

Shi'ism and the Vision of Islamic Democracy - Ways to Secure Peace and Human Rights

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Abstract

Democracy is a much used and abused word. As a possible structure of political organization, democratic concepts are very much under debate in Muslim countries. Democracy in a western sense has become associated with a forceful “democratization” of the Middle East, which in effect has brought war and various forms of foreign domination to crucial areas of this sensitive region. However, up to now democratic structures are an exception in Muslim countries. Due to historical developments during the past centuries, there seems to be a lack of theoretical backing for democracy in the culture of the Middle East. This is surprising, because Islam, from its beginning, has offered the model of shura (consultation), which can and should be developed to serve modern governance.

Especially Shi'ism can offer a theological backing through interpretations and explanations conducive to the formation and implementation of an Islamic democracy. In Imam Ali's (a.s.) letter to Malik al-Ashtar, we find a beautiful outline of what today is called “good governance”. Moreover, Shi'ism postulates the Imamate of the Mahdi (a.s.) as a just rule to-come. In the absence of the Imam-e zaman, an Islamic democracy should prevail with full participation of Muslims. But how is it possible to organize a modern Muslim country democratically? In addition to a working government and a majlis or parliament formed on the basis of elections, the expertise of religious scholars is needed – scholars who are capable of Ijtihad, so that they can find answers to the needs of present-day life in the wake of ongoing social change.

In an Islamic polity, the period of awaiting al-Mahdi al-muntazar requires active participation of the people, since unless there is widespread readiness to support the

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good cause, the Mahdi will not appear. This participation is a basic human right and also a duty of men and women. For this purpose, every individual should have the opportunity to develop his/her moral, religious and cultural consciousness and the social and political awareness through education and self-education, so that citizens may fulfil their social and democratic responsibilities within the framework of Islam.

Keywords: Shi'ism; Islam; Democracy; Peace; Human Rights.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to look into the interdependence of peace, human rights and democracy, and to examine the religious aspects connected thereto. In this context, democracy can be understood as a political method that works to ensure that human rights are respected, and – with the help of public participation – justice can be established and peace secured in the social and political field on a national and international level.

What is the role of religion – and specifically Islam - in this context? Islam and Muslims are nowadays often blamed for a supposed inability or unwillingness, to implement democratic structures. As a matter of fact, up to now democratic structures are an exception in Muslim countries. Due to historical developments during the past centuries, there seems to be a lack of theoretical backing for democracy in the culture of the Middle East. This is surprising, because Islam, from its beginning, has offered the model of *shura* (consultation), which can and should be developed to serve modern governance.

While more theological expertise is required to work on the precise mechanisms of an Islamic democracy, I would like to recall some outlines that connect the above-mentioned values and human aspirations, i.e. peace and human rights, and democracy as a way to reach and to secure both of them.

It may be interesting to note that especially the Shi'a school of thought can offer a theological backing through interpretations and explanations conducive to the formation and implementation of an Islamic democracy – e.g. in Imam Ali's (P)¹ letter to Malik al-Ashtar, we find a beautiful outline of what today is called “good governance”. They are meant to ensure the rights of citizens – though the concept of “citizen” is a modern one. Nevertheless, these teachings can be incorporated into modern concepts for broad popular participation.

Definitions

1. *Democracy* is a much used and abused word. If we go to the ancient Greek roots of the word², it approximately means “sovereignty of the people”. However, at that time “the people” resp. citizens, or electorate, did not include women, slaves, strangers or those who did not own land. Platon in his *politaea*

1. Muslim readers and listeners are asked to express their respect for the Imam by mentioning “Peace be upon him” after his name.

2. See: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy>

was not in favour of democracy, he preferred elitist systems, or a nomocracy (rule of law) over it. His disciple Aristoteles made a further differentiation, preferring *politie*, i.e. the rule of reasonable members of society. He laid greater emphasis on good government than on any form of representative rule. Positive connotations that are part of the modern understanding of democracy can be found in his definition of *politie*. It was only following the French revolution, that democracy assumed a broader popularity and extended understanding. In the course of times, the concept of democracy has assumed a much wider meaning, it has come to include concepts such as a just political system, in which the voice of the people is heard and heeded, it implies social justice, an economically balanced system, civil rights, and participation of individuals and groups in the political process. There is no fixed or comprehensive definition of democracy, and several forms of it exist today. Nevertheless, democratic systems have some characteristics that distinguish them from other types of government. Depending on the respective focus, some of these are:

- participation of the people in public affairs and in the political decision-making process;
- separation of the legislative, the judiciary and the executive power from each other;
- Control of government performance by an elected body, e.g. a parliament or *Shura*.

In Muslim societies, democratic concepts are under debate as a possible structure for political organisation. This is for two reasons:

1.1 In Islamic understanding, Allah is the sovereign and the supreme law-giver, and thus an Islamic state should be based on His divine commandments. Therefore, the scope of human lawmakers, i.e. parliamentarians, is by necessity a limited one, and should be carefully defined.¹ On the whole, democratic rights are considered positive and desirable, and efforts have been made to have them theoretically embedded into the teachings of Islam.

1.2 Democracy in a western sense has become associated with a forceful “democratisation” of the Middle East, which in effect has brought war and various forms of foreign domination to crucial areas of this sensitive region. The claim of western powers to spread or support democracy is often understood as a deceitful scheme for spreading western domination. This the more so, as democratic elections in Muslim communities – such as in Palestine

1. See: Jannati, 1985: 56-70.

and in the early 1990ies in Algeria – were not accepted by the West, because they yielded results in accordance with the wish of the people, but not in accordance with (foreign) hegemonial intentions.

This situation leaves Muslim peoples in a dilemma. Democracy can neither be imported into the world of Islam, nor can it be brought about by force. A viable democracy in Muslim countries has to grow out of the peoples' own religious and cultural values. The religion of Islam – and in particular the Shi'a *madhhab* - can provide theological, spiritual and practical guidance as to how democracy can be realised within the framework of Islam.

2. *Human Rights* are equally a source of debate between Islam and the West. Which rights do we mean?

2.1 The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) of 1948 contains a corpus of rights resulting from earlier documents that evolved in 17th century Europe, and later also America.¹ The historical background is the so-called Age of Enlightenment, when endeavours were made to put an end to medieval clerical domination over virtually all human affairs, and to emancipate the citizen as an individual with own rights and responsibilities. This has to be seen also against the background of the 30 Years' War that raged over Europe – a war between Christian Catholics and Protestants, and also a struggle for political domination by some powers or empires over others.

When the UDHR was promulgated as a legal instrument after two more World Wars (that started from Europe), the intention was to stipulate a code of minimum rights of the individual vis-à-vis state authorities, and the subsequent conventions such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (both of 1966/1976) have gone further to specify certain rights in greater detail (last not least in the light of a bipolar world), later also women's rights (i.e. CEDAW of 1979/1981), and a number of other global and regional conventions.

2.2 Historically, the world of Islam has gone through quite different developments:

There was nothing like a Church in the realm of Islam that stood between the individual believer and God. Consequently, the sciences of the time were not hampered in their development – and during the “(Dark) Middle Ages” in Europe, the Islamic civilisation went through its “Golden Age” full of

1. See: Bielefeldt, 1995: 587-617.

achievements in all fields of knowledge, brought about by independent thinking of its great thinkers and scholars.

Later the realm of Islam fell into stagnation, and here it would lead us too far to analyse the manifold reasons for this. But what was equally important was that in the modern age Muslims lands were colonized at a large scale, making them the objects of exploitation and humiliation, while the colonial powers thrived on their natural wealth, developing their own economies and pushing forward industrialisation and research.

Thus, when today Western thinkers urge Muslims to bring about an “Age of Enlightenment” for the Islamic civilisation, Muslims again find themselves in a dilemma – because modernism and post-modernism have already arrived in Muslim societies, leaving the social and spiritual development of their human force grappling with all the contradictions. In addition, the many effects of globalisation call for adequate and positive answers.

2.3 Human Rights in Islam.

While human rights are being abused worldwide, Muslim countries are frequently urged to implement them, and Islam is often thought to be “incompatible with human rights”.

The stance of Islam towards human rights is not the main subject of this paper, but let me mention that – as the esteemed audience is aware – several Islamic declarations of human rights have been issued, a number of conferences held (also in Iran) and valuable books published on this and related topics. Some of those works deal with the rights of women and of minorities in a Muslim majority society – topics that still require further attention. As my own humble effort, I undertook to search in Islamic sources which of the “modern” human rights can be linked to them,¹ and I found a considerable number of texts from the holy Qur'an and *Hadith* (although this work must be considered incomplete).

It may be argued that as the UDHR contains a standard of rights which is universal, there is no need to look for rights peculiar to certain cultures, as this might lead into “cultural relativism.” Nevertheless, experts appreciate that it is worthwhile to trace the common roots of human rights in any culture of humanity.²

1. See: Abid, 2004.

2. See: Bielefeldt, 1995: 587-617.

The work done so far by Islamic scholars and Muslim thinkers shows that Islam not only has a rich tradition of human rights, but there is also a common basis with international human rights documents. However, much remains still to be done to recognize the full scale of human rights and dignities with complete confidence from the viewpoint of Islam, and to realize human rights – both on an individual as well as on a collective level – in Muslim societies.

3. *Peace* is an aspiration of all mankind. The world's great religions propagate peace in their original teachings, and Gods messengers were sent to guide the believers so that they may find peace in submission to God. Islam is the best example in this regard, the word "Islam" itself being derived from the Arabic root consonants "*s-l-m*" which symbolize "being in peace, being safe and sound" – in short, being in peace with the Creator and all creation and also with oneself. A Muslim is a person who submits to God's will and thereby finds peace.

In the holy Qur'an, Sura 10, Verse 25 we read:

"And Allah invites to the abode of peace and guides whom He pleases to a right path".¹

The history of Islam and of Muslim nations shows that a lasting peace must be based on justice. Justice is one of the main tenets advocated by Islam.² No stable peace can be reached as long as injustice prevails, because oppression and injustice are in themselves an aggression and a violation of human rights. Injustice destroys peace, because it creates suffering and eventually results in unrest and rebellion.

Non-Muslim sources and media depict Islam often as a war-like ideology that was spread by "fire and sword". Contrary to this, the teachings of Islam offer many practical examples on how peace can be achieved and protected, and the behaviour of the defenders of early Islam, even in times of war, shows a humane treatment of civilians, refugees and prisoners of war, and respect for the priests and sanctuaries of other religions.³ Not Islam can be blamed, when in the course of Muslim history these ideals were abolished by some individuals, warlords or by rulers more interested in power than in religion. In the same way, the religion of Islam cannot be held responsible when today Islam is misused and its teachings perverted by criminals and terrorists.

1. The Holy Qur'an. Translation into English & Persian by Akbar IRANPANAHI, Sazman-e Chap va Entesharat, Tehran, 1378/1999

2. See: Beheshti & Bahonar, 1993: 116-129.

3. See: Muhaqqiq Damad, 2001: 253-293.

However, it is the Muslims and their religious leaders and scholars who should take a clear stance against such deviations.

The Role of Democracy in Relation to Human Rights and Peace

The interdependence of peace and justice points to democracy as a method of stabilizing and upholding both justice and peace. Democracy – for this purpose understood as active and institutionalised participation of the people in the social, political and economic affairs of their country – has some main purposes, e.g.

- Participation in decision-making at a different levels as a bottom-up process,
- Participation by electing qualified representatives to a legislative assembly and its organs,
- Ensuring the best possible performance of the state's organs by exercising a controlling function through democratic institutions, embedded in the legal system.

If these tasks are performed properly 1) at local *Shura* levels and 2) at parliamentary level, injustice in its various forms can be curbed and eliminated and justice should prevail. Social and economic justice secures social peace, allows for legitimate wealth, investments and a sensible economic growth. Thus it helps to develop trade and commerce on a national and international level, and contributes to good relations with neighbouring countries and peace in the region.

Options for Islamic Democracy in Shi'ite Thought

To elucidate the basis for democracy in an Islamic system, it is necessary to look at the human being in Islamic philosophy first. Muhammad Hossein Beheshti and M. Jawad Bahonar in their book “Philosophy of Islam”¹ write under “Doctrine of Justice: This is the real Shi'ah doctrine based on the moderate views of Islam. Imam Ja'far al Sadeq (P) has said: 'There is no predestination nor absolute human discretion. The truth lies between the two extremes.’” – The authors conclude among others: “As man's free will is also an outcome of the command of Allah, therefore Allah alone is the Sovereign Lord of the whole universe including man. [...] It is evident that man's free will does not amount to absolute freedom. It has many limitations: natural, environmental, hereditary, innate, etc. ...”²

1. See: Beheshti & Bahonar, 1993: 120.

2. See: Beheshti & Bahonar, 1993: 120.

The authors refer to the rule of law as one of the basic requirements for the functioning of an Islamic state:¹

“...what appears to be necessary is to throw a little more light on the factors which guarantee the enforcement of law under the social system of Islam. These factors are as under:

- mature thinking of the masses,
- human and ideological sentiments,
- faith in Allah and His recompense and retribution in this world as well as in the next,
- deep and wholehearted respect of law because it has a direct and indirect connection with Allah,
- exhortation to good and restraining from evil², and Government”.

Concerning the legitimacy of government, elections play a major role, and the process of election will have to be regulated and organized in accordance with times and needs, as shown below.

Election of the Head of State

Imam Ali is reported to have said:

“In a Divine rule and an Islamic state it is an obligation of Muslims not to make any [collective] move before they select for themselves a chaste and knowledgeable leader who is pious, abstinent and well-versed in administration of justice, who may collect for them tribute, taxes and charities, and take care of their *hajj* and [prayers in] congregation.”³

The election of the head of an Islamic state is an intricate matter. A common question raised is how a Shi'ite community will deal with this issue, because all mundane leadership is considered only a preliminary and temporary substitute for the hidden Imam (AS). M.H. BEHISHTI and M.J. BAHONAR (p. 478ff) distinguish between appointment by Allah – which of course pertains to Prophets only – and appointment by a Prophet, which pertains to his successor(s). For both cases, the authors consider that recognition by the people should follow automatically - but as we know, differences of opinion

1. See: Beheshti & Bahonar, 1993: 471.

2. *amr bil-ma'ruf va nahy an al munkar*

3. Quoted from Al-Hayat, Vol. II, p. 421 in: JANNATI Ayatullah Ahmad: Legislation in an Islamic State. p. 61, In: Al-Tawhid, A Quarterly Journal of Islamic Thought and Culture, Vol. II, No. 3, Orient Distrib. Services, London, April-June 1985.

emerged after the demise of Prophet Muhammad (P)¹ which resulted in a different understanding between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims.

As a third way of appointment, Behshti and Bahonar mention appointment of a head of state through election by the people – a process which becomes applicable in our times and is therefore of particular interest. The authors stress that this form of government is accepted by all Islamic schools of thought (*madhab / madhahib*), “with the difference that the Shi'a regard it as justified only during the occultation of the Imam of the Age. Otherwise the Shi'a give preference to those who were appointed or designated by the Prophet and the Imams. But according to the Sunnis immediately on the death of the holy Prophet, this form became the only right form of the government.” (p. 483)

Then the authors point out that during the period of occultation of the 12th Imam, only the general qualities and characteristics for leadership have been mentioned: “This shows that it is up to the people themselves to choose a person as their leader, having those qualities and characteristics.” (p. 483) BEHISHTI and BAHONAR thoroughly discuss the nature of allegiance (*bay'at*), either as a covenant of acceptance and obedience, or – in some instances - as a general, popular vote, or a vote of confidence, e.g. by parliament or by an elective council, to the head of state. From their elaborations we can derive that leadership gains legitimacy

a) From elections whose procedure will have to be specified in a constitution and pertinent regulations,

b) From continuous support of the people resulting from the unquestionable human, moral and spiritual qualities of the person elected.

Point a) will not be analysed here in greater detail, since structured election processes, just like the power structures in the state and the organisation of government will depend on the constitution of the respective country. As mentioned already, a representative government needs to be organised in a way as to ensure peoples' participation on the broadest possible level.

Point b) requires a large measure of transparency of the power structure and performance of leadership and government, because without such insight, the continuous support of the people cannot be guaranteed. Here arises the

1. Muslim readers and listeners are asked to express their respect for the Prophet by mentioning "Peace be upon him and his family" after his name.

question of control of power, and we arrive again at the vigilant participation of the people, men and women.

Some Orientalists and/or Islamologists rather prefer the Sunni model of election of a Caliph as the more democratic approach to Islamic leadership. However, when taking a closer look upon history, different aspects open up. First of all, the election of the first four Caliphs – generally called “the rightly-guided Caliphs” – cannot be termed an overall popular election as we understand elections today.¹

Nevertheless, even if those Caliphs were appointed by acclamation or installed through different processes of election – election processes that can be found in modern times as well – the allegiance (*bay'a*) given to them required public consent by men and women alike. It is also reported in some sources that prior to the election of the Caliph all citizens of the Medina State, men and women alike, were asked to give their opinion with regard to the eligible candidates. Hence, even if – in a modern sense - no polling stations were set up at that time, public consent was important.

However, with the transformation of the Caliphate into a hereditary monarchy by the Umayyads, to be continued by the Abbasids, the democratic traits of early Islam vanished altogether, although in the works of later Sunni theoreticians on the legitimacy of political (i.e. Caliphal) authority some of the early ideals are still present.

In contrast, Shi'a Muslims have different views on the history of the early Caliphate. They hold that Imam Ali was appointed by Prophet Muhammad himself at Ghadir-Khumm, and all later disputes were, therefore, out of place. Proper leadership was rightfully due to the *Ahl-e Bayt*, i.e. Ali and his successors – twelve according to *Ithna 'Ashariya* (seven according to the *Isma'ili* and five according to the *Zaydi* school of thought).

Modern Shi'i thinkers like Ali Shari'ati have pondered about how democracy can be realized while accepting that Imam Ali was appointed by the Prophet to succeed him, and the succession of 11 more Imams after Ali was also mentioned by Muhammad. Shari'ati highlights the spiritual and moral quality of the Imamate in addition to the role of political leadership (i.e. Caliphate) in his essay “Selection and/or Election”.² Just as Prophethood, also the Imamate

1. For details See: Beheshti & Bahonar, 1993: 496; 488.

2. See: <http://www.shariati.com/election.html> (29/12/2008)

is not subject to popular vote but to Divine appointment. Concerning the time of occultation of the 12th Imam, he writes:

“There are two historic phases after the Prophet. One is a temporary phase of the 12 leaders of Islamic society. They guide Islamic history in order to foster Islamic society. This is organized by means of 12 particular individuals chosen by the Prophet.

The Prophet remained silent about the second phase. Religion and society continue.

Therefore (after *vesayat* – my interpolation), again we should adhere to the second principle which is also an Islamic principle, the principle of council and allegiance. [.....] Democracy means leadership by means of allegiance and council by election.”

According to Ali Shari'ati, the practice of pledging allegiance should be a conscious democratic act by which the members of society accept the leadership – either by consent if they constitute the majority, or by compromise if they constitute the minority.

In view of a pre-defined leadership by the 12th Imam, the awaited *Al-Mahdi al-muntazar*¹, some critics raise the question how democracy can be realised in a Shi'ite political entity. For centuries, Shi'ite scholars held that in the absence of the 12th Imam, all political leadership can only be a substitute.

However, the vision of a perfectly just rule after the Mahdi's appearance offers a big chance to strive for true democracy in his absence, and the notion of being only a substitute implies a huge moral responsibility. Imam Ar-Reza (P) said in an important sermon: “An Imam is a trustee of the people appointed by Allah”.² But how can leadership obtain and secure legitimacy in the absence of the 12th Imam? The answer must be: by the clear vote and overwhelming consent of the people: “*Mizan ra'y-e millat ast*” – as Imam Khomeini put it in distinct terms: “The balance (of decision) lies in the vote of the nation”.

Next to legitimate leadership, the political processes need to be defined. Consultation (*Shura*) is a general principle, and in the complex structures of a modern state, it can best be realized in a manner of democratic representation.

1. The Muslim audience is asked to express respect: "Peace be upon him".

2. See: Usul al-Kafi, Vol. I, quoted in See: Beheshti & Bahonar, 1993: 494.

Consultation (*Shura*)

From an Islamic point of view, it is quite clear that *Shura* – counsel and consultation – should lie at the core of decision-making in a given political entity, and in human communities in general, in accordance with Qur'an, Sura 42, in particular verse 38. Counsel is a principle, but the method is open, and its efficiency in terms of popular participation and public discourse depends on the quality of implementation.

Ali Shari'ati in his above-mentioned essay "Selection and/or Election"¹ elucidates the practice of Prophet Muhammad:

“We see that the Prophet himself in his life-time held councils and even, at times, preferred another's opinion over his own and he did not impose himself upon them. We saw with the battle of Ohod, the Prophet intended to remain in Medina while the younger people wanted to leave Medina and fight. After a vote, the young people won. The Prophet was in the minority. The Prophet immediately went out and returned armed for battle.”

After quoting a few more examples, Shari'ati continues:

“We see that even knowing the position of the Prophet, he permitted the people to vote and express their opinions. He valued the vote of the majority in social affairs. [...] The Traditions (*Sunna*) of the Prophet show how much importance Muhammad placed in his personal actions on counsel and on yielding to public opinion and the votes of the majority.”

In modern states of today, as far as peoples' participation on the broadest possible level is concerned, we will first of all face organisational questions with regulating election processes and with establishing *Shura* at various levels. I shall not deal with these organisational and administrative matters here, because their realization depends on many different circumstances. In other words, suitable processes of *Shura* have to be implemented, but how this is done in a particular Muslim community will be subject to circumstances such as time and geographical area, accepted local customs (*'urf*) and other details.

The same applies to popular elections to any *Shura* body, the details of which are to be adapted in accordance with the needs and situation of the society.

1. See: <http://www.shariati.com/election.html> [29/12/2008]

Lessons from the *Nahj Al-Balagha*

Representative bodies did not exist at the time of Imam Ali in forms we know today. Arab society had been a tribal one, and only through Islam the loyalty of its members was shifted from the tribe to the *Umma*. However, tribal interests, tribal councils and an elected chieftainship continued to exist, and also Imam Ali counted on the loyalty and support of some tribal heads who in turn were representatives of their clans. Thus we have a rudimentary form of election and representation, but nevertheless, in the Imam's sermons and writings we find many interesting remarks concerning the relationship between a government and its subjects.

The Imam was in favour of an open, “transparent” administration that today we would call the best form of democracy. He stressed that each and every citizen should have access to those in charge, in order to voice his or her concern and problems vis-a-vis the government. He insisted that all letters or applications to the government must be dealt with and carefully answered; none was to be disregarded.¹

Imam Ali relied on consultation and said: “Take your subjects into confidence and make them feel that you are their well-wisher and friend. - Never break a promise or go against the terms of a treaty. It is a sin against God.”

To his able administrator Malik al-Ashtar he pointed out that those on top must be open to criticism:

.... Malik, I am sending you as a governor to a country which had seen many governments before this. Some of them were benign, sympathetic and good, while many were tyrannical, oppressive and cruel. People will judge your government as critically as you have studied the activities of other governments; they criticise you in the same way as you have criticised or approved other rulers. (Askari Jafery, 1981: 75)

If citizens are to carry out their rights and duties, they need freedom to express their views in the process of participation. Constructive criticism is an asset for every administration, and Ali told Malik al-Ashtar to place confidence and trust into honest companions and ministers “...who can always speak out the bitter truth to you most unreservedly and without fear of your position ...” (Askari Jafery, 1981: 250)

1. See: Askari Jafery, 1981: 87.

From the order to Malik al-Ashtar we understand that not only free expression of opinion was considered crucial by Imam Ali, the overall approval of governmental performance by the citizens (or subjects at that time) is also one of the main topics of Ali's letter, e.g.:

The things which should most gladden the heart of a ruler must be the fact that his state is being ruled on the principles of equity and justice and that his subjects love him. And your subjects will love you only when their hearts are not sore against you. Their sincerity and faithfulness will be proved if they gather around you to support your government, when they bear your authority without considering it an unbearable burden on their heads and when they do not constantly wish your rule to come to an end. (Askari Jafery, 1981: 252)

Many more lessons on good governance can be derived from Ali's sermons and letters, e.g. loss of contact with the people, with the electorate, means loss of sight of political realities: "You must take care not to cut yourself off from the public. Do not place a prestige curtain between you and those over whom you rule" (Askari Jafery, 1981: 256)

In our times there are different ways and means to provide for the flow of information between government and people, and to ensure counselling and control of power. As pointed out by Imam Ali, one such instrument is public opinion – today closely intertwined with the press and other media, topics with might be subject to further research.

Modern features

An important sector of people's participation are initiatives of individuals or groups for the benefit of society. Such initiatives have assumed increasing importance during the last decades, also in Muslim countries, and now constitute an important part of what is called "civil society".

The Iranian political scientist A. Naghizadeh saw a broad involvement of the citizens as constituent of democratic processes:

In our opinion the close relationship between Islam and democracy – as a kind of direct democracy and popular vote – is more important than all other ideas. Obviously there is no prohibition that stands in the way of this elementary form of democracy to crystallize in a modern way. When democracy is accepted, different ways of thinking also have to be recognized. Obviously Islam is a rallying point of all

these tendencies. Furthermore, we have to consider that also western societies are based on overall consent, without which the meaning of society would become absurd. (Naghizadeh, 2000: 34-38)

This “crystallization in a modern way” can take shape in the form of associations and interest groups (socially, culturally, professionally ...) in the framework of law.

In Iran, “*mardom-salariye diny*” is frequently referred to as a modern concept for democratic participation in an Islamic framework. I shall neither translate this special term here, nor attempt to interpret it. It will be worthwhile for social and political scientists to follow up the developments with regard to this interesting subject.

Last not least, it can be seen that institutions for democratic participation – such as elections, parliaments and consultative bodies at local or community level – have been created in most Muslim majority countries. However, differences and/or difficulties are to be observed in their accessibility and effective use. This concerns also the exercise of the human rights/citizens’ rights connected thereto. In this regard, religious awareness of the people can set an agenda for fairness, equity and justice in all affairs of Muslim societies.

Conclusion

When taking a close look upon Islamic theories of state, Shi’i as well as Sunni schools of thought offer democratic ways for popular participation, elections and government, provided the political will is there.

The Shi’ite position regarding the awaited rule of the Mahdi does not mean that until he appears, the community is to be ruled by an autocratic leader. On the contrary: The expectation of the Mahdi’s benevolent rule requires the society to prepare itself well for this ideal state of affairs. This expectation is a vision, and society can come close to it if it implements justice in all spheres, socially and economically, and if it provides for “clean politics” and transparent power structures that have no dark sides to hide.

With regard to leadership, some practical points remain to be discussed. It is not enough to demand that a person is elected for leadership in a valid election procedure. No matter how qualified, wise and pious such person may be, it is nowadays impossible for one single human being to overlook all affairs of a complex modern state. Leadership needs consultation (*Shura*), and the role of

consultative bodies has to be laid down in a constitution. Likewise, those consultative bodies not only have to be composed of experts in various fields, they also have to be representative of the peoples' aspirations.

Ali Shari'ati stated in one of his essays:

The political philosophy and the form of regime of the *Umma* is not the democracy of heads, not irresponsible and directionless liberalism which is a plaything of contesting social forces, not putrid aristocracy, not anti-popular dictatorship, not a self-imposing oligarchy. It consists rather of "purity of leadership" (not the leader, for that would be fascism), committed and revolutionary leadership, responsible for the movement and growth of society on the basis of its world-view and ideology, and for the realization of the divine destiny of man in the plan of creation. This is the true meaning of Imamate! (Shariati, 1979: 119)

Out of the complex topic of human rights, I have laid emphasis in this paper on the citizens' rights vis-à-vis the government concerning aspects of democratic participation. The Shi'a theory of state offers more of it, and the concept of awaiting the Mahdi's just rule opens the door for political legitimacy through democracy in anticipating him. It is the balance of rights and responsibilities that helps to stabilize justice and peace on a national and international level.

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