Mechanisms of Popular Participation in the Consolidation and Collapse of Despotism: A Comparative Analysis of the Views of Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi and John Locke

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ABSTRACT

Political despotism is one of the most significant challenges of governance in human history and is reproduced not only through institutional structures and the exercise of coercive power, but also through social mechanisms and popular participation. The role of the people in this process is dual: through silence and passivity, they may contribute to the consolidation of despotism, or through awareness and resistance, they may bring about its collapse. The purpose of this study is to comparatively analyze the mechanisms of popular participation in the emergence and decline of political despotism from the perspectives of Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi and John Locke. The present research was conducted using a qualitative approach and a comparative analysis method, with data collected through documentary research and content analysis of the works of the two thinkers. The findings indicate that in Locke's theory, tacit consent functions as a form of passive legitimation of despotism, and the transition to the right of resistance occurs when citizens become aware of the systematic violation of their natural rights. In al-Kawakibi's theory, public ignorance, collective fear, and the complicity of elites constitute the three principal mechanisms of despotism's stabilization, while its decline requires the elevation of awareness, the strengthening of rationality, and peaceful struggle. Points of convergence between the two thinkers include an emphasis on collective responsibility, opposition to ideological distortion, and the central role of enlightenment; however, the main divergence lies in their strategies, as Locke emphasizes the right of resistance and revolution, whereas al-Kawakibi stresses gradual cultural reform. The results of the study demonstrate that freedom is an achievement attained through awareness, responsibility, and the active participation of citizens.

Keywords: *political despotism; John Locke; tacit consent; Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi; popular participation.*

Introduction

Political despotism is one of the most enduring and destructive forms of power organization in human history, reproduced not only through institutional structures and sovereign coercion but also through complex social mechanisms (1). Historical examinations of despotic regimes indicate that the persistence of such systems is practically impossible without the participation, passivity, or complicity of segments of society (2). Popular participation and the collective behavior of citizens thus function as a dual factor that can both reinforce despotic structures and create the conditions for their collapse (3). This duality has constituted a central concern of many political thinkers across diverse intellectual traditions (4).

Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi, a nineteenth-century Islamic reformist thinker, offered a structural analysis of despotism in his seminal work *The Nature of Tyranny*, highlighting popular passivity, public ignorance, and elite complicity as key factors in the persistence of autocracy (5). On the other hand, John Locke, the seventeenth-century political philosopher, articulated the concepts of popular consent and the right of resistance as foundational bases of political legitimacy and clarified the conditions under which legitimate revolution against illegitimate power becomes justified (6). A comparative analysis of these two thinkers enables the identification of both shared and divergent patterns in the operation of collective agency vis-à-vis despotic power (7).

Comparatively examining the role of the people in the dynamics of despotism is of considerable importance. Understanding how popular passivity transforms into indirect legitimation of despotism, and how collective awareness becomes a force of resistance against autocracy, provides a new analytical framework for interpreting contemporary political dynamics (8). At a time when many societies are confronted with the resurgence or persistence of new forms of despotism, identifying effective strategies for strengthening popular participation and constraining arbitrary power has become an undeniable necessity (9).

The study of popular roles in despotic dynamics faces multiple challenges. The complexity of power relations and the multidirectional interaction among rulers, elites, and the masses complicate precise analysis of this phenomenon (10). Distinguishing between active legitimation and silent popular passivity, as well as identifying the turning point at which consent transforms into resistance, requires sophisticated analytical tools (11). Fundamental differences in historical, cultural, and conceptual contexts between Islamic and Western intellectual traditions further limit direct comparison and increase the risk of inappropriate analogies (12). Moreover, analyzing collective behavior under despotism involves methodological constraints, as many processes unfold at the macro-social level and within specific historical contexts that are difficult to reconstruct accurately (13).

Previous studies have addressed various aspects of this subject. Haft Baradaran et al. conducted a comparative study of Ayatollah Taleghani's and Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi's political thought on despotism, showing that both thinkers opposed all forms of tyranny and emphasized resistance—particularly against religious and political despotism—while their differences stem from Shiʿi and Sunni perspectives on state formation (14). Kazemi examined the role of despotic culture in the decline of the Islamic world from the perspectives of Kawakibi and Naʾini, concluding that the central cause of decline lies in a culture of despotism and that popular political participation, constitutional government, and the limitation of state power are essential to preventing oppression (15).

Despite these contributions, a significant gap remains in the systematic comparative analysis of the precise mechanisms of popular participation in the consolidation and collapse of despotism from the perspectives of Kawakibi and Locke. Prior studies have largely offered general comparisons of viewpoints while devoting less attention to the in-depth analysis of social processes through which people play an active role. The present study seeks to address this gap by focusing on the practical mechanisms of popular agency and by offering a more detailed comparative analysis across the two intellectual traditions, thereby providing a more comprehensive framework for understanding power dynamics. The primary objective of this research is to comparatively analyze the mechanisms of popular participation in the emergence and decline of political despotism from the perspectives of Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi and John Locke. The study addresses two main questions: (1) How, in Locke's theory, do people contribute to the consolidation of despotism through tacit consent, and when does this consent transform into a right of resistance? (2) How do public ignorance, fear, and elite complicity lead to the stabilization

of despotism in Kawakibi's theory, and which mechanisms are necessary for its decline? The principal innovation of this research lies in its systematic analysis of convergences and divergences in collective behavioral mechanisms across two distinct intellectual traditions and in identifying generalizable patterns for understanding the popular role in despotic dynamics. This study thus undertakes a comparative examination of popular participation mechanisms in the consolidation and collapse of despotism and identifies shared and distinctive patterns of collective agency in the face of despotic power. The following sections address the research methodology, theoretical foundations, comparative analysis of participation mechanisms, and the study's findings.

Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative approach using a comparative analysis method. Research data were collected through documentary and library research, and primary and secondary texts related to the works of Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi—particularly *The Nature of Tyranny*—and John Locke—especially *Two Treatises of Government*—were examined as core sources. Data analysis was conducted within a conceptual and qualitative content analysis framework. Key concepts such as despotism, popular participation, tacit consent, and resistance were first extracted from the works of the two thinkers. Subsequently, the practical mechanisms of popular roles in the emergence and decline of despotism were identified, and finally, points of convergence and divergence among these mechanisms were systematically compared. To ensure analytical validity, source triangulation was employed, and the findings were compared with prior studies and other relevant thinkers' works.

Theoretical Foundations and Conceptualization

Conceptualization of Political Despotism in Kawakibi's Thought

In Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi's intellectual framework, despotism is defined not merely as a particular form of government but as a social pathology that contaminates all dimensions of collective life (5). Kawakibi defines despotism as the absolute appropriation of others' rights without fear of accountability, whereby the despotic ruler places himself above the law and beyond responsibility (16). Unlike purely institutional definitions, this conception highlights the psychological and cultural dimensions of despotism, demonstrating that tyranny becomes entrenched not only within power structures but also within social mentalities and behaviors. In this view, despotism persists when society normalizes it and accepts it as part of the natural order (12).

Kawakibi analyzes despotism across three distinct yet interrelated layers: political despotism, economic despotism, and intellectual despotism. Political despotism refers to the monopolization of decision-making power by an individual or a narrow group ruling without popular consent or oversight. Economic despotism emerges as a direct consequence of political tyranny, wherein public resources are arbitrarily appropriated and distributed by rulers, depriving citizens of control over their collective wealth (5). Intellectual despotism—arguably the most destructive form—entails the control of thought, belief, and public discourse through censorship, propaganda, and the distortion of reality (15).

A central dimension of Kawakibi's analysis is his emphasis on the role of the people in sustaining despotism. He argues that tyranny cannot endure without indirect cooperation or popular silence (14). Within this framework, public ignorance, collective fear, and the absence of political awareness function as the primary pillars of despotic systems. Ignorance signifies not merely a lack of information but the absence of critical analytical capacity and understanding

of power relations, preventing citizens from recognizing their rights and the means of claiming them (17). Fear operates as a principal mechanism of social control, produced not only through physical repression but also by cultivating psychological insecurity and mutual distrust among citizens (8).

Conceptualization of Despotism in Locke's Thought and Its Distinction from Other Forms of Rule

In the *Second Treatise of Government*, John Locke defines despotism as a fundamental deviation from legitimate government, wherein the ruler governs citizens' lives, liberties, and property without their consent and without legal limitation (6). Within Locke's framework, despotism constitutes not merely a breach of the social contract but a return to a state of war between ruler and people, in which the ruler positions himself as an enemy of society (11). Unlike classical definitions that identified despotism primarily by the number of rulers, Locke emphasizes the nature of the ruler–subject relationship and the violation of natural rights (10).

Locke distinguishes despotism from other forms of illegitimate rule. An absolute monarchy may, in certain contexts, operate according to accepted laws and traditions, but despotism rejects even these conventional constraints and is governed entirely by the arbitrary will of the ruler. In a despotic system, no stable or predictable law exists; decisions are made according to the ruler's momentary desires, resulting in absolute insecurity for citizens (1). Moreover, whereas some authoritarian regimes may leave aspects of private life free from state intrusion, despotism seeks comprehensive control over both public and private dimensions of life (2).

A key element of Locke's analysis is his emphasis on popular consent as the foundation of governmental legitimacy. In Locke's social contract theory, individuals voluntarily transfer part of their natural freedom to government in order to safeguard their natural rights—life, liberty, and property (18). This transfer is conditional, and government remains legitimate only so long as it fulfills its obligation to protect citizens' rights. When a government violates these rights and descends into despotism, the social contract dissolves, and the people acquire the right to resist and revolt (10). This perspective underscores the active role of the people not only in establishing government but also in its continuous oversight and, when necessary, its overthrow, thereby providing the theoretical foundation for the right of resistance.

Political Anthropology and the Status of the People in the Two Thinkers' Theories

The political anthropology underlying each thinker's framework shapes their analysis of popular roles in despotic dynamics. In Locke's theory, human beings are rational agents endowed with inherent rights and capable of discerning their interests and making informed decisions regarding governance (6). This assumption of rationality underpins the social contract, whereby individuals calculate their interests and agree to exchange a portion of natural freedom for security and order (7). Nonetheless, Locke acknowledges that rationality does not always operate actively and that popular passivity and silence may contribute to the persistence of illegitimate regimes (10).

In Kawakibi's view, humans likewise possess the capacity for rationality and reasoning, yet this capacity can be obstructed or enhanced by social, cultural, and political conditions (5). Kawakibi places particular emphasis on education, public enlightenment, and social experience in shaping citizens' analytical capacity and political will (12). He argues that despotism systematically generates ignorance, collective fear, and widespread poverty, thereby suppressing rational capacities and transforming people into passive subjects incapable of resistance (14). From this perspective, liberation from despotism requires an educational and cultural process that reconstructs citizens' critical and political capacities (17).

Both thinkers emphasize the collective role of the people as the primary agent of political change, albeit with different emphases (4). Locke focuses on the natural right of resistance and the conditions of legitimate revolution, asserting that once people recognize systematic violations of their rights, they are justified in overthrowing government (11). Kawakibi, by contrast, stresses the gradual awakening of consciousness, the strengthening of civil associations, and cultural reform as processes that generate the social foundations necessary to confront despotism (15). This divergence reflects distinct strategies for popular mobilization: a revolutionary-legal strategy in Locke's theory and a reformist-cultural strategy in Kawakibi's thought.

Mechanisms of Popular Participation in the Emergence of Despotism

Tacit Consent and Passive Legitimation of Despotism

The concept of tacit consent functions as one of the most important mechanisms of indirect legitimation of despotism and plays a pivotal role in the analyses of both thinkers (11). In Locke's theory, consent is divided into explicit and implicit forms, and implicit consent manifests through silence and the absence of active objection (6). When citizens remain silent in the face of governmental encroachment upon natural rights, this silence is interpreted as a form of passive acceptance that rulers treat as a warrant for continuing their actions. By emphasizing citizens' responsibility for continuous oversight of government, Locke regards silence as a breach of civic obligations that can gradually pave the way for the consolidation of despotism (10). This analysis indicates that, within the social contract framework, citizens possess not only rights but also responsibilities for preserving a legitimate political order.

From a different yet complementary perspective, al-Kawakibi interprets popular silence as the product of specific structural and psychological conditions that despotism itself generates. Through a sociological reading, he explains how ignorance of rights, fear of the consequences of resistance, and the absence of historical experience in political participation push people toward passive acceptance of tyranny (19). Within this analytical framework, silence is not necessarily a sign of genuine consent; rather, it is the outcome of a structural incapacity to protest—an incapacity produced by despotic policies of repression and the manufacturing of ignorance (14). This distinction between silence as a conscious choice and silence as structural powerlessness provides an important insight into the differing historical–social contexts in which the two theories are situated.

Both thinkers stress the shared consequence of silence: the foundations of despotism are gradually strengthened through passive legitimation (12). Despotic rulers interpret public silence as a sign of acceptance—or at least the absence of serious opposition—and accordingly expand the scope of their arbitrary actions. This gradual process produces a cycle of intensifying despotism and deepening silence, the disruption of which requires a fundamental transformation in collective awareness and will. Comparative analysis suggests that, in both theoretical frameworks, exiting this vicious cycle requires the recovery of popular collective agency and a transformation in citizens' understanding of their role and responsibility within the political order (10).

A critical difference between the two approaches lies in the proposed strategies for breaking the cycle of silence. Locke places greater emphasis on the natural right of resistance and the necessity of restoring the social contract through collective action; he argues that when violations of rights become systematic, silence is no longer justifiable, and the people are entitled to revolutionary action aimed at reconstructing the political order (11). Al-Kawakibi, by contrast, emphasizes the gradual processes of education, public enlightenment, and cultural reconstruction, which

can generate the socio-psychological preconditions necessary for moving beyond silence (17). This strategic divergence reflects a difference in diagnosing the causes of silence: if silence results from a conscious breach of contract, revolutionary resistance is logically implied; but if silence is produced by structurally embedded ignorance and fear, then education and enlightenment become prerequisites for any fundamental transformation (13).

The Role of Elites and Religious Scholars in Stabilizing Despotic Structures

The role of elites in stabilizing and reproducing despotic structures is a major dimension in both thinkers' analyses, addressing the complexity of power relations in human societies (20). Focusing on the socio-economic context of seventeenth-century England, Locke analyzes the role of propertied classes and aristocratic strata in supporting despotic systems. He shows how powerful groups, in order to preserve their economic privileges and social position, may align themselves with despotic rulers and, in exchange for access to resources and political protection, endorse autocratic policies (6). This argument foregrounds the importance of the political economy of despotism, in which class interests play a decisive role in shaping governing coalitions.

Attentive to the different structure of Islamic societies, al-Kawakibi concentrates on religious scholars and merchants as two influential elite groups. In a critical analysis, he demonstrates how some religious scholars, by providing obedience-oriented interpretations of religious texts and justifying unconditional submission to the ruler, contribute to the ideological legitimation of despotism (19). This process of religious distortion not only equips rulers with an instrument of social control, but also frames despotism as inevitable and divinely sanctioned, thereby rendering resistance morally illegitimate. Merchants, who constitute a major segment of the economic strata, likewise become integrated into despotism's interest networks through dependency on state concessions and contracts (12).

A central point of convergence in Locke's and al-Kawakibi's analyses is the identification of interest-seeking as a key driver of elite complicity with despotism (9). Both thinkers show how short-term rational calculations by powerful groups can lead to collaboration with repressive structures, even when such collaboration is detrimental in the long run to society—and potentially to the elites themselves (8). This line of analysis emphasizes the importance of understanding how power and resources are distributed in despotic systems: rulers construct supportive coalitions by creating networks of dependency and benefit that help stabilize their authority (1). Such networks of interest constitute a major obstacle to democratic transformation, because beneficiaries of the status quo actively resist change (2).

The two thinkers' proposed responses to elite complicity are different yet complementary. Locke stresses the necessity of oversight institutions, separation of powers, and limiting the economic–political influence of elites through legal structures; without institutional mechanisms that constrain elite power and ensure accountability, the risk of collusion with despotism remains persistent (10). Al-Kawakibi, alongside emphasizing limitation of power, focuses more strongly on reviving authentic religious interpretations and reconstructing the role of religious scholars as critical overseers of power. In his view, scholars must return to their primary role as defenders of the people's rights and critics of injustice, rather than becoming instruments that rationalize tyranny (19).

Public Ignorance, Lack of Awareness, and Authoritarian Political Culture

Public ignorance and the absence of political awareness constitute one of the most fundamental factors in the consolidation of despotism in al-Kawakibi's analysis, which frames tyranny as a "social disease" (19). In this account,

ignorance does not merely signify a deficit of information; it denotes the absence of critical analytical capacity, a lack of rights-consciousness, and an inability to grasp power relations. Al-Kawakibi shows how despotic regimes systematically produce and reproduce ignorance as a primary instrument of social control by restricting access to education, controlling knowledge resources, and promoting superstition (14). This policy of manufacturing ignorance deprives people of recognizing their rights, understanding the possibility of change, and imagining political alternatives, thereby transforming them into passive subjects incapable of envisioning and demanding a better life (8).

Although Locke does not treat ignorance as a standalone concept in the same manner, he underscores the importance of rationality and awareness for the proper functioning of the social contract. In his theory, citizens must be able to recognize their natural rights and identify violations of those rights in order to participate meaningfully in political life and, when necessary, resist governmental overreach (6). The absence of such awareness enables rulers to exploit citizens and to distort the social contract (10). This emphasis on rationality and knowledge highlights the epistemic conditions required for legitimate political systems; without them, even the most carefully designed institutional arrangements remain vulnerable to corruption and manipulation.

Authoritarian political culture, as a product of systematic ignorance and historical experiences of despotism, constitutes another major barrier to democratization (3). This culture is characterized by beliefs such as the inevitability of obedience to power, distrust in the possibility of change, extreme individualism, weak social solidarity, and a lack of mutual trust among citizens (13). Al-Kawakibi explains how such a political culture— itself produced by prolonged despotism—contributes to its continuation and generates a vicious cycle between tyranny and authoritarian culture (19). Breaking this cycle requires a fundamental transformation in values, beliefs, and social behavioral patterns, a process that is inherently long-term and complex.

Accordingly, the proposed responses to ignorance and authoritarian culture in both thinkers' analyses center on education, public enlightenment, and cultural reconstruction. Al-Kawakibi in particular emphasizes the expansion of public education, the revival of critical thinking, and the rereading of religious principles in a freedom-oriented manner as a foundation for building the epistemic conditions necessary for resistance. He maintains that without raising public awareness and reconstructing political culture, no institutional transformation can remain sustainable (21). Locke likewise stresses the importance of education and the strengthening of public rationality, though primarily in terms of its necessity for the sound functioning of representative and accountable institutions (22). Ultimately, both thinkers converge on the conclusion that a critical, informed citizenry with a participatory political culture is a fundamental prerequisite for establishing and sustaining free political orders (23).

The Role of the People in the Decline of, and Resistance to, Despotism

The Right of Resistance and the Conditions of Legitimate Revolution in Locke's View

The theory of the right of resistance in John Locke's political philosophy is among the most fundamental concepts for analyzing the people's active role in confronting despotism. By foregrounding the social contract and natural rights, it offers a theoretical framework for justifying collective resistance (6). In Locke's intellectual system, political legitimacy is wholly grounded in the consent of citizens, and government is established solely to protect individuals' natural rights—life, liberty, and property. When a government deviates from this primary duty and engages in systematic violations of citizens' rights, it effectively breaches the social contract and thereby forfeits its legitimacy

(10). Such a breach creates not only a right but also a duty of resistance for citizens, who must act to restore a legitimate order (7).

In specifying the conditions under which resistance becomes legitimate, Locke emphasizes several core criteria, reflecting his concern to prevent anarchy and social instability (6). Violations of natural rights must be systematic and widespread rather than isolated and limited, because minor errors or individual misjudgments by rulers cannot justify dismantling the entire political order (11). This insistence on systematic violation underscores Locke's worry that the right of resistance could be abused and turned into a mechanism of permanent destabilization. In addition, citizens should attempt to reform conditions through legal and peaceful channels, and only when these avenues have been exhausted does active resistance—and ultimately revolution—become justifiable (22). This cautious approach distinguishes Locke from radical theorists and indicates his effort to balance the preservation of social order with the protection of citizens' rights (18).

A further significant dimension of Locke's theory concerns the authority for determining whether despotism exists and whether resistance is legitimate—a judgment he explicitly assigns to the people (6). In Locke's view, citizens, as the "final judge," are capable of discerning when government has transgressed the law of nature, and collective judgment serves as the principal criterion for determining the legitimacy or illegitimacy of rule (11). This emphasis on the people's collective judgment reflects Locke's confidence in citizens' rational capacity and his understanding of politics as participatory, such that foundational decisions about the political order cannot be made without popular consent and involvement (11). This approach provides conceptual foundations for participatory democracy and underscores that sovereignty ultimately belongs to the people rather than to rulers (4).

The influence of Locke's right-of-resistance doctrine on political movements and historical revolutions has been extensive. The Glorious Revolution in England, the American Revolution, and many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century liberation movements drew directly on Locke's philosophical premises, adopting the right of resistance, popular sovereignty, and the limitation of political power as foundational principles (9). In contemporary contexts, these concepts continue to play a central role in political discourses concerning civil rights, civil disobedience, and the legitimacy of popular protests, functioning as a theoretical reference for justifying resistance against despotic systems (2). The enduring impact of this legacy indicates the lasting value of Locke's insight for understanding the dynamics of collective resistance and the people's role in political transformation, offering a broadly applicable framework for analyzing struggles against despotism (23).

Al-Kawakibi's Strategies for Popular Awakening and Confronting Despotism

In his analysis of pathways for confronting despotism, Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi emphasizes gradual popular awakening, the elevation of public awareness, and cultural reform—an approach distinct from abrupt and revolutionary strategies. With a deep understanding of the cultural and epistemic roots of despotism in Islamic societies, he argues that effective opposition requires a fundamental transformation in mental structures, beliefs, and social values—one that cannot be achieved through merely political or institutional changes (19). Within this framework, education and enlightenment are treated as the primary instruments for countering despotism, capable of providing the epistemic and psychological conditions needed for collective resistance.

Al-Kawakibi maintains that despotism relies heavily on the people's ignorance and, therefore, that raising the level of public awareness can weaken the foundations of tyranny (14). His principal strategy for popular awakening is the revival of critical thinking and the rereading of religious principles in a freedom-oriented manner, thereby

undermining the ideological grounds through which despotism is legitimated. By criticizing deviant religious interpretations that justify tyranny, he shows how despotic rulers instrumentalize religion as a means of social control and power consolidation (19). A return to foundational principles and a rational interpretation of religious texts can deprive rulers of this instrument of control and transform religion into a force for freedom and justice (15). This approach demonstrates that al-Kawakibi seeks internal reform and reconstruction of tradition from within rather than its wholesale rejection, arguing that Islamic societies' own cultural and religious resources can serve as a basis for resisting despotism.

In al-Kawakibi's analysis, the role of elites, intellectuals, and religious scholars is especially significant in the process of popular awakening. He holds that these groups bear a moral and social responsibility to contribute to the awakening of the masses through education, social critique, and the promotion of freedom-oriented values (12). Such elite responsibility encompasses not only opposition to distorted religious interpretations, but also the creation of spaces for dialogue, the strengthening of political literacy, and the diffusion of a culture of critique and participation (14). Al-Kawakibi contends that genuine transformation becomes possible only when elites cease colluding with despotism and instead perform intellectual and moral leadership, acting as pioneers of change (17).

Al-Kawakibi's approach to confronting despotism stresses gradual and peaceful reform, which he deems more compatible with the historical and cultural conditions of Islamic societies. He argues that sudden revolutionary change often leads to violence and chaos and may ultimately install a new despotism in place of the old one (19). By contrast, cultural reform and gradual transformation of values and beliefs can create more durable foundations for political change and reduce the likelihood of relapse into tyranny. This emphasis on gradualism reflects al-Kawakibi's realism in assessing the possibilities and constraints of transformation in Islamic societies and his awareness of the complexity of the transition from despotism to freedom (4).

Comparing the Transition Processes from Despotism to Freedom in the Two Frameworks

A comparative analysis of transition processes from despotism to freedom in Locke's and al-Kawakibi's thought reveals important convergences and divergences that reflect differences in the thinkers' historical, cultural, and epistemic contexts (14). Both emphasize the people's central role in transition, yet they propose distinct mechanisms for mobilizing and activating that role. Locke focuses primarily on the right of resistance, the social contract, and the possibility of legitimate revolution, offering predominantly political and institutional pathways for transition (6). Al-Kawakibi, by contrast, emphasizes cultural awakening, gradual reform, and the roles of education and enlightenment, proposing largely cultural and epistemic mechanisms for transformation (19). This divergence corresponds to their different diagnoses of despotism's roots: Locke locates them chiefly in political and institutional arrangements, whereas al-Kawakibi situates them primarily in cultural and epistemic structures (15).

A major point of convergence is their shared belief in the necessity of active and informed popular participation in transition processes, without which no sustainable transformation is possible (10). Both argue that the transition from despotism to freedom is fundamentally a bottom-up process that cannot be achieved solely by elites or through top-down reforms. Locke's emphasis on the social contract and popular consent indicates that the legitimacy of any political order depends on citizens' acceptance and participation, and consequently transformation must likewise occur through their participation (7). Al-Kawakibi's emphasis on popular awakening and education similarly indicates that durable transformation can occur only when it emerges from within society through citizens' conscious

participation (12). This shared position reflects a common understanding of collective agency as central to political change.

The primary divergence in transition strategy lies in the emphasis on the pace and modality of transformation (22). Locke accepts the possibility of immediate resistance and even revolution when a government systematically violates natural rights, arguing that under certain conditions rapid and fundamental change is not only necessary but also legitimate (6). This perspective reflects the historical context of seventeenth-century England, where political mobilization and institutional change were feasible (18). Al-Kawakibi, conversely, stresses gradual reform in light of the cultural and political conditions of Islamic societies, contending that without cultural transformation and the elevation of public awareness, any political change will remain unstable (19). This contrast reflects each thinker's realism in assessing the constraints and opportunities within their respective contexts.

Despite these differences, both thinkers converge on a core premise: freedom is not a gift bestowed upon the people from above, but an achievement attained through persistent effort, awareness, collective reason, and civic resistance (13). This shared insight reflects a participatory conception of freedom—not as a static condition but as a dynamic process requiring ongoing protection and reinforcement. Both indicate that the transition from despotism to freedom is complex and multidimensional, demanding simultaneous effort across intellectual, cultural, social, and political arenas, and that its success depends substantially on a society's capacity to mobilize its material and moral resources against despotic structures (9).

Convergences and Divergences in the People's Role

Locke's Empirical Reason and al-Kawakibi's Islamic Rationality in the Analysis of Collective Behavior

The epistemological foundations of both thinkers directly shape how they analyze the people's collective behavior and their role in the dynamics of despotism (4). With his empiricist orientation, Locke holds that human knowledge is formed through sensory experience and that the human mind begins as a blank slate that is gradually filled by diverse experiences (18). This perspective has important implications for interpreting popular political behavior, insofar as it suggests that citizens form their understanding of rights, justice, and political legitimacy through lived experience. Accordingly, collective behavior toward despotism is itself a product of historical experience and social learning, which may incline societies either toward acceptance or toward resistance (6). This line of analysis underscores the significance of historical experience in shaping collective responses to power structures.

By contrast, al-Kawakibi advances a conception of rationality situated within the Islamic intellectual tradition, in which reason operates not in isolation but in interaction with revelatory sources and religious teachings (19). In this view, popular understandings of rights and justice are not merely products of individual and collective experience, but are also shaped by moral and spiritual values rooted in religious instruction (15). This epistemological difference leads to distinct prescriptions for changing collective behavior: Locke emphasizes new political experiences and civic education, whereas al-Kawakibi focuses on reviving religious values and critically rereading tradition (12). Nevertheless, both stress the importance of reason and rationality for diagnosing political conditions and making collective decisions, arguing that without the exercise of rational capacities people cannot properly recognize their rights or resist despotic transgressions (17).

In both theoretical frameworks, the analysis of collective behavior highlights the role of awareness and cognition in shaping political reactions (8). Locke argues that citizens must acquire—through education and experience—the

capacity to identify violations of their natural rights, and that such awareness is a precondition for any effective resistance against despotism (6). Al-Kawakibi likewise emphasizes education and intellectual awakening, yet locates these within the revitalization of Islamic knowledge and the strengthening of critical reasoning in interpreting religious texts (19). This shared emphasis on awareness indicates a common understanding of the relationship between knowledge and political action: shifts in cognition can generate transformations in collective behavior.

The principal epistemological divergence lies in the sources of cognitive authority. Locke, by privileging experience and rational argument, situates cognitive authority within the individual and the community, asserting that citizens can identify their rights and interests without dependence on external authorities (11). Al-Kawakibi, by preserving the role of religious authority and revelatory teaching, maintains that full knowledge requires the interaction of reason and revelation, and that without recourse to religious teachings deviation from the correct path remains possible (19). This difference reflects two distinct intellectual traditions—one emphasizing the autonomy of individual reason and the other emphasizing harmony between reason and revelation—yet both ultimately aim to strengthen the people's critical analytical capacity in confronting despotism.

Ideological Distortion and the Use of Fear as Instruments of Popular Control

The use of ideological distortion as a tool of social control represents one of the most significant convergences in Locke's and al-Kawakibi's analyses of despotic mechanisms (19). Both show that despotic regimes rely not only on physical coercion, but also extensively on manipulating concepts, values, and social beliefs to justify domination (8). Locke, in particular, highlights the distortion of law and sovereignty, arguing that despotic rulers justify violations of citizens' natural rights by claiming divine entitlement or invoking security necessity (6). Such distortion reshapes public understanding of legitimacy and the limits of power, thereby facilitating the acceptance of autocracy and preventing citizens from correctly identifying despotism (11).

Al-Kawakibi likewise provides a detailed account of how religious teachings are distorted to justify tyranny. He argues that despotic rulers, in collusion with certain scholars, disseminate erroneous interpretations that portray absolute obedience to the ruler as obligatory and resistance to injustice as prohibited (19). This religious distortion becomes an especially effective mechanism of social control because it governs not only outward conduct but also individuals' internal conscience, rendering resistance morally and religiously illegitimate (15). By producing ambiguity and confusion within popular religious belief, such distortion weakens critical judgment and creates conditions for unquestioning compliance with rulers' commands.

Fear, as another instrument of popular control, occupies a central place in both thinkers' accounts (22). Locke shows that despotic systems deter protest and resistance by creating an atmosphere of terror, generated not only through direct repression but also through displays of power and implicit threats (6). Al-Kawakibi similarly analyzes fear-production mechanisms, describing how despotism constructs networks of surveillance, threat, and arbitrary punishment that generate pervasive distrust and internal insecurity—conditions in which individuals fear one another and even fear themselves (19). This internalized fear becomes the most effective form of control because it reduces the need for constant overt repression; individuals begin to censor themselves (17).

Both thinkers emphasize that countering ideological distortion and fear requires enlightenment, critical education, and civic courage (4). Locke argues that raising public awareness and strengthening correct understanding of natural rights can expose ideological distortions and create conditions for resistance (11). Al-Kawakibi stresses critical rereading of religious texts and the revival of freedom-oriented interpretations to deprive rulers of justificatory

instruments (19). In addition, both highlight civic courage and overcoming fear as prerequisites for resistance, contending that so long as fear dominates a society's spirit, genuine transformation remains unattainable (14). This convergence reflects a shared recognition that confronting despotism requires intellectual and psychological struggle alongside political contestation.

Collective Responsibility for the Emergence and Persistence of Despotic Regimes

The concept of collective responsibility for the rise and endurance of despotism is a major dimension of both thinkers' analyses, foregrounding the people's active role not only in resistance but also in the consolidation of despotic structures. Locke, emphasizing the social contract and popular consent, argues that citizens bear a fundamental responsibility for preserving a legitimate political order, and that their silence or indifference in the face of governmental violations of natural rights constitutes a breach of civic responsibility (6). Within this framework, citizens possess not only a right but also an obligation to exercise continuous oversight of government and, when necessary, to resist it. This stress on active responsibility reflects Locke's conception of citizenship as participatory and engaged, rather than reducible to passive receipt of state services (18).

Al-Kawakibi similarly analyzes the people's collective responsibility in the persistence of despotism, showing how silence, passivity, and unquestioning acceptance of oppression become factors in the reproduction of tyranny. His sociological analysis presents despotism not merely as a product of rulers' will, but as an outcome of a complex interaction between rulers and the people, in which collective behavior plays a decisive role in either reinforcing or weakening despotic structures. This perspective moves people from the position of mere victims to that of potential historical agents, indicating that they can influence political transformation through shifts in collective behavior (19).

Both thinkers emphasize the importance of awareness of collective responsibility and the strengthening of a culture of civic participation. Locke maintains that civic education and reinforcing citizens' understanding of their rights and duties can enable the proper exercise of collective responsibility (6). Al-Kawakibi emphasizes moral awakening and strengthening responsibility in the face of injustice, arguing that genuine transformation becomes possible only when individuals perceive themselves as responsible for collective destiny and avoid indifference and passivity (19). This shared emphasis on responsibility-awareness reflects both thinkers' understanding of cultural transformation as a precondition for political transformation.

A key difference lies in the conceptual framing of collective responsibility. Locke places greater emphasis on citizens' legal–political responsibility to oversee government and preserve the social contract, defining responsibility within a framework of civic rights and duties (11). Al-Kawakibi emphasizes individuals' moral–religious responsibility to confront injustice, framing it within religious and ethical obligations (19). Nonetheless, both converge on the conclusion that without the people's fulfillment of collective responsibility, no free and just political order can emerge or endure—and that responsibility is not a gift granted from above, but a duty that must be exercised through awareness and will (13).

Conclusion

Political despotism is reproduced through both institutional structures and social mechanisms, and the people play a dual role in this process. On the one hand, silence, passivity, and acceptance of ideological distortions can contribute to the consolidation of despotism; on the other hand, awareness, resistance, and collective mobilization can lead to its collapse. This study aimed to provide a comparative analysis of the mechanisms of popular

participation in the emergence and decline of political despotism from the perspectives of Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi and John Locke. Adopting a qualitative approach and a comparative analytical method, the research first extracted key concepts—despotism, popular participation, tacit consent, and resistance—from the works of the two thinkers; it then identified the practical mechanisms through which people contribute to the rise and fall of despotism, and finally compared the convergences and divergences of these mechanisms in a systematic manner.

The findings show that, in Locke's theory, tacit consent functions as a form of passive legitimation of despotism, with despotic rulers interpreting popular silence as acceptance and expanding the scope of their arbitrary actions accordingly. The transition from tacit consent to the right of resistance occurs when citizens become aware of the systematic violation of their natural rights and when this awareness is accompanied by a collective will for change. In al-Kawakibi's theory, public ignorance, collective fear, and elite complicity are identified as the three principal mechanisms stabilizing despotism, operating through restrictions on access to education, control over knowledge resources, the creation of a psychological climate of insecurity, and the formation of interest networks. The decline of despotism within this framework requires a gradual process of elevating public awareness, strengthening Islamic rationality, reviving authentic religious interpretations, and engaging in peaceful struggle against oppressive structures. The findings also indicate that elites and religious scholars play a dual role in either consolidating or dismantling despotism: they may contribute to its stabilization through ideological justification and collaboration with rulers, or they may facilitate its collapse through critical critique, education, and popular awakening.

Key points of convergence between the two thinkers include their emphasis on the people's collective responsibility for the emergence and persistence of despotism, the importance of confronting ideological distortion, overcoming fear, and the central role of awareness-raising in the transition from despotism to freedom. The main differences lie in their proposed strategies: Locke places greater emphasis on the right of resistance, the possibility of legitimate revolution, and the establishment of oversight institutions, whereas al-Kawakibi focuses on gradual cultural reform, critical rereading of religious texts, and the role of religious scholars in popular awakening.

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that civic education programs prioritize the strengthening of critical thinking, awareness of civil rights and responsibilities, and civic courage in order to create the necessary conditions for effective resistance to despotism. Policymakers and civil society actors should pay close attention to the role of political culture and patterns of collective behavior in reinforcing or weakening despotism, and should develop long-term strategies for cultural transformation and the enhancement of public awareness. Future research is encouraged to undertake broader comparative analyses by including additional thinkers from diverse intellectual traditions in order to identify more universal patterns. Empirical studies on the application of Locke's and al-Kawakibi's theories in contemporary anti-despotism movements could further illuminate the relationship between theory and practice. Ultimately, this research demonstrates that freedom is not a gift bestowed from above, but an achievement attained through awareness, collective reason, responsibility, and civic resistance, and that its preservation requires constant vigilance and the active participation of citizens.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adheried in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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