

The Role of Political Elites and the Public in Shaping Islamic Governance

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Abstract

The interaction between political elites and the general populace is a key subject of scholarly inquiry, receiving significant attention in academic discourse. This relationship can be seen as the relationship between the government and the people in one interpretation and the relationship between the government and society in another. In a general division, some people believe in the priority of the political elites, some in the people, and finally, the third group believes in the same priority of the political elites and the people. Islamic thinkers have also theorized in this regard. This research, based on the library and documentary methods and contextual interpretation methods, seeks to answer these questions: "What is the relationship between the people and the political elites in Islamic thought?" What are its most important features, and what are the obstacles to the participation of more elites? In order to achieve these goals, we first discuss the basics, and then, based on Islamic principles and values, we examine the role of the people with the political elites or the government. We point out the obstacles to the desired interaction and finally provide some recommendations.

Keywords: Political elites, Islamic thought, government-society relationship, public participation, Islamic principles.

Introduction

In addition to the complexities that arise in political thought in general, religious political thought also has more conceptual problems. The attribute of religion makes our source for formulating thoughts clear: religion. However, human knowledge has always been related to each other, and the precise definition of the border between them has always been a problem. The issues raised in the political thought of Islam are similar to religious political thoughts to a large extent. But since the beginning, Islam has presented itself as a comprehensive religion that covers all human actions, and the issues raised in Islamic political thought have found many more diverse divisions and sections. We formulate these issues in the form of several questions. Any type of answer to these questions has directed the flow of Islamic thought in a certain direction.

The first issue in this field is to distinguish the borders of politics and religion from each other. A huge part of religious issues is in the realm of political performance, while on the other hand, many issues in the realm of politics are related to religious realms. In other words, both from the theoretical and practical aspects, each of them is inevitably drawn into the other realm, and therefore politics requires religion, and religion also requires politics.

The second issue is whether politics is a goal or a means for religion. Or in other words, is it the main or the sub? One of the most obvious manifestations of politics is power; is power a goal or a means from the perspective of religion? Many thinkers believe that in religious thinking, political power is only a means to establish the right and implement justice. Power is desirable because it is used in the service of the people; otherwise, the desire for power is an anti-value.

The third and, in a way, the most important question is whether the teachings of Islam are conditional or unconditional. There are two main views in this field: The first view believes that the religion of Islam, which is based on the direct revelation of God, is its teachings for all times and all places. From this point of view, if we have extracted a ruling from the seer (Mobin) religion, that ruling cannot be conditional. The second perspective asserts that, based on evidence embedded within religion by God Himself, religious rulings are often contingent upon individual capacities, necessities, contextual realities, and feasible possibilities. Depending on which answer we choose, various branches have emerged in Islamic thought. Our point of view in this article is a balanced point of view. In this way, some religious rulings are unconditional, and others can be conditional according to

the general interests of the society. The diagnosis of this matter is the responsibility of the comprehensive jurist.

The fourth issue is the confrontation between Islam and modernity. With the world's entry into the modern era and the gradual familiarization of Muslims with the rules and issues of the new era, the relationship between religiosity and modernity became one of the most important issues facing the contemporary Muslim man; in particular, some religious propositions were inconsistent with the achievements of the new civilization. Gradually, the scope of this inconsistency widened. Among the different parts of Islam, the field of Sharia grew more than the fields of faith and belief and ethics in the abyss of this incompatibility. The problem became more serious when slowly the achievements of the new civilization and the products of modernity became the custom of the time, and in a more technical term, the way of thinking in this era and some religious propositions were opposed to this custom and way of life.

1. Domains of Religious Knowledge

One of the problems in the field of religion is that when a question is asked, an answer is provided depending on which field we are an expert in, and therefore different fields of religious knowledge give different answers. For example, when we ask a question from the field of jurisprudence, the answer will be different from the answer from the field of philosophy. As we go from the general to the details, the meanings of the concepts change. Therefore, when we talk about knowledge in general, it is different from when we talk about religious knowledge.

Religious knowledge has also emerged and evolved in various fields. The main framework in religious knowledge is philosophy, theology, and jurisprudence. The collection of these teachings is called religious thought. Philosophy, in its general sense, has been called the first, supreme, or absolute philosophy in Islamic literature. This knowledge has serious opponents and serious supporters in the history of religious thought. The set of debates and discussions that are presented in defense of the contents of religious texts is called theology, and regarding the defense of Islam, this scientific field has taken the name of "Kalam." In the West, it has the same meaning; that is, the issues that have been deduced from the holy texts: ethics, beliefs, religious behavior, etc., but as it is clear, in the West, theology is more general than the knowledge of Islamic words.

Ja'far Mohaghegh Hilli (also known as Mohagheq Hilli, distinct from al-Allama al-Hilli) defines jurisprudence in *Ma'araj al-Usul* as the body of practical knowledge concerning Shari'a rulings, each of which is supported by clear reasoning. He explains that a Shari'a ruling encompasses both the rulings explicitly introduced by the Shari'a and those derived from reason that have been affirmed by it. Based on this definition, jurisprudence is classified as a form of knowledge, while Shari'a rulings include both divine legislation and rational judgments endorsed by the Shari'a (Mohaghegh Hilli, 1403: 47).

2. The Principles and Values Underpinning Islamic Governance

An Islamic government is founded upon core principles derived from the Qur'an and Sunnah, including monotheism (*Tawhid*), justice ('*Adl*), consultation (*Shura*), human dignity, and the promotion of good and prevention of evil (*Amr bil Ma'ruf wa Nahi anil Munkar*). The Qur'an emphasizes justice: "Indeed, Allah commands justice, good conduct, and giving to relatives..." (Qur'an 16: 90). Consultation is mandated in "And consult them in the matter..." (Qur'an 3: 159). These principles establish a framework for governance that mandates rulers to interact justly and consultatively with the people.

The principle of consultation is highlighted in the verse "And consult them in the matter (Qur'an 3: 159). These foundational values not only legitimize the government but also provide a framework for the interaction between political elites and the people (Tabataba'i, 1996, *Al-Mizan*).

Monotheism (*Tawhid*) affirms Allah's absolute sovereignty over all aspects of existence. This principle is encapsulated in the Qur'anic verse: "Say, 'Indeed, my prayer, my rites of sacrifice, my living, and my dying are for Allah, Lord of the worlds.'" (Qur'an 6: 162).

Justice ('*Adl*) entails the establishment of fairness across all dimensions of governance. The Qur'an underscores this principle, stating, "O you who have believed, be persistently standing firm in justice, witnesses for Allah..." (Qur'an 4: 135). Majid Khadduri, in *The Islamic Conception of Justice*, highlights justice as a fundamental pillar of Islamic political thought.

Consultation (*Shura*) refers to the process of decision-making through collective deliberation. This principle is emphasized in the Qur'an: "And those who have responded to their Lord and established prayer, and whose affairs are [determined by]

consultation among themselves..." (Qur'an 42: 38).

Another fundamental concept is human dignity, which entails recognizing and upholding the inherent worth of every individual, as reflected in the Qur'anic verse: "And We have certainly honored the children of Adam..." (Qur'an 17: 70).

The principle of Promotion of Good and Prevention of Evil (*Amr bil Ma'ruf wa Nahi anil Munkar*) is among the most politically significant tenets in Islam. This concept entails the active encouragement of righteousness and the deterrence of wrongdoing. As stated in the Qur'an: "You are the best nation produced [as an example] for mankind. You enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong..." (Qur'an 3: 110).

3. Foundations of Political Legitimacy

There are different views about the criteria of legitimacy: moral values, social contract and divine legitimacy are among the criteria of legitimacy. In Islam, only God has absolute sovereignty, and only those who have been appointed by God have the right to rule, and people have a role in the objectification and implementation of government. Many Islamic political thinkers differentiate between legitimacy, acceptability, and legality. Legitimacy is compliance with Sharia, while in Western political thought, other issues such as natural rights and social contracts are considered sources of legitimacy. Weber identifies legitimacy as an important explanatory category for social science because faith in a particular social order produces social regularities that are more stable than those that result from the pursuit of self-interest or from habitual rule-following (Weber 1964: 124).

In Islamic jurisprudence, political legitimacy derives from a combination of divine authority and the consent of the people.

From the point of view of Sunnis, one of the sources of legitimacy and the factor of installing a ruler is the use of weapons by force, and if someone can overcome others by force, then the caliph is the right and Islamic ruler, and his rule is by allegiance with reluctance or even without. The Pledge of Allegiance on behalf of the Muslim community or the agreement of the *Ahl al-Aqd* is valid, and the people are obliged to obey him. According to this basis, the people's vote is not relevant in choosing a ruler, and without the will of the people, a ruler can legitimately rule over them. This tendency considers power as synonymous with righteousness, and by rejecting the infidel Imamate, they have only satisfied themselves with the necessity of being Muslim as a

condition for the ruler, although some of them consider people's allegiance to be necessary in other cases of emergency (Al-Nawawi, 1992, 12: 222).

The basis of the legitimacy of the Shiite political system is the law based on revelation. The Islamic jurist appointed by God for general installation has the duty of fulfilling the Shari'a and legitimacy. On the other hand, without people's votes, the system will not be efficient and acceptable and will not be implemented. From another point of view, it can be seen as a kind of "social contract" between Muslim rulers and believers. The approach of this political system depends on the realization of this issue, the authenticity of the duty, and bringing the society to its prosperity and legitimacy. During the era of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the infallible Imams (PBUT), legitimacy was granted through divine appointment. In the absence of direct divine guidance, the theory of "Wilayat al-Faqih" (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist) emerges, combining divine legitimacy with popular consent (Khomeini, 1970, Islamic Government). Therefore, interaction between elites and the people is essential for acquiring and maintaining legitimacy.

Political legitimacy in Islamic jurisprudence is grounded in several key principles:

- 1- Divine Sovereignty:** Ultimate authority is vested in Allah, as reflected in the Qur'anic verse, "The decision is only for Allah..." (Qur'an 12: 40). This notion is further explored in Abul A'la Maududi's *Islamic Law and Constitution*.
- 2- Implementation of Sharia:** Legitimacy is derived from governance in accordance with Islamic law. As Sayyid Qutb argues in *Social Justice in Islam*, rulers are obligated to implement Sharia to ensure justice.
- 3- Consent and Allegiance (Bay'ah):** Political legitimacy is affirmed through the people's pledge of allegiance, a practice historically observed when caliphs received bay'ah from the community, symbolizing mutual consent and contractual obligation.
- 4- Qualifications of the Leader:** Leaders must exhibit qualities of justice, knowledge, and competence. Al-Mawardi, in *The Ordinances of Government*, outlines the essential qualifications for leadership.
- 5- Public Welfare (Maslahah):** Governance is expected to promote the common good. Imam Al-Ghazali, in *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, emphasizes that the ruler's responsibility is to safeguard the welfare of the people.

4. The Dynamics of Elite-Populace Interaction

Islamic jurisprudence emphasizes the importance of consultation and public participation. The Qur'an instructs, "And their affairs are conducted through consultation among them" (Qur'an 42: 38).

In a division, the society is divided into two political classes, the rulers and the governed, and the non-political class of the governed. The relationship between these two has always been one of the stable and permanent questions of political philosophy and political science. In the history of Islam and the establishment of the Prophet's government, this question has been given a specific answer in the form of the practical life of the Prophet and the righteous caliphs. In the biography of the Prophet, there was not much difference between the rulers and the people. Imam Ali has intelligent recommendations regarding the relationship between people and officials. The recommendations that can be seen in the objective performance of his five-year government are due to being a speech act. One of his recommendations to his governor in Makkah is as follows: sit in the morning and evening to take care of people's affairs and answer their questions. There should be no intermediary and ambassador between you and the people except your tongue, and no opposition or obstacle except your face (Nahj al-Balaghah, 67). According to Yaqoubi and others, the Hajib phenomenon first started during the reign of Muawiyah. He was the first person in Islam who appointed guards and porters in the court of his government. Curtains hung. He hired Christian secretaries, sat on the throne, and openly called himself the king and the people under his command (Siyuti, 1406: 222 and Yaqoubi, 1356: 166-165).¹

Elites are expected to engage with the public, acknowledge their opinions and needs, and incorporate these factors into decision-making processes. Imam Ali (PBUH) emphasized this responsibility, stating, "He who appoints himself as a leader of the people must begin with educating himself before educating others" (Nahj al-Balagha, Wisdom 73; Mutahhari, 1991).

Islamic jurisprudence advocates for a mutual relationship based on:

- 1- **Consultation (*Shura*):** Leaders are obligated to consult with the community. "And consult them in the matter..." (Qur'an 3: 159). This ensures that governance reflects the people's needs and aspirations.

1. Yaqoubi, A. B. A. (1362). *Tarikh Yaqoubi* (M. I. Aiti, Trans.). Scientific and Cultural Publications. (Original work published 1362, 2 volumes) & Siyuti, J. (1406 AH). *History of the Caliphs*. Darul Alam.

2- Justice and Equity: Fairness in all dealings is mandatory. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said, "Allah does not bless a community in which the weak cannot take their rights from the strong without fear." (Sunan Ibn Majah).

1- Accountability: Leaders are accountable to Allah and the people.

2- Accessibility: Leaders should be approachable. The Prophet (PBUH) was known for his openness to all individuals, regardless of status.

5. The Role of the People and Elites in Shaping the Structure of Islamic Government

The place of people in the political thought of Islam is one of the topics that has attracted the attention of many experts in recent years. According to what theoretical reason and practical reason rule, the government in every society, in every time and place, should be based on the two main foundations of power and legitimacy; because government without power is not government and government without legitimacy is oppression. In the verses of the Qur'an, it has been repeatedly emphasized that the divine leaders are responsible for calling the people to support and follow them in order to establish the rule of justice and the law-abiding society, not those who use force and take away their authority. The people rule the people. God addressed the Messenger of God, peace and blessings of God be upon him, and said, If God had willed, all those who live on earth would have believed. Do you want to make people believe reluctantly? (Qur'an 10: 99). And he also says, There is no reluctance in religion; (because) guidance became clear from misguidance. (Qur'an 2: 256).

This issue pertains primarily to the establishment of a divine society and the implementation of the rule of justice. However, once established with the will and support of the people, it becomes the responsibility of the divine leaders, who derive their authority from this popular support, to uphold the law of justice within the Islamic society. They are also tasked with defending the integrity of the Islamic society and government, as well as promoting justice and purity globally. This mission involves articulating the truth, urging human societies toward justice and piety, and, when necessary, exercising power and engaging in jihad to dismantle the rule of tyrants and free the oppressed from their domination.

People have the right to participate in determining their government within Islamic jurisprudence. The concept of "*Bay'ah*"

(allegiance) serves as a social contract between the ruler and the people, signifying their consent and support. Historical practices during the Prophet's time and the era of the infallible Imams (PBUT) demonstrate the crucial role of public allegiance in legitimizing governance (Jafarian, 2002).

The people play a vital role in governance:

- 1- **Pledge of Allegiance (*Bay'ah*):** This concept affirms the legitimacy of the leader, establishing both authority and a social contract between the leader and the people. This is explored in *The Early Islamic Conquests* by Fred M. Donner.
- 2- **Participation in *Shura*:** Active involvement in the consultative process ensures that governance reflects the collective will of the community.
- 3- **Holding Leaders Accountable:** Through the principle of enjoining good and forbidding evil (*Amr Bil Maroof Wa Nahi Anil Munkar*), the populace holds leaders to ethical standards. As stated in Sunan Abu Dawood, "The best jihad is a word of truth before a tyrannical ruler."
- 4- **Selection of Leaders:** In Sunni thought, the *Ahl al-Hall wa al-'Aqd* (people of influence) represent the community in the process of leader selection. In contrast, Shia Muslims maintain that the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) designated his cousin and son-in-law, Imam Ali (PBUH), as the first of a hereditary line of Imams from his family to lead the community. However, the implementation of Imam Ali's rule was contingent upon the people's allegiance.

Political elites in an Islamic government bear the responsibility of guiding society in accordance with Islamic principles. They are expected to exemplify piety, justice, and a commitment to serving the people, thus acting as moral role models. Imam Ali (PBUH) counseled Malik al-Ashtar: "Fill your heart with mercy, love, and kindness for your subjects" (*Nahj al-Balagha*, Letter 53). Furthermore, political elites are entrusted with serving the people, as emphasized by the Prophet (PBUH): "The leader of a people is the one who serves them" (*As-Suyuti*, *Al-Jami' al-Saghir*). The core responsibilities of political elites include:

- 1- Implementation of Sharia: Ensuring that laws and policies align with Islamic principles..
- 2- Upholding Justice: As the Qur'an states, "O David, indeed We have made you a successor upon the earth, so judge between the people in truth..." (Qur'an 38: 26) and "O you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice..." (Qur'an 4: 135).

- 3- Moral Exemplarity: Leaders are expected to model ethical behavior, thereby inspiring the same virtues in others.

Conclusion

The jurisprudential foundations of the interaction between political elites and the people in an Islamic government have been thoroughly elucidated through the utilization of scholarly texts and sources. These foundations are not only grounded in religious principles but are also aligned with historical experiences and societal needs, with the objective of establishing a just, participatory, and stable governance system. The principles that guide this interaction have been outlined, emphasizing the establishment of a just and participatory society.

Throughout Islamic history, there have been both positive and negative examples of elite-people interactions. The governance of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and Imam Ali (PBUH) serves as exemplary models of desirable interaction, where leaders consulted with the people and respected their opinions. Conversely, periods where elites distanced themselves from the populace led to dissatisfaction and social unrest (Hosseini, 2011).

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) implemented a model of inclusive governance, regularly consulting his companions on critical matters such as the Battle of Uhud. Similarly, Ali ibn Abi Talib, the first Imam, would conduct nightly patrols to assess and address the needs of the people.

There have been some challenges with interaction between elites and people in Islamic governments. In some Islamic countries, especially in later periods, saw deviations with less consultation and increased autocracy. Deviations occurred with reduced consultation and increased autocracy, highlighting the need for adherence to Islamic principles.

Several obstacles can hinder optimal interaction:

- 1- Authoritarianism and Elitism are primary factors contributing to governance challenges. The centralization of power without consultation contradicts the principle of Shura and may be limiting. Concentrating power undermines the practice of consultation, and when elites adopt authoritarian attitudes and disregard public opinion, it fosters disconnection. The absence of consultation can lead to poor governance, while neglecting communal input alienates the public. Ignoring the needs and demands of the people undermines the legitimacy of the government. The Qur'an cautions against arrogance and self-

exaltation, stating, "And do not turn your cheek [in contempt] toward people and do not walk through the earth exultantly" (Qur'an 31: 18).

- 2- Corruption and Discrimination violate justice and erode public trust. The Qur'an admonishes, "And do not consume one another's wealth unjustly..." (Qur'an 2: 188). Financial and administrative corruption leads to a decline in public trust, while discriminatory practices undermine the principles of justice.
- 3- Lack of Transparency and Accountability is another factor impeding effective interaction between political elites and the public. Opacity in decision-making processes exacerbates the alienation of the people.
- 4- Social and Economic Disparities contribute to divisions between elites and the broader population, exacerbating the gap between leaders and the people. Islam advocates for social justice to mitigate these inequalities.
- 5- The Absence of Mechanisms for Accountability contributes to a lack of responsibility among leaders. Without effective mechanisms for holding leaders accountable, misconduct and malfeasance remain unchecked.

Public participation plays a pivotal role in ensuring the stability and fortification of the Islamic system. Imam Khomeini emphasized this by stating, "The people are our benefactors" (Sahifeh-ye Imam, Vol. 8). Active engagement of the populace in political and social spheres not only bolsters the government's legitimacy but also acts as a safeguard against corruption and authoritarianism. By affirming the government's legitimacy, public participation ensures that policies align with the common good, making it a fundamental element of Islamic governance.

To enhance the interaction between elites and the public, the following suggestions are proposed:

- **Strengthening the Culture of Consultation:** Establishing councils and consultative assemblies with public representation, thereby creating formal consultative bodies, as advocated by scholars such as Rashid al-Ghannouchi in his work *Public Freedoms in the Islamic State*.
- **Transparency in Governance:** Ensuring the provision of clear, accurate, and accessible information regarding governmental decisions and policies.
- **Combating Corruption:** Establishing effective oversight mechanisms aimed at preventing and addressing corruption.
- **Education and Awareness:** Promoting public understanding of

individual rights and civic responsibilities to foster informed participation.

- **Social Justice:** Striving to reduce socio-economic inequalities through policies aimed at the equitable distribution of resources and the implementation of fair practices.
- **Promoting Justice:** Enacting policies designed to ensure fairness and equity in societal interactions and governance.
- **Ensuring Transparency:** Fostering open governance that cultivates public trust and encourages cooperation among citizens and authorities.
- **Education and Awareness:** Empowering citizens through education to engage effectively in civic duties and decision-making, as emphasized by Yusuf al-Qaradawi.
- **Strengthening Accountability:** Developing systems of checks and balances that ensure accountability of elites, as outlined in Masudul Alam Choudhury's *The Principles of Islamic Political Economy*.

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