is indeed guided by a common good idea of justice (Rawls, 1999, pp. 65-67).

Rawls's concept of a "common good idea of justice" is grounded in a comprehensive doctrine that provides a vision of human life and well-being. This vision serves as the foundation for structuring society to promote human flourishing and cultivate forms of human excellence. Societies organized around such an idea of justice can be well-ordered – that is, they can function as systems of social cooperation rather than mere social coordination – provided the comprehensive doctrine defining their "common good" is broadly accepted by their members. Rawls refers to these societies as "decent" to distinguish them from well-ordered liberal societies (Rawls, 1999, pp. 66-68).

Every cooperative society must respect certain basic rights, as these are essential for ensuring the minimal capacities of the agency required for individuals to act according to their own will, make their own choices, or affirm their values. Without the protection afforded by these rights, obedience to a society's basic laws would not reflect the genuine, willing cooperation of its members. This criterion of protecting agency is less demanding than the liberal ideal of autonomy, as it does not require individuals to critically evaluate their choices or the social expectations imposed on them. Instead, it ensures only the minimal conditions necessary for meaningful participation in social cooperation (Rawls, 1999, pp. 71-72).

Rawls notes that "comprehensive doctrines, religious or non-religious, might base the idea of human rights on a theological, philosophical, or moral conception of the nature of the human person," but he explicitly avoids grounding his theory on such foundations (Rawls, 1999, p. 81). Instead, Rawls emphasizes that social cooperation is only possible if individuals possess basic capacities of agency. Societies guided by a common good idea of justice must, therefore, implement what Rawls terms a "consultation hierarchy" – a system in which members have some degree of representation in political decision-making. However, these

rights fall short of the full democratic participation guaranteed in liberal societies (Rawls, 1999, pp. 71-75).

While Rawls does not fully elaborate on why a consultation hierarchy is required, it appears to stem from his understanding of the institutional prerequisites for a society to embody a common good idea of justice. Such institutions, he implies, are necessary to uphold a minimal yet meaningful form of political representation and collective decision-making.

The comprehensive doctrine or “special priorities” accepted within such a society, which underpin its idea of justice, inherently shape and limit the terms of political discourse. However, disagreements about how that framework applies to specific policy issues or other relevant considerations are inevitable. To uphold their legitimacy, rulers must demonstrate their commitment to society’s idea of justice by being open to such disagreements and justifying their decisions in terms of the shared comprehensive doctrine (Rawls, 1999, pp. 71-73).

Without an institutional framework for addressing disagreements and explaining decisions, authorities would lack the means to show that their actions reflect a genuine, good-faith interpretation of the common good idea of justice rather than arbitrary or self-serving will. In such a scenario, those subject to their rule would have no compelling reason to accept an obligation to comply with their decisions.

A well-ordered society, therefore, must recognize the principle that rulership involves governing individuals who possess the capacity for agency and the right to have their voices heard. Only when individuals are given a meaningful opportunity to participate in or influence political decision-making can a society claim legitimacy (Rawls, 1999, pp. 71-72).

It would be simplistic to categorize societies based on the common good idea of justice as merely “traditional” in contrast to “modern.” Such an assumption would be misleading. As Rawls notes, “All societies undergo gradual changes, and this is no less true of decent societies than of others. Liberal peoples should not suppose that decent societies are unable to reform themselves in their own way” (Rawls, 1999, p. 61).

Liberal societies play a role in facilitating this evolution by recognizing decent societies as legitimate members of the Society of Peoples. When

these societies are treated with respect by liberal peoples, they are more likely to recognize the value of liberal democratic institutions and, in turn, make efforts toward reforming themselves in a way that reflects liberal ideals (Rawls, 1999, pp. 73-75).

ii. A Decent Muslim Society

Rawls further elaborates on the criteria of decency by examining the example of an imaginary society, *Kazanistan*, which he believes liberals should view as a non-liberal society deserving of toleration and recognition as a member of the Society of Peoples (Rawls, 1999, p. 79). While *Kazanistan* is a Muslim society, Rawls emphasizes that a decent non-liberal society need not be religious. He states that “many religious and philosophical doctrines, with their different ideas of justice,” can lead to institutions that meet the conditions of decency (Rawls, 1999, p. 64). Although Rawls provides an example of one type of decent non-liberal society—the decent hierarchical society—he acknowledges that other forms of decent societies may also exist. For example, Stephen Angle (2005) argues that the model of “decent socialist people” in the context of Chinese socialism might satisfy Rawls’s criteria of decency if certain reforms were made.

In *Kazanistan*, religion and state are not separate. The favored religion is Islam, and thus only Muslims can hold high political and legal positions. However, other religions are not only tolerated but encouraged to “flourish culturally” and to actively participate in the broader civic life of the society (Rawls, 1999, p. 76). Michael Walzer (1997) also argues that multiple paths can lead to toleration, a perspective that aligns with Rawls’s view of decency.

This idealized decent Islamic society is notable for its enlightened approach to non-Islamic religions, adhering to the belief that “all religious differences between peoples are divinely willed” and that “punishment for wrong belief is for God alone.” Here, Rawls references Roy Mottahedeh’s (1993) essay on Islamic toleration in his discussion of these principles. Additionally, it holds that different religious communities should respect one another (Rawls, 1999, p. 76).

Moreover, the rulers of *Kazanistan* do not have aggressive intentions toward their neighbors. They reject military interpretations of jihad,

instead advocating for a moral and spiritual understanding of the concept (Rawls, 1999, p. 76). Kazanistan also satisfies the second criterion of decency, as its political and legal system exemplifies a “decent consultation hierarchy” (Rawls, 1999, p. 64).

This structure serves as an example of a basic framework that a decent society could adopt. Rawls asserts that all decent hierarchical societies are “associationist in form.” In such societies, members are regarded as part of distinct groups, each of which is represented in the legal system through a “decent consultation hierarchy” or an equivalent structure, ensuring all members have a substantial role in political decision-making (Rawls, 1999, p. 64).

Although members of a decent hierarchical society do not enjoy the same full political rights as citizens in a democratic society (Rawls, 1999, pp. 66, 83), they still possess certain political rights, and the system as a whole ensures the protection of fundamental interests for each member. Rawls explains:

In political decisions, a decent consultation hierarchy allows an opportunity for different voices to be heard... . Persons as members of associations, corporations, and estates have the right at some point in the procedure of consultation (often at the stage of selecting a group’s representatives) to express political dissent, and the government has an obligation to take a group’s dissent seriously and to give a conscientious reply (Rawls, 1999, p. 72).

Additionally, representative bodies within the consultation hierarchy convene in assemblies where they can raise objections to government policies and receive responses from government officials. According to Rawls, “Dissent is respected in the sense that a reply is due that spells out how the government thinks it can both reasonably interpret its policies in line with its common good idea of justice and impose duties and obligations on all members of society” (Rawls, 1999, p. 78).

Dissent has the potential to drive meaningful reforms: “I further imagine... that in Kazanistan dissent has led to important reforms in the rights and role of women, with the judiciary agreeing that existing norms could not be squared with society’s common good idea of justice” (Rawls, 1999, p. 78).

Some critics argue that Rawls's conception of a decent society fails to grant women any meaningful political rights. For instance, Martha Nussbaum (2004) has criticized Rawls's conception, describing it as "inadequate and half-hearted in the remedies that it offers." But, this judgment is unfair. A defining feature of a decent society is its provision of a certain degree of political representation for all members, including women. This characteristic establishes the moral legitimacy of decent societies and differentiates them from benevolent absolutisms. While decent societies may not achieve full justice from a liberal perspective and lack the institutions of representative democracy that guarantee political participation on equal terms, they nevertheless incorporate a consultation procedure that ensures a right to political participation. This procedural mechanism upholds the moral character of decent societies, even if they fall short of liberal democratic ideals.

Thus, the idealized decent hierarchical society that Rawls envisions aligns with the concept of a well-ordered society, though from a liberal perspective, such a society falls short of being perfectly just (Rawls, 1999, pp. 78, 83). However, a liberal can still acknowledge a decent non-liberal society as possessing moral legitimacy. It is well-ordered under a legal framework grounded in a "common good idea of justice," which ensures the protection of basic human rights for all members and guarantees certain rights of political participation. Thus, political relationships in such a society are not based solely on coercion. Both government officials and the governed recognize and strive to fulfill their duties and obligations as defined by society's conception of justice.

Rawls asserts:

Something like Kazanistan is the best we can realistically—and coherently—hope for. It is an enlightened society in its treatment of religious minorities. I think enlightenment about the limits of liberalism recommends trying to conceive a reasonable, just Law of Peoples that both liberal and non-liberal peoples could jointly endorse. The alternative is a fatalistic cynicism that views the good of life solely in terms of power (Rawls, 1999, p. 78).

Rawls observes that "The Law of Peoples does not presuppose the existence of actual decent hierarchical peoples any more than it

presupposes the existence of actual reasonably just constitutional democratic peoples. If we set the standard very high, neither exists” (Rawls, 1999, p.75). Nevertheless, some commentators on *The Law of Peoples* have identified real-world examples that could align with Rawls’s idea of a decent hierarchical society. For instance, David Reidy (2004), suggests that Oman might, in some respects, qualify as a decent society. Similarly, Chris Brown (2000), argues that Rawls’s idea could be extended to societies such as Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand.

Rawls’s idea of a decent hierarchical society implies that modern democracies themselves have evolved from such systems (Riker, 2008). For instance, eighteenth-century Britain, though not fully democratic, upheld certain human rights, maintained a constitutional government, and provided limited political representation. This historical trajectory of partial justice and gradual reform mirrors the paths taken by many contemporary democracies, which have developed incrementally from more hierarchical and less inclusive systems.

Rawls’s theory of global normative order, as articulated in *The Law of Peoples*, has sparked significant debate, particularly among cosmopolitan egalitarians who accuse him of deviating from his own liberal egalitarian commitments. These critics argue that Rawls’s theory falls short in several key respects:

1. **Insufficient Attention to International Distributive Justice:** Rawls is criticized for not endorsing a more robust principle of global distributive justice, which cosmopolitans argue is essential to address economic inequalities between nations (Buchanan, 2007; Caney, 2002).
2. **Focus on Inter-Societal Rather Than Intra-Societal Justice:** Critics argue that Rawls prioritizes justice between societies at the expense of addressing inequalities and injustices within individual societies (Pogge, 2006).
3. **Reliance on Ideal Theory:** Rawls’s approach to international justice begins with ideal theory – an examination of how societies should ideally function – which some claim is an inappropriate

starting point for addressing urgent, real-world injustices (Kuper, 2006).

4. **Over-Accommodation of Non-Democratic Societies:** Rawls's recognition of "decent hierarchical societies" as legitimate participants in the Society of Peoples has been criticized as overly lenient, potentially legitimizing regimes that do not fully respect liberal democratic values (Tasioulas, 2002; Tan, 2000).
5. **Minimalist Conception of Human Rights:** His framework is viewed as offering a "thin" conception of human rights that, according to critics, fails to align with a more comprehensive liberal and egalitarian understanding of individual freedoms and entitlements (Beitz, 2004; Macleod, 2006).

Despite these criticisms, defenders of Rawls argue that his approach represents a principled extension of his commitment to toleration into the global realm. They maintain that cooperation among independent peoples is a moral requirement for fostering peaceful coexistence and mutual respect. Without such cooperation, they argue, cosmopolitan ideals risk failing to create the conditions necessary for societies Rawls terms "decent" to thrive. As Rawls himself asserts, "...liberal peoples should not suppose that decent societies are unable to reform themselves in their own way. By recognizing these societies as bona fide members of the Society of Peoples, liberal peoples encourage this change" (Rawls, 1999, p. 61).

Supporters of Rawls emphasize several pivotal aspects of his argument in *The Law of Peoples*:

- **No Obligation of Distributive Justice Among Societies:** Rawls argues that principles of distributive justice, central to his domestic theory, do not extend to relationships between societies. Instead, he focuses on ensuring that societies meet basic thresholds of justice and stability (Freeman, 2006; Heath, 2007; Risse, 2005).
- **Basic Human Rights Do Not Require Democracy:** Rawls asserts that a society can respect fundamental human rights without being a liberal democracy, so long as it meets the criteria of a

“decent hierarchical society” (Cohen, 2006; Cohen, 2004; Reidy, 2003).

- **The Peace Argument:** Rawls extends the democratic peace theory to include decent hierarchical peoples, suggesting that such societies deserve respect because they contribute to world peace by refraining from aggressive behavior (Wenar, 2002; Brown, 2002).

In this view, Rawls’s idea is less about enforcing liberal values universally and more about creating a pluralistic, stable global order in which diverse societies can coexist while respecting basic principles of justice.

IV. Conclusion

In light of John Rawls’s political conception of justice, the foundation of global peace is grounded in the establishment of a moral and just international order, where societies, whether liberal or decent, can coexist and cooperate within a framework of shared principles. Rawls’s *Law of Peoples* provides a comprehensive and pragmatic vision of how to structure relations among diverse societies, emphasizing justice, diplomacy, and mutual respect over the pursuit of dominance or military expansion. His model of a decent Muslim society, underscores the potential for non-liberal societies to meet the moral criteria of decency, demonstrating that respect for human rights, political participation, and non-aggression can coexist with diverse cultural and religious traditions. This example reflects Rawls’s broader argument that non-liberal societies—while not necessarily adhering to liberal democratic principles—can still be considered legitimate and moral members of the global community, so long as they meet the necessary standards of decency.

Rawls’s theory calls on us to transcend ideological divides and embrace the possibility of a peaceful global order that is not centered on uniformity, but on cooperative justice. His vision acknowledges the diversity of cultural and religious traditions, advocating for a form of justice that can be shared across societies despite their differing conceptions of the good life. This approach urges us to move beyond the often rigid binaries of liberal versus illiberal or Western versus non-Western and instead focus

on fostering international cooperation based on mutual respect and shared principles of justice.

Ultimately, the challenge posed by Rawls's vision lies in cultivating a global public reason that can effectively guide international relations, promoting peace while respecting the cultural pluralism that defines the contemporary world. Such a reason must be flexible enough to accommodate the diversity of perspectives that exist among different peoples, yet firm enough to maintain the moral standards necessary for sustaining a just global order. While Rawls's conception of just world order is not without its limitations – particularly in terms of its reliance on a minimal conception of justice that may not fully address global inequalities – his framework offers a hopeful path forward. It encourages us to envision a world where justice, peace, and cooperation are not only possible but achievable, and where societies, both liberal and non-liberal, can collaborate in the pursuit of a more just and peaceful global society.

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