

Imamate and Leadership:

The Case of the Shi'a Fundamentalists in Modern Iran

L'IMAMAT ET LE LEADERSHIP:

LE CAS DES FONDAMENTALISTES CHIITES EN IRAN MODERNE

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Abstract: The theory of Imamate (absolute religious, spiritual and political leadership of the Muslim community) is one of the most important pillars in Twelver Shi'ism (the second largest branch of Islam). While there was a relative agreement on the nature and boundaries of the theory of Imamate and leadership during the presence of the twelve Shi'i Imams, there is no such consensus among the Shi'a in this regard after the Occultation of the last Imam, the Mahdi, in 874. Generally speaking, with respect to the latter period, there are two broad schools of thought. For *Traditionalists*, during the absence of the Imam, Imamate is no longer conceivable as the absolute religious and political leadership of the community of believers. On the other hand, *Fundamentalists* believe in full implementation of the theory of Imamate in the society by jurists, as the general deputies of Imam Mahdi in his absence. This study intends to examine the views of the Shi'a fundamentalists, particularly in the modern Iran.

Keywords: Shi'ism; Imamate; infallible Imams; fundamentalism; Islamic government; guardianship of the jurist; democracy

Résumé La théorie de l'imamat (le leadership absolu, religieux, spirituel et politique de la communauté musulmane) est l'un des piliers les plus importants dans le chiisme duodécimain (la deuxième plus grande branche de l'islam). Bien qu'il y ait un accord relatif sur la nature et les limites de la théorie de l'imamat et du leadership au cours de la présence des douze imams chiïtes, il n'y a pas ce genre de consensus parmi les chiïtes à cet égard après l'occultation du dernier Imam, le Mahdi, en 874. De manière générale, à l'égard de cette dernière période, il y a deux grandes écoles de pensée. Pour les traditionalistes, l'imamat n'est plus concevable en tant que le leadership absolu religieux et politique de la communauté des croyants. Par contre, les fondamentalistes croient en la pleine application de la théorie de l'imamat dans la société par les juristes, en absence des représentants généraux de l'Imam Mahdi. Cette étude vise à examiner les vues des fondamentalistes chiïtes, en particulier en Iran moderne.

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*Received 30 June 2010; accepted 5 October 2010

Mots-clés: Chiisme; imamat; imams infallibles; fondamentalisme; gouvernement islamique; tutelle du juriste; démocratie

INTRODUCTION

Twelver Shi'ism is the second largest branch of Islam and its adherents believe in twelve divinely-guided, infallible leaders (the Imams) as the true successors of the Prophet Muhammad. During the presence of the Imams (632-874), there was a tendency among the zealous Shi'a to establish a just Islamic/Shi'i government under the leadership of the Imams. However, after the tragedy of Karbala (in which Husayn, the third Imam, and his companions were massacred in 680 by Yazid, an Umayyad Caliph) the closest disciples of the Imams in obedience to them avoided political activism. In this way, particularly the sixth Imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq, strongly prohibited the Shi'a from such political activism until the rise of Imam Mahdi at the end of the time (Bayat 1989, 348).

While such an apolitical approach among the Twelver Shi'a, more or less, had been the case for centuries, particularly in the twentieth century the situation was changed in favor of political activism with the ultimate goal of establishment of a just Islamic state. In this sense, it was no longer needed to wait passively until Imam Mahdi's return; rather it was the responsibility of the Shi'a to rise against injustice as a prelude to the universal rule of Imam Mahdi. The present work concerns with this school of thought and its adherents, as Shi'i fundamentalists, in Modern Iran.

FUNDAMENTALISM

Shi'i fundamentalism is a quite modern phenomenon. However, it is the outcome of a long-term development in the Shi'i political thought. Before moving specifically to modern Iran, it is better to delineate what 'fundamentalism' means in this work. First of all, it must be noted that fundamentalists are not necessarily radical. Islamic fundamentalism, in general, encompasses a broad spectrum of religio-political thoughts which share some essential ideas. The main concern of fundamentalists is to re-establish patterns of social development according to Islamic teachings (Sobhani 1385/2007). In other words, fundamentalists consider "Islam as a total way of life and as a viable alternative to Western secular ideologies" (Zeidan 2001).

In the Shi'i context, fundamentalists come out of traditionalism, and so, they have many things in common with traditionalists. They believe in the theory of Imamate in the same way that traditionalists do. According to the classic view of Shi'ism, the 'Imam' is "the most virtuous and perfect of men" and has a responsibility to guide the Muslims in their "external life and acts" as well as "spiritual life, and the inner dimension of human life and religious practice" (Tabatabai 1977, 189). Hence, in Twelver Shi'ism, Imamate or belief in such leadership by the twelve infallible Imams is the cardinal principle of Islam. However, "fundamentalists contrast sharply with traditionalists" in some areas, particularly when they come to implement the theory of Imamate during the Occultation of Imam Mahdi (Zeidan 2001). Traditionalists put practical limits on the implementation of social and political teachings of Shi'ism in the absence of the Imam. In contrast, fundamentalists by reinterpretation of some Shi'i/Islamic concepts such as *intizar* (waiting for the return of the Hidden Imam) and *shahadat* (martyrdom) try to mobilize the believers in order to revive Shi'ism in socio-political arena. In this way, unlike traditionalists, fundamentalists emphasize on changing the society as a whole by thinking of the state as "the main instrument" for implanting Islamic teachings (Ibid.).

Generally speaking, in terms of social thought, fundamentalism represents Islam in general and Shi'ism in particular, as 1) A progressive model, independent of Western ideologies, which covers all aspects of social and individual life of human; 2) An efficient system in managing the society, capable of resolving all social, economic and political problems of the modern world (Sobhani 1386/2008). To sum up this section, Shi'i fundamentalism can be distinguished by following characteristics:

- I. Believing in Islam as a total way of life even during the Occultation of the Imam
- II. Paying great attention to Islamic social and political philosophy and jurisprudence
- III. Insisting on the necessity of establishing a religious government in the absence of the Imam

- IV. Believing in the unity of state and religion during the Occultation period
- V. Emphasizing on the responsibility of Muslims to take preliminary steps toward the promised global just government of Imam Mahdi

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

To some extent, modern Shi'i fundamentalism emerged as a "natural response" to the paradox of Shi'ism, which was "a deeply political theological doctrine that lacked a direct political expression" (Fradkin 2009). This was impossible without the long-term development of the Shi'i political thought as well as consolidation and centralization of religious authority. However, since the beginning of the Occultation period, the "inescapable presence of the Hidden Imam" always has limited the "theological grounds for the designation of leadership" (Amanat 2009, 150). Historically, the consolidation of the religious establishment mainly began during the Safavid period (1501-1732). While the Shahs benefited the support of the clergy to legitimize their rule, in return, the clergy strengthened their religious and social position under the patronage of the Shahs. However, the clergy lacked an independent authority, and even "the office of *Shaykh al-Islam* [which] was held by a high-ranking jurist...was not understood to be a legal supervision over the entire judicial community" (Amanat 2009, 183). In fact, the Shahs practically kept the authority of the clergy limited by patronizing "the *Akhbāri* school, which rejected *ijtihad* [reasoning in deriving verdicts] and its logical rationalization, in contradistinction to the *Usuli* school" (Ibid.).

The end of the Safavid period and subsequently the dominance of *Usulis* over *Akhbāris*, by efforts of Ayatollah Wahid-Bihbihāni (1704-1791), opened a way for *ulama* (clergy), to exercise greater authority in the society with more independence from governments. This advance, however, did not come out of vacuum; it had its roots in the earlier periods. Already, by the philosopher Nasīr al-Dīn al-Tūsī (1201-1274), the concept of "perfect teacher" had been envisaged "as leader of the Community" (Campanini 2006). Moreover, Allāmah al-Hillī (1250-1325) had maintained that "the jurists are vested of the authority to substitute the Imam in his duties of legislator and vicegerent of prophecy" (Ibid.). Al-Shahīd al-Thani (1506-1558) had also considered *ulama* as "the right inheritors" of the Imams (Ibid.).

After the Safavids, Shaykh Ja'far Najafi (1741-1813), a disciple of Bihbihāni is noted as "the first to have contemplated the *niyabat-e 'amm* (general deputyship) of the [Hidden] Imam primarily as the collective function of the *ulama* body" (Amanat 2009, 155). Mullā Ahmad Narāqi (1771-1829), another pupil of Bihbihāni, theoretically developed the role of *fuqaha* (jurists) "as the acting sovereigns and guardians of the religion and community during the occultation of the Imam" (Bahar 1992). He even extended the authority of *ulama* to include "political sphere;" for him "the ruler had authority over the people and the *faqih* had authority over the ruler" (Ibid.).

Later, Shaykh Murtaza Ansari (1799-1864), who was the first to become known as *marja'e-taqlid-e-kull* (the supreme source of emulation), "introduced a centralized leadership in the hitherto pluralistic system of Shi'i scholarship and pastoral guidance" (Enayat 2005, 162). However, he acknowledged the right of all "qualified *fuqaha* to diverge (*ikhtilaf*) in the expression of their legal decisions (*ijtihad*)" (Bahar 1992). Ansari was also the first to introduce the terminology of *Welayat-e-Faqih* (guardianship of the jurist), though "as a highly restricted exercise of authority by the jurist, not as a general right to rule" (Ibid.).

The transformation of the "collective leadership" into "a single headship with far greater acceptance" gained scholarly support by Ansari himself and particularly his disciple, Mirza Hassan Shirazi (1814-1896) (Amanat 2009, 167). However, both of them as the holders of the position of *riyasat* (seniority) in their time, avoided "to attach a doctrinal justification to their own seniority," rather justified it based on "the practicalities of leadership" (Ibid., 153). The political potential of *riyasat* first was demonstrated during the tobacco movement (1890-1891) by Shirazi's general ban on the use of tobacco, which mobilized "the people against a concession granted by the Qajar Shah [Naser al-Din Shah] to a British company [Imperial Tobacco Company]" (Moaddel 1992).

FUNDAMENTALISM IN MODERN IRAN

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Shi'a clergy had found themselves with much more authority than they had under the Safavids, capable of supervising and challenging the state. In fact, "the institutional

translation of the Shi'i religious system reached its furthest point" (Arjomand, 1989, 204). In this sense, the tobacco movement and later the Iranian constitutional revolution (1905-1909) were not simple political incidents; rather they were a turning point in the way *ulama* dealt with political situations. In the constitutional revolution, particularly, the focus of debate between the *ulama* was over the proper location of political sovereignty.

However, regardless of the position of the *ulama* between two extremes of pro-constitutionalists (led by Akhund Khorasani (d.1911) and Ayatollah Na'ini (d.1936)) and anti-constitutionalists (led by Ayatollah Yazdi (d.1918) and Shaikh Fazlollah Nuri (d.1909)), the outcome was in one sense a complete failure for all religious forces. The execution of Nuri (1909) by the revolutionaries shocked religious establishments. Moreover, it followed by exclusion of the *ulama* from post-revolution political arena by secular forces, particularly during the reign of Reza Shah (1925-1941). Furthermore, "the clerical authority in the educational sector" and "in the Judiciary branch of the government" declined after the revolution (Hosseini 1999).

Although, the experiment of the revolution with its disappointing results re-strengthened the views of traditionalists with their highlighted aloofness from politics, for fundamentalists it was reinforcement for activism. For them, the only way to revive Islam in the society, as a total way of life, was to reassert the "political role and function" of the Imamate during the absence of the Imam (Bayat 1989, 350). In this way, particularly by the works of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1900-1989), the idea of the legitimacy of religious government and its necessity during the Occultation period found favor from mid twentieth century onward (Ibid., 351). Khomeini in his criticism of the aftermath of the constitutional revolution argued:

The influence and sovereignty of Islam in society have declined; the nation of Islam has fallen victim to division and weakness; the laws of Islam have remained in abeyance and been subjected to change and modification; and the imperialists have propagated foreign laws and alien culture among the Muslims through their agents for the sake of their evil purposes, causing people to be infatuated with the West. It was our lack of a leader, a guardian, and our lack of institutions of leadership that made all this possible. We need righteous and proper organs of government (Khomeini 1981, 54).

However, during the first decades of the twentieth century, fundamentalists suffered theoretically. Having accepted the *de facto* separation of religion and state by the Shi'a for a long time during the Occultation, they had been well behind Sunni fundamentalists in theory. Consequently, in this period there was an increased tendency to translate works and ideas of the Sunni counterparts such as Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), Rashid Rida (1865-1935,) Abul A'la Mawdudi (1903-1979) and Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) (Sobhani 1386/2008).

Furthermore, fundamentalists lacked support of top-ranked religious leaders. As long as Ayatollah Seyyed Hossein Burujerdi, the supreme juridical leader of the time (1945-61), was alive, he publicly discouraged *ulama* from interference in politics, whether practically or intellectually. It was only after his death (1961) that various religious scholars found an opportunity to propose reforms in socio-political doctrine of Shi'ism to address problems of the modern society. In 1961, a volume of essays, *An Inquiry into the Principle of Marja'iyat and the Religious Institution*, written by some prominent religious scholars was published. It was widely circulated among the younger generation of *ulama* and university students. In fact, this was the first major scholarly effort in the way of transition from traditionalism to fundamentalism. What the authors had in mind "would have led to the emergence of an autonomous religious institution which might effectively have challenged the state's domination of that institution since the Safavid period" (Akhavi 1980, 120). Akhavi summarized the author's views in these points (Ibid., 119-120) :

(1) The need for an independent financial organization for the clergy; (2) the necessity of a *shūrā-yi fatvā* – i.e., a permanent committee of *mujtahids* [jurists], the members of which were to be drawn from the country at large, to issue collective authoritative opinions in matters of law; (3) the idea that no Shi'i society is possible out the delegation of the Imam's authority; (4) an interpretation of Islam as a total way of life, therefore incorporating social, economic and political issues Into the religious ones; (5) the need to replace the central importance of fiqh [jurisprudence] in the madrasah curricula with *akhlaq* (ethics), *'aqa'id* (ideology) and *falsafah* (philosophy); (6) the need for a new concept of leadership of youth based on a

correct understanding of responsibility; (7) the development of *ijtihad* as a powerful instrument for the adaptation of Islam to changing circumstances; (8) a revival of nearly defunct principle of *al-amr bi-ma'ruf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar* [enjoin what is good and forbid what is wrong] as a means of expressing a collective and public will; (9) specialization among *mujtahids* and making *taqlid* (emulation of a *mujtahid*) contingent upon it; (10) the need for mutuality and communal spirit to overcome the individuality and mistrust that pervades Iranian culture.

(2) The most famous of the authors, Allameh Tabatabai (1903-1981), while arguing “no society in any circumstances can be free from the need for guardianship,” separates the office of leadership from “the person who occupies it” (Rajaei 2007, 107). In his view, the fact that there is no righteous Imam available now does not nullify the office of leadership. He maintains that in the absence of the infallible Imam, the rational way is to appoint a “person who is supreme in religious righteousness, sane judgment, and awareness of the situation” as the leader (Ibid.).

However, although Tabatabai in theory backs the idea that *ulama* are “the true holders of authority, and government is essentially delegated by them,” for him, like the pro-constitutionalist *mujtahids* in 1905-09, the government should be “under the supervision and with the agreement of the '*ulama*, rather than by them” (Martin 1992). In other words, in practice, he believed in religious government under leadership of just Muslim experts and not directly by *ulama*. Although, he never involved in politics, his major work, *Al-Mizan* (a very famous exegesis of the Quran), in which he discusses Islamic social philosophy, and his social writings have inspired fundamentalists, particularly after the Islamic revolution of 1979 (Sobhani 1386/2008).

Another major contributor was Ayatollah Morteza Mutahhari (1920-1979), one of the most important architects of Islamic ideology in modern Iran. Mutahhari wanted Islam to come out of “the corner of mosques and temples” and to “become a philosophy of life dominating the society” (Rajaei 2007, 127). In his essay, he argues that “the clergy’s dependence on the special religious tax coming from the people compromises its independence” (Ibid., 108). He invites the “leaders of the religion to launch deep reforms” in order to take over the leadership of the community and to “play the role of true leaders rather than that of indirect followers” (Ibid.).

With regard to the Occultation of Imam Mahdi, Mutahhari in his other work, *The uprising and the revolution of the Mahdi*, considers the emergence of the Imam at the end of the time not a sudden event, “but as the final stage in an ideologically driven revolution to establish Islam’s ‘ideal society’” (Amanat 2009, 64). Demanding “active involvement” by the Shi'a, Mutahhari regards the establishment of a just state as “a legitimate first step toward the final revolution of the Mahdi” (Ibid., 65). In this way, Mutahhari was in favor of repoliticization of the supreme religious authority of the Shi'a community (Dabashi 2006, 165).

The third and the only non-clerical contributor was Mehdi Bazargan (1907-1995), who was also a co-founder of the Freedom Movement of Iran in 1961. Bazargan in his essay, *The People's Expectations of the Religious Authorities*, directly calls the *ulama* to involve in politics. Considering Islam as a total way of life, he argues that “the clergy must actively participate in all aspects of life” (Rajaei 2007, 108). He maintains that this has been traditionally the role of *ulama* to stand “for truth and justice” (Ibid.). For him, the Shi'i religious leadership has been “both the source of authority (*marja'*), and the place of refuge (*malja'*)” in the face of tyranny (Ibid.). He demands his contemporary *ulama* to restore such functions as their religious duty. In fact, although after the revolution Bazargan broke with fundamentalism, his works were influential in the development of fundamentalism, particularly among the university students.

Among the other influential figures in transition from traditionalism to fundamentalism, Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleqani (1910-1979) primarily was known for his introduction to Ayatollah Na'ini's tract, *Tanbih al-Umma va Tanzih al-Mellah*, in 1955. Na'ini in his work “defended constitutionalism as a way of limiting despotism” (Rajaei 2007, 79). In his introduction, Taleqani considers constitutionalism as “a means to an end, not an end in itself” (Martin 1992). He argues that while Na'ini wrote the tract to show that many aspects of constitutionalism were not contradicted to the *Shari'a*, his main purpose was to prepare “a guide for implementing Islamic order” (Rajaei 2007, 81). Toward this purpose, Taleqani supports repoliticization of the clergy and criticises the *ulama* for their quietism. For him, in the absence of the infallible Imam legitimate leadership in “the social issues are in the hands of just and pious religious

authorities (*ulama*) who are at once knowledgeable of the primary and secondary principles of religion and subject to the angel of justice” (Dabashi 2006, 232).

In this line of scholars, Ali Shariati (1933-1977), “a major ideologue of revolutionary Shi’ism,” had a significant role in reinterpretation of fundamental Shi’i ideas (Amanat 2009, 62). In fact, he was “instrumental in popularizing the idea of Islam as a way of life and attracting mass support among the youth and the intelligentsia for the establishment of an Islamic government” (Afshar 1985, 223). In Shariati’s view, Imamate is not “belief in twelve pure, saintly, extraordinary names,” but “pure, honest, revolutionary conduct of the people and the correct foundation of society in terms of conscience, the expansion and independence of people’s judgment” (Dabashi 2006, 111-112). For him, Imamate has a mission to guide the community towards perfection. Therefore, a person in a position of Imamate and leadership should possess a certain qualification which not everyone can have. Like other fundamentalists, Shariati argues that Imam Mahdi “in his absence, has bestowed this role upon the pious and learned *ulama*” (Jahanbakhsh 2001, 122).

Shariati sees the solution for the Islamic society during the Occultation period in a “guided democratic political system operating in accordance with a revolutionary Islamic ideology” under the leadership of committed religious scholars (Ibid., 137). In fact, as Bazargan once stated after the Islamic Revolution, Shariati’s emphasis on the necessity of committed religious leadership in his ‘*Ummah and Imamate*’ “more than any other work helped consolidate [Ayatollah] Khomeini’s position as the leader of the movement” and created a fertile soil for acceptance of the theory of *Welayat-e-Faqih* (Rajaei 2007, 141).

Believing in such a way, Shariati severely criticizes traditional *ulama* for turning “a revolutionary creed into a quietist faith” (Nasr 2006, 126). He seeks to transform *intizar* from “total irresponsibility” and “the uselessness of all action under the pretext of the Imam’s absence” into a school of protest (Dabashi 2006, 112). Shariati argues that Imam Mahdi would not return to lead an “ultimate revolution” for the humanity without treating *intizar* “as a way of acquiring social responsibility, working toward a just and equitable order and rejecting political oppression and cultural degradation” (Amanat 2009, 62-63). Hence, Shariati attacks *taqiyya* (practice of precautionary dissimulation) as a “reactionary and outmoded mentality,” and instead he highlights *shahadat* (martyrdom) as “fighting and dying for a just cause” (Dabashi 2006, 115-116).

Alongside these intellectual and theoretical developments, changing the traditional approach in relation between religion and politics during the Occultation was fuelled by two other streams outside Iran: The Iraqi stream, exemplified by the thought of Ayatollah Muhammad-Baqir al-Sadr (1935-1980) and the Lebanese stream, led by Ayatollah Musa al-Sadr (1929-disappeared in 1978). Both scholars not only philosophically advocated political activism in order to prepare the situation for the return of Imam Mahdi, but also in practice they had great political influence in their community. Baqir al-Sadr, in particular, proposed a plan for organizing and strengthening the “office’ of the *Marja’iyya*” to remedy its “chronic shortcomings” and in order to be able to perform its responsibilities in the society (Aziz 2001, 143). Arguing that the government derives its authority from *ulama* (Martin 1992), he also “developed the essential theory of juristic rule upon which Khomeini relied” in his interpretation of *Welayat-e-Faqih* (Hamoudi 2009).

WELAYAT-E-FAQIH

The transition from traditionalism to fundamentalism, however, primarily was launched by Ayatollah Khomeini’s works and his political activism. In 1943 Khomeini published *Kashf al-asrar* (Uncovering of Secrets) to “repudiate attacks upon the *ulama*” by some secular-minded reformers (Martin 1993). In 1943 he “regards existing government as bad government, but in default of the ideal, or as far as he can perceive at this time, of the practical possibility of better government, it is necessary for the ‘*ulama*’ to seek accommodation with the existing state” (Ibid.). At this stage, Khomeini like traditionalists considers *ulama* as general representatives of Imam Mahdi whose “participation in government stems from the advice they are able to give from their knowledge of the *Shari’a* and the perceived need to have the *Shari’a* enforced” (Ibid.). However, after Ayatollah Burujerdi passed away, Khomeini changed his approach, and took aggressive actions against the government of Mohammad-Reza Shah. The symbolic turning point in Khomeini’s appearance in politics was the uprising of June 5, 1963. From this point on, Khomeini

discourages the religious leader from practicing *taqiyya* and working with “unrighteous government,” arguing that it is “enforced in matters of religious rituals but not with respect to principles of Islam” (Bayat 1989, 354).

While in exile, Khomeini introduced his theory of *Welayat-e-Faqih* (the guardianship of jurist) between 1970 and 1971. In support of his theory, Khomeini relies on some Shi'i traditions, such as *Maqbulat-ye Umar ibn-Hanzala* and *Toqih Sharif*, in which the jurists are vested authority in place of the Imam and people are recommended to refer to them in case of newly occurring circumstances. Although traditionalists according to the texts of such traditions only justify legal authority for *ulama*, Khomeini argues that this authority includes “social and political issues, since it was an already established practice, even in the lifetime of Imams, to refer questions and issues of a personal nature to the jurists” (Rajaei 2007, 178).

Although such theory already had been existed among the Shi'a, particularly since Shaykh Murtaza Ansari, it was Khomeini who “fully articulated” it to extend the judicial authority of *ulama* in a way to justify their right to rule on behalf of Imam Mahdi. (Kamrava 2008, 94). The idea behind this theory is that in the absence of the infallible Imam, the best alternative is “the rule of Muslim scholars” who know the God's will, which is “manifested in the juridical narrative of Islam” (Rajaei 2007, 121). Since there is no possibility of infallibility during the Occultation, on the question of who would be qualified to be the leader, Khomeini emphasizes on “knowledge of the [Islamic] law and justice” (Khomeini 2002, 44). To determine the level of authority Khomeini argues: “If a worthy individual possessing these two qualities arises and establishes a government, he will possess the same authority as the Most Noble Messenger (‘a) [and the Imams] in the administration of society, and it will be the duty of all people to obey him” (Ibid.).

At that time, the Khomeini's reading of *Welayat-e-Faqih* was based on three points: “(1) complete subordination of the political institutions to Islamic law (*Shari'a*) (2) governance by the *faqih* as the real wielders of legislative, executive, and judicial power (3) duties incumbent upon every Muslim in establishing an Islamic government” (Bahar 1992). In fact, having no reference to the legitimacy of legislation in his book, *Islamic government*, Khomeini advocates the ideas of Shaikh Fazlollah Nuri. Khomeini argues “elections and legislation are illegal according to the *Shari'a* and so, therefore, is a constitutional assembly” (Martin 1992).

FUNDAMENTALISM AFTER THE REVOLUTION

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 was a great victory for fundamentalism and a setback for traditional clerical quietism in Iran. The Revolution helped the fundamentalists to implement what they had articulated in theory. However, the Revolution also clarified the differences among the fundamentalists, which resulted in the emergence of another school of thought as ‘religious modernism’ in opposition to the political implementation of the theory of Imamate by Khomeini's version of *Welayat-e-Faqih*. Today, religious modernism in Iran is mainly represented by thinkers such as Abdolkarim Soroush and Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari.

Since the 1960s, fundamentalism had been nurtured by a new generation of clergymen and laymen who had tried to provide theoretical platforms for socio-political aspects of Islam. In this way, new religious seminaries and research and educational institutions were also established to train the new generation of religious-minded intellectuals according to the needs of the time (Sobhani 1386/2008). However, although the Islamic Revolution was a huge success in one sense, its aftermath cut short the theoretical development of fundamentalism for more than a decade and changed its direction forever. The death or assassination of prominent religious scholars, particularly Morteza Mutahhari, who could deepen the Shi'i socio-political thought in the face of modernity, and preoccupation of other thinkers with executive positions caused further damage to the idea of fundamentalism, made it a victim of politics (Ibid.).

The Islamic Republic put Khomeini's theory of *Welayat-e-Faqih* in practice, and he became known as the first *Wali-ye Faqih* (the governing jurist). To some extent, such advance was a *de facto* return toward the ideal of Shi'ism, that is, “the supreme religious authority should also be the supreme political authority” (Gheissari and Nasr 2006, 107). Not surprisingly, Khomeini was called by the prestigious title of ‘imam,’ which had been exclusively used for the twelve infallible Imams. However, Khomeini in the Islamic Republic, in effect, changed his initial theory of *Welayat-e-Faqih* by accepting the Constitution which also

“advocates certain modern institutions normally identified with modern democracy” (Hosseini 1999). Khomeini supported “a dual notion of sovereignty between the learned clerics and the people, with veto power lying firmly in the hands of the former group” (Hashemi 2005, 160). This was, however, a partial shift from the ideas of Fazlollah Nuri to that of Na’ini.

During the first years after the Revolution, Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri (1922-2009), a former student of Khomeini and once his successor, was the major theoretician of *Welayat-e-Faqih*. In fact, as the initial chairman of the Assembly of Experts, he was mainly responsible for inclusion of *Welayat-e-Faqih* as a principle in the new Constitution during the summer 1979. In the constitutional debates, Montazeri, like Khomeini, argued that in the absence of the Imam, “ultimately, government and the laws must terminate in the hands of the jurists who are just and conversant with the affairs and issues of the day” (Akhavi 2008). However, Montazeri never advocated an absolute authority by the jurist, rather total supervision of the administration without any executive and policy making role. This is, of course, a point that has caused split among fundamentalists since 1988, when Khomeini in a famous statement developed his theory to what is known today as *Welayat-e-Mutlaq-e-Faqih* (absolute guardianship of the jurist). In that occasion, Khomeini wrote to the then president, Ali Khamenei:

The government can unilaterally abrogate legal [*shar’i*] agreements that it has made with the people.... The government can-when it sees it to contravene the good of the Islamic country-prevent the pilgrimage, which is one of the important divine duties.... If the government can exercise its authority only within the bounds of the peripheral divine laws, then the bestowal of the divine ordinances through absolute deputyship upon the Prophet....would be hollow and meaningless (Akhavi 1996).

What Khomeini introduced in 1988, however, was an effort to modernize “Shi’ite jurisprudence by making it more practical” (Arjomand 2001, 313). He institutionalized “the legislative authority of the supreme jurist” and established “the *Maslahat* [expediency] Council as its bureaucratic organ” (Ibid.). In this new form of Islamic government, whenever political expediency is required the governing jurist can intervene in the practice of *Shari’a*. In fact, before this advancement, there were two distinct sources of law: “primary rules derived from the *Shar’ia*, and secondary rules contrived for the practical purpose of implementing the primary rules” (Bahar 1992). However, *Welayat-e-Mutlaq-e-Faqih* combined these two together, “declaring all governmental ordinances to be incumbent primary rules” (Ibid.).

This was one step further toward an ideal Shi’i-Islamic government in which “the divinely ordained absolute, infallible religious leadership (the Prophethood or the Imamate)” is a “fundamental prerequisite to the performance” of *Shari’a* (Sachedina 2001, 136-137). According to *Welayat-e-Mutlaq-e-Faqih*, the governing jurist as the deputy of the Imam is “the absolute ruler of the Shi’is” with an “unrestricted authority” and so, the validity of “all governmental institutions” depends on his permission (Ibid., 138). Thus, in new phase of fundamentalism, the *fuqaha* are no longer merely guardians of *Shari’a*, rather they are “invested with the absolute and exclusive authority of divine governance” (Bahar 1992).

NEO-FUNDAMENTALISM

Welayat-e-Motlaq-e-Faqih partly was shaped to resolve the long-term “problem of unregulated leadership” (Amanat 2009, 189). It was intended to institutionalize the office of *Marja’iyat* and centralize it around one person: *Wali-e-Faqih*. As long as Ayatollah Khomeini, as the absolute political leader and a great *Marja’*, was alive, in accordance with the Constitution, the supreme religious and political authority were almost the same. After his death in 1989 when Hojatolislam Ali Khamenei was selected as Khomeini’s successor and the new *Wali-e-Faqih*, he was not a *Marja’* or even an Ayatollah to be constitutionally qualified for his new position (Ibid., 139). However, after Khamenei succeeded Khomeini, gradually he became known as ‘Ayatollah Khamenei.’ The problem was legally resolved by revision of the constitution in 1989 in order to a non-*Marja’* be able to assume the position of *Wali-e-Faqih*. This was, however, an acknowledgment of the gap between the religious and political authority, which, of course, was not a desirable order in the system of *Welayat-e-Motlaq-e-Faqih* (Roy 1999). Therefore, a few years later, after the death of the senior *Marja’*s, Ayatollahs Golpayegani and Araki (in 1993 and 1994, respectively), ‘Ayatollah’ Khamenei was officially recognized as a *Marja’*. This, however, did not go well

completely, as it was faced with some “opposition from the clerical circles of Qom,” particularly Ayatollah Montazeri (Roy 1999).

In a further effort to unite the religious and political authority, though at the expense of the former, some even have questioned the functionality of *Marja'iyat vis-a-vis Welayat-e-Faqih* arguing that the institution of *Marja'iyat* had been belonged to “the period when the Shi'ites were excluded from government which was then in the hands of tyrants” (Brunner 2001, 320). For them, in the Islamic state while there is a governing jurist at the top, it is unreasonable to divide the authority between the jurist and *Marja's*. After the death of Ayatollah Araki in 1994, Ayatollah Muhammad Yazdi (a powerful conservative cleric who was then the head of Judiciary System of Iran) made such a point claiming that the plurality of the sources of emulation (*Marja's*) is not acceptable in the Islamic state when “guarding the sovereignty of Islam is an incumbent necessity” (Ibid., 321). He maintained that, in order to preserve the Islamic state both religious and political authority must be centralized and unified in the system of *Welayat-e-Faqih* (Ibid., 321).

Having failed to unify or substitute *Marja'iyat* with *Welayat-e-Motlaqe-ye-Faqih*, in neo-fundamentalism, there is a tendency to push *Marja'iyat* to its limited religious functions related to personal and ethical matters. On the other hand, *Wali-e-Faqih* is considered to be a qualified jurist, not necessarily the most knowledgeable jurist, “in overall charge of the political system, [who] ensures the harmony and stability of society, and is the final authority on issues of social and political concern” (Kamrava 2008, 110). In other words, a *Marja'* is one among others who issues his religious “opinions (*fatwa*)”, while the *Wali-e-Faqih* issues “edicts and commands (*hukm*)” which are mandatory and “all people are commanded to obey him” (Ibid., 111).

In neo-fundamentalism, there is an especial emphasis on the issue of Imamate and leadership by “acceptance of the absolute supremacy” of *Welayat-e-Faqih* (Khosrokhavar 2001). In fact, *Welayt-e-Faqih*, in its absolute form, is considered as the bedrock and sprit of the Islamic society. The *Wali-e-Faqih* is in charge to implement all aspects of Islam in the society. In order to do so, Ayatollah Javadi-Amoli (1388/2009, 235), one of the most prominent conservative clerics, argues that the *Wali-e-Faqih* determines the priority of the *Shari'a* decrees based on the interests of the Islamic society; he has responsibility to appoint the state officials, arrange the state regulations within the boundary of Islam and control domestic and foreign affairs.

According to Ayatollah Muhammad-Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi (1386/2007, 85), the chief ideologue and theoretician of neo-fundamentalism, the state under full control of the *Wali-e-Faqih* would be the closest form of government to the ideal government of the infallible Imam. For him, this is possible because the *Wali-e-Faqih* is one who has three characteristics: 1) Knowledge of general Islamic injunctions; 2) Spiritual and ethical merits which prevent him from impiety and wickedness; 3) Skillfulness in managing society, which includes social and political realization, awareness of international affairs, courage in face of enemies, and ability to recognize the priorities. Mesbah-Yazdi maintains that the *Wali-e-Faqih* with such traits would keep pillars of the state in harmony and elevate it toward its ideal.

Mesbah-Yazdi argues that since the qualified jurist is, in fact, designated by Imam Mahdi and represents him, disobeying his rules means rejection of the rule of the Imam and consequently God, which is an unforgivable sin (Ibid., 101). He even extends his argument to the trustees of the *Wali-e-Faqih*. In defense of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad after the disputed election of June 2009, Mesbah-Yazdi once stated that since the President represents the *Wali-e-Faqih*, who himself is the deputy of Imam Mahdi, “obeying the President [, as long as he is in the path of Islam,] would be the same as obeying God” (Hashemi 2010). However, Mesbah-yazdi (1386/2007, 105-111) insists that this does not result in a dictatorship, because at the top of the state there is a just jurist who rules on behalf of the Hidden Imam, in accordance with the interests of the Islamic society and the will of God. Hence, if the jurist behaves otherwise, no longer he deserves to be the *Wali-e-Faqih*.

Neo-fundamentalism, particularly since the presidency of Ahmadinejad in 2005, also has been known by its radical political Mahdiism. Ahmadinejad from his first days in power has supported and promoted messianic tendencies (Filiu 2009). Although, such a belief in the return of Imam Mahdi has its roots in authentic Shi'i classics of *hadith* collections, the way Ahmadinejad exploits from this Shi'i belief to legitimize his government is quite new and radical. For some of his radical supporters, Ahmadinejad's era is considered as the period of Imam Mahdi's lesser advent (*zuhur-e-suqra*). Ahmadinejad himself once refused “the claim that he is in contact with the Imam,” but claimed that his government is indirectly “under

the management of the Imam” (Amanat 2009, 243-244). In fact, such statements are stemmed from his deep belief in political interpretation of *intizar*.

FUNDAMENTALISM, IMAMATE AND DEMOCRACY

As it can be inferred from previous discussions, there is not a unique approach on the relation of the theory of Imamate and democracy in the fundamentalists’ camp. However, there is no doubt that non of them sanction the possibility of democracy in the presence of an infallible Imam. The problem emerges when they come to delineate the relation of Imamate and democracy in the absence of the Imam. Generally speaking, among fundamentalists the two ends of the spectrum, between acceptance of democracy, though limited, and rejection of democracy, goes back to the ideas of Ayatollah Na’ini and Shaikh Fazlollah Nuri respectively.

The most moderate faction of fundamentalism was represented by Ayatollah Taleqani, who picked Na’ini’s idea. While arguing that in the presence of the infallible Imam the ideal form of government is one that is headed by the Imam, Taleqani states that in his absence, “the only path remaining is to formalize and legalize the election of the people, which also opens a path for the influence of the source of emulation [*marja'*] in public affairs, that is, through the people” (Rajaei 2007, 82). In his view, there must be “a central committee of religious authorities who, through consultation [with the people] and collective consensus, directs the affair of the Shi’i community” (Dabashi 2006, 265). Taleqani was against “religious despotism” in the form of “supreme leadership of the Shi’i believers” by a particular individual (Ibid.). However, he does not reject the idea of a “supreme authority of one or a select group of high-ranking clerics” at the top of such consultative committee as he accepted the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini (Ibid.). In other words, for Taleqani, the supreme religious leader is in the position of a supervisor or a director, and the affairs of the society must be handled through real consultation with the people.

While defending the idea of “Islamic Republic,” Ayatollah Mutahhari takes a quite similar position. He maintains that *Welayat-e-Faqih* does not mean putting a jurist at the top of the government as a ruler; rather the jurist has a responsibility as an ideologue and a supervisor in a society in which the majority of people have accepted Islam as an ideology and committed to implement it. With regard to democracy, Mutahhari argues that such a system is not in contrast with democracy, since essentially people themselves choose the jurist democratically (Mutahhari 1372/1993, 85-86).

Generally speaking, in this line of thought (which was favorable in the initiative stages of the Islamic Republic), the emphasis is on the people who choose a religious leader who in return supervises the government to ensure its compatibility with Islam. In fact, it is the traditional idea of supervision of the state by *ulama*, but in a modernized and systematic way by putting an elected jurist at the top of a consultative organ of guardian jurists. According to Ayatollah Montazeri in his published work on the Islamic government (1988), the jurist is chosen among “the most knowledgeable, just and pious people” who are also “the most aware of the issues and problems of their time” (Martin 1992). The outcome is a limited and guided democracy, in a sense that the people have the right to elect their rulers and legislate within the boundary of Islam. The sanction of democracy among such fundamentalists has its roots to this fact that, like traditionalists, for them there is no perfect alternative to the absolute authority of the infallible Imam in his absence. Therefore, in their view, mixing the authority of religious scholars with popular will would be the best choice.

However, both Mutahhari and Montazeri (in his first comments on this issue) put some limits on free election arguing that the state officials, particularly the president, should be elected from the list of the *Wali-e-Faqih*’s choices (Mutahhari 1372/1993, 86; Moslem 2002, 29). In Montazeri’s view, this is to be done to ensure that the executives are committed to implement the God’s laws. For him, this is in the opposite of the Western-style democracies which base the elections on “the satisfaction of the electorate, and the objective is the realization of their desires and cravings, without the elector or the elected being bound by legal stipulations, rational interests or moral criteria” (Akhavi 2008).

On the other side of the spectrum, Ayatollah Khomeini, at least in his early version of *Welayat-e-Faqih*, was very much in tune with Fazlollah Nuri’s ideas. For Khomeini, *Welayat-e-Faqih* is “governance for the people, but not by the people” (Bahar 1992); *Welayat-e-Faqih* “turns ultimately to the people for legitimating its laws and rulers, and it is deemed to belong to the people” (Ibid.). He fully emphasizes on the

Guardian Council as an important organ in the system of *Welayat-e-Faqih* and “a bulwark against Western concepts of sovereignty” (Akhavi 1988). Khomeini does not try to conciliate Islamic government with democracy. For him, Islam can introduce a far better plan for managing the society than democracy, since the core principles of democracy such as “justice, freedom and self-determination” are embedded in Islam (Hashemi 2005, 165);

While in the early stages of fundamentalism there was a tendency to define democracy within the framework of Islamic teachings, in neo-fundamentalism democracy is treated as something out of Islam. In fact, according to *Welayat-e-Motlaqe-ye-Faqih*, the governing jurist is the alternative to the infallible Imams and has the same absolute authority that they have in running the Islamic society. Hence, for these neo-fundamentalists, “popular participation in an Islamic government is limited to notions of consultation and confirmation,” and there are no such things as “independent declarations of majority will” (Bahar 1992).

In the revised Constitution of 1989 even “the possibility of a direct election of the Guide [*Wali-e-Faqih*] by the people,” was dropped (Roy 1999). According to Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazi (1379/2000, 1:21-22), this is because the legitimacy (*mashru'iyat*) of the *Wali-e-Faqih* as the deputy to the Imam does not come from people, since sovereignty does not belong to people, rather it comes from God through the Prophet Muhammad and the Imams. Thus, election has nothing to do with bestowing legitimacy on the *Wali-e-Faqih*.

Mesbah-Yazdi maintains that as it is practiced in the Islamic Republic, the people can elect some prominent *faqih*s for the Assembly of Experts, and they have responsibility to discover (*kashf*) the qualified *faqih* and appoint (*entesab*) him as the supreme leader (Ibid., 1:23). In other words, “the only proper and acceptable way for an eminent theologian to become a [*Wali-e-Faqih*] is to be designated as one by other scholars of *fiqh* and by the populace at large” (Kamrava 2008, 106). Therefore, in neo-fundamentalism, “elections are for the purposes of acceptability and functionality, or *maqbuliyyat*, not determining righteousness and legitimacy, or *mashru'iyat*” (Ibid., 107). The rationale is that *Welayat-e-Faqih*, as it is clear from its name, is a matter of guardianship (*Welayat*) rather than deputation (*Wekalat*); the *Wali-e-Faqih* is not supposed to act necessarily in accordance with the people’s will but his main responsibility is to implement the God’s decrees in the society (Mesbah-Yazdi 1379/2000, 2:17-18). Similarly, Ayatollah Javadi-Amoli (1388/2009, 212) argues that if the *Wali-e-Faqih* were to be elected by the people, he would be the people’s deputy and not the Imam’s deputy.

Mesbah-Yazdi (1379/2000, 1:28-29) argues that once the people accepted the Islamic government headed by the *Wali-e-Faqih*, they are obliged to obey his commands. Thus opposition to his rule is not tolerable and any effort to topple the Islamic government must be repressed, provided that the dissidents constitute a minority of the people. Nevertheless, in a case that an absolute majority of the people cease their support and want to get rid of the Islamic government, although the *Wali-e-Faqih* retains his divine legitimacy (*mashru'iyat*), he loses his acceptability (*maqbuliyyat*) and consequently, his authority in managing the Islamic society. In any case, however, Mesbah-Yazdi insists that the sanctity of the *Wali-e-Faqih* as the supreme leader and the deputy of Imam Mahdi should be maintained (Ibid., 2:16). However, the violent events of the disputed Iranian presidential election in 2009 showed that in practice it is not clear how the people can exhibit their peaceful opposition to the current system of government, and how it can be proved that the acceptability of *Wali-e-Faqih* is low or high.

In final remark, according to neo-fundamentalism, Western style of democracy is absolutely at odds with the Shi'i concept of Imamate and leadership whether in the presence of an infallible Imam or during the Occultation period. Mesbah-Yazdi (1386/2007, 67) considers Western democracy and freedom as “the goddesses of the twenty-first century and the sacredest idols of humanity.” However, generally, in fundamentalism a system based on the doctrine of Imamate is believed to encompass all the advantages of a democratic system without its negatives.

Javadi-Amoli (1388/2009, 513) argues that in the Islamic government, the people have the right to vote and consciously choose the state’s executives. While in democratic systems the state law comes from customs and imperfect human thought, in the Islamic model everything is based on divine revelation. In addition, the ruler of the Islamic state is either an infallible Imam, or a just jurist, and so, there would be no corruption at the top of the state. Furthermore, in Western democracies, people have pseudo-freedom, since they free themselves from God’s orders, but in the Islamic system people are free from everything except

God. Therefore, Javadi-Amoli concludes, in the Islamic government, freedom and human right (in their proper meaning) as well as the right to vote and electing the state officials by the people exist and at the same time "the spiritual dimension of human is preserved and the disadvantages of the democratic systems are excluded."

CONCLUSION

As has been argued, Shi'i fundamentalism is a broad term to refer to a spectrum of different ideas about how the Shi'a should implement the socio-political aspect of the theory of Imamate during the absence of the Imams. Unlike traditionalists who focus on cultural and educational activities with a meaningful aloofness from politics, fundamentalists seek drastic changes by establishing an Islamic state. For them the concept of Imamate and leadership has not been ceased after the period of the twelve Imams, and it is the duty of *ulama* to actively participate in the social and political arena on behalf of the Hidden Imam in order to implement Islam, as a total way of life, in the society.

However, with regard to the relation of religion and state, while the first generation of fundamentalists generally considered a supervisory role for *ulama*, Ayatollah Khomeini's theory of *Welayat-e-Faqih*, particularly its absolute version, aims to bring the state as a whole under control of a qualified jurist. In fact, *Welayat-e-Motlaqe-ye-Faqih* is the continuation of the theory of Imamate in its complete meaning, and gives the governing jurist the same authority as the Prophet or the Imams in managing the Islamic society. Putting *Wali-e-Faqih* in the position of the infallible Imams, in effect, gives the people a secondary and supportive role instead of a primary and determinant one in the administration of society. In this sense, neo-fundamentalists treat democracy as something completely alien to the Islamic concept of governance. Nevertheless, their opposition with democracy, at least in theory, does not stem from an authoritarian or despotic nature, rather their sincere belief in the supremacy of the Islamic government based on the theory of Imamate over all other forms of government designed by human beings.

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