Implications of the Thought of Martyr Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr for Participatory Governance: With an Emphasis on the Theory of Human Vicegerency

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Abstract

This paper aims to elucidate the implications of the thought of Martyr Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr for participatory governance, with a particular focus on his theory of collective human vicegerency. According to this theory, the stewardship of worldly affairs has been entrusted by God to the human community as a divine trust. Hence, maximum public participation in societal administration is regarded not merely as a right, but as a religious obligation.

The research methodology is based on interpretive analysis of al-Sadr's works, specifically employing a thematic approach to identify key concepts such as decentralization of authority, social justice, and collective responsibility. The findings indicate that, in al-Sadr's thought, popular governance is a structural process grounded in two main pillars: the liberation of human potential and the guarantee of continuous movement toward divine values.

The theory of collective vicegerency attributes political legitimacy to the fulfillment of divine trusteeship and the active participation of the people through mechanisms such as consultative councils (Shora), public oversight, and the integration of religious jurisprudence with collective rationality. This model stands in contrast to Western democracies, where legitimacy is derived solely from the will of the majority.

The most significant challenges to participatory governance include economic inequality, individual moral weaknesses, and the complexity of modern institutional systems. Proposed strategies include the cultivation of responsible individuals, institutionalization of accountability, development of citizen-centered technologies, dismantling of monopolies, and mobilization of individual interests within a framework of collective justice.

In conclusion, participatory governance in this framework not only fosters social justice, but also serves as a manifestation of collective vicegerency, providing a path toward proximity to absolute divine values.

Keywords: Decentralization of Authority, Participatory Governance, People-Centered Administration, Theory of Collective Human Vicegerency, Social Justice, Implication Analysis

Introduction and Problem Statement

Popular participation and the decentralization of authority—referred to in Persian as Mardomisazi (literally, "popularization")—constitute foundational principles of Islamic governance. From the perspective of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, these principles represent an enduring necessity for the advancement and development of an Islamic society. In numerous public addresses, the Supreme Leader has repeatedly emphasized the significance of active and effective citizen engagement across various dimensions of social life. For instance, while outlining the foundational principles of Islamic governance, he has highlighted the necessity of public involvement in key national decisions and affirmed the vital role of the people in addressing societal challenges (Khamenei, 2022, April 4; 2021, February 17; 2022, August 30).

Linguistically, Mardomisazi denotes the process of making affairs accessible to or carried out by the public. In this paradigm, people engage in decision-making and participation across recognized economic, cultural, political, and social domains. Thus, the term strongly aligns with the notion of intensified public participation. It emphasizes collective awareness, collective will, collective approval, and collective choice, all rooted in societal needs. In a successful Mardomisazi process, recognizing a shared problem, perceiving the necessity for cooperation, assessing existing capacities and resources, and maximizing their use become vital elements. As a result, decentralization of authority implies elevating the role of the people in all aspects of public life—including policymaking, implementation, and oversight (Shirali, 2021, p. 16).

In recent years, Mardomisazi and citizen participation have gained particular significance within the framework of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Supreme Leader has identified widespread public engagement in economic and administrative affairs as a strategic pillar in national planning and policymaking. This emphasis was clearly reiterated in his Nowruz message marking the beginning of the year 1403 (Khamenei, 2024, March 20).

Broadly speaking, people's participation in various domains can serve as both a catalyst and a stabilizer for national policies. Past experiences—particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic—demonstrated the critical role of popular involvement, as evidenced by the rapid mobilization for mask production, hospital volunteering, and community-driven relief efforts. Historical precedents such as the role of popular mobilization during the Iran–Iraq War, rural development initiatives, literacy campaigns, and volunteer efforts in post-disaster recovery all exemplify this phenomenon.

The importance of Mardomisazi can be summarized as follows:

Strengthening the Republic: In an Islamic Republic, widespread citizen participation in decision-making and administrative processes reinforces the legitimacy of the system. When people are given genuine opportunities to engage in public affairs, trust in governance is enhanced, thereby facilitating the establishment of a people-centered state.

Socioeconomic Development: Active public engagement in economic and social development planning allows for the creation of policies tailored to the actual needs and aspirations of the community. Such participation paves the way for sustainable, justice-oriented development.

Enhancing Divine Governance: Public participation contributes to the realization of elevated forms of governance (Hokm-e Motlaq) in which informed and active citizens play a direct role in shaping public policy in accordance with collective values and needs.

Increasing Public Trust: When citizens are included in governmental decision-making processes, their trust in the state and its institutions increases. This trust, in turn, strengthens social and political stability and deepens the bond between the state and the populace.

Given the increasing relevance of Mardomisazi, this study addresses a central research question: How can the thought of Martyr Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr—as a pioneering figure in the development of Islamic human sciences—particularly through his theory of collective human vicegerency, offer a conceptual framework for designing a model of participatory governance in Islamic societies that responds to religious and identity-based needs?

1. Theoretical Framework

The discourse on participatory governance and the decentralization of authority (Mardomisazi) finds its roots in theoretical debates surrounding the dichotomy between the state and the market. For over three centuries, a central question has persisted: Who should manage the economy? Marxist theory, grounded in the inherent conflict between labor and capital, advocates for maximum state intervention to defend the rights of the working class. However, it does not propose a popularized or people-centered model of economic governance.

Liberalism, on the other hand, prioritizes private ownership and capital. In this tradition, the role of the state is to optimize the performance of the private sector. Citizens are primarily framed as consumers and labor providers, with no real claim to popular control over economic decision-making processes.

The emergence of New Public Management (NPM) represents an attempt to apply private-sector mechanisms within the public sector. Articulated by Pollitt in 1994, NPM was introduced as an ideological system shaped by corporate managerial ideals. Virtanen (1996) argued that NPM is rooted in neoliberal economic fundamentalism and market-driven administrative models. Nevertheless, the approach drew considerable criticism for alienating the state from its foundational role as a servant of the people. In response, Denhardt proposed the Public Service Management model, which emphasizes that government must actively serve the public and, where necessary, fulfill the essential needs of its citizens.

In the institutionalist paradigm, the triad of state, market, and civil institutions is foregrounded. This framework assigns a far more significant role to the public in the administration of societal affairs. A people-centered economic model could emerge as a new paradigm—one that views public administration through the lens of popular engagement, aiming for maximal public benefit and inclusion.

Within this context, Mardomisazi (popularization) and participatory governance are conceptually tied to two interrelated notions: participation and democracy. The following sections will explore each of these concepts in greater detail.

1-1. Democracy

The realization and strengthening of democracy has long been emphasized as a central goal in public administration. The term democracy originates from the Greek words demos (people) and kratein (to rule), meaning "rule by the people." This classical definition dates back to ancient Greek

thinkers and statesmen. Pericles, the famed Athenian leader, referred to the political system of Athens as democratic because it was governed by the majority. Aristotle also characterized democracy as a system in which all citizens are permitted to participate in the political affairs of the community.

Democracy is a multifaceted concept that has been interpreted in various ways and manifested in different forms. According to Aristotle, democracy entails the rule of the poor in pursuit of their own interests. Carl Friedrich, a key theorist in public administration, defined democracy as governance in accordance with the preferences and desires of the general public. In Friedrich's view, the role of the state as a representative of the people is critical, even if his definition does not necessarily imply broad political participation. Similarly, Cohen defines democracy as a system of governance in which members of a society participate—either directly or indirectly—in decisions that affect their lives (Tahmasebi, 2020, pp. 88–89).

Democracy remains a contested and debated term with a wide array of interpretations. As Diamond notes, there are nearly 550 different definitions of democracy, most of which fall into three main categories: minimalist (electoral) democracy, semi-democracy (hybrid models), and maximalist (participatory or substantive) democracy. Despite these variations, the most widely accepted definition frames democracy as a system in which people govern themselves.

While etymologically democracy refers to "rule by the people," in practice it often denotes a specific method of selecting political leaders. Democracy is frequently treated as a political concept applied to internal electoral processes and foreign policy discourse. It is particularly invoked by those seeking greater personal freedoms and self-governance. As such, democracy continues to serve as a fundamental pillar in the administration of public affairs in democratic nations (Azizi-Hossein, 2023, p. 39).

1-2. Decentralization of Authority and Popular Participation

Participation is often defined as a purposeful action within an interactive process between an agent and their social environment, directed toward achieving specific predetermined goals. Conceptually, the term "participation" refers to involvement and cooperation in actions, decisions, or organizational activities, whether actively or passively. At its core, participation is essentially about engagement and mutual influence within social processes (Alipour et al., 2009, p. 117).

In classical Persian sources, such as Dehkhoda's dictionary, participation (mosharekat) is defined as cooperation, sharing, and joint utilization. Another common definition emphasizes voluntary and willful activities through which community members engage in local affairs—whether at the neighborhood, city, or village level—and contribute directly or indirectly to shaping their collective social life. Some theorists have extended the notion of participation beyond national development, characterizing it as active human engagement in all dimensions of life—political, economic, and cultural. Given that the nature of participation varies across political systems, defining it in universal terms is complex and often controversial.

Proponents of democratic systems tend to view participation as voluntary, spontaneous citizen engagement in national policymaking, electing public officials, and influencing political leadership. In contrast, participation under totalitarian regimes is frequently coerced, incentivized, or symbolic. In the former Soviet Union, for example, participation was often driven by top-down mandates, threats, or institutional pressure. Absolute monarchies, lacking participatory structures, tend to experience specific kinds of stagnation and sociopolitical tension. Huntington, in this regard, predicted a bleak future for traditional monarchies. More recently, even authoritarian systems such as China have begun revisiting the notion of participation, introducing reforms—like limited freedoms and open-door policies—to mitigate social unrest and incorporate broader public involvement in governance.

The human drive for participation may stem from our inherently social nature. Given the multiplicity of human needs and desires, individuals cannot fulfill their aspirations in isolation. Participation becomes a pathway to self-realization, fulfillment, and collective progress. Participation may take many forms—from passive behaviors like consuming news media to active engagement such as voting, public consultation, and involvement in policymaking. Key motivators for participation include economic interests (seeking personal or communal benefit), psychological incentives (pursuit of security, power, recognition), and ideological or religious beliefs (as drivers of civic responsibility) (Maleki, 2017, pp. 100–101).

Decentralization of Authority (Mardomisazi)—in its literal sense—refers to the process by which an action or policy becomes public in nature or is carried out by ordinary citizens. It highlights the significance of collective will, public acceptance, and conscious engagement aligned with the real needs of society. The primary aim of decentralizing governance is

to open up decision-making processes to popular and community-based participation, enabling inclusive coordination for shaping national and regional policies while preserving core societal values across political, cultural, and social domains.

In this light, Mardomisazi is not tied to any particular political party or faction. Rather, it is seen as a democratic deepening mechanism that seeks broad consensus and collective participation in all dimensions of social, political, and economic life. The process is grounded in recognizing public needs, identifying shared challenges, and promoting group collaboration to effectively utilize available capacities and resources. Ultimately, this model seeks to strengthen the public's role in decision-making, implementation, and oversight, thereby ensuring meaningful, engaged, and active citizen involvement at every level of governance (Azizi-Hossein, 2023, pp. 81–82).

Decentralization of authority is fundamentally about creating opportunities and conditions for people to participate in decision-making and implementation of their own development agendas. It is built on a deep understanding of community identity, local characteristics, and the crucial role of local governance in achieving sustainable development. In this framework, the state bears the responsibility to empower local communities and facilitate citizen engagement in local affairs. Concurrently, citizens are expected to actively participate in local governance and contribute to collective development efforts.

This approach necessitates attention to local needs and interests, technical and managerial capabilities, and a balanced role between state and society. The government is thus recognized as a development partner responsible for legal, financial, and institutional support, ongoing training, and the creation of participatory structures. In turn, citizens play an active and accountable role, making autonomous decisions and engaging in participatory actions at the grassroots level. This enables communities to enhance their capacities and responsiveness to local challenges.

In conclusion, this approach promotes sustainable and equitable development, emphasizing public participation and local governance as key drivers of transformation. It supports the establishment of a cooperative management system rooted in mutual engagement between government and the people (Rezvani, 2004).

2. Literature Review

The decentralization of authority and the popularization of governance (Mardomisazi) have emerged as significant topics in the fields of public

administration and governance, garnering increasing scholarly attention in recent years. A selection of key studies is reviewed below:

A study titled "A Comprehensive Model of Expert and Civil Society Organization Participation in Public Sector Performance Management" by Ebrahimi, Moghimi, Pourazat, and Latifi (2021) identified the lack of expert and NGO participation as the central phenomenon. Key contributing factors included the absence of participatory infrastructure, mistrust in effectiveness, expert conflicts of interest, and bureaucratic arrogance. The study categorized systemic weaknesses into causal conditions, contextual factors, intervening conditions, and consequences—such as bureaucratic routine, political contraction, symbolic participation, administrative entropy, and expert inefficacy. It proposed a model to enhance expert and NGO participation based on thematic categories derived from interviews with practitioners familiar with public performance management systems in Iran.

Another study titled "A Public Participation-Based Model for School Resource Allocation in the Islamic Republic of Iran" by Tajalli, Chitsazian, and Saeedi (2021) explored strategies for mobilizing public participation in school funding. Amid declining public education budgets and increasing privatization, the study emphasized hybrid public-private partnerships through educational vouchers and philanthropic contracts. It recommended approaches such as awareness-building, capacity development, value-based engagement, and community empowerment—anchored in principles like merit, ethics, autonomy, and public trust.

In the study "A Model of Civic Participation in Public Administration Based on Nahj al-Balagha" by Khanmohammadi, Vaezi, and Delshad Tehrani (2014), the authors explored an Islamic framework for citizen participation rooted in the teachings of Imam Ali (a.s.). The study emphasized the cultural-contextual shaping of participation models and the potential for Islamic texts to inspire locally grounded approaches to public governance.

The article "Factors Influencing Volunteer Participation During Crises" by Babakhani, Yazdaninasab, and Nouri examined citizen participation in emergency situations. Utilizing surveys and questionnaires, the study found that perceived anomie, social trust, and individual isolation significantly affected public volunteerism in times of crisis.

In "The Impact of Social Capital, ICT Development, and Globalization on Urban Good Governance in the Light of Participatory Culture", Rahnavard and Sargazi (2021) assessed how technology, social capital,

globalization, and local authority attitudes affect urban governance. They concluded that while social capital and ICT development had significant effects, participatory culture itself was not found to be a direct determinant of good governance outcomes.

"Designing Public Participation Processes" by John M. Bryson and Kathryn S. Quick offers an interdisciplinary, evidence-based guide for practitioners designing effective public engagement processes. The authors advocate for context-specific, iterative design grounded in careful analysis of participation goals and community dynamics.

"The State, Popular Participation, and the Voluntary Sector" by John Clark discusses the evolving relationship between NGOs and the state. Clark suggests that NGOs can act as representatives of marginalized groups, facilitating a shift from supply-driven service delivery to demand-driven advocacy and empowerment through policy dialogue and grassroots mobilization.

In "Attitudes, Opportunities, and Motivations: A Field Essay on Political Participation", John E. Leigh examines major theoretical models and empirical findings related to political engagement. The article emphasizes the importance of linking attitudinal studies with actual behavior and outlines future research directions for understanding collective political action.

"The Participation Question: Toward Authentic Public Involvement in Public Administration" by Cheryl Simrell King, Katherine M. Feltey, and Bridget O'Neill Susel explores how public engagement processes can be transformed to become more dynamic and reciprocal. Drawing from interviews and focus groups, the study proposes shifting from static, reactive models to more active and deliberative frameworks that empower both citizens and administrators.

Finally, "Guidelines for Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation: Field Experiences" by Katja Jobs uses qualitative interviews and group discussions to explore how participatory M&E practices can be enhanced. The findings underscore the need for redefined roles and relationships between citizens and public officials, emphasizing a move toward consultative and iterative engagement models.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed library-based and documentary research methods to collect data. Primary sources included the intellectual works of Martyr Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, such as *Islam: A Guide to Life*, *Qur'anic Studies*, *Iqtisaduna (Our Economics)*, *The Imams of Ahl al-Bayt*,

and Glimmers. These texts were thoroughly reviewed, and approximately 100 pages of analytical notes were extracted and categorized as the foundation for further analysis.

For data analysis and the derivation of implications related to participatory governance (Mardomisazi), the study adopted the method of implication analysis (Delalat-pajohi). This methodological approach involves extrapolating and transferring implications, applications, consequences, or insights from one philosophical system, theoretical framework, or model into another disciplinary context (Danaeefard, 2016, p. 49).

Implication analysis serves as a crucial bridge for the expansion, refinement, and enrichment of human knowledge. Within this methodology, two sides are identified: a lending domain (source) and a borrowing domain (target). The source domain provides the conceptual object from which key insights or "supporting elements" are drawn. These are then adapted to the conceptual framework of the target domain, where relevant implications are designed and contextualized to align with the objectives of the receiving discipline (ibid., pp. 47–48).

In this study, the philosophical and theological foundations of al-Sadr's thought function as the lending domain, while the field of participatory governance serves as the borrowing domain. The goal is to identify applicable insights and reframe them into a coherent framework that can inform theoretical and practical approaches to people-centered governance in contemporary Islamic contexts.

3-1. Procedural Steps of Implication Analysis

The methodology of implication analysis (delalat - pazhuhi) consists of a structured, eleven-stage process. While each stage is explained in detail in the original framework, the process can be broadly conceptualized as follows (Danaeefard, 2016, p. 55):

1. Identifying Supporting Elements (Contributions)

Recognizing the key conceptual contributions from the source domain (e.g., philosophical or theoretical foundations).

2. Validating the Supporting Elements

Assessing the relevance, coherence, and applicability of the extracted contributions.

3. Determining Relevant Implications

Designing meaningful and logically derived implications for the target field based on the validated concepts.

4. Validating the Implications

Evaluating the final implications for theoretical robustness, contextual fit, and practical utility.

3-2. Detailed Steps of the Implication Analysis Method

1. Determining the Appropriateness of Implication Analysis for the Study

Given that the present study aims to extract implications from the thought of Martyr Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr for the development of participatory governance, implication analysis is deemed an appropriate methodology. Additionally, the researchers' prior experience with al-Sadr's thought, the concept of Mardomisazi, and qualitative research further justifies the selection of this method.

2. Identifying the Source of Implications

The philosophical and theoretical works of Martyr Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr are designated as the primary source for implication extraction. Al-Sadr is recognized as a prominent Islamic thinker whose intellectual system is both comprehensive and rich in Islamic content. Moreover, people-centered governance is a central theme in his work.

3. Establishing a Process for Exploring the Chosen Topic

The researchers began by conducting a comprehensive review and note-taking of al-Sadr's key works. This process included keyword searches as well as manual reading and annotation to ensure relevant content was identified for further analysis.

4. Determining the Conceptual Framework of the Target Field

This study adopts a hybrid, emergent approach to implication analysis. Rather than applying a pre-existing conceptual framework to al-Sadr's thought, the framework was allowed to emerge organically from within the texts. The researchers did not impose external categories but instead engaged in inductive reasoning to derive concepts directly from the source material.

5. Theoretical Sampling of the Source Domain

Primary sources included al-Sadr's original texts. Secondary sources such as scholarly articles, theses, and related books were also consulted. As new

questions emerged during analysis, texts were revisited multiple times using both keyword searches and full scans.

6. Extracting Supporting Elements (Conceptual Contributions)

The researchers did not rely solely on keyword identification; instead, they manually scanned the texts to locate meaningful passages. In the initial phase, 50 supporting elements were extracted using a systematic extraction process. Duplicates were removed (retaining one instance), and similar or semantically close items were combined without conceptual reduction.

7. Validating the Extracted Supporting Elements

The validity of the supporting elements was assessed through reanalysis of the original texts, with special attention paid to direct phrases and reasoning from al-Sadr's own language. Additionally, validation by domain experts further reinforced the reliability of the findings.

8. Aligning the Supporting Elements with the Conceptual Framework

The extracted elements were then mapped onto the emergent conceptual framework, ensuring coherence between the content derived from al-Sadr's thought and the target domain of participatory governance.

9. Deriving Specific Implications

Once the conceptual framework was established, the researchers examined each statement and proposition in relation to the broader framework. As more implications were identified over time, the conceptual structure became more refined, with new subcategories emerging.

10. Validating the Extracted Implications

The credibility of the implications was determined based on both their logical coherence and textual support. Attention was given to the strength of citation and the internal consistency of the implications in relation to the conceptual framework (Danaeefard, 2016, p. 62).

11. Reporting and Presentation of Findings

The final step involved compiling, organizing, and presenting the research findings in a systematic and scholarly format suitable for academic dissemination.

4. Findings – Extracted Implications

Implication One: Defining People-Centered Governance in the Thought of Martyr Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr

In the intellectual framework of Martyr Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, mardomisazi—commonly translated as people-centered governance—transcends mere administrative decentralization or popular participation. It represents a theologically grounded and ethically driven model of governance rooted in Islamic principles of vicegerency (khilafah), justice (adl), and collective responsibility. Based on an analysis of the extracted conceptual categories, the following interrelated dimensions can be identified:

First, people-centered governance necessitates the broad-based participation of the populace in productive economic activity and investment. By expanding economic ownership and facilitating the inclusive mobilization of capital, al-Sadr envisions a dismantling of monopolistic structures and a redistribution of wealth in service of the public good. This approach aligns with his vision of economic justice as outlined in Iqtiṣādunā (Our Economics), where investment is not merely an individual right but a collective responsibility toward social upliftment.

Second, the governance process is conceived as a continuous and purposeful movement toward absolute divine values, reflecting the Islamic conception of history as a teleological journey toward perfection and justice. Governance, in this context, is not limited to technocratic efficiency or short-term objectives; rather, it is embedded in a dynamic eschatological framework wherein human communities are tasked with actualizing divine norms through historical agency.

Third, al-Sadr underscores the liberation and empowerment of previously marginalized or exploited human capacities. People-centered governance thus involves reclaiming human potential that has been commodified or suppressed under exploitative systems, and redirecting it toward collective flourishing. This transformation reflects the Qur'anic emphasis on human dignity (karāmah) and capability (qudrah) as foundational to legitimate governance.

Fourth, the evaluative standards guiding such a governance model must be inclusive, balanced, and justice-oriented. Al-Sadr insists on adopting criteria that reconcile individual autonomy with collective welfare, ensuring that governance mechanisms do not privilege one group, class, or epistemology over others. This integrative vision resists reductionist

metrics and promotes a morally coherent and socially inclusive evaluative paradigm.

Synthesis In sum, the notion of people-centered governance in the thought of Martyr Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr is defined by both structural transformation and moral commitment. It entails the expansion of economic and political participation as a means of achieving social justice, alongside a sustained orientation toward divine values as the ultimate reference point of legitimacy. This model emphasizes that true governance must facilitate not only public inclusion but also moral elevation, ensuring that the processes and outcomes of governance reflect a holistic vision of human dignity, equity, and transcendence.

Implication Two: The Theory of Collective Human Vicegerency as the Foundational Framework for People-Centered Governance

In the political and philosophical thought of Martyr Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, the theory of collective human vicegerency (khelāfat al-jamāʿah al-bashariyyah) offers a foundational framework for the development of a people-centered governance paradigm deeply rooted in Islamic theology and moral philosophy. This theory presents mardomisāzī not merely as a political arrangement or technical mechanism, but as a sacred duty grounded in divine trust and oriented toward the realization of justice and human dignity.

At the heart of al-Sadr's vision lies the notion that legitimate governance is inseparable from the collective moral responsibility entrusted to humankind by God. Drawing on Qur'anic references, particularly the narrative of divine vicegerency being conferred upon the human collective rather than an individual figure, al-Sadr asserts that the very legitimacy of governing authority depends on its foundation in shared responsibility and public accountability. Governance, in this view, must not be monopolized by elites or reserved for a select class; rather, it is to be exercised by the people as a manifestation of their divinely ordained stewardship.

This vicegerency is conceptualized as an amānah—a divine trust so weighty that even the heavens and the earth recoiled from accepting it, yet humankind embraced it, despite its limitations. This narrative reveals that political power, from an Islamic standpoint, is not a right to be claimed but a burden to be borne with ethical consciousness. Consequently, popular legitimacy must be understood not only in terms of public consent but also as a moral obligation to fulfill the requirements of divine trusteeship.

Governance thus emerges as a sacred function derived from and subordinate to the overarching principle of human vicegerency.

Within this framework, al-Sadr underscores that governing authority is exercised through consultative and participatory mechanisms grounded in Qur'anic injunctions. The principles of shūrā (mutual consultation) and amr bi al-maʿrūf wa nahy ʿan al-munkar (enjoining good and forbidding wrong) are viewed as institutional embodiments of the people's role in ensuring ethical oversight and collective decision-making. These mechanisms empower the Ummah not merely as passive subjects but as active agents in shaping the moral and legal contours of public life.

Moreover, al-Sadr emphasizes the universal moral foundations upon which this model must rest. The Qur'anic conception of human dignity and equality is central to his understanding of governance. All members of society—irrespective of race, class, or gender—are equal participants in the moral project of vicegerency. This implies that people-centered governance must actively resist all forms of discrimination and exclusion, seeking instead to promote inclusive structures that reflect the brotherhood and equality of all human beings.

In the absence of an infallible Imam—a condition characterizing the contemporary age—al-Sadr articulates a dual structure of responsibility shared between the marjaʿiyyah (religious authority) and the broader Muslim community. In this arrangement, scholars serve not as rulers but as moral guides whose role is to ensure fidelity to divine law, while the people retain the mandate to manage public affairs through institutional mechanisms of consultation and participation. Such a model avoids both autocracy and anarchy, embedding governance within a balanced framework of spiritual leadership and popular responsibility.

Finally, a defining characteristic of al-Sadr's theory is the imperative to emulate divine attributes—justice, wisdom, mercy, and truthfulness—in public governance. This ethical imperative, known as tashabbuh bi akhlāq Allāh, demands that political institutions and leaders reflect the values of divine justice in their treatment of the vulnerable, their distribution of resources, and their confrontation with oppression and corruption. Governance, in this light, becomes an arena for the embodiment of divine ethics, not merely the execution of administrative functions.

In conclusion, the theory of collective human vicegerency as developed by Martyr Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr offers a profound theological and moral justification for people-centered governance. It situates political legitimacy within a divinely mandated framework that affirms both

popular participation and ethical obligation. By grounding governance in the sacred trust of vicegerency, and by integrating Qur'anic principles of equality, consultation, and moral oversight, al-Sadr's vision provides a uniquely Islamic model that harmonizes spiritual responsibility with democratic engagement and social justice.

Implication Three: The Distinction Between Western Democracy and Islamic People-Centered Governance

Martyr Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr's theory of collective human vicegerency (khelāfat al-jamā'ah al-bashariyyah) offers a profound reconfiguration of political legitimacy and sovereignty, positioning it as a divinely mandated trust rather than a product of human consensus. This perspective reveals a series of foundational divergences between Western liberal democracy and Islamic people-centered governance. At the heart of this divergence is the question of sovereignty. In the liberal democratic tradition, sovereignty resides with the people; legitimacy is derived from majority rule, and the constitution is viewed as a human artifact subject to change through collective will. Consequently, the democratic state is not morally bound beyond the will of its citizens, even when majority decisions result in the marginalization of minorities or the erosion of ethical norms. In contrast, al-Sadr's Islamic conception of governance roots legitimacy in divine vicegerency. Here, the people do not rule as autonomous sovereigns but as trustees of God, accountable for upholding a sacred trust (amānah). Governance is, therefore, not an expression of unfettered human will but a moral duty bound by the immutable principles of Shariah. The people are not at liberty to legislate in contradiction to divine justice, even by overwhelming consensus, for authority is bounded by ethical and theological constraints that transcend temporal majority preferences.

This divergence extends further into the realm of lawmaking and moral responsibility. While Western democracies derive legal norms from deliberative consensus or majority interest—often vulnerable to the sway of special interests or moral relativism—Islamic governance, as articulated by al-Sadr, is anchored in divine law as an impartial and stable foundation. Legal codes in Islam are designed not merely to reflect collective will but to secure enduring principles such as justice, human dignity, and the prohibition of oppression. Moral responsibility in Western systems is limited to electoral accountability; ethical outcomes are subordinated to legal formalism. In contrast, Islamic governance considers the moral integrity of decisions as paramount: rulers and ruled alike are obliged to resist injustice, even when such injustice is legally sanctioned

or socially accepted. Al-Sadr draws upon Qur'anic imperatives, urging believers not to acquiesce to corrupt systems, and endorsing resistance, migration, or reform as ethical responses to systemic wrongdoing.

The purpose of governance further delineates these models. In liberal democracies, the state primarily seeks to secure material welfare and fulfill the majority's aspirations, even at the expense of deeper moral considerations. In contrast, the Islamic model envisions governance as a tool for actualizing divine justice, preserving human dignity, and cultivating moral development in alignment with God's trust. Political mechanisms in Western systems rely heavily on institutional checks such as elections, courts, and parliaments, which remain subject to majority dynamics. Islamic governance, however, institutes deeper safeguards: the constancy of divine law, the communal obligation to enjoin good and forbid evil (amr bi al-maʿrūf wa nahy ʿan al-munkar), and the oversight of religious authority (marjaʿiyyah) in the absence of an infallible Imam collectively function as internal correctives against deviation from ethical norms.

In sum, al-Sadr's model contrasts two fundamentally different paradigms: one that elevates human will as the ultimate source of legitimacy, and another that subjects human agency to a higher moral order. While Western democracy centers on procedural legitimacy and human autonomy, Islamic people-centered governance—mardomisāzī—is structured as a collective duty within a divine framework. It transforms popular participation from a right of self-expression into a form of spiritual accountability. This paradigm shift reorients governance away from the fluid preferences of majorities toward a stable ethic rooted in transcendence, safeguarding against the relativism and instrumentalism often seen in secular political systems. Ultimately, the distinction lies not in the mechanisms of participation but in the metaphysical foundation of authority: Western democracy is founded upon human sovereignty, whereas Islamic governance rests on divine trusteeship.

Implication Four: The Scope of Public Participation in Islamic Governance

In the political and ethical philosophy of Martyr Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, the role of the people in governance is both foundational and multidimensional. It is grounded not merely in political necessity or utilitarian logic, but in a deeply integrated system of religious, moral, and institutional principles that reflect the Islamic worldview. At the heart of this framework lies the belief that the people are entrusted with divine

vicegerency (khilāfah), bearing the collective responsibility to cultivate, administer, and morally guide society in accordance with God's will.

One of the essential concepts structuring this participatory vision is takāful ijtimāʿī, or social solidarity. Islam, as al-Sadr emphasizes, assigns responsibility for the well-being of the disadvantaged to the community itself, particularly to the affluent, regardless of the presence or absence of a formal Islamic state. This ethical obligation transforms social welfare into a spiritual mandate, internalizing a strong sense of collective accountability within the public. Governance, in this context, is not to be confined to state apparatuses alone; rather, it must activate grassroots mechanisms such as charitable associations, cooperative financial systems, and local communal networks to fulfill the imperatives of justice. Participation in governance, therefore, begins with the moral agency of individuals and extends into organized efforts that ensure equity and compassion at the societal level.

This theological foundation is inseparable from the principle of divine vicegerency, which posits that human beings are God's representatives on earth. According to al-Sadr, political sovereignty belongs ultimately to God, and the people function as His trustees in executing authority. The legitimacy of governance, then, stems not from popular autonomy in the Western liberal sense, but from the ethical performance of divinely entrusted duties. Political power is a sacred responsibility, not a license for arbitrary will. Accordingly, public participation is not merely a democratic right but a religious obligation, encompassing engagement in legislative, executive, and oversight institutions.

Institutional structures within this framework reflect this normative vision. Through electoral processes, the public exercises its guardianship over legislative and executive functions. One prominent institutional expression of this principle is the majlis ahl al-ḥall wa al-ʿaqd (Council of Delegation and Resolution), whose members are directly elected by the community. This council bears key responsibilities, such as approving high-level governmental appointments, legislating in areas of juristic discretion (manṭaqat al-farāgh), and supervising the implementation of laws. The people, as the bearers of sovereignty, are recognized as equal before the law, and their rights to political expression and participation are considered fundamental to Islamic governance.

Al-Sadr's vision also places justice at the core of governance objectives. The Islamic state is not merely a neutral administrator of policy but is charged with the moral duty to reduce class disparities, ensure universal welfare, and uphold economic equity. Education, too, is integral

to this mandate. Islamic education plays a formative role in constructing a religious identity capable of sustaining the intellectual and spiritual foundations of the Islamic system. Hence, public engagement in welfare delivery and educational initiatives is not auxiliary to governance—it is essential to its success.

In order to structure collective deliberation, al-Sadr emphasizes the principle of shūrā (consultation), through which the general vicegerency of the people is exercised under the supervision of the wālī al-faqīh (Guardian Jurist), who serves as the representative of the hidden Imam. Consultative bodies thus serve as intermediaries between the people and religious authority, ensuring both participatory governance and fidelity to Islamic legal principles.

Finally, the spiritual and moral dimension is inseparable from the practical framework of governance. Through moral education and religious cultivation, Islamic society seeks to produce individuals who align their personal ambitions with the goals of divine governance. The eschatological consciousness cultivated by the Qur'anic worldview—especially the fear of divine accountability for neglecting the poor—acts as a powerful internal motivator for civic engagement and public service.

In summary, al-Sadr articulates a tripartite vision of the people's role in Islamic governance. First, legitimacy is simultaneously divine and popular: governance derives from God but is realized through the collective agency of the community. Second, social responsibility is not a peripheral concern but a central ethical obligation that mobilizes public involvement in justice, education, and welfare. Third, institutional mechanisms operationalize this vision, enabling consultative councils, elected authorities, and supervisory bodies to translate theological commitments into functional governance. This participatory model reflects the principle of collective vicegerency (khelāfat al-jamāʿah), wherein governance is understood not as a vertical, top-down authority, but as a dynamic and reciprocal relationship between the public, religious authority, and legal structures—all harmonized in service of divine justice.

Implication Five: Barriers to People-Centered Governance in Islamic Thought

In the framework of Martyr Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr's theory of Islamic governance, the realization of Mardomisazi—people-centered governance rooted in collective vicegerency—is not simply an ideological aspiration but a practical challenge constrained by multiple layers of resistance. These barriers emerge across three interrelated domains:

structural-economic configurations, ethical-individual shortcomings, and systemic-social complexities. Each level reveals how the full actualization of divine vicegerency through public participation is obstructed by forces that require holistic and multi-dimensional reform.

At the structural-economic level, one of the primary barriers lies in the monopolization of productive assets and the entrenched inequalities in the distribution of resources. Al-Sadr warns against the concentration of economic tools in the hands of a minority, noting that such accumulation paves the way for systemic exploitation and power asymmetries. Without specific legal frameworks to ensure distributive justice—such as anti-monopoly legislation and progressive taxation—economic growth becomes a mechanism of domination rather than empowerment. The Qur'anic concept of ẓulm (oppression) is interpreted in this context as the unjust distribution of divine blessings, including natural and financial resources. Consequently, unequal access to land, water, technology, and capital not only violates the tenets of social justice but also nullifies the community's divine responsibility to manage creation equitably. A genuine model of Mardomisazi thus requires not merely abstract commitment to justice but concrete redistributive mechanisms such as the institutional revitalization of the Bayt al-Māl and transparent fiscal governance.

However, structural reforms alone cannot address the second layer of barriers: those rooted in ethical and individual failings. Al-Sadr, drawing on Qur'anic anthropology, emphasizes that human beings are susceptible to nafsānī (carnal) temptations such as greed, arrogance, and the abuse of power. These inclinations can erode the sense of collective duty and lead both rulers and citizens into patterns of corruption, apathy, and irresponsibility. The Qur'an repeatedly warns against such moral lapses, reminding believers of their duty to uphold truth even against their own interests. Moreover, al-Sadr identifies a deeper cultural malady—kufr al-niʿmah, or ingratitude for divine blessings—which manifests as societal complacency and resistance to reform. When communities fail to utilize their resources or fear the disruption of entrenched norms, they stagnate, betraying their role as divine vicegerents. The solution to these ethical barriers lies in sustained moral education, the promotion of collective piety, and the institutionalization of values such as amr bi al-maʿrūf wa nahy ʿan al-munkar (enjoining good and forbidding evil). These ethical institutions must be woven into the fabric of society not as marginal moral guidance but as pillars of civic consciousness and transformative agency.

The third domain of obstacles arises from the complexity of modern social life. As societies become more differentiated and stratified, the gap

between the powerful and the weak widens, undermining collective solidarity and complicating the implementation of consultative principles such as shūrā. Al-Sadr notes that modern governance requires normative and legal structures capable of managing pluralism while maintaining unity. Without clear frameworks to regulate participation, protect minority rights, and uphold justice across class divides, participation can become a tool for elite entrenchment rather than communal empowerment. The absence or weakness of legal structures—particularly in the domain of manṭaqat al-farāgh (areas of juristic discretion)—poses a critical risk to participatory governance. To address this, there is a need for the codification of laws based on Islamic jurisprudence, especially in ambiguous areas, and the establishment of robust oversight institutions, such as people's guardian councils and legally mandated ombudsman bodies. These institutions serve not only as technical correctives but as expressions of the people's shared commitment to justice and accountability.

In synthesis, the barriers to implementing people-centered governance in the Islamic context can be categorized into three integrated but distinct spheres. First, economic structures characterized by distributive injustice marginalize the public and reduce divine vicegerency to elite domination. Second, human moral weakness—manifested in both leadership and the broader citizenry—undermines the ethos of collective responsibility, highlighting the need for ethical cultivation. Third, the social and legal complexities of modern life threaten cohesion and the integrity of participatory frameworks unless they are met with clear institutional designs rooted in Islamic principles.

To overcome these barriers, al-Sadr's vision calls for a strategic and unified approach comprising three foundational pillars: the pursuit of economic justice through redistributive laws and institutional checks on accumulation; the promotion of spiritual and moral education to nurture a sense of vicegerency and public duty; and the construction of participatory institutions—ranging from local councils to the Ahl al-ḥall wa al-ʿaqd—to operationalize the collective moral and political agency of the community. Only through the integration of these elements can the ideal of Mardomisazi transcend abstraction and become the living reality of Islamic participatory governance.

Implication Six: Prerequisites for People-Centered Governance in Islamic Thought

The successful realization of Mardomisāzī—people-centered governance—in Islamic political philosophy is contingent upon a

constellation of theological, ethical, institutional, and economic prerequisites. In the thought of Martyr Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, these conditions are not merely idealistic aspirations, but normative imperatives derived from scriptural foundations and demonstrated throughout Islamic history. They reflect a holistic vision in which divine sovereignty, human agency, distributive justice, and political participation converge under the banner of collective vicegerency (khelāfat al-jamāʿah).

Foremost among these prerequisites is the acknowledgment of mutual responsibility as the ontological basis of human vicegerency. The Islamic model of governance, as articulated by al-Sadr, regards the people not merely as political participants but as bearers of a divine trust. Human beings, collectively designated as God's vicegerents on earth, are charged with the task of administering justice, upholding divine ordinances, and cultivating the earth in accordance with sacred principles. Participation in governance, therefore, is not a political privilege alone, but a religious duty that demands alignment with divine law. This conception renders political engagement an act of worship and a condition for legitimate sovereignty (Theory of Collective Vicegerency, pp. 79–80).

Integral to this vision is the Islamic affirmation of human freedom and agency. The Qur'anic paradigm presupposes that individuals possess the moral capacity to choose between gratitude (shukr) and denial (kufr), and this freedom is the foundation of both personal accountability and collective responsibility. As such, governance must occur within a socio-political environment that fosters conscious, voluntary participation. Mardomisāzī is not compatible with authoritarianism or blind obedience; it requires citizens who are morally aware and spiritually motivated to participate in reform efforts grounded in divine guidance (Theory of Vicegerency, p. 93).

Another essential condition is the incorporation of the public into the processes of justice and law enforcement. The Qur'an commands believers to "judge with justice" (4:58), a directive that implies the necessity of consultative mechanisms and communal oversight in the implementation of legal norms. Islamic criminal law is not merely punitive, but pedagogical and preventative—requiring public endorsement and moral awareness to function effectively. Al-Sadr thus envisions a participatory legal order in which society assumes partial responsibility for maintaining justice and deterring corruption (Theory of Vicegerency, pp. 271–275).

Furthermore, hope is identified as a critical spiritual driver of collective action. Without a realistic and faith-based hope for justice, Mardomisāzī becomes devoid of vitality. Al-Sadr argues that authentic Islamic

governance must cultivate a sense of purposeful hope—one rooted in religious eschatology and prophetic narratives rather than imported political myths. This hope is not abstract optimism, but a motivational force that inspires sacrifice, perseverance, and resistance in the face of oppression (The Essential Condition for an Islamic Uprising, p. 43).

In this context, Islamic political thought warns against the uncritical adoption of external models, particularly Western liberal democracies that prioritize material individualism and market rationality. For Mardomisāzī to be meaningful, it must emerge from indigenous traditions aligned with Islamic ontology and values. Al-Sadr underscores the importance of historical exemplars such as Imam Ali (a.s.), whose governance combined social justice, equal legal treatment, and principled leadership. These cases offer not only theoretical inspiration but practical templates for structuring participation and accountability (Sources of Power in Islamic Government, pp. 158–159).

Moreover, al-Sadr insists that legal legitimacy in Islamic governance is dependent upon practical implementation, not mere textual symbolism. He critiques historical and contemporary governments that possess righteous constitutions yet fail to actualize them in daily life. The true test of Mardomisāzī lies in the state's ability to translate constitutional values into equitable outcomes—particularly in access to justice, social services, and legal protection (Sources of Power, pp. 95–96).

Economic justice is also a foundational condition. The Islamic state must actively combat exploitative practices such as hoarding and monopolization. In al-Sadr's economic vision, labor-based ownership, progressive taxation mechanisms like khums and kharāj, and price regulation are essential tools for balancing public welfare and private enterprise. These policies ensure that economic participation remains inclusive and that the concentration of wealth does not erode the foundations of public sovereignty (Islamic Economic Blueprint, pp. 192–198, 243–245).

Further, a legitimate Islamic government must commit to job creation and poverty eradication. By guaranteeing employment and providing welfare to those unable to work, the state fulfills its moral obligation and reinforces the participatory essence of Mardomisāzī. Al-Sadr reinterprets governance not as an elite-controlled bureaucracy but as a system tasked with social upliftment, equity, and the eradication of deprivation (Islamic Economic Blueprint, p. 341).

Finally, the role of righteous religious leadership is emphasized as a catalyst for popular engagement. The Iranian revolution, for instance,

demonstrates how religious authority—embodied by figures such as Imam Khomeini—can unite faith with political agency, mobilizing the masses in opposition to tyranny. In this view, Mardomisāzī is most effective when spiritual guidance, collective resistance, and public participation converge within a framework of legitimate religious leadership (Draft Constitution of the Islamic Republic, p. 16).

Taken together, these conditions form an integrated architecture for implementing people-centered governance in Islamic thought. They encompass theological commitments to divine sovereignty, ethical imperatives for justice and agency, structural requirements for economic equity, and institutional mechanisms for participation. More than a theory, this framework is reflected in the historical praxis of early Islamic governance, especially in the conduct of Imam Ali (a.s.), whose leadership exemplified the convergence of divine authority and public accountability.

Thus, Mardomisāzī is not a mere expression of political inclusion; it is a spiritually rooted model in which civic engagement and religious ethics operate in tandem. It represents a paradigm of governance wherein the legitimacy of the state is measured not by electoral success alone, but by its fidelity to divine ordinances, its responsiveness to the needs of the people, and its capacity to translate collective vicegerency into both institutional form and social function.

5. Conclusion and Final Remarks

This study, grounded in the political and theological thought of Shahid Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, has examined the theory of collective human vicegerency (khelāfat al-jamāʿat al-bashariyyah) as a foundational paradigm for realizing people-centered governance (Mardomisāzī) in the Islamic tradition. Al-Sadr conceptualizes this model not merely as a political entitlement, but as a divine obligation embedded in the amānah (trusteeship) granted by God to humanity. Within this framework, the people—acting as God's vicegerents—bear a moral and institutional responsibility for managing society, implementing justice, and embodying divine values in public life.

The findings of this research may be summarized across five key dimensions. First, the study articulates a definition of people-centered governance in al-Sadr's thought as both a structural and value-driven process. It entails active and equitable public participation in ownership, decision-making, and policy implementation—while maintaining a qualitative orientation toward divine justice and ethical integrity. Second, the theory of collective vicegerency provides the theological underpinning

for the legitimacy of participatory governance. In this model, the vicegerency of humankind is actualized through mechanisms such as shūrā (consultation), communal oversight, and religious ijtihād. During the era of ghaybah (occultation), this responsibility is shared between the marjaʿiyyah (religious authority), which provides normative guidance, and the Ummah, which carries out executive and deliberative functions.

Third, the study highlights the normative contrast between Islamic people-centered governance and Western liberal democracy. While the latter derives legitimacy from majoritarian will and popular sovereignty, the former is rooted in divine trusteeship and adherence to immutable principles of justice and human dignity. In the Islamic framework, even majority consensus cannot override these divinely ordained rights.

Fourth, the implementation of Mardomisāzī is hindered by three interrelated categories of obstacles: structural (e.g., economic inequality and monopolistic ownership), moral (e.g., spiritual apathy and ingratitude), and systemic (e.g., social fragmentation and regulatory weakness). Addressing these challenges requires a tripartite strategy of distributive economic justice, sustained moral cultivation, and institutional reform.

Fifth, the study identifies the practical requirements for actualizing people-centered governance in line with Islamic principles. These include the internalization of divine accountability, the preservation of individual agency and freedom, the practical enforcement of justice, economic decentralization, and the integrative role of righteous religious leadership. Accordingly, key policy recommendations are offered: cultivating morally responsible and socially engaged individuals; institutionalizing state accountability mechanisms; promoting people-centered technologies and governance tools; and aligning individual incentives with communal values.

In sum, this research demonstrates that Mardomisāzī, as envisioned by al-Sadr, is a dynamic, multi-layered process that synthesizes ethical commitment, legal accountability, and participatory governance under the canopy of Islamic values. Its implementation requires a reconceptualization of the state not as an authoritarian structure, but as a facilitator of divine justice and communal empowerment. Only through such a transformation can people-centered governance fulfill its potential as an expression of collective vicegerency and contribute to the formation of a just, God-centered society.

Ultimately, this study affirms that al-Sadr's thought not only offers a coherent response to the governance dilemmas of the contemporary Muslim world, but also serves as an inspirational and operational

framework for justice-oriented movements seeking to establish a spiritually grounded and ethically coherent socio-political order.

6. Suggestions for Future Research

A comparative analysis of the theory of collective human vicegerency with governance models from other philosophical or religious traditions.

Empirical studies on the role of grassroots institutions (e.g., local Shora councils) in achieving social justice in contemporary Islamic societies.

Examination of the role of digital technologies in enhancing public participation and reducing administrative corruption.

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