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Control of Power and Oversight in Islam with Emphasis on the Conduct and Sayings of Imam 'Alī (A.S.)

1. Alireza. Tofighi¹: Department of Law, Shi.C, Islamic Azad University, Shiraz, Iran
2. Abdolhamid. Farzane^{2*}: Department of Law, Shi.C, Islamic Azad University, Shiraz, Iran
3. Mahdi. Sheikh Movahed³: Department of Law, Shi.C, Islamic Azad University, Shiraz, Iran
3. Hamid. Mahmoudian³: Department of Law, Shi.C, Islamic Azad University, Shiraz, Iran

*corresponding author's email: ab.farzaneh@iau.ac.ir

ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify Islamic values in this domain and to uncover the strategies offered by Islam regarding the control and oversight of power, drawing upon Islamic sources (the Qur'an and Sunnah) with particular emphasis on the conduct and sayings of Imam 'Alī (A.S.). One of the fundamental duties of governance is the control and oversight of power. Islam, through presenting its distinctive worldview and perspective on this subject in governance, and by emphasizing authentic values rooted in human nature, exerts a profound influence on the substance of this process (i.e., the control and oversight of power). Moreover, considering the comprehensiveness of Islamic rulings in both theoretical and practical conduct, as well as the establishment of the Islamic government by the Prophet of Islam (P.B.U.H.) and the Commander of the Faithful (A.S.)—whose conduct reflects Islam and embodies its beliefs and values in the governance of society—Islam also provides a practical and applicable system at the procedural level that can serve as a guiding framework for humanity in managing societies.

Keywords: Islam, control, oversight, power, governance

Introduction

Supervision is one of the essential duties of an Islamic ruler across various spheres of governance, serving to evaluate the performance and programs of subordinate institutions and identify their strengths and weaknesses. Oversight functions as a deterrent against deviation and stagnation among administrators and acts as a mechanism for their proper regulation and moderation (1). For the advancement of governmental objectives, reciprocal legal supervision between the state and the people is necessary, ensuring the proper implementation of laws and the fulfillment of the rights of both government and nation (2). In reality, a principled and rational relationship between rulers and citizens—one that operates in both directions—plays a constructive role in elevating religion, developing and flourishing the country, and reforming social affairs (3).

In the governance model of Imam 'Alī (A.S.), reciprocal oversight between the people and the rulers is regarded as a foundational principle of the social system, and both a dynamic government and an informed nation are called



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upon to uphold this essential matter (4). His theoretical stance indicates this meaning, just as his practical conduct throughout his period of governance demonstrates it in numerous instances. The outcomes of such oversight include the rectification of affairs, purification of the administrative system, punishment of violators, public reassurance, national hope, and strengthened solidarity between the people and the Imam—a process that becomes possible only when the people are present on the scene and informed about governmental performance and programs. Therefore, if supervision and control are carried out properly and accurately, their positive effects will manifest in society and the lives of its members, preventing anyone from daring to act contrary to the system and the law and thereby hindering the organization or administrative structure from achieving its predetermined goals. Imam ‘Alī (A.S.), in order to prevent any form of oppression, negligence, or deviation and to ensure that affairs proceed through their rightful channels, employed specific mechanisms of oversight that both removed administrative obstacles and served as a model for future generations. It is hoped that by following the example of this infallible Imam (A.S.), society may witness growth, progress, and the realization of justice.

Definitions and Concepts

To examine how power is critiqued and supervised from the perspective of Islam and the governance of Imam ‘Alī (A.S.), it is first necessary to provide brief explanations regarding the concepts of *power* and *freedom*.

Power (Power) is originally an Arabic term (*al-qudrah*), which in lexicographical sources appears with meanings such as ability, capability, potency, force, superiority, strength, authority, and domination (5).

In its technical sense, *power* has been defined as “a set of material and spiritual factors that enable an individual or group to bring another individual or group into obedience” (3).

Mullā Ṣadrā identifies two dimensions of power: first, a psychological quality from which action or non-action originates—meaning that a person has equal capacity to perform or refrain from performing an act; thus, the preference for one over the other requires an internal motive, as preference without justification is impossible. Second, the agent must possess freedom, such that whenever he wills to act he may do so, and whenever he wills to refrain he may refrain (6).

Bakhshayeshi defines power as the existence of a dominant will under which other wills are subordinated (7).

According to ‘Ameed Zanjānī, power consists of material and spiritual factors enabling one individual or group to subject another to obedience (8).

Oversight and Control of Power in Religious Teachings

Oversight from the Qur’anic Perspective

“*Why were there not, among the generations before you, people possessing virtue who forbade corruption on earth, except for a few of those whom We saved? But the wrongdoers pursued the luxuries they were given, and thus became guilty ones.*” (Qur’ān 11:116)

In this verse, a social principle guaranteeing the salvation of societies from destruction is presented: as long as a group of committed and responsible thinkers in any society refuse to remain silent in the face of corruption and instead rise to confront it through enjoining good and forbidding evil, that society will not fall into ruin (9). However, when indifference and silence prevail and society becomes defenseless against corruption, then corruption—and subsequently, collapse—becomes inevitable (10).

The verse shows that *enjoining good and forbidding evil* is a powerful mechanism that promotes virtues, eliminates corruption, and functions as an important tool for controlling and restraining political power in society (11). In an Islamic system, the responsibility of individuals is inseparable from that of the government; rationally, this creates a right and duty for all individuals to oversee the actions of rulers so as to prevent their deviation from truth, justice, and piety (12). Although justice and piety are prerequisites for leadership in an Islamic system, public reminders and communal oversight can prevent errors and play a complementary role (13).

Oversight in the Conduct of the Prophet of Islam (P.B.U.H.)

In the early efforts to establish the political system of Islam, during the Prophet's meeting with the representatives of Medina—who later became known as the *Anṣār*—after they professed faith and pledged allegiance, he appointed one or two individuals from each tribe as *naqībs* to monitor their affairs closely and supervise the process of Islamization and the society's transition from ignorance to monotheism (2).

After the Prophet migrated to Medina and established the Islamic government with the help of the *Anṣār*, he not only retained these representatives but gradually expanded the scope of oversight, appointing additional observers for various regions and tribes (14). For example, in the sixth year after the Hijrah, he appointed one overseer (‘*arīf*) for every ten warriors so they could remain informed about developments and conditions (15).

The Prophet similarly appointed observers for tribes—such as Jundub ibn al-Nu‘mān and Rāfi‘ ibn Khadīj—who were tasked with monitoring tribal conditions and reporting political and religious developments to Medina. He also oversaw markets and economic affairs, appointing Sa‘īd ibn al-‘Āṣ over the Meccan marketplace and ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb over the market and trade affairs of Medina (16).

As the Islamic realm expanded and governmental experience accumulated, oversight likewise increased both quantitatively and qualitatively. The Prophet even utilized women for supervisory and informational purposes, appointing *Umm al-Shifā* over one of the markets—a testament to the inclusive nature of oversight in early Islamic governance (17). He also instructed that experts from each profession should be sought for supervisory tasks within their respective fields (18).

Oversight and Control of Power in the Conduct of Imam ‘Alī (A.S.)

Historical evidence demonstrates that Imam ‘Alī (A.S.) viewed governmental authority as a trust (*amānah*) and regarded any proprietary or unjust approach toward it as a betrayal of that trust and of the Muslim community (19). In response to a report from Abū al-Aswad concerning the conduct of the governor of Basra, he wrote: “People like you—those who are committed and conscientious—offer sincere counsel to the Imam and the community, fulfill the trust (administrative responsibility), and guide toward the truth...” (20).

In his letter to Ibn ‘Abbās, he stated: “I made you a partner in my trust... yet you neither supported your cousin nor fulfilled the trust” (21).

In another letter, Imam ‘Alī (A.S.) praises Abī Salamah, the governor of Bahrain, affirming that governance is a trust that must not be betrayed: “I removed you (from the governorship of Bahrain) without any fault on your part. You administered the office well, discharged the trust faithfully, and no accusation whatsoever touches your integrity” (6).

Imam ‘Alī (A.S.) emphasized the necessity and importance of oversight in governance through various statements and methods, underscoring that proper supervision is indispensable for justice and administrative integrity (22).

A. Strengthening Internal Oversight

All of the Imam’s ethical counsels and pedagogical reminders directed toward the people and the officials of the government serve this very purpose. In order to strengthen reason, truth-seeking, and integrity within individuals—so that they do not commit error and violation behind the back of state overseers and the general community—the Imam repeatedly highlights, in his sermons, letters, and admonitions, the themes of divine piety, fear of the consequences of disobedience and rebellion, God’s constant and meticulous supervision over all affairs, and the centrality of people’s rights (12). He reminds them of the short duration of their tenure as trustees and of the certainty of accounting and punishment, recalling death, the Resurrection, Paradise, and Hell, so that officials will not regard their period of rule as “booty,” nor fall into opportunism and greed, but rather see it as a trust, take divine oversight seriously and continuously, and adopt honesty as the foundation of their conduct (3).

B. The Necessity of Establishing an External Supervisory Apparatus

After offering sufficient doctrinal clarification concerning the need for state agents to remain mindful of divine supervision and warning them not to neglect this, the Imam (peace be upon him) introduces the notion of external oversight and insists on its necessity for the integrity and endurance of the political order (11). In a letter addressed to Ash‘ath ibn Qays al-Kindī, he states: “Your work is not a morsel given to you [to consume]; rather, it is a trust upon your neck, and you are being watched over by one who is above you. You have no right to act arbitrarily with respect to the subjects, nor to undertake any risk without firm proof, and in your hands is a share of the wealth of God...” (15).

In this political document, the Imam draws attention to the necessity of supervision by superiors over the performance of officials and subordinates, as well as to the duty of state agents to accept such oversight. He thus seeks to institutionalize external supervision in relation to the style of governance adopted by statesmen (18). In a passage from his historic letter to Mālik al-Ashtar, he instructs: “For the control of your officials and employees, appoint honest spies who are loyal to the system.” (2). To another governor he advises: “It is my view that you should send a group of upright and pure individuals, whose religiosity and trustworthiness you are confident in, so they may question [the people] about the conduct of the officials and administrators (and inquire from the populace), and investigate and ask about whatever is being done in the cities.” (1)

These excerpts in fact represent only a small portion of the Imam’s many admonitions regarding the necessity of oversight and the strengthening of the observant “eyes” of the representatives in the Islamic lands. They emphasize that state officials are, without exception, under supervision and seek to prepare their minds and attitudes for acceptability of oversight, rectitude of thought, correctness of conduct, and readiness to be held accountable (23).

Operational Mechanisms of Oversight

In his government, the Commander of the Faithful (peace be upon him) implemented various supervisory mechanisms which, taken together, produced significant reformative successes in enhancing the effectiveness of his political order and the Alid system (8). Thus, across the centuries, this system has come to be regarded as an

ideal and exemplary model, longed for by freedom-seekers and researchers pursuing the realization of justice and the establishment of a virtuous city.

Appointing Ideologically Committed Officials

Without doubt, the presence of upright and ideologically committed officials in a political system is extremely valuable. After assuming governance, Imam ‘Alī (peace be upon him) placed at the top of his agenda the identification and appointment of competent and value-oriented forces, as well as the removal and exclusion of opportunists and authoritarian figures (22).

A brief look at the Imam’s officials and a comparison with those of his predecessors confirms that ‘Alī (peace be upon him) insisted on a variety of qualities in his appointees, including a strong sense of conscientious oversight, constant awareness of divine supervision, and readiness to accept supervision and accountability in governance (9). Clearly, those who are more mindful of God and the Day of Return—such as Mālik al-Ashtar, Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr, Abū Salamah b. Umm Salamah (Umm al-Mu’minīn), Abū al-Aswad, Ibn ‘Abbās, and companions like Salmān al-Fārsī, Bilāl al-Habashī, Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī, Miqdād, ‘Ammār b. Yāsir, Ibn Tihān, Dhū al-Shahādatayn, and others—possess exemplary piety and outstanding asceticism. With such individuals, oversight becomes easier, and the supervisory apparatus more efficient and less costly (16). For principled thinking and righteous conduct in a system are grounded in righteous and worthy managers, and with the integrity and chastity of leaders and administrators, a significant part of policies and performances is secured and the system is protected from many dangers (17).

In fact, appointing pious and trustworthy managers and governors in place of individuals such as Marwān b. al-Hakam, Mu‘āwiyah b. Abī Sufyān, Mughīrah b. Shu‘bah, Sa‘īd b. ‘Uthmān, ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ, Ziyād b. Abīh, and others amounts to reforming the Islamic order on multiple fronts, including the enhancement of supervisory capacities and the activation of this vital governmental function toward lofty divine and popular goals (20). Employing competent and effective personnel, in reality, means purifying the system of oversight and enabling expert and precise information-gathering.

Methods of Controlling and Restraining Power in Islam

The internal methods of controlling power in Islam can be divided into two categories: epistemic restraint and moral restraint (7).

Rational-Epistemic Restraint

One of the methods for controlling the political and social behavior of rulers is the body of knowledge and insights they possess. Among these bodies of knowledge are the following:

1. Juristic Expertise (Fiqh)

Some hold that the social conduct of a ruler and leader who is a jurist differs greatly from that of a non-jurist, and that a jurist-leader is more successful in observing the rights of society (3). In Islam as well—where infallibility and divinely granted knowledge are not present—juristic expertise in religious rulings is required of the leader. Given that *fiqh* constitutes the comprehensive value system of Islam and is broader than positive law, the Islamic jurist may be regarded as an Islamic legal expert (11). The Commander of the Faithful (peace be upon him) states: “The

one most entitled to this matter (leadership) is the strongest in it and the most knowledgeable of God's command concerning it" (6).

2. Theistic Worldview

Theology and belief in the Resurrection, together with a deep heartfelt conviction that God is ever-watchful and that one is accountable before Him, play a major role in guarding power from deviation and corruption (12). For this reason, the Qur'an denies the legitimacy of the authority of unbelievers over believers—"And never shall God grant to the unbelievers a way [of domination] over the believers" (Q 4:141)—and Imam al-Husayn (peace be upon him) considers adherence to the true religion a condition of leadership (13).

3. Conception of Power

The epistemic framework of those in power and their conception of power play a decisive role in how it is exercised. In other words, the ruler's worldview and the place of power within it are of great importance. One of the fundamental roots of the "corruption of power" lies in the proprietorial, absolutist, and possessive attitude of the powerful toward power itself (5).

The Islamic view of "political power" is one of responsibility and trusteeship. Imam 'Alī (peace be upon him) writes to Ash'ath b. Qays, the governor of Azerbaijan: "Governorship is not a means for you to seek bread; rather, it is a trust upon your neck..." (15). One of the most important consequences of this conception of power is refraining from corruption and dictatorship. Hence, the Imam continues: "You have no right to behave despotically toward the subjects!" (19). In another letter to one of his governors, he writes: "Now then, I have made you a partner in my trust (of government and rule)..." (21).

Moral Restraint

The character traits and dispositions that have taken root in a person's soul are among the most important determinants of human behavior. Accordingly, Islam places great emphasis on the moral qualities of the ruler and recognizes only those who possess the highest commendable traits and are free from blameworthy ones as fit for leadership (14). The most important qualities of a leader in religious texts include:

1. Justice

From the Islamic perspective, leadership is reserved solely for the just and for those who oppose oppression. The Qur'an states: "And do not incline toward those who have committed injustice, lest the Fire touch you" (Q 11:113). In his letter to the people of Kūfah, Imam al-Husayn (peace be upon him) writes: "By my life, the Imam is none but one who judges according to the Book of God, upholds justice, adheres to the true religion, and restrains his soul for the sake of God." (7)

2. Piety (Taqwā)

Piety is among the crucial conditions for leadership in Islam. The Prophet (peace be upon him) stated: "The Imamate is not fitting except for one who possesses three traits: piety that keeps him from disobeying his Lord, ..." and so on (10).

3. Forbearance and Good Conduct

The Prophet is described as having forbearance through which he restrains his anger, and as exercising benevolent leadership over citizens, such that he is like a compassionate father to them (24).

Mechanisms of External Restraint of Power in Islam

The methods of externally restraining power in Islam are multiple and diverse. In addition to the mechanisms explicitly mandated by Islam (text-based mechanisms), there are also rational, convention-based mechanisms which, so long as they do not conflict with divinely sanctioned authority or hinder the fulfillment of governmental duties, may be legitimately employed (22).

Structural control, separation of powers, and organizational control fall among such mechanisms. An example of organizational control—instituted in the Islamic Republic of Iran—is the supervisory and controlling role of the Assembly of Experts over the Supreme Leader (4).

Some of the mechanisms of external restraint of power in Islam include:

Divine Direct Control

God is the most important controller and the most powerful and knowledgeable overseer of power. He exercises His supervision in various ways, including:

a. Legislation

One of the means of restraining power is the provision of comprehensive and appropriate norms regarding how power is to be exercised and the determination of rules governing the behavior of rulers.

Divine legislation and the strong emphasis on the necessity of obeying God's rulings play a crucial role in restraining power. The Qur'an stresses this matter intensely, characterizing governance that disregards divine rulings as oppression, transgression, and unbelief (2). Imam al-Husayn (peace be upon him) likewise recognizes only one as ruler who acts in accordance with the Book of God (13).

b. Revocation of Legitimacy

Alongside specifying the moral and intellectual criteria for leadership and the behavioral norms for rulers, Islam also provides a powerful enforcement guarantee: should power become corrupt, it must be immediately corrected and prevented from continuing (3).

One of the preventive and remedial mechanisms is the revocation of legitimacy. The conditions and behavioral rules for rulers only possess effective force when those who lack these qualities or depart from these norms are no longer recognized as legitimate. When a gap arises between the ruler and the standards prescribed by religion, his legitimacy is instantly nullified, and he is, in effect, dismissed from his position according to the Sharī'ah (11).

C. Punitive Measures

From the Islamic perspective, rulers and citizens alike are subject to God's precise oversight and control. God is ever and everywhere watchful over human behavior and conduct—He is “ever a Watcher over you”—and He reacts to the oppression of wrongdoers. His dealing with the injustice and corruption of “power” takes several forms:

1. Inspiring believers and fighters in the path of God to struggle against oppression and assisting them against tyrants;
2. Imposing legal and situational punishments in this world;
3. Imposing creational and consequential punishments in this world;
4. Imposing punishment in the Hereafter (12).

The Commander of the Faithful (peace be upon him), addressing 'Uthmān, states:

“Know that the best servants in the sight of God is the just leader who has been guided and strives to guide others; who upholds the well-known traditions and eliminates the unfamiliar innovations... And the worst of people

in the sight of God is the unjust leader: the one who is astray and leads others astray; who destroys the recognized traditions and revives the abandoned innovations. Verily, I heard the Messenger of God (peace be upon him and his family) say: On the Day of Resurrection, the unjust leader will be brought forth having neither helper nor advocate, then he will be cast into the Fire of Hell and will be ground therein like a millstone, and thereafter he will be dragged in chains to the lowest depths of the Fire." (7)

D. Regulation of Mutual Rights

In the Islamic system, the relationship between the people and the state is reciprocal and based on mutual rights and responsibilities: the ruler and the people each have obligations toward one another, and both are responsible before God (11). The Commander of the Faithful (peace be upon him) says: "Indeed, I have a right over you, and you have a right over me..."—thus establishing the principle of dual, interlocking rights and duties between ruler and ruled (3).

E. Equality before the Law

From the Islamic point of view, all human beings are equal before the law, and no one enjoys legal privilege over another. This rule, known as the principle of "participation in the rulings," is unanimously accepted among Muslims (8).

2. Public Control

Islam does not regard the proper purification of the exercise of power as achievable without broad and extensive social participation. For this reason, it has designed multiple mechanisms to realize such participation. In Islam, political and social participation is not only a right of the people but also a duty upon them; the overlap of right and obligation in this sphere has its own theoretical foundations and implications (4). Some of the mechanisms that realize participatory, controlling involvement in Islam are as follows:

a. The Necessity of Consultation (Shūrā)

In a religious government, turning one's back on the people, practicing authoritarianism, and excluding the opinions of believers is condemned and blameworthy. The Qur'an explicitly commands consultation with the people and instructs the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) to create, through *shūrā*, an appropriate framework for public participation (2).

b. Universal Responsibility

From the Islamic perspective, all people share responsibility for ensuring that power does not incline toward corruption. The Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) said: "Each of you is a shepherd, and each of you is responsible for his flock." Based on this tradition, later scholars have emphasized that responsibility is mutual and reciprocal between rulers and the people: the ruler's missteps concern the people, and the people's neglect concerns the ruler (22).

By examining the religious texts, we find that Islam is the most comprehensive and realistic system in this field. It emphasizes both internal and external control of the branches of power and, in each domain, offers diverse mechanisms. In the light of these mechanisms—without undermining the authority of the political system—the potential for corruption of power is reduced to the minimum possible (1).

Critique and Oversight of Power in the Islamic Perspective

In Islamic thought, specific principles have been established for controlling government so that power may be restrained. Islam accepts the principle of critique and oversight of power and strongly emphasizes it, while at the

same time the Islamic mode of government—being bound and conditioned by the Sharī‘ah—defines the limits of governmental activities (7).

From the Islamic viewpoint, all human beings are created free, and no one has an inherent right to rule over another. Classical and modern Muslim thinkers have argued that religion and politics represent two dimensions of power and that faith and worldly affairs complement one another; accordingly, “oversight of government is a right of the people—a prior, pre-existing right that does not depend on the permission or mediation of any other power or source” (6).

Freedom of expression and the right to critique within the Islamic system is protected and guaranteed; indeed, Islam regards voicing opinions and offering criticism as among the religious obligations and duties (13). In Islam, there is no difference between ruler and people with respect to the right to critique and supervise one another. Alongside the critique and oversight of power, Islam pays close attention to the principle of freedom, which is a necessary condition for such oversight—so much so that it does not even endorse coerced acceptance in the highest religious matter, namely faith itself: “There is no compulsion in religion...” (Q 2:256), and it urges religious inquiry and investigation, listening to different viewpoints and following the best of them, and rejects inquisitorial probing of beliefs (10).

The Qur'an also foregrounds *enjoining good and forbidding evil* as a mechanism for critiquing and supervising power: “You are the best community brought forth for mankind: you enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong...” (Q 3:110). Another verse indicates that abandoning this duty leads to being forgotten by God (Q 9:67). Prophetic traditions likewise affirm the legitimacy of critiquing and supervising power: “Whenever you see my community afraid to say to the oppressor, ‘You are an oppressor,’ then you may bid them farewell” and “When people witness the oppression of a tyrant and do not restrain his hand, it is not unlikely that God will encompass them all in a general punishment” (3).

Another narration from the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family)—“The disagreement of my community is a mercy”—clearly points to the importance of exchange of ideas and the critique and oversight of power, which presupposes freedom of expression (24).

The conduct of the Prophet himself shows that he accepted critique and oversight of his own authority, and the behavior of the early caliphs likewise indicates that they acknowledged critique and oversight of power as a right belonging to the people (5). It is reported, for example, that Abū Bakr, at the very beginning of his rule, said: “I have now been placed in authority over you, though I am not better than you; therefore, if I act rightly, support me, and if I deviate, correct me.” (8)

The concept of freedom in Islam appears in a particularly striking way in the dialogue between Imam al-Ṣādiq (peace be upon him) and ‘Abd Allāh b. Jundub: “Whoever wakes up with his main concern directed toward something other than freeing a human being (i.e., freeing himself from bondage) has belittled the great (matter) and sought from his Lord a lowly gain,” meaning that a person who spends his energy and anxiety on pursuits other than freedom has trivialized the great value of liberty and settled for a minor benefit from God (12).

Among the methods which Islam introduces for critiquing and supervising power are: *enjoining good and forbidding evil, sincere advice to the leaders of the Muslims, standing up to the unjust use of power, constructive criticism, and exposing oppressive power* (9).

Critique and Oversight of Power in the Conduct and Sayings of ‘Alī (peace be upon him)

One of the important principles in the government of ‘Alī (peace be upon him) is his acceptance of the people’s right to critique and supervise power. To this end, he not only insisted on the implementation of this principle but regarded it as one of the fundamental rights of the populace: if a ruler deviated from his duties, the people had the right to criticize him and, if necessary, to remove him from office (14).

The path and method of ‘Alī (peace be upon him) was essentially opposition to despotism. In order to prevent rulers from drifting away from justice, he regarded the people as guardians over the rulers, the source of governmental authority, and those responsible for enjoining and forbidding (18). He articulated, in the form of clear principles, the framework for critique and oversight of power. In what follows, relying on historical sources such as *Nahj al-Balāghah* and the works of Muslim and Western scholars, these principles are explained (6).

The first principle vital for effective critique and oversight of power—without which such oversight cannot occur—is the principle of freedom, particularly freedom of expression. ‘Alī (peace be upon him), because he had an idealistic and value-oriented view of power, accepted the people’s freedom to express truths before the rulers and implemented this in practice. In reality, “his conduct is entirely an encouragement that people speak openly before the ruler, avoid blind obedience, and share what is in their minds with the leader; the awe and grandeur of the ruler must not prevent them from doing so” (25).

‘Alī (peace be upon him) regarded the ruler’s autocratic outlook toward the people, and the people’s servile and owned-like view of the ruler, as the greatest afflictions of governance, and he strove intensely to purge his government of such attitudes. Thus, he fought strongly against despotism and self-willed rule (23).

Promoting freedom of thought, emphasizing rational reflection, attending carefully to the criticisms of opponents, and insisting on comprehensive oversight are among the most prominent features of ‘Alī’s style of governance. On the basis of this principle of promoting freedom, “never was anyone forced, through violence or pressure, to follow the truth” during his rule (4).

The Imam taught that human beings are, by nature, created free and that none of the powerful has the right to strip others of this freedom; he respected freedom of expression and actively encouraged people to criticize him and speak openly before him (17).

‘Alī (peace be upon him) allowed his companions to criticize his policies. It is reported, for instance, that Mālik al-Ashtar objected to his appointment of some of the sons of ‘Abbās to official posts; the Imam replied by inviting him to introduce anyone more qualified so that he might appoint them instead (16).

Two important principles in ‘Alī’s political philosophy are:

1. No one other than God has a one-sided relationship with the truth;
2. In a healthy community, the weak can take their rights from the strong without stammering (3).

‘Alī (peace be upon him) not only believed in freedom to critique and supervise power, but, despite being kept away from political authority for approximately 25 years, he himself openly criticized power when necessary—especially the policies of previous caliphs—though always in a constructive, analytical, and rational manner, not in a destructive or fanatical way (7). In the celebrated “Shaqshaqiyah Sermon,” he criticizes Abū Bakr for depriving him of his rightful caliphate and entrusting it to ‘Umar, and he criticizes ‘Umar for two main traits: excessive harshness, which frightened companions from speaking the truth, and frequent impulsiveness followed by apologies for his errors (24).

During the caliphate of ‘Uthmān, ‘Alī (peace be upon him) strongly criticized some of his policies and openly expressed his objections. It is well known that he accompanied Abū Dharr at the time of his exile and delivered words clearly addressed to the caliph: “Abū Dharr, you became angry for God’s sake, and these people feared you regarding their worldly interests, while you feared them for your religion. Had you accepted their world, they would have loved you” (5).

In another sermon about ‘Uthmān, ‘Alī (peace be upon him) says: “He undertook the affairs without consulting others and thus ruined them,” underscoring the necessity of consultation and collective oversight (15).

‘Alī (peace be upon him) regarded the severing of the ruler’s direct connection with the people as extremely dangerous, leading to ignorance of the people’s affairs and inability to distinguish between major and minor matters, good and bad, and truth and falsehood. He tells Mālik al-Ashtar: “Never say, ‘I have been given authority and must therefore be obeyed,’ for this will corrupt the heart and weaken the faith and bring one closer to ruin” (14).

The second principle that the Imam emphasizes in the area of critique and oversight is the condemnation of flattery and undeserved praise. In the midst of the Battle of Ḫiṣn al-Kudrā, he stresses the necessity of criticizing and supervising power without flattery: “Do not extol me as people praise their tyrannical rulers; do not converse with me as you would with the arrogant. Do not think that speaking the truth is difficult for me to hear, and do not imagine that I seek self-aggrandizement. One who finds hearing the truth difficult and who finds that justice is burdensome will have it even harder to act upon them” (12).

He rejects royal pomp and ceremonious protocol and advises the populace not to burden themselves with elaborate receptions merely to please the ruler. When the notables of Anbār dismounted and ran ahead of him to show respect, he rebuked them and explained that such practices bring no real benefit to rulers and only bring hardship in this world and loss in the Hereafter for the people (13).

The third principle to which ‘Alī (peace be upon him) attaches great importance in the realm of critique and oversight of power is the need for frankness and honesty between rulers and the people. Because of his commitment to an idealistic political ethic, he insists that the leader speak truthfully with the people and be mentally prepared to accept their criticisms; otherwise, the power of the oppressor will grow and the call of truth will become weak and marginalized (11). He asks the people: “Help me through sincere advice free of deception and hypocrisy.”

To foster this climate of honesty and frankness, he himself would walk among the people, learn of their problems directly, and instruct his officials to listen personally to the concerns of the citizens and to address their needs. He advises Mālik to dedicate a part of his time specifically to those who need him and to remove guards and barriers so that people may speak to him without fear or hesitation (4).

The most important Islamic principle in the sphere of critique and oversight is *enjoining good and forbidding evil*, which ‘Alī (peace be upon him) presents as the basis for the people’s critique and supervision of power and as a condition for preserving the health of society. He equates the establishment of this principle with *jihād* and states: “*Jihād* is on four pillars: enjoining good, forbidding evil, steadfastness in battle against enemies, and opposing the wicked. Whoever enjoins good strengthens the backs of the believers, and whoever forbids evil humiliates the hypocrites” (9).

Accurate critique and oversight of power require adherence to the essential principle of control and accountability and the abandonment of arrogance and self-aggrandizement. The fourth principle to which ‘Alī (peace be upon him) pays great attention is the necessity of supervising officials and auditing their conduct. To this end, he kept

close watch over the behavior and actions of his governors and, when he saw deviations, harshly reproached them and, in some cases, removed them from office without hesitation (22).

For example, he severely criticized ‘Uthmān b. Ḥunayf—the governor of Basra—for attending a banquet hosted by a wealthy youth who neglected the poor. In a famous letter he tells him to fear God, to be content with coarse bread if salvation from the Fire is his concern, and reminds him that his own lifestyle as leader consists of two worn garments and two simple loaves, that he has not hoarded wealth or amassed worldly goods, and that he could have lived in luxury had he wished—but he refuses to do so while there are hungry stomachs and burning livers around him (17).

In another letter, he reproaches Shurayḥ the judge for purchasing an expensive house and sends someone to confiscate it from him; later, when he found some of Shurayḥ’s rulings unsound, he removed him from his position (20). He even demanded that his officials treat non-Muslim subjects within his realm with justice and dignity, and when he observed negligence in this respect, he rebuked them firmly (23).

Conclusion

In the view of ‘Alī (peace be upon him), the Islamic ruler must constantly keep the conduct of his officials under supervision, and if any error or violation occurs on their part, he must discipline and punish them accordingly (22). The fifth principle that ‘Alī (peace be upon him) emphasized in the sphere of critique and oversight of power was rigorous supervision over the actions of his relatives and those close to him, so that they would not abuse the position that had arisen. In this regard, he was even strict with his own family: not only did he refrain from assigning offices to his own sons, but he also exercised tight oversight over their behavior, and he recommended the same to Mālik al-Ashtar: “A governor has close associates and relatives who are inclined to seek superiority and behave arrogantly, and who are less inclined to observe fairness in their dealings. Uproot the roots of their injustice by cutting off the means to it; do not grant any of your entourage or relatives land as a gift, and do not let them become hopeful of such favors from you” (17). The conduct of ‘Alī (peace be upon him) toward his opponents and enemies likewise shows that he accepted critique and oversight of power. He allowed his opponents, so long as they did not take up the sword, to express their views and criticisms; concrete examples of this are his leaving those who refused to pledge allegiance, as well as the Khawārij, free. The Khawārij, in complete freedom, expressed their beliefs and even caused commotion during his prayer; yet the Commander of the Faithful dealt with them with the utmost tolerance—he neither imprisoned nor flogged them, nor did he cut off their share of the public treasury (7). Even in the face of their accusations, he would respond to them and did not obstruct their social, political, or economic activities, nor did he prevent them from expressing their opinions and beliefs; in this way, he granted his political opponents the right to voice their views and criticize the highest political authority. He also advised his companions to pay attention to the content of speech rather than the identity of the speaker, saying: “Look to what is said, and do not look to the one who says it” (12).

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All authors equally contributed to this study.

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Transparency of Data

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