

Political System

Essential Features of the Islamic Political System

by

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The political system of Islam is based on three principles: *Tawhid* (unity of *Allah*), *Risalat* (Prophethood) and *Khilafat* (vicegerency). It is difficult to appreciate the different aspects of Islamic polity without fully understanding these three principles. I will therefore begin with a brief exposition of what they are.

Tawhid means that only *Allah* is the Creator, Sustainer and Master of the universe and of all that exists in it, organic or inorganic. The sovereignty of this kingdom is vested only in Him. He alone has the right to command or forbid. Worship and obedience are due to Him alone, no one and nothing else shares it in any way. Life, in all its forms, our physical organs and faculties, the apparent control which we have over nearly everything in our lives and the things themselves, none of them has been created or acquired by us in our own right. They have been bestowed on us entirely by *Allah*. Hence, it is not for us to decide the aim and purpose of our existence or to set the limits of our authority; nor is anyone else entitled to make these decisions for us. This right rests only with *Allah*, who has created us, endowed us with mental and physical faculties, and provided material things for our use. *Tawhid* means that only *Allah* is the Creator, Sustainer and Master of the universe and of all that exists in it, organic or inorganic. The sovereignty of this kingdom is vested only in Him. He alone has the right to command or forbid. Worship and obedience are due to Him alone, no one and nothing else shares it in any way. Life, in all its forms, our physical organs and faculties, the apparent control which we have over nearly everything in our lives and the things themselves, none of them has been created or acquired by us in our own right. They have been bestowed on us entirely by *Allah*. Hence, it is not for us to decide the aim and purpose of our existence or to set the limits of our authority; nor is anyone else entitled to make these decisions for us. This right rests only with *Allah*, who has created us, endowed us with mental and physical faculties, and provided material things for our use. *Tawhid* means that only *Allah* is the Creator, Sustainer and Master of the universe and of all that exists in it, organic or inorganic. The sovereignty of this kingdom is vested only in Him. He alone has the right to command or forbid. Worship and obedience are due to Him alone, no one and nothing else shares it in any way. Life, in all its forms, our physical organs and faculties, the apparent control which we have over nearly everything in our lives and the things themselves, none of them has been created or acquired by us in our own right. They have been bestowed on us entirely by *Allah*. Hence, it is not for us to decide the aim and purpose of our existence or to set the limits of our authority; nor is anyone else entitled to make these decisions for us. This right rests only with *Allah*, who has created us, endowed us with mental and physical faculties, and provided material things for our use.

This principle of the unity of Allah totally negates the concept of the legal and political independence of human beings, individually or collectively. No individual, family, class or race can set themselves above Allah. Allah alone is the Ruler and His commandments are the Law.

The medium through which we receive the law of *Allah* is known as *Risalat*. We have received two things from this source: the Book in which *Allah* has set out His law, and the authoritative interpretation and exemplification of the Book by the Prophet, blessings and peace be on him through word and deed, in his capacity as the representative of *Allah*. The Prophet, blessings and peace be on him, has also, in accordance with the intention of the Divine Book, given us a model for the Islamic way of life by himself implementing the law and providing necessary details where required. The combination of these two elements is called the Shari'ah.

Now consider *Khilafat*. According to the Arabic lexicon, it means 'representation'. Man, according to Islam, is the representative of *Allah* on earth, His vicegerent. That is to say, by virtue of the powers delegated to him by *Allah*, he is required to exercise his *Allah*-given authority in this world within the limits prescribed by *Allah*.

Take, for example, the case of an estate which someone has been appointed to administer on your behalf. You will see that four conditions are invariably met. First, the real ownership of the estate remains vested in you and not in the administrator; second, he administers your property only in accordance with your instructions; third, he exercises his authority within the limits prescribed by you; and fourth, in the administration of the trust he executes your will and not his own. These four conditions are so inherent in the concept of 'representation' that if any representative fails to observe them he will rightly be blamed for breaking the covenant which was implied in the concept of 'representation'. This is exactly what Islam means when it affirms that man is the vicegerent of *Allah* on earth. Hence, these four conditions are also involved in the concept of *Khilafat*.

A state that is established in accordance with this political theory will in fact be a human caliphate under the sovereignty of *Allah* and will do *Allah*'s will by working within the limits prescribed by Him and in accordance with His instructions and injunctions.

This is a new and revised translation of a talk given by the author on Radio Pakistan, Lahore, on 20th January, 1948.

Democracy in Islam

The above explanation of the term *Khilafat* also makes it abundantly clear that no individual or dynasty or class can be *Khilafah*, but that the authority of caliphate is bestowed on any community which accepts the principles of *Tawhid* and *Risalat*. In such a society, each individual shares the *Allah*-given caliphate. This is the point where democracy begins in Islam.

Every person in an Islamic society enjoys the rights and powers of the caliphate of *Allah* and in this

respect all individuals are equal. No one can deprive anyone of his rights and powers. The agency for running the affairs of the state will be established in accordance with the will of these individuals, and the authority of the state will only be an extension of the powers of the individual delegated to it. Their opinion will be decisive in the formation of the Government, which will be run with their advice and in accordance with their wishes. Whoever gains their confidence will carry out the duties of the caliphate on their behalf; and when he loses this confidence he will have to relinquish his office. In this respect the political system in Islam is as perfect a democracy as ever can be.

What distinguishes Islamic democracy from Western democracy is that while the latter is based on the concept of popular sovereignty the former rests on the principle of popular *Khilafat*. In Western democracy the people are sovereign, in Islam sovereignty is vested in *Allah* and the people are His caliphs or representatives. In the former the people make their own laws; in the latter they have to follow and obey the laws (Shari'ah) given by *Allah* through His Prophet. In one the Government undertakes to fulfil the will of the people; in the other Government and the people alike have to do the will of *Allah*. Western democracy is a kind of absolute authority which exercises its powers in a free and uncontrolled manner, whereas Islamic democracy is subservient to the Divine Law and exercises its authority in accordance with the injunctions of *Allah* and within the limits prescribed by Him.

Purpose of the Islamic State

The Holy Qur'an clearly states that the aim and purpose of this state, built on the foundation of *Tawhid*, *Risalat* and *Khilafat*, is the establishment, maintenance and development of those virtues which the Creator of the universe wishes human life to be enriched by, and the prevention and eradication of those evils which are abhorrent to *Allah*. The state in Islam is not intended for political administration only nor for the fulfilment through it of the collective will of any particular set of people. Rather, Islam places a high ideal before the state for the achievement of which it must use all the means at its disposal. The aim is to encourage the qualities of purity, beauty, goodness, virtue, success and prosperity which *Allah* wants to flourish in the life of His people and to suppress all kinds of exploitation and injustice. As well as placing before us this high ideal, Islam clearly states the desired virtues and the undesirable evils. The Islamic state can thus plan its welfare programmes in every age and in any environment.

The constant demand made by Islam is that the principles of morality must be observed at all costs and in all walks of life. Hence, it lays down an unalterable requirement for the state to base its politics on justice, truth and honesty. It is not prepared, under any circumstances, to tolerate fraud, falsehood and injustice for the sake of political, administrative or national expediency. Whether it be relations between the rulers and the ruled within the state, or relations of the state with other states, precedence must always be given to truth, honesty and justice. It imposes obligations on the state similar to those it imposes on the individual: to fulfil all contracts and obligations; to have consistent standards in all dealings; to remember obligations as well as rights and not to forget the rights of others when

expecting them to fulfil their obligations; to use power and authority for the establishment for justice and not for the perpetration of injustice; to look on duty as a sacred obligation; and to regard power as a trust from *Allah* to be used in the belief that one has to render an account of one's actions to Him in the Hereafter.

Fundamental Rights

Although an Islamic state may be set up anywhere on earth, Islam does not seek to restrict human rights or privileges to the geographical limits of its own state. Islam has laid down universal fundamental rights for humanity as a whole, which are to be observed and respected in all circumstances irrespective of whether a person lives on the territory of the Islamic state or outside it and whether he is at peace with the state or at war. For example, human blood is sacred and may not be spilled without justification; it is not permissible to oppress women, children, old people, the sick or the wounded; woman's honour and chastity must be respected in all circumstances; and the hungry must be fed, the naked clothed, and the wounded or diseased treated medically.

These, and a few other provisions, have been laid down by Islam as fundamental rights for every man by virtue of his status as a human being, to be enjoyed under the constitution of an Islamic state.

The rights of citizenship in Islam, however, are not confined to persons born within the limits of its state but are granted to every Muslim irrespective of his place of birth. A Muslim *ipso facto* becomes the citizen of an Islamic state as soon as he sets foot on its territory with the intention of living there; he thus enjoys equal rights of citizenship with those who are its citizens by birth. Citizenship must therefore be common to all the citizens of all the Islamic states that exist in the world; a Muslim will not need a passport for entry or exit from any of them. And every Muslim must be regarded as eligible for positions of the highest responsibility in an Islamic state without distinction of race, colour or class.

Islam has also laid down certain rights for non-Muslims who may be living within the boundaries of an Islamic state, and these rights must necessarily form part of the Islamic constitution. According to Islamic terminology such non-Muslims are called *dhimmis* (the covenanted), implying that the Islamic state has entered into a covenant with them and guaranteed their rights.

The life, property and honour of a *dhimmi* is to be respected and protected in exactly the same way as that of a Muslim citizen. There is no difference between Muslim and non-Muslim citizens in respect of civil or criminal law; and the Islamic state shall not interfere with the personal law of non-Muslims. They will have full freedom of conscience and belief and will be entitled to perform their religious rites and ceremonies. As well as being able to practise their religion, they are entitled to criticise Islam. However the rights given in this respect are not unlimited: the civil law of the country has to be fully respected and all criticism has to be made within its framework.

These rights are irrevocable and non-Muslims can only be deprived of them if they renounce the

covenant which grants them citizenship. However much a non-Muslim state may oppress its Muslim citizens, it is not permissible for an Islamic state to retaliate against its non-Muslim subjects. This injunction holds good even if all the Muslims outside the boundaries of an Islamic state are massacred.

Executive and Legislature

The responsibility for the administration of the Government in an Islamic state is entrusted to an Amir (leader) who may be likened to the President or the Prime Minister in a Western democratic state. All adult men and women who accept the fundamentals of the constitution are entitled to vote in the election for the leader.

The basic qualifications for the election of an Amir are that he should command the confidence of the largest number of people in respect of his knowledge and grasp of the spirit of Islam; he should possess the Islamic attribute of fear of *Allah*; he should be endowed with the quality of statesmanship. In short, he should be both able and virtuous.

A Shura (consultative council), elected by the people, will assist and guide the Amir. It is obligatory for the Amir to administer the country with the advice of his Shura. The Amir can retain office only so long as he enjoys the confidence of the people, and must resign when he loses this confidence. Every citizen has the right to criticise the Amir and his Government, and all responsible means for the expression of public opinion should be available.

Legislation in an Islamic state should be within the limits prescribed by the Shari'ah. The injunctions of *Allah* and His Prophet are to be accepted and obeyed and no legislative body can alter or modify them or make any new laws which are contrary to their spirit. The duty of ascertaining the real intent of those commandments which are open to more than one interpretation should devolve on people possessing a specialised knowledge of the law of Shari'ah. Hence, such matters may have to be referred to a sub-committee of the Shā r~ comprising men learned in Islamic law. Great scope would still be available for legislation on questions not covered by any specific injunctions of the Shari'ah, and the advisory council or legislature is free to legislate in regard to these matters.

In Islam the judiciary is not placed under the control of the executive. It derives its authority directly from the Shari'ah and is answerable to *Allah*. The judges will obviously be appointed by the Government but, once appointed, will have to administer justice impartially according to the law of *Allah*. All the organs and functionaries of the Government should come within their jurisdiction: even the highest executive authority of the Government will be liable to be called upon to appear in a court of law as a plaintiff or defendant. Rulers and ruled are subject to the same law and there can be no discrimination on the basis of position, power or privilege. Islam stands for equality and scrupulously adheres to this principle in the social, economic and political realms alike.