

Session 22: Islam and Democracy (Part 2)

Secular democracy and its philosophical underpinning

The new concept of democracy as being necessarily secular is advanced by statesmen in Western countries in which no trace of religion must be seen in any government institution. Religion can neither interfere in legislation nor law enforcers rule in the name of religion. This is why young women in Islamic *hijab* are banned from entering public schools because the entrance of a person with a religious symbol means that the state supports him or her. Indisputably, this new concept is totally anti-religious. Instead of the label “democracy” used for it, it is appropriate to call it “anti-religion dictatorship” because it does not allow individuals to practice their religious beliefs and affairs in society and prohibits the practice of religious obligations in government institutions.

This method and approach, devoid of any philosophical foundation, has been advanced by the anti-religious politicians with the aim of thwarting the spread of religions, Islam in particular, in Western countries. Under the pretext of advocating democracy in countries affiliated to them including some Muslim countries, they are trying their best to adopt this approach. An example of this can be witnessed in Algeria and Turkey.

In order to prevent this approach from acquiring the image of true dictatorship and be promoted in the frame of a moderate and peaceful democracy, a philosophical underpinning has been considered to mitigate tension with religious elements.

The so-called philosophical justification is as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that all human beings are one, and so to speak, have no class distinction. Permission to observe religious rites in government institutions would be a kind of privilege accorded to religionists, whereas, all human beings must be treated as equals!

But this question remains unanswered: Why do they allow other social groups to do whatever they want and behave and wear attires in whatever fashion they like but deny the religionists the prerogative to wear special attire or cover their hair (the *hijab*). This is actually a denial of freedom and negation of the

rights of some citizens.

Fallacy in the philosophical foundation of secular system

This is how they justify what they are doing, but there is a profound fallacy in it for all citizens to be equal in citizenship is not a corollary of the equality of all human beings in humanity. The equality of all human beings in humanity is an issue which Islam has upheld before and more than the rest. As God says,

﴿...يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ﴾

“O mankind! Indeed We created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes that you may identify one another. Indeed the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most God-wary among you...”¹

The Qur'an categorically negates distinction and superiority between human beings, presenting them as children of the same parents, siblings without any distinction and superiority. This issue has never been mentioned in any other heavenly scriptures in such an eloquent manner. As Muslims, we also believe that all human beings are equal in humanity and humanness has no first or second class. As Sa'di say:

بنی آدم اعضای یک دیگرند که در آفرینش زیک گوهرند

The children of Adam who are of one essence in creation are parts of one another.

However, this does not mean that all human beings in all countries equally enjoy the legal rights of a citizen. As a principle in international law, it has been accepted throughout the world that citizenship has its peculiar conditions, rights and merits. A person might migrate from his country of origin and live for many years in another country which might benefit a lot from his services but he would not be granted citizenship in that country because of particular laws and rules.

Even if it is granted it might be a second class citizenship which does not accrue all the privileges of a native. This fact exists everywhere in the world. We do not have first and second class human beings but we may have first and second class citizens, and this is something which is also accepted in Islam.

We must be vigilant and aware that Western states present their dictatorship as “democracy” in order to realize their wicked motives. We should not be deceived by them. Advancing the new theory about democracy is actually a kind of dictatorship that deprives the Muslims of practicing their religious obligations in those countries.

This is while the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has stipulated that religion is free and all people are free in performing their religious obligations. No condition is made in the Declaration that religious

symbols and practices should not be observed in government institutions, but whenever they want, the politicians interpret the law in their favor and talk about war in the name of peace and violation of the rights of others as protection of human rights. Everyday we witness their oppressive and deceitful acts on a global level.

Advancing democracy in the sphere of management

Three meanings of democracy have been mentioned, all of which are related to political philosophy, but some writers who portray themselves as “intellectuals” claim that in essence the concept of democracy has nothing to do with political philosophy for it is related to the domain of management. The simple reply to these individuals is that a survey will make it clear that there is no book of political philosophy in which democracy is not touched.

If the concept of democracy is not related to political philosophy, why is it extensively discussed in all political philosophy books? The secret behind this claim is that recently, liberal thinkers and writers of the West have presented a new definition of democracy to keep it out of the political vocabulary and insert it in other realms of social sciences.

They have asserted that democracy is meant to limit the power of the ruler and foster compromise among opposing groups and encourage conciliation among parties and groups, and it is not only related to administration but also applicable to management. For example, if there is a difference of opinion among managers of a company or among their subordinates, they must arrive at a consensus because persistence of this difference of opinion will not be beneficial for the company. So, in order to advance the interest of the company, they have to consult one another and finally arrive at an agreement, or uphold the majority decision. They call this the ‘democratic’ method.

Democracy is now a way of removing differences within an organization. Given this definition, democracy in its general sense is taken out of political philosophy and introduced in the sphere of management. Governance and administration is actually also a managerial task on a grand scale, but it has a specific domain and in order to expand the concept of democracy, they assert that whenever there is conflict between two groups a reconciliation in the above manner will be based on democracy. The explanation for this is that in the conflict between two groups, one group may dominate the other by force and impose its view. Certainly, this approach is undemocratic. But if they agree and finally uphold the majority opinion, that means putting democracy into practice.

We do not oppose the coinage or expansion of a scientific term, but it must not be forgotten that this concept is originally related to the realm of politics and extended to other domains. In social sciences, there are many similar concepts which were initially used in one field and after extending their meanings, applied in various contexts in other fields. For instance, the concept of “strategy” is used commonly in all fields. Basically, this term means “leading an army” [*sawq al-jayshi*], used in military science, and “strategist” is the one who is in charge of planning and commanding the war. The area where an army

encamps or stays or where an attack will commence is called “strategic area”.

Later on, this concept was gradually adopted by other sciences and is now used, in political discussions as “strategic policies”. Even in training and education and different types of management, “strategic issues” are tackled. For instance, we have provisions of the constitution that are “strategic” in nature such as the article that emphasizes the necessity of adapting laws of the country to Islam. Yet, it is astonishing that sometimes some elements talk about the Constitution as if it is above the Qur’an and divine revelation. At times, they also oppose it as if it is of no value to them at all.

Wherever the Constitution deals with honoring the will of people, they do not allow even the verses of the Qur’an to state anything against it; the Prophet (s), infallible Imams (‘a) and the Imam of the Time(‘a) have also no right to oppose it! But the provision of the Constitution which stipulates that all existing laws in the country must be compatible with Islam is forgotten and to oppose it is declared lawful. They say, “The basis is the people’s vote!”

Is it not enshrined in the same constitution that laws to be enacted in the country must be compatible with Islam? So, if some thing is *haram* according to Islam, how can you afford to declare it lawful by citing the Constitution? Considering this constitution emphasizes the observance of Islam, how is it that it is free to insult sanctities and essential laws of Islam by invoking freedom of the press? The press is free within the framework of law, and not beyond it. When Islamic law regards it obligatory to honor religious sanctities and not to slight laws of Islam and mock God and the Prophet (s) as it will be tantamount to apostasy, law on freedom of the press cannot declare such a thing lawful. The Constitution is originally codified to expound the concept of an Islamic Republic.

Paramount station of Islam and wilayah al-faqih in the Islamic Republic

During the first year of the victory of the Revolution, i.e. in 1979 when a referendum for the Islamic Republic was to be held, different options were suggested as to the forms of government from which the people could choose. Some of the selections were “republic,” “democratic republic,” “Islamic democratic republic,” and “Islamic republic”. But the Imam said: “‘Islamic republic’, no more, no less.” Ninety-eight percent of the people of Iran also voted for the Islamic republic.

That is, the Islamic description of the government cannot be removed and be replaced by the word “democratic”. Now, if democracy is something above Islam, why did the Imam not allow this word to be inserted in the name of the Islamic government? And if republicanism is the same as democracy, there is no more need for the label “democratic”. Why did they insist on the label “democratic republic” and why did the Imam and the people in obedience to him oppose it? It is obvious that democracy could have different meanings, and certain things beyond its meanings could be applied to republicanism which would be negated and reliance on public opinion would outdo Islam.

Our system is an Islamic republic whose pillar is supported by the people. It was these people who staged the Revolution and who will keep it going with its Islamic substance and framework. The late martyred professor Mutahhari (may Allah the Exalted, be pleased with him) has an explanation which serves as a guidance for us in this context. He used to say: “Republicanism speaks of the form of government while ‘being Islamic’ speaks of the substance of government.”

The substance of government is the implementation of the commandments of Islam, but its form is republicanism in contrast to monarchy. So, our regime will not be a monarchy. Rather, its form is republic while its substance is Islamic. Authenticity is with the Islamic concepts, laws and values, and we do not have anything below or beyond Islam.

The Imam used to say time and again that the legitimacy of every system and every government position in the Islamic Republic depends on the authority of the *wali al-faqih*, upon which the theory of *wilayah al-faqih* is based. We have learned from the *fuqaha*, especially from the Imam, who also confirms its rational and textual proofs. Since the *wali al-faqih* is the authorised successor of the infallible Imam (‘a) who, in turn, is authorized by God, the legitimacy of the system comes with the *wilayah al-faqih*. Of course, this theory is not compatible with those who have been accustomed to Western culture.

We insist on this theory because this theory is consistent with the intellectual basis derived from monotheism and rooted in the Islamic viewpoint and not from the inclination of the clerical establishment. As I have explained before, the legislative Lordship of God demands that divine authority must be observed both in legislation and execution of laws; otherwise, a kind of polytheism is committed. This does not mean, however, that the people in this society do not have any role. The people have a total role in this system within the framework determined by Islam, and in this domain nothing else can replace the role and impact of the people. But one should make a difference between the legitimacy [*mashru’iyyah*] and acceptability [*maqbuliyyah*] of a system.

The explanation for this is that since the Renaissance, there is no place in Western legal, philosophical and social discussions for God and religion. When, for example, they stipulate human rights in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the relationship between man and God is not mentioned there. If freedom of religion is also mentioned there, it is because as a choice, human beings have the right to choose any religion. There is no mention of truth and falsehood, or whether God exists or not.

Whenever social rights, including fundamental rights, civil rights and criminal rights, are stipulated for individuals, there is no association of those rights with God. It is never discussed whether God has rights over man or not; whether man has duties toward God or not. They do not like to consider God in issues pertaining to their rights, but if in accordance with our own beliefs, we want to base the legal system of our country upon the teachings of Islam and divine rights, they do not have any authority to deprive us of this right. As believers in God, monotheistic people and followers of Islam, we believe that in all legal issues—social, civil, criminal, and political—God must be taken into account. Above all rights is the right of Allah. With respect to Him, we have duties and responsibilities that we must discharge.

On the other hand, the rights of men are not the only discussed issue. In fact, rights and duties must be discussed together, the most important being the duty of man toward God. The right of legislative Lordship of God over human beings is for them to accept His laws in sociopolitical affairs. If a person does not believe in God, we will not compel him to accept Islam, but as Muslims we have the right to apply our beliefs in politics and the means of administering our country. In the constitution of our country, this has been accepted and as such it is significant to the highest degree for us. Our respect to the Constitution is the same as giving value to Islam.

Form of democracy acceptable to Islam

The second meaning of democracy has been accepted with certain conditions and qualifications. No legislative authority has the right to oppose the definite laws of Islam which is how we accept democracy. Meanwhile, concerning democracy as a method of solving differences, it must be said that as long as Islamic values are sufficient to solve differences, they shall take precedence, but in case of differences where Islamic laws have no specific way of solving them and there is also no competent arbiter, the majority view shall be preferred.

For example, a number of people form a committee within the framework of law to decide an important matter and all believe in Islam and observe Islamic values, but do not arrive at a consensus on the issue as the majority has a certain opinion while the minority has another opinion and there is no basis to prefer one view over the other—the majority view will take precedence, and opposing majority view shall be considered an undue preference.

As such, whenever we have no preferable option, we can obtain a sound opinion from the majority view which will be credible and preferred. If through the majority view of ignoramuses, we can not obtain a sound opinion, preferring that opinion will be rationally reproachable and incorrect. This method is credible to a certain extent, but it is not correct to abuse it by placing the majority of people against a minority of experts. For example, let us assume that for sketching a military plan there are ten military experts and one thousand common people who are unfamiliar with military issues.

If attention is given to the view of common people who are unfamiliar with military issues while the view of experts is rejected, this act is unreasonable. Every intelligent person says that the view of the experts takes precedence over the view of non-experts. Thus, democracy as a means of solving differences with certain limits and conditions is credible, but as the basis of giving preference to every majority over every minority it is not credible

¹. Surah al-Hujurat 49: 13.

<https://www.al-islam.org/islamic-political-theory-legislation-volume-1-muhammad-taqi-misbah-yazdi/session-22-islam-and#comment-0>