

# Iqbal's View of Democracy

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That Iqbal was a critic of democracy is well known. He saw it practiced in the western, imperialist world of his time which bred exploitation and corruption. A few months before his death, Iqbal said, "The tyranny of imperialism struts abroad, covering its face in the masks of democracy, nationalism, communism, fascism and heaven knows what else besides. Under these masks, in every corner of the earth, the spirit of freedom and the dignity of man are being trampled underfoot ... The so-called statesmen to whom government and leadership of man was entrusted have proved demons of bloodshed, tyranny and oppression. The rulers whose duty it was to higher humanity to prevent man's oppression of man and to elevate the moral intellectual level of mankind, have in their hunger for dominion and imperial possession shed the blood of millions and reduced millions to servitude simply in order to pander to the greed and avarice of their own particular groups. After subjugating and establishing their dominion over weaker peoples, they have robbed them of their possessions, of their religions, of their morals, of their cultural traditions and their literatures. They sowed divisions among them that they should shed one another's blood, and go to sleep under the opiate of serfdom, so that the leech of serfdom might go on sucking their blood without interruption." (*Speeches and Statements of Iqbal*, edited by "Shamloo")

Iqbal also drew attention to some problems created by democracy in general. "Democracy means rows," he said, referring to the endless debate and controversy it involves, not all of it constructive, and "[it] lets loose all sorts of aspirations and grievances, which may have an anarchic tendency or arouses hopes and ambitions often quite impractical." (*Speeches and Statements of Iqbal*)

In Iqbal's view, democracy, which was not always guided by empirical considerations, "has a tendency to foster the spirit of legality. This is not in itself bad; but unfortunately it tends to displace the purely moral standpoint, and to make the illegal and wrong identical in meaning." (*Speeches and Statements of Iqbal*)

Yet, though Iqbal mentioned the limitations of democracy, he did not despair of this form of government. He said, "Democratic government has attendant difficulties but these are difficulties which human experience elsewhere has shown to be surmountable." (*Speeches and Statements of Iqbal*)

Thus the assumption that Iqbal did not believe in democracy rests largely on a verse he wrote in which he said that democracy was "that form of government in which persons are counted, not weighed." (*Zarb-e-Kalim*). In a democracy, everyone counts for one and no one counts for more than one. This is both the most obvious advantage (in the sense that it

prevents monopoly of power and privilege) and disadvantage (in the sense that numerical equality is stressed at the expense of unequal merit) of democracy. That Iqbal should have pointed out something obvious by no means indicates that he was against democracy.

The distinction between “individuality” and “personality” which has been admirably brought out by J. J. Houben, is helpful in understanding Iqbal’s attitude to democracy. “The notion of personality ... does not refer to matter as individuality does. It refers to the highest and deepest dimension of being. Personality is rooted in the spirit and it constitutes the secret depth of an ontological structure, a source of dynamic unity and inner unification. The spirit forms personality, enlightens and transfigures the biological individual and makes it the concrete fullness of life ... The community too readily recognizes what belongs to the world of matter, meanwhile being blind to the reality of the spirit. It sees in men only the shadow of real personality, namely the material individuality. The consequence is that the person is enslaved to the social body.” (“The Individual in Democracy and Iqbal’s Conception of *Khudi*” in *Crescent and Green*)

When Iqbal said that in a democracy persons were “counted” and not “weighed” he was drawing attention to the fact that society takes note of “individuality” which is a material fact but not of “personality” which is a spiritual fact.

In an essay entitled *Islam as a Moral and Political Ideal*, Iqbal stated “Democracy ... is the most important aspect of Islam regarded as a political ideal” and added that “there is no aristocracy in Islam.” (*Thoughts and Reflections of Iqbal*, edited by S. A. Vahid). For him, the two basic propositions underlying Muslim political constitution were “(1) The law of God is absolutely supreme. Authority, except as an interpreter of the law, has no place in the social structure of Islam. Islam has a horror of personal authority. We regard it as inimical to the unfolding of individuality; and (2) The absolute equality of all members of a community.” (*Thoughts and Reflections of Iqbal*)

Iqbal remained highly critical of states which considered themselves democratic but engaged in political, economic, social and psychological exploitation of disadvantaged peoples within or outside of themselves. However, to him real democracy was an integral part of his belief in the principle of “*Tauhid*” (Oneness of God) upon which he built his thought. To Iqbal this principle implied the equality of all human beings created by the one God. Iqbal believed that “the essence of ‘*Tauhid*’ as a working idea was equality, solidarity and freedom” (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*). These are principles that many today would consider essential characteristics of a democratic society.

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