

## **Religious Democracy in Iran: Discursive Analysis of Imam Khomeini's Political Thought**

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### **Keywords**

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### **Abstract**

Almost two decades after the advent of the Revolution and the system of the Islamic Republic, the model of "Religious Democracy" was introduced. It resulted in various scientific issues and dialogues about the concept of "religious democracy," its potentials, limitations, pillars, and institutions. Therefore, in the present article, the discourse formation of religious democracy is presented with a brief look at its concept. In accordance with the author, religious democracy is a conception of democracy that recognizes the collective power and people's participation as the essence of democracy, and also justifies, analyzes, and explains that referring to religion and its principles. According to a methodological study of discursive analysis, in religious democracy, "religion" and according to its Iranian discourse, "Islam" is regarded as nodal points. The main floating signifiers of Religious Democracy in the Iranian discourse are "People", "Law", "Political Equality", "Freedom", and "Independence". The meaning of these signifiers will be understood by referring to Islam as the nodal point of the Religious Democracy. Nowadays in Iran, this kind of Democracy is exercised, and it seems that the most important "strategic and political necessity" for Islamic countries is exercising the "Religious Democracy" of their own.

## **Introduction**

The 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran was the formation beginning of the pattern of the political system in Iran known as the Islamic Republic. Leaving behind the “monarchic order,” the revolution laid the groundwork for shaping up a new order defined as “popular order.” So this order is the first experience of political life for Iranians outside the “monarchic one.” In such an order, the socio-political relations of citizen with rulers are regulated by people themselves, who enjoy the right of organizing their order. The Islamic Republic established this order in the socio-political life of the Iranians in 1979.

Almost two decades after the advent of the Revolution and the system of the Islamic Republic, the model of “Religious Democracy” was introduced. Raising this pattern emanated from the theoretical necessities that were felt both at home and abroad. The model was brought up not apart from the Islamic Republic but as an extension to it in order to greatly enhance its potentials. Moreover, it resulted in various scientific issues and dialogues about the concept of “religious democracy,” its potentials, limitations, pillars, and institutions. Questions such as what does it mean? How can a political system be religious and at the same time democratic? Isn't it paradoxical? Also, the like “were discussed.” The result of these discussions was the formation of relatively popular literature, providing suitable awareness. However, less attention has been paid to the theory in a discursive approach. Therefore, in the present article, the discourse formation of religious democracy is presented with a brief look at its concept. Clearly, understanding the theory and its deference with another type of democracy depends on the understanding of this discourse formation.

## **Definition of Religious Democracy**

At first glance, it seems that religious democracy is a compound term. Thus, the combination of democracy and religion is considered a compatible one and spoken of as religious democracy among other types of democracy. However, while democracy is regarded as the pattern of a particular political

system based on particular political thinking and philosophy, the combination of religion and democracy appears to be a conceptual impossibility. Indeed, the incompatibility of secular democracy with religion in the modern era is taken for granted according to this view. Since incompatibility with Islam is regarded as an integral part of a term, there is no point to discuss its compatibility (Mesbah Yazdi, 2001, p. 297).

Given the mentioned incompatibility as to the concept and basis of democracy, the advocates of religious democracy have set out to explain the compatibility of democracy with religion, using a different approach. In their opinion, democracy relates to the manner of governance of a society rather than being a mere socio-political philosophy. This view is based on an approach, which is related to a kind of political system and the interpretation of people's political lifestyle (Kelayar, 1972).

According to this approach and based on Karl Cohen's view of democracy, some writers have analyzed the concept of democracy, by segregating democracy as a method from democracy as a value, and considered religious democracy as an acceptable approach. Admitting to the impracticality of the principle of "government of the people by the people," Cohen considers the existence of "democratic order" in the political structure of society as the main characteristic of "governance based on public participation." Therefore, Cohen's definition of democracy is widely accepted today, and it seems that the issue of religious democracy should be investigated in light of this version of "democracy" (Eftekhari, 2006).

Although such an approach prepares the ground for discussing religious democracy, it is based on segregating methodological democracy from value democracy, which is not much acceptable in the history of discussions on the concept of democracy and the formation of democratic systems. Democracy is a pattern of the socio-political system, which has been discussed throughout history based on presuppositions and particular theoretical bases and has introduced a particular method for governing the state as well as the society.

On the contrary, it seems that it is possible to talk about, instead, of

another approach to the possibility of the concept of religious democracy. Given the linguistic distinction made between 'concept' and 'conception,' various conceptions could be presented from a single concept. In other words, every term or expression has a single concept, which could have various conceptions based on particular aspects of its concept. These conceptions are multiple and various since they are based on different presuppositions and principles. However, because conceptions finally refer to aspects of a single concept, they possess a kind of unity. Indeed, conceptions are interpretations that different schools of thoughts have presented from facets of a single concept, justified it and its aspects based on their acceptable principles, and, as a result, provided a particular definition of the concept in question. That is why there is no prejudgment in concept, and its facets do not evoke a particular value.

According to this approach, religious democracy is a possible concept. Hence, it is a conception of the concept of democracy, which justifies and envisions the concept of democracy based on presuppositions and religious principles. In fact, religious democracy accepts the essential concept of democracy, and also justifies, analyzes, and explains it based on religious principles. Understanding the essential concept of democracy seems confusing, but Antony Arbelaster (2000) states, in roots of all definitions of democracy lies the idea of collective power and a situation in which power and, possibly, authority are derived from the people.

As such, collective power or authority reflects the essential aspect of the concept of democracy. Such power in a democracy does not possess an individual or collective nature - democracy talks of an ideal in which important decisions in the society as a collective should be made based on the views of all people. Moreover, all members of society should enjoy equal rights in order to participate in decision-making processes (Beetham & Boyle, 1997). Based on this outlook, the collective nature of power and authority brings about public participation as the essence of democracy.

In the present article, religious democracy is a conception of democracy that recognizes the collective power and people's participation as the essence

of democracy, and also justifies, analyzes, and explains it, referring to religion and its principles. Here, justification is interpreted concerning credibility in which the aspects and essence of democracy are represented as justified based on epistemological sources. Analysis means the discovery of various principles and presuppositions based on which aspects and essence of democracy are justified. Moreover, finally, explanation refers to the description of statements, which determine the boundaries of the aspects and essence of democracy. The result of the three stages of justification, analysis, and explanation based on religious sources and principles is the formation of a conception of democracy defined as religious democracy.

Therefore, religious democracy explains the justification of collective power or authority and public participation with the help of religious statements, analyzes the ontological, anthropological, sociological, and teleological foundations of democracy based on religious sources, and finally determines the conceptual boundaries of collective power and public participation based on religious teachings. According to this definition, religious democracy stands opposite to other types of democracy such as liberal democracy and social democracy. While these two justify, analyze and explain the essential aspects of democracy with the acceptance of the authority of liberalism and socialism, the religious democracy accepts the authority of Islam in justifying, analyzing and explaining the essential aspects of democracy.

### **Religious Democracy as an Iranian Discourse**

At the end of the second decade of the Islamic Revolution, religious democracy entered the political literature of Iran. Raising the issue of religious democracy in this era derived from the internal and external requirements. In this period, the Islamic Republic put forward the theoretical model ruling over its political system as a rival model against other models of democracy, especially liberal democracy. In such a situation, considerable theoretical efforts were made to explain this model, and remarkable literature was compiled and presented. However, discursive analysis has not been

done much to explain this model. Consequently, the charting out discourse on religious democracy as an Iranian discourse is quite significant and would, provides the possibility of comparison with other models.

### **Nodal Point of Religious Democracy**

In every discourse, floating signifiers become meaningful in light of “Nodal Point.” The process of finding meaning for signifiers is called articulation. In the act of articulation, signifiers and various concepts of discourse become meaningful regarding the nodal point. Therefore, the possibility of meaningful understanding of reality in discourse theory depends on articulation (Laclau, 1990). In fact, in such a process it is possible to determine the position of signifiers and concepts of discourse, and explain the formation process of signifiers and concepts. As a result, in every discourse analysis, first, determining the nodal point is necessary, and second, the meaning of other signifiers should be taken into account in light of this nodal point.

According to a methodological study of discursive analysis, it is first necessary to determine a nodal point in order to explain religious democracy. In religious democracy, “religion” and according to its Iranian discourse, “Islam” is regarded as nodal points. As it was mentioned earlier, in religious democracy, the authority of Islam is recognized. However, it is quite clear that Islam is interpreted in this discourse in terms of political Islam. Political Islam insists on the inseparability of Islam and politics plus regards Islam as a potential political religion. In Iran, such an attitude towards Islam is explained based on different approaches of which juristic approach is the most important one. For this reason, it is possible to speak of juristic political Islam, which is based on the political and juristic thinking of Imam Khomeini. According to Imam Khomeini’s outlook, the government is the pivot of Islamic thinking, and jurisprudence is regarded as the provider of its rules and regulations. He believes, “For a real jurisprudent, the government is the practical manifestation of jurisprudence in all aspects of human life. Government reflects the practical aspect of jurisprudence in addressing

social, political and military and cultural challenges. Jurisprudence is the real and comprehensive theory of ruling over human being and society from the cradle to the grave” (Khomeini, 1992, p. 98). So, jurisprudence is an Islamic knowledge regarded as a theory provider and supporter of the Islamic government. It includes a number of rules and regulations regarding the Moslems political life.

The authority of Islam and jurisprudence in political life and the necessity of forming an Islamic government based on Islamic teachings as defined in jurisprudence naturally lead to the formation of the theory of the Rule of Jurisconsult According to this theory, “An Islamic ruler must have two characteristics, which are the bases of a legal state, and without them, (the existence of) a legal state is not logical. One of these two characteristics is the knowledge of the law, and the other is justice” (Khomeini, n.d., p. 460).

In this theory, knowledge of law means knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence, and justice means the existence of conditions and states that guarantee the safety of a government and prevent deviation from Islam. For this reason, in an Islamic government, the primary objective is the execution of Islamic decrees (Khomeini, 1992), and jurist stands in a central position to execute and guarantee these decrees. Of course, he needs more qualifications such as the ability to manage the society, a good experience in management and the like so that he can implement the Islamic ideas.

According to what was mentioned, accepting the authority of Islam in the religious democracy of Iran is based on the relation between religion and politics and the negation of secularism. As a result, the juristic approach to Islam introduces “wilayat al” as the essence of political Islam during the occultation of the twelfth Shi‘an Imam (Imam Mahdi). Hence, juristic political Islam and the idea of wilayat al-faqih are regarded as the nodal point of religious democracy in Iran.

### **Floating Signifiers of Religious Democracy**

As it was mentioned earlier, in discursive course analysis after the explanation of nodal point, the explanation of floating signifiers plus their

way of formation reveal discourse formation in which floating signifiers become meaningful in relation to the nodal point. The main floating signifiers of Religious Democracy in the Iranian discourse are:

### **People**

The first floating signifier of religious democracy is the people signifier. In religious democracy, people are regarded as the first signifier that becomes meaningful based on the outlook of juristic political Islam. In this process, people are the central pillar of religious democracy. In fact, in this theory, the people's sovereignty right is recognized, but it is derived from a divine right whereby "the law of Islam is known as the cause of liberties and true democracy" (Khomeini, 1992, p. 102).

Considering the Islamic democracy as more comprehensive, the juristic political Islam tries to explain the compatibility of Islam and democracy with emphasis on Islamic teachings and juristic approach. Such an outlook links the system of the Islamic Republic with Islamic teachings as such: "The government of the Islamic Republic receives inspiration from the policy of Prophet Mohammad and Imam Ali, is dependent on the votes of people, and people's votes will determine the form of government. Establishing the government of the Islamic Republic is based on the principles of Islam and the votes of people" (Khomeini, 1992, p. 230). This interpretation of the Prophet Mohammad and Imam Ali policy can be justified by the fact that their governments were established by Bay'at (i.e., taking the oath of allegiance, which is equal to the votes of people).

Therefore, although divine law forms the essence of the political system, the votes of people is the only basis for the formation of the Islamic political system. Imam Khomeini as the leading theorist and representative of the process of juristic political Islam in modern Iran asserts, "Criterion is the votes of people. Sometimes a nation votes by itself. Other times, it determines a group of people to vote" (Khomeini, 1992, p. 173). This statement reveals the role and status of people and their votes, and at the same time, introduces the concept of "nation" in the juristic political literature of Iran.



The centrality of the nation (being a yardstick) is analyzed from various aspects:

### **1. System-Making**

According to the theory of religious democracy, the Iranian nation stands in the position of system-making. However, as it was mentioned earlier, the meaningful role and status of people rely on the nodal point of this theory, which is political Islam and wilayat al-faqih. Although the votes of people do not grant legitimacy to Valie-h Faghih or Supreme Jurisconsult – since he enjoys a divine right and legitimacy – they provide him with authority to form the government. Imam Khomeini explains this role as such, “A jurist enjoys the authority in every aspect [of society]. However, the governance of Muslims’ affairs and the formation of government are issues dependent on the votes of the Muslim majority, a point, which is also mentioned in the Constitution, and was interpreted as taking the oath of allegiance (بيعت) to the Guardian of the Muslims (Wali Muslimin) after the advent of Islam” (Khomeini, 1992, p. 173).

Therefore, the legitimacy and guardianship of wilayat al-faqih are not based on the votes of people rather the formation of the government is only possible through the votes of the majority. Equating votes of the majority with the concept of allegiance as one of the Islamic teachings reveals the aim of the theory of religious democracy in Iran, an aim, which intends to refer the concepts and requirements of democracy to religion in the process of justification.

### **2. Decision-Making**

The second field of public participation in the theory of religious democracy is the field of decision-making and law-making. According to this theory, the votes of people determine the role of institutions and the law-making and decision-making organizations. Moreover, the role of people in the process of decision-making is explained with emphasis on the concept of consultation (Showra) as one of the essential Islamic teachings. Therefore, the votes of people determine the formation of the Islamic parliament

(Majlis) as the most critical decision-making and law-making institution, and for this reason, parliament enjoys a very significant position. In accordance with Imam Khomeini's view, "Islamic Consultative Assembly (Majlis), which supersedes all other institutions of the system of Islamic Republic, has particular characteristics of which the most important one is its Islamic national identity. It is Islamic since all its efforts are directed at enacting laws compatible with the holy decrees of Islam, and it is national because it emanates from the context of people. Today, Majlis is the true home of people" (Khomeini, 1992, p. 459).

In these statements, the role of people in shaping up the Islamic Consultative Majlis is recognized, but it is interpreted in terms of passing laws compatible with Islamic decrees. In other words, accepting Islam as the nodal point of religious democracy makes the role of people meaningful in law-making as long as it does not contradict Islam and divine laws.

### **3. Implementation**

Public participation in religious democracy is also recognized in the field of implementation of the law in addition to system-making and decision-making. Referring to this theory, the president is directly elected by the votes of people, which are also determining in the implementation of the laws. However, the role of people becomes meaningful in the light of Islam and juristic approach. The theory of religious democracy in Iran explains the legitimacy of a presidential body with the "confirmation" policy of the Islamic leader or *wilayat al-faqih*. For this reason, Imam Khomeini writes about the presidential confirmation of a number of presidents as such, "Because the legitimacy of president must be based on the appointment by the Supreme Guardian (*Vali-yi Amr*), I confirm the votes of the noble people, and appoint him as the president of the Islamic Republic of Iran" (Khomeini, 1992, p. 420).

### **Law**

Law is one of the most important signifiers in the theory of religious democracy in Iran. According to this theory, the socio-political relations

between people and government are determined based on law. Therefore, the law is considered as the most essential basis of regulating the socio-political life, and democracy would not be realized without it. In the discourse formation of religious democracy in Iran, the floating signifier of law becomes meaningful in the light of the political Islam as a nodal point, so law here is the Shari'a Law, which is discussed and written in the Jurisprudence. According to this discourse, the most advantage of this law is that it is the Divine Law, so is perfect and can make the happiness of humankind both here and hereafter. Law becomes meaningful in this theory in the following two main areas (Khomeini, 1992):

### **1. The Constitution**

Although the constitution of religious democracy in Iran is enacted [by human beings], it receives its legitimacy from divine law and Islamic teachings. For this reason, according to this outlook, the Islamic Republic as a religious and democratic model is a "state based on Islamic principles; its Constitution is Islam, which is the executor of Islamic precepts" (Khomeini, 1992, p. 145). In fact, it is safe to say that with the acceptance of the authority of Islam in democracy, Islamic law is regarded as the principal source of the Constitution, and is recognized as the source of the socio-political life. Therefore, the policies and laws of the country cannot be inconsistent with Islamic law.

### **2. Normal Law**

The compilation of the Constitution based on Islamic law in the theory of religious democracy in Iran does not mean the denial of the credibility of human law-making. This theory recognizes the usual law-making in political life but interprets its legitimacy in the process of the meaningful discourse based on its non-inconsistency with Islamic law. According to religious democracy, law-making as planning and regulating laws and rules of political life based on the logicity of people's representatives should not be inconsistent with Islamic law. For this reason, according to the theory of

religious democracy, "All programs that are carried out in the governance of society in order to fulfill the needs of people should be based on divine laws" (Khomeini, n.d., p. 461).

The necessity of the compatibility of normal laws with the Constitution and Islamic law justifies the existence of the Guardian Council in the system of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Based on this necessity, the Council, which consists of legal experts and jurists, announces the non-inconsistency of normal laws with the Constitution and Islam. Therefore, the normal laws approved by the Parliament receive legitimacy and become binding.

In religious democracy, any inconsistency between the normal laws and the Shari'a is resolved through state-issued decrees on the basis of "expediency." As Imam Khomeini stated: "Government, which is a branch of the Guardianship (Wilaya) of the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, is among the primary decrees of Islam and takes precedence over secondary decrees" (Khomeini, n.d., p. 452).

Such an outlook led to the institutionalization of the Expediency Council in the system of the Islamic Republic, this institution intends to recognize the interests of society, and provides the Supreme Jurisconsult with the necessary advice.

### **Political Equality**

The concept of political equality as one of the floating signifiers is put forward in the discourse formation of religious democracy. This concept becomes meaningful concerning the nodal point, which is the political Islam. Political equality recognizes two types of its kind in the discourse of religious democracy:

#### **1. Equal Political Participation**

In the discourse of religious democracy, equal political participation is recognized for all citizens. In this discourse, the equal role and presence of all Iranians in the formation of various institutions of the system of the Islamic Republic are accepted, and every Iranian enjoys an equal right to

vote. Of course, this type of equality divides citizens into Muslims and non-Muslims in relation to political Islam. Non-Muslims of Iran including Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians enjoy the right of participation as religious minorities, although there might be some differences regarding their rights and powers compared with those of Muslims. Imam Khomeini explains the status of minorities in Iran as such, "Islam has respect for them. We give full rights to all of them. They have the right to have a representative in Majlis (Parliament), and freely have their social and political activities, and freely practice their own religious rituals. They are Iranians" (Khomeini, n.d., p. 452).

There are some points here that should be taken into account. First, Islam is the basis of classification among citizens, but there is no difference between Shiites and Sunnis. Sunnis are not considered as a minority despite Shiite majority. Second, the right of religious minorities for equal political participation is explained in the light of Islam. As a result, the discourse of religious democracy in Iran takes into account the concept of people, and therefore, recognizes equal political participation for each person. Imam Khomeini believes, "it is the primary right of every nation to determine its fate and the type of government it wants to have" (Khomeini, 1999, p. 292).

## **2. Equality before the Law**

In religious democracy and the conceptual process of political equality, equality before the law is distinguished from equality in law, and at the same time is recognized. According to this outlook, all citizens enjoy equal position before the law, although they are not regarded as equal in law. This is how democracy is defined: It is the right of all people to express their views about public issues through institutions of civil society and participation in state, and this right belongs to all citizens based on the principle of equality (Khomeini, 1999).

Religious democracy recognizes these principles and explains equality based on Islamic teachings. As a result, it accepts fair inequality in law. According to the law and based on the principle of justice, citizens enjoy

their own exclusive rights; however, the application of laws and their restrictive rules is done on an equal basis. So this inequality can be fair in the sense that it will apply equally to all people. For this reason, the powers of people and political leaders are determined in the Constitution, but in general, the equality of all people before the law is emphasized in Article 14 of Principle 3 (Beetham, 2004). The equality before the law even applies to the leadership as the supreme official of the country. In Principle 107 of the Constitution, the principle of equality before the law is even mentioned for him: Leader stands before the law in an equal position with other people of the country (IRR. Cons, III).

### **Freedom**

The notion of freedom is other floating signifier in the Iranian discourse of religious democracy. This type of discourse aims to explain freedom in the political arena based on the philosophical and discourse bases of freedom, and uses the practice of religious jurisprudence or *ijtihad* to explain the concept of freedom in relation to the nodal point of political Islam. Political Islam basically recognizes God's absolute ownership of the universe and mankind plus negates the domination of people over people. According to Imam Khomeini's viewpoint, "The root and principle of all of our most important and valuable beliefs is the principle of monotheism. This principle teaches us that humankind must only be submissive before God, and must not obey any human being unless obeying him is meant to be obedience to God. From this principle of belief, we learn the principle of human freedom based on which no person has the right to deprive another human being or society or nation of freedom"(IRR. Cons. CVII). According to this view, freedom is regarded as a divine right for "God has created every human being free" (Khomeini, 1992, p. 166).

The divinity of man's right to freedom puts it into the framework of divine sovereignty, and consequently, divine law explains its boundaries. For this reason, teachings such as Enjoining of Goodness and Forbidding of Evil (Amr Be Maroof Va Nahi Az Monkar) are applied to explain this concept.

These teachings promote freedom from right to duty, and as a result, one of the most important duties of humankind is his freedom. Freedom as a duty is introduced in various areas, the most important of which is the freedom of dissent and protest, criticism and participation in organizations. Imam Khomeini explains the concept of freedom as a duty as such, "all people are obliged to supervise the affairs (of their statesmen). If I deviate from the right path a bit, people are obliged to warn me, and tell me to correct my conduct" (Khomeini, 1992, p. 61).

There is no doubt that public supervision brings about the license of criticism and protest. In his discussion on the of the right of protest and criticism, Imam Khomeini regards this right as the source of preparing the ground for prosperity in society, "In the Islamic Republic, all of the people should prepare the ground for prosperity in society through criticism and raising problems" (Khomeini, 1992, p. 118). Of course, criticism is meant to be constructive criticism. Imam Khomeini asserts, "I have said that creative criticism does not mean staging an opposition, and if a criticism is done rightfully, it will lead to guidance. No one should consider himself as an absolute person and exempt from criticism" (Khomeini, 1992, p. 78).

### **Independence**

Independence is one more floating signifier and concept in the Iranian discourse of religious democracy. In this discourse, the independence of the Islamic Republic is investigated in relation to other political systems. The cultural, economic, and political independence forms the most important aspects of this concept, which was introduced from the beginning as the slogan of "Independence, freedom, Islamic Republic." According to this discourse, the achievement of independence relies on the negation of any dependence on the Western blocs that existed at the time (Khomeini, 1999, p. 378). For this reason, Imam Khomeini asserts, "if we want to be independent and free, we should find ourselves. We are lost. We must leave behind ..." (Khomeini, 1992, p. 153).

## Conclusion

The primary aim of this essay is a discursive formulation of Religious Democracy in Iran. Based on the linguistic distinction between “concept” and “conception,” Democracy as a concept and Religious Democracy as conception can be considered. This essay, therefore, reached the following conclusions:

1. Religious Democracy is a conception of Democracy, so, it can be considered as a rival conception against liberal democracy and other conceptions of democracy.
2. Religious Democracy is a conception that recognizes the authority of “Religion” in the “justification,” “analysis” and “explanation” of the components of Democracy, i.e. “collective authority” and “public participation.”
3. Recognizing the authority of “Religion” leads to the recognition of “Political Islam” as the “Nodal Point” of the Religious Democracy, so the theory of *wilayat al-faqih* will be regarded as the basis for the legitimacy of the political system.
4. The most important “Floating Signifiers” of the Iranian discourse of Religious Democracy are People, Law, Political Equality, Freedom, and Independence. The meaning of these signifiers will be understood by referring to the Political Islam as the nodal point of the Religious Democracy.

Nowadays in Iran, this kind of Democracy is exercised, and it seems that the most important “strategic and political necessity” for Islamic countries is exercising the “Religious Democracy” of their own as the alternative for Liberal Democracy in the globalization era.



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