Modern Islamic political thought is quintessentially characterized by the commitment to divine sovereignty in politics and legislation. But, even in the most theocratic of Islamist thinkers there are explicit commitments to a kind of popular political agency and responsibility. What are the origins in modern Islamist thought of the commitment to popular sovereignty? What does it mean to hold that both God and the people can be said to be “sovereign” and what unresolved paradoxes remain at the level of theory (with all due respect for the way in which such tensions are negotiated in the legislative and judicial spheres)? Which specific aspects or powers of sovereignty are the “people” said to enjoy? Are they fully sovereign powers or are they said to be constrained? What are the implications for traditional conceptions of the divine law and those agents who claimed to speak for it? What kind of “people” is imagined to be sovereign, what are the conditions for it to claim this authority, and how is this sovereignty represented and enacted? This talk, based on a forthcoming book manuscript, explores the meaning of popular sovereignty in modern Islamic thought through the ubiquitous political theological claim that the political representation of God has devolved universally onto “the people” – a doctrine that I refer to as “the caliphate of man.”

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