Shi‘a Ideology’s Practicality

QUESTION: Keeping in view the fact that aside from the short five-year period of Amir al-Mu’minin (peace be upon him), the administration of society was not in the hands of the Imams (peace be upon them), to what extent is the system of religious government according to the Shi‘a view practicable and able to be implemented in society?

ANSWER: Shi‘a thought is a logical school that has and has always had the possibility of being implemented in the core of its teachings.

The Shi‘a view about the issue of Imamah is that after the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) the religious and political leader of society must be someone who knows better than all else all the laws and principles the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) brought for the people from Allah. Without doubt during the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) none but ‘Ali (peace be upon him) possessed this distinction, and therefore the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) selected ‘Ali (peace be upon him) to succeed him and then introduced the rest of the Shi‘a Imams, who are twelve people in all, to the people and appointed them his successors.

Certainly, this was not because of their physical relationship with the Prophet; rather their spiritual attributes, intellectual abilities and so forth became the reason that Allah chose them alone from among the people to succeed the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family), just as the Qur’an says about the successors of the prophets as well: “Verily Allah chose Adam, Nuh, the family of Ibrahim, and the family of `Imran over all the people of the world.”[1]

If the people want to tread the true path in all matters, they must follow them and regard them as wali al-amr (guardians of the believers’ affairs), must consider it obligatory to obey them, and must respect their commands just like the commands of the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family). At the same time, the laws and policies broached in the Shi‘a school are not imaginary and unreal affairs that could be said to be unable to be implemented. Rather, they are the most genuine Islamic teachings that, if conditions are available, can be implemented in every society.

If we see that during a portion of history some people prevented their political aspect from being realized, it does not mean that they cannot be implemented. Rather, since these laws were formulated in view of the realities of the existence of man, all human societies are in search of them, and according to the belief of Shi‘as, will in the end reach them. This undertaking will be accomplished at the end of time through the last Divine authority (hujjat),

and human society will be administered by a single system and law.

In addition, what is fundamental in the call of the prophets is to explain the realities and the path of salvation and the way that leads to ultimate success, which must be announced to the people even in case of certainty that it will not be accepted: “Surely We have guided him to the Path, whether he be grateful or ungrateful.”[2]

This is because the responsibility of the prophet is to propagate the Divine laws, among which is Imamah; it is the people who must accept the prophets’ invitation and cooperate with the prophets and Imams (peace be upon them) to make available the opportunity to put it in practice. The conduct of the Imams (peace be upon them) and their policies were all practical, bearing results, and at the same time realistic.

For example, the conduct of Amir al-Mu’minin (peace be upon them) was in light of the conditions of existing realities and the conduct of Imam Hasan al-Mujtaba (peace be upon him) and Imam Husayn Sayyid al-Shuhada’ (peace be upon him) was the same way. They performed all their actions while keeping in view existing conditions.

For example, if Imam Hasan al-Mujtaba (peace be upon him) made peace with Mu`awiyah, he took into consideration all the aspects of the issue and in those conditions saw no better course of action. And Imam Husayn (peace be upon him) consciously refused to pledge allegiance to Yazid, went to Karbala’ and accepted those sorrowful difficulties, and in the end reached his purpose.

Yes, if Imam Husayn (peace be upon him) had been in a different situation and had seen that the path and provisions for taking charge of the government are ready, he would still have moved to acquire his right and repel the undeserving from the khilafah of the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family). But conditions in his time were such that he knew that the situation is not suitable for reaching this aim. Thus, with the great and unparalleled mission which he implemented he created a reawakening in the Muslim world, and as long as the world remains the reawakening of Islam’s reviver will remain alive.

He, although apparently he did not prevent Yazid and all the usurpers of the khilafah who came after him from usurping the khilafah, internally turned people’s hearts away from them and put to the wind Mu`awiyah’s plots to defeat Islam. He performed such a deed that afterwards it was said, “Islam is Muhammadi in origin and Husayni in continuance.” The remaining Imams (peace be upon him), too, performed well the responsibility with which they were entrusted in protecting Islam, keeping in mind existing conditions.

Belief in the appearance of the savior and twelfth Imam gave comfort to the Shi‘as and created a spirit of resistance, patience, and perseverance in the people and prevented power-seeking,

despair, and carelessness towards religion. It is a belief that has been explicitly mentioned in the core of Shi'a teachings and reliable traditions, and this principle received more attention during the time of Imam al-Baqir (peace be upon him) and as-Sadiq (peace be upon him) and people's inclination to it increased in light of the transgressions the usurping rulers committed. The people understood that if some indifferent individuals during the time of the companions – that is, after the Prophet's demise (peace be upon him and his family) – conjectured that introducing change in the principle of Imamah would not bring much change in the Islamic agenda, in reality it caused a major tragedy and caused Islam to veer from its true course and the usurped khilafah became a means of hedonism and easy living for a few and of fettering the people and a return to the customs of Caesar, Kisra, and other Satanic powers.

This matter strengthened their faith in the principle of Imamah and they understood that it is only this school of thought that can bring Islam's agenda to fruition and end that deplorable situation.

Thus, the becoming conduct of the Imams (peace be upon them) on the on hand and the oppressive behavior of the usurpers of the khilafah on the other caused the Shi'a school of thought to become ever more influential in people's hearts, and as a result their inclination to the Imams (peace be upon the) began to increase. It is because of this that in spite of the efforts of the rulers, Imam as-Sadiq (peace be upon him) was so popular among the masses that the Shi'a themselves are recognized through him.

Notes:

[1] Surah Ali-Imran (3), Verse 33

[2] Surah Insan (76), Verse 3