

Investigating the Theological Foundations of Religious Democracy from the Perspective of Nahj al-Balagha

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Undoubtedly, Nahj al-Balagha is one of the most important Islamic texts after the Noble Qur'an, serving as a comprehensive guide for human life in all aspects and providing direction in various fields. One of the areas that Nahj al-Balagha strongly emphasizes is governance and politics. The prominent view of Nahj al-Balagha on governance is religious democracy. This study, through an analytical and descriptive method, seeks to explore the question: What is the meaning of religious democracy from the perspective of Nahj al-Balagha and what are its theological foundations? In Nahj al-Balagha, divine governance is intertwined with democratic governance; if people desire to establish democracy, it must occur under the umbrella of divine governance. This notion is demonstrable within the theological foundations of monotheism, resurrection, prophethood, and Imamate. As a result, the theological foundation of religious democracy in Nahj al-Balagha can be summarized in this statement by the Commander of the Faithful, Imam Ali (peace be upon him): "All of you are shepherds, and all of you are responsible for your flock." Thus, religious democracy means the realization of divine vicegerency and the rule of the oppressed on earth, as also emphasized in the Noble Qur'an.

Keywords: *Nahj al-Balagha, democracy, Islam, theological foundations, religious democracy.*

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1. Introduction

Undoubtedly, Nahj al-Balagha is the most important book after the Qur'an, which can serve as a guide for human beings in all aspects of life and take on the task of guiding humanity in various fields. One of the key features that distinguishes Nahj al-Balagha from many other books is the diversity of topics it addresses. These topics include theology and metaphysics, conduct and worship, governance and justice, Ahl al-Bayt and caliphate, preaching and wisdom, philosophy, theology,

and more. One of the most significant areas discussed in Nahj al-Balagha is governance and politics, including religious democracy, which undoubtedly has theological foundations based on monotheism, prophethood, resurrection, justice, and Imamate. The connection between religious democracy and these theological foundations is inseparable. This is because, within the theological foundation of monotheism, it can be said that God seeks to grant dignity to His servants by inviting them to the truth through His prophets. The Qur'an has promised the faithful and righteous humans the



caliphate and vicegerency. God's perspective toward His servants is one of making them dignified and noble rather than humiliated, and this is a monotheistic view of democracy.

Thus, the God of Islam is people-centric, and the prophethood, which conveys this divine good news, is also people-centric, as it contains a message for the guidance of all human beings to the path of truth. One can even say that our view of resurrection is in some way an attention to social justice, as our resurrection is based on divine justice (reward and punishment). Justice dictates that there must be balance in all sections. Religious democracy in Nahj al-Balagha, in contrast to other Islamic sects, such as the Ash'arites, is undoubtedly incomplete because they emphasize narration and God-centeredness while highlighting only the external aspect, which leads to the neglect of customs and people. If the theological foundations were those of the Mu'tazilites, they would also emphasize reason in an exaggerated manner, which in turn harms the divine discourse. The same issues arise in the Salafis and in Eastern and Western secularism, which either follow a tradition devoid of rationality or seek to separate religion from the people. Furthermore, there is the secular external view, where two theories are proposed:

The atheistic theory, as proposed by atheists like Sartre, who reject the existence of God and argue that if we highlight God, humans will be annihilated, so we must prioritize humans (atheistic existentialism).

The theory of the secularists themselves, who unfortunately have the most followers in the Western world, as opposed to the East (Ash'arites, Mu'tazilites, Salafis), who do not believe in the separation of God from the world of existence, but either excessively emphasize reason or narration, thereby weakening one or the other. This article seeks to examine issues such as: What are the theological foundations of religious democracy according to Nahj al-Balagha? Considering that Islam is a rational, intelligent, and reason-promoting religion in the realm of politics and governance, can the foundations of religious democracy be inferred from it? What are the rational grounds for religious democracy in Nahj al-Balagha? On what basis do we call the perspective of Nahj al-Balagha religious democracy?

The answer to these questions lies in the words and actions of the Commander of the Faithful, Ali (peace be upon him), who, by affirming the theological foundation

of the principles of religion, summarized it in one sentence: "All of you are shepherds, and all of you are responsible for your flock." (Ershad al-Qulub, vol. 1, p. 184). This statement can be explained as aligning with the Qur'anic verse: "Whoever desires honor, then to God belongs all honor" (Fatir, 10) and "Honor belongs to God, His Messenger, and the believers" (Munafiqun, 8), thus elaborating on religious democracy. In this regard, articles such as "Religious Democracy in Nahj al-Balagha" by Abolqasem Arefnejad and "Ali's Thought and Management as a Symbol of Religious Democracy" by Hassan Mesbah define and explain religious democracy and compare it with democracy in the political sphere. However, the aim of this study is to prove religious democracy and establish the theological-philosophical foundations of religious democracy in the light of Islam, a rational religion, where religious democracy is embedded within divine governance. If people want to establish democracy, it must happen under the shadow of divine governance. Alawi democracy means the realization of divine vicegerency and the rule of the oppressed on earth, as mentioned in the Qur'an. Religious democracy does not mean the absolute rule of the majority but rather the realization of caliphate and inheritance: "We want to bestow favor upon those who were oppressed on earth and make them leaders and inheritors" (Qasas, 5). This Alawi view stands in stark contrast to Trump-style democracy, Daesh, Talibanism, and Wahhabism.

2. Democracy

The term "democracy" has Greek and Latin roots, combining two words: demos meaning the mass of people and kratein meaning governance, with demos kratein meaning governance by the people (Tabatabai et al., 2011). The term "democracy" entered the English language in the 16th century through French, and its root "demos" means people, while "kratein" means governance and rule. According to the Greek language, "demos" refers both to the people residing in a land and to the land itself, making "demos" a broad concept encompassing all Greek citizens and all people of the city (Ball et al.). Carl views democracy as collective governance in which, in many respects, the members of society directly or indirectly participate in decisions that affect them, or they can participate (Bentham, 2004, p. 41). In the dictionary of political science, democracy is

the official declaration of the minority's submission to the majority and the recognition of individuals' equal rights in society (Aqabakhshi & Afshari Rad, 1996). Simply put, "democracy" is a political system and social philosophy that accepts diversity of opinions more than any other system or philosophy, and in which the transfer of political power takes place through peaceful means, aiming to ensure a minimum level of welfare for everyone (Alam, 1994).

The Greeks were among the founders of democracy; in the city-state of Athens, due to the distinction between Athenian citizens and slaves and non-Athenian foreigners, the conditions were set for a unique type of democracy. Despite the complexity of the city-states, direct democracy was established. The Greeks believed that political power belonged to all Greek citizens, and the best form of governance, in their view, was one in which those possessing the status of citizens could participate in political power. They defined citizens as adult, free, male Athenians, excluding women, foreign residents, slaves, freed slaves, and those born in Greece to non-Greek parents. Such individuals were not considered citizens and were not allowed to intervene in governance (Ball et al.). Democracy has undergone a historical period of changes, and the traces and roots of modern democracy can be found after the Renaissance in Europe, where it was completed under political, cultural, and social factors. In 1215 CE, English nobles limited the powers of the king and laid the groundwork for a primitive form of a legislative assembly. This idea introduced the notion that no individual, not even the king, is above the law, marking the first attempt to limit the autonomy of the government. Gradually, political rights were extended to most people (Qazi Abu Ali Muhammad ibn al-Husayn al-Farra, 1993). Modern democracy is unlike village, tribal, or city-state democracy in ancient Greece; rather, it is state-nation democracy, emerging alongside the formation of state-nations.

3. Religious Democracy

One type of democracy is religious democracy, a model of political system where religion forms the foundation and content of governance, and the people play a central role. In this system, the people, alongside religion, are key and determining components of governance, especially in selecting rulers. "The democracy of the

righteous" is a good synonym for religious democracy. In this system, people and elections determine the rulers, laws, decision-making processes, oversight, and accountability, provided that the elected rulers are righteous from the start and do not deviate from the framework of Islam while in power. From another perspective, religious democracy means the participation of all members of society in decision-making, with equal rights, within the framework of Sharia (Mishkat, 2003). The difference between governance based on religious democracy and other political systems lies in the sources of knowledge, which are the sources from which principles, foundations, programs, and social standards are derived. These sources include three parts: the first part consists of matters that human reason and intellect can judge. Reason and intellect are considered both logically, philosophically, and practically, and are necessary in practical planning. The second fundamental difference between the system of religious democracy and non-religious systems is the difference in worldview and ideology. The system of religious democracy is based on a religious worldview and Islamic ideology. This worldview is based on three fundamental principles: the first is the belief in the servitude of human beings before God. The second is the belief in prophethood and the way of divine revelation for the individual and social guidance of human beings; not only individual guidance but social guidance as well. The third is the belief in the afterlife, or resurrection: the return to another world and accountability for what humans do on earth. These three principles are not only considered in personal life and social behavior but are also taken into serious consideration in the overall system of Islamic governance and politics. They form the foundation of the worldview of the system of religious democracy, shaping their central position in the thought and social behavior of Muslims (Homayoun Misbah, 2004). However, religious democracy in Islam, based on theological foundations, pays attention to three important pillars: a) the teachings of Islam itself; b) the general will of Muslim and religious people; and c) religious leadership. Islam has many foundations, principles, and social and individual behavior guidelines, each of which can be explained, analyzed, and derived according to the Qur'an, the tradition of the Prophet (peace be upon him), and the conduct of the infallible Imams (peace be upon them)

(Ibn Abi al-Hadid). The role of the people in religious democracy is that, based on the foundations, principles, and teachings of religion obtained from religion and scholars, they make choices in all matters. In determining instances and examples, people play a full and complete role. The role of religious leadership in the system of religious democracy is to guide society in thought, behavior, and social planning according to Islamic principles and foundations. In this system of governance, who the religious leader is—what characteristics and traits they should have—and how they should govern are both discussed. It is not enough to ask who should govern; how they govern must also be addressed. The letter from Ali (peace be upon him) to Malik al-Ashtar is one of the most beautiful and eloquent documents concerning how an Islamic ruler should govern in an Islamic society (Ibn Abi al-Hadid). These types of demands and questions in the realm of religion, politics, leadership, active public participation, etc., indicate the rational foundation of Islam. Islam, compared to other religious democracies, offers a more complete framework of rationality, wisdom, and acceptance of reason. Islam is a rational religion, meaning that it aids rational activities in two ways: first, Islam nurtures and cultivates rationality and wisdom; second, it endorses and encourages human intellectual activities, calling humans toward them as both an obligation and a duty. The natural sciences and human phenomena that Islam so greatly directs reason and thought towards are not confined to a specific type of thinking or reasoning. Thus, with the advent of religion, rationality not only does not experience stagnation or limitation but also finds openness and dynamism.

Second, Islam is an intelligent religion. This means that the foundations, principles, methods, concepts, values, and language of Islam are intellectually acceptable to humans. In other words, Islam, which has originated from above and manifests as a series of epistemological, doctrinal, value-based, legal, and social propositions, with a combination of non-symbolic, symbolic, metaphorical, allegorical, motivational, explanatory, descriptive, empirical, and investigative expressions, is suitable for humans and aligns well with human reason. Naturally, such a religion can assist the human society in achieving its goal.

Third, Islam is an accepting religion, meaning that human reason can understand it and engage in dialogue

with it. The door is open to everyone, and Islam participates in a two-way discourse. In this way, religiosity and rationality (rationality, wisdom, and acceptance of reason) are combined. Both work together in perfect harmony and cooperation to regulate, nurture, and produce relations and harmony between culture, economy, knowledge, values, rights, politics, traditions, and more, at both external and internal levels. In religious governance, rational governance is strengthened, and in rational governance, religious governance is consolidated.

4. The Concept of Democracy in Nahj al-Balagha

Based on these explanations and the discussion of the rational foundations in Islam, particularly in the Shia school of thought, the most complete form of religious democracy can be elucidated and analyzed according to the words and actions of Imam Ali (peace be upon him) in Nahj al-Balagha. Both the Qur'an and Nahj al-Balagha have significant educational goals, the most important of which is the cultivation of both worldly and spiritual growth in humans, leading them closer to God. The purpose of politics, economics, and culture in society is also education and development. Without scientific, spiritual, and moral advancement, as well as nearness to God, life would be meaningless. Human spiritual and existential development only occurs within a just society. Thus, the goal of religious democracy in the Qur'an is to establish justice among the people, as indicated by the verse: "So that mankind may uphold justice" (*liyaqoom al-naas bil-qist*). This shows that all people matter and that the purpose of democracy is not for a few to become rulers, but for all people to uphold justice.

The phrase "*liyaqoom al-naas bil-qist*" essentially sets the goal of democracy as social justice, and this social justice allows humans to achieve spiritual and existential growth. In Imam Ali's teachings, people are central because if they are not the focus, if they do not reach dignity and existential perfection, even social justice and the objectives of the prophets become meaningless. The goal of life is not for humans to merely pursue materialistic desires. Therefore, it can be said that the educational philosophy of Nahj al-Balagha and the Qur'an requires that we pursue religious democracy, which means moving towards a system where people are central in governance, statecraft, and politics.

Imam Ali (peace be upon him) emphasizes that if it were not for the presence of the people and the obligation of proof, he would have abandoned the caliphate. He states, "Had it not been for the presence of the people and the establishment of proof, I would have cast the reins of the caliphate onto its camel's hump," meaning that he would have relinquished governance if not for these responsibilities. The theological foundations of Imam Ali, the Qur'an, and religious democracy aim for a higher purpose: "Indeed, I will place a vicegerent on the earth" (inni jaa'ilun fil-ard khalifa), which points to the educational goal of society—moral and individual development, the elevation of society, and closeness to God. Imam Ali addressed the people who pledged allegiance to him, saying: "Your allegiance to me was not without thought and reflection." This statement implies several things:

- People's participation in politics and governance must be purposeful and conscious.
- The government and the people are responsible for disseminating and institutionalizing knowledge and understanding in society.
- The majority's opinion, if based on ignorance, has no value in governance.

Imam Ali (peace be upon him) advises: "In matters that regulate your cities and uphold what the people before you established, consult extensively with scholars, and engage in dialogue with honest and thoughtful individuals" (Nahj al-Balagha, Letter 51). Law and order were key features of Imam Ali's governance. His adherence to law, justice, and rights is a hallmark of his leadership, and this was also the reason for his isolation and the suffering of his followers. The principles of justice and truth formed the foundation of the laws he sought to implement (Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 126, vol. 2, pp. 389-390). While justice and truth found expression in Imam Ali's actions and those of a few of his sincere companions, their broader implementation in society remained difficult. This is where Imam Ali (peace be upon him) found himself standing alone.

5. The Foundations of Religious Democracy in Nahj al-Balagha

5.1. The Issue of Governance and Justice

The first issue to discuss is the value and necessity of governance. Imam Ali (peace be upon him) frequently

emphasized the need for a strong government. He fought against the ideas of the Kharijites, who initially claimed that with the Qur'an, there was no need for governance. As we know, the Kharijites' slogan was "La hukm illa lillah" ("Judgment belongs only to God"). This slogan was derived from the Qur'an, implying that the authority to legislate comes only from God or those permitted by Him to make laws. However, as Imam Ali pointed out, they misinterpreted this truth, using the phrase to suggest that humans had no right to govern, which was a false interpretation (Motahari, 1993, vol. 16, p. 432). Imam Ali (peace be upon him) responded: "Yes, I also say la hukm illa lillah, but in the sense that the authority to legislate belongs to God. However, they claim that governance and leadership also belong solely to God, which is illogical. God's law must be implemented by humans. People cannot do without a good or bad ruler. Under a government, the believer can work for God, and the disbeliever can enjoy worldly benefits. Through governance, taxes are collected, enemies are fought, roads are made safe, and the weak are protected from the strong, until the righteous are at ease and the wicked are subdued" (Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 40).

Imam Ali, like any devout servant of God, did not seek governance and leadership as worldly positions to fulfill human ambitions. He saw these roles as trivial, less valuable than a worn-out shoe unless used to establish justice and uphold the truth. He would not hesitate to fight to protect governance from falling into the hands of opportunists and wrongdoers. In one instance, Ibn Abbas visited Imam Ali while he was mending his worn-out sandal. Imam Ali asked him: "What is the value of this sandal?" Ibn Abbas replied: "It has no value." Imam Ali responded: "This worn-out sandal is worth more to me than ruling over you unless I can use it to establish justice, restore rights to their owners, or eradicate falsehood" (Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 33).

5.2. The Rights of the Nation and Leadership

In the just social system depicted in Nahj al-Balagha, the people play a central role. All divine messages, the great prophets, sacred books, and reformers were sent to guide humanity, and this guidance is only possible through human autonomy, the preservation of their freedom in decision-making, and their ability to express love and obedience to their religious leaders. In Sermon 207, Imam Ali discusses the reciprocal nature of rights:

"Among the rights of God are those He has established between people. He has made every right reciprocal: each right has a corresponding duty." This implies that every right granted to an individual or group imposes a duty on others, and rights are only binding when others fulfill their duties concerning these rights.

This study, in both theoretical and practical aspects, examines the mutual rights of the people and their leader according to Imam Ali's view. Key concepts include the philosophy of leadership according to Imam Ali, the necessity of leadership, the characteristics of a leader from the perspective of scholars, and the management of Imam Ali. Imam Ali clarifies these mutual rights in several sermons, including Sermon 216, his famous will to Malik al-Ashtar, and his warning to Uthman ibn Hunayf regarding the rights and responsibilities of both leaders and the people. It is clear that the people will not experience goodness unless their governance is just, and governments will not be just unless the people are steadfast and aware of their duties and rights. This shows that it is not enough for a leader to be just, pious, and seeking God's approval. The general populace must also be knowledgeable about their rights and duties, and they must seek justice and fairness.

In one of his letters to a governor, Imam Ali wrote: "The right that the people have over the ruler is that wealth does not change his character, the length of his rule does not make him arrogant, and he does not distance himself from the people. He must remain close to the people" (Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 216).

5.3. *Imamate in Shia Islam and Democracy*

The principle of Imamate in Shia Islam, following the concepts of monotheism, prophethood, and resurrection, is a fundamental theological tenet and is considered one of the core beliefs of Shia doctrine. The aim of this study is to demonstrate that there is a very close and reciprocal relationship between religious democracy and Shia Imamate. However, opposing views exist on this issue, which we will address. One opposing view argues that Shia Imamate is appointive and must be specified by God and the Prophet (peace be upon him). Therefore, someone whose appointment, authority, and governance are not based on consultation and popular choice, but instead are determined from above—by God and the Prophet—suggests inherent exclusivity and authoritarianism in its nature. Consequently, they claim

that Imamate in Shia Islam, due to its appointive nature and its high status, has no connection with democracy, consultation, or popular will. Since the Imam is chosen by God and the Prophet, the people have no role, and thus, according to this view, Imamate has no relation to democracy.

In response, it must be said that the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the Ahl al-Bayt (peace be upon them) established a government and state based on popular support, meaning it was democratic in nature. One strong piece of evidence for this is that when the Prophet (peace be upon him) formed a government in Medina, if the people had not accepted his conduct, principles, and state, he would never have imposed himself on them. Therefore, it can be said that the Prophet gained power and established a government through the support and backing of the people of Medina, and this was his political approach—relying on the people. The second piece of evidence is the five-year government of Imam Ali (peace be upon him), which clearly demonstrates this. After the assassination of Uthman, the people rushed to his door and pledged allegiance to him. Thus, the principle of allegiance was present during both the time of the Prophet and Imam Ali. After the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah, the Prophet (peace be upon him) commanded all to pledge allegiance, relying on the people's will and support. After the people had grown tired of Uthman's government, and after the crises that had reached their peak following the rule of the first and second caliphs, they crowded at the door of Ali (peace be upon him). In his famous sermon, he stated:

"If it were not for the presence of the people and the establishment of proof through the presence of supporters, and if God had not made it obligatory for the scholars not to remain silent in the face of the excess of the oppressors and the hunger of the oppressed, I would have cast the reins of the caliphate on its shoulders and let the last drink from the cup of the first" (Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 3, Shaqshaqiyyah).

If the people had not rushed to him, he would have abandoned governance. If the overwhelming presence of the people, the completion of proof, and God's covenant with the scholars to not remain silent in the face of oppression and injustice did not exist, he would have let go of the caliphate, just as he had stayed away from governance before. Thus, in this matter, the people were central—they flocked to Imam Ali. This theory

strengthens the view that the conduct and tradition of Imam Ali and the Prophet are the best evidence to support this research's argument. It can therefore be said that democracy and popular sovereignty are fundamental in the prophetic and Alawi model of Islam, and without the people, governance has no meaning or value.

Another opposing view is one that looks at Imamate from a purely mystical and spiritual perspective. It argues that the political and social leadership of the Imams and prophets is not their primary aim. According to this view, their goal is spiritual guidance, and political and social leadership is not a priority. Therefore, in this view, the people play no role in managing the political affairs of society. The issue of the political and social leadership of the Ahl al-Bayt is thus considered irrelevant, and Shia Imamate is disconnected from political governance. Proponents of this view argue that if the Prophet and Imam Ali established governments, it was merely coincidental—it was a historical contingency forced upon them due to circumstances. The Prophet (peace be upon him) and Imam Ali (peace be upon him) did not seek to form governments. They claim that the Prophet and Imam Ali were concerned primarily with the people's afterlife, not their worldly affairs. Their focus was spiritual growth and enlightenment, and they left political and social matters to others.

In response to this third view, it must be said that Shia Imamate is entirely compatible with popular sovereignty, though not in the Western or modern democratic sense, where leaders are chosen by the people based solely on majority votes. Shia Imamate is indeed democratic, but not in the sense of Western or American democracy, where governance is purely elective and determined by whoever receives the most votes. Shia Imamate is democratic, but in a different way—never authoritarian or dictatorial. In fact, it can be argued that it represents the highest and best form of popular governance, even though the Imam's leadership is rooted in divine knowledge, as he is a *hujjat Allah* (proof of God) and a paradigm in knowledge, religious understanding, and understanding of the external world. The Imam is a spiritual guide and has a position of spiritual and moral authority; he is a model of spirituality, mysticism, and nearness to God. The Imam is the exemplar of the path to God, and in the domains of knowledge, spirituality, and politics—namely, the

political leadership of society—the Imam stands out as the best model. The Imam serves as a model for the people in three areas: knowledge, spirituality, and politics.

To support the claim that the Imam is fully democratic, the first piece of evidence comes from the Qur'an, which presents humans as God's vicegerents. When God created Adam, He appointed humans as His vicegerents on earth, which is the greatest proof for this idea. The principle of human vicegerency ("I am placing a vicegerent on earth") (Qur'an 2:30) shows that God made humanity His representative on earth. God appointed humans as His vicegerents ("We have made you vicegerents on earth") (Qur'an 10:14), and Imam Ali also emphasizes this in the first sermon of *Nahj al-Balagha*, saying that God appointed humans as His vicegerents. Given that humans are God's vicegerents, how can this vicegerency be compatible with authoritarianism or exclusivity? Vicegerency and authoritarianism are incompatible, as are vicegerency and democracy. This means that governance and political leadership are fundamentally aligned with human vicegerency. In Islam and Shia thought, the Imamate is inherently connected to human vicegerency, meaning that political leadership is aimed at fulfilling the role of humans as God's representatives on earth. The goal of the Shia Imamate is also to make humans *khulafa Allah* (vicegerents of God). The Imam aims to guide all people to become vicegerents of God, or *insan kamil* (the perfect human). What other philosophical or ideological system, whether in the West or the East, holds such a view of humanity? The Imam seeks to make the people vicegerents of God, which is the foundation of prophethood and Imamate.

In *Nahj al-Balagha*, Imam Ali acknowledges the people's insistence as the reason for accepting the caliphate. Likewise, when the Prophet migrated to Medina and was warmly received by the people (the Ansar and the Muhajirun), he took this welcome seriously. The Prophet realized that in Mecca, the conditions were not suitable for forming an Islamic government because the people did not want or support such an endeavor. Without popular support, establishing a government is impossible. Would it have been possible to promote religion under such circumstances? When the Prophet saw that the people of Medina were eager for religious and divine knowledge and that his presence would

impact the community, he took the migration seriously and moved to Medina.

Thus, the second piece of evidence supporting the democratic nature of the prophets and Imams, after the principle of human vicegerency, which is both rational and supported by the Qur'an, as well as by the teachings of Imam Ali and the Ahl al-Bayt, is that leadership in Islam and Shia Imamate is intrinsically linked to popular will.

The Second Principle: The Actualization of Government
According to the status of thubut (ontological status), all twelve Imams of Shia Islam are considered divinely appointed rulers and vicegerents of God, whether they hold external power or not. However, the actualization of government and the establishment of a state without popular sovereignty—that is, without the people's support and selection—would be impossible. This leads us to say that the actualization of government, state, and Imamate depends on being people-centered. In other words, the continuity of governance requires not losing the people's support, and their opinions must be considered, because without the people, governance cannot be imposed upon them. Furthermore, without the people, governance would be meaningless, or if the people lack understanding, what could the government accomplish? Therefore, it is essential to understand that the actualization of governance and the Shia Imamate is contingent upon popular sovereignty. Unless the people make the right choice, it cannot be said that the Imamate and government have been actualized. Additional arguments can be made to support the idea that the Imamate is, in essence, based on consultation, as God commanded the Prophet: "Their affairs are a matter of consultation among them" (Qur'an 42:38), and "Consult them in the matter" (Qur'an 3:159). The Prophet is not only required to consult with prominent figures but with everyone.

5.4. *The Third Principle: Consultation and Shura*

The Shia Imamate, as the vicegerent and successor, cannot exist without being people-centered. It cannot operate without consulting the people, engaging with them (in governance and beyond), and seeking their opinions. Some argue that the verse "When you have made a decision, then rely upon God" (Qur'an 3:159) justifies dictatorship, but this interpretation is never endorsed by the Qur'an. The Qur'an commands

consultation and listening to the people's views, whether right or wrong, before making decisions. Consultation means valuing the opinions of others. The Qur'anic principle of shura requires prophets, divine messengers, and the infallible Imam to consider the people's views. Moreover, the Prophet and the Imams serve as role models for humanity. They set the paradigm for democracy and for making people vicegerents of God. Can they make people vicegerents without consulting them?

The Fourth Principle: The Spiritual and Intellectual Status of the Imam

The Shia Imamate is appointive, not elective. The Prophet's appointment of the Imam in Shia thought does not imply imposition. The appointive nature of the Imam is not coercive—why? Because the Imam serves as a model and paradigm for society. If the Prophet appointed Ali at Ghadir Khumm, it was because he had to introduce his rightful successor, who would serve as a spiritual and intellectual role model. The Prophet's appointment was based on argumentation and reasoning. By introducing intellectual and spiritual leaders to society, the Prophet presented individuals who were undoubtedly the most qualified for selection. The appointive nature of the Ahl al-Bayt (the family of the Prophet) means that the Qur'an, the Prophet, and the Ahl al-Bayt introduced the best and most suitable individuals for the people's selection. Their introduction does not, by any means, imply disregarding the people.

The Shia Imamate and popular sovereignty are deeply connected in a profound and precise manner. In fact, God created the prophets and the Ahl al-Bayt so that people could attain knowledge and benefit from their presence, gaining spiritual blessings and drawing closer to God. Furthermore, the Ahl al-Bayt were social and political leaders who advocated for a government based on popular sovereignty. They came to teach people real democracy and popular governance, to strengthen the people's knowledge (in both intellectual and spiritual matters), and to guide them towards God. In reality, they came to establish democracy among the people. Why? Because justice depends on popular sovereignty. Without democracy, justice cannot be established. Justice is achieved through real democracy, not through injustice or oppression.

6. The Political Theory of Imam Ali (peace be upon him) and Ethics

The political theory of Imam Ali (peace be upon him) is based on morality (the virtues and moral characteristics of the Commander of the Faithful). His ethical principles are rooted in his philosophical and theological views, forming part of a comprehensive political theory—the same vision of the *madina al-fadila* (virtuous city) that contrasts with the ignorant society Imam Ali criticized beautifully in *Nahj al-Balagha*. In a short but meaningful passage from Sermon 2 of *Nahj al-Balagha*, Imam Ali offers over twenty concise and clear statements that precisely depict the state of affairs during the era of ignorance. In the first few sentences, he says: "God sent His Prophet at a time when people were entangled in trials, where the ropes of religion had been severed, the pillars of faith were shaky, fundamental human values were overturned, and the affairs of the people were scattered, with no way to escape the trials and no refuge to turn to." He described a society where Satan's temptations had torn apart the fabric of faith and belief, while disorder pervaded the community, and the flames of division burned everywhere.

In five more sentences, Imam Ali summarizes the results of this chaotic state: "In such an environment, guidance was forgotten, and misguidance and blindness dominated everything. As a result, God was disobeyed, Satan was aided, and faith was left without support." Naturally, to follow the path of God requires both the light of guidance and a clear vision. In a society without these, people inevitably become Satan's army, and sin and transgression engulf the community.

Imam Ali continues with four additional sentences: "In such a state of affairs, the pillars of faith collapsed, its landmarks became obscure, its paths were destroyed, and its highways obliterated." Even the main highways of guidance were lost in such a society. Imam Ali then concludes: "In these circumstances, people became the prisoners of Satan, obeying him and walking the paths he laid out for them." As a result, they followed Satan's ways and drank from his cup.

Imam Ali further describes the consequences: "Through these people, Satan's banners were raised, and his flags waved." In his vivid metaphor, Imam Ali portrays society as being trampled under the feet of trials: "The trials trampled them with their hooves, crushing them with their claws, and continued to stand on their feet." The

people of this society, lost in trials, were wandering aimlessly, ignorant, deceived, and lacking any vision or refuge. Despite living in the best place—near the House of God and the land of great prophets—they were surrounded by the worst of neighbors, whose constant atrocities left them sleepless and tearful.

Imam Ali closes by stating that in this dismal society, the knowledgeable were silenced and powerless to guide or save the people, while the ignorant were honored and ruled over the community. This phrase, "Their sleep was sleeplessness, and their eyeliner was tears," encapsulates the chaos and misery of the era of ignorance, which ended only with the emergence of Islam and the transformative power of the Prophet's guidance.

In this detailed and precise description, Imam Ali offers a vivid portrayal of the pre-Islamic era. His statements highlight the magnitude of the Prophet's mission and the revolutionary impact of Islam. Transforming such a society into the Islamic community of the Prophet's time seemed an impossible task, but only the miraculous power of divine revelation and the comprehensive teachings of Islam could bring about such an extraordinary change.

7. Conclusion

The relationship between the theological foundations of Imam Ali (peace be upon him) and democracy is reflected in his ethics and political approach, which are based on divine ethics. This divine ethical framework is a manifestation of the principle of "adopting the ethics of God" (*takhalluq bi akhlaq Allah*). Based on the results obtained, religious democracy stems from the principles of Islam, and its fundamental values—including adherence to moral values, the prioritization of justice, legalism, public satisfaction, a focus on justice, public participation, and a deep and broad connection between the people and their leaders—are all the fruits of these knowledge-based foundations. Therefore, the theological foundations of Imam Ali (peace be upon him), such as monotheism, prophethood, Imamate, and even resurrection, are intended to elevate people to the status of being God's vicegerents on earth.

As we can observe, Imam Ali thoroughly examined and explained the state of the ignorant society (*jahiliyyah*) before Islam. In contrast to this, the *madina al-fadila* (the virtuous city) of Imam Ali's vision is people-centered and

based on popular sovereignty. In a society of ignorance, the leaders are the elders, chiefs, and powerful individuals, while scholars and knowledgeable individuals are sidelined. However, in an Alawite society, scholars and the people are placed at the center. Therefore, Alawi virtues and ethics are grounded in three foundational principles:

- Philosophy
- Theology
- Mysticism

Thus, Imam Ali's vision of a virtuous society is rooted in his ethics, which are informed by his philosophical, theological, and mystical foundations. These intellectual frameworks transform into moral virtues that shape his character and serve as the foundation for his religious democracy. The philosophical, theological, and mystical principles of Imam Ali, as presented in Nahj al-Balagha and his other sayings, form the basis of both his individual and divine ethics. His philosophy, theological monotheism, and mystical monotheism become the foundation for divine ethics, which in turn serve as the foundation for individual morality. All of these combine to form the basis for social ethics, which are essential in discussing religious democracy. Without attention to these ethical foundations—divine, individual, and social—it is impossible to speak of religious democracy. If divine ethics are absent, meaning if a person does not experience or achieve moral interaction with God and does not reach that level, prophethood cannot extend to individual and social ethics.

Only someone who considers God their supreme ruler can make the people the leaders, the foundation, and the vicegerents of God. This means that the philosophy, theology, and mysticism of Imam Ali all revolve around making God the supreme ruler. Without God as their supreme ruler, a person cannot become a ruler themselves, even on an individual level. In his famous sermon to Hammam, Imam Ali discusses individual ethics, which in themselves embody a form of democracy. In his letter to Malik al-Ashtar, he discusses social ethics, advising against treating people like prey and against exploitation and deception. Imam Ali critiques the Umayyads and Abbasids, who had enslaved and exploited the people, using public wealth for their own benefit while outwardly pretending to care for the people, much like historical dictators such as Pharaoh and Nimrod, who acted similarly. They would outwardly

show affection for the people but in practice had enslaved them.

Therefore, Imam Ali emphasizes that your foundation should be the people. Do not place any barriers between yourself and the people. The essence of his message is to make the people the leaders and ensure that they are your supporters. The goal of the prophets and infallible Imams was always popular sovereignty, not through force, oppression, or intimidation, but by preserving people's dignity and free will.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

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Transparency Statement

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