The Relation between Islam and Democracy from the Viewpoints of Religious Authorities

Marḍiyyah Amīrī

Abstract

From the beginning of development in man's civilization and culmination of human society, when the governments were founded, every government has adopted a certain model for administering the society under its rule. One type of government is democracy whose roots date back to ancient Greece and with the course of time has undergone much change. It has now come to be the superficial form of government in most of the western countries under the name of government of the people over people. After the Islamic Revolution of Iran, whose late founder Imām Khomeinī, considering people's will, declared the government as Islamic Republic, the world was taken by surprise and could not make out the reconciliation between a religious government and republicanism, and regarded it as an utter paradox. Likewise, some of the admirers of the western democracy regarded the reconciliation between Islam and democracy a kind of paradox and anomaly. This paper is a review of the enlightening viewpoints of Imām Khomeinī and those of some other Islamic scholars on this matter, with the aim of making though little effort in resolving this paradox.

Introduction

From the beginning of the Islamic Revolution and formation of the Islamic Republic by the Revolution wise leader, Imām Khomeinī, a question has always been raised by the world's politicians and mass media reporters: what do you mean by this kind of government? Is it a conservative government based on the religious ideals? Is it a communist government or a capitalistic one? Is it possible to talk of democracy in a regime that is based on single religion and faith that is Islamic?

In answer to these questions Imām Khomeinī used to express his ideas in short, and in many cases left the comprehensive answer of these questions to other scholars among whom, Martyr Muṭahharī has expressed most ideas.

Two decades after the glorified Revolution, with regard to the doubts raised on the problem of republicanism of the Islamic government, and on the reconciliation of Islam and republicanism and democracy in an Islamic system, it is worth analyzing, however briefly, Imām Khomeinī's views as well as those of 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī and Martyr Muṭahharī and those of other religious eminent personalities.

The concept of democracy has undergone much change, from the time of its appearance in the Metropolis of the ancient Greece in which democracy meant direct involvement of people in government up to now for which no exact and comprehensive definition, despite its defender's claim, is presented. In different sciences, hence, the notion of democracy takes different meanings. However, the concept of democracy, which has entered other domains as well, producing such concepts as economic democracy, social democracy, etc, is principally related to the realm of politics.

What prevailed and became known as political democracy, regardless of its deficiencies and severe consequences was that defined by Abraham Lincoln who thought democracy as "*government of the people, by the people, for the people*"[1]. Which minus the role of religion, it is accepted today. Although democracy does not necessarily negate religion, its role is so highly disregarded in law-making that it has practically led to its elimination.

Believing that democracy is part of Islam and that from Islamic point of view people are free in both thought and action, Imām Khomeinī does not separate democracy from Islam.[2] Islam is indeed an advanced and democratic

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[1] Dāriyūsh 'Āshūrī, "*Dictionary of Political Terms*", Morvārīd Publication, Tehran, 11th edition, 1375 AHS, p. 88.

[2] *Ṣaḥīfeh-ye Imām*, vol. 5, p. 468.

religion. Islamic laws are progressive and entail freedom, independence and advances.[1]

The late 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī says on this:

"Some think that the westerners have gifted to man freedom, democracy and human rights, while 1400 years ago, before anyone else, Islam offered in the best possible way, those things through its rich teachings. But the west, through its unjust propaganda is making societies and nations think that they brought human rights."[2]

Imām Khomeinī says on this:

"In order for the people of the world to know what Islamic means, Islam's laws should be made known to all. They did not let Islam to be known. They deluded our youths. They did not let the youths know what Islam is, what law it has, what commandments God has given to us, what He has given to us. If they let each one of these laws together with their political, economic and other problems be put into action, they will understand that neither their hollow democracy nor their human rights is a match for true Islam. Their philanthropy should be compared with that of Islam."[3]

He also says:

"Our ideal democracy might be similar to that existing in the west. The kind of democracy we want to establish does not exist in the west. Ours is complete compared with that of the West."[4]

Martyr Muṭahharī, also believes that the true-born form of democracy is offered by Islam and goes on to use as a witness to his assertion and regards it a social, practical monotheism, which, in his opinion, is equal to freedom and democracy. Professor Muṭahharī then concludes that:

"As you can notice, there exist personal liberty and democracy in Islam, of course with the difference that exists between the Islamic thought and western thought."[5]

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[1] *Sahifeh-ye Imām*, vol. 5, p. 353.
[2] Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Al-Mīzān*, vol. 6, p. 506.
[3] *Sahifeh-ye Imām*, ibid,
[4] *Sahifeh-ye Imām*, ibid.
[5] Murtaḍā Muṭahharī, "*About the Islamic Revolution*", Ṣadrā Publication, p. 99.

As for the Islamic principles and Imām Khomeinī's ideas, Martyr Muṭahharī as well as other thinkers has maintained that the Islamic and the western democracies have substantial differences while in some of the principles, they are clearly antithetical. These discrepancies manifest themselves more clearly in the origin of freedom, regard for man's freedom in spiritual and material aspects, the way of looking to individual and society, and fundamentals of legislation.

1. Differences in the origin of freedom

The Islamic democracy is based on the freedom of man but this freedom is not limited to freedom of passions and carnal desires. That is the very subtle point of difference between the prophets' schools and human schools which, in Martyr Muṭahharī's view their difference lies in that "The prophets have come to grant to man spiritual freedom in addition to social freedom."[1] He believes that one cannot provide spiritual freedom but through prophets, religion, and divine books.

"That we say democracy exists in Islam means that Islam wants to grant to man real freedom-limiting brutality and freeing humanity."

From Islam's point of view, freedom and democracy are based on what man's human perfection requires, that is, "freedom is the right of man due to the fact that he is man", the right of man's human potentialities and not the right of the individuals' desires and their passions. In Islam democracy means the freed humanity.[2]

Elsewhere he says:

"Democracy's role, on the whole, is to provide freedom and Imām 'Alī's caliphate is the best witness to this. Imām 'Alī not only did not suppress people in order to deprive them of the right of criticism under the pretext that they cause confusion and disorder, but invited them to criticism."[3]

As he says in one sermon:

"Do not talk to me as if you are talking to an oppressor king and do not treat me like when you are talking to an angry person. Do not treat me in collusion matter. Do not think that the just word does harm to me and lest you do not tell the right thing for the purpose of respecting me like a person

[1] Murtaḍā Muṭahharī, *Spiritual Speeches*, Ṣadrā Publication, 10th edition, 1371 AHS, p. 19.
[2] Murtaḍā Muṭahharī, *About the Islamic Revolution*, ibid, pp. 102-104.
[3] Murtaḍā Muṭahharī, *Professor Muṭahharī's Notes*, Ṣadrā Publication, 1st edition, 1378 AHS, vol. 1, p. 97.

who cannot bear the right word or when he is faced with justice. Then, do not avoid consultation and telling the truth, since I do not consider myself above of committing a mistake."[1]

An example of the Islamic democracy in Imām 'Alī's government is his own trial in the court selected by him. Our late Imām says on this:

"Do you know of any democracy in which the head of the government is summoned by the judge before him. He appears in the court and the judge issues verdict against him and he accepts."[2]

This is an instance of the Islamic democracy. Another example is the way he lived. On he very day people swore allegiance to him, he took his spade and hack and went to work.[3]

Martyr Muṭahharī's definitions of the Islamic democracy are quite in harmony with spiritual freedom, which he knows as the real freedom.

He believes that the Islamic democracy conforms to social and spiritual freedom; he further adds that the Islamic democracy believes in that social freedom is not possible and practical without spiritual freedom.

Great leader of the Revolution, Āyatullāh Khāmene'ī, also says on this:

"In the western thought, the origin of freedom, like any other man's civil rights, belongs to the category of man's rights, but Islam believes in freedom as part of man's instinct, that is, the right to freedom is in fact, like the right to life and living. While the boundary of the western freedom is only material values, in Islam moral losses are limits of freedom."[4]

Hence, those who sacrifice spiritual values for social values have violated freedom boundaries. "This is the current ill of the human society, which wants to provide social freedom but does not look for spiritual freedom."[5] "The freedom I talked of and has come to form the basis of the Western democracy, as we see, is in fact a sort of animalism at large (unrestrained brutality). That man has a desire and

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[1] *Nahj al-Balāghah*, Sermon 216.

[2] *Saḥīfeh-ye Imām*, ibid.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *The Great Leader of the Revolution*, Hamshahrī, 6th year, no. 1633 AHS, p. 2.

[5] Murtaḍā Muṭahharī, *Spiritual Speeches*, ibid, p. 19.

craving based on which he must be free, should not cause one to draw distinction between human freedom and bestial freedom."[1]

2. The difference between the way of looking at the individual and society

Different philosophical and social schools hold different views on the individual and the society. Some give priority to the individual and some to society. These views have affected their views on the problem of freedom as well.

Regarding important both the individual and the society, Islam does not separate them from each other, considering both equally with respect to freedom. On one hand, the Islamic democracy gives value to human beings' tendencies and respects them and on the other hand, gives significance to society's interests. When personal demands lead astray the society, Islam no longer gives freedom to the individual. Martyr Muṭahharī says on this:

> "While being a social religion, thinking about society and regarding the individual responsible for society, Islam never disregards personal liberty, not giving priority to the individual. In Islam's view an individual owns such political, economic, legal as well as social rights as right to consultation, selection, suffrage and the right to choosing job, residence and spouse. Wherever an incompatibility appears between the right of the individual and that of society, the latter is given priority over the former and public rights are given privilege over private rights."[2]

But as we observe in the western democracy, the personal interests and wishes have come to form the basis of freedom. If the individual intends to, based on their carnal desires, do an action, which disregards some of the wishes of others, then disagreeing with those individuals will be opposition to freedom.

Man's tendencies and desires constitute the origin and basis of freedom in the west. Where man's will is talked about in the west, no differentiation is made, in fact, between wish and will. In the western philosophers' view, man is a creature possessing a series of desires and wills to live such a life. It is this desire, which form the basis of his freedom of action. What confines the personal liberty is limiting others' desires; no other rules and criteria can limit man's freedom and desires. In the western freedom, not only is not

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[1] Murtaḍā Muṭahharī, "*About the Islamic Revolution*", ibid, pp. 100-102.
[2] Murtaḍā Muṭahharī, "*Revelation and Prophethood*", pp. 117-118.

others' domination criticized, but some times it occurs that man feeling no shame accepts the worst kinds of servitudes in order to achieve his desires.[1]

Difference in the basis of legislation

The chief difference between Islam and democracy which is of course the most important difference is that of legislation. Since Islam is a monotheistic religion, it not only considers God as the single creator of the universe, but also deems Him as one in Godhood. Hence, Islam believes God is the only legislator of man's life, because He is the one who gives both existence and existential identity. As a result, God is aware of man's wonderful mysteries, potentialities and needs and it is via these criteria that He makes laws for perfection of his existence.

Based on this Islamic point of view, we will lead toward polytheism if we equal anyone to God in legislation. Accordingly, the western system of democracy, which regards the will of the majority as the only basis of legislation with no regard to faith and religion, is a manifestation of the polytheism. Āyatullāh Jawādī Āmolī says on this:

> "Some think that only dictatorial governments are based on polytheism. Vicious propaganda of the foreigners has caused one to think that democratic system is a just one, but one must bear in mind that as faith consists of different degrees, so does polytheism. Although dictatorship and autocracy is one of the vilest degrees of polytheism, this does not mean that democratic system is not polytheistic."[2]

In the Western view of democracy, religion plays no role in the social regulations and laws, not putting God as legislator even beside other legislators and only the idle of majority is the thing they worship and praise. "What is the basis of legislation in the western countries? It is the will of the majority. It is based on such a thing that under pretext of respecting democracy and majority's views, homosexuality becomes legal. In accounting for ratifying this law, they explain that since the majority of our people agreed with the problem of homosexuality, democracy requires that we render it a binding law."[3]

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[1] Murtaḍā Muṭahharī, "*About the Islamic Revolution*", ibid, pp. 110-102.

[2] Āyatullāh Jawādī Āmolī, "*The Philosophy of Human Rights*", Asra Publication, 2ᵈ edition, 1377 AHS, p. 116.

[3] Murtaḍā Muṭahharī, "*About the Islamic Revolution*", ibid, pp. 100-102.

In Martyr Muṭahharī's opinion, this way of thinking of the Western democracy is derived from the fact that they have not known well Christianity's principles:

> "Christianity's principles are beyond known thought and reason. They themselves fashioned the idea that here is the realm of faith and not that of reason. This means that they believe in one domain for faith and another one for thought and reason. They said that the problem of thinking is different from the problem of faith and submission. You are not entitled to think in the domain of faith. The realm of faith is only realm of submission."[1]

Faith alone or reason by itself cannot rescue man's ship from storm and help it arrive at freedom. One of the deficiencies of the western culture is that it knows reason as the only savior of humanity. Quoting from Iqbāl, Professor Muṭahharī explains the matter beautifully:

> "European man believes in man, but he is not philanthropic in practice. He believes in human rights, but shows no respect for human rights in reality and practice. The European applies the name of freedom for his culture, he talks of freedom, but deep in his heart, he does not really believe in freedom."[2]

That is why Professor Muṭahharī believes that: "What the European say, are suggestions with no guarantee."[3]

By briefly investigating Imām Khomeinī's views and those of other religious eminent personalities, one can come to the conclusion that it is possible to put into action in Islamic government a particular model of democracy as one form of government. A model whose content is constituted by original laws and commandments of Islam, with God as the only real legislator.

In answer to the problem of disagreement between principles of democracy and those of Islam, Martyr Muṭahharī, as one of the adherents of the Islamic democracy, asserts:

> "Islamic Republic is composed of two terms of Islamic and Republic. The later indicates the form of the suggested government and the former shows

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[1] Murtaḍā Muṭahharī, pp. 72-73.
[2] *Ibid.*
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 74.

that such a government should be governed by the Islamic regulations while proceeding on Islamic principles. Since we know that while being a religion, Islam is an ideology as well, it is a program for man's life in every dimension. The matter of republicanism is related to the form of the government, which is associated with a kind of democracy in which people are entitled to be involved in their fate and this does not mean that people cannot show tendency toward a school or ideology and that they are exempt from feeling obligation to a school."[1]

In accounting for the Islamic government as a program having the potential of putting into action in its real meaning the democracy, Imām Khomeinī states:

"The Islamic Republic plans to establish a government behaving justly with all groups, giving no favor to particular groups, unless they themselves have merits. If we succeed and put into action the Islamic Republic of Iran with its Islamic content, and establish a full-fledged Islamic government, it will prove a model for all other countries for which democracy in its real meaning and not a plan with no truth, as well as freedom in its real meaning and not as a meaning for deceiving others will be put into action, God willing."[2]

Democracy, then, meaning the government of people over people, which is more advanced than that in ancient Greece, is acceptable in Islam only conditionally. However, if it is regarded as a concept accompanied by secularism and atheism, it will be in disagreement with the Islamic criteria.[3]

Advocates and defenders of democracy have realized its deficiency, making their offer to modify this concept and form of government the full discussions of which is outside the scope of this paper and is left to the readers themselves to probe in full.[4]

For a good conclusion of this chapter, we refer to Imām Khomeinī saying:

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[1] *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.

[2] *Sahīfeh-ye Imām*, vol. 9, p. 72.

[3] Muhammad-Taqī Miṣbāh Yazdī, "*Islam, Politics and Government, Center of Political Research and Studies*", Qom, 1378 AHS, pp. 84-87.

[4] Antony Arblaster, *Western Liberalism*, trans. 'Abbās Mukhbir, Marker Publications, 3rd edition. 1378 AHS.

"Unfortunately, in western countries, which boast more of democracy, there exists no democracy. The westerners want with this incantation to destroy and exploit us. We cannot practice democracy unless under the banner of Islam."[1]

In practice, it is seen that the more the west talks of freedom, the more freedom is drowned in confinement, because every one wants to be free to the extent of his wishes, and man's wishes and desires are endless. When, therefore, there is no limit to his freedom, he becomes so drowned in it that it negates others' freedom as well as his own spiritual freedom, and in fact, under the name of freedom, he imprisons freedom.

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[1] *Sahifeh-ye Imām*, vol. 8, p. 89.