



Popular Governance in the Alawi Discourse

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Abstract: This study explores the foundations and principles of popular governance in the Alawi discourse, with a particular focus on the political thought and practice of Imam Ali (AS). It argues that Alawi political theory emphasizes active citizen participation in decision-making, implementation, and oversight. Imam Ali (AS) considered government a divine trust, whose legitimacy is contingent upon public acceptance and consent. Core principles of this model include justice orientation, transparency, consultative governance, accountability of rulers, and the protection of human dignity. Within this framework, the people are recognized not merely as the "Pillars of Faith" and "God's Family," but also as holding a pivotal role in the formation, administration, and supervision of government.

The study further suggests that revisiting the political legacy of Imam Ali (AS) can provide valuable insights for contemporary political systems seeking to develop indigenous models of popular governance that combine divine legitimacy with popular approval. Such a model has the potential to address the needs of modern Islamic civilization and to serve as a normative basis for effective governance in Muslim societies.

Keywords: Popular Governance, Imam Ali (AS), Political Participation, Human Dignity, Justice.

Introduction

Throughout the history of political thought, the relationship between “government” and “the people” has consistently represented one of the most challenging theoretical and practical questions in the field of governance. Among the various models of governance, the approach of “popular governance”—emphasizing active public participation in decision-making, implementation, and oversight—has come to be recognized globally as a key component of good governance. In the contemporary world, although different models of popular governance have emerged, inspired either by liberal-democratic systems or by indigenous experiences, the fundamental question remains: within the intellectual and practical framework of Islam, and particularly in the Alawi discourse, what is the status and role of the people in governance?

The Alawi model of government, characterized by such features as justice-centeredness, popular orientation, transparency, consultative decision-making, and accountability, offers a distinctive capacity to serve as a paradigm for Islamic governance. In *Nahj al-Balāgha*—the most significant source reflecting the political thought of Imam Ali (AS)—there are repeated emphases on the role and dignity of the people in governance, ranging from describing them as the “pillar of religion” and the “dependents of God” to articulating an inclusive, human-centered vision that transcends sectarian boundaries.

Nevertheless, despite the considerable potential of Alawi teachings for formulating an Islamic model of popular governance, this subject has rarely been examined systematically within contemporary scholarly literature. In light of this gap, the present study adopts a qualitative approach and employs document analysis to investigate the epistemic foundations, core principles, and practical components of popular governance in the thought and conduct of Imam Ali (AS). The aim is to offer an inspiring model for rethinking Islamic governance in the modern context. Accordingly, the central research question of this article is: What are the foundations and principles of popular governance in the Alawi discourse?

1. Literature Review

With regard to the subject of this article—popular governance in Islam—only a limited number of works have been published to date. Mansuri Larijani (2022) in his book *Alawi Governance: A Model of Political System in Islam* analyzes Imam Ali’s (AS) political system within the framework of Alawi thought, addressing the pillars of the political order, its structural dimensions, the executive management system, and the reciprocal duties of rulers and the

people, along with the political, educational, economic, cultural, and social responsibilities of administrators. Bahadori Jahromi and Fattahi Zarfarqandi (2024), in *Principles of Governance in the Islamic State*, examine both the theoretical foundations and the practical principles of governance in an Islamic system. Their work seeks to delineate the fundamental rules of governance within Islamic thought and to clarify their role in achieving justice, safeguarding public interests, and ensuring ethics-based governance.

Similarly, Keshavarz (2018) in *Governance in Islamic Sharia* investigates the methods of government in Islam, the objectives of the Islamic state, and the principles governing it. Nosrat Panah and Bakhshi (2018), in *A Universal Model of Islamic Governance in the Thought of Imam Khomeini*, apply 'Allāma Tabatabaei's theory of "i'tibārāt" (constructive propositions) to explain a model of Islamic governance based on Imam Khomeini's perspective. Azimi Shushtari (2010), in his study *The Nature and Indicators of Governance in the Political System of the Islamic Republic*, argues that governance in the Islamic Republic shares several indicators with the global concept of "good governance" while also retaining distinctive features.

In addition, Mirahmadi (2023), in his article *Waqf and Popular Governance*, emphasizes that the localization of governance depends on affirming the people's right to participate in public affairs. According to him, the integration of waqf into social domains such as welfare and justice enables broader popular participation in governance and ensures its continuity through community-based management of endowments. Bāghsangānī (2023), in *A Model of Popular Governance Based on the Experience of Jihād-e Sāzandegī*, highlights principles such as council-based decision-making, bottom-up management, field-oriented policy-making, prioritizing public consent, overcoming deadlocks, rapid developmental growth, the mobilization of societal capacities, and the training of efficient managers as outcomes of popular governance in that movement.

A review of the existing literature reveals three key points: (1) no independent, comprehensive, and systematic study has yet been conducted on popular governance within the Alawi discourse; (2) focused examination of "popular governance in the Alawi discourse" can open new avenues for expanding research on popular governance in relation to broader issues of statehood and administration; and (3) the starting point for any model of popular governance in the Islamic political system appears to be a precise understanding of how political elites conceptualize governance—a task toward which this study is directed.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. Participatory Governance

Governance refers to the set of processes, structures, and institutions employed to manage, regulate, and advance the objectives of a society or organization. These processes include decision-making, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programs. Participatory governance is a form of governance in which citizens play an active and meaningful role in policy formulation, decision-making, implementation, and oversight. In this model, citizens are not merely voters but active stakeholders who participate in decision-making, policy execution, and the supervision of government officials.

Participatory governance emphasizes fundamental principles such as participation, transparency, accountability, the rule of law, justice, and efficiency. Its outcomes include increased public satisfaction with government, higher-quality decision-making, enhanced civic responsibility, reduced corruption, and strengthened social trust. In recent decades, governance—and by extension, participatory governance—has emerged as one of the central issues in global political discourse (Abdi, 2022: 9–19). In this context, political systems seek to offer more effective models of good governance through participatory approaches. However, it is important to note that not every interpretation or experience of participatory governance can be considered consistent with the principles and foundations of Islamic governance.

2.2. Islamic Governance

Islamic governance is a distinct form of governance grounded in principles such as divine sovereignty; social justice and equitable distribution of resources and opportunities; consultation (*shūrā*) with citizens and elites in decision-making; accountability of rulers before God, the people, and the law; transparency; and the protection of public rights and citizenship. This model is distinguished from other forms of governance by its emphasis on the implementation of divine law (*sharīʿa*), adherence to ethical and human values (justice, honesty, trustworthiness, altruism, etc.), people-centeredness, and the balance between worldly welfare and spiritual salvation (Rangriz, 2023: 16–20).

The most important charters of Shiʿi governance are the Prophet Muḥammad’s (PBUH) ten-year rule in Medina and Imam Ali’s (AS) four-year governance in Kufa. Any form of statehood established by Shiʿi communities must therefore be inspired by the unparalleled model of the Prophetic and

Alawi states. The features of participatory governance are strongly reflected in the political thought and practice of Imam Ali (AS). For example, he adopts a universal, human-centered perspective on people: “People are of two kinds: either your brothers in faith or your equals in creation.” This vision shaped his understanding of government as a divine trust temporarily entrusted to rulers: “You are the treasurers of the people, the representatives of the community, and the envoys of the leader” (Nahj al-Balāgha, Letter 53). Accordingly, rulers are duty-bound to serve the people: “The people are the family of God; thus, the most beloved of them to God are those who serve His family and bring them benefit.” Moreover, the people are described as “the firm pillars of religion, the vibrant assemblies of the Muslim community, and the defense forces of society” (Nahj al-Balāgha, Letter 53). In this sense, the people are the true proprietors of government and the participatory, consultative, supervisory, and executive foundation of governance.

3. Imam Ali’s Perspective on People and Government

3.1. A Humanistic and Supra-Religious View of People

Imam Ali (AS) divided the citizens of the Islamic community into two categories: “The first group are Muslims, who are your brothers in faith; and the second group are non-Muslims, who, though not of your religion, are equal to you in creation” (Nahj al-Balāgha, Letter 53). For Imam Ali, the very fact of being human constituted sufficient grounds for ensuring the protection of people’s rights and their civic entitlements. In his covenant with Mālik al-Ashtar alone, he refers to the “people” and “human beings” more than thirty times, consistently presenting them as equals regardless of tribe, nation, religion, or social class (Jafari, 1990: 319). These references are primarily concerned with the socio-political rights of the people and the obligations that rulers and the political system bear toward them.

3.2. A Trustee-Oriented and People-Centered View of Government

In Imam Ali’s (AS) political thought, government is understood as a trust entrusted to rulers: “You are the treasurers of the people, the representatives of the community, and the envoys of the leader” (Nahj al-Balāgha, Letter 53). Rulers are therefore required to view themselves not as masters but as servants of the people: “People are the family of God; thus, the most beloved of them to God are those who serve His family and bring them benefit” (al-Kulaynī, 1969: 164). Every decision must be guided by the public interest, since the people constitute the body of the Muslim community, the supporters of government in the face of threats, and the foundation of God’s religion:

“Beware of doing anything that may please you personally but is harmful to the collective interest of the Muslims” (Nahj al-Balāgha, Letter 69).

The Islamic state must therefore prioritize reform of the community as a whole. Given that reform inevitably pleases some groups while displeasing others, the ruler must always choose the path most closely aligned with the welfare of the majority. In the Islamic political system, priority is given to the general public over the elite: “The most commendable actions in your sight should be those which are most equitable, most comprehensive in justice, and most conducive to the satisfaction of the people. For the discontent of the general public renders insignificant the satisfaction of the elite, while the discontent of the elite can be overlooked if the masses are content. Know that the pillars of religion, the large assemblies of the Muslims, and the defensive forces of society are the people themselves; therefore, incline toward them and rely on them” (Nahj al-Balāgha, Letter 53).

Imam Ali (AS) also advised his officials to hold open meetings with the people: “Set aside a portion of your time for those who have needs of you, O Mālik” (Nahj al-Balāgha, Letter 53). Such gatherings were to be conducted without barriers or restrictions, allowing the people to present their requests directly: “Let no intermediary stand between you and the people except your own tongue, and let no doorkeeper prevent access to you except your own face” (Nahj al-Balāgha, Letter 69).

4. The Role of the People in the Formation of Government

The ideal model of governance in Shi‘i political thought is the model of Imamate. According to this model, the legitimacy of government is based on divine appointment; however, the realization of legitimacy depends on the support and cooperation of the people with their rulers. Thus, in Imam Ali’s (AS) political thought, government ultimately belongs to the people, and it is they who possess the right to determine the form of government. Government becomes legitimate only when accepted by the people: “O people! This matter (government) is yours, and no one has the right to govern you except the one whom you appoint as your leader” (Ibn Athīr, 2006: 193–194).

4.1. Freedom in Choosing and Accepting Government

Throughout history, even authoritarian regimes have sought to secure public opinion in order to maintain their rule. The behavior of the people—their willingness to obey or disobey—plays a decisive role in shaping the government, its objectives, its relationship with society, and ultimately its survival or collapse. Imam Ali (AS) sought to establish the legitimacy of his

rule on the basis of the people's free consent. In Nahj al-Balāgha (Sermon 229), he states:

“You extended your hands to me for allegiance, but I held mine back. You pulled my hand toward you, and I withdrew it. Then you pressed forward to me like thirsty camels rushing to their watering place, so that my sandals were torn, my cloak fell from my shoulders, and the weak among you were trampled. Such was the joy of the people in pledging allegiance to me that even children rejoiced, the elderly came trembling to witness it, the sick were carried to attend, and young maidens appeared unveiled in celebration.”

In another passage (Nahj al-Balāgha, Sermon 137), he affirms: “I have no need of your government; whoever you choose, I am content with him.” For Imam Ali, government had a fundamentally human character, and political authority derived from the people's right to determine their destiny. As he declared: “Let the oath of allegiance be made publicly in the mosque, for allegiance to me is not to be done in secret and cannot be realized without the consent of the Muslims” (Delshād Tehrānī, 2000: 116).

Accordingly, people are free to choose their government and leaders, and no individual or group may be coerced into obedience. Imam Ali (AS) states: “Whoever pledged allegiance to me out of obedience, I accepted it; and whoever refused, I did not compel him, but left him free” (Abū al-Sahāq, 1992, vol. 1: 31). Similarly, he recounts the words of the Prophet (PBUH): “O son of Abū Ṭālib, leadership is your right. If they grant it to you willingly and in unity, then assume it; but if they differ over you, then leave them to their choice, for God will open another way for you” (Islamic Sciences and Culture Research Institute, 2005: 102).

4.2. The People's Commitment After Choosing Government

Although, in Imam Ali's (AS) political thought, people enjoy full freedom in establishing government and selecting rulers, once they have done so they are bound by their choice and cannot renounce it. They must remain obedient and loyal to the government they have established: “O people! You pledged allegiance to me on the same terms as to those before me. Before the pledge, you had the choice and freedom; but once you pledged, you no longer had such freedom. It is the duty of the ruler to remain steadfast, and it is the duty of the people to obey. This is a general pledge; whoever rejects it has rejected Islam and followed another path. Your allegiance to me was given with full deliberation, not hastily or without reflection” (al-Maḥmūdī, 2018: 208).

The Qur'ān emphasizes this principle: “Fulfill your covenants; surely, you will be questioned about them” (Q 17:34), and “O you who believe, fulfill

your contracts” (Q 5:1). The necessity of loyalty to the chosen government lies in the fact that only through the trust and support of the people can the state implement their aspirations and advance toward higher objectives.

5. The Role of the People in the Administration of Government

Imam Ali (AS), in his letter to Mālik al-Ashtar, declares: “The solid pillars of religion, the enthusiastic assemblies of Muslims, and the public forces of defense are the common people.” The unity and presence of the people constitute the main factor of dynamism and vitality in governance, and simultaneously serve as the foundation of national strength and resilience. His expression of the positive role of the people underscores the necessity of their participation and their exalted status as the steadfast pillars of religion. In Nahj al-Balāgha, he expresses gratitude for their constructive presence (Letter 2), while elsewhere he chastises their negligence and breach of duty with the sharpest rebukes (Sermon 34): “Woe unto you, O people of Kūfa! For your endless reproach has wearied me.” These contrasting commendations and reproaches highlight the crucial role of the masses in ensuring effective governance and political stability.

5.1. Political and Social Participation of the People

Every government, regardless of its form, requires the participation and cooperation of its people in order to sustain itself. Even authoritarian regimes attempt to mobilize popular support for their objectives. The active presence—or absence—of the people profoundly shapes the administration of the state. In Imam Ali’s (AS) political thought and practice, genuine participation of the people constitutes one of the essential foundations of governance: “Had it not been for the presence of the multitude of people and the establishment of proof by the existence of supporters, I would have cast the rope of the caliphate on its back [like a camel] and abandoned it” (Nahj al-Balāgha, Sermon 3).

From his perspective, even the most capable ruler cannot succeed without popular support: “There is no opinion for the one who is not obeyed” (Nahj al-Balāgha, Sermon 27). In the Islamic political system, state and society are deeply interwoven; the term *ra‘iyya* (subjects) is not a label for the weak or marginalized, but refers to all members of society, each with a vital role. Imam Ali (AS) explicitly names all classes: “Know that the people consist of classes whose affairs are only set aright through one another. Among them are the soldiers of God; the scribes, who handle public and confidential correspondence; the judges, who administer justice; the administrators, who act with fairness; the taxpayers, both Muslim and non-

Muslim; the merchants and artisans; and finally, the needy and destitute. God has ordained for each group its due portion, recorded in His Book or established through the Sunnah of His Prophet. This constitutes a covenant from God, safeguarded in our trust” (Nahj al-Balāgha, Letter 53).

In practice, Imam Ali (AS) engaged in consultation with the people and urged his officials to do the same. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn records: “Ali would weigh the affairs of his companions against their counsel, and he never acted autocratically but always consulted them in both major and minor matters” (Husain, 1953: 182). He advised Ibn ‘Abbās: “Do not withhold your counsel from me in matters of governance” (Nahj al-Balāgha, Maxim 333). For Imam Ali, consultation (shūrā) was both an obligation of the ruler and a right of the people: “Do not withhold from me the utterance of truth or a just counsel, for I am not above making mistakes, nor do I feel secure from error unless God protects me” (Nahj al-Balāgha, Sermon 216). He further cautions: “Whoever relies on his own opinion perishes, while he who consults others shares in their wisdom” (Nahj al-Balāgha, Maxim 161).

5.2. Public Oversight of Government

Oversight has always been one of the most complex and fundamental issues of social and political life. While human beings naturally resist surveillance, the Qur’ān repeatedly reminds that God is ever-watchful over human deeds. When extended to governance, oversight of rulers and administrators acquires even greater importance.

In Imam Ali’s (AS) political thought, the ruler’s duty to supervise his officials was paramount, for it preserved the integrity of governance and strengthened public trust. He instructs Mālik al-Ashtar: “Keep watch over their deeds, and appoint for them trustworthy and loyal inspectors; for your vigilant oversight compels them to preserve honesty and kindness toward the people” (Nahj al-Balāgha, Letter 53).

Yet Imam Ali (AS) also recognized and institutionalized the people’s right to supervise their leaders. Upon assuming the caliphate under public insistence, he declared: “I did not desire the caliphate, but you pressed me into it. Know that I will not act without your consultation. The keys to your wealth are in my hands, yet I shall not take a single dirham without your consent. Do you approve?” (al-Ṭabarī, 1987: 2328, 310). Here, Imam Ali explicitly affirms the legitimacy of public oversight over his administration.

Throughout his rule, he maintained rigorous supervision over his governors, even monitoring their private conduct, such as attending aristocratic banquets (Nahj al-Balāgha, Letter 45). At the same time, he

enjoined the people to monitor and judge their officials based on adherence to divine law and Prophetic Sunnah. For instance, when appointing Ibn ʿAbbās, he instructed: “Obey him so long as he obeys God and His Messenger; but if he introduces innovations or deviates from the truth, know that I shall remove him from authority” (al-Jamal, 1995: 413). He also cautioned against authoritarian arrogance: “Do not say: I am commanded and I command, so I must be obeyed. Such self-importance corrupts the heart, weakens religion, and hastens the loss of blessings” (Nahj al-Balāgha, Letter 53).

6. The Rights of the People in the Governance of Imam Ali (AS)

In Imam Ali’s (AS) political thought, both the people and rulers enjoy reciprocal rights, where every right is accompanied by a duty and vice versa. He states: “God has assigned me a right over you by virtue of my governance, and in return, He has placed upon me a right on your behalf. Among God’s rights, the greatest is the mutual right between the ruler and the ruled.” (Nahj al-Balāgha, Sermon 216).

6.1. Education and Nurturing

The most fundamental right of the people, according to Imam Ali’s (AS) political philosophy, is education and nurturing. He declares: “Your right upon me is that I withhold not counsel from you, expend the treasury for your welfare, and teach you so that you may be freed from ignorance, and train you so that you may learn.” (Nahj al-Balāgha, Sermon 34).

Education and nurturing, in his view, lead to enlightenment and awareness: “It is incumbent upon the Imam to teach the people of his dominion the principles of Islam and faith.” (Ghurar al-Ḥikam, vol. 1, p. 488). Through this process, human beings may actualize divine attributes: “God taught Adam the names, all of them.” Humanity possesses latent capacities that, if realized through the pursuit of truth, lead to both individual and collective transcendence: “The learned is one who knows his worth, and ignorance is nothing but failing to know one’s own worth.” (Nahj al-Balāgha, Letter 50).

Thus, nurturing in Imam Ali’s (AS) political thought is inseparable from rationality and the cultivation of wisdom. As noted in the opening sermon of Nahj al-Balāgha: “The prophets came to awaken buried intellects.”

6.2. Candor and Honesty with the People

In contrast to Machiavellian teachings, Imam Ali’s (AS) political philosophy leaves no room for deceit or demagoguery. He insists: “The leader must be

truthful to his people.” An Islamic ruler must be candid and transparent, concealing only military secrets for security reasons: “Know that your right over me is that I conceal nothing from you except in matters of war, and I undertake no action without your counsel except the implementation of divine law.” (Nahj al-Balāgha, Letter 50).

6.3. Compassion Towards the People

Repressive governance often stems from a pessimistic view of human nature—exemplified in Hobbes’ assertion that “man is a wolf to man.” Imam Ali (AS), however, sees humanity as capable of attaining divine likeness. Consequently, his conduct was marked by dignity and compassion, and he consistently urged his governors to treat people with kindness: “Let compassion for the people be the foundation of your heart, and befriend them. Beware of being a predatory beast who sees them as prey, for people are of two kinds: either your brethren in faith or your equals in creation.” (Nahj al-Balāgha, Letter 53).

He further warned that despotism leads to the downfall of rulers: “Whoever acts tyrannically perishes.” (Nahj al-Balāgha, Saying 319).

6.4. Ensuring Public Security and Welfare

Throughout his rule, Imam Ali (AS) sought to guarantee basic public rights, including safety and welfare. In his letter of appointment to Mālik al-Ashtar as governor of Egypt, he emphasized: “This is the command of God’s servant, Ali, the leader of the faithful, to Mālik al-Ashtar, when I placed him over Egypt, to collect its taxes, to fight its enemies, to improve the condition of its people, and to prosper its lands.” (Nahj al-Balāgha, Letter 53). Thus, rulers bear the responsibility of maintaining security, improving livelihoods, and ensuring prosperity and development.

6.5. Enlightenment and Political Awareness

Imam Ali (AS) consistently sought to raise political awareness among the people to protect them from misguided stances. He dispatched trusted envoys and wrote clarifying letters to prevent confusion during times of sedition. For instance, in his first letter of Nahj al-Balāgha to the people of Kūfa, he wrote: “I inform you of the matter of ‘Uthmān in such a way that hearing it will be as seeing it.”

Differences of opinion often yield divergent political stances, which, when compounded by misinformation, can threaten political order. Furthermore, adversaries exploit ambiguities by blending truth with

falsehood, making it difficult even for elites to discern right from wrong. Imam Ali (AS) emphasized that truth and falsehood are not to be measured by personalities:

“Truth has become obscure to you. Truth and falsehood are not known through men. First know the truth, and you will know its adherents.” (cited in Dashtī, 1999, p. 307).

6.6. The Rights of Political Opponents

Imam Ali (AS) exhibited unparalleled commitment to the rights of political opponents, upholding their dignity and allowing broad political freedom. Even when dissenters disrupted congregational prayers or promoted opposing views, he tolerated them—resorting to force only when they initiated armed conflict or jeopardized social security and Islamic principles. On one occasion, when insulted by a dissenter, the crowd sought to kill the man. Imam Ali (AS) intervened: “Leave him. An insult may be met with an insult, or it may be forgiven.” (Nahj al-Balāgha, Saying 42).

6.7. The Rights of Religious Minorities

Religious minorities also held a respected position in Imam Ali’s (AS) governance. Upon hearing that a non-Muslim woman had been robbed by Mu‘āwiya’s raiders, he exclaimed: “If a Muslim dies of grief over this disgrace, he deserves no blame; rather such grief is worthy of him.” (Nahj al-Balāgha, Sermon 27).

People of the Book—Christians and Jews—were guaranteed peaceful coexistence under the Islamic state so long as they respected their covenants and the rights of Muslims. In one instance, when Imam Ali (AS) saw an elderly Christian man begging, he rebuked the officials: “You have used him in his youth, but when he became old and incapable, you abandoned him? Provide for him from the public treasury.” (‘Āmilī, n.d., ch. 19, ḥadīth 1).

7. Principles Governing the Governance of Imam Ali (AS)

7.1. Safeguarding and Observing Divine Ordinances

The ultimate purpose of establishing an Islamic government is the implementation of divine ordinances, which ensure human prosperity and well-being¹. The boundaries of these laws are delineated by the Qur’ān and the practice (sīra) of the Imams. The Infallibles (AS) possess no personal discretion in applying these ordinances and are bound to enforce them unconditionally. Imam Ali (AS) states: “By God, if I were given the seven climes with all that lies beneath the heavens in exchange for disobeying God

by wrongfully seizing a single grain of barley from an ant, I would not do so.”² In Islam, governance is synonymous with the rule of law. No individual has an inherent right to dominate others; sovereignty belongs exclusively to God, and divine law constitutes the sole source of command. This law encompasses all— from the Prophet himself to his successors and the entire community: “We uphold the law equally among black and red, establishing equality without distinction.”³

7.2. Ethical Politics

In politics, the relationship between ends and means reveals whether rulers integrate or separate ethics from governance. Historically, many rulers have pursued power by resorting to deception, manipulation, violence, and bloodshed. Machiavelli observed that “those princes who achieved great things were those who did not regard keeping their word, but rather outwitted men through cunning and deception, ultimately prevailing over those who acted honestly.” (Machiavelli, 1961, p. 99).

Imam Ali (AS), by contrast, adopted an uncompromisingly truthful approach. In his first governmental sermon, he declared: “What I say, I undertake and guarantee... By God, I have never concealed the truth nor ever uttered a lie.” (Nahj al-Balāgha, Sermon 16). Transparency reached its zenith in his governance, making his rule a model of integrity. Imam Ali (AS) instructed his officials to govern on the principle of *iṣḥār*—full clarity, akin to the openness of the desert (Delshād Tehrānī, 2003: 255)⁴. Thus, in his political thought, Machiavellian doctrines hold no place; rulers must refrain from deceit, demagoguery, or concealment from the people, withholding only military secrets in times of war: “Know that your right upon me is that I conceal nothing from you save matters of war, and I undertake nothing without your counsel except the execution of God’s command.” (Nahj al-Balāgha, Letter 50).

When critics accused him of being less politically adept than Mu‘āwiya, Imam Ali (AS) replied: “By God, Mu‘āwiya is not more cunning than I; but he betrays and sins. Were betrayal not reprehensible, I would be the most cunning of all men.” (Nahj al-Balāgha, Sermon 200). His commitment to ethical politics extended beyond governance to the battlefield: he refrained from initiating conflict with the Khawārij or Mu‘āwiya until they began hostilities, consistently urging his followers to act with restraint and morality (Ṭabarī, vol. 5, pp. 10–11).

In Islam, politics is not an end in itself but a means of serving humanity and guiding them toward salvation. Governance is understood as a

divine trust, entrusted to rulers for implementing divine ordinances and establishing a just order. For the Imams, political power devoid of higher objectives is worthless—less than a worn-out shoe⁵, a goat’s nasal discharge⁶, or a withered leaf⁷—for deviating from the straight path to pursue worldly gain is a betrayal of the very aim of governance: human felicity and salvation.

7.3. Upholding Human Dignity

The Qur’ān presents the human being as a creature of clay into whom God breathed His spirit⁸, thus granting intrinsic dignity⁹. It was this dignity that led the angels to bow before Adam, while Iblīs’ refusal marked his eternal downfall¹⁰. Humanity was created in “the best form” (aḥsan taqwīm)¹¹, endowed with innate dignity, and honored above other creatures¹². This dignity is both inherent (takwīnī) and acquired (iktisābī), allowing humankind to ascend to the loftiest ranks (a’lā ‘illiyīn) or descend to the lowest abyss (asfal sāfilīn)¹³.

God further affirms this dignity by declaring human beings His vicegerents (khulafā’) on earth: “When your Lord said to the angels: I am appointing on earth a vicegerent” (Qur’ān 2:30).

According to exegetes, the entire Qur’ān may be viewed as an exposition of this lofty station. The goal of human existence is to realize this vicegerency through perfection (Jawādī Āmulī, 2006: 280).

Imam Ali (AS) reflected this perspective in practice. In a letter to tax collectors, he instructed them to act with composure, kindness, and respect, avoiding intimidation or coercion. He wrote: “Say to them: O servants of God, the trustee of God and His vicegerent has sent me to collect God’s right in your wealth. Is there such a right in your property? If they deny it, do not approach them again. If they affirm, accompany them without frightening, threatening, or burdening them. Take what they willingly give of gold and silver, but do not enter their homes without permission, for most of their property belongs to them. Do not act arrogantly or harshly, nor distress the herdsmen, nor alarm the animals...” (Nahj al-Balāgha, Letter 25).

This approach not only safeguarded human dignity but also fostered trust and legitimacy in governance. Imam Ali (AS) applied the same principle to the distribution of public wealth: equality among all people, without favoritism. When questioned about granting equal stipends to freed slaves and tribal leaders alike, he replied: “You have no superiority over one another.” (Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd, vol. 7, pp. 37–38).

7.4. Centrality and Expansion of Justice

Justice is the cornerstone of prophetic missions and the essence of Islamic governance. Philosophers throughout history—from Plato onward—have grappled with its definition. Some considered it as moderation, others as fairness or social contract, yet all addressed only partial dimensions. Generally, four meanings are ascribed to justice: balance, equality and elimination of discrimination, giving each their due, and proportion in the order of existence (Mottaḥarī, 1978: 59–63).

In Islam, justice is deeply rooted in the worldview of tawḥīd (divine unity), extending through prophecy, leadership, eschatology, and every domain of social, political, and economic life. Its value surpasses generosity¹⁴, for generosity is selective while justice is universal (Khājah Naṣīr, 1981: 147). Shi‘i scholars elevate justice to one of the five foundational principles of religion (uṣūl al-dīn) (Mottaḥarī, 1978: 70).

Imam Khomeini (RA) emphasized the inseparability of justice and opposition to oppression, declaring: “Islam enjoins: do not oppress, and do not submit to oppression. To accept injustice is no less than committing it¹⁵.” (Khomeini, 1999, vol. 11, pp. 255–56).

For Imam Ali (AS), justice was the very criterion of politics¹⁶: “the establishment of truth and the eradication of falsehood¹⁷,” “placing matters where they belong,¹⁸” “the system of governance,”¹⁹ “the safeguard of the people,”²⁰ and “the pillar of social life and the lamp of Islam.”²¹ With such a conception, he embraced governance, enduring adversity without wavering, and his rule became a historical measure for distinguishing justice-seeking from mere power-seeking.

Political justice in Islam signifies the concrete application of justice in political structures and practices. It relates directly to concepts such as power, legitimacy, freedom, equality, obedience, and coercion, as well as to state institutions and the mechanisms of distributing authority (Akhavān Kāzemī, 2002: 180). Its point of departure is equality among all human beings: “People are equal like the teeth of a comb,”²² declared the Prophet. In Islam, superiority is granted only by piety (taqwā), with its reward reserved for the Hereafter, not for worldly privilege²³. By eliminating racial and linguistic hierarchies, Islam laid the groundwork for treating all individuals equally in society, ensuring that no privileges distort policy-making and that governance seeks the satisfaction of all citizens as the first step toward collective perfection²⁴.

Conclusion

This study, through an examination of the theoretical foundations and practical conduct of Imam Ali (AS), demonstrates that popular governance in the Alawī discourse represents a distinct model, inspired by Shariah and based on human dignity, justice, public participation, and mutual oversight. In this model, the people are not only the source of political legitimacy but also play an active role in selecting, advising, monitoring, and guiding the government. In the Alawī conception, governance is a divine trust, sustained through public consent, respect for reciprocal rights, clarity in speech, and integrity in action. The foundation of politics in Alawī governance is ethics, transparency, and the primacy of justice, rather than opportunism or authoritarianism. Equal treatment of social groups, respect for political opponents, protection of minority rights, and attention to education, nurturing, and awareness-raising are central features of this system. By combining divine legitimacy with popular acceptance, Imam Ali (AS) presented a model of religious governance capable of being reproduced and adapted to the needs of contemporary Islamic political systems. Accordingly, revisiting Alawī governance can provide both a theoretical and practical framework for developing a locally rooted model of democratic governance in the modern Islamic civilization.²⁵



Note

- 1-Surah Al-Baqarah (2:187)
- 2-Nahj al-Balaghah, Khutbah 224
- 3 - **Hadith:** “We are equal in it, between the black and the red.” (Al-Kafi, Vol. 8, p. 69)
4. Nahj al-Balaghah, Letter 53
- 5-Nahj al-Balaghah, Khutbah 33
- 6- Nahj al-Balaghah, Khutbah 3
- 7- Nahj al-Balaghah, Khutbah 32.
- 8- Surah Al-Hijr (15:26)
- 9-Surah Al-Hijr (15:29)
- 10- Surah Al-Baqarah (2:34)
- 11- Surah At-Tin (95:4).
- 12-Surah Al-Mu'minun (23:14).
- 13- Surah At-Tin (95:5)
- 14- Nahj al-Balaghah, Hikmah 437.
- 15-Surah Al-Baqarah (2:279)
- 16-**Hadith:** “The standard of governance is justice.” (Ghurar al-Hikam, p. 331)
- 17- Nahj al-Balaghah, Khutbah 33
- 18-Nahj al-Balaghah, Wisdom 437
- 19- **Hadith:** “Justice is the foundation of governance.” (Ghurar al-Hikam, p. 339)
- 20- **Hadith:** “Justice is the pillar of the people.” (Ghurar al-Hikam, p. 339)
- 21 - **Hadith:** “God, the Pure, has made justice the foundation of humanity, a means of distancing from oppression and sin, and a source of facilitation and advancement for Islam.” (Ghurar al-Hikam, p. 99)
- 22 - **Hadith:** “People [are equal] like the teeth of a comb.” (Nahj al-Fasahah, p. 589) Hujurat (49:13) .
- 23 - **Hadith:** “O people! Your Lord is one, and your father is one; all of you are from Adam, and Adam is from dust... No Arab has superiority over a non-Arab except by piety.” (Nahj al-Fasahah, p. 587)
- 24 - “The author acknowledges the use of ChatGPT, an AI tool, for translation support from Persian to English.”

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