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Allama Iqbal on Islam-Democracy Discourse:

An Analysis of his Views on Compatibility and Incompatibility

Tauseef Ahmed Parray

Allama Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) was a poet and philosopher, a fine prose-writer, a great linguist and man of letters, a well-known lawyer, a leading politician, a front-rank statesman, an esteemed educationist, a great art critic, Muslim reformer, a dominant and one of the most distinguished thinkers of the 20th century. His writings – consisting of poetry in three languages: Punjabi, Urdu and Persian and prose in English and Urdu - have inspired thousands and his thought has moved millions. Iqbal was at the same time a philosopher in the line of al-Farabi, Ibn Sina and al-Ghazzali and a poet in the rank of Saa`di and Hafiz. For most of his life his profession was law and his passion, writing prose and especially poetry, considering it as a vehicle for the propagation of his thought.

Iqbal studied both Islamic sciences and the Western philosophy. His writings were indebted to two principal sources: his Islamic heritage and the western philosophy he studied at Cambridge, Munich, and Heidelberg.

The poetry of Iqbal is mainly philosophical and the questions relating to religion, race and civilization, government, progress of women, literature and arts, and world politics were of equal interest to him.

In this paper, an exploration of Iqbal's views about democracy is made, revealing that he accepted only those principles of democracy which he deemed compatible with Islam and at the same time rejected the secular and material orientation of the western democracy; and is followed by the conclusion.

Iqbal's Acceptance of some Democratic Principles:

Some of the important principles of democracy that are appreciated by Iqbal include 'freedom', 'equality' and 'election'. He finds these principles compatible with Islam to a certain extent. For instance, he points out that in Islam, although the interest of an individual is subordinated to the community but the individual is given sufficient liberty which is necessary for the development of his personality. He writes: "The best form of

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government for such a community would be democracy, the idea of which is to let man develop all the possibilities of his nature by allowing him as much freedom as possible".¹

Regarding the doctrine of *Tawhid* (Unity of God/Islamic monotheism) Iqbal believed that God's Will or law governed every aspect of life. For him, *Tawhid* is the principle that brings the community together, the source of its solidarity, equality, and freedom. In *The Reconstruction* he writes:

"The essence of *Tawhid* [Islamic monotheism] ,as a working force, is equality, solidarity, and freedom .The state ,from the Islamic standpoint, is an endeavour to transform these ideal principles into space-time forces, an aspiration to realize them in a definite human organization".²

Iqbal illustrates that the Caliph of Islam is subject to the same laws like all others in the given state. He is supposed to be elected by the people and should be deposed by the people if he goes contrary to the law; hence he asserts: "Democracy, then, is the most important aspect of Islam, regarded as a political ideal".³ But at the same time, he points out that this ideal of freedom lasted in the Muslim world only for thirty years and later "disappeared with its political expansion".⁴

Iqbal traced some historical facts to show how the principles of freedom, equality, election and deposition of rulers are operated in early Muslim history. Iqbal pointed out how Abū Bakr was selected as the first Caliph and what he said to the people: Obey me as I obey the Lord and his Prophet, where in I disobey, obey me not".⁵ Thus Iqbal highlighted some important historical facts to show that "the idea of universal agreement is, in fact the fundamental principle of Muslim constitutional theory." ⁶All this shows that freedom and equality are embodied in Islam. He also discussed the classical theory of Caliphate, particularly the theory presented by al-Mawardi. Throughout this discussion, he emphasized that "if the Caliph does not rule according to the law of Islam, or suffers from physical or mental infirmity, the Caliph is forfeited."⁷

Iqbal also discussed how all the officials are appointed or elected in the Caliphate and they are removed by the concerned authorities or people, as explained by al-Mawardi. After having discussed all this, he remarked: "It is clear that the fundamental principle laid down in the Qur'an is the principle of election; the details or rather the translation of this principle into a workable scheme of Government is left to be determined by other considerations."⁸

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From the above views of Iqbal, many scholars including Mazharuddin contend that “Iqbal stresses the elective principle as the basis of Islamic democracy. Besides, he believes in the supremacy of the law and the equality of all Muslims.⁹

In fact, according to Iqbal, it is Islam which has imported to the people their natural rights, equality, freedom and justice. He writes:

Liberty took its birth from its gracious message,

This sweet wine dripped from its grapes!

It was impatient of invidious distinctions.

Equality was implicit in its being! ¹⁰

The above words of Iqbal throw abundance of light on the fact that the modern Western discourse on liberty and equality can be traced back to Islam, particularly from the time of the Prophet Muhammad and the period of Khulfa-i-Rashidun. It was during this period that the real meaning of liberty and equality was translated into practice. In other words, this principle of democracy-liberty and equality are not new to Islam at all. In fact, it is Islam which has presented these concepts to the world to liberate man from all sorts of man-centred authoritarianism and dominations. It clearly implies that Islam is totally against hereditary monarchies, dynasties, empires, military dictatorships and self-imposed rule over the people. But, after the period of Khulafa-i-Rashidun (period of Four Rightly Guided Caliphate), the elective principle of Islamic polity was gradually relegated to background. Therefore, it is generally argued that one of the reasons of the decline of the Islamic Ummah can be traced back to the time of the Muslim history when the concept of *Shura* (consultation) is set aside and instead the elements of ‘force’ or ‘heredity’ were practically incorporated in the Muslim political history.¹¹ Hence, it is important to differentiate between the real Islamic political system and the Muslim political practices after the Rightly Guided Caliphate.

Nevertheless, it is no doubt the mission of the Islamic Ummah to liberate people from absolutism and despotism of a single man or a group of people, but this requires the promotion of popular ‘vicegerency’ not popular sovereignty which is the central part of secular democracy. Iqbal’s views on the importance of *ijtihad* and *ijma* are also very much relevant to comprehend his stance for democracy. He writes:

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“The transfer of power of *ijtihad* from individual representatives of schools to a Muslim legislative Assembly which, in view of the growth of opposing sects, is the only possible form *ijma* can take in modern times ,will secure contributions to legal distinction from laymen who happen to possess a keen insight into affairs”.¹²

A believer of collective '*ijtihad*' Iqbal argued that in the contemporary times, the right of *ijtihad* should not be concentrated only in the hands of individual scholars and experts of the Qur'an and Sunnah alone. Along with the experts of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, it seemed essential to seek the opinions of experts in physical and social sciences on the given issue as the case may be. Hence according to Iqbal, legislative assemblies constituted by experts of various disciplines including the experts of the *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah* and *Uṣul al Fiqh* can play an important role in exercising collective *Ijtihad*.¹³

However, an important point can be raised here as a corollary of this discussion on *Shura*, '*ijtihad*, and *ijma* and Iqbal's assertion on the consultative and elective principles of democracy that they are based on the Qur'anic demand "rule by mutual consultation", (*amruhum Shura bainahum*).¹⁴ Even the Prophet was commanded to take counsel with the companions in all public matters. When the Prophet was asked by the companions about the decision that is mentioned in the Qur'anic verse (3: 159) he replied that it means "taking the counsel of those who are known for their good opinions and then following it."¹⁵It is also reported by Abu Hurairah that "the Prophet practiced *Shura* with his companions more frequently than anyone else he had seen".¹⁶ The same tradition of consultation (*Shura*) was followed by all the first four Rightly Guided Caliphs. According to Ibn Taimiyyah (*Shura*) consultation is obligatory for Muslim authorities (*ulu 'l-amr*) where no explicit injunction from the Qur'anic revelation is available.¹⁷

According to the historical practice, it is important to note that not only the Caliphs ruled with consultation but even they were appointed on the basis of the consultative method. According to the jurists including Ibn Taimiyyah and al-Baqilani, the Imam can only be appointed through the choice of the people, (*al-ikhtiyar*) which implies that "the Imam holds his office because of a contract drawn by the wise (*ahl al-ḥall wa al-'aqd*).¹⁸

In other words, democracy as such cannot be regarded as a good government acceptable to Islam unless those who are in power are God-loving people and they aim at the general good of the people and make the laws based on the spirit of the Qur'an and the Sunnah for all the good of the people.

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From the above discussion, it is quite evident that although the elective and consultative principles of democracy are accepted by Iqbal as compatible to Islam, these principles are not totally free from problems and risks in secular democracies.

Secular Foundations of Democracy and Iqbal's Rejection: A brief Overview

Iqbal's rejection of the secular and material foundation of democracy is rooted in his comprehension of the Islamic concept of *Tawhīd*, the unity of Allah and the unity of life. *Tawhīd*, for Iqbal, is the unifying force which joins the spiritual and material aspects of life into a single and the united entity of life. Unlike the dualistic concept of life of the West which separates 'matter' from spirit' according to Iqbal, in Islam 'all this immensity of matter constitutes a scope for the self-realization of spirit.¹⁹ For Iqbal, distinction between the Church and the state does not exist in Islam as he argues that according to the law of Islam there is 'no distinction between the Church and the state'. The state (in Islam) is not a combination of religious and secular authority, but it is a 'unity' in which no such distinction exists. The caliph is not necessarily the high priest of Islam; he is the representative of God on earth. In fact, the idea of 'personal authority' is quite contrary to the spirit of Islam.²⁰

This unified approach to life in Islam is antithetical to secularism, nationalism and democracy. Iqbal was quite aware of this fact. He points out the main difference between democracy in Islam and democracy in Europe:

"The Democracy of Europe – overshadowed by socialistic agitation and anarchical fear – originated mainly in the economic regeneration of European societies. ...The Democracy of Islam did not grow out of the extension of economic opportunity, it is a spiritual principle based on the assumption that every human being is a centre of latent power, the possibilities of which can be developed by cultivating a certain type of character".²¹

Democracy in the West being originated from the economic regeneration of European societies is secular and materialistic by its very nature. It mainly caters to the material life of a society leaving the spiritual aspect altogether. Consequently, democracy in the West tends to move away from moral and ethical values. This secularist and materialistic orientation of Western democracy is totally rejected by Iqbal. This is precisely pointed out by Fazlur Rahman: 'the essence of his [Iqbal's] criticism is that the Western

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democratic societies aim only at accomplishing material ends, and that the average Western man is devoid of any vision of a higher moral social order".²²

Iqbal once said the following about democracy:

The Democratic system of the West is the same old instrument

Whose chords contain no note other than the voice of the Kaiser,

The Demon of Despotism is dancing in his democratic robes

Yet you consider it to be the *Nilam Peri* [goddess] of liberty.²³

Islam does not tolerate any form of despotism, whether it is despotism of single monarch or despotism of some people in power. Iqbal says: 'Subservience to others is a proof of the self's immaturity! Rise superior to such leaning, O bearer of the cross.'

All these views of Iqbal go entirely against the secular foundation of democracy and its important principle, popular sovereignty.

According to some scholars, Iqbal rejected democracy because he had less confidence on the masses and also because of his high vision of a perfect man (*mard-i-kamil*). Following poetic verses of Iqbal are quoted by such scholars to illustrate this point:

Keep away from Democracy: Follow the perfect man,

*For the intellect of two thousand asses cannot bring forth a single man's thought.*²⁵

John L. Esposito fully comprehends Iqbal's criticism of democracy. He writes:

"He (Iqbal) believed that the success of a democratic system was contingent upon the preparedness of its members.... Thus, Iqbal did not accept the absolute democracy of undeveloped individuals. This is at the heart of his criticism of modern Western democracy: 'Democracy is a system where people are counted but not weighed'.²⁶

Besides all these, Iqbal's philosophy of "Khudi" ego (selfhood), and his philosophy of Divine vicegerency also go entirely against the temperament and nature of secular

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democracy. In secular democracy, the relation of man with God is limited and formal. Whereas, a believer in Islam who is conscious of his "Khudi", strives to make himself as perfect as possible and as nearer to God as possible to establish the Kingdom of God on the earth. According to Iqbal, man cannot be a complete individual as long as he distances himself from God. He becomes a complete person '*mard-i-kamil*' when he comes nearer to God and "he absorbs God into himself."²⁷ Thus, the true person not only absorbs the world of matter by mastering it, he absorbs God Himself into his Ego.

In order to become unique and absorb God, the Ego passes through three stages- "(a) Obedience to the law, (b) self-control, which is the highest form of self-consciousness or Ego-hood (c) Divine vicegerency."²⁸ Divine vicegerency is identified by Iqbal as the third and the last stage of human development on earth. As quoted by Vahid, Iqbal wrote:

"The *na'ib* (vicegerent) is the vicegerent of God on earth. He is the complete Ego, the goal of humanity, the acme of life both in mind and body;... . In his life, thought and action, instinct and reason, become one. ... He is the real ruler of mankind; his kingdom is the Kingdom of God on earth."²⁹

It implies the establishment of "democracy of more or less unique individuals, presided over by the most unique individuals possible on this earth.

Conclusion

Thus, the above analysis of Iqbal's views on democracy clearly reveals that he accepted only some of the principles of democracy and at the same time rejected the secular foundation of as well as all those principles and core concepts of democracy which he thinks incompatible with Islamic philosophy of life and Islamic polity. But his acceptance of some principles- those compatible with Islam - does not mean that Iqbal has accepted western democracy fully. In a word, Iqbal accepted (certain principles) and at the same time rejected (various principles of) western democracy.

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(Tauseef Ahmed Parray is Ph.D research scholar in the Department of Islamic Studies, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh. Email: tauseef.parray21@gmail.com)