

Sayyid Qutb's View on Caliphate Government and its Relevance in Muslim Society

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Abstract: The study of Islamic caliphate has become interesting topics to be focused and debated extensively by both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. The abolition of the caliphate institution in Turkey by Mustafa Kemal in 1924 has led the discussion to be more significant since Muslim scholars and thinkers started to look at a new model of Islamic government to be followed which 'enjoining good and forbidding evil' become their main concern. This paper will discuss Sayyid Qutb's view on a caliphate government covering the following aspects namely; concept of a caliphate government, the appointment of a caliph and its role and responsibility. Using secondary data analysis as a main design and a content analysis technique, the study analyses Qutb's ideas and thought in regards to caliphate government that appear in his writings particularly his *Fi Zilal al-Quran* works. Other secondary data such as books, journal articles discussing and commenting on Qutb's thought are also taken into account in order to have a clear picture about the latter arguments. Result of the study shows that Qutb's conception of a caliphate government was in parallel with some classical scholar's perspectives believing that the establishment of a caliphate government became one of the solutions in solving Muslim social, political and economic disparities facing Muslims. In administration of the government, Qutb found that there was no room for the khalifa to act unjustly since the procedure of appointment (*shura*) was such as to make the post-holder the best person to judge according to the shariah. Whereas the concept of *istikhlaf* (the appointment of the khalifa) demanded that human beings were to accept guidance (*al-huda*) only from God and thus, the caliphate's responsibility and role were bound by His moral action (*manhaj*) of life.

Key words: Caliphate, government, Muslim scholar, Sayyid Qutb, Ideologue

INTRODUCTION

Issues and concern on the importance of Khilafah or caliphate government often being discussed in human society due to many reasons. One of those reasons is the need to follow the golden era of Islamic society during the Prophet's time and His companions. Secondly, the need to establish a just (*al-Adl*) society following the Quranic injunction and the Sunnah of the Prophet including enjoining good and forbidding evil. Thirdly, the decline of the Muslim world in its society, economy and politics during the twentieth century compared with the West, coupled with the appearance of corrupt political leaders in certain countries, who used their authority to exploit national resources for their personal interest and that of their cronies among the bourgeois and autocrats without considering the needs of the general population. In so doing, oppression and political pressure were sometimes

used against any Muslim group attempting to revive or reform the countries on the basis of Islam. In addition, the West's interference in the politics and economy of the Muslim countries contributed towards the deterioration of the situation rather than solving the problems (Haddad, 1982).

Realizing this phenomenon, there appeared some Muslim scholars and thinkers in the early and mid-twentieth century, who were concerned about the problems and tried to find solutions from the Islamic perspective. Names like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d.1897), Muhammad 'Abduh (d.1905) and Rashid Rida (d.1935) were among those who saw the need to understand the causes of decline so as to rectify the situation and restore Muslim countries to their proper place in the world. Qutb (1952) was one of the most important and influential Muslim figures of the twentieth century who focused on the problems facing the Muslim Umma as a whole and

Egyptian society in particular. The continuing dire economic situation of his country, the political corruption and the incessant squabbles of the political parties caused him to feel increasingly disillusioned and frustrated. In his view, the revival of the Muslim life in accordance with the teachings of the Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet, Peace Be upon Him was the only solution. Many books and articles were written by Qutb suggesting this strategy and calling his fellow Muslims to return to Islam as "their own resource" to find solutions to the existing problems, besides restoring them to their proper place as Muslims including the establishment of so called a caliphate government.

The study on caliphate government has become a great interest amongst Muslim and non Muslim scholar up to the present day. For Western scholars like Sir Thomas Arnold, Richard Bell, Albert Hourani, Martin Hinds and JD McAuliffe, their works clearly demonstrated the historical descriptions, the division of Muslim sectarianism and Quranic analysis and its doctrinal and doctrinal theology related to Islamic caliphate. For Timothy Poirson's work, Introduction: Caliphates and Islamic Global Politics, his discussion revolve around Islamic movements' and groups' belief that their struggles are motivated by the idea that there is 'not enough Islam' in society. Thus, the 'Islamisation' of society until an Islamic political system replaces the existing one is crucial and important. Besides those concern, matter of the Islamic caliphate will remain interesting sources of discussions and even controversial to some extents (Adam *et al.*, 2014).

This study, therefore aims to highlight Sayyid Qutb's views in regards to caliphate government and how its relevance in the context of Muslim society differs from that of Western models particularly; concept of a caliphate government, the appointment of a caliph and its role and responsibility.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present article is basically derived from a qualitative research conducted using secondary data analysis as a main design. The design is sometimes called content analysis design. Content analysis is a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding (Stemler, 2001). Holsti (1969) on the other hand views content analysis as any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages. Researcher regard content analysis a flexible method for analysing text data (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). This study will analyse

Qutb's ideas and thought in regards to caliphate government that appear in his writings particularly his *Fi Zilal al-Quran* works. Other secondary data such as books, journal articles discussing and commenting on Qutb's thought are also taken into account in order to have a clear picture about the latter arguments

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion will focus on concept of caliphate government, the appointment of caliphate and its role and responsibility.

Caliphate government: On many occasions of Qutb's arguments in particular, *Fi Zilal al-Quran*, Qutb reminded Muslims of their role on this earth as God's vicegerents (khalifah), honoured with many distinctions compared with the rest of God's creatures, among which were knowledge and desire. These two important elements, if properly managed in accordance with God's command, would make people superior even to His angels. But if they took the wrong path and indulged in evil doing, then their position would be even worse than that of animals in the sight of God (Qutb, 1992). The Qur'an mentions the role of human beings as God's vicegerents on this earth. Among the best known is verse 30 of Sura 2 (al-Baqarah):

And (remember) when your Lord said to the angels: "Verily, I am going to place (mankind) generations after generations on earth." They said: "Will You place therein those who will make mischief therein and shed blood while we glorify You with praises and thanks and sanctify You." He (Allah) said: "I know that which you do not know"

In interpreting this verse, early Qur'anic commentators and scholars like Ibn al-'Abbas (d.670) for instance, decided that the khalifah referred to Prophet Adam and his descendants as successors to the previous generations which God had created on this earth. Hasan al-Basri (d.728), on the other hand, viewed the vicegerency of Prophet Adam and his descendants as their role as God's successors to settle the earth and to rule it justly in accordance with God's command. He did not relate this new creation of humankind to the previous generations. Qutb held the same opinion on the nature of the khalifa as that of Hasan al-Basri. This was because Qutb maintained that the concept of *istihklaf* (the appointment of human beings as God's vicegerents) on this earth referred to people's capability to develop their lives here and reform them in accordance with God's

command. It also referred to their capability to realize (tahqiq) justice on this earth (Qutb, 1993). Therefore, Qutb understood that the establishment of a Caliphate government was necessary to achieve harmony throughout human society on this earth. To support his argument, Qutb included terms like reign (mulk), triumph (ghalaba) and government in the meaning of al-istikhlaf, so long as they were applied to the development of human society and the realization of the manhaj of God which has been designed for the guidance of humans (Qutb, 1993).

In Qutb's view, the vicegerency of humankind entailed ruling this earth justly and making judgments in accordance with God's commands. The one who assumed this responsibility was known as the khalifa or imam. In describing the nature and responsibility of the khalifa, Qutb quoted verse 26 of Sura 38 (Ra'd) regarding Prophet David (Dawood) who was both prophet and khalifa:

O Dawood (David) Verily We have placed you as a successor on the earth; so judge you between men in truth (and justice) and do not follow your desire-for it will mislead you from the Path of Allah

The vicegerency of human beings and their duty to rule this earth were also related to the management of the universe. This meant that God created them and imposed upon them the divine duty (the role of khalifa) to carry out His commands so that their lives would run in parallel with the rest of God's creation. The creation of the sun and moon, for instance, clearly showed that they had been arranged in such a manner that precluded collisions. "And the sun runs its course for a period determined for it; that is the decree of (Him), the Exalted in Might, the All-Knowing". Humans as part of God's creation, were responsible for maintaining the harmony established by Him. This is because the justice required from those vicegerents of the earth (khulafa' al-ardh) in judging among their people, actually constituted part of the whole truth (Qutb, 1993).

That is why in discussing this question, Qutb always reminded Muslims to study carefully the Islamic theory about the universe, life and humankind and their correlation before discussing other human social relations because Islam and all its doctrines, legislation and ritual were built on this fundamental idea. Qutb's emphasis on a similar idea can be found in his early books such as al-'Adalah and al-Salam al-Alami. Looking to Qutb's political discussion in *Zilal*, it seems that his emphasis on the Islamic theory of the universe and the vicegerency of humankind was to instruct Muslims in the

basics of Islam, so that if they became khalifa or imam later on, they would have a clear understanding of their role and thus will support and rule for justice. A question arise here, how was it possible to handle the huge responsibility of successfully maintaining justice and harmony in this world comprising people of different colour, race, etc.? This was the question that led Qutb to argue on the need to establish the so-called a caliphate government. The idea derived from the fact that it would be impossible for individuals (afraad) to implement God's command if they were small in number. A strong organization or a government was essential to look after human affairs and, more importantly, to represent them in executing the shari'a of God in a true sense. Therefore istikhlaf (the appointment of human beings as God's vicegerents) in Qutb's view was important in an Islamic government because it derived from the basic purpose of human existence in this world, that is, to give total obedience to God by following His manhaj of life which emphasized justice and harmony in human society and opposed all kinds of oppression and exploitation of other people (Qutb, 1992).

The appointment of a Caliph: Since the government itself represented Muslims in executing God's command, the caliph, who was selected to lead the government, held the same responsibility. The only difference between the caliph and other Muslims was that the former had the power to enforce the shari'a of God and punish those people who deviated from the right path and bring them back to the teachings of Islam. It was, therefore, this duty that made the caliph or the imam eligible to be obeyed by all Muslims. As verse 59 of Sura 4 (al-Nisa') states: "O you who believe! Obey Allah and obey the Messenger (Muhammad) and those of you (Muslims) who are in authority".

Citing this verse, Qutb argued that giving obedience to the caliph constituted a Qur'anic injunction too. This was because after the Prophet there were only the Qur'an and his sunna as the main sources of legislation for Muslim society. The caliph's role was to implement the shari'a of God as stated in the Qur'an and the Sunna so as to maintain obedience to God and His Prophet. In one of his statements Qutb stressed: "God sent His messengers to be obeyed (by their people) with His consent, not to be disobeyed (by their people) on their instruction, nor to become merely preachers and spiritual leaders! (Qutb, 1992).

Qutb sometimes used the term imama to refer to those who led an Islamic government. The imam in his view was the one who led the people to the way of God, guided

them to the right path and showed a good example to them in conduct and, more importantly, religious commitment (Qutb, 1992). The term imama, according to Qutb had three meanings: imama al-risala, imama al-khilafa and imama al-salat. He maintained that Imama al-Risala and Imama al-Khilafa were integrated as exemplified by Prophet Muhammad and Prophet David who not only preached God's message but at the same time, led their governments. After the Prophet, it became the responsibility of the caliph or imam among Muslims to continue this task through the enforcement of the shari'a law, constant obedience to the Prophet and constant implementation of God's commands (Qutb, 1992). In support of this argument, Qutb cited verse 124 of Sura 2 (al-Baqara):

Verily, I am going to make you an Imam for mankind. [Prophet Abraham] said, "And of my offspring (to make leaders)." (Allah) said, "My Covenant (Prophethood) does not include Zalimun (polytheists and wrong-doers)"

This verse, according to Qutb, clearly signified that only those who worked for justice and executed the shari'a of God were eligible to be imam, not those who oppressed other people. He also asserted that the most important criteria in appointing the imam were religious commitment and readiness to be a just imam, not that of family ties and blood relations (Qutb, 1993). Qutb's emphasis on the above criteria derived from his belief that family ties and blood relations could not always guarantee a suitable leader if they were not bound by 'aqida (strong faith) and a just administration. It might seem that Qutb's notion deviated from that of traditional scholars such as al-Mawardi, who included in the criteria membership of "the family of Quraysh". However, an analysis of the current political situation in Muslim society suggested that Qutb's notion was more appropriate in the modern age. This was because the attraction of worldly pleasure could be strong enough to cause a leader to deviate from the truth. Qutb admitted this when he studied the current state of Muslim society:

And this is what Prophet Abraham (Ibrahim), peace be upon him, was told. This is a clear covenant in its wording without any twist and vagueness. It is also decisive in dismissing claims among those who call themselves Muslims today

It also dismisses their unjust and immoral actions which diverged from God's path and also their action in throwing away His shari'a:

And [even though] their declaration is for Islam, at the same time they set aside the shari'a of God and His manhaj from their lives. [Indeed] this is a false declaration which has no [true] basis of a covenant of God ('ahd Allah) (Qutb, 1992)

Thus 'aqida and justice were the most important criteria for the imamate, so that any person coming to the post would be from among the God-fearing and ready to execute the shari'a of God in human affairs. In regard to the way the caliph or imam come into being, Qutb stressed that its appointment should be through the sharia system. This was because the holder of that post represented the whole Muslim community to uphold God's command and put it into the practice. Therefore, the appointment was subject to the will of the people, whose duty would be to supervise and observe their leader's application of the shari'a. Meanwhile, no belligerent act was to be permitted against the caliph or imam provided that he did not deviate from the basic instructions of the shari'a (Qutb, 1992).

Since the government itself was based on shura and the imam was appointed by a majority of shura members, Qutb rejected the emergence of another imam within the same territory assuming him to be a transgressor (bughah). This was because the role of the imam was to maintain justice, unity and solidarity among the members of the community and also to look after their welfare. It would be impossible to do this job effectively if someone else claimed to be imam. In Islamic government, Qutb argued, once an imam had been selected to lead the Muslims and had been given a bay'a, no other person could hold the post. Rather, the transgressor was to be fought to bring him back to obey the one imam. Qutb cited the example of Imam 'Ali (who fought against dissenters at the battles of Camel and Siffin) to show that Islam permitted the imam to act against troublemakers so long as he was in the right. Some of the Companions who supported the Imam's action took part in the battles, though there were some who did not participate. According to Qutb, their non-participation should not be seen as their disagreement with the Imam's opinion. There were also among these Companions some, who were still confused over whether the step taken by the Imam had been permitted by Islam or not. Qutb then came across a narration which stated that Ibn 'Umar regretted siding with the Imam, signifying that the Imam was in the right to fight against those who were disloyal to him. This was because his aim was to maintain justice, solidarity and brotherhood among all the members, since love, peace and co-operation had become attributes of an Islamic community (Qutb, 1992).

Role and responsibility: Since, shura was one of the principles of the caliphate or imama government, any matters concerning Muslims should be discussed first with the imam who would then decide how to proceed. Therefore, Qutb maintained, it was forbidden for individual Muslims to hold a secret counsel without the imam's consent, considering such conduct as among Satan's attributes. The reason was that such an action was open to misinterpretation by some people and could thus create disunity among Muslims, even though it perhaps intended the betterment of Muslims in general. Moreover, it would arouse suspicion among Muslims and destroy trust which was one of the most important elements in creating solidarity and brotherhood among all Muslims (Qutb, 1992). Qutb was clearly describing the role of the imam as being the focal point to which everyone referred their problems. It is then for the imam to decide, after holding a counsel with the shura members, what should be done to solve the problem. Indeed, there was a hadith forbidding Muslims to hold a secret counsel, even if there were three of them: "when there are three of you, do not hold a counsel between two of you without the attendance of the other member because such conduct will make him sad." This hadith should become the basic guideline for Muslims so that their community would remain strong because its members trusted one another without creating any confusion among them.

Although, the caliph had the authority to enjoin good, forbid evil and expect obedience, there were certain conditions to be fulfilled so as to maintain that right of obedience. Should the imam or caliph act contrary to God's commands, his appointment would be withdrawn. According to Qutb, this was to ensure that the leader would always follow the will of the people who had selected him to represent them in fulfilling God's command. The post of imam did not mean that one could act freely in the administration of the state. Rather, the imam should always have the consent of the people that he might act in accordance with their desires, enjoining good and forbidding evil, part of the purpose of human existence on earth as God's vicegerents (Qutb, 1992).

CONCLUSION

Throughout his discussion on the caliphate or imama government, Qutb was apparently convinced that once this form of government had been established in Muslim community, many problems such as social, political and economic disparities would be solved. In

administration of the government, Qutb found that there was no room for the caliph or imam to act unjustly since the procedure of appointment (shura) was such as to make the post-holder the best person to judge according to the shari'a. Moreover, the concept of istikhlaf (the appointment of the caliph) itself demanded that human beings were to accept guidance (al-huda) only from God and were bound by His manhaj of life. Therefore, in the context of Muslim's life, there was a choice of two paths: to accept God's commands or to follow Satan; there was no middle way. In Qutb's view, Quranic injunctions on the need of establishing this form of government is still applicable and practical within Muslim society of modern day so long as they follow three important criteria namely; understanding its concept and philosophy, following rules pertaining caliph's appointment and finally, to have a clear understanding on the caliph's role and responsibility among which to 'enjoining good and forbidding evil'.

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