

Shiite imamate and democracy

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Abstract: The concept of democracy in the Middle East and especially in Muslim countries has always had many ups and downs and over time has evolved a lot. Although the challenge of the emergence of democracy in many Middle Eastern regimes is visible, the seriousness of the challenges with regard to historical, cultural and economic aspect of the different countries is various. For more than three decades, Shiite Islam has existed in the political world and in Iran and continues to exist with the formation of theocracy. Given the geopolitical situation of Iran in the region and the world, it is important to examine the process of democratization in the country with careful observation and study. Study and measurement of Islam in general and Shiite Islam in Iran in particular, is important from at least two aspects; first liberal democracy as an ideal theory in many contemporary societies especially in advanced countries is accepted and second is that liberal democracy is an end to political thinking and has blocked the way for the previous doctrine. In such conditions, it is necessary that the political theory of Islam clarify its theoretical status regarding the idea of successor and rival, especially liberal democracy. In the light of this analysis and assessment, not only the differences and similarities will be clear but also an image of religious and political basic values will be available and on the other hand the desire of masses of people in Islamic countries toward democracy will pose the question that whether the capacity and possibility of the world of Islam creates the opportunity to impose or to accept liberal democracy as a model for political alternative? This subject has different aspects. One of the facets is the study of the amount of compatibility of Islam with liberal democratic teachings and values. It is very important to know if Islam in organizing political culture of Muslims has the capacity and possibility of reconciling Islam with liberal democracy or that the two are fundamentally different and inherently irreconcilable. Is the Islamic democracy in Iran today a model of Shiite liberal democracy or a special kind of democracy that is based on religious teachings? It seems that the answer to this question is of great importance and necessity.

Key words: *Democracy; Imamate; Middle East*

1. Introduction

1.1. Scientific elaboration of the main issues

Several scientists have provided opinions about the subject as a result of the high significance it bears. Generally, there are two categories of opponents and proponents. These categories however do not enjoy adequate profoundness and accuracy. Having divided these categories to two, we end up with four viewpoints.

1.2. First group: opponents of compliance of Islam and democracy

1.2.1. First approach (with an emphasis on Islam)

This fraction of theoreticians denies any compliance between Islam and democracy. They maintain that Islam has provisions for the life on Earth and hereafter and there is no need for democracy and these two are possible to integrate. For instance, counsel who is one of the core values of democracy is only permissible in Islam where the

religion lacks the required rules. The basics of Islam (the divine rules) are not negotiable.

Discrepancies between Islam and democracy are mostly evident in legislation. In Islam, the will of majority cannot alter divine rules and the public is allowed to make rules where Islam is quiet and has no rules already, for instance, some civil laws such as traffic rules.

The ideology is obviously in contradiction to modern definition of mankind due to the significance it gives to religion. According to this view, mankind is obliged to follow the will of God and considers this the only way to salvation for them. The mankind defined here is basically distant from modern definitions both in terms of philosophy and sociology.

1.2.2. Second approach (with an emphasis on democracy)

This view rejects any compliance between Islam and democracy as well. They consider democracy as the core of social and political life and exclude religion from governance. The sheer exclusion of religious rules in the government leads to totalitarianism.

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This belief maintains that traditional and fundamental interpretation of Islam leads to resistance against modernity. The main reason for the incompliance is the unity of religion and governance.

This ideology suggests that mankind is grouped based on roots of civilizations and Islam and democracy are totally different and distant in that respect.

Freedom as one of the basics of this view is not available in Islamic countries in the sense accepted by the western standards. In Islam justice is prioritized over freedom and is basically in contradiction with democracy.

1.3. Second group: proponents of compliance

1.3.1. First approach (with emphasis on unification of values)

This group believes in compliance between Islam and democracy and argues that it is possible to form compliance through unification of values. This way of thinking rejects that Islamic culture impedes modernity and emphasizes that Islam is aligned with pluralism. For instance, principles such as diligence (updates interpretation of religion), consensus (unanimity of the majority) and counsel (with the public) are all in accordance with democracy.

According to this view, reforms do exist in Islam and the religion is potential to form a society with equality and democratic values.

In this interpretation of Islam principles such as Unity (following God's order not a single man), Caliphate (equality for all mankind) and other values which justify democratic potentialities.

This group also maintains that Islam does not play the main role in electing a governor. It is the public that plays the main role and Islam only provides the frameworks. This view indicates the role of public in elections and is thus compliant with democracy.

1.3.2. Second approach (with emphasis on no unification of values)

This view claims democracy can be expressed in Islam with no need to the unification of values. Bringing democratic values of the west to the world of Islam leads to a situation where the values lose their democratic essence.

They maintain that concepts such as justice and the rejection of dictatorship are common human values and shared by all humanity. These concepts exist in Koran and thus satisfy democracy.

This view also focuses on the fact that democracy is actually beneficial to Islam. In Islam, representatives are elected directly by the public within religious frameworks and are no difference between public and divine governance. Public governance is equal to divine governance and is generally compliant with democracy.

In terms of Shiite, imamate is the constant requirement for an imam who is guided by God on Earth. Based on this, Shiite imams are the heirs to prophets in promoting divine guidance, protecting *shariah* and imposing limits. Shiites believe in 12 imams after the demise of the prophet and maintain that it is essential to have an imam in order to guide the public. They believe this is an advantage provided by God. The most important condition for imamate is "*esmat*" which is innocence and purity from sins. As AlameHelli suggests, an imamate must be "ma'soom" or innocent that is only defined by God. Imam in Shiite culture has three responsibilities:

- 1- Promotion of the religion
- 2- Leadership
- 3- Judgment

As mentioned before, Shiites maintain that the last imam (the 12th) is currently alive but absent. During his absence, scholar with adequate devout qualities mentioned in religious texts can replace him. The public will elect this person. In order to identify another similarity between imamate and democracy, we will provide another definition for democracy.

There are several definitions for democracy and as BullTrance and Doug Richard suggest, democracy is basically a controversial issue. According to the most common definition for democracy, it is a system in which the public rule over themselves. David Held defines democracy as follows:

Democracy is a government where people rule instead of the monarchy or the aristocracy. Democracy was generally discussed in the first chapter of this document. However, due to the complicated nature of finding similarities between imamate and democracy, it is required here to provide some technical definitions for democracy. Democracy and its components can be analyzed as follows:

- 1- Intrinsic components of democracy
- 2- Practical components of democracy

Intrinsic components of democracy refer to the concepts forming democracy and practical ones are those related to specific intellectual or philosophical issues that have led to a specific conception of democracy.

Therefore, concept is the application of the term in the course of time whereas interpretation is the judgment by different people in different situations.

For instance, liberal democracy or social democracy is different interpretations of democracy that have their own values.

Liberal democracy is mostly concerned with political inequalities while social democracy deals with economical inequalities and the fair distribution of assets. In terms of this investigation, imamate bears several resemblances to the concept of democracy, however remains contradictory to the practical interpretations of democracy.

The concept of democracy dictates the ruling of people and this is nothing but collective essence of the government. This indicates that democracy has a

public foundation and cannot be assigned to specific people or groups. Therefore, two concepts of collective power and political contribution by the public may be extracted from democracy.

Anthony Arbalester admits that the concept of democracy is vague. Nevertheless, he emphasizes that collective power of the society is conspicuous in all definitions for democracy. In another definition for democracy by David Bentham and Kevin Boyle, it is expressed that democracy is a situation in which crucial decisions for the public are made by the members of that society and every single member of the society share the same level of rights to participate in public decisions. Now, our aim is to assess the theory of imamate in terms of collective power and public participation.

2. Imamate and collective power

According to the theory of collective power, the leader is obeyed because of his special qualities. The leader will give orders and pass out rules without sparking any controversy among the public. The society is administrated through practicality and collective will. From the vantage point of imamate, an imam must have specific qualities that make him suitable for this position. For instance, in 124th scripture of Baqarah, the prophet Abraham was promoted to an imam once he passed the divine test; there are specific requirements for an imam.

In another scripture from Koran, this concept has been indicated.

«و جعلنا ائمه يهدون بامرنا» (Anbiah)

Which means: we have assigned imams as guides who will lead people to our order”

The purpose of this scripture is to outline the fact that an imam owns qualities which helps mankind to reach salvation. In addition, imamate along with guidance is to transport Shiites and followers to the truth and righteousness. In Shiite culture, the power of an imam comes from the grace of God which is bestowed upon him. People will trust in him since he is truthful and bears divine qualities. The confidence in an imam is not just political support and is wholehearted. Imam Hossein, the third imam of Shiites is a clear example of this issue. Every year, his death is mourned by millions of those who are spiritually connected with him.

Another point which can be extracted from Koran for imamate is the divine caliphate, which is outlined in 30th scripture of Baqarah:

و اذ قال ربك للملائكة اين جاعل في الارض خليفة

That is “when God told the angels that he wanted to set an heir on Earth.

This heirdom is a gift from God that is shared by everyone and everyone has a right to it on Earth (this is similar to equality in democracy). This is related to imamate in a way that God selects an imam with special qualities from the public. This imam is politically legitimate when he has the support of the public. This is how an imam gains his

collective power. In a quotation by the 8th imam of Shiites, who is buried in the Iranian city of Mashhad, it is expressed that an imam is identical to Kaaba to which people must approach and encircle. Therefore, the collective power in Shiite is similar to the collective power in democracy. However, the collective power in Shiite is based on religion, while the one in democracy is based on public wisdom. Generally, they are both publicly substantial.

3. Imamate and political participation

The second intrinsic aspect of democracy is public participation. This is a very wide issue and covers different aspects of cultural, economic, social affairs.

However, the most significant aspect of it is undeniably political participation which as been explained before. One definition for it is the public organized efforts to elect a leader along with effective participation in social affairs and remaining influential on political development.

A deeper look into the explanations above may bring about three aspects of political participation.

- 1- Participation in the election of a leader and forming a government
- 2- Participation in political decisions of the government
- 3- Participation in the process of observation

People are equally subjects to these rights. In terms of imamate, public participation in the selection of an imam and establishing his government is clearly visible in the concept of allegiance, which was discussed earlier. Thus, voting or allegiance with an imam is actually political approval that is spiritually up to God. It is therefore people's task to support that leader.

All in all, allegiance in Islam or voting in democracy is the most significant of political procedures. In Shiite school of thought, imam is discouraged from imposing force and his legitimacy depends on the will of the public that is a core concept in Islam and is identical to democracy. This is still true among Shiite leaders who will not able to rule with force and brutality.

As for the second item, public participation in decision-making processes can be evaluated in Islam through the idea of councils, which was thoroughly discussed earlier.

Council in political terms is the right of the public to politically participate in governmental affairs. Based on this, the concept of participation in democracy is equal to the theory of counsel in Islam that is the sole focus in Shiite.

As far as the third subject is concerned, public observation in terms of Shiite is outlined in the concepts of “order to the right” and “prevention of the wrong”; which imply the encouragement towards what is right and discouragement from what is wrong. These concepts cover the leaders as well.

In Koran, God has revealed in 110th scripture from Ale'Emran that:

كنتم خير امة اخرجت للناس، تأمرون بالمعروف وتنهون عن المنكر و تومنون بالله

That is "you are the best of nations which has been created for the sake of humankind, since you encourage the right and discourage the wrong and have faith in God".

In a quote by Imam Ali, it has been mentioned that:

"All the good deeds and Jihad on the path of God are like drops to the vast ocean against the order to the right and prevention of the wrong"

The essence of these two concepts in Shiite is visible in the political alignment of imams and is equal to public observation over the authorities. The public is urged to supervise the government and discourage them from wrongdoings. Thus, we discussed the similarities between imamate and democracy in terms of collective power and public participation.

4. Imamate versus practical subjects of democracy

As explained earlier, there are subjects that have been formed in philosophy, which are later added to intrinsic concepts of democracy so as to form novel interpretations.

For instance, there is the division of democracy into liberal democracy and social democracy. Hereby, our aim is to compare imamate to liberal democracy.

As you may already know, liberalism is a school of thought, which is based on individualism and all the political values, and symbols are inclined towards individualism. Thomas Hobs asserts here that: if the society members reach agreement that one person or group is legitimate, then that one person or group has the right to act independently, to pass out rules and make possessions and etc. According to the social contract theory by John Locke, satisfaction is the basis for government legitimacy. It is a mutual contract based on which a government is formed and credentials are given to the government to take measures. On the other hand, the government is obliged to act for the sake of the society members.

Therefore, the definition above brings us to the fact that public satisfaction is key to the legitimacy of a government

Approving allegiance is similar to public satisfaction. Based on the famous Shiite principle, public approval is not a basis for the divine legitimacy of an imam. God assignment is the key for the legitimacy of an imam. However, his political power will later depend on public support. In terms of democracy, a leader is legitimate only if he is approved by the society; appoint which exist in Shiite.

However, as it was stated before, God must appoint imam in Shiite and this requirement does not exist in liberal democracy.

5. Imamate and the essence of profit-orientation

In some modern political views, individualism is associated with freedom and tendency towards benefits that imply the fact that it is the individual who is responsible for their benefit not the government or society. Therefore, the freedom to do so will provide this right for him.

As John Stewart Mill suggests, freedom is the constant cause of development. Freedom in society will help everyone gain their benefits through their own will and judgment. However, the theory of imamate stands against these two aspects of freedom that we mentioned before.

On one hand, a person in a society is unable to judge his/her own benefits any better than the Imam. Imam is the leader of the society and is more knowledgeable with connection to divine guidance. It is him who decides the major issues for a society.

In the eyes of Shiite, an Imam is a conduit between the Earth and the sky and cannot be distinguished from prophecy. With these roles, imam becomes the one who can decide properly for the sake of the society. Therefore, individual tendencies towards benefits in democracy are not compliant with Islam.

Another discrepancy between imamate and democracy is freedom that is a necessity in democracy and is the source of development. It is possible to claim that the development of individual and social freedom is one of the main goals of democracy. However, Islam does not prioritize freedom and maintains it merely as a tool. Freedom in Islam is allowed as long as it remains within the religious frameworks. In Islam, freedom is bound to divine and religious principles whereas in democracy, religious boundaries are not acknowledged.

The next important consideration is wisdom. Neol Cunt bases his philosophy on "will" and "wisdom possibility". Practical wisdom, in his opinion, is a power through which we are able to achieve goals that we desire; for which we have formed principles to practice upon.

The quadruple sources in Shiite are Koran, ritual, consensus, and wisdom. Therefore, one can perceive wisdom both in democracy and in Islam. In democracy, wisdom is independent whereas in Islam it is based on higher sources such as revelation. An imam is therefore required to materialize revelation. Based on this, an imam collects all the divine knowledge and rules. Every time he encounters new challenges, he will act upon revelations and the speculative power that God has bestowed upon him. Therefore, he requires no wisdom or training.

In democracy however, wisdom will not build any connection to revelation despite the fact that it respects ethics and moralities of the people.

Democracy considers devout issues in life but has no place for them in government.

Iran as a country with a government based on Shiite theories places imamate on the top of its political hierarchy. Ayatollah Khomeini, as the founder of the Islamic revolution, emphasizes that the leader (Vali Faqih) is similar to imams and prophets. (Solely in terms of government). The leadership now is the same as the age of the prophet and Imams.

This is predominant in every governmental aspect of the Islamic republic. The correlations between the society and the leader must be evaluated based on imamate. It was mentioned earlier that imamate and democracy are relatively compliant in terms of collective power and public participation. However, imamate remains solidly in contrast to individualism and personal benefits. We will discuss this further in the third chapter.

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