

Politics in two Schools

Imam Ali (a.s.) took over the affairs of Muslims on Dhil Hajja 18, 35 AH / June 17, 656 CE, and was martyred in his prayer niche on Ramadan 21, 40 AH/ January 29, 661 CE. Hence, the reign of his holiness lasted only four years, nine months, and three days. Issues in relation to this period of his life are as follows:

1. How the Imam (a.s.) attained power; dimensions of 'Alawi reformation and its fundamentals.
2. Various kinds of resistance against 'Alawi policies; wars and clashes during his holiness' short period of rule.
4. Administrators of Ali (a.s.)'s government and his companions.
5. Plot for assassination of Imam Ali (a.s.), and his martyrdom.

Of the above mentioned topics, "'Alawi Policies in hukuma (rulership)" is of utmost importance and specific status due to its instructive and functional significance in the present era, and its guiding doctrine for rulers, particularly for the Islamic Republic of Iran's statesmen.

We believe that if "Politics" in 'Alawi and Umayyad schools is rightfully defined and the Imam's political principles in governing are, however briefly, delineated, objections that are made, and perhaps even now are manifested in some peoples' words and writings, on his political insight will be responded and his policies will be rightly and steadfastly defended.

Political insight, from the viewpoints of Imam Ali, is one of the most crucial requirements of leadership. The Imam not only considers "understanding politics" and having correct appreciation of it as the secret of durability of a government, but also stresses that "governing a state is the very politics".¹

He asserts that political incapability is a malady that threatens the statesmen's authority with downfall. In the Imam's view, rulers who do not possess acute and efficient political insight will not stay long in office. Eventually, incorrect policies, according to 'Alawi doctrines, are indicative of the decline of governments

and downfall of states.[2](#)

Thus, according to 'Alawi school, ruling a community on the basis of Islamic principles would be practicable solely through the right statesmanship of the rulers. In other words, statesmanship is one of the general principles of management, equally important in various doctrines. The type of attitude and how politics is interpreted, appreciated, and perceived is what distinguishes Islam in this respect from other doctrines, outshines 'Alawi policies above other policies, and sets it against Umayyad policies.

Umayyad Policies

In Umayyad ideology, politics is defined as "recognizing the goal and attaining it through every possible means". The world politicians of the past and present seem to have had no perception beyond this. In reality, politics in Umayyad ideology falls in the same category of meaning as political trends of the governments that are not based on value foundations and are not prompted by the criterion for realizing truth and false that would guide them in their interactions and manners. Describing a feature of politicians, Oswald Spengler said: "a politician by nature has nothing to do with the truth or falsehood of things."

Moreover, Bertrand Russell has perceived political motives and behavioral roots of man in politics as such and stated:

"Political motives in most people include profiteering, selfishness, competition and love of power. For instance, in politics, all human actions originate from the above traits. A political leader who can convince people that he would be able to satisfy these needs, would also be able to subjugate people in such a way that they get to believe that two plus two equals five, or his authority has come down to him right from God.

The political leader who neglects these basic motives is usually deprived of the support of the masses. Psychology of public dynamics is the most basic part of successful political leader's education. Most political leaders achieve their posts by convincing people that they have humanitarian ideals. It is easily understood that such belief will be welcome as it is emotionally appealing. Fettering people, public lectures and sermons, illegal punishments, and wars are procedures of development of emotions. I think keeping people in emotions provides the followers of illogical thinking with a better chance to deceive them and make benefit from them."[3](#)

What is brought up in this analysis about political leaders of communities is consistent with the interpretation made of politics by Umayyad statesmen. Mu'awiya is the founder of this approach to politics in Islamic history. On this basic, and relying on the slogan "Politics is barren" in order to snatch power and safeguard the acquired power, he was ready to go to any extremes and use any hideous means to this end.

'Alawi Politics

Politics, in Ali (a.s.)'s view, is unfaltering administration of the community based on Divine criteria, and a truth – oriented movement. He is quoted as saying:

Administering a state is politics.[4](#)

He never approved of doing anything for achieving power and retaining it. On the contrary, he never considered resorting to illegitimate means as permissible, even to the cost of losing power.

According to 'Alawi doctrine, politics is the recognizing and employing legal instruments in administering a community, and providing people with material and spiritual welfare. In other words, by 'Alawi doctrines, exploiting illegitimate means and tools which are ostentatiously efficient but erroneous in effect, is not regarded as politics; rather, it is deception, fraudulence, and in Imam al-Sadiq (a.s.)'s words, "imposture".[5](#)

From the viewpoint of Imam Ali (a.s.), government is dominion over the hearts and conquest of wisdoms and affections, rather than subjugation of "bodies", dominance over individuals, and riding upon their shoulders. Such interpretation of government leaves no room for resorting to illegitimate political instruments. In his view, power has no sanctity except for administering justice, hence no need to fall back on false ways to preserve it. Dominion over hearts is in no way possible except by using the right methods and treatment based on values. Illegitimate and false policies may gallop along and go on dominating for a short while, but they will never last long and bring nothing to people but harm and loss:

Truth has a lasting sovereignty, and falsehood a short-lived flaunting.[6](#)

'Alawi Reformations

With this attitude towards government and sovereignty, and with such interpretation of politics, Imam Ali (a.s.) took over the reign, and right after achieving political power started the state reformations accordingly, with the motto, "Social and Economical Justice".

He had proclaimed the reason for accepting hukuma as "embarking on reforms and restoring the suppressed rights. Ali (a.s.) believed that whatever had happened before his time and after the demise of the Apostle of God, had radically changed the community and altered the values, creating a great gap and inconsistency between what was towed behind by the name of "Islamic State", and what the Holy Prophet (S) had originally founded. In his formal statement at the beginning of his caliphate, Ali (a.s.) asserted that what had been done had been inconsistent with the sira and sunna of the Apostle of God; the status quo was unbearable; and there was a strong need for providing a new way and a firmly set procedure which would be unlike "the tradition of the two Shayks", but of "'Alawi tradition and 'Alawi reforms" consistent with "the tradition of the Prophet" and Muhammadan reforms".

Surprisingly, Imam Ali (a.s.) has found out through his deep political insight that such procedure and reformation would not be tolerated by people who had for a long time been accustomed to reverse values: "Neither hearts can stand it nor can intellects accept it".⁷

However, he is a Truth-oriented statesman who regards "Politics" as honesty in speech and clarity in position, as well as adherence to Truth, and no less than that. That is why in his very first statement, he declares explicitly an unrelenting struggle against alterations, deviations, abnormalities, and undue ups and downs, without the slightest fear of the political repercussions and social tension that would ensue. Of course, he started all this with resolution, far-sightedness, and accurate and firm policy-making and planning.

'Alawi Policies in Confrontation with Deviations

Imam Ali (a.s.) was profoundly and closely aware of what had befallen the people, and knew how they had acclimatized to the deviations, and now he is determined to embark on reforms; he knew both the depth of the calamity and the difficulty of removing it from every nook and cranny of the society. Thus, Imam Ali (a.s.) acted neither hastily nor unplanned. He divided the reforms he intended to make into two categories:

1. Fighting against administrative and economic corruption,
2. Fighting against cultural deviation.

The Policy of Administrative and Economical Reformation

Ali (a.s.) began encountering administrative and economic deviations and fighting against related corruption from the very beginning of his rule. He expelled incompetent, corrupt, and ill-behaved administrators from their posts and reclaimed the plundered public treasury.

On the first day of his rule, the Imam proclaimed his intended reform policy in the following thought – provoking words:

You should know that if I respond to you, I would lead you as I know I should and would not care about whatever one may say or abuse.⁸

That means you should comply with me, rather than the reverse. Ali (a.s.) is Truth-centered man, adept in the sunna, and absorbed in God. What is thought-provoking here is that the Imam indicates that he knows this complying would lead to hardships; above all, rebukes, faultfinding, and chantage and lobbying would follow. His motto, however, is: "I am Truth-centered and I safeguard the truth, and nothing else.

Then, on the second day of his Caliphate, he asserted in his lofty status of social guidance and in view

of his great responsibility of leadership as follows:

Know that any land that 'Uthman has granted and any wealth from God's property that he has given as gift will be refunded to the public treasury; as nothing would violate previous rights and if I find the assets I will restore them to their rightful place even if they are given as marriage-portion to women or distributed among cities; as justice is expanding in nature, and for whomsoever justice is constraining, oppression will be even more so.[9](#)

In a fervent, awakening and thought-provoking sermon, the Imam widely spoke on the same day about the responsibility of the authorities of a community in realizing social justice, stressing that he would not give a special privilege to anybody for utilizing public treasury; and those who have appropriated, through public treasury, plots of land, water, well-bred horses, and good looking maids should know that Ali will confiscate all those assets and return them to the treasury.

These words came down like thunderbolts, heavily striking like a smith's hammer on the heads of those who had plundered and pillaged, and now were extremely worried; and thus Ali (a.s.)'s outcry advocating justice reverberated more than ever among the well-known figures, who soon turned into staunch opponents of Alawi rule.

These mottos were uttered, and the people got familiar with a resonance unknown to them up to then.

On the third day of Ali (a.s.)'s rule, people sought to receive their portion of public treasury. The Imam ordered his notary, 'Ubayd Allah b. Rafi' as follows:

Start from Muhajirun (the emigrants). Call for them and give them three dinars each. Then, call for the Ansar (the helpers), and treat them similarly. Anyone else coming to you, black or red, or..., treat them the same way you treated Muhajirun and Ansar....[10](#)

The dignitaries from among the people found out that Ali (a.s.)'s plan of economic justice was not a slogan; it was real practice, and very serious indeed. Objections began to be raised in his presence. He reported the events. Not only the Imam was not shocked by the onset of oppositions, especially from pompous figures, and did not hesitate on his way, but also decisively asserted the continuation of his reforms. He said:

By God, if I remain [in power] and stay unimpaired, I will set them firm on a bright path.[11](#)

From this very moment, vengeance for 'Uthman's bloodshed began! Was it not ironic that some of the gold-hoarders and affluent stipulated their allegiance to the Imam on the following two conditions?

1. Ali (a.s.) should not meddle in the wealth that they have seized over the rule of 'Uthman;
2. He should identify, arrest and kill the murderers of 'Uthman.

The Imam, however, knew that vengeance for 'Uthman's bloodshed was only a pretext. What was of importance to them was prevention of taking back the illegitimate riches and treasured up properties left over from the era of 'Uthman. In this respect, the Imam had heard various proposals and had strongly rejected all the proposals, which were compromising, contradictory to restoring rights, and based on trampling upon public treasury.

- [1.](#) See 10/1 (Causes for Durability of Governments).
- [2.](#) See 10/2 (Causes for the Decline of Governments).
- [3.](#) Robert Edward Egner, Bertrand Russell, Best: Silhouette in Satyr.
- [4.](#) Al-Saduq, al-Amali, 132.
- [5.](#) Imam al-Sadiq (a.s.) says about Mu'awiya's political wits: "It is imposture and devilishness; it looks like intellect, but is not intellect." (Al-Kafi: I, 11.)
- [6.](#) Al-Kafi: II, 447.
- [7.](#) See 1/3: ahadith 7 & 6. [Nahj al-Balagha: Sermon 92. Translations of Nahj al-Balagha throughout this book are mainly adopted from Sayyid Ali Reza and William Chittick.]
- [8.](#) See 1/3, hadith 8.
- [9.](#) 2/3, hadith 72.
- [10.](#) See 2/1, hadith 62.
- [11.](#) Ibid.

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