Examination of Political Anti-Values According to the Nahj al-Balaghah

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ABSTRACT
Islam is a religion with a value system; it fights against deviant values and values that move away from human dignity, and it has established a system of divine and human values. Ali ibn Abu Talib is considered the greatest exegete of the Quran and religion. His life and very being is interfused with the teachings of the Quran. Considering this as well as the fact that the teachings of Ali are the most expressive, reliable, and objective teachings about religion and life in general and that the Nahj al-Balaghah is the most important document on the thought of Ali, the present research examines negative values, or anti-values, in politics according to the Nahj al-Balaghah. First, the view of Ali on politics is investigated and then the negative political values of oppression and hypocrisy, which have greatest emphasis in the Nahj al-Balaghah, are examined. This paper does not claim to discuss all political anti-values presented in the Nahj al-Balaghah; rather, the most important issues on the topic are presented as main headings and secondary issues are discussed where appropriate.

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INTRODUCTION
Destruction of values and propensity toward negative values are among the afflictions that may plague any political system. The tendency of politicians and government officials toward despotism and political hypocrisy engenders oppression against their peoples. As a great exegete of the Quran, numerous times in his great legacy, the Nahj al-Balaghah [1], Ali rejected anti-values and emphasised the importance of values in all areas of human life including political, social, cultural, and behavioural areas. In his mighty heritage, Ali has handed down a set of guidelines for formation of exalted societies. This paper seeks to answer the following questions using the Nahj al-Balaghah:
1. What is the viewpoint of Ali about politics?
2. According to Imam Ali, what is political oppression and what types of this anti-value can be found in politicians? Furthermore, what are the effects that might be produced by an oppressive political system?
3. In the opinion of Ali, how can a political hypocrite be identified?

Politics according to Imam Ali:
The Imam’s political and governmental views are mostly presented in the Nahj al-Balaghah. These range from personal discussions and letters written to various personages to public warnings, all of which point to the endeavours of the Imam in governing the state. The main approach in the political thought of Ali is ‘politics as it should be’. This type of political approach is in fact the most basic and important spearhead for founding a divine-human government. Not being acquiescent to dominant rules and criteria in politics when explicating political principles and provisions in Islam, Ali went to extensive pains to establish the optimal state of affairs. For him, the optimal state is politics as it should be, not as it is. His criticism of corrupt and false governments while also considering their Islamic demeanour shows that their political methods were not as they should have been. Some values were employed for the benefit of rulers and politicians whereas the rulers and politicians should have dedicated themselves and their resources to values. The ‘politics as it should be’ approach is Ali’s primary method, which shows that the foremost criteria in his political methodology are truth and righteousness according to the rules of Islam and the Quran [2, 3]. In the thought of Ali, politics and power have inherent value. He does not desire to rule to achieve power, but rather for revival of truth, realisation of divine values,
and survival of integrity and purity [4, 5]. He is not willing to base his governance on deception since Islamic laws prevent him from doing so. As he has said, ‘If deception were not abominable, I would be the most devious of people [6].

In the view of Ali, politics and rule are not a purpose, but a means. Rulership, as an office or appointment, has no value from his perspective. It is, in his words, of less worth than the mucus of a goat’s nose (Ibid, sermon 3), a bone from a pig in the hands of a leper (Ibid, saying 236), a chewed leaf in the mouth of a grasshopper (Ibid, sermon 224), and a worn-out shoe (Ibid, sermon 33). In the opinion of Ali, the value of rulership lies in it being a means to serve God and His servants as well as to uphold truth and goodness and to negate falsehood and evil. Power is not synonymous with dominance, superiority, selfishness, imperiousness, or acquisition of wealth [7].

He agrees that a government or political system is a crucial necessity for any society. It is of such importance that Ali even considers unfair and unrighteous governance to be better than anarchy or lack of government (Nahj al-Balaghah, sermon 40). Thus, formation of government and establishment of an ordered system is numbered among the most essential needs of human beings. The manner in which the Imam dealt with the anti-government and anti-law thought of the Khawarij is the best example for explicating the status of law-based government and rulership. In the political thought of Imam Ali (a), government has a divine but also people-oriented nature. The legitimacy of the Islamic government derives from God, but it is the people who must accept it. The Imam of truth and righteousness is oriented toward God and also looks upon the people. In an Islamic government, there is no distance between the righteous leader and the people. A righteous government can only successfully exercise power and implement its programmes when it has the benefit of divine legitimacy and public acceptance [8]. Examination of the Nahj al-Balaghah demonstrates that anti-values such as oppression and hypocrisy are rejected in the political thought of Imam Ali (a). Each of these anti-values is explained in further detail below.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Political Oppression:

Oppression is a negative value behaviour against which noble Ali warned his officials in various ways. As a result, many cases of such warnings may be found in the Nahj al-Balaghah [9]. Two definitions have been cited for oppression (zulm) in Islam.
1. Violation of the Right [10]: Ascribing partners to God, named as zulm ‘azim (The Holy Quran 31:13) or the great sin, is a violation of the boundaries of the right [11].
2. Putting something in the Wrong Place [12]: A popular saying in this regard is, ‘One who makes a wolf the shepherd of a flock has oppressed [13].

Noble Ali has stated, ‘A wise person is one who places everything in its correct place (Nahj al-Balaghah, saying 235). In a government system, if an unwise official is appointed, the official will either develop flawed plans or incorrectly implement sound programmes. In other words, the work deviates from the correct path, making right seem false and false seem right [14].

Types of Political Oppression:

The dimensions and scope of oppression are very broad. We continuously encounter cases of oppression that have both visible and hidden signs. Political oppression in a government does not only refer to unfair execution of the oppressed. As previously indicated, oppression also means placing something where it should not be. In a political system, whatever is not placed correctly is considered oppression. An inappropriate decision, making decisions without council, and unsuitable appointments may all be considered cases of political oppression. The following are varieties of oppression in political systems that might be performed by a ruler or government officials and representatives. Ali struggled against these manifestations of oppression in both word and deed.

Violence:

In the philosophy of Ali, wise and rational discourse is the means to solving problems and disputes. Ali lived in a time when the response to insult or opposition was force and violence and it was difficult for the people to imagine a person who could prevent violence through reason and peaceful action. The people of Arabia had only seen this behaviour in their prophet. However, as long as there was a peaceful solution, Ali would not resort to violence and war. He knew that cold-heartedness and brutality distanced the people from government officials [15, 16], just as God said to Prophet Muhammad, ‘and had you been harsh and hard-hearted, surely they would have scattered from around you (The Holy Quran 3:159). Ali strongly advised kindness and friendly behaviour lest his officials behave aggressively or savagely with the people. When Ali appointed ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Abbas as governor of Basra, he advised ‘Abdullah about management ethics thus: ‘Meet people with a welcoming face in private and public audiences and when making judgements. Also, avoid
anger... (Nahj al-Balaghah, letter 76). In short, avoiding aggressive behaviour in relation to the people brings their hearts closer to the government resulting in greater government stability.

Unjust Bloodshed:

There is no sort of oppression in Islam greater than shedding the blood of the innocent. Those who believe that they can reinforce their power base by murdering innocents whose only crime is opposition are greatly mistaken. Nothing corrupts and debilitates governments as much as shedding the blood of innocents [17]. In the belief of Imam Ali, the government does not have the right to put people to death under the pretext of consolidating power. Even where a political leader causes the death of an innocent citizen, the death must be avenged. The Imam counselled Malik Ashtar thus: 'You should avoid shedding blood without justification, because nothing is more inviting of Divine retribution, greater in (evil) consequence, and more effective in the decline of prosperity and cutting short of life than the shedding of blood without justification. On the Day of Judgement, Allah the Glorified shall commence giving His judgement among the people with the cases of bloodshed committed by them. Therefore, do not strengthen your authority by shedding prohibited blood because this will weaken and diminish authority, if not destroy it or shift it to others. You cannot offer any excuse before Allah or before me for wilful killing because the question must arise of the existence of revenge in it. If you are involved in it by error...then haughtiness of your authority should not prevent you from paying the blood price to the heirs of the killed person (Nahj al-Balaghah, letter 53).

Despite his phenomenal courage and strength, Ali did not easily take to the sword or stain his hands with blood. When rational debate with the opposition was unsuccessful and war was the only resort, he would tell his followers on the battlefield, 'Do not fight them unless they initiate the fighting (Ibid, letter 14).

Absence of a Meritocratic System:

Assigning persons for positions for which they are not competent and qualified is another form of oppression in political systems. When imprudent or power-hungry persons take on a government office, their thoughtlessness and bad planning damages the government and leads to the corruption and downfall of the state [18]. As stated by Ali, 'Entrusting affairs to inferior persons and those lacking in effort results in the deterioration of governments [19]. In summary, a reversal of the roles of positive and negative values in the political arena can only culminate in the fall of the government. If the values in a country are inverted even in one area, there will be widespread repercussions in all other areas, leading to the downfall of the government. In his first speech after assuming office, Imam Ali (a) revived meritocratic values, which had been all but destroyed. He described this trend as follows. 'Those who had a history in Islam and had withdrawn from the society will rise to work and those who have advanced unjustly will be cast back (Nahj al-Balaghah, sermon 16). In another speech, Ali spoke of a degeneration in values in the near future, indicating the absence of appointment through merit: 'A time will come for people when high positions will be given only to those who defame others, when only immoral people will be liked, and when only the just will be regarded as weak. People will regard charity as a loss and consideration for kinship as a favour (Ibid, saying 102)'.

Tyranny:

There are two types of tyranny.

Tyranny in Implementing Personal Opinions:

If a ruler or government representative acts autonomously in political and administrative decisions due to their position of leadership or as a result of being a senior figure, that person has oppressed and betrayed the people [20]. It is Ali’s belief that if officials, especially the ruler, of a nation act without consulting others causing loss of opportunity and inferior performance, they are oppressing and betraying the people (Nahj al-Balaghah, letter 53). Advisors and consultants should not only include official government representatives and politicians but also the people otherwise there would be no need for Ali to mention this. Every government has its own political advisors, and there would be no need for Ali to advise political leaders to consult with the people and listen to their bitter words of truth if he were referring to government advisors (Ibid). He also advised the people not to withhold the truth or their advice from their leaders (Ibid, sermon 216). According to the Imam, the presence of advisors alongside the political elite is not for the purpose of reinforcing power or attracting people, but rather for finding correct methods of governance, avoiding mistakes, and preventing loss of opportunities and competent personnel [21, 22].

Tyranny in Selecting Rulers and Politicians:

This type of tyranny signifies that allegiance to the leader and selection of government officials are not freely carried out by the people and that most of the people are reluctant or forced to accept. This is a type of oppression against the people since governance belongs to the people. No one should consider governance their personal right and use it to oppress the nation. Ali desired free choice and allegiance by the people (not
governance through force). He believed that the allegiance that the majority of the people pledged to him was neither due to fear of a totalitarian power nor for achieving material gain [23, 24].

Consequences of an Oppressive System:
Oppression in a political system, or even smaller groups, has repercussions for the oppressor. Not only will it entail severe divine punishment in the hereafter, but devastating effects in this world as well. In accordance with the words of Ali, the effects of oppressive systems may be outlined as follows.

Making Permissible what God has Forbidden:
A great wrong that an Islamic government can inflict against its nation is to consider permissible what God has forbidden. By doing so, theoretical and practical values become anti-values, and both the nation and the government suffer the consequences. The cause of tendencies for this type of oppression may be carnal desires, as a result of which a person or government may tread over any and all religious laws (Nahj al-Balaghah, sermon 9).

Debilitation of Social Obligations and Conventions:
Humans as social creatures are restricted by a series of human and social conventions. As adherence to these conventions weakens, the most basic foundations for survival of a society are lost. When social conventions are broken, schisms disunite the society resulting in insecurity (Ibid). Addressing Malik Ashtar, Ali has said, ‘If you conclude an agreement between yourself and your enemy or enter into a pledge with him then fulfill your agreement and discharge your pledge faithfully. Shield with your life whatever you have pledged...
(Ibid, sermon 53).

Regret of both Religious and Secular Persons:
Ali regards oppression influential in the minds and spirits of the people. According to him, it makes religious people feel depression and despair that their religion will ever advance. However, it is not only religious people who feel regret. Materialistic individuals do not feel a sense of satisfaction and security either since oppression strips the whole society of peace and security (Ibid, sermon 98). The fundamental that is able to protect the balance in society and keep relatively everyone satisfied is justice. Oppression is not even able to keep oppressors and those who benefit from oppression in a state of peace and satisfaction, let alone the oppressed and the downtrodden. Oppression is a byway that cannot even lead the oppressor to a destination [25].

Emergence of Slave-Master Relationships in the Government:
When a political system becomes oppressive, the relationship of the people with the government becomes that of slaves and their masters. In the view of the people, such a government is no longer the greatest sanctuary and protector of values. When the people see themselves in thrall to their government, they bear it only with humiliation and ignominy. This serfdom has two important consequences for the incumbent regime.

a. According to Ali, if the thraldom of the people is due to fear of the government, whenever the people perceive the supervision of the administration, they are servile. Where supervision is lacking, they mount an opposition or at least disparage the government. In a manner of speaking, they are embers in the ashes awaiting an opportunity to erupt. The thraldom of the people is to the detriment of the ruling administration since it will be destroyed eventually by such people (Nahj al-Balaghah, sermon 98).

b. If being and remaining slaves becomes part of their very beings, such that the people do not even bat an eye or feel dissatisfied with the rule of despots, the result would be that all their talents and genius will extinguished, and they will suffer apathy, despair, and thoughtlessness. This situation is not in the interests of the regime since a government can only be successful when the people have the power of thought and genius with which to promote development of the society. Even though ignorant people lengthen the duration of oppressive regimes, it is possible for such governments to be subjugated by other oppressive rulers, leaving no trace of the former government (Ibid).

Loss of Divine Blessings:
As stated by Imam Ali, alteration of blessings is one of the severe divine punishments in this world for oppressors. ‘Nothing is more inductive of the reversal of Allah’s bounty or for the hastening of His retribution than continuance in oppression (Nahj al-Balaghah, letter 53).

Retardation:
Noble Ali considers oppression as the most important factor in the underdevelopment of nations since oppression deviates matters from their original course and creates division in the society. First, oppression leaves no room for thought, teaching, learning, and contemplation with regard to development. If the society’s elite have fallen astray and oppress others, they shall drag the society with them. In this way, the effect of their
thought and actions on the retardation of the society is doubled [26]. Second, oppression makes the nation destitute leading to feelings of inferiority, lack of confidence, and diminishment of thought, all of which contribute to further retardation. Third, when oppression becomes common among political leaders of a society, despairing from justice, the nation tends toward deception, exploitation, crime, weak public ethics, and disunity. The result is spiritual and moral retardation and instability in the government and political system [27].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Political Hypocrisy:

Hypocrites have been likened to rats. They make two openings to their dens, one for normal usage and another as an escape route that is used when they sense danger [28, 29]. Hypocrites are the same. They have a door by which they enter Islam and another secret door to use when they feel threatened. Hypocrisy is a kind of hidden disbelief and hypocrites are disbelievers that hide their unbelief. A hypocrite is a person whose thought says one thing and words and deeds say another [30]. Hypocrisy includes any kind of external or internal duality, and a common example of it is hypocrisy in beliefs. False friendship, hypocrisy in religious duties, and pretense in beliefs are some examples of hypocrisy. If such actions are aimed at achieving political leadership and power, it is entitled ‘political hypocrisy’.

Signs of Political Hypocrisy:

As per the sayings of Ali, some signs of political hypocrisy are as follows.

Violation of Promises:

When an obligation is conferred on and accepted by an agent or politician of an Islamic government and the responsible person violates the commitment, performing the work incompletely or perfunctorily, this agent is hiding a type of hypocrisy. This hypocrisy will gradually manifest itself in a more tangible manner [31].

Breach of Trust:

In accordance with pledges made to the government by government representatives, the representatives are depositaries of a trust. Therefore, any negligence or dereliction of duty is a kind of betrayal. Noble Ali considers persons who embezzle public funds to be traitors (Nahj al-Balaghah, letters 20 and 41). He also considers betrayal of the people to be the worst type of betrayal (Ibid, letter 26). When a person enters the world of hypocrisy, they cannot even have true companions in their own dominion. That is why they continuously search for friends across the borders of their country to seek refuge in them when they reach a dead end. Such persons have no qualms against betrayal or breach of trust against their own society in order to open a place for themselves across borders. Referring to such tricks, Ali has stated, ‘Hypocrites have a key to every door and a lamp for every night (Ibid, sermon 194). He has also stated, “Betrayal is the basis of hypocrisy” [32]. If a person commits treason, they must suffer the stigma forever. In fact, besides corporeal punishment and confiscation of property gathered through treason, the traitor must be identified as such before the public so the people know of the betrayal (Nahj al-Balaghah, letter 53).

Flattery:

Flattery, which is a sign of political hypocrisy, is false expression of adoration and friendship. This demonstration of friendship manifests itself where political status is at issue. However, behind the scenes, there is nothing but vilification and gossip. Finding the way to insinuate themselves into political favour by taking advantage of the weaknesses of politicians, sycophants utilise misplaced praise and flattery as snares to capture their prey. Ali speaks of this characteristic as well where he says, ‘They change into many colours, and adopt various ways. They support you with all sorts of supports, and lay in waiting for you at every lookout... They eulogise each other and expect reward from each other (Ibid, sermon 194). When one of the hypocritical Khawarij began immorally praising Ali, the Imam cut off his words saying, ‘I am below what you express and above what you feel in your heart (Ibid, saying 83). Flattery is a disguised strike by politicians, especially the elite, upon the body of the government. Imam Ali advised Malik Ashtar, ‘More preferable among them for you should be those who openly speak bitter truths before you... Educate them, so that they should not praise you or please you by reason of an action you did not perform, because an excess of praise produces pride and drives you near haughtiness (Ibid, sermon 53).

Disclosure of the Shortcomings of others:

When hypocrites feign friendship with someone through flattery and deceive, they may discover some secrets and weaknesses. These false friends who cannot keep secrets remember everything they see and hear to use when the opportunity arises. Regarding this, Ali has said, ‘the friendship of a person with a great deal of hypocrisy is not clear [33].
Fickleness:

Hypocrites are always hesitant throughout their lives. Stability and consistency cannot be found in their thought, belief, or behaviour so they are never committed to a single ideology. This is because they seek to use everything to their advantage and remain mysterious with their chameleonic behaviour. As stated by Ali, ‘A habit of hypocrites is transformation in behaviour (Ibid, hadith 9983). In a sermon, he declared, ‘They change into many colours, and adopt various ways (Nahj al-Balaghah, sermon 194).

Pretence:

Showing oneself to be perfect and free of flaws is a sign of hypocrisy. Also, words that are not backed by deeds can be considered a type of pretence. In Islamic teachings, it is always asked, ‘Why say something you do not act upon?’ (The Holy Quran 61: 2-3). In governmental systems, pretence with the aim of becoming close to the centre of power is a political pathology. The pretence of the political elite coupled with exploitation of the ignorance of the public leads to many problems in the governmental system. By refusing to express truths, inventing facts, and making a display of conservativeness, they evade the truth and conceal their opinions. In order to protect their success, the pretentious elite parade false devotion and synchronise themselves with the desires and ideas of their leaders. Thus, instead of preventing wrongful actions, they encourage leaders to do wrong [34]. In this regard, Ali has said, ‘The hearts of hypocrites are sick while their appearances are decorous. Their descriptions are medicine and their words are cures; however, their deeds are maladies without remedy. They speak, but in speaking cause doubt and error; they describe, but in describing they deceive. At first, they make the path seem easy, but then guide to dead ends when complications are encountered (Nahj al-Balaghah, sermon 194).

Conclusion:

Continuously drawing on the teachings of revelation and traditions of the Prophet (s), Ali has illustrated ‘values’ by confirming and emphasising specific methods of speech and behaviour. He has also clarified ‘anti-values’ by proscribing and rebutting other words and deeds. In political and governmental issues, Ali has revealed the path for rulers, government agents, officials, and all powerful personages by expressing what should and should not be done. In the view of the Imam, all values in the areas of governance and politics are oriented toward accomplishment of the commandments of God, public service, and resolution of the needs of the people. According to the teachings of the Nahj al-Balaghah, service to the people is not just a value but rather a divine responsibility that legitimises the ruling authority when upheld. In the political school of Ali, those in power must know that if they lean toward anti-values and present wrong as right, the downfall of their power and rule at the hands of ordinary citizens is certain. They shall also lose their importance, reputation, and credibility. Some of these transgressions include oppression and hypocrisy, which are the roots of most wrongs. Those who are consumed with desire for power and status are willing to do anything to protect their positions. Ultimately, they are forced to conceal themselves behind the veil of hypocrisy and commit all kinds of oppression. Such persons may resort to the most overt forms of oppression, like murder and massacre, as well as the most subtle, including immoderation and unsuitable appointment of officials.

REFERENCES

[1] The Nahj al-Balaghah is one of the most reliable and valuable historical and narrative books for Muslims. It is called the brother of the Quran.


