

Islam on Governance

Government in Islam is one of the fundamental, in fact key, issues on which many books and articles have been written to this day. The great importance that has been attached to this issue by Moslem thinkers, as I mentioned earlier, was due as it is a vital issue. In Islam, governance is of significance both in respect of its principles (in other words, the origin and basis of governance in Islam) as well as its limits. The government is important in view of its principles in Islam as it is a divine activity on earth, particularly according to Shi'ism. I will mainly focus on Shi'ite views; nonetheless, the Sunnite views are also worth mentioning here.

Part One: The Foundation of Islamic Government as Seen in Shi'ism

Government is considered as a divine affair by Shi'ism. To put it otherwise, as the rulership of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in the Islamic community was a divine or heavenly endowed status, if Imam Ali (PBUH) and his progeny had the opportunity to rule the Moslem community, their rulership was also divine in essence.

It has been thoroughly debated in Kalam why government is essentially a sacred [i.e. nonsecular] issue in Shi'ism. Laconically speaking, social leadership and Imamate is the continuation of prophecy. In other words, it acts in light of and in the wake of prophecy. Those people who want to govern the society must be delivered of the bondages of carnal desires and animal urges and be immaculate; moreover, they could have a right foothold for the articulation of revealed maxims and also for the interpretation of all elements of Islamic worldview. Thus, they should have a divine character; otherwise, there would be no guarantee as to the authenticity of their claims of truth. To state the matter differently, if rulership in Islam is supposed to be undertaken by people themselves, i.e. ordinary folks rather than educated minds and enlightened spirits, it will result in no advantage as compared to other types of governance. A sacred government is led by enlightened minds who know the truths of heavens. In fact, here lies the basic difference between theocracy and democracy. It is indeed true that people can run themselves provided they have a dependable knowledge of the nature, coordinates and requirements of life. This knowledge requires that they be purged of selfishness and carnal desires as these would surely distort their knowledge of life.

If people can meet the requirements just depicted, then they can certainly run their own affairs. However, this is almost impossible. The history of human life has already proven that such an evolution was either not possible as such for humanity or at least it did not have realizable possibility in philosophical parlance. Even if this has had an

essential possibility, no occurring possibility has ever been recorded of it, unless we narrow down the case to individual evolutions and leave the ideal of collective evolution aside. As a result, we can say that Islam has not wholly discredited the idea of democracy, but it nonetheless believes that it cannot be realized on the planet earth. As we mentioned earlier, if the man succeeds in achieving a fundamental knowledge of the truths of life, he could then cure all pains, answer all questions and manage his own affairs. Two verses of the Quran have broached the principle of consultation [collective leadership]:

1- And those who respond to their Lord and keep up prayers, and their rule is to take counsel among themselves, and who spend out of what we have given them.

(The Consultation 42:38)

2- And take counsel with them in the affair; so when you have decided, then place your trust in Allah; surely Allah loves those who trust.

(The House of Imran 3:159)

These verses clearly show that people's right of participation in the election of the government has not been overlooked. Moreover, in the application of divine laws to one's individual problems, the right of thought and choice has not been ignored, but the fact is that enlightened minds and sane sense always follow the divine laws.

Anyway, the question is whether man can manage his own affairs alone in a way that he can answer all questions and tackle the problems. What history has demonstrated in this regard is that some schools have emerged and established some forms of government, but unfortunately, along with their partial enlightenments, they have added a huge amount of obscurity to the obscurities of social life and this is a very critical issue. Thus, it is not fair to say that Islam is a despotic system of theocracy. On the contrary, when we say that Islam is a sacred system, it implies that it offers a sane interpretation of human primordial nature, human instincts and human existence along with all of its all aspects and properties.

Undoubtedly, the Islamic establishment is required to prepare the necessary conditions for the realization of these properties, gifts and aspects. Man is a purpose-built creature who has been brought to this universe by divine providence; moreover, man's destination is eternity. Such a being cannot be managed by these limited senses and material-stricken ideals. This is why some scholars of the humanities argue that had man accepted the divine codes and laws, we would know the true capacity of humanity for perfection and growth!

Unfortunately, since divine codes – whether those which are supposed to manage governmental affairs or those which are concerned with the management of people's collective life as well as divine culture – are in conflict with animal whims and selfishness, man is thus not willing to accept the fact that divine culture and codes can better assist mankind in the path of evolution. To put it otherwise, as man has been so

busy with matter and the material aspect for such a long time, he was not able to fathom the fact that if the rules, government system and even civil, criminal and international laws are based on the sacred, man will certainly reach evolution. But since mankind has failed to understand this critical fact, he has been afflicted with so many pains, plights and grieves since the dawn of human history. All of these misfortunes, which exceed fifty cases, have had their roots in human ignorance of "sane life". As Avicenna writes in his *Al-Isharat wa-'l-tanbihat* ("Remarks and Admonitions"):

He who endures the lack of perfection has no conception of perfection.

Nevertheless, all of these misfortunes have their origin in the reluctance on the part of man to confess that life must be managed by the Heavens as his reason and other senses are driven by the desires of the "natural self" and cannot provide an ideal life for mankind. There are some verses in the Quran that substantiate this truth. One of these verses reads:

Surely those who swear allegiance to you do but swear allegiance to Allah; the hand of Allah is above their hands. Therefore, whoever breaks (his faith), he breaks it only to the injury of his own soul, and whoever fulfills what he has covenanted with Allah, he will grant him a mighty reward.

(Victory 48:10)

This verse announces in a clear voice that the Islamic government is in fact the rule of God. As a result, the approval of this verse implies that Prophet's reign is the manifestation of rule of God. On the other hand, the successors of the Prophet (SAW) must have the divine requirements of rulership. Thus, it is proved that whether during the reign of the Prophet and Imams (PBUH) or their successors, the government must retain its divine aspect. Another verse of the Quran states:

O you who believe! Obey Allah and obey the messenger and those in authority from among you; then if you quarrel about anything, refer it to Allah and the messenger, if you believe in Allah and the last day; this is better and very good in the end.

(Women 4:59)

Aligning "those in authority from among you" with the Prophet and his progeny (PBUH), this verse demonstrates the necessity of the continuous presence of divinity in the leadership of the Moslem community as the nation of God.

It is indeed the allegiance to Allah and his Messenger that distinguishes Islamic society from other societies, and this is itself an argument of the necessity of the divine factor in Islamic leadership.

I have elaborated this necessity in a chapter that I contributed to a book on philosophy of law. There I explained that the recognition of this necessity could enhance human culture into great heights in terms of man's mental and spiritual capacities.

Part Two: Shi'ism on the Limits of Government

As the basic beliefs of Shi'ism suggest, the government has a very wide domain of

activity. According to the Shi'ite political doctrine, religion embraces all aspects of human life. The government must take serious actions for the correction of morals in society; it should manage and adjust the society upon these morals; it has to take pragmatic measures to reduce crime rate, to protect people's rights and even to make the citizens ready for the acceptance of noble governmental and legal codes. Imam Ali (PBUH) describes the goals underlying the order he sent to Malik Ashtar in the following words:

*I have issued this order for the regulation of economic affairs, the prosperity of the country, resistance toward the enemies and the correction of the people of that society.*¹

In some Islamic sources, we read that the government is to be held accountable for every event that happens in the society. It has been quoted that Ali ibn Musa Reza (PBUH) was in Ma'mun Al-Rashid's court one day when a thief was brought in. Ma'mun ordered his soldiers to cut his hand. "They should first cut your hand and then cut my hand," the thief said. Ma'mun retorted, "I shall not suspend the judgment prescribed by the heavens because of such nonsense. Why are you telling that my hand must be chopped?" "It was your duty to build the economy of society in a way that I would not have to commit theft," the thief replied. Imam Reza (PBUH) turned to Ma'mun and told him, "You must answer the question." Since Ma'mun was unable to answer, he harbored a grudge against the Imam.

This makes it clear whether a government is Islamic or not. The government is accountable before everything in the society from politics to culture, economy, morality and so on and so forth. Thus, the Islamic establishment is the most comprehensive form of governance in the world, for it embraces the whole gamut of human life.²

www.ostad-jafari.com
Info@ostad-jafari.com

1- *Nahjulbalaghah*, Letter 53.

2- See Ja'fari, M. T., *Translation and Interpretation of the Nahjulbalaghah*, Vol. 9. (Originally in Persian)