

The Effect of Social Text and Context on the Political Thinking of the Contemporary Shiite Scholars

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Abstract: The purpose of the present study is to investigate the effect of social text and context on the political thinking of the contemporary Shiite scholars. On the one hand, contemporary scholars' political thinking exists at the heart of modernity's recent social and political events and in the framework of their understanding of religious teachings in Quran and Sunnah on the other hand. Thus, through their interactions in social contexts and their perception of texts, we may understand their thinking. On the one hand, the struggles, interests and side takings of social and political forces inarguably influence the formation and development of the contemporary scholars' political thinking. On the other hand, religious texts and deductions from them have been effective in understanding new concepts and problems. In this regard, this research attempts to comparatively investigate the effect of social text and context on the political thinking of contemporary Shiite scholars of Samarra, Najaf and Qom schools using discourse and cognitive-comparative methods.

Keywords: Modernity, political thinking, social context, text

INTRODUCTION

Political thinking is a general concept which points out to any coherent and structured thinking about a political subject. In Raymond Aaron's opinion, political thinking is an attempt to determine goals which are capable of being fulfilled to a reasonable extent and instruments which are reasonably expected to be a means to achieving that goal (Schiffrin *et al.*, 2003). Types of political thinking form around major social interests and affect them and in order to have the right understanding of them, the dialectics of thinking and truth should be investigated. Thus, the struggles, interests and side takings of social and political forces in every age have an undeniable effect on the formation and development of the political thinking of that age (McGuire, 2002). Political thinking tries to unravel social and political complexities and is directed toward human beings' endeavors to establish a political society (Dabashi, 1993). Therefore, the general characteristic of any political thinking is a comprehensive description and definition of the social interactions human beings have in their encounter with political life. In the history of Islamic and Iranian political thinking, due to the existence of an all-inclusive whole which dominates all aspects of the society and social and individual life, namely Islam as a religion, political thinking has had a religious quality. The goal of this thinking has been to increase efficiency, regulation and better management of the society. Asking questions about the quiddity and being of man, society, justice, equality, liberty, desired government, form of government in the age of

occultation, ruling system, authority and power and public interest are among political thinking questions through answering to which Shiite scholars have founded Islamic political thinking (Mirmosavi, 2008).

In addition, depending on the particular logic governing sociopolitical thoughts, perception of theological debates greatly affect understanding how those thoughts are formed. The present study enjoys a new approach in regard with the manner of interactions between thoughts and contexts. Respecting the fact that consequent to changes in thinking among discourses changes also occur in practice, the political thinking of contemporary Shiite scholars experienced a period of regeneration and reconstruction in the process of Iranian political thinking which was effective in revitalizing contemporary religious life and this revitalization transformed the intellectual foundations of Islamic Revolution. The Islamic Revolution reintroduced religion to the modern world, insisted on religious beliefs and living despite the accepted relations in modern world and it introduced a different way of living, understanding the world and human relations. In this respect, this study attempts to answer the question, "How the political thinking of contemporary Shiite scholars in three Samarra, Najaf and Qom school are influenced by social text and context?"

METHODOLOGY

The present study uses a historical analysis method. Accordingly, this study is characterized neither a text-oriented nor a context-oriented study, but one

based on an amalgam of both. According to this combined approach, thoughts are born out of interactions between text and context which makes understanding thoughts with regard to these interactions indispensable (McGuire, 2002; Tully, 1988). From this perspective, political circumstances are only a preliminary step in understanding actions and behaviors and not the reason for their formation. As a result, understanding orientations, actions and behaviors requires understanding the mentality and thinking influencing those actions as well as understanding sociopolitical conditions (Focault, 1972). According to this methodological approach, the orientations of contemporary scholars are, on the one hand, born out of the sociopolitical conditions of this age and on the other hand, they are influenced by their particular mentality and thinking which, as religious texts, are based on the Koran and Sunnah.

DISCUSSION

Moslems' thinking and ideas are founded on religious texts and sources. Considering those different theological schools and various theories in Islamic thought including Sunnah-oriented, Sharia-oriented and even seculars all rely on Islamic texts (McGuire, 2002; Tibi, 2002). Thinkers' premises in different understandings emanate from one single text which indicates that religious meaning and thought is not derived from pre-established and extra-religious fundamentals, but it is the interaction between social context and religious text which has facilitated understanding Islamic political thinking (McGuire, 2002). The reader of a text approaches it with her social presuppositions and contexts, but the text itself modifies questions and presuppositions. In this study, by religious texts we mean Koran and the Islamic Sunnah. In the age of occultation, because of the absence of Ma'sum¹, Shiites are confronted with some puzzles, concerns and questions. In finding an answer to those questions, puzzles and concerns and maintaining permanent Shiite principles, have had to present answers assumptions with respect to the unvarying Shiite principles in order to be able to resolve existing issues some of which threaten these principles (Tibi, 2002; Choudhury, 1990).

In this age, which began with advancement of the process of modernity toward neighboring nations covering the Shiite society, traditional thinking boundaries have deranged and many new concepts have entered the Shiite collective mentality when Shiite political knowledge and thought have not yet geared up. During this process, some modern concepts found their way into Iran at a time when the tradition of Islamic

thinking was still too feeble to be able to produce and renew (Bennett, 2005). What aggravated the problem was collocation of new concepts and signs with the existing concepts and terminology in the Shiite semantic system. Questioning the relation between these two groups of concepts produced some new questions which necessitated new answers (Mirmosavi, 2008).

Islamic scholars' reactions in regard to the aforementioned discussions have been in two general veins: First, the movement of following Western civilization which includes an extensive range of Western-oriented to westernized intellectuals and second, the movement which reconstructed and renewed religious thinking through the works of religious scholars (Bennett, 2005). The gradual decline of Muslim governments led Shiite scholars to believe that the former power and authority of and closeness with Islamic teachings were lost and a solution had to be sought. In searching for the past, they found the primary source of power in the genuine and real Islam and their ultimate goal in reintroducing Islam was redeeming Moslems' former power through Islamic teachings and counterattacking the eradication of the West (Boroujerdi, 2003). These thinkers were unanimous in blaming Moslems' estrangement with the reality of Islam as the cause of their deterioration and degeneration and they made an effort to find a suitable solution for the problems of the Islamic society by dissecting many new concepts such as equality, conferment, democracy and fusing them with Islam in the present age in order to arrive at a new reading of Islam. The primary goal of the contemporary Shiite scholars is to react against identity-cultural consequences of modernity and Western exploitative infiltration and domination by enriching Islamic concepts and redeeming Moslems' political power (Chehabi, 1990). The major instrument available for Shiite scholars for answering such questions was Ijtihad. In this perspective, Ijtihad is a mechanism and framework of visible and invisible principles forming the process of deduction and the Mojtahid forms his thoughts in this framework and his understanding and deduction works in this mechanism. Ijtihad is a rule-bound framework for designing and presenting questions stemming from a Moslem's historical needs for religious texts and texts' interpretation (Mirmosavi, 2008). The discourse of Ijtihad interprets facts as well as text which results in linking text and social context. In the present study, Ijtihad is treated as discourse which encompasses Shia's serious political theological actions in its framework (Mirmosavi, 2008).

The foundations of contemporary Shiite political thinking come from three political schools established

by the great Mojtahids such as Mirzay-e Shirazi, Sheikh Fazlollah Noori, Akhund-e Khorasani, Mirzay-e Naini, Nurollah Isfahani, Imam Khomeini and Shahid Motahhari. These three schools by fundamentally changing Shiite political understanding, revolutionized politics and the sharia in modern times and established a new system with religious undertones of politics. A number of these ecclesiasts challenge the entirety of modernity and resist against it; a number of them acknowledge some of modernity's features; and a third group of them acknowledge some aspects of modernity as required by circumstances while resisting against being westernized (Munson, 1988). Samarra, Najaf and Qom schools are the fruits of Shiite ecclesiasts' efforts in the field of political knowledge; they reconstructed fundamental structures of political power based on the concept of Authority (Velayat), a concept which had become devoid of its flourishing potential and had been confined by philosophy and jurisprudence during history after the occultation of Imam Zaman (Arjomand, 1984).

The political school of Samarra was founded by Mirzay-e Shirazi between 1291 (A.H) and 1250 (A.H) in Samarra. The goals, ideas and methods of Samarra school were pursued by Sheikh Fazlollah Noori in his treatises, *The Sanctity of Constitution and Tazkerat-ul Ghafel Wa Ershad-ul Jahel* after the death of Mirzay-e Shirazi and they were organized in Iranian constitutional movement in form of the basics of constitutional movement. The school of Samarra is a movement which resists against modernity and to some extent challenges its entirety. The school of Samarra connects the domination process of divine doctrines and manifestation of political phenomena in the social life of shias with Sharia and considers the separation of politics from Sharia as the fundamental political thinking crisis of the modern man (Arjomand, 1984). This separation contradicts human nature and the inherent nature of religious thinking. In the view of Samarra School, foundation of government and ruling has been nothing but religious thought in all ages. The crisis caused by modernity is overcome only by the adherence of the political system to religious beliefs and religious identity. From this perspective, there is an unbreakable relation between power and government and prophetic matters and the divine origin of government. According to this school, since the political system based upon Sharia is responsible for enforcement of divine laws and principles, the interpretation, explication, protection and generalization of laws in the age of Imam's occultation is delegated to jurists and Mojtahids (Lambton, 1970). The Authority of the Jurisprudent in the sphere of politics is thus an irrefutable principle. In fact, the main concern

of the political thinking of Samarra School is establishing a secure political system based on legitimacy. This is further illustrated by Sheikh Fazlollah Noori's opinion that new concepts and phenomena are clothes tailored especially for the West and it is impossible to make it fit for religion. Accordingly, Islam is in no means compatible with new concepts such as constitutionalism, the law of freedom, equality, etc., which have entered our vocabulary through the expansion of Western Civilization (Mirmosavi, 2008).

The political school of Najaf is the outcome of some part of the sociopolitical transformations of Shiite world in the recent centuries which was established by Akhund-e Khorasani in the course of constitutional movement in Najaf Ashraf. Najaf School springs from the political ideas of Akhund-e Khorasani and theorizations of Mirzay-e Naini. Najaf School seeks to reevaluate all modern concepts based on the historical destiny of Islamic civilization and thinking in a religious respect (Lambton, 1970). In Najaf School, modern concepts have been treated not as part of Western history, but as a justification for the new stage in the civilization and transformation of Islamic world. A stage which heralded returning to Islam and freedom from the slavery of foreign domination and degeneration (Rozental, 1958). In Najaf thinking, there is a kind of unity between new and old concepts and a kind of symmetry between stability and dynamism. Using the instrument of modern concepts, Najaf School has been seeking to counteract foreign colonization and domestic despotism. Najaf School has endeavored to assess the relation between the totality of Islamic thought and civilization and totality of new Western thought and world. While advocating constitutionalism, freedom and new concepts, Najaf has been skeptical about West and the Western origins of those concepts. This movement has never accepted modernity's intellectual foundations, but it has seen the entire notions of modernity to adaptable to Islam and even taken from Islam. They consider west to have some positive aspects and try to combine these aspects with religious and traditional heritage (Lambton, 1970).

The political school of Qom was founded in 1961 by Imam Khomeini. The School of Qom was the result of the struggle and effort to establish a political system based on Shiite religious jurisprudence understanding. Qom School derives from the *Ijtihad* of traditional jurisprudence attitude and the generalization of this attitude in interpreting political phenomena using time and space expediences. Qom School is a movement which withstands some aspects of Westernization, but according to time and space requirements, tries to find a common ground for religious thinking and some pillars

of modernity (Chehabi, 1990). This movement's perception of Westernization is not refuting the totality of the new world, but opposing the attitude of adopting a Western identity. The hegemonic figures of this movement are Imam Khomeini and his disciples who gradually in the years after the Islamic Revolution reached various but concurring interpretations of his ideas. By adhering to religious texts, Qom School strives to introduce an interpretation proportionate to the requirements of the age. In this view, interpretation of Islam is not exclusive to the past people, but its dynamism and endurance depends on fresh interpretations which is only possible through the power of religious prudence system (Boroujerdi, 2003).

The restoration sphere is the result of contemporary Shiite scholars' efforts to establish a stable political system based upon religious jurisprudence thinking and pillars of religious understanding in the past century; efforts which freed politics from the constraints of jurist Taqlid (Imitation) and religious secondary principles and put in the jurisdiction of theological science and religious principles. From the perspective of these Shiite scholars, Islam has a political theory about government and politics. Returning to Islam was considered as the sole solution for the contemporary society's crises (Mirmosavi, 2008). The aim of this discourse is to reconstruct the society according to Islamic principles and gaining political power is considered the necessary, preliminary step in this endeavor. Shiite thought has the required capacity for producing such a political model, but some traditional postulations or interpretations of them impede with Shiite thought's playing such a role. These scholars found out that present perceptions are far from the original views and by nothing but restoring them ideological challenges might be overcome (Armajani, 2004). This restoration implicates goals such as generalizing religious ideas in playing superior political and social roles, adapting it to the expediencies of time and using religion's capacity to fight against domestic despotism and foreign domination (Bennett, 2005). Rethinking and reinforcement in concepts and issues such as the relationship between religion and politics, self-denial, martyrdom, waiting for the end of occultation, Jihad, etc have been accompanied by Shia's political plan for a government which has led to such a pervasive political and social revolution as the Islamic Revolution.

CONCLUSION

A quick look at the sociopolitical events and changes in the present age clearly shows preparations for presenting political ideas among contemporary scholars. Even though contemporary scholars try to support their claims by referring to the Koran and the

Prophet's Sunnah, studying these references indicate that despite providing evidence and deducting from religious teachings, their interpretations and perceptions seem to be different. From the viewpoint of this study, these differences arise from the social context those scholars have been living in. Indeed, the contemporary Shiite political thinking reflects the interaction between a will to modernity and the discourse of Ijtihad. Ijtihad as the interpreter of religious texts and the mechanism of individual and collective understanding of religious doctrines has had an important place in the development of Shiite political reasoning. By establishing a systematic relation between religious texts, reason and facts, Ijtihad sets upon interpretation and deducting religious doctrines related to life. Shiite Mojtahids as the agents of discourse have become responsible both as supporters of Sunnah and carriers of modernity. Because of its rationalism, Shiite Ijtihad has had the potential to use and improve on discussions of political philosophy. By rethinking the philosophical and theoretical foundation of politics and government, constitutional Mojtahids were able to take crucial steps in favor of civil power by establishing constitutionalism. In fact, Shia's contemporary political thinking is in an interaction between new and old eras and in order to break away from this situation, it needs to question Sunnah and criticize the new era and it also needs to criticize the ideologies which have been introduced as a bridge between tradition and modernity.

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End note:

¹Literally, *Sinless*. One of the 14 Ma'sums in Shiite belief including the 12 imams, Prophet Mohammad and his daughter Fatimah.