Benefits of Religious Democracy Addressed by the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran

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ABSTRACT: Democracy is the dominant discourse in the contemporary world. Religious democracy is a derivative of democracy, which is realized in the model of Islamic Republic in Iran. Every regime is based on a set of beliefs entailing specific effects and outcomes. Islamic republic of Iran is no exception to this rule. Therefore, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic republic of Iran, who has led the Islamic revolution for over two decades, has frequently emphasized the invaluable benefits of the Islamic republic as the symbol of religious democracy. In this paper, we aim to study the benefits and advantages of religious democracy as viewed by the Supreme Leader under the rubrics of religious democracy contributing to national resistance, courage and devotion as well as nurturing spirituality and a sense of responsibility in people.

Keywords: the Supreme Leader, religious democracy, Islamic government

INTRODUCTION

Democracy is a compound Greek word comprising ‘demos’, meaning people, and ‘cratia’ or ‘kratos’, meaning governance and power, which together mean the government of people (Purfard, 2009). Religion is a particular way of living in the world, which promises to provide both the welfare of the mundane life and the eternal bliss in the vicinity of the Almighty (Tabatabaie, 1985). Although some scholars consider religious democracy as the combination of two terms (Purfard, 2009), many Islamic theorists do not regard the term as a virtually compound word. They contend that religious democracy is not the combination of religion and democracy but a unified truth as the essence of Islamic regime. That is, when governance is to develop based on religion, it will not thrive without public acceptance. Besides, a real democracy may not actualize without religion (the Supreme Leader, Ettela’at daily, January 04, 2004).

The governance guided by religious democracy offer major benefits including the sovereignty of God and religion, certain qualifications of the rulers and devotion of the rulers to people. However, while liberal democracies offer obvious advantages comparing with imperialauthoritarianregimes, they suffer from multiple deficiencies such as the dominance of material desires and absolute freedom, the governance of capitalists and a lack of real freedom. In the present study, we aim to delineate the advantages of religious democracy as viewed and addressed by the Supreme Leader of the Islamic republic of Iran.

METHODOLOGY

A review is conducted through referring to Quran, Interpretations and narrative resources for surveying the subject.

RESULTS

The Supreme Leader’s attitude toward the effects and benefits of religious democracy was extracted from books, speeches and sermons delivered at Friday Prayer service as well as the essays written by scholars, journals and the websites affiliated with the Supreme Leader.
**The sovereignty of God and the religion of truth**

According to the Koranic verse ‘Say: I exhort you only to one thing, that rise up for Allah’s sake in twos and singly’ (Sura Saba: 46), human is exorted to only one duty: to rise up for God on one’s own or collectively in personal and social issues. Undoubtedly, a society with deep faith in divine teachings rather than economy or mundane world may rise up for truth because, in the latter case, people would rise up to satisfy their passions or material welfare rather than to establish justice and divine law. A right rise should only serve the Lord God and Allah’s word: ‘The word of Allah is supreme’ (JavadiAmoli, 2002). Therefore, in view of the fact that God has the sovereignty and His orders guarantee people’s good in a religious democracy, the Supreme Leader declares that “every government has a framework. Western democracy was based on free desires of people and the majority, which was directed by capitalists. However, in religious democracy, the framework is the divine religion, and people have accepted the sovereignty of this framework” (Islamic Revolution Document Center, in Friday School, Vol. 6: 300).

Nowadays, in Islamic rule, all government authorities from top to down; from the Supreme Leader who serves people to the president; from ministers, judiciary authorities, members of parliament to the directors across the country should advance the divine religion (Musapur, 2005). “The main constituting element of the [Islamic] government is Islamism and reliance on Islamic-Koranic foundations … because Iranian people have relied on, believed in and practiced Islam wholeheartedly” (the Supreme Leader, JomhuriEslami newspaper, June 06, 2002). “The advantage of the Islamic rule is that the framework is the divine commandments, Koranic law and the divine guiding light that shed light on the hearts, minds and practices of people” (the Supreme Leader, JomhuriEslami newspaper, August 04, 2001).

**Spiritual orientation**

A society planned based on the divine law and sovereignty assumes the preservation of doctrinal foundations and directing people to spirituality as its primary maxim. Imam Ali, peace be upon him, considers public education as the people’s right on rulers. He says, “your right on me is to teach you so that you will not remain illiterate and to train you about the rules of conduct in life” (Nahjal-Balagha, Sermon 34). The Supreme Leader observes, “The Islamic government premises to lead people out of the dark into light. It intends to guide human out of the dark and selfishness, egotism, lust and entrapment in limited facilities and to deal with every individual, object and phenomenon with a virtue and to advance toward spirituality, light and endeavor toward the divine” (the Supreme Leader, JomhuriEslami newspaper, January 30, 2001).

He further declares, “nowadays, it is a prevalent thought, the thought of religious democracy: the thought of spiritual and religious sovereignty, thought of people’s attendance at events, the thought of resistance to bullying on the part of world powers and powerful blocks. These thoughts are now prevailing. You see these thoughts are prevailing in the world. It is not associated with the name of Iran, though. Let it not be. We do not insist to associate it with Iran. But, no one in the world may deny the effect of the Islamic revolution and Iranian resistance on these events. Today, this is the question” (the Supreme Leader, addressing the elites and authorities of North Khorasan Province, 2012).

**Attention to the poor**

In Islam, it is a primary duty to serve people and win their trust and affection. This is particularly important in the poor. In his government charter to Malik Al-Ashtar in Nahj al-Balagha, Imam Ali, peace be upon him, speaks thus of the poor social groups, “allocate part of the public treasury and the wheat reaped from the spoil lands to the poor in every city… lest the ecstasy of power prevent you from serving them. You must always be mindful of their problems. Do not turn away from them, particularly those who are overlooked due to their humility – those who are considered as inferior and who hardly have access to you…always appease orphans and the elderly who have no resort and do not complain. The rulers undertake a heavy responsibility …” (Nahj al-Balagha, Letter 53).

“In our regime, every cause, policy, law and effort should serve the underprivileged people who were undermined from various aspects during the long imperial regime” (the Supreme Leader, the Seventh National Conference on Prayer, 2008). “By people, we mean all people. However, those who are more underprivileged should be served more; therefore, Imam Khomeini, May God have mercy upon him, always stressed the importance of attention to the poor social groups” (the Supreme Leader addressing the pilgrims to Imam Khomeini mausoleum, June 4, 2001).

**Nurturing a sense of responsibility in people and authorities**

Islam definitely teaches its followers to bear a sense of responsibility to contribute to their destiny so that it introduces active participation in one’s own destiny as a divine providence (the holy Koran, Sura AR-RAD, Verse
In this regard, defining people’s responsibility towards the rulers, Imam Ali, peace be upon him, says, “I am entitled to have your loyalty. Have goodwill for me both implicitly and explicitly, answer me whenever I call you and obey whenever I order you” (Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 34). The philosophy behind the responsibility is clear: when people fail to involve in social events and assume no responsibility, the Islamic regime may collapse even if it is led by Imam Ali, peace be upon him. Thus, ordering people to involve in social events, God says true believers are those who, besides faith in God and the prophet, support their divine leaders in social issues (the holy Koran, Sura AN-NOOR, Verse 60).

The Supreme Leader considers people’s voting in election not only a right but also a responsibility and duty. “The basis of religious democracy differs from the basis of western democracy. Religious democracy, which is the basis of our elections and originates from divine right and duty, is not merely a contract. All people are entitled to vote and shape their destiny. This gives meaning to elections in the Islamic republic of Iran” (the Supreme Leader, the death anniversary of Imam Khomeini, 2005).

“Presidential elections, Assembly of Experts election, Islamic Consultative Assembly elections and other elections are the manifestation of people’s involvement, voting and will. In fact, people’s voting and presence in presidential elections, Islamic Consultative Assembly elections and other elections are both a right and a duty” (the Supreme leader, Jomhuri-Eslami newspaper, June 06, 2001). “People are motivated by religion, a sense of responsibility and national, religious sense of duty. Thus, they enter the scene and select one from among the candidates” (the Supreme Leader, presidential inauguration ceremony, 2005). “We did not achieve independence easily. We did not achieve religious democracy easily. Our nation has struglled for that. Sincere lives were lost in this route. Our nation has suffered. They will not lose these achievements easily” (the supreme Leader, meeting with government ambassadors, 2003). Islamic republic is made up of two components: it is a republic, so it is for people, and it is Islamic, so it is based on divine values and religion. It is for people; that is, people were involved in establishing this regime and the authorities of this regime. Thus, people assume responsibility. People are not excluded” (the Supreme Leader, public meeting with people in Chalus and Nowshahr, 2009). “Iranian people have learned the lesson of democracy from Islam, are deeply faithful and committed to it, have struggled to overcome the barriers and signed its document with the blood of their youth” (the Supreme Leader, Ahmadinejad presidential inauguration ceremony, 2005).

Certainly, people’s commitment to the Islamic rule will fail without authorities’ commitment to their ideals because it is impossible to achieve goals and make progress in different aspects, including justice, without nurturing a sense of responsibility in all people and particularly in authorities. As the leader of justice-seekers across the world and the icon of justice and piety, Imam Ali, peace be upon him, was thronged by people who wanted to elect him as the Caliph after the murder of Othman. He accepted people’s request and declared, “If it was not for the numerous homage by people and the companions did not assure me and if God did not require the scholars to break silence at the face of gluttony of tyrants and the starvation of the oppressed, I would leave the harness of Caliphate’s camel on its hump and let it lose.”

The Supreme Leader considers that a benefit of our religious rule is the development of a sense of responsibility in authorities: “we cannot feel satisfied with promising something and holding the office, or in lay words, the power but not be wary of the present and future and the spiritual and material development in the nation. This is unlikely. The Islamic rule requires the authorities to think they are standing before God. That people understand or do not understand their services and thank or do not thank them should be a secondary consideration. The authorities should primarily think they are accountable to God to serve people and promote justice. Estimations show that the Islamic republic has made significant progress over the past twenty-five years. We do not contend that we have achieved all our goals. No, we have to struggle more. But we say and claim that Islamic republic has progressed” (the Supreme Leader, 2003). “The focal point of the responsibility is adhering to people’s rights, justice among people, fairness in dealing with people’s issues and endeavor to fulfill people’s needs” (the Supreme Leader, Sermon delivered at Tehran Friday Prayer, December 15, 2000). “Democracy has two wings. One wing of democracy is that the regime is developed by people’s vote and will….another wing of the democracy is that we are seriously accountable to people after they have selected us” (the Supreme Leader, meeting with the ambassadors, 2000).

**Meritocracy (the rule of the fittest)**

In Islamic view, sovereignty belongs to the best-qualified ruler. Thus, when the best-qualified ruler is present, the rule of the non-fittest is considered as usurpation. The Verse 247 of Sura AL-BAQARA reads, “He said: Surely Allah has chosen him in preference to you, and He has increased him abundantly in knowledge and physique...” In this verse, God considers Talut’s rising to power among his people to be the result of his greater physical strength and superior knowledge. The prophet Yusuf declares that he accepted incumbency over treasury
due to his knowledge and trustfulness – “surely I am a good keeper, knowing well” (Sura YUSUF, Verse 55). Therefore, religion has required people to delegate the government jobs and responsibilities as divine bonds to qualified individuals and if they fail to do this, they, the prophet of Islam notes, have betrayed God. Ibn Abbas quotes the prophet who said, “One who appoints somebody, who is not the best among his people, to a job, he has betrayed God” (Majlesi, 2009). On the other hand, those who seek government positions through election should work in favor of those who they know are better suited for the positions so that the former should leave the positions for the latter, otherwise the former have betrayed God’s bond. Imam Sadiq, peace be upon him, says, “one who invites people to himself while there are more knowledgeable individuals than him among people, is a heretic and is misguided” (Majlesi, 2009).

The Supreme Leader observes that “when the Almighty has not designated a specific person as the ruler, there are two principles to guide the ruler. The first principle is adherence to criteria and attributes that Islam has decided for the rulers such as knowledge, piety, competence, commitment and the attributes considered for a ruler. The second principle is acceptance and support by people” (the Supreme Leader, Islamic Revolution Document Center, in Friday School, Vol.7:3).

“Religious democracy is not deniable as it is based on religious faith. That is, if anyone could commit electoral fraud or attract people towards himself in non-righteous manner, for example he pretends to hold a value while he does not and people believe in and vote for him, he has no rights based on the logic of religious democracy. This method is acceptable in the logic of liberalism that is the foundation of western liberalism but not in the logic of religious democracy (the Supreme Leader, Dar SayehSar-e Velayat, 2009, Vol.5:92).

**Human dignity**

In Koranic terms, human has two types of dignity: inherent or ontological dignity and acquired or axiological dignity. Inherent dignity premises that all humans are revered, that is, they enjoy better facilities comparing with other creatures (Rajabi, 2005). In achieving this dignity, human has no role; rather, it is the God’s gift bestowed upon human so that people are not evaluated based on this dignity. Acquired dignity is the status and prestige that one achieves through endeavor: thus, it is considered as the evaluation criterion of people. Since faith and good deed contribute to the achievement of this spiritual perfection, the context should be provided for the faith and good deed to realize in society so that people may achieve their valued dignity. Based on the Verse 41 of Sura Al-HAJJ, religious rulers are primarily responsible to provide such context. Therefore, one of the achievements of the Islamic republic has been inviting people to human dignity and the factors contributing to such dignity in the world that is devoid of spirituality.

The Supreme Leader considers that “Iranian nation knew his dignity, to think, to decide, to act and to select, thanks to the revolution” (the Supreme Leader, Dar SayehSar-e Velayat, 2009, Vol.5). “The rule of Islamic republic is the rule of those who come from among people, are with people, selected by people and behave as people do. This means republic, that is, people’s beliefs, honor, identity, personality and dignity should be valued” (the Supreme Leader, public meeting with people in Chalus and Nowshahr, 2009). “Religious democracy refers to true human dignity and people’s movement within the framework of divine religion but not ignorant traditions, whims of economic enterprises and the self-made principles of militarists and warlords” (the Supreme Leader, the death anniversary of Imam Khomeini, 2007). “Nowadays, we offer religious democracy in politics; offer spirituality-based civilization in social domain; present human dignity in various domains and suggest the blend of religion and life. These are new ideas; they have never existed in the world before. Even before the western materialism and humanism and the development of secular thoughts, the religion and life did not blend and co-exist, never” (the Supreme Leader, meeting with university professors, 2012).

**The restoration of Islamic values**

Considering the wide spectrum of values in Islamic culture, the Supreme leader has addressed the values realized in the Islamic rule:

A) Intimacy between people and authorities. “Islamic republic with its religious democracy, with people’s presence in elections of authorities at all executive and legislative levels, with people’s presence at different events, with intimacy between authorities and people – you should know that a meeting like our meeting today where the two sides love each other and feel overbrimmed with mutual affection – is unique among the countries we know around us (the Supreme Leader, meeting with the chiefs and trustees of Kurdistan nomads, 2009). “In this country, the sovereignty and relations between the ruler and people used to be a non-Islamic, Sultan-peasant and dominant-subservient relation before the Islamic rule and Islamic republic. Their relation with people was like ‘we order’. That Imam said ‘I tell the nation’ and ‘I am the servant of people’ belonged to the Islamic republic, Islamic Imam and Islam. However, it was ‘we decree’ and ‘we ordered such’ before Imam Khomeini. These words show
the type of relation. The relation was one of a ruler, conqueror, authoritarian and powerful ruler. They won the rule with sword or inherited it from their fathers. Therefore, they were not indebted to anybody. In this era [the Islamic republic era], if there is any master, they will be people themselves” (the Supreme Leader, Hadith Velayat, Vol.6:114).

B) Unanimity. “The motto of pure Islam that the Islamic rule developed out of it is that Muslims should have unanimity despite their disagreements about beliefs and religious principles. They should stress their agreements and avoid hurting the feelings of one another” (the Supreme Leader, meeting with the members of Assembly of Experts, 2003). “This religious culture originated from the Islamic rule, that was the source of Islamic rule per se, and the movement toward Islamic unity—one of the things in this belief is the unity of Islamic nations; that is, the Islam’s view of people as a unified system – and avoidance of ethnic disputes in the word of Islam and Islamic communities is what was represented by the Islamic revolution. This should not be neglected and forgotten” (the Supreme Leader, meeting with the members of Assembly of Experts, 2003). “This solidarity among people and between people and authorities - people like their authorities, trust them, help them, cooperate with them and there is solidarity among people themselves – should be preserved and reinforced increasingly. One of the big conspiracies of the enemies of Iranian nation is making schism in the country under the pretext of ethnicity, under the pretext of religion, under the pretext of political orientations, under the pretext of factions and various pretexts – solidarity should be preserved (the Supreme Leader, Imam Reza Mausoleum, 2011).

C) Implementation of Islamic law. “In our country, thanks to the Islamic rule, people are at the center of decision-making and the framework of decision-making is both for people and for authorities of Islamic law. This imposes heavy duties upon our shoulders all” (the Supreme Leader, presidential inauguration ceremony, 2001). “If Islamic nations want to know what the Islamic republic says and claims, they should know that this is our claim: we do not withdraw from Islam; we consider it necessary to obey Islamic law and divine Sharia in all aspects of our life; we struggle to achieve this. Our frame of reference is religious democracy” (the Supreme Leader, meeting with the members of Assembly of Experts, 2011). “Islamic republic has two wings: it is a republic; that is, it is for people. It is Islamic; that is, it is based on divine values and Sharia” (the Supreme Leader, public meeting with people in Chalus and Nowshahr, 2009).

D) Esteem and pride. “The experience of over thirty years shows that Islam can give esteem to a country, can make a nation proud, can set good goals, can pave the way toward these goals, can create a scientific movement, can create a technological and industrial movement, can create a pious, ethical movement, can uphold them before other nations. These have happened in our country. These are big tasks that have been done because of Islam” (the Supreme Leader, meeting with the members of Assembly of Experts, 2011). “That Muslim nations look at Iranian nation with an eye of appreciation results from the fact that Iranian nation did primarily a courageous act to enter the scene, and the regime dared to involve people and then introduced a new concept, a new frame, a new venture of democracy that was unknown in the world” (the Supreme Leader, meeting with Yazd people, 2007).

E) Defending the oppressed. “This humanistic value is defined in Islamic revolution as a duty of people and authorities, and its political symbol is the Quds Day. This stance should be preserved by Iranian nation, all groups and the elites who are loyal to Imam [Khomeini’s] thoughts. Imam did so himself. Imam never stopped supporting the oppressed across the world to please the bullying powers across the world. Imam always referred to the question of Palestine as a primary issue. Imam explicitly attached importance to the ‘O Muslims’ call of the oppressed nations in his will and speeches; explicit defense of the right of the oppressed, explicit defense of the right of Palestinian people and every other oppressed nation. This is Imam’s method, this is Imam’s line, and this is Imam’s method and will. Fortunately, Iranian nation and authorities followed this method. For thirty years, when you Iranian people confronted American imperialism, you won and your enemy failed” (the Supreme Leader, the death anniversary of Imam Khomeini, 2008). “One of the things that irritate the enemy is defending the Muslim nations. Dear brothers and sisters! It is over one year that Iranian nation and government support the oppressed Bosnian people and says the word of truth about them. Support of nations, support of Bosnian people, support of Palestinian nation; this is the way we are deemed to follow and this is what irritates our imperialist enemies” (the Supreme Leader, Sermon delivered at Friday Prayer, June 3, 1993). “Islamic rule and law are deemed to defend the oppressed across the world. It is because of this attitude that imperialism weaves plots against Islamic republic of Iran” (the Supreme Leader, addressing women in Urmia, September 18, 1996).

**Presenting a new model of political systems**

The new model of religious democracy opens a new window to the human race and protects their life against the blights of regimes created based on individual and party despotism or the powerbrokers and looters, and against the entrapment in materialism and negligence of spirituality to verify the convergence of democracy and theism in practice. This new model, in its development, survival and strength, is a strong evidence against all
CONCLUSION

Religious democracy, which is the product of developmental and legislation volition of God, was realized in the form of the Islamic republic in Iran when the messages of religious values and spirituality were dissolved not only in political systems but also in people’s social and individual life. The Supreme Leader, as the leader of Islamic republic, observes that Islamic republic has provided the humanity with certain benefits such as the sovereignty of God and the religion of truth, spiritual orientation, attention to the poor, meritocracy (the rule of the fittest), human dignity, the restoration of Islamic values such as intimacy between people and authorities, people’s involvement in their destiny, unanimity, the implementation of Islamic law, esteem and pride, defending the oppressed and a new model of political system.

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