

## **Imam Ali on Justice**

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### **Abstract**

A constant yet complex question in the history of political thought is that of justice, which has been discussed by all political thinkers. Yet, different answers have always been provided to the question what justice or a just act is or what decision can be considered to be a just one. Nevertheless, as a concept throughout history, justice is also a topic constantly dealt with in divine religions, especially in Islamic thought. In Islamic thought, justice is by itself of such significance that it has been frequently discussed in the Holy Quran as well as in the tradition and, subsequently, has been one of the most controversial religious concepts analyzed by Islamic thinkers including philosophers, theologians and Islamic jurists. The present article studies the concept of justice according to Imam Ali, especially because he is the only Infallible Imam throughout the history of Islam who functioned as the head of the political power and led the Islamic society through complex political events and with wide gaps.

### **Keywords**

Imam Ali, justice, piety, wisdom/sagacity, equitableness, denial of discrimination

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## **Introduction**

The question of justice is doubtless one of the most stable and complex ones in the history of human thought. It is considered such a fundamental question that no political thinker has ever failed to mention and explain it. The developmental history of human life is also full of cases with noticeable presence or absence of justice. A study of the course of global civilization well indicates that the formation and collapse of governments has generally been in connection with seeking justice on the one hand and state injustice on the other hand. Therefore, in the history of political thought, one of the most prominent works on politics, Plato's Republic also begins with the question of justice (Plato, 1988, p.331).

Justice should be considered as one of the characteristics of human nature, which is innately present in every human being in one way or another. Even oppressors do not wish to be called oppressors and constantly attempt to explain and justify their deeds within a framework of justice. Justice has a simple appearance but a complex content and is conceptually among abstract categories. It should be admitted, however, that human beings, as they share the same human essence, have the same understanding of it.

This becomes important especially when justice as a category has to do with worldly affairs. Inequality in worldly material assets such as wealth, power and sociopolitical status despite similarity rather than the identicalness of individuals' aptitudes are undeniable realities in human societies from times past to present. The reality shows that one cannot significantly explain the relationship between the existing inequalities and inequality of talent. Justice in its general sense in fact explains all discussions in place whether in relation to or in defense or rejection of such inequalities.

However, the question what justice or a just act is or what decision can be called to be a just decision has always been answered in different ways throughout history. In ancient Greek philosophy, justice was explained as a virtue and, generally, within the framework of balance at different levels (human versus community). Therefore, a just society was considered to be a balanced society, i.e., in the same way that a person has various forces inside, all of which have to serve their own purposes for the individual to be a balanced person, a just society was also explained in its hierarchical form, in a way that each layer would fulfill its specific functions (Foster 1991:41-71, Enāyat 1998, pp.49-53, 105-9)

Subsequent developments in the West, however, prevented any further significant impact of such an understanding of justice on political thoughts. In modern times, and especially after the 17<sup>th</sup> century and with the development of the social contract discourse, justice was also explained within a utilitarian framework. Justice in this sense was interpreted as man's farsighted rationality for protection of material individual interests, which require recognizing the interests of others. Justice in this sense was considered to be both to the benefit of the individual as well as the others. Therefore, the basis of justice was considered to be contractual, while everybody could reach an agreement with another on whether an act amounts to justice.

In the meanwhile, however, another outlook was gradually developed which looked at justice as impartiality, i.e., ignoring individual interests. This outlook was teleological and ethical, contrary to the instrumentalist or contractual view. In this outlook, the prior condition had to be one in which justice makes sense and there are principles for it, which is accepted by human beings rationalistically and beyond personal interests rather than for individual purposes.

On the other hand, however, the concept of justice as a history-independent element is also a permanent question in divine religions,

especially in Islamic thought. In Islamic thought, justice by itself has a fundamental status and is widely discussed in the Holy Quran as well as in the tradition, while being consequently precisely analyzed by Islamic thinkers, including jurists as well as philosophers and theologians. While calling people to take God's path as revealed through the prophets and to follow the path of self-refinement and educating the people, the Quran provides the way to establish justice in the society and to form a society that would call the people towards justice. In line with this, the goal of the prophets is to revive faith in God among the people and to make religious morals flow throughout the individual and the society, so as for the people to rise for justice.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, in response to such questions as what human acts would be just, Islam provides an eternal solution within a framework of innate rules, because, considering the nature of legislation in Islam, which is based on a divine human nature, justice has a divine meaning, in which people's convenience and interest forever are taken into account rather than for a certain period of time. This provides a framework in which the criteria are defined in accordance with man's divine nature while, in implementation of these regulations, piety and justice have been set as conditions.

In Shiism, justice is defined as one of the principles of the religion while Shiite history and beliefs have constantly considered it as an integral part. Shiism not only defines the mission of the divine prophets and the Prophet of Islam as well as that of the Infallible Imams as the spreading of justice but also outlines its utopia, which will be realized with the emergence of the 12<sup>th</sup> Imam, in light of the concept of justice.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the issue of justice should be taken into consideration in the history of political and ideological thoughts of Muslims equally with matters of determinism and free will, because there is a direct rational relationship between justice and free will on the one hand and

determinism and denial of justice on the other hand, since it is only in the presence of free will that a discussion of doing or not doing one's individual duty on the one hand and that of punishment, on the other hand, make sense, and it is such questioning in the history of Muslims' intellectual thought that formed two schools of the Mu'tazelites and the Ash'arites. The immediate reflection of the Mutazelite view consists of accepting independent intellections, responsibility and free will of man and the possibility of justice and its establishment in the human society (Motahari, No Date-A pp13-26).

According to what has been mentioned regarding the intellectual history of justice, the present study will make an attempt to analyze this concept according to Imam Ali, who is the most prominent thinker and expression of Islamic thought after the Prophet of Islam. After the expansion of Islam in other civilizations, it was obviously in Imam Ali's rule that for the first time justice appeared in state policymaking while, because of Imam Ali's inclusive outlook on it as the main concept in various dimensions, justice emerged and was developed. On the one hand, Imam believed that justice is a principle that governs the whole being and that the human society, therefore, had to be based on the same basis. On the other hand, however, because of formation of the government, he tried to put into practice whatever of the justice he believed in, in a society full of various gaps and fragile cracks in the short period of his rule.

### **1. Meaning and concept of justice**

The word '*adl*', which is the Persian equivalent of 'justice' and is a loanword from Arabic, has various meanings in its original Arabic, including 'persistence, judging aright, insistence, equality among objects, the middle path (between the two extremes), clean, ransom' and the like (Ibn Manzur, 1984, pp.430-437; Ma'luf, 1988, pp.491-492). Dehkhodā also mentions various meanings for the word '*adl*,

including 'justice, equity, something midway between the extremes, rewarding good things with the good and bad things with the bad, fair judging,' etc (Dehkhodā, 1962, pp.121-124). The opposite of 'justice' is 'injustice, oppression,' which generally means 'deviating from the right thing, ignoring the rights of others.'

The word 'equity' (*qest* in Persian) is often used along with 'justice' and is a synonym of it. It is a word that means 'justice, share,' and the like. The Quran also expresses the establishment of equity, i.e. persistence in and expansion of justice, as one of the goals of sending the prophets (Hadid:25). However, equity is also used to refer to people who [claimed to work towards equity but] did injustice, as in the case of opponents of Imam Ali (the '*qāsetīn*').

"Equity (*qest*) is a share based on justice and the word *qest* ('equity') also has other meanings," thus writes Rāqeb Esfahāni. "And that would refer to someone who takes another person's share, which is an unjust act, as the Quran says so, "And as for those who are unjust, they are firewood for hell." (72:15), where 'those who are unjust' are the same as *qāsetun* ('equity-robbers') (Rāqeb Esfahāni NO DATE, p.403).

The Greek equivalent *dikaisoune* has a much wider meaning than *adl* in modern Persian or 'justice' in English and in fact contains an entirely ethical concept (although in Islamic jurisprudence and sharia a 'just' witness is one who is pious and chaste). The Greeks considered 'impartial adjudication, self-restraint and individual chastity' all to be applications of justice, i.e., to them, justice meant personal righteousness and social piety at the same time (Enāyat 1998, p.50).

Justice can be conceptually explained in various meanings, one being 'coordination and balance in objects,' the opposite of which is 'lack of coordination or proportion.' The other meaning is 'equity and absence of discrimination,' which is in fact of 'lack of difference between individuals.' Moreover, in another sense, it means 'merits

and entitlement', which means observing the rights of individuals and granting them their rights<sup>3</sup> while, injustice, which is the opposite of this interpretation of justice, means 'disregard for and violating the rights of others'. It is in the fourth interpretation, i.e., entitlement to benefit from divine blessing, the people are not equal with each other and justice means 'not refusing to give someone what they are entitled to' (Motahari NO DATE-A, pp.59-67).

In Shiite jurisprudence, a special meaning of justice is taken into consideration, which can be interpreted as the jurisprudential and moral justice. The jurisprudential definition of justice is "individual characteristic that brings about piety, which constitutes fulfillment of compulsory duties and quitting the major sins absolutely (whether there is persistence in the majors sins or not) and avoiding the minor sins if there is persistence therein and association with generosity, which consists in following and carrying out good habits and also avoiding bad habits and what causes despise by others and degrades individual determination." (al-Jab'i al-'Āmeli, 1398 A.H, pp.792-793). This meaning of justice is apparently the same as pure piety. Nevertheless, justice should be considered as admitting to what is right and implementing it, which is made possible naturally by being associated with divine piety.'

## **2. Importance and concept of justice according to Imam Ali**

### **2.1. Importance of justice.**

A discussion of justice according to Imam Ali requires considering two things: one is the origin of his thoughts and the other the sociopolitical conditions governing the Islamic society after Prophet Mohammad passed away. The concept of justice had doubtless no origin other than in divine revelation and the practice of the divine prophets and that of Prophet Mohammad. As one who would continue

the Prophet's mission, Imam Ali always works towards guiding the society towards equity and justice.

Therefore, Imam Ali's outlook on justice is rooted in his divine worldview. Therefore, his view of justice should not be deemed as based on customs, traditions or social accepted rules. Rather, it is something that is borne by the essence of and flows throughout being. Imam Ali's widespread and fundamental attention to justice can be searched in his various sayings, a fundamental part of which is focused on human and social transactions.

To Imam Ali, justice brings about people's stability, forms the state, is synonymous with fairness, is a human virtue, is a virtue for the ruler, is the best virtue, the biggest wealth, organizes the citizens' lives, is the beauty of the rulers, guarantees continuation of power, is the beauty of politics, gives order to and saves the state, is the best policy, eliminates differences and is a cause of unity (al-'Āmadi al-Tamimi, 1407 A.H., vol. 1, pp.13, 15, 21, 32, 37, 40, 41, 48, 82, 102, 127, 329, 335, 338), is the apex of faith, is equivalent of benevolence, is the highest rank of faith (Mohammadi al-Reyshahri, 1983, vol. 6, p.81) and the like, all of which not only indicate the importance of justice for a reasonable human life but rather in fact point to its necessity as an innate value for the human society.

This value is such that the Imam considers it as one of the four pillars of faith along with jihad, patience and perfect certitude (Nahjulbalāghah, 1972, p.1099) and, under the title of justice, explains four subtitles of "precision to understand properly, achieving the truth of knowledge, good judgment, and establishment of patience". Then he adds, "Thus, whoever understands the truth of knowledge, will pass good judgments in accordance with the rules of the religion; and whoever is patient, will not be negligible in his task." (Nahjulbalāghah, 1972, p.1099) (In this sense, Imam considers justice to be the comprehension and knowledge as well as judging in favor of



knowledge and patience, in its implementation, which is the enforcement of the truth of the religion).

In order to more transparently figure out the concept of justice according to Imam Ali, it is necessary to search his other sayings as well as his practice as the ruler, in order to further analyze them with a greater degree of precision, especially because justice in Imam Ali's view is considered achievable, tangible and objective, as he himself says in respect of his rule, "They lived under my rule (and now joined Muāwīa), they recognized justice, saw, heard and knew. The people with us are equal in rights, then they fled so as to gain some profit." (Nahjulbalāghah, 1972, p.1072, Letter 70). These words of Imam Ali introduce his rule as a just state, in which the outcome of spreading justice was objective and tangible for the people.

## **2.2. Concept of justice**

In his sermons, letters and words of wisdom, Imam Ali introduces justice in a variety of ways and pays special attention to it. Nevertheless, in order to outline clearly the concept of justice according to Imam Ali, it is necessary to examine it in the following frameworks:

### **2.2.1. Justice as piety**

A famous saying of Imam confirms justice as a focal point in politics, and that is one in which he says, "The criterion of politics is justice." (al-Āmadi al-Tamimi, 1407 A.H., p.278) It seems that, in this complex yet meaningful saying, Ali sets forth a most important discussion on justice in the political and social realm. As it has already been noted, the core of discussion in political philosophy is the concept of justice and, in this saying (*hadith*), Ali introduces justice as the measurement standard in politics. Indeed the concept of justice here requires an understanding of politics according to Imam Ali.

Numerous definitions have been provided for politics, which is the most sensitive area of human activity in the society. The best known such definition is 'the rule of people, fighting for power and preserving it, authoritarian distribution of values', etc ('Ālam, 1996, pp.29-30). Maurice de Vergé provides a Jaussian picture of politics and believes that the essence of politics, its nature and true meaning are that there in a dialectic always and everywhere (de Vergé, 1979, p.9). It is quite obvious that, in the realm of politics, the element of ruling and managing the human society is a basic element and is, in the words of Robert Dall, inevitable for human life while humans are at all points of time somehow involved in issues relating to it (Dall 1983, p.1).

It must, however, be admitted that politics can be explained according to its objectives as well. In this sense, politics can be a means to the salvation of people or, on the contrary, be deemed as a holy goal in itself. Thus, politics that would lead the society towards salvation is one that is constantly the same for God's prophets and friends. In line with this, the most important task of the Prophet of Islam within politics is to guide the society towards the higher interests, which is why the similar terms 'leading the people' are used for Imam Hadi and the Infallible Imams in the Marvi prayers (Qomi, 1999, p.901).

Therefore, the objective of politics according to religion is to define relations among people in line with the divine guidance, the truth and justice, which is in fact an ethical perception within politics. In this view, neither politics nor power is by itself an objective. There are rather other higher goals such as justice, happiness, guidance and the superior good for people and the human society that are proposed while the duty of politics is explained as preparing the ground for conditions to reach such fundamental values.

This is indeed Imam Ali's approach to politics because he considers politics that develops salvation and piety and is based on justice. Accordingly, the core of his outlook on politics is justice, and

it is a politics that looks at man and human interactions from the viewpoint of virtues rather than one that is identifying the objective and acquiring any means to achieve it. The goal of Imam Ali ibn Abi Tāleb in politics and state goes far beyond achieving political power. Therefore, he only thinks of strictly adhering to moral principles and values and merely properly and constantly implementing the divine teachings and commandments of Islam (Derakhshé, 2003, p.10). He never accepted politics in the sense of deceit and oppression, and this constitutes the focal point in Islamic justice.

A definition of politics according to Imam Ali can be found in the following words of his, “To God I swear that Mu‘āwiyah is not cleverer than I am, but he is slier and more oppressive.

“By Allah, Mu‘āwiyah is not more cunning than I am, but he deceives and commits evil deeds. Had I not been hateful of deceit, I would have been the most cunning of all men (Nahjulbalāghah, p.648, Hikmah 191)”

Although we do not seek to illustrate the linguistic structure of Imam Ali’s saying here, it is to be noted that these words carry multiple literary emphases that would make the meaning different. Among Arabs, Mu‘āwiyah was known as one of the five most cunning Arabs that would not refrain from anything in order to conquer and preserve power. Imam swears to God here that Mu‘āwiyah is not more cunning than he is. However, what stopped Imam from resorting to such cunning acts was his divine piety and distance from oppression and deceit, as politics to Imam Ali was the same as the truth and the right path and, thus, nothing but piety and justice.

Ali’s ascetic outlook on political power and statesmanship have made his political approaches quite moral and humane, which is why he does not consider any expedience higher than justice-spreading and truth-seeking policies. This is a monotheistic approach and can be explained only within a divine worldview.

Imam was indeed well aware of the methods and means to acquire power and stabilize his rule and could also apply such methods in order to expand his power, yet he did not do so. It should be concluded, then, that Ali ibn Abi Taleb's political practice is not deemed an end by itself. It is rather a means to the objective of implementing and expanding justice and good in the society. This type of outlook, the criterion of which is justice, is one of the most moral understandings of politics, which is achievable only on the basis of true ethics and away from oppression and deceit. In this approach, politics is the same as ethics and piety while the most prominent element of ethics is the same as seeking justice. Therefore, the reason why Ali introduces the main core of politics as being justice and seeks the criterion of politics in justice is rooted in his moral view. Even while enumerating the characteristics of pious people, he mentions the same thing, saying, "The pious person commits himself to justice and the first step of his justice is the rejection of desires from his heart. He describes right and acts accordingly (Nahjulbalāghah, Sermon 86). In other words, Imam Ali considers divine piety as the beginning of justice and deems politics to be meaningful within this framework. Therefore, one of the meanings of justice according to Imam Ali is the same as divine piety, rejection of deceit and oppression.

### **2.2.2. Justice as wisdom**

Another element of justice according to Imam Ali is what he says in answer to a question, i.e., "Which of justice and generosity is superior and more valuable?" Imam said in response,

"Justice contains things and generosity diverts them out of their natural course. Justice is law and general management (for all) while generosity benefits only one, to whom something has been given (a special share). Therefore, justice is more respectable and superior." (Nahjulbalāghah, Hikmah 429).

What Imam says in the above saying can be explained in its philosophical framework as well as in its socioeconomic sense. In the philosophical perspective, this definition of justice has been deemed synonymous with wisdom and, thus, a just act is considered a wise act, because, in this sense, justice is putting anything in its proper place or doing any act appropriately.

While explaining this religious saying, Mortezā Motahari notes that justice and generosity are both human characteristics, emphasizing that, if only we judge by moral and individual standards, generosity more than justice indicates perfection of the soul, yet Imam Ali does not have such an opinion and believes that justice is beyond generosity, for which he mentions two reasons. First, that justice puts things in their natural course yet generosity takes them out of it, because the concept of justice is that natural and real merits should be considered and everyone should be given what they deserve by judging them according to their work, talent and merits (Motahari, No Date-B, pp.111-112).

Therefore, justice is more important than generosity according to Imam Ali, because justice is the principle that can maintain balance in the human society and make peace flow in it. This sense of justice is a general extensive meaning that includes social and moral justice. Such a balance in the society cannot indeed be achieved without observing the principle of nondiscrimination and observing the merits of individuals and granting everyone their right.

Somewhere else, Imam says that a just person is equal to a reasonable person and, consequently, reasonableness and justice are equal. While elaborating on the reasonable person, he says, “He is the one who puts everything in its proper place.” (Nahjulbalāghah, Hikmah 227). Accordingly, there is no difference in Ali’s eyes between justice and reasonableness. Yet, this is not about reason that is focused on personal interests. It is rather reason that contains the

principles of justice and is in line with reason prevailing the entire being. A clear example in this regard is that of prohibition of injustice, which is acceptable to reason. This is the same as justice.

### **2.2.3. Justice as fairness**

The other meaning that can be perceived from the concept of justice according to Amir al-Mu'mineen is fairness. In a saying following the Quranic verse "Lo! Allah enjoineeth justice and kindness," [16:90], Imam Ali says, "Justice is fairness and kindness is generosity." (Nahjulbalāghah, Hikmat 223). Also regarding fairness, he says, "Fairness removes differences and scattering and brings about solidarity ((al-Āmadi al-Tamimi, 1407 A.H., vol. 1, p.82).

In this view, Ali apparently defines justice as observing the interests of the others within the framework of social interactions. However somewhere else, he introduces fairness as piety, saying, "Control your desires and be stingy to them (be stingy in doing things that are now allowed) because stinginess for the desires amounts to fairness and justice." (Nahjulbalāghah, Letter 53). He immediately generalizes it towards ruling over citizens, adding, "Kindness and good treatment of citizens should have a place in your heart" (Nahjulbalāghah, pp.992-3) and "Treat God fairly (Perform God's commands and refrain from what He has prohibited) and, in behalf of yourself, relatives and any citizen who you like and in the case of people, do not fail to observe fairness since, if you do, you will be an oppressor." (Nahjulbalāghah, p.995). Here fairness means piety as well as observing the preferences of others and performing God's orders in respect of them. Therefore, one can conclude that Ali has discussed fairness in three respects of a person's relations with themselves, with the others and with their God, while considering the opposite act as injustice."

One can also notice the meaning of fairness in Imam Ali's advice to his son, where he says,

“Oh my son, as to what is between you and others, set yourself as the balance. Then, wish them what you wish for yourself, and hate for them what you hate for yourself. Do not cause injustice, as you would not like to be treated unjustly.

“Do good, the way you want good to be done to you, and hold bad for yourself what you hold bad for the others. Happily have for people what would make you happy. Do not say what you do not know, even if what you know is little, and do not say to others what you would not like to be said to you.” (Nahjulbalāghah, 1972, p.921, Advice 31)

In fact, here Imam thinks of man as the balance of fairness and shows that the essence of all people can be set as the standard to judge justice, while generalizing this not only at the individual level but also at the social, political and economic level.

#### **2.2.4. Justice as denial of discrimination**

One of the most tangible aspects of justice is indeed justice within the realm of politics and economy, which can be labeled social justice. In fact, the practical results of the discussion of justice are identified in this realm. Therefore, most discussions in political philosophy regarding what is just is dedicated to establishing what is just in political and economic realms. An analysis of the practice of Imam Ali reveals that a significant part of Imam's discussions, especially during his rule, is directed towards this realm and towards implementing divine justice, which is why Imam Ali's rule is the unique example of a just rule throughout history of humankind.

Justice in this aspect includes fighting injustice, observing equality among people, especially in material and fiscal matters of the state, observing judicial justice, renouncing ethnic and tribal superiority and, subsequently, greed and the like, which have drawn

the attention of Amir al-Mu'mineen. This basis, especially as the fundamental identity of Imam Ali's political program, has been thus expressed in the Sermon of al-Shiqshiqiyah,

“If people had not come to me and supporters had not exhausted the argument and if there had been no pledge of Allah with the learned to the effect that they should not acquiesce in the gluttony of the oppressor and the hunger of the oppressed, I would have cast the rope of Caliphate on its own shoulders” (Nahjulbalāghah, Sermon 3).

“Gluttony of the oppressor” in this sermon reveals Imam's view of refusing an economically stratified society.

In Imam Ali's faith-based city, attention is fully diverted to matters of the deprived, which indicates the fact that he attempted to create a wide space to repair such harms in the society. It is indeed obvious that justice in this sense is not absolute equality of individuals, yet, in view of the special conditions prevailing in the Islamic society after the prophet, it essentially means denial of political, economic or judicial discrimination and observing the rights of the citizens, especially where it is the matter of the relation of the citizens and the state.”, such that Imam says, “Know that citizens are of several groups and matters of some groups will not be in order unless by depending on matters of the other groups and there is no group that does not need the other group.” (Nahjulbalāghah, Letter 53)

In these words, Imam confirms the need for cooperation among people for fulfillment of social life and accepts different capacities and, consequently, merits. However, this does not mean that people should be treated differently by the principles and rules governing a political society. They are, rather, all equal before the law and, in other words, every human being in the social system should feel that their rights have been observed in proportion to his aptitude and activities and no injustice has been done to them. These merits cannot be a basis for ethnicity, tribe, race or consequently socially made-up privileges.



Such justice, in Imam's eyes, results in stability of governments (al-Āmadi al-Tamimi, 1407 A.H., vol. 1, p.329) and the reformation of God's people (al-Āmadi al-Tamimi, 1407 A.H., vol. 2, p.15). Imam seeks such justice for his friends as well as enemies (al-Āmadi al-Tamimi, 1407 A.H., vol. 1, p.135). Therefore, he considers undeserved generosity to be injustice and a case of wastefulness (Nahjulbalāghah, Sermon 26).

In the same line and considering the economic and social gaps already in place in the Muslims' society and the formation of a stratified society, he pays special attention to the lower classes, i.e. those who have no excuse to continue to live a reasonable and decent life. Imam Says:

“[Oh Malik] fear God in respect of the lower classes, i.e. the desperate who have no excuse in the society... For God's consent do what He has ordered you in their respect and allocate to them in every city, part of the public treasury that you have and part of the grains and profits of lands taken by Islam, because the farthest of them is their share, which the closest of them have.” (Nahjulbalāghah, Letter 53).

Observing the rights of individuals and eliminating deprivation of individuals in the society are integral parts of Alavite justice, because “The best of God's people are like a just Imam who have been properly led and who lead the others and the worst of the people are like an oppressive leader who has been misled and who misleads the others (Nahjulbalāghah, Sermon 163). Thus, on the one hand justice and guidance come together and, on the other hand, injustice and misleading. He believes in people's equality in rights and justice and explicitly states that, “Know that people are equal before us in terms of rights and justice.” (Nahjulbalāghah, Letter 70)

This outlook of Imam's is more extensively emphasized in his letter to those he appointed,

“In your behavior with your subjects, remember that you should use leniency and tolerance alongside severity.

“But remember always to treat them sympathetically, kindly, courteously and to treat them cheerfully. While meeting them, talking to them and wishing everyone of them, whether rich or poor, big or small you should behave as if they are your equals so that important persons of your State may not presume to derive undue advantage out of your uncalled for servile behavior and poor people may not lose hope in your justice and sympathy.” (Nahjulbalāghah, Letter 46)

He even extends this attitude to non-Muslims and, in his letter to Mālik Ashtar, thus advises:

Maalik! You must create, in your mind, kindness, compassion and love for your subjects. Do not behave towards them as if you are a voracious and ravenous beast and as if your success lies in devouring them.

Remember, Maalik, that amongst your subjects there are two kinds of people: those who have the same religion as you have; they are brothers to you, and those who have religions other than that of yours, they are human beings like you (Nahjulbalāghah, Letter 53)

This is why he emphasizes to Maalik, “Avoid monopolizing and allocating to yourself that for which all people are equal (Nahjulbalāghah, Letter 53). This means that things in which all people are equal and to which all people have equal rights should not be monopolized by the rulers, because all people are equal to others in creation and, regardless of any condition, people are equal in rights. This is why Imam sees rights to be the same for all individuals, far and close, and says, “Observe the rights for those who are entitled to it, no matter whether they are distant from or close to you (Nahjulbalāghah, Letter 53). Therefore, in Imam Ali’s intellectual system, the concept of justice and right are interwoven and semantically interdependent, while one of the main aspects of their existence is fulfilling the rights

of people and removing all discrimination between them in what they are equal for.

The conclusion of the discussions in respect of the concept of justice as provided above is that justice can be explained in all aspects and the senses that can be figured out in Imam Ali's outlook complement and explain each other.

### **3. Imam Ali and spreading justice in ruling**

The conditions of the Islamic society under the third caliph clearly required the need for fundamental political and economic changes in public opinion, thus drawing the justice-seeking inclinations of the people towards Imam Ali's leadership because the people saw in Imam Ali's leadership the solutions to the problems remaining from before and reconstruction of the disrupted atmosphere of the Islamic society, thus preparing the conditions for returning to Islamic principles and attitudes. There were indeed people who thought that associating with Imam Ali would bring them unjust financial and political benefits. Imam's conduct, however, showed that he owed nothing to anybody and never sacrificed the principles of justice for individual or tribal interests or expedience.

It is quite clear that, in order to amend the conditions of the society as inherited from the past required overcoming various challenges and vacuums, of which Imam was aware. Therefore, confronted with the people's request to accept to become the caliph, he said, "Leave me and seek someone else. We are facing a matter which has several faces and colors, which neither hearts can stand nor intelligence accept" (Nahjulbalāghah, Sermon 91).

These words by Imam Ali show that he was analyzing the subject of ruling by realistically looking into the future on the one hand, and the objectives that he intended to achieve, on the other hand, while well knowing that this society is not capable of accepting his justice-

seeking policies because, more than two decades of implementing discriminating policies, especially in distributing the public treasury and adopting ethnic-oriented methods, had already had an impact on the culture of the society, increasing the material greed of the well-to-do Arab nobility, in a way that a justice-oriented approach would be difficult and even unbearable for them.

However, Imam finally accepted to lead the society, with his main goal being the spreading of justice according to the basic principles of Islam or, in Imam's words, "pledge of Allah with the learned to the effect that they should not acquiesce in the gluttony of the oppressor and the hunger of the oppressed" (Nahjulbalāghah, Sermon 3). Therefore, what ruling meant to Imam as the institution of power was not domination, superiority and autocracy, but an institution whose value depended on reinstating the rights and spreading justice. This view can be seen throughout Imam's rule, because ruling by itself had no attraction for Imam unless for revival of divine values.

Therefore, it should be admitted that Imam's goal in ruling was to constantly implement divine values and to serve the people honestly in order to establish justice. Imam never sought worldly status and glory through which to continue the government. Therefore, ruling to him was "worth less than a goat's sneeze" (Nahjulbalāghah, Sermon 3), which is why when it was reported to him that Uthmaan ibn Hunayf, his governor in Basra, attended a dinner party of one of the citizens, he wrote a reprimanding letter to him to the following effect:

Ibn Hunayf! I have received information that a person of Basra invited you to a dinner and you immediately accepted the invitation. I have also heard that very sumptuous meals were served there! Finest varieties of viands were placed before you in large plates and you enjoyed them. I am sorry to hear the news. I never expected that you would accept the invitation of a person who invites big officers and

rich people and from whose doors poor persons and hungry paupers are turned away rudely.

Look carefully into the things which you eat. If there is even a shade of their being obtained unlawfully then throw them away, only eat those things about which you are perfectly certain that they are obtained by honest means. You must know [...] your leader [Imam Ali]. In this world he has satisfied himself with two old, torn and coarse garments and two pieces of bread (Nahjulbalāghah, Letter 45)

Then Imam adds:

If I had so wanted I could have very easily found ways and means to provide for myself the purest honey, the best variety of wheat and the finest silk clothes that could be woven. But it is not possible for inordinate cravings to overcome me and it is not possible that greediness persuades me to acquire the best provisions when in Hijaz and Yemen there may be people who have no hope of obtaining a piece of bread and who have never satisfied their hunger fully. It is not possible for me to satiate myself when there are around me people whom hunger and thirst keeps restless and agonized.

Shall I be satisfied simply because people call me “Amir al-Mu’minin” (Leader of the faithful Muslims)? Shall I not sympathize with the faithful Muslims in their calamities?

Am I created simply to keep on thinking about my food? (Nahjulbalāghah, Letter 45)

This behavior is doubtless very complex. While Imam Ali is at the apex of political power with access to all privileges, he avoids worldly advantages through piety and advises his governors to be pious and stay away from oppression and at the same time considers the state to be something entrusted with the ruler in order to administer rights. He says to a chief of army, “The power to rule is not your prey but a gift entrusted with you, which you have to protect for the one who is higher than you.” (Nahjulbalāghah, Letter 5).

The outline of Imam Ali's policies while he was ruling can be seen in his first sermon after accepting to rule the state. In this sermon, he explains his main plans based on socioeconomic justice and revival of religious and moral values. This sermon, which is entered into the exegesis on Nahjulbalāghah by ibn Abi-'l Hadeed, contains very important and valuable points for a religious state. In his sermon, while analyzing the course of the past history, he introduces himself as one like the other citizens, saying:

I'm a man like you. What is for me, is also there for you. What is for me to do, is also for you to do. Know that I will lead you by following the practice of the prophets and I will do what I have been ordered to. My stance after the demise of the Prophet is the same as that during his life. Know that those who have sunk into the world and have taken control of lands and have created streams and are riding good horses and have tender female slaves, and these have become cause of blames for them, if I prevent them from doing what they have sunk into and I return them to their rights, which they know what they are, they will become angry. In that case, do not tell, 'Ibn Abi Taaleb deprived us of our rights.' Any of the Migrants and the Companions considers himself superior because of associating with the Prophet should know that superiority is that with God and his punishment and reward will be also with God, then everybody who has accepted God's invitation and that of his Prophet and has admitted our truth and adopted our religion and has faced our kiblah, he shall indeed be subject to the rights defined in Islam and to the limits set forth therein. Therefore, you are all creatures of God and God's property will be divided among you equally. No one is superior to another in this respect (Ibn Abi-'l-Hadeed, 1385 A.H, vol. 7, pp.36-37).

It can thus be seen that Imam in his rule emphasized some basic principles including:

1. Strictness in implementation of justice;

2. Demolishing any privilege resulting from social and ethnic supremacy;

3. No change of attitude before and after the Prophet's demise.

These principles were all in fact fundamental views that pervaded the ruling system of Imam Ali.

Ibn Abi-'l Hadeed writes under the said sermon that Imam's speech created revenge in the hearts of some individuals against him, because they were reluctant to have the public treasury equally distributed among individuals. He adds, "When the day after came, people went to the public treasury to receive their share. Ali ibn Abi Taaleb told Abdullah ibn Abi Raafe', "Begin from the Migrants and read their names. Whoever is present, give him 3 dinars. Then do the same for the Companions and whoever is present, whether red or black, do the same."

Ibn Abi-'l Hadeed goes on to say, "Sahl ibn Haneef said, "Oh, Amir al-Mu'mineen! This person was my slave yesterday and I just released him." Ali said, "We will give him exactly what we give to you." and then gave them each 3 dinars, without giving anyone any privilege over the others. It was here that Talha and Zubair, Abdullah Umar, Sa'id ibn al-Amer, Marwan ibn al-Hakam and some Quraishis did not like this method of Imam and refused to take their share (Ibn Abi-'l Hadeed, 1385 A.H, vol. 7, pp.36-37), because Arab as led by Bani Umayyah could never put up with such a policy and expected Ali not to talk about justice in the beginning and not to implement it. Their love of the previous privileges was so that they had forgotten to accept an Islam in which Muslims did not differ from each other.

Imam also challenged the financial policies that were in practice before him and thus expressed his understanding of justice:

By Allah, even if I had found that by such money women have been married or slave-maids have been purchased I would have resumed it (Nahjulbalāghah, Sermon 15).

Imam Ali believed that such concessions were obvious discrimination that cannot go on in his state. This principle is otherwise so expressed by Imam:

Oh, God, you know that what we did was not for acquiring power or under the wish to rule or to achieve unworthy worldly benefits. Our goal was rather to erect the landmarks of your religion and to make reforms and establish peace in your cities so that your oppressed people can be in security and comfort and your unfulfilled orders be fulfilled (Nahjulbalāghah, Kalām 131).

Somewhere else, while stitching his shoe, he says to Abdullah ibn Abbas:

By Allah, it [the shoe] should have been more dear to me than ruling over you but for the fact that I may establish right and ward off wrong (Nahjulbalāghah, Sermon 33)

These words of Imam well show that the fundamental principle governing his state was to deeply abide by justice and right. It was within such a framework that Imam Ali in his orders to Maalik Ashtar, advises the latter to constantly modify his understanding within political power.<sup>4</sup> (Nahjulbalāghah, Letter 53)

Therefore, it should be affirmed that justice, as one of the constant and eternal questions in political philosophy, constitute Imam Ali's most fundamental principles of politics and state, without understanding which one cannot have a proper understanding of his government. Nevertheless, one should not consider justice in Imam Ali's thoughts and practice merely as a moral issue. Rather, it should be considered as the most basic principle of political and social management in the structure of his political power. In the words of George Jordagh, "Justice in his view is not a religion or method that he could have learned from someone else – although this method was after him turned into a school of thought – and is not a program required by the politics of governing – although it was an integral part



thereof – even if he walked on this path and opened in a place for himself in the hearts of all good people of the world for ever. Justice in his ethical and spiritual school is a principle that is in relation to other principles and is a destiny that he cannot provoke himself against it and is so as if this justice-seeking constitutes his physical build, it is a blood that boils in his heart and veins and is life that he depends upon.” (Jordagh, 1996, vol. 6, p.64).

There is no doubt that Imam Ali’s implementing a justice-oriented policy of fighting injustice was not pleasant for those who inherited privileges from the previous governments. They expected Imam Ali to give them a bigger share while Imam adopted a political orientation against such expectations. Imam Ali believed that such supremacies were in conflict with the basic principles of religion. Adopting such justice-oriented policies by Amir al-Mu’mineen caused strong oppositions against him while he ruled. Imam Ali, however, without any doubt or negligence, and in the same way that he had emphasized, sought to form fundamental revolutionary changes in the society, as he thus emphasizes in Sermon 16:

By Allah who sent the Prophet with faith and truth you will be severely subverted, bitterly shaken as in sieving and fully mixed as by spooning in a cooking pot till your low persons become high and high ones become low.

Hence, it should be emphasized that, in Imam Ali’s state approach, justice as a value has a vocal and inclusive role while the Islamic state has to spread justice in various realms, because, without justice, the moral stability of the society will be eliminated and the society will move towards corruption. Therefore, Imam considers the implementation of Islamic justice as the most important of his objectives in government and organizes all his programs around this objective, until the conditions are appropriate for the formation of the

government. In his letter to Maalik Ashtar, Imam so says in respect of this policy in Sermon 53:

To you, the best thing to do should be the middle path in rights, the most general in justice and the most inclusive for the satisfaction of the citizens.

He also says in Letter 53:

What brings the most happiness to governors is establishment of justice in society and spreading friendship among citizens.

Imam Ali was fully aware that, if the society is not administered based on justice and if the objectives of the state are led by oppression and discrimination, it will not be a stable, valuable society that seeks to be on the right path because, leading people towards justice is one of the great goals of the divine prophets while the other values will be stable when justice is stable. This outlook of Imam Ali is in contrast with those of oppressive rulers who resorted to oppression to maintain and stabilize their own political power, social and economic status, since their ultimate goal was power and ruling. In realizing the exalted goal of justice in all its aspects (economic, political, social), Imam Ali did not make any concessions and clearly directed his criticism against what existed before he became the caliph. In the words of George Jordagh, "Imam Ali's story in justice is a valuable remnant that dignifies man's position and the human spirit." (Jordagh, 1996, vol. 1, p.117)

Imam Ali's treatment of his brother, Aqeel, is surprising and interesting from this point of view. This is the story in Imam Ali's own words:

By Allah, I certainly saw (my brother) Aqeel fallen in destitution and he asked me a sā` [~3 kilograms] out of your (share of) wheat, and I also saw his children with disheveled hair and a dusty countenance due to starvation, as though their faces had been blackened by indigo. He came to me several times and repeated his request to me again and again. I heard him, and he thought I would sell my faith to him and

follow his tread leaving my own way. Then I (just) heated a piece of iron and took it near his body so that he might take a lesson from it, then he cried as a person in protracted illness cries with pain and he was about to get burnt with its branding. Then I said to him, “Moaning women may moan over you, O’ `Aqeel. Do you cry on account of this (heated) iron which has been made by a man for fun while you are driving me towards the fire which Allah, the Powerful, has prepared for (a manifestation of) His wrath? Should you cry from pain, but I should not cry from the flames? (Nahjulbalāghah, Sermon 215)

In his government, Ali’s executive agenda was the precepts of religion and moral principles while, without any political negligence, he behaved in a way that left a true model of Islamic religious rule for ever in history. He never victimized justice and moral values for political purposes. When he began his government, Imam Ali well considered the fact that his government had to break the structures and norms already in place in the society and among people, while leading the society towards an Islamic community. He always wanted the government for its holy and divine goals rather than its material values.

The state that Imam Ali ruled was one that had to be in conformity with the precepts of religion without any distortion. It was not even allowed to do the slightest wrong in order to establish it and the religious principles were the criteria to be considered for this. Therefore, Imam during his rule opposed any action that opposed the principles and morals of Islam, because his ultimate goal was growth, guidance and educating the people in an Islamic way and forming an Islamic utopia, which was considered a responsibility for Imam.

In order to further clarify the issue here, we will mention some more examples of his approach. Imam Ali believed that giving superiority and discriminating obviously in favor of some people were in conflict with the Islamic precepts. Therefore, from day 1 of his rule,

he opposed such things. His practice can be seen in the historical story of when a group of the Companions asked him why he distributed things among people equally and asked him to give superiority to the Arab nobility, the way Mu'āwiyah did, over freed slaves and non-Arabs. Imam strongly opposed this, saying:

Are you asking me to achieve victory through oppression? I swear to God that I will not do so. By God if it was my own property, I would still distribute it equally, let alone now that all these belong to the people (Nahjulbalāghah, Sermon 126)

After a meaningful silence over his financial policy, Imam said:

Know that giving away property unrightfully and undeservedly amounts to wasting and is improper to do, and makes one appear high but he will be low in the afterlife. He will be high in people's eye and low before God (Nahjulbalāghah, 1972, pp.389-390)

This practical policy made the nobility in Kufa incline towards Mu'āwiyah, because Imam would not give anybody more than his share because of association with the nobility, while Mu'āwiyah would make generous giveaways in order to attract the others towards himself and he would prefer the noble class over the others. An example is the way Imam Ali treated Talha and Zubair. Once in political power, Imam Ali insisted on following the Prophet's path. Talha and Zubair were among the first to pledge allegiance to Ali. They saw the allegiance as a means to achieve their purpose so as to guarantee their interests under Ali. They came to Ali and asked for governing Basra and Kufa, saying that they had pledged allegiance to Ali only on condition that they would have a share of the caliphate. Imam was aware of their intentions and, therefore, answered in the negative.

Yet, Imam asked ibn Abbas about what they wanted. Ibn Abbas said, "These two like your governance. Appoint Zubair as governor of Basra and Talha as that of Kufa." Imam smiled, saying:

Beware that these are influential in the city and have property. If they dominate over the people, they will attract ignorant people to themselves and ignore the rights of the weak, while giving domination to powerful people (Ibn Qutaibah al-Dinvari, 1364A.H, p.52)

However, Imam Ali talked to the two (Talha and Zubair), saying:

By God I did not have any inclination towards caliphate and did not get it by cunningness and deceit. When I became the caliph, I considered God and looked at the law that He has set for us and according to which He has ordered us to judge. So, I obeyed and saw what the Prophet had made his tradition and, in those, I followed the Prophet. However, concerning your inquiry about the way I allocated the public treasury, I did not follow my personal desires. Rather, from what the Prophet has brought to us, I and you have found out that the Prophet was not done with them. Therefore, in allocation of property, which is an issue God is done dealing with and has passed judgment on, there was no need to consult you (Nahjulbalāghah Sermon 196)

When Talha and Zubair decided to go apparently on a minor (*umrah*) hajj pilgrimage but really for fulfilling their political and economic desires, Imam let them leave and, when ibn Abbas asked Imam why he let them leave despite the fact that it was so clear that they were conspiring a plot, Imam said:

Ibn Abbas, you are ordering me to adopt an oppressive practice and to do sins before beginning to do good. By God I will not violate in ruling and justice from what He made me pledge to do (al-‘Akbari (Sheikh Mofid), NO DATE, p.89)

Another instance is the way Imam Ali treated the Kharijites after the battle of Seffin, which is an outstanding model of his justice and moral attitude against his enemies. In this crisis, Imam Ali treated the Kharijites in the most liberal way, while he could punish them severely. Yet, he never ignored moral and religious limits and justice and, did not

show violence from the very beginning. He did not jail them or cut off their share of the public treasury. Imam Ali says in this respect:

We will not cut off their pension and will not bar them from entering the mosque and, as long as they do not commit anything wrong and have shed no blood, we will not bother them (Al-Mahmudi, 1379 A.H, vol. 2, p.339)

However, when they entered into war with Imam, he fought them as well, believing that the Kharijites had been deceived by Satan and Satan had opened his ways for them (Nahjulbalāghah, Sermons 120, 127, 180). After the battle of Nahravān, he thus told about the survivors:

Do not kill the Kharijites after me, because one who seeks right but does not find it, is not like one who seeks wrong and finds it (Nahjulbalāghah, Sermon 60)

However, the nicest act of Imam Ali can be seen with his murderer. While the gates of eternity were being opened to him, he told about his assassin to his children:

O' sons of Abdul Muttalib! Let there be no retaliation for the act of my murder, do not roam about with a drawn sword and with the slogan, "Amir al-Mu'minin is killed".

See to it that only one man, that is my assassin, is killed, as the punishment of the crime of murder is death and nobody else is molested. The punishment to the man who attempted the murder shall take place only when I die of the wound delivered by him and this punishment shall be only one stroke of sword to end his life (Nahjulbalāghah, Letter 47; Majlesi, 1983, vol. 42, p.339)

He goes on to say:

Feed him and give him drink and treat him well as a captive. If I recover, I will decide what to do with him. If I want, I will forgive him and if I want to retaliate, I will do so. If I die, then kill him (Majlesi, 1983, vol. 42, p.339)

Thus, Imam Ali, in the last moments of his worldly life, left a heritage of justice, magnanimity, religious virtue and nobility for the history. Doubtless, he will be a reflection of the justice-seeking conscience of humankind throughout history.

### **Conclusion**

Justice is one of the most stable and, at the same time, most complex questions in the history of human thought. It is a question that no political thinker has failed to set forth and elaborate on. The role of this category for man becomes more important when its scope covers the social life and interactions of people because, from important aspects of the discussion of justice, the issue of equality or inequality of people is in the material and worldly capacities such as wealth, social and political status, yet with similarities rather than equality of individual talents.

Justice in its general sense in fact explains all discussions that have been set forth in relation to defending or rejecting such inequalities throughout the history of humankind. However, the question still remains what justice is and how a justice act can be recognized. In the meanwhile, Islam, a divine religion, has defined justice within the framework of innate rules and has emphasized the spreading of justice as a fundamental goal of prophets along with purification and guidance of people.

The present article was an attempt to re-explore the concept of justice according to Imam Ali, whose words and actions in statesmanship are indeed the reflection of the historical conscience of humankind in its eternal inclinations towards justice, especially because the government of Imam Ali is the only case in the history of Islam in which an infallible Imam took political power and led the Islamic society. Indeed the formation of an Alavite state created a new political and spiritual world not only for Islamic society but also for

the human history and prepared the appropriate conditions for reviving the specific tasks of a justice-seeking government among Muslims, and in conditions that the society of Muslims had experienced more than two decades of frustration.

In line with this, Imam Ali's administration should be deemed as the most prominent model of an Islamic state after the prophet, which provided a different definition of politics to dedicate all attempt towards spreading justice and implementing the rights in the Islamic society. Doubtless, justice as an inclusive issue in policymaking and state administration, for the first time after the expansion of Islam among other civilizations and cultures, was founded in Amir al-Mu'mineen's administration and, because of Imam's determined and all-inclusive attitude towards justice, it developed in all various dimensions as a basic principle. With his belief that justice is a principle governing the being, Imam Ali based the society and state also on this basis and, within his state, attempted to put in practice what he believed in regarding justice. Justice in Ali's approach had no origin other than divine revelation and the Prophet's practice. Therefore, justice in his view is rooted in a divine worldview.

Justice to Imam Ali is a multidimensional issue and, although based on the word and practice of Imam Ali, it can be explained in various ways, including as piety, wisdom, fairness, fulfillment of rights, denial of discrimination and oppression, all these concepts become meaningful within an integrated system and in fact complement each other. However, it should be emphasized that the most basic practical dimension of justice to Imam Ali is the realm of human interactions, especially issues relating to social economy. Ali ibn Abi Tāleb, Amir al-Mu'mineen, being the most prominent expression of Islamic thought with a strong belief in justice, the most focal pillar of the state and the most important measurement to evaluate political power, put it in practice as well. The purpose of



Imam Ali in state and politics was to form a power structure in which a right can be administered and oppression eliminated, so that social, political, economic and judicial issues will get meaning based on justice. With his religion-oriented approach, Imam did not set political power as a goal in itself. Rather, he wanted it for higher goals such as justice and good. Therefore, with a deep belief and a practical adherence to religious principles and values, he set justice as the main criterion to evaluate politics and the state and accepted the people merely in order to remove oppression from the oppressed.

## **Notes**

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1. Reference is made here to the Quranic verse that says, “We verily sent Our messengers with clear proofs, and revealed with them the Scripture and the Balance, that mankind may observe right measure; and He revealed iron, wherein is mighty power and (many) uses for mankind, ...” (al-Hadid (57):25)
  2. This refers to the religious saying “The earth will be filled with equity and justice after oppression and injustice are eliminated.” (Majlesi, 1983, vol. 5, p.84)
  3. This meaning has been included in a saying from Imam Musā Kāzem, in which he says, “Allah has created all sorts of wealth. He has distributed it to all humankind according to everyone’s merit, the masses and the elites, the poor and the destitute and people of different walks.”
  4. “Do not say that I am ordered to do something and, therefore, I will do it. That is deep into the heart, extreme preoccupation with religion and getting closer to the other's privacy.”

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