



The Role of the People in Islamic Governance (Religious Democracy): The Perspective of Imam Khamenei

Ali Rezaeian: Professor, Organizational Behavior Management, Faculty of Management, Public Administration & Accounting, Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran.

a-rezaeian@sbu.ac.ir |  0000-0002-0563-389X

Abstract

Purpose: This scientific note aims to examine the role of the people in Islamic governance—often conceptualized as religious democracy—from the viewpoint of Imam Khamenei. It seeks to clarify the relationship between divine authority and popular participation within Islamic political thought.

Method/Approach: The study adopts a conceptual and analytical approach grounded in Islamic political theory, focusing on the intellectual framework articulated by Imam Khamenei regarding governance, legitimacy, and public participation.

Findings: The analysis demonstrates that in Islamic political thought, divine authority and popular participation are not contradictory but complementary and mutually reinforcing. God-centered governance presupposes conscious faith, voluntary participation, and moral responsibility of the people. Public religiosity, social responsibility, ethical governance, and human vicegerency (khilāfah) constitute the conceptual foundations of Islamic political legitimacy. Furthermore, popular will is essential both in the establishment and continuity of an Islamic government, while elected officials bear profound moral and practical obligations toward society.

Conclusion: Islamic governance is ultimately presented as a system in which human agency, divine law, justice, and ethical accountability converge, forming an integrated model of religious democracy rooted in both divine guidance and active public participation.

Keywords

Islamic Governance, Popular Participation, Religious Democracy, Ethical Leadership, Public Religiosity.

Introduction

One of the most frequently debated issues in contemporary political theory—particularly within discussions of Islamic governance—is the relationship between divine sovereignty and popular participation. Critics of religious governance often assume an inherent tension between God-centered authority and people-centered democracy. However, Islamic political thought, especially as articulated by Imam Khamenei, rejects this dichotomy. In this view, divine legitimacy and popular will are not opposing principles but interdependent dimensions of governance.

The concept of *religious democracy* in Islamic thought rests upon the assumption that a political system grounded in divine law can only emerge, function, and sustain itself through the active will, belief, and participation of the people. Thus, the people are not passive subjects of a sacred authority, but conscious agents whose faith, choice, and responsibility are central to political legitimacy.

1. People-Centeredness in God-Centered Governance

In Islamic understanding, God-centered thinking is inseparable from people-centered thinking. A religious government cannot be imposed upon a society that lacks religious belief or public acceptance. The existence of an Islamic government in any country necessarily reflects the religiosity and conscious will of its people. In other words, the formation of such a government signifies that the people themselves have chosen this path and desired its realization.

From this standpoint, public faith is not merely a private or spiritual matter; it is a social and political force that shapes collective destiny. Without the people's belief in religion and their readiness to uphold it in social life, neither a religious society nor an Islamic government can be established. Therefore, popular will is not an auxiliary element of Islamic governance, but one of its essential pillars.

2. Popular Will and Political Legitimacy

A fundamental question arises: if a religious government is based on divine laws, does this eliminate the role of the people? Imam Khamenei's response to this question is unequivocal—never. No ruler can assume power without public acceptance and allegiance. If people do not pledge allegiance to a leader and do not desire his leadership, he cannot legitimately govern.

This principle highlights a critical dimension of Islamic political legitimacy: authority is realized through public consent. While divine law

provides the normative framework, the realization of governance occurs through the people's choice. Thus, legitimacy in Islamic governance is both normative (rooted in divine values) and social (rooted in public will).

3. Democracy in the Islamic Framework

Democracy, as understood in Islamic governance, has two inseparable dimensions. The first concerns the formation of the political system. The people choose the system, determine the form of government, elect their representatives, and participate—directly or indirectly—in selecting key officials. This participatory process reflects the centrality of popular will in political organization.

The second dimension relates to responsibility and accountability. Those who are elected by the people assume serious, real, and ongoing duties toward them. Governance is not a privilege or a favor granted to society, but a responsibility entrusted by the people. Officials must not regard public service as benevolence, nor should they exaggerate their achievements or make promises they fail to fulfill.

4. Ethical Governance and Moral Responsibility

A core element of Islamic governance is ethical conduct. Leaders are warned against self-glorification, broken promises, and symbolic performance devoid of substance. Exaggeration diminishes truth, and broken promises erode trust—both in the eyes of the people and before God.

The Qur'anic principle articulated in Surah As-Saff (Verse 3) underscores this moral accountability: *“It is very displeasing to God that you say something and do not do it.”* Although these teachings were originally addressed by Amir al-Mu'minin (Imam Ali) to Malik Ashtar, they transcend time and context and apply equally to all who hold authority.

In this ethical framework, governance is inseparable from moral integrity. Political authority without ethical commitment loses its legitimacy, regardless of formal structures or legal claims.

5. Human Vicegerency and the Philosophy of Responsibility

From a broader philosophical perspective, Islamic thought introduces the concept of the human being as the vicegerent of God (khalīfat Allāh) on earth. Humanity has been entrusted with the responsibility of managing, developing, and cultivating the world. This trusteeship requires both knowledge and action.

Human history demonstrates that natural forces—such as fire, electricity, gravity, and countless other potentials—existed long before humanity recognized or utilized them. Discovering and harnessing these forces is part of humanity’s divinely assigned mission. Seeking knowledge, understanding nature, and advancing human life are therefore not merely scientific endeavors, but religious responsibilities.

6. Inner Capacities and Human Development

The concept of vicegerency extends beyond external nature to the internal dimensions of the human being. Humans are endowed with intellect, wisdom, creativity, and profound psychological capacities. Extracting and cultivating these inner talents is a fundamental duty.

In this view, human development is holistic: it encompasses intellectual growth, moral refinement, self-purification, and social responsibility. A society guided by Islamic governance must therefore create conditions that allow individuals to realize their full potential—both as moral agents and as contributors to collective progress.

7. Justice, Social Relations, and Collective Responsibility

At the macro level, the target audience of Islamic governance is all individuals within society. Justice, ethical relations, and social responsibility are not confined to rulers or elites; they are obligations shared by all members of the community.

Every individual is responsible for his or her words and actions, for self-transcendence and moral purification, and for contributing to the development of society and the world. Governance, from this perspective, is not merely a top-down structure but a shared moral project.

8. Conclusion

From Imam Khamenei’s perspective, Islamic governance represents a synthesis of divine law and popular will. People are not marginal actors but central participants in both the establishment and the continuation of political authority. Religious democracy, as articulated in this framework, is grounded in public faith, ethical governance, human responsibility, and collective justice.

Ultimately, Islamic governance is a system in which legitimacy flows from conscious belief, moral accountability, and active participation. It affirms that a God-centered system is not opposed to the people, but is realized through them.