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The Social Functions of Imamate

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Abstract

Imamate is a divine institution, and the Imam is responsible for administering the affairs of society through being linked to the main source of guidance – Allah. The acquisition of understanding what does or does not contribute to believers' religion and their world are important issues that necessitate the existence of a divine guide (*hujjah*) in society.

On the other hand, man's constant need for guidance further raises the question of existence of a guide. The role of Imamate in safeguarding against faults and errors is another function that manages the relationship between believers, and guides their beliefs and divine religion. This paper investigates the existence and impact of Imamate.

Introduction

Without a doubt, the concept of Imamate is a challenging issue in the Islamic theology (*kalam*), and the Ahlul Bayt[1] underlined the importance of deepening our beliefs in it. On the other hand, there are differences of opinions about it between different schools of Islam. This is considered the first disagreement among Muslims.[2]

When debate over the issue of Imamate extends to the issue of government and political administration of society, it is so extensive that authors of Islamic sects claim that throughout the history, there have not been as many fights on any other issue as there were on Imamate.[3]

The Shi'a doctrine introduces Imamate as an institution with various aspects that influence our lives. The inaccurate definition of this institution and incorrect understanding of its functions cause mistaken recognition and identification of the Imam. Sunnis regard this institution as an issue only contingent upon the interests of society, the choice of Ummah, and requirements of human society.[4]

On the other hand, the Shi'a view the fulfilment of divine promises as contingent on knowing the Hujjah[5] and consider the Imam as an element to which this institution continues to guide man to salvation.

Imam Ali introduced the Imam as follows: "On behalf of God, the Imams manage people's affairs."[6] This refers to running the society as God's vicegerent who brings divine rules into force in society. Based on this design, non-Shi'a definitions and identifications of Imamate are challenged, and classifying Imamate as a secondary issue (far'), and not as a principal doctrine, cannot logically justify their mistake in pinpointing the roots and instances of Imamate.

Irrespective of the extensive issue of identification of the Imam and its historical aspects, this article reviews the social functions of Imamate and its assumptions. If the five major functions mentioned in this article are institutionalized, they not only enhance the understanding of people and constantly guide them, but also protect the Shi'a and their beliefs through controlling their faults and managing their relationships.

1. Hujjah: the means of attaining knowledge and understanding

The first step to perfection and salvation is the acquisition of knowledge. This is emphasized so much that Islam is summarized in two things: the knowledge of God and action based on divine satisfaction.[7] Divine knowledge is tied up with Hujjah.[8] On the other hand, a goal of divine Messengers is considered to be the improvement of man's understanding and wisdom.[9]

Deeply linked to society, the Ahlul Bayt are the means of acquiring teachings and enhancing man's understanding. An excerpt from Ziyarah Jami'a al- Kabirah points to this important function:

Through your Wilayah, God has taught us doctrines of our religion, and restored all that of our world that has been ruined.[10]

Attention to the intermediary function is complemented with friendship and obedience. In one of his sermons, Imam Ali referred to the function of obedience. Citing verse 71 of the Qur'anic chapter al-Ahzab, he introduced Prophet Muhammad as the means of being delivered from error and ignorance.[11]

Nevertheless, the term Hujjah, unlike other common terms to refer to different positions, is first introduced by the Shi'a. In a unique initiative, when classifying hadiths in al-Kafi, Sheikh Kulayni (d. 349 A.H) classified hadiths on imamah in a section, entitled, "Kitab al-Hujjah."

On the basis of the literal meaning of Hujjah, there lie two issues in this term: one is discussing and inquiring about the Imam, and the other is proving ones' claims and preparing for refutation.[12]

On the other hand, the fact that Hujjah is an intermediary between God and His creatures is evident. The corollary of observing this link is the existence of two fundamental and important aspects in defining the wide-ranging essence of the Imam: one is to clarify divine knowledge for those who need it, and seek

divine guidance to understand it.

Otherwise, they may suffer confusion. The other aspect is related to people's daily affairs and due to the Imam's link to the main source of guidance, he defines their interests. This is observable in the words of Imam Sadiq to an atheist:

When we prove that there is the all-Wise, all-Mighty God, it is proved that He has sent His creatures some messengers who introduce Him to His servants and guide them to their interests and benefits, as well as what revives them spiritually and what ruins their spirituality.[13]

These teachings are reflected in two sections, namely "The Urgent Need for Hujjah" and "The Necessity of Obeying the Imams."[14] The narration reported by Mansur ibn Hazim, who was trained in the school of the Ahlul Bayt, defines Shi'a beliefs and reflects on the Ahlul Bayt's method of training their students. Mansur ibn Hazim regarded the knowledge of divine satisfaction and anger as the fruits of knowledge of Hujjah and viewed gaining God's satisfaction and avoiding His anger as necessary as a rational requirement. He says:

I have pondered on the Qur'an and concluded that Murji'ites, Qadarites and even Heretics who do not believe in it argue on the basis of it in order to overcome their opponents. So I have understood that the Qur'an is not Hujjah except through a guardian who knows its secrets.[15]

As he pointed out, the Qur'an has some inner aspects and teachings, and lack of knowledge of its interpretation and commentary leads to different and even contradictory understandings. A clear example of these understandings is the issues of determinism and free will, and each opposing stance refers to Qur'anic verses. If we accept that it is the role of Imams to interpret and comment on the Qur'an, their absolute scientific and theological authority in every society and era is proved.

2. Hujjah, the linked guidance

Guidance is the gist and the outcome of efforts by all Imams in leading the society and its members. This goal has its roots in the Qur'anic guidance and is also understood through the intellect. The Qur'an considers God as responsible for guidance.[16] Accordingly, guidance is not a covert issue, but revealed to people along with clear signs.[17]

The infallibles' guidance is also adopted from the Qur'an and the divine guidance, complementing this process, manifesting, and perfecting numerous forms of this issue. In a narration, Abu Basir asked Imam Sadiq about the interpretation of verse 7 of the Qur'anic chapter al-Ra'd. After conforming "Warner" (mundhir) to the Prophet and Guide (hادd) to Ali ibn Abi Talib, the 6th Imam asked him, "O' Aba Muhammad! Is there a Guide today?"[18]

His answer emphasized the continuation of guidance, and he stressed that the Imam is the present manifestation of guidance for mankind. Referring to the hereditary quality of guidance in Imams, the 6th

Imam emphasized the eternity of the Qur'an and its verses as well as its existence in all eras.[19]

The impact of this guidance is so significant and deep that anyone who troubles himself with worshipping God to a great extent and yet does not accept any Imam as the leader, in the words of Imam Baqir, such a person resembles a sheep without a shepherd which wanders at night – the time when it needs its owner's protection and supervision – which joins other herds, or is hunted by wolves. The man separated from the divine guidance is driven left and right with a gentle breeze and is drowned in the whirlpool of attacks to beliefs.[20]

The Ahlul Bayt are depicted in hadiths as being guides and signs of the Truth and lights. Using these key words, Kulayni has mentioned six hadiths[21] in the section: "Surely the Imams are Light of Allah the Glorious, the Majestic" and three hadiths[22] in the section "Knowledge of the Imam and Rejection of Him." Imam Sadiq said:

Listening and obeying are the doors to the good; the obedient listener is by no means rebuked, and the sinful listener cannot give any reason for his acts; on the Day of Judgment in which God referred to as "the day when We will call every people with their Imam," the Imam of Muslims will complete the argument on everybody.[23]

The notion that guidance accompanies and is eternally linked to the creation of mankind doubles the significance of this function. If there were only two people on the earth, one would definitely be a divine Hujjah,[24] and after the Hujjah of God departs this life, the dwellers of the earth will be sunken into it.[25]

These are reasons for the divine Sunnah to guide man and to place this guidance in the household of Prophet Muhammad. This guidance has a divine basis and belongs to the servants who have enough capacity to enjoy it and for whom God has ordained good. Thus, the Imams' companions have been forbidden from urging the opponents to accept the Imamate.[26]

3. Hujjah and controlling the faults

Hujjah is the link between the material world and divine guidance through revelation. Among the Qur'anic functions of this link are education, guidance, and an explanation of Islamic teachings and injunctions.

Considering that Prophet Muhammad is the seal of prophethood, these elements have been perfected in him, and the firm and constant connection between the Qur'an and Hujjah necessitates the transfer and continuation of this link in Imamate.

According to the Qur'anic verses, following this trend negates the possible incorrect use of the Qur'an and leads to correct interpretation of its unclear or inexplicit verses (mutashابihات) and immunity from disagreement and error.[27]

This Qur'anic description can also be found in hadiths. Defining this function of the constant presence of Hujjah among people, Imam Sadiq said:

كيما إن زاد المؤمنون شيئا ردهم، وإن نقصوا شيئا أتمه لهم.

So that if believers hold onto some additional beliefs, the Imam denies them, and if the believers lack some beliefs, the Imam will provide them with these beliefs.[28]

This hadith found in the section "Surely the Earth Is Not Left Void of a Hujjah" emphasizes that believers are under constant supervision. According to the verse 6:153, merely by knowing the true path, it is possible to be steadfast in its path and avoid error.

Due to the believers' exposal to struggles in the right path and invariant temptations of the falsehood front, they are constantly in danger of making slips and going to extremes in Islamic teachings and obligations.

This brief explanation introduces the Imam as Hujjah, with his incessant and nonstop presence on the earth in order to directly train the believers. Like a compassionate mother who accompanies her toddler, the Imam protects believers against being diverted from the path of salvation and helps them reach their purpose, making them accompany the followers of the divine revelation. The excerpt from Ziyarah al-Jamia al-Kabirah reflects this function in society:

فالراغب عنكم مارق واللازم لكم لاحق

The one who turns away from you is also separated from Islam, and the one who accompanies you attains the truth.[29]

An example of this function is found in the debate between Hisham ibn Hakam and 'Amr ibn 'Ubayd.[30] Likening the Imam to the heart, Hisham refers to this function in society and among believers in order to remove doubt.

The crucial point is that in this hadith, the primary function of human organs and limbs are not dispensed with; rather, they are only supervised by a careful and deep critique when there is a doubt. Regarding this important function, every individual is personally responsible to know his religion in both saying and action. If there is a doubt or fault, the Imam will lead him to certainty and restore equilibrium in him.

The emphasis on "believers" in this phrase implies the crucial role of this function in the Imam's embarking on constantly monitoring the society and finding out its problems. The basic guidance is clearly distinct from this function.

Called the factor that distinguishes truth from the falsehood, this function is implemented in society through the Imam's two qualities, namely knowledge and infallibility. The perpetuation of this controlling tool in society is considered as divine Sunnah. In addition, it is stressed that this rectifying function works only for the believers.[31] Abu Basir, a truthful companion, said:

Verily God has not left the earth without a religious scholar because if this were the case, the truth could not be distinguished from the falsehood.[32]

This element is the locus of Hisham's discussion with Imam al-Kazim in order to know the successor to Imam Sadiq. According to this account, recounted in numerous sources, including al-Kafi, Basa'ir, Irshad, and Ikhtiyar Ma'rifat al-Rijal,[33] the prevalence of Fatahiyyah doubt led to various inclinations on the part of some Shi'a and even the chiefs of Imamiyyah sect. This doubt was so extensive that it perplexed well-known people such as Hisham ibn Salim and Mu'min Taq.

In three phases of attracting, processing, and consequencing guidance when interacting with Hisham to guide him from confusion to recognition of the rightful Imam, Imam al- Sadiq had a delicate position. Soon flocked to Imam al-Kazim, and only very few did remain loyal to Abdullah.

4. Hujjah: the Manager of Relationships

On the basis of Shi'a beliefs, the main function of Imam is to regulate the society and introduce it as the venue for implementing the religious model of government. In Shi'a culture, Imamate is a divine position, and benefiting from the two powerful wings of knowledge and infallibility, the Imam guarantees people's interests in all political, economic and social aspects.

The reason why Imamate is more effective than other models of leadership is that in this institution relationships are managed on the basis of the divine model. Ayyub ibn Hurr quoted Imam al-Sadiq as saying:

By God, you act upon the religion of God, His Prophet, and Ali ibn Abi Talib. These [teachings] only result from Prophet's teachings which are safe with us.[34]

In contrast, the currents derived from Taghut lack such a liberating model. In the first serious criticism of error after the demise of the Prophet, Lady Zahra emphasized this point, implying the divine and theoretical clarification of Imamate. Unlike other currents which had been theorized about after several events, Shi'ism demonstrated that it had based its principles on the divine revelation.

Delineating the philosophy of the religious obligations, Lady Zahra said,

Allah, the Almighty has made faith obligatory so that you are cleansed of polytheism…, so has He made obedience to us obligatory to establish order in the Islamic Ummah. The same applies to Imamate in order to save people from disunity,[35] and this is also the case with love for us in order to keep Islam

revered.36

Besides other important religious obligations such as faith, prayer, and Hajj, there is an emphasis on obedience, Imamate, and love as three distinct fields in relation to the Ahlul Bayt in this sentence. As the most important legislative principle of Islam, this strand was pursued by Imam al-Rida in the hadith in section On the Merits of the Imam and His Qualities.

Among the Shi'a narrations on the Imam's aspects and functions, the above hadith has the most comprehensive authority and covers various dimensions of this realm, including the Imam's status, his relation with the Qur'an and the Prophet, the way to recognize the Imam, and so forth. Elaborating on the Imam's status, Imam al-Rida also said,

Verily Imamate safeguards religion, establishes order in Muslim society, makes believers' world prosperous and themselves honorable.37

The words by Lady Zahra refer to a divine religious obligation on servants in the field of social teachings, resorting to which leads to the establishment of order in society and deliverance from disunity. In Imam al-Rida's hadiths, the reality forms the basis of his word, and there is an emphasis on social outcomes of this institution in his word.

This function is even applied to the link between God and His servants. In one hadith, Imam Sadiq defined the existential scope of the Imam and introduced an act of worship in harmony with the role models chosen by God as the true act of worship. Treading any path other than this clear path is also considered misguidance and diversion from the right path.

Imam Kazim quoted Imam Sadiq as saying, "God the Glorious, the Majestic created and formed us well and has made us the guards of His sky and earth. [In order to attest to our great high status,] a tree started to talk. Thanks to our acts of worship, God the Glorious, the Majestic is worshipped. If it were not for the sake of us, Ahl-ul-Bayt, God would not be worshiped."38

5. Hujjah, the guard of Shi'ism and Shi'a Beliefs

Among the functions of the Imam are to protect the Shi'as and safeguard Shi'a beliefs and the doctrine of Imamate.

Delineating the efforts of the Ahlul Bayt's enemies to rule them out and their adversaries' use of any plot and deceit to distance them from society, Imam Ali pointed to the divine will and ordinance as related to their role in safeguarding the religion, saying, "Allah has willed that we safeguard His religion and off their evil."39

The institution of Imamate regulates Muslims and religion, and the Imam has been introduced as a guard who is immune from weakness and fear.40 In short, the Imam is the guard of God's religion41 and the

guardian of His servants.42

Addressing Yazid ibn Salit, Imam al-Kazim referred to this significant function in Imam al-Rida:

Through him, Allah will prevent from bloodshed, make peace between people, gather dispersed people, and fill the gap (i.e., remove innovations in religion as well as misguidance).43

Imam al-Sadiq's word on Zurarah is the clear example of defense of the Shi'a. This defense was so strong that it led to others' finding fault with this prominent companion. In a word indicating the opposing atmosphere, Imam al-Sadiq stressed that opposition and adversaries would quickly put persecution of whoever was praised by the Ahlul Bayt.

In that time, due to opposition to Ahlul Bayt, it was customary to praise those rebuked by the Ahlul Bayt and to rebuke those praised by them.44

The Last Word

There are two prerequisites for the fulfillment of these functions in society: one concerns God's servants and the other is related to God Himself.

To benefit from the functions of the Imam in society, God's servants need three elements: 1) submission to the Imam, 2) recognition of him, and 3) knowledge about him. Undoubtedly, the fulfillment of these elements as a cycle is in people's individual and social interests.

According to Imam al-Sadiq, if this cycle lacks perfection, and misguidance and bewilderment are certain to emerge, and on the other hand, the good deed is derived from submission to – and confirmation of – the Imam, this is accepted by God. He also emphasized that God accepts fulfilling conditions and keeping promises.45

In the narrations of the section The divine argument is not complete except through the Imam,46 what stipulated in the phrase "حتى يعرف " is regarded as the condition for fulfilment of divine Hujjah for people. On the possible interpretation of this phrase, Allamah Majlisi wrote,

It is possible to regard "حتى يعرف "as an active voice; meaning until people know what they need. This way our claim is proved. Another possibility is to consider it as a passive voice with an accent (*shiddah*) or without. This way, the verb refers to God, religion, or the truth ... The same possibility applies to some copies in which there is *hayy* meaning alive instead of *hatt* meaning unless or until, but the verb refers to the Imam.47

As mentioned above, every Imam, including the prominent companions, used to introduce the next Imam who was not responsible for introducing himself.

The intensity of the above-mentioned functions in the presence of the Imam or during his occultation is

an important issue worthy of investigation. The mechanism of each function differs from the period of Imam's presence to his occultation; however, their basis is the same. No doubt, these two characteristics, namely being the means of divine bounty and spiritual guidance go beyond time and place by their very nature.

However, controlling faults, managing social relationships, and safeguarding Shi'as and their beliefs are issues that depend on the direct, immediate presence of the Imam in society. Although instances of these functions can be reported, the complete fulfilment of these functions is contingent upon presence of the Imam and is considered a great divine blessing on His servants.

Conclusion

The mechanism of administering society is rooted in its intellectual and educational elevation. The need for Hujjah and his interpretative role in understanding the Qur'an is also an undeniable element that leads society to accept and follow the Imam. Guidance and its related terms in the Qur'an and hadith firstly are attributed to God and then to the prophets and their successors.

The impact of the Imam's guidance on our lives is direct and deep in individual and social life. Establishing order in society and introducing a criterion for relationships among rulers and society are other functions of this institution that are to guarantee people's real interests which are tainted with carnal desires in the alternative versions to Imamate.

The great impact of Imamate and its central element, the Imam, is portrayed in how he rectifies the relationship between a servant and his Lord as the underlying building block of society. Safeguarding God's religion, protecting its realm, and preventing disagreements and disunity among Shi'a all imply the comprehensive functions of this institution.

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1. The household of Prophet Muhammad, namely Imams Ali, Hasan, and Husayn, Lady Fatimah, and the Prophet himself.
2. Maqalat-ul-Islamiyyain wal Ikhtilaf al-Musallin, p 2.
3. Al-Milal wa a-Nihal. vol. 1, p. 24.
4. See Ibn Khaldun: p. 203 and Al-Imamah wa Al-RRad ala-Rafidah, p. 24.
5. Nahj-ul-Balaghah: p. 264, sermon 189.
6. ibid. p. 198, sermon 152.
7. Al-Kafi, vol. 9, p. 429, the section a-Dua' ila al-Islam qabl al-Qital, H. 1.
8. ibid. vol.2, section fi Ghaybah meaning "On Occultattion", p.148, H. 11.
9. ibid. vol.1, the book al-'Aql wa al-Jahl, p.30, H. 11.
10. Tahdhib-ul-Ahkam, vol. 6, p.100; Man la Yahduruhul-Faqih, vol. 2, p. 616.
11. Al-Kafi, vol. 1, p. 348, section Jawami' al-Tawhid, H-7.
12. See Investigation of the Holy Qur'an Words, vol. 2, p. 169.
13. Al-Kafi: section al-Iztirar ila Hujjah, pp. 409-410, H-1.
14. The noteworthy point in the title of this section is that the need for Hujjah is urgent, and unlike the theological discussions which start talking about the Imam with favor which has a descending relationship with servants, the urgent need for Hujjah which has an ascending relationship with servants can be found in Hadiths. Careful investigation of Hadiths in this section shows that Imam's words confirm his companions' beliefs, and they should talk of their own understanding of this issue. Ahl-ul-Bayt's teachings in this regard indicate Shi'as' ability to defend and elaborate on Imamate as well as to rationally define it.
15. ibid., p. 411, H-2, p. 462, H-15.
16. Surely Ours is it to guide (Surah Layl: 12); Whomsoever Allah guides, he is the one who is guided (Surah Araf :178); Surely the[true] guidance is the guidance of Allah (Surah Ale-Imran:73).
17. Qur'anic chapter Baqarah: 159, Qur'anic chapter Nisa:115.
18. The Imam's questioning him is noteworthy.
19. Al-Kafi, vol. 1, section "surely Imams are guidance," pp. 471 472, H-3.
20. ibid. section "the knowledge of the Imam and rejecting him", pp. 448 449, H-8.
21. Al-Kafi, vol. 1, pp. 477-482.
22. ibid. vol. 1, pp. 441-454.
23. ibid.: the section "obedience to Imams is obligatory", pp. 465, H-17.
24. Kulayni allocated a section to this topic. (See ibid. vol. 1, p. 439).
25. ibid. vol. 2, p. 703, H-17.
26. See the section "surely guidance is from God", p. 400, H-1, and p. 404, H-3, p. 405, H-4.
27. For more information on related Qur'anic verses and an analysis of this relationship see: "Imamate and Seal of

Peophethood from the Perspective of the Qur'an and Hadith", pp. 111- 114.

28. al-Kafi, the section "verily the earth is not left void of Hujjah", pp. 433-434, H-2.

29. Tahdhib-ul-Ahkam, vol. 6, p.100; Man la Yahduruhul-Faqih, vol. 2, p. 616.

30. al-Kafi, vol. 1, pp. 413-416, H-3.

31. See Mir'at-ul-Oqul, vol. 2, p. 295, Commentary on Osul al-Kafi, vol. 2, p. 479.

32. Commentary on Osul al-Kafi: p. 435, H-5.

33. Al-Kafi, vol. 2, section "What distinguishes between the rightful and the false claimer in Imamate, p. 191, H-7, Basa'ir-u-Darajat, p. 251, the section "Imams informed their Shi'a of what was going in their minds and their internal conversations, H-4, Ikhtiyar al-Ma'rifah a- Rijal, vol. 2, p. 556, No. 502.

34. This concept received attention in numerous collections of narratives. For example, in Basa'ir-u-Darajat there are sections such as "Imams have the knowledge which is received from Prophet, and they do not speak based on their own ideas" including 14 hadiths and "The Prophet gave Imam Ali the Greater Name of Allah, the Prophetic heritage, and the knowledge heritage on his deathbed" including 4 hadiths emphasize that the Imams' knowledge is connected to divine revelation, inherited and protected. (See Basa'ir-u-Darajat, pp. 229 and 468).

35. Allama Majlisi used the word "لما" instead of "آمنا". Bihar al-Anwar al-Jami'ah Li Durar A'imah al-Athar, vol 29, p 241.

36. Balaghat-a-Nisa: p.16.

37. Al-Kafi, the section "On Merits of the Imam and his qualities," p. 492.

38. ibid. the section "Surely Imams are guardians of His affairs and treasures of His knowledge", p. 476, H-6.

39. Nahj al-Balaghah, letter 9, p. 368.

40. Al-Kafi, section "On Merits of the Imam and his qualities," p. 489, H-1.

41. ibid.

42. ibid., p. 503, H-2.

43. ibid. vol. 2, section on designation of Imam Rida, p. 78, H-14.

44. See Ikhtiyar al-Ma'rifah a-Rijal: vol. 1, pp. 138, no. 221.

45. Al-Kafi, vol. 1, the section "Knowledge of the Imam and rejection of him", p. 445, H-6.

46. باب ان الحجة لا تقوم لله على خلقه إلا بإمام

47. Mir'at-ul-Oqul, vol. 2, p. 293.

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