

Home > Imam Khomeini, Ethics and Politics > Part 2: Ethics and Politics > Imām Khomein[ؑ] and Ethical Politics > The meaning of politics and the status of power

Imām Khomein[ؑ] and Ethical Politics

In an article entitled, *Politics and the Problem of Dirty Hands*, Coady endeavors to prove the bitter reality that politics is incompatible with remaining innocent and pure, and anyone who enters the political arena should accept the veneer of infamy, meanness, defilement, and any kind of pollution. It is because political expediency and the human condition are such, and “If they mean dirty hands, then they are the mere offshoot of the human condition”^[446] and one cannot escape from them.

The Imām’s approach to this issue is of a different kind: His stand is that politics can, and should, be ethical, for politics is nothing but implementation of ethics in a broader spectrum of the society as well as realization of religious ideals and goals. As such, he believes in the oneness of ethics and politics and in a bid to prove it, he puts forth certain points which are discussed in the content of the following:

- Universality of Islam;
- Meaning of politics and the status of power;
- Politics as indispensable for the realization of Islam; and
- Oneness of ethics and politics in Islam.

Universality of Islam

It was mentioned earlier that man has numerous existential realms and he should nurture and let all of them grow. Now, keeping in view this fact, all divine religions, especially Islam, have appeared so as to nourish these dimensions. The One who holds the reins of authority over the universe, with the

knowledge of all the needs of humanity, has sent a prophet (‘a) to every community in every epoch in order to let man attain his perfection: “Because the human being is a multidimensional creature, with many needs, the prophets came to answer these needs and teach man how to act in order to attain true happiness.”[447]

As such, all religions in their respective times have been universal and all the prophets (‘a) have explained all the things needed by the people. “The prophets (‘a) have spoken of those things which concern the spirit, things which concern the different stages of understanding and which relate to the realms of the unseen.”[448] Thus, every religion has had its own particular time of universality until we reach Islam, which is the culmination and perfection of Abrahamic faiths. In this religion, all the needs of humanity have been anticipated and the ways of meeting them precisely specified.

The traditions and the Holy Qur’an have spoken both of issues which concern individual duties and which play a part in man’s development and maturation, and of political issues as well as economic issues; issues which concern society and have something to do with the regulation and moral teachings of the society.[449]

It is with this perception that we see, “We have such a book in which personal affairs, social affairs, political affairs, state administration, and all things are encompassed.”[450] The least doubt on the universality of Islam, and limiting its scope is tantamount to the negation of its principles.

Those who confine Islam to [merely] eating, sleeping, praying, and fasting while not interfering with the problems of this nation, and of the predicaments of this society are not Muslims, [451] according to the narration of the Most Noble Messenger (s).[452]

In the opinion of the Imām, Islam is not a religion which is only concerned with the spiritual and personal needs; rather, “Islam is everything for the human being; that is, it has ideas and views on everything from nature to beyond nature to the celestial world; Islam has a thesis; Islam has a program.”[453] This program of Islam takes into account all the facets and dimensions of life: “Islam has rules and decrees for the entire life of man from the day he is born up to the moment he is delivered to his grave.”[454]

The meaning of politics and the status of power

Politics is inextricably intertwined with all the dimensions of our life and it is so palpable and conspicuous that its existence and influence cannot be denied. But, what is politics really? Innumerable descriptions of politics have been advanced. But one thing is certain: politics is related to the acquisition of power or the struggle for the acquisition of power. So, at the core of the concept of politics, ruling (over others)

and attempts at exerting influence lie latent.

If such is the meaning of politics, then it cannot be evaded and must be accepted. It is because the requisite of social welfare and well-being of the society lies in the existence of power, and attainment of power is tied to politics. “What is politics by the way? It is the relations between the ruler and the nation, relations between the ruler and the other governments and, I should say, it is to prevent the corruption and mischief that exist. All of these constitute politics and it is so.”[455] If politics is such and forbidding corruption is deemed part of it, then Islam also has politics as it pursues the enjoyment of what is good and the preclusion of what is bad. Hence, the Imām describes Islam itself, thus: “Islam is governance along with its affairs and decrees.”[456] Similarly, the Infallibles (‘a) have always been involved in politics in this sense.

On what day was the Most Noble Messenger (s) concerned with political issues? He (‘a) used to establish a government; he (s) used to resist those who were anti-Islam and oppressed the people; he (s) used to wage war against them.[457]

It was not only the Most Noble Messenger (s) who used to engage in politics in this sense; the aspect of politics was there in all the prophets (‘a). Because, politics means ensuring the interests of the people, and the prophets (‘a) used to perform this duty in the best manner.

Politics means guiding the society and showing the way; it means considering all the interests of the society, and taking into account all aspects of man and society and guiding them toward the things that are best for them, for the nation and the individuals. This is exclusive to the prophets (‘a).[458]

Politics in this sense has been the principal axis of movement of all the prophets (‘a) and no religion can be regarded as alien and distant from it.

But, the most essential element of politics is power. However, power is something that is frightening. It misleads man as well as disenchants him, that the nature of power corrupts man. A person who feels powerful rebels, and forgets himself, as well as his being a servant of God, and nourishes an illusion of godhood. The story of Pharaoh is not a mere historical account.

Everybody has a ‘Pharaoh’ within himself and awaits a favourable opportunity and situation to beat the drum of divinity for himself. François Mitterrand, the former President of France who spent his life in obtaining, preserving and extending power, says about this phenomenon, “I think that power is always a dreadful thing; the one who possesses power should—if not fear—be at least extraordinarily heedful of the nature and extent of his particular role.”[459]

Power is prone to excesses and does not stop at a certain point. If the instinct of power-seeking is given free rein, its expansion and spread, then, can no longer be prevented. Because of this, many people, the

mystics in particular, have greatly feared and evaded power owing to its corruptive quality. The following story about an ascetic with the name of Ki Yuyu shows the depth of this fear and evasion:

One day, an emperor of ancient China said to a certain master of Zen named Ki Yuyu, “You are a very great man. I like to transfer the imperial throne to you after my death. Do you accept?”

Ki Yuyu was extremely annoyed and only said, “These words defiled my ears.”

Then, he left so as to wash his ears in the nearest river. While heading toward the river, he was talking to himself: “Today I have heard impure words.”

His friend, along with a cow, came to the river and asked him, “Why are you washing your ears?”

Ki Yuyu replied, “Today, I am very displeased. An emperor wants me to be his successor. He offered the imperial crown to me, and my ears have been polluted by these words. I have to wash them.”

His friend said, “I was supposed to let my cow drink from this limpid water, but now this water has been contaminated.”[460]

The view of our mystics on power has been usually a negative one. They consider the forestalling of power as the alternative to unbridled power. By reflecting on the spirit of men they have realized that only a few can withstand the enticement of power and not become its captive.

Mawlānā has a parable which speaks of this matter. A snake-catcher goes to a cold region in search of a snake. He finds an extremely dreadful, yet dead, dragon. He painstakingly drags it to Baghdad, which is a hot place, and tries to excite astonishment.

Due to the scorching heat of the sun in Iraq, the dragon gradually regains consciousness. It frees itself of its bonds, chases the spectators and the snake-catcher, and devours them.[461]

From this tale Mawlānā concludes that in the lifespan of every man, there exists a seemingly dead dragon. If a bit of the heat of power and wealth reaches it, it will corrupt man:

نفست از درهاست، او کی مرده است؟ از غمبی آلتی افسرده است

که به امر اوهمی رفت آبجو

گریابد آلتِ فرعون، او

را صد موسی و صد هارون زند

آنگه او پنیاد فرعونى کند

پشہ ای، گرید ز جاہ و مال صقر

کرمک است آن اژدها از دست فقر

The dragon is thy sensual soul: How is it dead?

It is (only) frozen by grief and lack of means.

If it obtain the means of Pharaoh,

By whose command the water of the river (Nile) would flow,

Then it will begin to act like Pharaoh

And will waylay a hundred (such as) Moses and Aaron.

That dragon, under stress of poverty, is a little worm,

(But) a gnat is made a falcon by power and riches.

Keep the dragon in the snow of separation (from its desires);

Beware; do not carry it into the sun of Iraq.

So long as that dragon of thine remains frozen (well and good);

Thou art a mouthful for it, when it gains release.[462]

In the words of the Imam, the Hitlerian makeup and his mania for power exist in the mind of everyone. "Hitler was ready to annihilate the whole of humanity and make himself stay in power in Germany. The superior race and that which was in the mind of Hitler are in the minds of all of you. You have made yourselves unwary." [463] Can it be concluded from this matter that power is evil in itself?

In reality, the claim of those people is that since power has unpleasant repercussions such as excesses, injustice and insolence, it follows then that one must eschew it totally. This view has been propagated by many of the Muslim mystics and it has been one factor in the decadence of the Muslim societies. But if gluttony has dire consequences, it cannot be concluded that food must be absolutely discarded.

If abundant wealth is corruptive, one cannot reject it totally and abandon the same. As in the previous discussion on instincts, the way of approaching the insolence of instincts is not to uproot them, but to guide them. On the issue of power too, the same approach must be adopted. Keeping aloof from the detriments of power by giving it up cannot be realized.

The evils should be identified and their emergence prevented. Mitterrand who himself speaks about the dangers of power, regards the solution to lie in controlling and guiding it, and in his words, in acquiring anti-power. "If the one who is in power... is of sound reasoning, he will search for anti-powers." [464]

This anti-power can prevent the excesses of power as well as the corruption of the power-holder. It can be within a person, and is called 'conscience' according to Mitterrand: "Some of my powers only rely on my conscience." [465]

But one should not content himself with this anti-power; rather, "the society, likewise, ought to bring into

existence anti-powers within the framework of its institutions.”[466]

In other words, power should be controlled through the mechanisms of distribution of power, the partnership of the people, and the supervisory bodies. Nevertheless, between these two types of anti-power, it seems that the internal anti-power has primacy. As, sometimes, the power-holder is in such a position of strength that he can neutralize all the social anti-powers. It is here that “the only brake that exists for his actions is the one within him.”[467]

Therefore, according to Weasel, it can be deduced that “the true power is that power which man exercises on his self.”[468] It is this point that can be regarded as among the axiomatic truths of Islamic ethics and mysticism. It is only through internal edification and dominance over the self that power can be properly handled and its perils avoided.

In the opinion of the Imām, the essence of power is an attribute of perfection and God also possesses this attribute in its absolute sense. “Power is a form of perfection in itself. God, the Sublime and Exalted, is powerful.”[469] As such, one should not shun power. Instead, he should understand it and benefit from it, in an optimal way, and the proper way of benefiting from something, in the view of the Imām, is internal refinement. Thus, he stands on the proposition that in case it is acquired by unrefined individuals, power is dangerous. In case power is obtained by corrupt persons, this same perfection will lead him to corruption.[470]

Yes, all the evils that are found in the world arise from egocentrism. Craving position, desire for power, love of riches, and the like—all of them spring from self-love, and this ‘idol’ is the biggest one, breaking which is also far more difficult than everything else.[471]

Therefore, in the intellectual code of the Imām, power ought not to be feared or evaded. Rather, it should be properly utilized, nourished and embellished; by means of relentless trimming of the extra branches of power, its possible centralization and absolutism can be parried.

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