

# Dictatorship and Islamic State

## Question No. 38

### Is the Islamic State not a kind of religious autocracy and dictatorship?

To investigate this issue, it is necessary first to accurately define and identify the qualities of an “autocrat and dictatorial government”, then compare it to Islamic State. There are different views on the accurate definition and features of a dictatorial government. Here, some of the major features and functions of such governments are mentioned.

#### 1. Dictatorial government

The word “autocracy” has been defined as “governing oneself” or “absolute government”.<sup>1</sup> Another similar word is “despotism” which is defined as “a government wherein the ruling power and limitless jurisdiction is conferred to an oppressive and tyrant person such as a monarch”. Abd al-Rahman Kavakibi defines “despotism” as “the seizure of a nation’s rights by an individual or a group without fearing of admonition”. Still elsewhere, it has been defined as “any kind of authority whose legitimacy or the method of exerting power is not accepted by all people”.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes the word “dictatorship” is used here, defined as “the absolute dominance of an individual or a group or a social class without people’s consent... Some of the features of dictatorship follow:

1. lack of any rule or law according to which the ruler would be obliged to be held accountable for his actions;
2. acceding to power through illegitimate means;
3. no limitations set for exercising power;
4. no rule for succession;
5. exercising power through threat and terror in favor of a specific group;

## 6. People's submission to it because of fear.”<sup>3</sup>

Individualism, arbitrariness, and exercising power according to personal will and desire, and law's submission to the desires of the ruling person or group are among prominent features of a “dictatorial government”. “Lois XIV claimed that ‘I am the State, and the State’s rules are in my chest’”.<sup>4</sup>

## **2. The features of Islamic State**

a. In Islam, egoism, selfishness and domineering are severely rejected. In Quranic view, one who accedes to power because of selfishness and capriciousness is an illegitimate ruler (Taghut) and should be combated.<sup>5</sup>

In Islamic view, “government” is not a prey, but a divine trust, and should be accepted just through a benevolent motive and divinely intention. Imam Ali writes in a letter to Ash’ath bin Ghayth, the governor of Azarbayjan: “*Governorship is not a prey for you, but a trust conferred to you*”.<sup>6</sup>

One of the essential differences between Islamic State and dictatorial government is thus in its origin. The dictatorial government is egoistic, while Islamic State is divinely inspired.

b. Another difference between these two types of government lies in the qualifications of the ruler and the agents. Islamic State is a government governed by qualified persons, and those without the least scientific and moral qualifications are not accepted. Dictatorial governments, on the other hand, are not essentially based on proper qualifications.

c. The dictatorial government lacks any law or gives priority to the ruler’s will over the law, while Islamic State is the rule of law and its main philosophy is the enforcement of divine laws based on real expediencies of human beings.

d. In dictatorial government, there is no room for public participation and there is no mechanism for controlling power; while in Islamic State, there is a large room for public participation and it contains the strongest mechanisms for controlling power.<sup>7</sup> Therefore egoism, selfishness, individualism, sturdiness, escaping law, escaping responsibility, neglecting people’s wills and participation – which are the essential features of dictatorial governments – are inconsistent with the very nature of “Islamic State”. Rather, one of the important philosophies of Islamic State is its struggling with oppression and tyranny.

Imam Ali (as), regarding the reason for his taking power, says to God:

“*Oh God! You know well that we are neither seeking power nor willing to enjoy worldly pleasures; we are trying to enforce teaching of Thy religion and reform in Thy land so that Thy oppressed servants may feel secure and Thy already ignored religious rules be established... ”<sup>8</sup>*

## **Question No. 39**

**What are the ways for people to control the power and supervise the Islamic State?**

### **The definition of power**

One of the concepts which is, like many other social and human concepts, difficult to define and is always defined variously with non-unanimous definitions is the term “power”. Russel defines “power” as creating favorable results.<sup>9</sup>

Max Weber defines it as the possibility of imposing one’s own will upon others.<sup>10</sup>

Poulantzas defines power as the ability of a social class to realize its specific objective interests.<sup>11</sup>

Hanna Arendt defines it as human’s ability for acting with other members of a group.<sup>12</sup>

All these definitions suffer from some common deficiencies and some specific deficiencies, which cannot be fully discussed here.<sup>13</sup> One of the common deficiencies of all these definitions is their material look at “power”. In contrast, Muslim thinkers have a more general approach to power.

Some writers have used Imam Khomeini’s speeches and his political way of life to conclude that power, in his view, is “the ability of actualizing all spiritual and material sources available for men to achieve justice and salvation”.<sup>14</sup> In this view, in addition to material elements, spiritual sources and the ultimate goal of power in this world and hereafter have been mentioned.

### **Power and corruption**

Some thinkers believe that “power” naturally leads to corruption. Lord Acton writes that power is tending to corruption.<sup>15</sup> This view has been questioned from some aspects.<sup>16</sup> Certainly, unlimited power in the hands of a non-impeccable and fallible person prepares the ground for many corruptions. Some of the corruptions resulted from power are: ambition, autocracy, escaping law, and depriving others from their legitimate freedoms. Thus, the issue of power and its control is one of the necessary issues in any political theory.

### **Controlling power in non-religious governments**

Non-religious political systems mostly use external methods of controlling power. The mechanisms of controlling power externally are not the same in various non-religious governments. What is noticeable in democratic western governments in modern age is the “structural control” or “separation of power centers”. The theory of separating power centers has a long precedent in history but in modern world, Montesquieu is regarded as the reviver of this theory. This theory is based on the idea that power cannot be restricted except by power.

Structural control is one of the important methods for external control of power in modern western societies. This method – thought to be a suitable way for controlling power and preventing corruption – suffers from some deficiencies. Some of these deficiencies are:

1. Impossibility of complete separation of elements of power;
2. Separation of elements of power has – at best – led to separation of corruption instances and decentralizing them.[17](#)
3. Organizing people's participation in elections by political parties has negated the philosophy of separation of elements of power;

In countries such as United States – where there is an almost absolute separation of elements of power – the power is in the hands of the Democrats or Republicans, and what is really effective behind the external façade of political institutes, which serves as an umbrella for all elements of power, is the ruling party.[18](#)

Anyway, in the present situation of the world, separation of elements of power seems unavoidable to some extent. However, it is not enough for preventing corruption resulted from power. Although the separation of elements of power may be accepted – just as the structure of Islamic Republic of Iran is based on this idea – it cannot be considered as eradicator of corruption.

What then should we do? Can we leave this idea just because it is not successful, and rely only on the internal control, that is the characteristics of those in power? This alternative seems inadvisable too, for the highest degree of internal control is Impeccability. With this, power would never tend to corruption. Nevertheless, only a restricted number of persons achieve this level of intellectual, spiritual and rational soundness. Therefore, some other solutions must be sought for cases of non-Impeccable leaders.[19](#) To do so, power must be controlled both externally and internally.

Referring to religious texts shows that the illuminative religion of Islam is the most comprehensive and most realistic school in this domain. Islam stresses the external and internal control of elements of power, presenting solutions in each domain. In the light of these mechanisms, the possibility of power corruption reduces greatly.

### **The methods for internal control of power in Islam**

These methods may be divided into two types: the method of “conceptual control” and the method of “moral control”.

#### **The insightful or rational control**

One of the methods for controlling political and social behaviors of rulers is through the body of their knowledge and insights. Some of these types of knowledge are as follows:

### 1. Religious expertise (Fiqhah)

Some believe that social behavior of knowledgeable Muslim scholars in leadership is different from those non-knowledgeable leaders; the former is more successful in observing the society's rights. In Islam – wherever the Impeccability and knowledge is not divinely inspired – expertise in religious decrees is necessary for the leader. Since religious expertise refers to the whole body of value system in Islam and is more general than merely legal knowledge<sup>20</sup>, faqih is also the Islamic Muslim scholar. Imam Ali says in this regard: "*Verily, the most deserving persons for leadership are the most competent and the most knowledgeable ones in God's decrees*".<sup>21</sup>

### 2. Divine worldview

Divinity, eschatology and deep wholehearted faith in God's supervision of human actions and a sense of duty toward Him are very effective in protecting power from diversion and corruption. Hence, the Holy Quran negates the dominance of the infidels.<sup>22</sup> Imam Hussein (as) also affirms true piety as a qualification for leadership.<sup>23</sup>

### 3. The type of attitude toward power

The epistemological structure of those in power and their attitude towards power is effective in the way they exert power. In other words, the dominant worldview and the idea of power in it are of great importance. One of the basic roots of "power corruption" is the authority's proprietary and desirous view of power. In Islam, however, political power is viewed as a responsibility and a trust.

Imam Ali writes to Ash'ath bin Ghayth, the governor of Azarbayjan: "*Governorship is not a prey for you, but a trust conferred to you*".<sup>24</sup> One of the most important results of such an attitude towards power is refraining from corruption and dictatorship. Hence, the Imam continues: "*You have no right to impose your arbitrary ideas upon people*".<sup>25</sup> In another letter to one of his governors, Imam writes: "*Then, I appoint you as my partner in my trust (i.e. leadership)*"<sup>26</sup>

### Moral control

Those moral characteristics deeply rooted in human's soul are among the most decisive factors in his behavior. Hence, Islam pays much attention to moral qualities and traits of the ruler, regarding as qualified leaders only those who enjoy the most prominent virtuous traits and lack any vicious qualities. The most important characteristics of a leader as asserted in religious texts are:

#### 1. Justice

In Islamic view, the right to leadership belongs only to those upright persons who fight oppression.

The Holy Quran says:

وَلَا تَرْكُنُوا إِلَى الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا فَتَمَسَّكُمُ النَّارُ

***“And do not incline toward those who do wrong lest the [hell] fire touches you.” (11:113)***<sup>27</sup>

Imam Hussein writes in his letter to the people of Kufa:

*“No one is Imam except one who acts according to God’s ordinances, and establishes justice; one who is pious and controls his soul for God’s sake”.*<sup>28</sup>

## **2. Piety**

Piety and chastity are among important qualifications of the ruler in Islam.

The Holy Prophet says:

*“No one deserves to be Imam except one who has three features: piety and chastity restraining him from disobeying God, ...”*<sup>29</sup>

## **3. Patience and good behavior**

In the tradition quoted above, the Prophet continues mentioning the features of the leaders:

*“...patience which placates his anger, and good leadership of citizens which makes him treat people like a kind father”.*<sup>30</sup>

## **The mechanisms for external control of power in Islam**

The methods for external control of power in Islam are variegated and numerous. In addition to methods ordained by Islam (textual), there are some rational methods (non-textual) which may be used if they are not in contradiction with religious authority and not opposing to the ruler’s playing his governmental duties.

The issue of structural control and separation of power centers as well as organizational control are among these methods. One example of organizational control – which has been devised in Islamic Republic of Iran – is the supervision and control exerted by the Assembly of Experts over the Authoritative Muslim scholar.

Some of the methods for external control of power are:

### **1. The direct divine control**

God is the most important controller and most powerful and knowledgeable supervisor of power. He exerts His supervision through different methods, including:

### a. Legislation

One of the methods of power control is presenting comprehensive and appropriate norms for the ways of exerting power and specifying the ruler's manners. Divine legislation and stressing the necessity of obeying divine decrees are very effective in controlling power. The Holy Quran pays much attention to this issue, calling the rulership oblivious of divine decrees as a kind of oppression, debauch, and infidelity. Imam Hussein also asserts that the ruler is the one who behaves according to God's Book.

### b. Negating legitimacy

In addition to specifying the character and scientific qualifications for the ruler as well as defining the rules of behaviors for him, Islam has added a strong executive guarantee so that in the case of power corruption, it can cure the ailment, preventing its continuation.

One of the preventive and curative methods is "negating legitimacy". The conditions and rules of behavior for rulers have an executive guarantee only once the ruler devoid of these norms is not considered legitimate. The ruler's legitimacy is negated as soon as a gap appears between him and the rules and conditions specified by religion, and he is legally dismissed.

### c. Punishment

In Islamic view, the rulers and citizens are all subject to accurate divine supervision and control. God is everywhere and every time watches men's behaviors and actions.<sup>31</sup> He reacts to the oppressions by oppressors.

His reaction to oppression and power corruption is of several kinds:

1. Motivating believers and combatants to fight tyrants, and assisting them in their struggle;
2. Conventional (wad'i) and legal punishments in this world;
3. Genetic (takwini) punishment and recompensing vicious actions in this world;
4. Punishment in the hereafter.

Imam Ali says to 'Uthman:

*"Know that the best servant for God is the just leader who has been guided and does his best to help others be guided; preserves the accepted traditions, and eradicates the undue heresies... and verily the worst person for God is the unjust ruler; the one who is deviated, and leads others astray; one who corrupts the accepted traditions and revives the obsolete heresies. I heard the Prophet saying: 'The unjust ruler is brought in at the Judgment Day, while he has neither any helper nor any intermediary; he is cast in the Hellfire, whirling like a millstone, then is fastened by chains in the depth of Fire'"*.<sup>32</sup>

#### d. Regulation of mutual rights

In Islamic government, the relations between people and the State are mutual and based on mutual rights, their responsibilities towards one another, and their responsibilities towards God. Imam Ali says: “*Verily, I retain some rights over you [people] and you retain some rights over me...* ”[33](#)

#### e. Equality before law

In Islamic view, all human beings are equal before law, and nobody enjoys priority over others before law. This rule is unanimously accepted by all Muslims as the principle of “commonality in verdicts”.

### 2. Public control

Islam believes that it is not possible to purify the power system without widespread social participation. Thus, it has provided various mechanisms for realizing this participation. In Islam, political and social participation is not only people’s right, but also one of their duties. Some of the mechanisms for realization of controlling participation in Islam are as follows:

#### a. The necessity of counsel

In Islamic State, it is condemned to shun people, be autocrat, and not considering people’s opinion in social affairs. The Holy Quran explicitly orders rulers to counsel people, and wants the Prophet to prepare the ground for public participation through counseling.[34](#)

#### b. Public responsibility

In Islamic view, all people are responsible for protecting power from corruption. The Holy Prophet says:

“*All of you [rulers] are responsible to people*”[35](#)

Imam Khomeini adduces this tradition and says:

“You are responsible to me, and I am responsible to you. If I deviated, you are responsible [to admonish me]”[36](#)

#### c. Devoting all efforts to Muslims’ affairs

Attempting to bring about success and prosperity for Muslim community and combating against agents of corruption is incumbent upon all Muslims and a necessary condition for being a Muslim. The Prophet says:

“*One who gets up in the morning and does not endeavor to deal with Muslims’ affairs, and one who hears a Muslim calling for help and does not help him, is not a Muslim.*”[37](#)

#### d. Enjoining good and forbidding evil

Enjoining good and forbidding evil as a divine obligation is one of the most important grounds for social interaction and participation. The Holy Quran sees this as one of the privileges of the Muslim community, saying:

كُنْتُمْ خَيْرَ أُمَّةٍ أَخْرَجْتُ لِلنَّاسِ تَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَنَهَايُونَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَتُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ

***“You are the best community that has raised up for mankind; you enjoin good and forbid evil, and you believe in Allah.” (3: 110)***<sup>38</sup>

The Holy Prophet says:

*“As long as my people enjoin good and forbid evil and cooperate in good conducts, they would be successful and fortuitous. But when they refrain from doing these duties, they would lose God’s blessings, and their vilest persons would dominate them, with no helper in earth or in heaven.”*<sup>39</sup>

#### e. Advising the Muslim leaders

The Arabic equivalent of the word “advice” is “nasihat” derived from the root “n-s-h” meaning benevolence and exhortation. Islam stresses being well-intentioned towards the rulers, and consequently offering proper guidelines, offering pieces of advice on time, and positive critiques.

The Holy Prophet says:

*“There are three things from which no Muslim would consent to escape: devotion to God, being well-intentioned towards Muslim leaders, and accompanying Muslim community”.*<sup>40</sup> Imam Ali considers one of the rights of the community ruler to be benevolent underhandedly and publicly.<sup>41</sup>

The abovementioned methods were some of the mechanisms for controlling power in Islam. A deep scrutiny of these mechanisms and comparing them to the methods found in other political thoughts and governments reveal the considerable richness and predominance of Islamic thought and its comprehensiveness.

1. Ali Aqa Bakhshi, Farhang-e ulum-e siyasi, p. 24.

2. Ibid, p. 89.

3. Ibid, p. 91.

4. BonyadHay-e ilm-e siyasat, p. 278.

5. The Qur'an, Nisa (4), 60.

6. Nahj al-Balagha, letter 5.

7. For further information, see Question no. 41.

8. Nahj al-Balagha, sermon 131.

9. Bertrand Russel, Power, pp. 25–34. Unwin Books, George, Allen and Ltd, Roskin House; See Museum Street London, 1967.unwin.

- [10.](#) Max Weber, Economy and Society, pp. 941–8.
- [11.](#) Nicos Poulantzas, Political Power and Social Classes, pp. 104–14, translation editor: Timotny O'Hagan, London, Newleft 1973.
- [12.](#) Hanna Arendt, On Violence, ch.2, Penguin Books Ltd., London 1910.
- [13.](#) For further information, see Sayyid Abbas Nabavi, Falsafi–ye qudrat, ch.2; see also Muhammad Javad Arasta, Qudrat–e siyasi dar Islam (article), dar amadi bar andishi–ye siyasi–e Islam (the collection of articles), ed. Sayyid Sadiq Haqqat.
- [14.](#) Falsafi–ye qudrat, p.117.
- [15.](#) Mahdi Mutahhari nia, Qudrat, insan, hukumat, p.201.
- [16.](#) For further information, see Qurdart–e siyasi dar Islam.
- [17.](#) Falsafi–ye qudrat, pp. 398–405.
- [18.](#) For further information, see Hussein Javan Araste, Bazkhani–e imamat, hukumat va towzi'–e qudrat dar qanun–e asasi (article), Hukumat–e asasi, 6th year, no. 4, p. 204–5.
- [19.](#) For further information, see Ali Akbar Alikhani, Musharkat–e siyasi, p.2–149.
- [20.](#) For further information, see Mustafa Danishpazhuh and Qudratullah Khusrowshahi, Falsafi–ye huquq, Imam Khomeini Educational and Research Institute.
- [21.](#) Nahj al-Balaghha, sermon 173
- [22.](#) The Qur'an, Nisa (4), 149.
- [23.](#) See Imam Hussein's letter to the people of Kufa.
- [24.](#) Nahj al-Balaghha, letter 5.
- [25.](#) op. cit.
- [26.](#) Nahj al-Balaghha, letter 41.
- [27.](#) The Qur'an, Hud (11), 113.
- [28.](#) al-Kamil ibn Athir, 4, p. 21; al-Irshad al-Munir, p. 186.
- [29.](#) Kafi, 1, p. 407, Kitaba al-Hujja, Bab ma yajib min haqq al-Imam al-ar-ra'iyya, trad. 8.
- [30.](#) Ibid.
- [31.](#) The Qur'an, Nisa (4), 1: إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلَيْكُمْ رَقِيبًا
- [32.](#) Nahj al-Balaghha, sermon 164.
- [33.](#) Ibid, sermon 34.
- [34.](#) Ahmad Va'izi, Jami'i–ye dini, jami'–ye madani, pp. 129–132.
- [35.](#) Bihar al-anwar, 75, ch.35, trad.36, p.38.
- [36.](#) Sahifi–ye nur, 8, p.47.
- [37.](#) Usul–e Kafi, 2, Kitab al-iman va-l–kufr, bab al-ihtimam bi–umur al-muslimin, trad. 1 & 5.
- [38.](#) The Qur'an, Al-e Imran (3), 110.
- [39.](#) Wasa'il al-shi'a, 11, p.398, trad. 18, ed. Beirut.
- [40.](#) Bihar al-anwar, 77, bab 6, trad. 39, p.132.
- [41.](#) Nahj al-Balaghha, sermon 34.

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