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Lesson 11: Answer to an Objection

There are people who think that if government were to originate with the people themselves, with the members of society choosing their own leader from among qualified persons, relying in their choice on their own desires, perceptive capacities and relative knowledge of the strong and weak points of various individuals, this would be more in accord with freedom and democracy and thus enable mankind to attain its highest ideal.

They imagine further that if the people are not permitted to have any share in the choice and designation of their leader and if the office of Imam or caliph is not a fully elected one, the people will see in him simply a ruler who has been imposed on them.

The error underlying this view is the identification of the appointed office of the Imam with tyranny. However, we see that in world politics tyranny comes to prevail as the result of a coup d'etat, a revolution, or a military intervention, and all that counts in a tyranny is the personal views and decisions of the ruler.

However, from the point of view of Shi'ism, there are certain inviolable criteria for the post of Islamic leadership. If someone lacks those criteria, it is impossible for him to lead Islamic society or to be recognized as its legitimate ruler. The rationale for the appointed nature of the post of Imam is that the Lord of the Worlds knows His creation perfectly; He knows the nature of man and his interaction with the world better than any scholar, and is better aware than people are themselves of their own interests.

Hence it is that He chooses as the leader and guardian of the Muslims the best and worthiest individual, one who has unique attributes such as complete immunity from sin and a life utterly free from the pull of instinctual desire. The one so chosen by God has himself no right to legislate, and since the Islamic concept of law is based on God's exclusive legislative prerogative, his sole point of reference is God's laws and commands, as they descended by way of revelation into the pure heart of the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family. In all his programs and plans, the divinely chosen leader draws inspiration exclusively from religion, striving always to implement God's commands as a matter of duty.

When God is the source of all legislation, His laws necessarily embrace all the true interests of man. They are in full accord with his primordial and immutable nature; ensure the fulfillment of justice in public life; and make it possible for man to ascend through the degrees of perfection. It is, of course, true at the same time that these laws may be opposed to man's personal inclinations and his self–interest, and that some may experience God's commands as arduous and in conflict with their temperament When the ruler is selected by God, Who is Himself the sole possessor of sovereignty, he will necessarily be free of all taint of sinfulness, disobedience, and oppression, and the only goal he pursues will be the welfare and benefit of society, the guidance of the *ummah*, and the construction of a pure and exalted community based on justice. A government of this type will be utterly incompatible with arbitrariness, oppression, and the usurpation of rights.

If religion lays down certain conditions for rulership and restricts people's right to choose, this in no way contradicts their possession of sovereignty. For society has already given its free consent to a system of rule based on its beliefs and is in fact inwardly devoted to such a system. The principle of popular sovereignty is thus limited by certain conditions that are deemed necessary by the religious beliefs accepted by the people.

Furthermore, in democratic governments, which are elected by majority vote, the ruler is always concerned with either winning the support of popular opinion or with following popular wishes, with no criterion available for measuring the legitimacy of those wishes. For that which determines those desires and inclinations are the circumstances in which a person grows up and which influence his attitudes towards the individual and society, towards history and the laws which he supposes to be the best for his particular society.

What is important for a politician in this system of government is to align himself with the views of the majority of his constituents, irrespective of whether or not his performance in social and administrative matters conforms to the principles of justice. His sole concern is to keep the social and political privileges he has obtained, and he may sometimes trample on the truth in order to avoid endangering his position. Rare are those who have no fear of public opinion and base their decisions solely on the welfare of the society.

A celebrated writer on politics by the name of Frank Cont remarks: "The necessity of obtaining a majority of the votes represents a very serious and grave problem, for in striving after that goal no consideration can be given to ethical matters or to right and wrong."[1]

Nonetheless, this is the mode of government favored by the adherents of liberty in today's world, a system in which truth, justice and conscience are treated as mere playthings. If this indeed be the nature of the system, is it all permissible that the successors to the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, should be chosen and exercise their functions in accordance with it? Can, for example, a group of Muslims come together, select a certain individual according to their own criteria, and then trust to him rule over the Muslims?

Can someone who is unacquainted with the culture and the principles of religion and the detailed injunctions of divine law build a fully Islamic society if he is appointed ruler? Can he implement God's laws in society with the necessary care, precision, and trustworthiness? If new, unprecedented circumstances arise, what knowledge or divinely bestowed insight can he draw on in order to derive a specific ruling for those circumstances from the general principles of the *shari'ah* and then to implement it in the public interest? Furthermore, in systems where the government is chosen by the majority, the views of the minority are ignored, so that, for example, a minority consisting of 49% of the people is obliged to submit to the views and preferences of persons who have come to power against their wishes.

For the opinions of such a large group of people to be ignored is in no way compatible with the principles of justice. Is there any reason for them to regard themselves as accountable to a government elected by the majority? Why should they be deprived of their freedom and their desires be crushed? The argument that the choice of the majority reflects the overall interests of society is unconvincing and fails to establish a duty of obedience and accountability on the part of the minority. The question therefore remains: on what basis is the minority obliged to submit to majority decision and to obey the views and wishes of others?

The laws approved by the majority and imposed on the entirety of the people may sometimes be harmful to society and damaging to its true progress and development.

If truth is indeed truth, it does not become falsehood merely because its followers are few in number or in the minority; and if falsehood is indeed falsehood, it does not become transformed into truth through the support of the majority. It may be that majority opinion is regularly taken as the principle on which to operate because it is allegedly less prone to error, but no proof exists for the proposition that the wishes of the majority are inherently better or more valuable than the inclinations of the minority, nor for the claim that those wishes possess an intrinsic legitimacy making them the proper source of all legislation and the basis for human life.

Communist countries which claim to implement democracy within the framework of Marxism belong in the final analysis to the category of despotism, since in them the Communist party possesses absolute sovereignty and imposes its will on the masses.

By contrast, when the selection of the leader is a matter of divine prerogative, acceptance of that leader is equivalent to submission to God's sovereignty, a submission eagerly undertaken, for reason confirms the necessity of obedience to the Creator and man discerns in adherence to divine command the source of happiness and well being in this world and the hereafter. There is no longer any question of minority or majority, because the government is the government of God, before Whom all are supremely responsible as the source of all existence, the origin of man's being and perfection, and the fount of infinite bounty.

It is He alone Who is deserving of obedience and Whose ordinances and laws command compliance. His laws are promulgated in accordance with the norms of nature and inspired by a comprehensive awareness of the essence of social relations with the result that they are intrinsically just and bound to secure the benefit, well being and happiness of man. The suspicion can never arise that personal motivation or self-interest on the part of the lawgiver is at work.

A society believing in God has no reason to follow the majority, a majority which might well choose an incorrect path in various matters and the judgement of which might prove erroneous. Many people in whom great hopes were placed and who came to power by overwhelming majority vote swiftly came to inspire despair rather than hope, and anger and enmity rather than love and affection.

It can thus be concluded that the views and inclinations of the majority, the result of experiences that are necessarily fallible, cannot form a basis for solving the problems of humanity or instilling justice into the life of the individual and society, nor can they guarantee the happiness and welfare of man.

1. Frank Cont, Sima-ye Shuja'an, p. 35.

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