A Comparative study of Religious Democracy Model in the political thought of Imam Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei

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Abstract

The analysis of the relationship between the people and the government and their roles and positions in governance is an age-old issue, with each school of thought and consequently each thinker presenting a framework for it. The people's political approach to governance in the context of the theory of religious democracy is both a product of the discourse of the Islamic Revolution and the lived experience of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Considering the governance experience of these two main theories in Iran, comparing their perspectives is key to solving many problems. By employing a selected theoretical approach and using a descriptive-analytical method, the authors have concluded that while there is a common discourse and approach between Imam Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei, the theoretical development of this concept and the elaboration of its operational details are distinctive features of the Ayatollah Khamenei 's perspective on Imam Khomeini.

Keywords
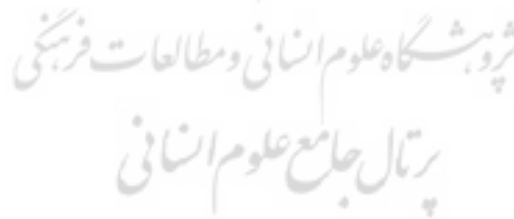
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Introduction

The nature of governance, especially in religious systems, has always been a subject of debate among intellectuals. Amidst this, the position and role of the people in governance are of paramount importance. While some emphasize the necessity of majority rule, others believe that the quality of people's participation correlates with the epistemological geometry of governance. Thus, the extent and depth of people's presence in government and its levels have long been a topic of discussion among political elites.

The Islamic Republic of Iran, as a practical example of this approach, serves as a good model for analyzing the dimensions and components of this theory. Therefore, revisiting the ideas and analyses of theorists of the Islamic Republic is a way to reach an understanding of the essence and nature of religious democracy. What, then, is the position of the people in an Islamic government? Hence, the following attempt will be made to provide a suitable answer by comparing the perspectives of Imam Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei.

1. Theoretical Framework

1.1. The approach of refusing religious democracy

This perspective argues that religious democracy, based on a particular political-social philosophy, is inherently incongruent because it is rooted in liberalism. Advocates of this approach argue that since the basis of democracy is founded on liberalism, its values are inherently liberal. Therefore, they question how liberalism can be reconciled with Islam. In this view, the refusal of religious democracy is not intrinsic but conceptual, based on the differing interpretations of the concepts of democracy and Islam.

1.2. The possibility of religious democracy approach

While religious democracy may have roots in Western intellectual tradition, it is viewed more as a mode of governance rather than a political-social philosophy. In this perspective, democracy is seen merely as a mode of governance, with practical implications and not necessarily reflective of liberal-democratic values. Thus, it is argued that in practice, there is no conflict between Islam and the administration of society through democracy. Some proponents, through hermeneutic analysis, argue that since Islam, at present, is interpreted by scholars from the texts of the Quran and Hadith, there is no inherent contradiction with democracy because Islam is defined by these interpretations. A third perspective views the discourse of religious democracy as a set of linguistic agreements that, due to the lack of meaningful

interpretation in various intellectual contexts, have different implications. These theoretical approaches provide different lenses through which to analyze the concept of religious democracy and its compatibility with Islam, emphasizing either the inherent incongruence or the conceptual possibility of its integration.

1.3. Selected Approach

The authors believe that understanding the relationship between democracy and Islam revolves around the difference between the concept and interpretation of it. Since each school of thought analyzes concepts based on its own value system, interpretations include the values of the analysts but the concepts remain fixed. Democracy and its interpretations are of the same nature. Therefore, to analyze the position and limits of the people's role in government, one must refer to the value system and interpretations of this concept. Imam Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei, as two thinkers with their own special value geometry, have a particular interpretation of democracy and subsequently the position and role of the people. Based on this foundation, an attempt will be made to compare their perspectives while analyzing the views of these two thinkers.

2. Religious democracy in Imam Khomeini's thought

Imam Khomeini considers the characteristics of Western democracy to be deceit, corruption, dictatorship, deception, and incompatibility with Islamic culture. He sees the governments claiming to be democratic, which have emerged under the guise of democracy, as similar to dictatorships and believes that most of them have deceived the people. In the following, we attempt to analyze the principles of religious democracy Imam Khomeini's thought

2.1. Freedom

Imam Khomeini, based on an Islamic perspective, considers freedom to be a great blessing bestowed by God upon humanity, and no one can deprive them of it: "There is no suffocation in Islam. In Islam, there is freedom for all classes, for women and men, for white and black, and for everyone." He considers freedom to be an integral part of the principled and inviolable policies of the Islamic system and believes that the Islamic system has no right to sacrifice it for anything else. "Our policies are always based on freedom, which we never sacrifice for anything else" (Khomeini, 1990, vol. 3: 49). In his view, freedom has several aspects:

2.1.1. Freedom of thought and expression

From their perspective, Imam Khomeini believed in the respect for people's beliefs and that individuals are free in their beliefs, and no one can compel them to adopt a certain belief: "People's beliefs are free. No one can force them to have a particular belief. No one can compel you to take a certain path. No one can force you to make a particular choice" (Khomeini, 1990, vol. 20: 88). Imam Khomeini Not only considered freedom permissible, but he also believed that the necessity of revolution requires the presentation of opposing views, even in the realm of jurisprudential issues. Imam Khomeini believed that different ideologies should complement each other through interaction and clash of opinions, ultimately leading to dynamic and effective ideas for the growth of the system and revolution. "The nature of revolution and the system always requires that social-jurisprudential opinions in various fields, even if opposing each other, be freely presented, and no one has the power or right to prevent it" (Khomeini, 1990, vol. 21: 48).

2.1.2. Freedom of the Press

Imam Khomeini explicitly supported the freedom of the press and relied on the crucial role of the media: "The role of newspapers in any country is above all else. Newspapers and magazines can nurture and guide a country" (Khomeini, 1990, vol. 14: 248). Imam Khomeini relied on the freedom of the press and broadcasting in presenting news and opinions to the people: "I have repeatedly said that the press must be free and independent. The press plays a fundamental role in creating a healthy or unhealthy atmosphere in any country. Likewise, radio and television must be free and independent and publish all kinds of criticisms with utmost impartiality so that we do not witness the time of the deposed Shah's radio and television again" (Khomeini, 1990, vol. 12: 23).

2.1.3. Freedom of Parties

Imam Khomeini, by accepting the concept of republic in the system of religious governance and having a deep understanding of the necessities of governance, approves the freedom of parties and groups: "Any gatherings and parties formed by the people, as long as they do not endanger the interests of the people, are free" (Khomeini, 1990, vol. 2: 280). One of the criticisms that Imam Khomeini directed towards the Shah's regime was the absence of real elections and the freedom of parties in this regime: "In this regime, individual freedoms are violated, and real elections, press, and parties are suppressed" (Khomeini, 1990, vol. 3: 238).

2.2. The People and the Legitimacy of Government

Imam Khomeini considers the legitimacy of government in legislation, execution, and adjudication to be solely the will of God: "The Islamic government is a government of law. In this form of government, sovereignty belongs to the law, sovereignty belongs to God, and the law is the command and decree of God" (Khomeini, 1990, vol. 6: 137). Imam Khomeini believe that the jurists, appointed by the divine Imams in all matters where the Imams have authority, have authority (Khomeini, 2019, vol. 2: 489). Despite accepting the theory of appointment in the guardianship of the jurist, Imam Khomeini considers the role of the people constructive. The role of the people will be manifested indirectly by selecting a jurist (one who meets the conditions of guardianship) during the process of divine appointment.

2.3. The Role of the People in Guiding and Supervision the Government

Imam Khomeini considers the awareness, participation, and universal supervision of the people over their government as the greatest guarantee of security in society: "The awareness, participation, and universal supervision of the people over their elected government will themselves be the greatest guarantee of security in society" (Khomeini, 1990, Vol. 4:248). In his view, the absence of people's supervision over the government increases the possibility of corruption in the political governance: "If the nation supervises the affairs of the government, the parliament, and everything else, it may prevent corruption" (Khomeini, 1990, Vol. 15:17). Imam Khomeini not only considered supervision and enjoining good and forbidding evil as obligatory for the people but also recommended officials to tolerate the opinions and views of the people: "You and your colleagues in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs must tolerate criticism, whether rightful or wrongful" (Khomeini, 1990, Vol. 2:201).

2.4. The Relationship between the People and the Government

Imam emphasized the continuous presence among the people and the necessity of active and effective communication with them: "I find it necessary to advise you, gentlemen who are at the head of the government, that you should rule the hearts of your own countries, not rule over their bodies and hearts. If Muslims want to succeed and free themselves from the commitment and dominance of foreigners, their governments should strive to win the hearts of their own people" (Khomeini, 1990, Vol. 14:179). In the Islamic perspective, the government and the people are divine trusts, and the duty of the ruler to the people is nothing but service. Imam Khomeini, drawing on Islamic foundations, always introduced the people as the trustees of

blessings: "You should understand the meaning of this, they (the people) are our trustees of blessings, and we must recognize them as our trustees of blessings, appreciate them, and serve them" (Khomeini, 1990, Vol. 16:33). He considered the people worthy of service and regarded serving them as the greatest honor for himself and officials. Therefore, if someone achieves the opportunity to serve the people sincerely, they should consider themselves indebted to the people due to this achievement.

2.5. Minority Rights

In the thought of Imam Khomeini, minorities in the Islamic Republic system enjoy equal rights and full respect like other individuals: "They share all things in common with others, and their rights are determined by laws, and in the Islamic government, they are in prosperity and well-being." (Khomeini, 1990, Vol. 11: 290). Security is one of the most obvious rights regarding minorities; Imam Khomeini states in this regard: "No one has the right to attack [these religious minorities] that exist in Iran; they are under the protection of Islam and Muslims... Those who have an official religion do not have the right to attack." (Khomeini, 1990, Vol. 5: 251). Another issue concerning minorities is religious freedom, which Imam Khomeini responds to the question: "Will the Islamic Republic allow other religions to freely and openly engage in their religious affairs?" He says, "Yes, all religious minorities in the Islamic government can freely practice all their religious duties, and the Islamic government is obliged to protect their rights in the best possible way." (Khomeini, 1990, Vol. 3: 75)

3. Religious Democracy in the view of Ayatollah Khamenei

3.1. Methodology of religious democracy in the view of Ayatollah Khamenei

According to Ayatollah Khamenei, the governance methods are value-oriented. Therefore, when accepting democracy, attention must be paid to its moral considerations because Islamic governance cannot be lenient in methods and choose any method. (Al-Saleh, 1982: 58) He believes that in the "Western democracy" method, contrary to what is stated, the people's right is not expressed and in practice, people are not involved in determining their own destiny as they should be. He concludes from the fraudulent actions of Western propaganda centers and their serious and extensive efforts to distort public opinion: "In the West, there was science, but no ethics; there was wealth, but no justice; there was advanced technology, but accompanied by the destruction of nature and human captivity; there was the name of

democracy and religious democracy, but in reality, it was capitalism, not democracy." (Khamenei, 2000).

In their view, because the method of "democracy" does not adhere to their slogans of democracy, it cannot have much credibility for an Islamic government. In other words, since an Islamic government must pay serious attention to the high status of the people in governance and adhere to such a position in practice (Abu Fars, 1986: 67), it cannot in any way accept Western democracy. Islam, when entering the political arena, maintains its characteristic of non-imposition and is not only not a supporter and advocate of "dictatorship" and "despotism" but also considers the fight against them as the basis of its work (Sharaf, 1990: 27). Based on this, since the Islamic government is founded on a particular discourse, it is fundamentally incompatible with the secular and humanist discourse of the West.

In the view of Ayatollah Khamenei, the Islamic government has its own specific method in managing society, and it is not such that it can benefit from Western methods to achieve its goals and objectives. The reason for this is related to the issue of the position and dignity of values in methods because each method has values that limit its use. Therefore, because the Islamic government has its own particular values, it is necessary for it to have its own specific methods.

3.2. Dimensions of Religious Democracy

3-2-1. Foundational Dimension
In the sense that people, by participating in the scene and voting, are involved in the establishment and construction of the political system and the determination of officials who hold government positions, and participate in the formation of government institutions and shaping the country's executive affairs (Fayaz, n.d.: 36).

3.2.1. Analytical Dimension

There exists a kind of spiritual relationship between the established political system and the people, in which the people consider the executives and the ruling system as the realization of their desires, ideals, and lofty goals. In this case, the subject is the "faith" of the people: "God Almighty brings the people into the scene; meaning it is divine faith, divine success, and divine support that brings people into the scene." (Khamenei, 2011).

3.3. Principles of "Religious democracy"

The Islamic government strives both in the field and in practice to gain the satisfaction of the citizens, and this satisfaction itself is the support of the

government (Sharaf and Mohammad, 1990: 77). In the Islamic government, the people consider themselves as the custodians of blessings, and the country and the government belong to them. In this regard, the satisfaction of the people encompasses a wide range:

3.3.1. Serving the People

In Islam and based on Islamic principles, the political system is obliged to respond to the legitimate needs of the people and prioritize working in the way of God and serving the people (Al-Ha'iri, 1979: 25). The importance of serving in the Islamic political system is such that the Ayatollah Khamenei says about it: "As much as the people see that the top officials of the country and other officials are working and striving, they become satisfied and content. The people need us to work; they demand service, and they have the right to it." (Khamenei, 2005).

3.3.2. Sincerity in Serving the People

In the Islamic government, officials of the political system are not only obliged to effectively address the needs of the people and respond to their demands but are also duty-bound to carry out such actions without any reservation. If governmental officials and agents fail to observe the aforementioned principle when addressing the problems and issues of the people, they fail to truly understand the essence of religious democracy and consequently fail to realize it in practice: "Not neglecting the people in return for the work done, not exaggerating in reporting the achievements, refraining from making promises without action, avoiding self-centeredness and selfishness towards the people, and not giving orders and prohibitions to the people due to holding positions and power, are among the important duties of the officials of the Islamic system to strive for the satisfaction of the people and to refrain from seeking the satisfaction of the powerful and wealthy."(Khamenei, 2000).

3.3.3. Elections and the Principle of People's Participation

From the perspective of the Ayatollah Khamenei, participation in the arena of elections and voting is perceived beyond a mere legal right relied upon in Western democracies; it is considered a religious and divine obligation as well as an act of worship that requires intention for proximity to God. It transforms what is conventionally a political operation in secular systems into a purposeful and dynamic political behavior: "Anyone who casts a vote in the ballot box for the sake of preserving the system and fulfilling their duty... is rewarded by God." (Khamenei, 2008)

3.3.4. value orientation

The Leader of the Islamic Revolution, while delineating the true meaning of religious democracy, emphasizes its value-oriented aspect: "Some individuals think that public opinion is a free and unrestricted area where they can do whatever they want! Public opinion is not a laboratory mouse that anyone can do whatever they want with." "Through misinterpretation, rumor-mongering, defamation, and falsehood, they harm the faith, emotions, beliefs, and sanctities of the people." (Khamenei, 2000) In the system of "religious democracy," the demand of the people, in the direction of strengthening and understanding the principles, foundations, and goals of religion, is thus, such demands not only do not negate and weaken the religious foundations, but also aim to strengthen and actualize the ideals of religion. Otherwise, popular sovereignty will lose the substantive content and lofty status of its religion, and consequently, describing religion with it would not be accurate. The Islamic government, due to the presence of two prominent features, divine approval and secondly, the establishment of the people, has the duty to employ all its efforts and capabilities in guiding the society, and planning and, consequently, striving in this direction as one of its very important missions, to ultimately achieve the satisfaction of both God and the people. (Al-Qabanchi, 1985: 232-233)

3.3.5. right and Justice

In the view of Ayatollah Khamenei in the Islamic system, governing the country does not mean the rule of someone or some people over the people, and it is not a one-sided right but a two-sided right, and the right of the people is much weightier. Paying attention to the above interpretation by the Leader of the Revolution guides us to several key points; one is that the right of the people compared to the rights of government officials and agents is much greater. Another point, which is the result of the first point, is that paying attention to the wishes and addressing the needs of the people is not a favor but a duty. On the other hand, based on this interpretation, it can be said: religious democracy implies the ownership of rights by the people. Therefore, the political system, through governmental planning and the actions of its agents, has the duty to fulfill the rights of the people properly and in line with their satisfaction. (Abdulaziz, 1997: 48-49)

3.3.6. The principles of lawfulness

The Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution regards respect for the law and adherence to it as fundamental for achieving justice in society: "The criterion and indicator of justice is adherence to the law. If an individual or a group's

actions align with the law, that is justice; if they deviate from the law, that is injustice." (Khamenei, 2010) They have referred to commitment to the law and legalism in all its dimensions - whether related to regulating relations among people or relations between people and rulers - as one of the most important principles governing "religious democracy."

3.3.7. Non-imitation of Western Models

Another characteristic of religious democracy, in their view, is its indigenous nature, as it fundamentally lacks an approach to the West. This is because democracy and religious democracy in the West entail knowledge without ethics and spirituality. Instead of people being in charge, it is the capital that rules, and the interests of the powerful and capitalists are prioritized. We did not want and could not imitate the West because although the West had things, it lacked more important things; it had knowledge but lacked ethics; it had wealth but lacked justice; it had advanced technology but destroyed nature and enslaved humans. It had the name of democracy and religious democracy, but in reality, it was capitalism, not democracy. (Khamenei, 2000) In the political ideology of leadership, religious democracy is an independent concept: "Religious democracy is not two things; it is not about taking democracy from the West and attaching it to religion so that we can have a complete set. Religious democracy itself is also related to religion." (Khamenei, 2000).

4. Comparing two views on religious democracy

It can be said that in the view of the Ayatollah Khamenei compared to Imam Khomeini, religious democracy enjoys more coherence, meaning that they have explicitly theorized about this concept and have explored its various aspects scientifically and theoretically. Based on this, the commonalities of these two scholars' discourse can be summarized in the following cases:

4.1. Religious democracy based on the theory of the appointment of the Supreme Leader:

According to the theory of appointment, which is the basis of thought of Imam Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei, the comprehensive jurisprudent has been appointed by the infallible Imam as a general authority. Therefore, the opinion and choice of the people have no role in the legitimacy of the government, and it only affects the acceptance of the Islamic system. However, this influence and participation are significant enough that if the people do not accompany the leader in governing, it may be difficult for him to fulfill his duties. Imam Khomeini and the Ayatollah Khamenei have both arrived at this theory in theorizing about the Islamic government; therefore, they both have the same

belief regarding the participation of the people in the Islamic system and their fate.

4.2. Religious Democracy in Action

Religious democracy in both theory and practice are exemplified by the fact that both have found the opportunity to implement their views and beliefs in the realm of action and materialize them. Imam Khomeini, as the founder of the Islamic system, was able to establish a system based on the Guardianship of the Jurist (Velayat-e Faqih) in Iran. He realized the manifestations of religious democracy and the role of people in action, and the Ayatollah Khamenei, as his successor, continued on the same path, experiencing this concept in practice. These manifestations can be observed in various governmental organizations and institutions, including the Assembly of Experts. This Assembly is essentially the practical manifestation of people's participation in determining their destiny in the constitution. According to the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the people play a role in determining the leader, representatives of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, the president, etc. Article six of the Constitution states: " In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the affairs of the country must be administered on the basis of public opinion expressed by the means of elections, including the election of the President, the representatives of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, and the members of councils, or by means of referenda in matters specified in other articles of this Constitution."

Conclusion

Comparative study of Religious Democracy model in the political thought of Imam Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei shows there is a general and the specific relationship between their ideas. However, what may distinguish the two perspectives to some extent and delineate the scope of the two viewpoints is that the Ayatollah Khamenei, compared to the Imam Khomeini, has addressed this issue more explicitly and has focused more on the principles and criteria of this theory. Nevertheless, this also returns to the requirements of the time and the experience of Islamic governance as a manifestation of religious democratic people. Fundamentally, no fundamental difference can be observed in the two viewpoints since the basis of their analysis and their scientific method is the same. Therefore, the criteria and foundations will lead to the same conclusions. Although the literature on these matters may differ, their essence and concept are in harmony.

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