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The Limits of the Imam's Leadership

Question:

Just as the range of the Imam's leadership includes guidance of the people, elucidation of religious rulings, exegesis of the Qur'an, and answering objections, it also includes political issues, protecting the order of society, implementing Islamic rules, establishing justice, ensuring security, and protecting the borders of Islam.

Please explain the relationship of these two parts with the principle of *Imamah* and explain to what extent Shi'a have accepted this issue.

Answer:

As has been indicated, their range of leadership includes both parts, and in reality these two parts are inseparable. However, the issue that was the focus of attention and covetousness of usurping politicians and oppressors was political leadership and taking control of the leadership of society.

Thus, their opposition to the Imams (peace be upon them) was focused on this aspect, and if they opposed them from the aspect of guidance in religious affairs – that is, if they entered the field by making institutions of learning, libraries, and schools – this was so that the people would feel less of a need for the guidance of the Imams (peace be upon them), and as a result, distance themselves from them, in order that they do not come under the effect of the spiritual and religious training of the Imams (peace be upon them).

Again, it was for this very reason that they feared the Imams' becoming well-known in intellectual and social circles, since they used to observe that the becoming known of their intellectual ability and enlightening guidance occasioned the progress and mastery of Shi'a thought and the people's increased inclination towards the Ahl al-Bait (peace be upon them).

The fact that in books of *kalam*, *Imamah* has been defined, in the words of the Prophet (peace be upon

him and his family), as “authority over all religious and worldly affairs of humanity” shows that in this definition their attention was primarily to the Imam’s authority over social affairs and his vicegerency of the Prophet in governing. This is because the dimension of the leadership and authority of the Imams in religious and spiritual matters and the intellectual eminence of the Ahl al-Bait (peace be upon them) were undeniable. Since enlightenment and guidance of people in religious and spiritual affairs was not linked to political issues, it was not opposed by the power-seekers.

And even if they desired to oppose them in this aspect, the people would not have accepted it, since the people were aware of their intellectual ability.

From the meaning of the word “*wilayah*” (authority), primarily the leadership and administration of social affairs, governing, and maintaining order are understood.

Verses of the Qur’an and many traditions, such as the *mutawatir* tradition of Ghadir also support this understanding. The following two verses are an example:

إِنَّمَا وَلِيُّكُمُ اللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا الَّذِينَ يُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَيُؤْتُونَ الزَّكَاةَ وَهُمْ
رَاكِعُونَ.

“Your wali is none but Allah and His messenger and the believers, those who establish the prayers and pay the poor-rate while they kneel (in their prayers).”¹

أَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا الرَّسُولَ وَأُولِي الْأَمْرِ مِنْكُمْ

“Obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you (the Prophet’s legatees).”²

The word *Imamah* also indicates the aspect of spiritual *Imamah* and intellectual and religious leadership to the same degree, as the following verse expresses:

وَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ أَئِمَّةً يَهْدُونَ بِأَمْرِنَا وَأَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْهِمْ فِعْلَ الْخَيْرَاتِ.

“And we made them leaders who guide at our command, and we revealed to them the performance of virtuous deeds.”³

In addition to these, many other verses and traditions such as the tradition of *thaqalayn*, *safinah*, *aman*,

and other traditions indicate this point. Thus, it has come in the tradition of *thaqalayn*:

“Do not precede the Ahl al-Bait, and do not go before them.”

In other words, be their followers. If greater attention is paid to the content of the mentioned verses and traditions, it will become known that they indicate both dimensions of leadership; thus the Shi‘a have always considered the Imam the possessor of both positions, political leadership, and spiritual leadership, and have considered others to be usurpers.

The usurping rulers also knew this reality – that according the Shi‘a, the Imam’s leadership is absolute – and thus, occasionally though they were confident that the Imam of the time did not intend to rise, they would act cautiously. As an example, Mansur had this belief with regard to Imam as-Sadiq (peace be upon him). Still, he wouldn’t abandon precaution, always kept the Imam under the surveillance of his secret officers, and would create difficulties for him in various ways. In the end he was still unable to bear the existence of the Imam, since he viewed the method the Imam had adopted as dangerous for his government; for this very reason he martyred him.

Harun adopted the same method. He held Imam Musa al-Kazim (peace be upon him) in prisons and under surveillance for many years, since he knew the Shi‘a consider both positions of spiritual and worldly leadership as belonging to the Imam.

As opposed to this, the role and conduct of the Imams (peace be upon them), which was a cause of the protection of Shi‘a thought and Islamic laws, was very important. It is possible to regard it as their miracle, and such action was not possible except through special Divine instruction.

Amir al-Mu‘minin (peace be upon him) and Imam Hasan (peace be upon him) adopted their particular policies, while Imam Husayn (peace be upon him) undertook his great uprising. In the same way, the remaining Imams (peace be upon them) each acted in a particular fashion. If they were not to do so, no path or method opposed to those tyrannous policies would be able to survive under such annihilating strikes; yet we see that the school of Shiaism survived and even until today is known in the world as the symbol of true Islam and the herald of a just world government.

One point worth noting is that all of the Imams (peace be upon him) would promise that spiritual, intellectual, and practical leadership would in the future – in the age of the reappearance of Imam Mahdi (may Allah hasten his return) (peace be upon him) – be united with political leadership, which hitherto was usurped by the oppressive rulers, and under the shadow of that leadership, all of Islam’s goals will be achieved.

1. Surah al-Ma‘idah (5), Verse 55

2. Surah an-Nisa’ (4), Verse 59

3. Surah al-Anbiya’ (21), Verse 73

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