

Chapter 8: Is The Shiite View On Imamate Against The Principles Of Freedom?

Liberty and freedom are among the sweetest and most delicate words that man has ever used and heard. The very word “freedom” with its fabulous tone, brings forth in man gaiety and happiness and excites wonderful feelings in him.

The most exalted aspiration for man is to unlock the chains of bondage and slavery and to struggle against colonialism in order to arrive at the lofty mount of freedom. Man's enthusiasm for freedom has forced him to give many sacrifices.

We must now try to establish which one of the two views concerning Imamate is compatible with the principles of democracy. Should an Imam be elected through elections, the Islamic High council or should he be appointed directly by God and the Prophet without people's involvement.

Some assume that the first view is compatible with the principles of freedom. If we consider the position of the Prophet's successor to be an elective one then we can be proud of the fact that the principles of liberalism and freedom have been acted out by Muslims.

Some Sunnite scholars criticize the Shiite view of the appointment of the Prophet's successor, arguing that such a view is incompatible with today's world¹.

A Solution

The most fascinating logic for electing an Imam is to claim that such a view is compatible and harmonious with today's social ideologies. To provide an answer to such a view, we should consider three basic points:

- (a) The issue of appointing the position of Imam is distinct from the issue of dictatorship;
- (b) Western democratic regimes, which are based on the majority of votes, are among the most unjust

systems to which man has referred to without his will;

c) On the supposition that such a procedure is quite correct for choosing a governor, the question is: Was this system used at the advent of Islam when electing Caliphs?

All these three issues especially the second and third deserve more elaboration. However we will briefly refer to them here:

A) The issue of appointing the position of Imam is distinct from the issue of dictatorship

Dictatorship is the most unjust way of government. This domination has been in use since antiquity and has taken different forms throughout the course of history (from tyranny by tribe leaders to absolute hegemony of self-centered dictators).

In a great dictatorship, a man by means of a coup d'etat expels the prevailing government and occupies his position, or he expels the previous government with the help of a foreign power and establishes a form of government in which only his own vote and decision count.

The Shiite view concerning the appointment of the Prophet's successor is far from a dictatorship. The Shiites believe that such an appointment should be done by God, who will appoint the most appropriate individual, who is free from flaws and who is obedient to God as the leader of the Muslim community.

It is clear that such a person, elected by God, will lead the community in accordance with Quranic commandments which the Prophet has conveyed to the Muslims.

God has the natural right to govern all. The members of the Ummah have willingly accepted His commandments. An Imam governs based on the same rules and due to his chastity is immune to any wrong doing. Consequently such a government would be the most rational government man can imagine, in which the concepts of majority or minority would never arise.

How can such a government be compared to despotism?

B) The weak points of democratic governments

The weak points of such governments are too numerous to be discussed here. However, we will discuss two of them here:

1. Under such governments, the president, who is elected by a party or by general votes, has to keep the voters satisfied and does not think of guiding.

For a party politician it is rarely important to be fair; rather, it is essential for him to not lose the voters,

even at the cost of ignoring his own system of beliefs and values. This is something to which even the greatest politicians of the world admit. John F Kennedy, the former president of the United States, writes in this regard:

"At times, a senator is obliged to put out his opinion spontaneously concerning an important issue". Obviously, he would rather have more time to think deeply so that he might have the power to resolve a problem through appropriate words. On the contrary, he neither has the time to think, nor can he escape expressing his actions. It is as if all his clients were waiting to see what he will say next; what he says will determine his political life. Besides, the very thought of being a senator with all its privileges, is a position which no one will reject.

For this very reason, most senators, without being aware, take up an easy and less hazardous route. That is to say whenever there is a conflict between their conscience and their decision, they satisfy their conscience through rationalization and they harmonize themselves with the opinions of their clients.

These individuals could not be said to be timid; rather, they have gotten into the habit of following the general community and have found their interest in doing as Romans do. And there are those among statesmen who think they should do away with their conscience altogether so that they could be in the political picture. As Franc Count says: politics can not be said to be an immoral occupation; instead, it should be said that 'politics is not a moral occupation'[2](#).

Franc Count, the political writer states: the very idea of getting more votes is of utmost importance so much so that issues like "ethics", "right" or "wrong" become irrelevant.

The best piece of advice offered to his friend by Marc Eshcal at the IQZO election was the following "you do not want to be a hypocrite. You should be aware that there are times for a politician when he should forget about his conscience"[3](#). This is the most justified statement in the world of democrats. This is the nature of such governments.

Can the Prophet's successor, who in many ways should follow the Prophet's path, be elected by reference to public votes? Definitely not. This is because in such a government, the elected one does not think independently: he is no more than a loudspeaker for the intentions of the voters. There are few politicians who do not fear the people's rage and declare what is in their best interest.

It might be assumed that keeping voters satisfied depends on the length of time a representative or senator is in power and since the leadership of an Imam is for life, he does not have to try to keep everybody happy.

This idea seems naïve. Firstly, in these governments the governor is elected for life and has to keep the voters satisfied or else revolutions erupt; secondly, the elected leader must promise to cooperate with the voters, and if he forgets his promises, he would put himself in jeopardy because such a leader has taught others how to break their promises.

In a six-person council which Umar had convened for the election of his successor, Abdol Rahman Ibn Auf, whose vote would change the fate of the election, addressing Imam Ali (as) said:

"I will ally with you if you promise to do as the Prophet and the previous two Caliphs have done". Ali (as) replied: "I will carry out the Prophet's tradition and I will rely on myself". Then Abd Al-Rahman addressed Othman and repeated the same statement.

Othman accepted his condition and was elected (later on, he did as he wished and made the Bani Umayyah dominate over people).

The truth-seekers never wish to accept social positions which are accompanied by specific conditions; consequently, indecent individuals take their places instead.

In the American presidential elections, the would-be president is obliged to put assistance to global Zionism on his agenda and has to promise vote-makers and vote-gatherers that he would assist the Zionists in any way he can, even if such an act is against humanity.

2. The second major drawback of such Western democratic regimes is their return to a sort of dictatorship and tyranny (the tyranny of the majority ruling over the minority).

This is because supposing the election takes place lawfully, the majority should govern even if they have won by one extra vote. The minority will be right but because of a difference of one vote the rights of the whole nation might suffer. Thus we could say that the government of 51 over 49 is a tyrannical government, which man has so wretchedly accepted simply because he has ignored the right path that religions like Islam have given to humanity.

Through the election of the Prophet's successor by God, as we have already said, the way to such cruelties have been blocked. An Imam is elected by the One who is accepted by all. He would follow the rules which are comprehended and understood by all Muslims. Therefore, the issue of majority versus minority would never arise.

Furthermore, in a democratic government, the interests of the majority would manifest themselves as laws and their decisions are imposed over all. But the very spirit of Islamic rule could never approve of such a view.

The Holy Quran persistently disallows the general thoughts and condemns the majorities through expressions such as

﴿ وَأَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ ﴾

﴿ وَأَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴾

and would not let the issue of Imamate be decided by the majority votes.

The Holy Quran says:

“And it may be that you dislike a thing while it is good for you and it may be that you love a thing while it is evil for you, and Allah knows, while you do not know”⁴.

Islam, which condemns the general wishes of the majority altogether and states that people at times wish for something which is hazardous to them and sometimes hate what is good for them could not approve of the election of the Prophet's successor by majority votes.

C) Was the election of Caliphs done by the majority at the advent of Islam?

Some explanations offered after the facts are nothing but rationalizations. Sometimes a social event takes place under certain conditions, then, afterwards the people of the following generations try to rationalize those events.

One such example is the rationalization regarding the ‘democratic’ government of the Caliphs. The thing which never took place was electing Caliphs by the people. This is what the Sunnite scholars never believed in. But recently some authors, resort to modern concepts such as democracy and liberalism and the issue of the people’s government. However these concepts did not exist at the time of the Caliphs.

To be on safer grounds, let us read opinions of ancient scholars concerning this issue:

The Judge Iji in his book writes:

When electing an Imam there is no need to resort to a consensus. Whereas, after an allegiance between one or more of the Prophet's close followers, the caliphate of an individual becomes legalized. Witnesses to this affair were the Prophet's close friends, with the religious beliefs that they had, who relied on Abu Bakr's decision to select Omar as his successor and did not care for a consensus by all Muslims; they even ignored opinions by the Prophet's friends and followers, who were living in Medina at the time⁵.

The author of “Al-Ahkam As-Soltanyah” writes:

Some assume that the election of a caliph should take place by the approval of Islamic individuals who live in Islamic cities; but, Abu Bakr came to power only with five votes at Soqayfah bani Saedah: these five votes belonged to Omar, Abu Obaydah, Osaid Ibn Hozayr, Boshr Ibn Saad and Salem Mawla Abi Hozayfeh⁶.

The history of the Islamic Caliphate attests to the fact that Omar's Caliphate became legalized only by

Abu bakr's vote. Omar too authorized the six–person council to elect a caliph from among themselves; in this way, he deprived others of being elected.

Judge Baqillani writes:

Abu Bakr's election took place with the endeavors of Omar and four others [7](#).

After the martyrdom of Imam Ali (as), Caliphate took on the form of a monarchy in the households of Bani Omayyah and Bani Abbas, of which we refrain from telling here.

- [1.](#) . Nazariat Al-Emamah, Ahmad Mahmoud Sobhi, the section on the appointment of Imam.
- [2.](#) . The Face of the Brave, p. 33–34.
- [3.](#) . Op. cit / p. 35.
- [4.](#) . Quran 2:216.
- [5.](#) . Sharh Mawaqef, vol. 3, p . 65.
- [6.](#) . Al-Ahkam Al-Soltaniyah, p. 4.
- [7.](#) . Al-Tamhid, p. 178.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/leading-ummah-jafar-subhani/chapter-8-shiite-view-imamate-against-principles-freedom#comment-0>