

THE MAJORITY RULE PRINCIPLE IN POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND DECISION-MAKING: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

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Prologue

One of the most complex political issues in today's world politics is ethnicity. As nations struggle for harmonious political system, ethnic politics seem bothering. In fact developed nations face internal ethnic-based conflicts. A comprehensive method is needed as ethnic diversity of a variety of societies is increasingly becoming prominent in world politics. The post-cold war era is an era where ethnic nationalism has become the major source of intrasocietal conflicts.

In Muslim political thought, this area of study has yet to be academically evaluated from the Quranic point of view, as Muslim political thinkers have adopted the Western systems in political administration. In fact a vast number of Muslim thinkers opine that majority rule principle originated from the Western democratic systems. Contrary to this assertion however, the two most authentic sources of Islam - the Qur'an and the Sunnah - made direct reference to the principle of majority rule. The four rightly guided Caliphs also ruled according to this principle.

Nonetheless, differences of opinion among governmental bodies, ethnic groups and individuals in any nation or society, more often than not, preclude unanimity in decision-making, particularly in the Muslim world. Although motives of decision-makers and societal leaders in acting one way or another are far too complex, experience suggests two reasons as the primary causes for the lack of unanimity in collective decision-making and mutual unity among leaders. One of these reasons is

the general selfish tendency of man. And the other is the diverse and varying perceptions towards the common good.

This is so because the political management in any society involves the adjustment of conflicting interests and opposing claims of man's selfishness that would assert his viewpoint and personal interest in any process of policy-making. In fact in today's political environment respect for ethical goals of life do not seem to be the rule of politics but the exception.

In Islamic political thought, at least on the theoretical level, the Divine Will (The *Shari'ah*) makes respect for moral and ethical goals on the part of Muslim individuals as well as on all governmental bodies a matter of both constitutional and religious obligation. It would nonetheless be a staid mistake to assume that the moral ideals of the Divine Will could prevail over selfish tendencies of man at all times.

The issue of majority rule from the Islamic perspective has its roots in early Islamic political thought. Immediately after the demise of Prophet Muhammad, his companions gathered to decide his successor in the political leadership of the society. The result was "majority rules".

This paper argues that in any modern society the largest ethnic group must rule politically, in other words majority rule principle should be exercised in order to maintain social, political and religious stability. The paper also insinuates that disputes among leaders and ethnic groups of any given nation can be resolved through the use of the "majority rules principle". With the full implementation of this principle, conflicts between tribes and ethnic groups, sometimes between diverse cultures and belief systems particularly in modern Muslim nations, could be facilitated.

The Emergence of The Principle of Majority Rule in Early Islamic Political System

The majority rule principle is rooted in the history of Islamic political thought. Immediately upon the sad news that Prophet Muhammad

had passed away, the two major groups of the companions, *al-Ansar* and *al-Muhajirun*, headed for separate meetings to select their future leader. The *Muhajirun* met in the mosque while the *Ansar* met in the hall of *Saqifah bani Sa'idah*. There were the two meetings were later merged after the prominent *Muhajirun* leaders decided to join the *Ansar* in *Saqifah*. Two groups but the concern was one - the appointment of the political successor of the Prophet.

In this meeting Abu Bakr, 'Umar and Abu 'Ubaidah represented the *Muhajirun* whilst Khabab bin Mundhir, Bashir bin Nu'man, Zaid bin Thabit were sitting for the *Ansar*. The *Ansar* were of the opinion that since they had sacrificed for Islam and rendered their help during the thuggish period, they deserve to have the leader appointed from amongst themselves. As much as this is a valid and logic argument, the *Muhajirun* rejected the proposal on the ground that the Quraishes are the biggest tribe among Arab tribes and subsequently the leader to be appointed has to emerge from them. Abu Bakr argued that: "We acknowledge the sacrifices of the *Ansar* for Islam, you really deserve to have a caliph from amongst yourselves but Arabs will not agree on caliph other than a person from the Quraish".¹

The *Ansar* then proposed to have two caliphs, one from Quraish and another from *Ansar*. "Let there be two leaders", said Khabab bin al-Mundhir. But the *Muhajirun* also turned down this suggestion. Umar Ibn al-Khatib, in rejecting Khabab's suggestion reminded the meeting the impossibility of appointing two chief executives. "This is not possible at all, for there will be great confusion" said Umar. But Khabab disagreed with him and the two exchanged broiled debate on the issue.

At this juncture Abu Bakr cited an authentic *hadith*; (prophetic tradition) which confirms the leadership of this *Ummah* belongs to the Quraish tribe.² Upon hearing this, the *Ansar* leaders warped down, in a show of clear obedience to the authority of the *hadith* cited by Abu Bakr.

1 Al-Hafidh Ibn Kathir, *Al-Bidayah wa al-Nihayah*, Bairut, Muasasat al-Risalah, 1976, vol.3, p.308.

2 Ibid.

Bashir bin Nu'man, a member of the *Ansari* delegation, stood up to urge the *Ansar* to accept the leadership of the Quraish. "Prophet Muhammad belonged to the Quraish tribe, and they have preference over others, all Arabs would agree upon them" said Bashir. He further added that the leader must come from Quraish for the *Ansar* do not want a dispute with the *Muhajirun* on a matter related to the Ummatic leadership. He also urged the *Ansar* to remain as helpers. Another *Ansari*, delegate, Zaid bin Thabit, supported Bashir's view, "The caliph should be from amongst *Muhajirun*, we Medinise were helpers of the Prophet and would remain helpers of his caliph as well", urged Zaid.

The aforementioned historical fact was the first political test of the *Ummah*. Since Prophet Muhammad did not nominate a successor the tribalistic Arab nation which were temporarily united under the umbrella of Islam had to find political solution to the crisis. The Quraish were not only the majority ethnic group among other groups such as the Aws and Khazraj, they were also the most notable group, and that is the main reason the political leadership was bestowed upon them. The *hadith* cited by Abu Bakr al-Sidiq is an authentic *hadith* narrated by Bukhari and Muslim - the two authentic books of source of knowledge after the Quran in Islam. It should not be however taken in its literal meaning, as Prophet Muhammad knew very well that Quraish would not always be the majority ethnic group among Muslim nations. The socio-political interpretation of this *hadith* would be any majority ethnic group be it Irish, Malay or Quraish should be given the priority in leading that particular nation. Put differently, the *hadith* does not confine leadership to Quraish rather it is about majority status.

The Quranic View

A related inquiry would be that whether the right to rule a society belongs to the majority group or the minority by virtue of right (*Haq*) in Islamic political thought?

The Quran elucidates that decisions of the majority does not necessary imply rightness. It is always possible that the majority, however large and even well-intentioned, on occasions makes mistakes, and conversely,

minority, in spite of its being a minority, can be right. Human limitations could not be however taken as the parameters in this case as the minority also can make mistakes. Nevertheless, it is difficult to see what alternative there could be for the decision-makers. Who is to establish, whether the majority or minority is right? Whose opinions should prevail? One might suggest that the final verdict should rest with the executive, but granting such an absolute power to any person may be seen as against the principle of mutual consultations, *al-Shura*".

There are several Quranic verses on the principle of majority rule. It is interesting to note that the Quran has evaluated the issue from two perspectives, it gaped at the minority and their powers over the disunited majority, at the same time the Quran views that for the maintenance of stability in any society or social structure majority group has to make the final political decisions. In *Surah al-A'raf* the Quran reminds Muslims to reflect or recall their past when they were quantitatively inferior to other groups and how Allah increased them in number making them the majority group.³

Contrary to this verse the Quran observes that minority with the right qualities could play better role against misguide majority. For instance we read in the Quran the story of Jalut (Goliath) and Talut that if the minority have confidence in God they could annihilate the majority.⁴ In the same *Surah* the Quran points out that it is the quality of the group that matters and not the quantity. The Quran particularly mentions the quality of endurance (*al-sabr*), to the extent that only twenty assiduous believers could obliterate two hundred infidels.⁵

In *Surah al-Anfal* one finds an important *ayat* in which Allah reminds Muslims of their past as they were weak in all aspects of life and how the almighty provided them with assets (*rizq*) and quality of life with

3 Surah al-A'raf Verse 87.

4 Surah al-Baqarah Verse 249.

5 Surah al-Baqarah Verse 64.

goodness (*tayibat*).⁶ However the Quran acknowledges that if the majority does not manage the goodness bestowed to them in the right mode they may lose it out.⁷

The Hadithic Outlook

The *hadith* in numerous occasions establishes standard procedures for decision-making and political unity to prevent possible divisionalism and disunity resulting from the conflicting opinions, which could lead nations to anarchy and chaos. Prophet Muhammad himself set these standard procedures. Most of the *ahadith* on the principle of majority rule emphasize the religious obligation of being on the side of the majority group, or the *Jama'ah*. For instance the *Hadith* which means: "Follow the mainstream"⁸ came in a form of order which obligates Muslims to be with the majority. And in another occasion the Prophet stated that: which carries the meaning that: "It is your duty to stand by the bigger group".⁹ Another *Hadith* states to the effect that: "The hand of almighty rests with the majority".¹⁰ These *Ahadith* provide us with constitutional basis in forming an opinion upon unanimous policy-making. The procedures set out by the prophet are that one has to follow the mainstream in the affairs affecting the society. Individualism or separatist tendencies are not therefore part of the Islamic political system.

Juristic Theories On The Principle of Majority Rule

Muslims jurists ruled that the majority principle should be the basis of decision-making. In his legal opinion as to how the attendants of a

6 Surah al-Anfal Verse 26.

7 Surah al-Rum Verse 8.

8 Muhammad Asad, *The Principles of State and Government in Islam*, Gibraltar, Dar al-Andalus, 1980, p. 50.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

mosque may select the *Imam* to lead the prayers, al-Mawardi argues: that "In case the attendants of a given mosque were divided on who should be the *Imam*, the majority should prevail".¹¹ Muslim jurists also agreed to regard the majority decisions as one of their fundamental (*usul*) in decision-making. They maintained that a majority should constitute the basis for juristic (legal) decisions when no other evidence was available.¹²

Imam al-Ghazali in his elaboration as to how the ruling body (*Ahl al-Hal Wa al-Aqd*) may elect chief executive or head of government writes: "In case they were divided, about who should be the chief executive, it is an obligation that the majority prevails".¹³ Cognizantly speaking, the idea of consultation (*al-Shura*) is meaningless if the majority does not prevail. The obligation of consultation upon the Muslim societies requires the adherence to the majority opinions.¹⁴

Ibn Khaldun was also among the Muslim thinkers who have enucleated this concept. This fourteenth-century historical-sociological and political thinker had elucidated how particular ethnic group accruals and loses majority status. According to him there are three ways of procuring or forming majority. Out of blood ties (*Hilf al-Dam*), political and social alliance (*Hilf al-Siyasi wa al-Ijtima'i*) and clientship (*Hilf al-wala*). Majority status derived from blood ties is the most ruinous of the three for it is based upon tribal unity or one single ethnic group which could lead to strong affection, subsequently results political destruction. That signifies if the conflict is from within is more disparaging than otherwise. The other two types of majority status denote attachment of one group to another group for ideal and noble reasons. It can be political, economical or

11 Muhammad al-Rayyis, *Al-Nazariyyah al-Siyyasah al-Islamiyyah*, Cairo Dyr al-Macarif, 1969, P. 208. See also Muhammad al-Khudari, "Nizam al-Hukm Fi cAhad al-Rashidin in *Muhadarah Tarikh al-Umam al-Islamiyyah*, Dyr al-Ictism, Cairo, 1977, p. 12.

12 Ali Ibn Muhammad al-Mawardi, *Al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyyah Wa al-Wilayah al-Diniyyah*, Matbacah Mustafa al-Halabi, Cairo, 1973, p. 102.

13 Al-Rayyis, *Al-Nazariyyah al-Siyyasah*, op.cit., p. 208.

14 Abd al-Qadir al-cAwdah, *Al-Islam WA Awdacuna al-Siyasiyyah*, Cairo, Dyr al-Mukhtar al-Islami, 1969, pp. 175- 176.

religious relations, such as political coalition, intermarriage or business partnership.

Ibn Khaldun also highlighted the reasons in which particular ethnic community may lose its majority status. Ibn Khaldun raised the issue of Arab rulership in the history of the Muslim Ummah. The power of the Arabs was weakened, as other ethnic groups held higher ranks in the government and in other influential institutions. Indulgence of the Arab community into luxurious life style was another reason resulted the climb of non-Arabs into the ladders of political powers.