

THE ISLAMIC GOVERNMENTS CONFRONTING CRITICISM¹

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Abstract

One of the significant conditions of the progress of a democratic society is the clash of ideas for surveying them from different aspects, which is the result of a free space, and is called as criticism. Since beside the western democratic countries, there are a few countries within the Islamic world, especially in the Middle East such as Iran, who, having Islam, try to perform democracy as well, it is necessary for them to know the method of establishing the culture of criticism as one of its basic principles. This article is to speak about the essence, necessities, and conditions of criticism. The direct relation between the durability of the governments and the peoples' right to criticize the governments' functions is another issue that is discussed in this article. Applying the theoretical and Islamic sources proves that both Shi'ite and Sunni sects can potentially support governmental criticism. The referencing style of this research is based on the Chicago style.

Keywords: Criticism, Islam, Government, Freedom

Introduction

This article speaks about the essence of criticism and its necessities, first in a democratic system in general, and then in an Islamic one. Since, there are a few countries in the modern era, within the Islamic world that call themselves as democratic, it is necessary to examine the possibility of criticism in those countries, as one of the most significant elements of democracy. Discussing on the red lines in criticism, along with its conditions forms the other parts of the article. Most important of all is historical facts of the precedence of criticism in the early Islamic period, accepted by both Shi'its and Sunnis, which enable the modern Muslims to embark on criticism, without any doubt. Despite a historical based fear of the

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acceptance of criticism in Muslim and especially Middle-Eastern countries that is discussed in the concluding part, a few reasons are shown there as the benefits of criticism both for governments and people. Meanwhile, the referencing style of this article is according to Chicago one.

The Essence of Criticism

One of the essential conditions for flourishing every society is the existence of a free environment for ideas clash. As far as a thought cannot find an opportunity to be appeared, and consequently become able to confront its opposing idea, never can find out its weak and strong points. This opportunity or the area of thought expression is compared with the arena of the wrestlers that as narrow it is the chance of maneuver is less to them and they will be deprived of the opportunity of expressing themselves and of victory. (Beirouti 1377, 243) Moreover, sometimes the clash of ideas is not only considered as one of the conditions of every society's progress but also as 'the unique valid condition' that under its shadow every idea could be regarded right –since no condition except the thought collision can logically convince the human being, who has wisdom, that an idea is right and strong. (Mill 1979, 18) In fact, it is because of the problem of the human fallibility (arising from the limited human faculties) that nobody can completely be assured of the correctness and rightfulness of an idea unless the others have the right to thoroughly examine an idea from different aspects, and to develop and assay for it. (Jamalzadeh 1338, 47) Such method, i.e. the multilateral survey of an idea from different aspects for being assured of its rightness or inaccuracy, that is definitely the fruit of the open space for thought expression, is critique or criticism, which is frequently called as *kritikā(qritikā)* in the Iranian Qajarid (18-20 centuries) political treatises. (See Akhondzadeh 1280, 8-9)

It is necessary to notice that criticism is not exclusive for the special people or groups; but it could rather be a general method comprising the governments as well. Criticism is the characteristic of the modern intellectual; and accepting criticism is the secret of the democratic governments' survival. Criticism is regarded as the main part of the mechanism of the constructive cooperation among the three principal elements of every democratic government (i.e. nation, government, and territory) that are helper for running the process of democracy. (Mojtahedzadeh 1386, 109-110) In the undemocratic governments, understanding the function of government by the citizens is not an important issue; and it is actually better for the people to be unable to perceive it. However, democratic governments will last just in the case that their citizens moot some questions about their functions. (Jones 1361, vol. 2, sec. 1, 11) In fact, while we have accepted the right to vote and participate in the

elections for who have come of age, it means that those people have the right to give opinion about those affairs or about the people who are voted as well. It does not mean that just in the case that those people defend our accepted policies, nobody cavil at them. (Islami 1380, 58-59) Therefore, the peoples' right to express their ideas is along with their right for participating in elections and is regarded as its supplement to it. If they are divested of that right, it means that their voting was not a right, but just a duty. However, a very significant condition of the fulfillment of governmental criticism is the existence of a clarified government. That could just be possible through letting the people to have correct and comprehensive information on the government's function. Actually, peoples' accession to the information is their citizenship right, and also the right of mass media –since the people pay tax for the execution of government projects. Consequently, they have the right to know what they have obtained in return. Thus, governments should not grant the people that information as a favor, rather it is the certain right of the citizens. (Beetham 1379, 85)

Islamic Facts

The famous Islamic principles applied in the Islamic governmental criticism is *amr bi al-ma'rouf va nahy an al-monkar* (commanding good and forbidding evil), which in its traditional form always is used on the people from the bottom to top. One of the dimensions of this principle is its usage about the rulers, both the despotic and the religious ones that equally deserve criticism in a democratic religious society –a problem that despite their fallibility has caused numerous controversies. Accordingly, the religious government not only should not fear of criticism, but also must welcome it. (Rezaee Rad 1384, 36, 46, 172; Kavakebiyan 1370, 102; Farasatkah 1377, 56; Islami 1380, 68) Since, in *Quran*, whenever people are cruelled, the right to shout is considered for them as well: 'Allah does not love the shouting of evil words, except by he who has been wronged.' (Surah 4, 148) In fact, if the Islamic government embarks on despotism, people are qualified to shout against it. This is verified by a Prophetic tradition narrated by Termedhi, Abu Davoud, Nisae, and the others: 'a word of truth against an oppressive ruler is the best of *Jihad*'. (Syed 2003, vol. 1, 241) Moreover, if the harsh words against the government cause a public sedition, they must be prevented. While, there will be no problem if the harm is a personal one. (Kamali 1997, 32) Consequently, the citizens of the Islamic government either have the right to protest against despotism or have the right to express their ideas on the governmental affairs, likewise to dispute with the rulers. (Syed 2003, vol. 1, 243; Kamali 1997, 65)

It is said that during the caliphate of Omar b. Khattab, freedom of expression of the opposing ideas reached to a point that everybody could stop him on his way and complain.

He would also welcome complaints against his appointed rulers such as Amr b. al-As, Moghayyaraht b. Shobeh, and Abu Mousa Ashari, and would act against them too. (Syed 2003, vol. 1, 245)

Imam Ali in his *Nahj ul-Balaghah* considers the utterance of the right word against a cruel ruler as the utmost *amr bi al-ma'rouf va nahy an al-monkar* (commanding good and forbidding evil). (1378, 429) Even, despite his infallibility, he voluntarily exposes himself to public criticism (1378, 328):

Do not stop uttering the right word or consulting on justice, since I am not superior to be without doing wrong or to be immune of making mistake, unless that God suffices me, since He is more powerful than I am. Undoubtedly, we, and you are the servants of God, and there is no God except Him.

In addition, in his epistle to Malik Ashtar, Imam Ali suggests him to prefer who tell him more the 'bitter right word' and refrain of helping him in the unjustified path than the others. (1378, 237)

He even exceeds far, mooting an interesting truth that has materialized as a generalizable rule in history. The truth is that if the ruler goes a wrong way it is obligatory to people to rebel and prevent of following him; otherwise, the divine punishment will not only descend on the ruler but also on all the people –because of following the wrong way or being silent against cruelty. The example that he states is the case of Thamud tribe (one of the primitive Arab tribes, who was destroyed by the divine punishment). Despite that the leg of the camel of Saleh the Prophet was cut by one person, the divine punishment was descended on all the members of tribe –since, they did not prevent that person. (1378, 237)

Again, it is narrated by Sa'd b. Sadaqah from Imam Sadiq from Imam Ali that the latter said:

God will not punish the masses for the sin of the rulers, in case that they commit it in secret and the people are not aware of it. However, if the rulers commit a crime openly, and the people do not take action against them, both the two groups deserve the divine punishment. (Ameli 1396, vol. 11, 407)

This idea, definitely, shows the possibility of public protest against the rulers, amongst the religious ones. Nevertheless, during the Islamic period, this manner has not often been verified by the thinkers. This was arising from the suppressing policies that caused them to

prefer considering the possibility of any protest and governmental criticism as a kindly advice or at most a personal affair (i.e. in the form of the relation of the protester with the government). Among such thinkers, it must be referred to Al-Ghazali (450-505 AH/1058-1111 CE), who despite believing in the legitimacy of the ruling power, gives the permission of opposing and protesting against it as well; while, just in the personal form. Thus, there is no problem, if man is willing to stand against the government; and if he dies, he will be considered as martyr. However, it cannot turn into a public revolt. (See Kamali 1997, 37; Soroush 1386, 288-289)

Another point that is worth noting here is about the attitude towards the opponents, amongst Khavarij who would criticize the Islamic government in the early Islamic period. Imam Ali neither put them in the lower social levels nor deprived them of the normal rights of every Muslim, because of their opposition, which was incidentally very harsh. (Syed 2003, vol. 1, 239)

The Necessities of Criticism

Listening to the critiques of the enemies, not of the friends

It is important to note that there are few cases, in which the friends embark on a real criticism. This has different reasons, as an example this point that the friends do not see the imperfections, or in case that they see, they deliberately hide them. This advisability is sometimes arising from a fear of different accusations. However, the enemy, having no fear or blind tie and with a motive for faultfinding, occasionally, can turn into the best critic. (See Islami 1380, 21-25)

Definitely, it is obvious that for listening to the opposing words, the environment for its expression must be open. This is that very right of thought expression along with the right of accession to the information for all the people. In fact, the necessity of the existence of civil modern instruments and the channels of criticism transference from the critics to the people is clear. In their absence, criticism has no function at all. Meanwhile, after the establishment of those issues, in order to give meaning to the governmental criticism, the principle of answerability must be accepted by the Islamic government. (Ajoudani, interview with the researcher, 9 Sept. 2008, London)

Constructive Criticism?

The subject of 'constructive criticism', that is welcome in many cases, for instance in the notices of the public relations departments of the offices or other places, is a doubtful subject. Adding the stipulation of constructive to criticism means to make it conditional upon being friendly, mild and far from any faultfinding, which is surely based on finding the critic's

motive. In this case, it is tried to guess the critic's motive and then to judge accordingly. Therefore, no criticism can automatically be constructive or destructive; yet, every criticism can potentially be either constructive or destructive. This is related to our understanding and interpretation of criticism. There are few people who have a good memory, often of being criticized, and sometimes of criticizing. During listening to criticism, we expect no fault to be found or speaking about a fault along with stating hundreds of perfections. In addition, during criticizing, we are always afflicted by doubt, guilty conscience, or fear of tormenting someone or a government and of being eventually punished by him. Nevertheless, despite all these hatred and fear, we are afraid of confessing them, and try to hide them under a cover of psycho-defend mechanisms. Opposite to some people, criticism exactly means faultfinding, caviling, and expressing dissatisfaction. Nothing can purify its meaning. Thus, any kind of effort for make it mild will be in vain. We must accept this truth that criticism is equal to faultfinding, and consequently is unpleasant. (Islami 1380, 9, 18-20, 29-30, 34, 46-47) However, regarding the unexpected result of criticism, some people try to canalize the critics in advance, in order to trim any negative result of criticism. This method causes criticism to become far from its real meaning and aim and to propagate flattery, which could be regarded as a ridiculous cartoon of criticism. (Ibid, 13, 34)

The Boundaries of Governmental Criticism?

It is arising from that mentioned fear or apprehension, or an aureole of reverence around the head of some people that some persons, rulers, and leaders are out of criticism in the governmental criticizing. This can include the political and especially religious characters and can cause a sanctuary no one can enter. What should we do in that case? It was previously seen that the rulers of the early Islamic period, such as Omar b. Khattab and Imam Ali, not only would welcome critiques, but also would encourage the people to do it. Imam Ali would insist people on not treating himself as was usual with despots. Meanwhile, it is worth noting that according to the Shi'ites the infallible persons were just fourteen and no other people can be immune of sin and fault. Therefore, considering the fallibility of the human being, no one, even in a religious government can be regarded out of the circle of criticism. (Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, interview by the researcher, 23 Oct. 2008, Mashhad, Iran; also see Bazargan 1377, 235; Islami 1380, 77)

In totalitarian governments, believing in an incredible reverence for the rulers, the possibility of peoples' equality in criticism is taken of them. This situation, because of that very fear or advisability, causes the people to speak of surface instead of depth, in which

through propagating humbleness, the ignorant is honored and the learned is degraded. (Soroush 1386, 366-367)

Here, we should mention the father of Iranian contemporary criticism, i.e. Mirza Fath-Ali Akhondzadeh (Akhondof) (1229-1295 AH /1812-1878 CE) –who was driven to extremities of the Qajarid society's disorganization and could not endure the incapability of the rulers. It was to encounter this situation that Akhondzadeh chose criticism, or as he used *kritikā* –a very strange method for Iran at that time, i.e. a country that its rulers would receive not more than some ineffective exhortations in different advice books. The tone of the words in those advice books was usually full of compassion, mildness, politeness, and of course full of advisability. However, Akhondzadeh, through a letter to Mirza Jafar Qarajedaghi (the translator of his works from Turkish into Persian) dated 16 Apr. 1870 writes (Akhondzadeh 1357, 206):

Critique cannot be written without faultfinding and reproaching and mocking and ridiculing. [...]. The right that is written as a sermon; and kindly and fatherly advice not in the method of criticism will never affect human natures after being accustomed to evil-doing. The human nature always hates studying and listening to preaches and advices, while is greedy for studying critique. According to the experiences of the European wise men and final proofs it has been proved that nothing can remove the shameful and blameworthy acts from the human nature unless criticism and mocking and ridiculing. [...]. You are afraid of criticism because this method is not prevalent in the Islamic epistolaries.

Looking at advice in order to reforming the wrong behaviors of the rulers as a useless action, he knows all the western progress as the result of applying this method of western criticism. In a letter to Mostasharoddoleh (one of the Qajarid thinkers), dated 29 Mar. 1871 Akhondzadeh writes (Adamiyyat 1349, 58-59):

If you do not point out these behaviors, they will not become aware and repentant and will stay in ignorance. If you are frank, it can be regarded as aggression. Thus, what must we do? However, the interest of the country and people ought to be made plain. It is the method of criticism. Such subjects cannot be stated by preaching and advice. [...]. Nowadays in each European country, the satiric

newspapers i.e. the critique and lampoon newspapers about the people's acts are written and published every week. The European governments have reached this order and progress thanks to the critique, not to the preaching and advices.

Akhondzadeh believes that this method, in order to works, must be far from every kind of effort for preserving advisability or even politeness. Since, he used the critical realism in the form of satiric and humorous literature about the rulers, he was titled in Europe as Molière of the East and Googol of Caucasia. (Adamiyyat 1349, 32-33) In his rebellious ideas, which were offered under the cover of comedy, literature was combined with politics: 'where you look at everywhere and touch everything, it is dirty and corrupt, procrastinating, concealing, flexibility, and reconciling is never permitted.'

Criticism and Conspiracy Suspicion?

Sometimes, criticism is allowed on condition that being without conspiracy: criticism is free; however, conspiracy is not. How the boundary of criticism and conspiracy could be separated? Some people believe that it is at least one century that most of the attention and energy of the Islamic and Middle-Eastern governments are wasted on how to encounter the threats with foreign origins. The deep roots of the existence of a foreign enemy, who is untruthful and illegitimate, and always appear in different forms, exists among both the political elites and the common people. A phobia about Britain, regarding the real colonial role of that country in the Iranian history, sees Britain behind everything in Iran and as the origin of all troubles. Likewise, Mohammad Reza Shah (ruled. 1320-1357 SH/1941-1979 CE), affected by such suspicion, even until the last minutes of its government was surprised that why the United States did not like him to be more in power. While, because of that very suspicion, Shah never saw the deficiencies of his government. (Barzegar 2006, 55-56)

The fast and explicit attribution of the word 'spy' and 'devotee of foreigners' to the critics, who are not supporters of government, is actually dividing the society into friend and enemy through guessing the motives. In this case, and by applying these words, whenever an authority does not like a critique, easily can introduce it as a conspiracy against him or government. In case that the authority can access to the probably negative (please take notice of the relativity of this word) precedents of the critic, it will aggravate the problem. However, the boundary of friendship and enmity is truly fragile. There is neither any definite and logical sign that the enemy always criticizes having an evil intention, nor dividing the society into friend and enemy will be useful for that society itself. Yet, it will increase the morale of distrustfulness and revengefulness towards the authorities. Thus, it is necessary to bring the

society to a level in which instead of fearing of conspiracy suspicion, examine any conspiracy as a critique. (See Varjavand 1377, 117; Islami 1380, 35, 37, 42-43)

Conclusion

Some people believe that because of the impatience and incapaciousness of the totalitarian systems, every kind of effort towards their reform, such as criticizing them, is an 'inaccessible dream' and therefore is useless. Thus, they conclude that such regimes must be overthrown to be reformed. (Soroush 1386, 292-293) However, the endeavor for institutionalizing criticism, especially governmental criticism, still is continued. Having a comparison with the western countries (the United States and Europe) reveals that the method of criticism, in the guided form, whether by force or willingly, is so institutionalized in the society that even it has led to the arena of cinema and its result is producing the movies that sometimes exaggeratedly criticize the function of government and show the corruption of the governmental offices. Yet, the early Islamic facts that were previously mentioned showed criticism as an accepted manner in both Shi'ite and Sunni Islam. However, we the Middle-Eastern people 'still remain in the Ibn Khaldunid (732-808 AH/1332-1406 CE) stage of our history'; applying the tribal discourse, try to repulse the fanaticism by fanaticism. (Nikfar 1378, 135) We neither have the culture of criticism nor accept its lack. We are not pleased with the critics; seeing the imperfections and overlooking them, as if we neglect a disease. We make criticism conditioned to being not partial, without noticing that 'criticism is always partial', whether it is regarded 'moral' or not. We forget that the people never criticize without having aim and motive. Criticizing the rulers is equal to destroying all they had made –thus, in any case, it torments them. Therefore, 'a man of different kind' is needed to find, not by 'power and authority' but with 'liberality' instead of 'defensive mechanism' or 'accusation', that the correctness or wrongness (still it is worth noting the relativity of these concepts) of any critique will just be clear after its expression. Accordingly, never must stop the expression of critique by applying the method of guessing the motives. It should be considered that the question has two aspects: that critique is correct. In this case, the government must naturally improve itself. Otherwise, that critique is wrong. In that case, by an explanation from the government, its legitimacy will actually be increased. Therefore, having a fear about the government of becoming ill and weak by touching the microbe of criticism (i.e. the outlook of the totalitarian governments) there is no reason to refrain from any contact with it. Yet, it is more wisely for strengthening the body to vaccinate it 'in a smart way, by injecting special microbes'. Hence, considering the experience of the Eastern Bloc totalitarian governments against criticism that caused their fall, and regarding this

principle that in a democratic system, more criticism brings more consolidation, it is necessary to empower the government through establishing a 'thought laboratory'. We should perceive that incidentally the most benefits of criticism are for the governments themselves (in case that it is applied in a smart way). One of the most those benefits is that the governments, knowing the comments of their citizens and becoming familiar with their positions, can preserve their dominance better. Another benefit is that it causes peoples' emotional discharge. By listening to peoples' critiques, the governments can prevent them from becoming a hidden complex, which can likely lead to an armed revolt. The last point is that we should not condition criticism to be along with a solution –since, mooting the question by many people, who see and understand deficiencies is possible, while, its solution needs another expertise. (Islami 1380, 9, 13, 15, 33, 38-40, 48-49, 72-75; Seyf 1378, 98; Soroush 1386, 278)

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