

The religious democracy and its theocracy politics essay



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The outbreaks of the late 20th century were especially notable in light of the Western assumption that less developed countries would naturally secularize their politics and culture as they modernized their society and economy.

Instead, rapidly developing Iran succumbed in 11 February 1979 to a religious revolution led by Imam Khomeini. Soon after, an interim government in Tehran gave way to a political form of government in early 1980 that made so many changes in its policies, the most important one was to practice the idea of Islamic Republic in which the government was to wed with religion of Shi'ite Islam indissolubly.

However, there exist different and even contending conceptions as to what form actually it is. Some argue that the form of Islamic Republic is just a "theocracy"[1]and some others has recognized the " constitutional theocratic character of the regime." [2]Some argue that theocracy as " the kingdom of God on earth" has not fully realized yet and thus prior to this full realization, theocracy can coexist with any transitory system of human government. This coexisted or combined form of government is an " ecclesiocracy" that seek to give the human religious hierarchy absolute control over the political power of a state.[3]Whereas to another one, theocracy can occur in any society where a powerful religious group or combination of religious groups has/have the decisive voice in a ruling political or judicial system.[4]

On the contrary, some believe that the Islamic Republic is just " one kind among so many democracies"[5]or " one of the most democratic states." [6]Even the US officials who used to oppose the new Islamic Regime in the past 23 years, now insist that there are some democratic characteristics found in there.[7]There are also others who observe it as a

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totalitarian tyranny, an absolutist autocracy, oligarchy or even “ all clerical oligarchy” and call Islamic Republic a “ clerical regime.”[8]

What I am going to argue here is that on the path of “ human development towards perfection” and “ human felicity throughout human society”, the Islamic Republic in Iran has brought a kind of mixed or combined form of government that includes the best characteristics of various forms prescribed by “ the Islamic principles and norms” and the current practices that may ensure “ the active and broad participation of all segments of society in the process of social development,” as explicitly mentioned in its Constitutional Law.

Forms of Governments

Most of the key words commonly used to describe forms of governments, such as monarchy, oligarchy, and democracy, are of Greek or Roman origin. The central question of politics in all these was always the same: the distribution of power among the citizens so that freedom and happiness is best preserved and defined. Plato believed that the object of politics was virtue, and that only a few would ever thoroughly understand the science, which believed to “ contemplate all truth and all existence” by which virtue could be attained and only these trained few, then, should rule. To his view the best was the form in which “ kings are philosophers” or “ philosophers are kings” which could be either monarchy or aristocracy but the fundamental laws of the State will be maintained. To this perfect ideal of “ just and good” succeeds different forms of oligarchy, democracy, tyranny after which Plato added “ some other intermediate forms of government” but

all “ these are nondescripts and may be found equally among Hellenes and among barbarians.[9]

But his pupil, Aristotle, gave another classification of the forms of government. To him the government “ which is the supreme authority in states” could be “ in the hands of one, or of a few, or of the many” and based on “ the purpose of a state”, it may seek either “ the common interest” or “ the private interest”. Accordingly there would be three (not one) “ true forms of ... kingship or royalty, aristocracy ... or ... a constitution” and three “ perversions” that are “ tyranny ... oligarchy, [or] ... democracy.”[10]In analyzing various forms of governments of the time, Aristotle, however, came to this notion that “ the whole system of government tends to be neither democracy nor oligarchy, but something in a mean between them.”[11]

This combination form of government could be seen in the new monarchy of Macedon arose and mounted in the battle against Sparta and Athens (338 BC) and also in Rome that emerged as the strongest state in the Mediterranean after the victory of Hannibal at Zama (202 BC). The Greek historian Polybius, who chronicled Rome’s rise, suggested that its constitution was such a success because it was a judicious blend of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. The Romans, a conservative, practical people, showed what they thought of such abstractions by speaking only of an unanalyzed “ public thing”-res publica-and thus gave a new word to politics.

From then onward various combined or blend forms governments were set up every where in the world. Justinian, the greatest of the eastern Roman emperors, in the 6th century, Charlemagne, king of the Franks, in 800, and later centuries the dynasties of Hohenstaufen and Habsburg so, as late as the 19th century, did Napoleon Bonaparte tried to restore the empire though none were succeeded. In the 7th century the Arab Muslims defeated the first of the two great powers of the time and conquered quite many parts of the second in North Africa and Spain. Beside to the strong monarchies that gradually developed almost everywhere in the world, various institutions and social classes were to fill the gap too. The church and the mosque, against enormous odds, had kept the light of religion and learning alive and spread what was left of Roman and Islamic civilization into modern city-states. Military aristocracy called nobiles in the Roman fashion and appropriated various late imperial titles such as comes (count), dux (duke) and khans have also effective powers. This dynamism in European society and elsewhere in the world prevented it from setting permanently into this or any other form and pattern even in the most characteristic governmental form of the modern world, the nation-state.

The application of the principle of parliamentary representation together with the concepts of divine, natural, and customary law as a restraint on the exercise of power besides some other fundamental occurrences of the Enlightenment and the Renaissance, the Reformation, the discovery of America and the American and French revolutions caused a new form of government known as modern democracy which is quite different from that of old Greek. The modern democracy repudiated the divine right of kings, the

ascendancy of the nobility and the privileges of the Roman Catholic Church. Equality before the law was to replace the system of privileges that characterized the old regimes and judicial procedures were insisted upon to prevent abuses by the king or his administration. By destroying the monarchy, a republic was set up and its centuries-old labours were crowned. Now in the name of rationality, liberty, and equality (fraternity is not a foremost concern anymore), the nation makes the quest its own. Free election of government bodies under (eventual) universal suffrage, competition for office through organized and permanent parties, freedom of speech and the press, and the rule of law together with greater influence for the working classes, women and foreigners are common in all three basic senses of a form of government either as direct, representative or constitutional (liberal) democracy.

Theocracy, too, derived from two Greek words meaning “ rule by the deity”, was the name given to political regimes that claim to represent the Divine on earth both directly and immediately. Most governments throughout history and across cultures have claimed to be following their gods’ designs or to be legitimated by a divine mandate. The kings in a number of ancient civilizations had been worshipped as gods on earth so, by definition, the king could not be wrong and in a number of others the God’s prophets or theologically trained elites were the rulers on behalf of Him and rule by divine right.

As the holy books, archaeologists, and historians show, the ancient

Hebrews, Tibetans, and Egyptians lived in theocracies for some of their

history. Theocracies are also found within the three great heavenly faiths of <https://assignbuster.com/the-religious-democracy-and-its-theocracy-politics-essay/>

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as well as Hinduism and Buddhism. Some examples are Jesus' message of the dawning of "the Kingdom of God," and not anyone else[12] or "the fulfilment on Earth of God's will" as the central theme of Jesus' teaching, and his expressly rejection of any collaboration with the Roman emperor,[13] the community established by the prophet Muhammad in Medina in 622, and ruled by him until his passing away in 632, [14] the Papal States under various popes whose purpose was to manage worldwide Catholicism, fundamentalism as seen within modern Judaism of Gush Emunim and the Haredim[15], within Christianity of Jehovah's Witnesses, within Protestant Christians of Evangelicals and some political action groups,[16] within Hindu nationalists in India, Sikh radicals in Punjab, and Buddhist militants in Sri Lanka, within Sunni Muslims in the political activities of Muslim Brotherhood. The more important one within Shi'ite Islam is the Islamic Republic of Iran, during which a Shi'ite teaching retrieved and developed into a politically useful doctrine: the Rule of the Jurist.

Religious Democracy

The form of government in revolutionary Iran is neither a sole theocracy in which people have no say in their political destiny nor a sole democracy in which people's vote can change every thing from the bottom to the top of the political hierarchy whenever they wish. Rather, as the official name of "the Islamic Republic" illustrates, it is a combination of all forms of government previously known especially both these two particular forms: theocracy and democracy and in some parts quite different from both sole of them, if one can find or even imagine.

The characteristic of this combined form of government and the major building block of the Islamic regime in Iran, as explicitly stated in several articles of the Constitution and the spirit surrounding it, is based on two pillars. One pillar is that of inspired by Imam Khomeini's notion of the "Absolute Rule of the Jurist" (Velayat-e Motlaqeh-e Faqih) by which the leading cleric has no limitation over society and politics and he is the one last position that can make the decisions to the benefit of all citizens. He is elected by the whole people in an uprising like what happened in February 1979 that led to the leadership of Imam Khomeini or by the Assembly of Experts (the representatives of people mostly clerics) through a popular suffrage of both sexes of 15 years and more like what happened in the nomination of Ayatollah Khamenei in June 1989. The ruling jurist is just one nominee among so many other theologians and according to Shiite tradition, and is identified as the successor of the 12th Imam. The latter kind of election is similar to the election of the US president by the Electoral College.

Standing at the top of the political hierarchy as the Supreme Leader and equal with others against the law, the ruling jurist supervises the three branches of the government. The regular armed forces, the Islamic Guards Corps, the police, and the radio and television network are under his command and he determines the direction of foreign policy and any other whole compassing or general policy. He appoints the Supreme Judges, has the power to dismiss the elected President, and selects the six jurists of the twelve-member Council of Guardians.

The second pillar is the democratic institutions that have been well

incorporated in the Constitution. Under section "The Form of Government in <https://assignbuster.com/the-religious-democracy-and-its-theocracy-politics-essay/>

Islam," the preamble of the Constitution reads that the " government does not derive from the interests of a class, nor does it serve the domination of an individual or a group." It expressly asserts that:

... Government ... represents the fulfillment of the political ideal of a people who bear a common faith and common outlook, taking an organized form in order to initiate the process of intellectual and ideological evolution towards the final goal, i. e., movement towards Allah [God]. ... The Constitution guarantees the rejection of all forms of intellectual and social tyranny and economic monopoly, and aims at entrusting the destinies of the people to the people themselves in order to break completely with the system of oppression. (This is in accordance with the Quranic verse " He removes from them their burdens of the fetters that were upon them".[17])

The Constitution devotes Chapter 5 including six articles to " the Right of National Sovereignty and the Powers Deriving there from" and explains the fact that the Iranian people have a lot say in the management of their country and how every one of them is the " master of his own social destiny." The National Sovereignty is considered a " divine right" dedicated from " Absolute sovereignty" of God " over the world and man" and should never been deprived or subordinated " to the vested interests of a particular individual or group." (Article 56) Separation of Powers into three independent ones of legislature, judiciary, and executive " functioning under the supervision of the absolute religious Leader and the Leadership of the Ummah, in accordance with the forthcoming articles of this Constitution" has been accepted in Article 57. " Direct recourse to popular vote through a referendum," as a function of the legislature, is also anticipated by Article 59

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for cases of “ extremely important economic, political, social, and cultural matters.”

The Islamic Consultative Assembly, as national assembly, is constituted by “ the representatives of the people elected directly and by secret ballot (Article 62) and has the power to “ establish laws on all matters” (Article 71) and has “ the right to investigate and examine all the affairs of the country” (Article 76) including “ a vote of confidence” or “ a vote of no confidence” to the Council of Ministers (Articles 87-88) and “ can interpellate” the Council of Ministers or an individual Minister or even the President. (Article 89) In this way not only the national executive power, but all local governments of provinces, cities, divisions, villages and other officials appointed by the government “ must abide by all decisions taken by the councils” (Article 103) “ elected by the people of the locality in question.” (Article 100)

Democratic concepts such as equality before the law, rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, freedom of belief, conscience, association, assembly and the press, secrecy of communication, recourse to the courts, respect for minority and women’s rights, economic development, and social justice are all explicitly expressed in Chapter 3 (Articles 19-43) of the Constitution and several guarantees have been given to succeed. The judiciary as “ an independent power” and “ the protector of the rights of the individual and society” is one of these important guarantees. Concerning status and duties of the Judiciary, Article 156 reads such:

The judiciary is ... responsible for the implementation of justice, and entrusted with ... investigating and passing judgement on grievances,

violations of rights, and complaints; the resolution of litigation; the settling of disputes; and the taking of all necessary decisions and measures in probate matters as the law may determine; restoring public rights and promoting justice and legitimate freedoms; supervising the proper enforcement of laws; uncovering crimes; prosecuting, punishing, and chastising criminals; and enacting the penalties and provisions of the Islamic penal code; and taking suitable measures to prevent the occurrence of crime and to reform criminals.

The concept of “ Velayat-e Amr va Imamat-e Mostamir (rule by the leader and the perpetual leadership),” according to the preamble of the Constitution is another such guarantees of those democratic rights in which an all qualified and trustworthy jurist, recognized as leader by the people, is to “ prevent any deviation by the various organs of State from their essential Islamic duties.” Article 107 too asserts that the Jurist is an “ elected” one either by recognition and acceptance “ as marji’ and Leader by a decisive majority of the people” as happened for Imam Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, or “ by the Assembly of Experts” which is also “ elected by the people.” The Experts are to “ review and consult among themselves concerning all the fuqaha’ (jurists) possessing the qualifications specified in Articles 5 and 109” namely “ scholarship ... in different fields of fiqh, Justice and piety ... right political and social perspicacity, prudence, courage, administrative facilities and adequate capability for leadership.” (Article 109) The Article adds that “ in case of multiplicity of persons fulfilling the above qualifications and conditions, the person possessing the better jurisprudential and political perspicacity will be given preference.”

It is true that the Supreme Religious Leader is at the top of the government hierarchy and can make final decisions of general policies but it is only if “ in accordance with the ... articles of this Constitution” (Article 57) and after consultation with the Nation’s Exigency Council that consists of the heads of the three branches and some other relative cabinet and Parliament members, all Council of Guardians members, and a few more experts (Article 112) to which some heads of different parties and political fractions are added in action. When the revision of the Constitution comes, as Article 177 expresses, some contents “ are unalterable” among them “ the Islamic character of the political system; the basis of all the rules and regulations according to Islamic criteria and the religious footing; ... the democratic character of the government; the Velayat-e Amr the Imamate of Ummah; and the administration of the affairs of the country based on national referenda.”

In so doing, the government in Iran is quite different from dictatorship or tyranny in which one person or a small group possesses absolute power without effective constitutional limitations. The religious democracy is thus a form of government which links religion and people’s beliefs to their will and wishes. There seems no conflict in its dual legitimacy of the Islamic Republic or any juxtaposition between popular sovereignty of the president or parliament and supervision of the ruling jurist. The letter of the constitution asserts on the equality of the two pillars in order to get the goal which is virtue, happiness and as a whole the movement toward God Almighty.

In theory too, as Poul Weber has noted, “ there is no reason why a theocracy and a democratic form of government are incompatible-vox populi, vox dei
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(" the voice of the people is the voice of God"),[18]a combination that seems possible and rational for Peter Schmid to conclude that " because Islam is compatible with both secularism and democracy, a religious democracy is in Iran's future.[19]According to Soroush's theory of " Contraction and Expansion of Religious Interpretation" too, secularism and democracy not only do not threaten religion but also they merely help to increase the understanding of religion and all are complementary, for the religious understanding is merely a variety of human understanding.[20]Soroush continues in an interview that:

There is no single God-given shape for Islamic government ... The system of " Velayat-e Faqih," introduced by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, is an anachronism ... Though religion itself is sacred, its interpretation is not sacred and therefore it is criticizable, modifiable, refinable, and redefinable.[21]

One may ask why a sole theocracy or a sole democracy is not favourable or even desirable among the majority of Iranian Muslims and why we need such a combination. The answer is that theocracy as an " absolute sovereignty" of God to the will of man and the state is far from our hands because we are sometimes unable to understand the true God's will and commandment. Such understanding and knowledge requires " long preparation, several degrees of training, and education ... People are not able to comprehend God's will through the explanations contained in the Quran and the Sunna. Acquiring such comprehension requires several years of studies and much effort." [22]And in some other times we are unwilling to surrender to His will

and law, and to implement His orders in our daily life for virtue need much much effort, deprivation, and abnegation.[23]

Furthermore when they do gain power, theocracies tend to be short lived for a number of reasons, some internal to the regime and others external to it. Internally, clerics trained in religious dogma and jurisprudence, are rarely skilled in political, economic and other social matters and have difficulty maintaining a complex modern society. When corruption occurs among government officials, ensuing scandals undermine religion as well as politics if those officials are also clerics. Resentment grows among the nonclerical populace when religious laws seem arbitrary or excessively strict and are enforced through civil power. Religious taxes, imposed on top of other taxes, especially in times of economic hardship, cause added resentment. Finally, clerics who presume to speak in the name of the Divinity have difficulty engaging in normal compromises so essential for political effectiveness. Such compromises may even seem to them to be immoral or sinful. Finally, in states controlled by one or no party, which theocracies tend to be, police are often tempted to resort to brutality and other harsh measures that undermine the legitimacy of the regime.

Externally, rulers in other nations often fear the exportation of religious dogma backed by political power and move to isolate a theocratic regime. And because secular cultures from outside can exert a constant seductive influence on young people through music, arts, clothes, and movies, and infuse them with political ideas of freedom, democracy, and equality, a theocratic regime is inclined to limit contact with the outside world. Such

actions increase isolation of the country but often lead to a fascination with <https://assignbuster.com/the-religious-democracy-and-its-theocracy-politics-essay/>

the outside and an underground opposition to the regime. Such conditions are not conducive to longevity, and theocracies rarely outlive their founding generation.

The sole democracy is not the best form of government either. That is why you see different types of democratic governments in the world. Even Great Britain and the United States, nations with relatively similar cultures, politics, and economies, have developed significantly different forms of democracy. Besides, many governments today (around 140 out of 191 states) in the most parts of the world claim to be democratic in the ascendant. Numerous authoritarian and totalitarian states, notably the communist nations of the 20th century, had also adopted outwardly democratic governments that nonetheless were dominated by a single authorized party with no opposition. States with Marxist ideologies asserted that political consensus and collective ownership of the means of production (i. e., economic democracy) were sufficient to ensure that the will of the people would be carried out. Moreover, there are some elements still threatening the existence of this democracy: class conflicts muted rather than resolved, nationalism still distorted voters' judgments in matters of foreign policy, demagogues abounded as much as they ever did in ancient Athens, and many politicians were corrupt. Furthermore democracy places high value on the freedom of the individual and generally stresses the self-directed, self-contained, and comparatively unrestrained individual or ego. This characteristic as Alexis de Tocqueville described is a kind of moderate selfishness, disposing human beings to be concerned only with their own small circle of family and friends.

Conclusion

It is right that in some cases (such as Egyptian nationalism, Taliban imposition of shari'a in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein's holy war in 1991 and 2003) we may find some unclear forms of government which claimed to establish a true theocratic or democratic form of government but failed to do so, or some tried to use religious rhetoric, symbolism, and values for nationalistic purposes, or religious ideals may be used to win popular support for liberation from foreign domination, from an autocratic ruling elite or to encourage economic renewal, but one can surely find some historical and contemporary examples to support a true combination of different forms of government as the Islamic Republic in Iran was a combination of such ideals and facts.

This form of Iranian government is neither a sole theocracy or ecclesiocracy nor an oligarchy either clerical or financial or military, nor a sole democracy of its any kinds but a political order between them all: the head of the state elected indirectly on a universal suffrage is not a philosopher who claims to know the truth from the false out of any way he can, but he should be a Islamist jurist prudent that obliges himself to explore the Shi'ite cannon law and seek to find the truth out of shari'a and should think and function in the interest of the whole people not himself or any particular fraction. As the people try to elect the best as their rulers, the aristocratic element is also present in this regime. There are lots of legal conditions and qualifications for people's representatives and heads of governmental departments that only part of the well educated and qualified bureaucrats can hold the official positions. For these reasons, aristocracy, in a more objective sense, means

the upper layer of a stratified group. Thus, the upper ranks of the government form – both legally and factually- the political aristocracy of the state. The principles of the constitution distribute the powers and make the government and its rulers constitutional and obliged to uphold the Constitution. This form is thus quite different from any given sole form of government.

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