

An Analysis of the Relationship between Western Democracy and the Shi'ite Imamate with Emphasis on the Opinions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Mulla Sadra

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Received: 2024/02/26 ; Revised: 2024/04/15 ; Accepted: 2024/04/16 ; Published online: 2024/07/01

Abstract

This article investigates the theoretical relationship between Western liberal democracy and the Shi'ite doctrine of Imamate through a comparative analysis of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's political philosophy and Mulla Ṣadrā's metaphysical-political thought. The study applies a descriptive-analytical methodology, relying on primary texts and scholarly sources to examine whether structural convergence exists between the two paradigms or if they are fundamentally irreconcilable. While the Shi'ite conception of Imamate is rooted in divine authority (wilāyah), infallibility (ʿiṣmah), and metaphysical legitimacy, Rousseau's model of democracy emphasizes popular sovereignty, the general will (volonté générale), and civil equality. The findings indicate that absolute compatibility cannot be affirmed; however, if democracy is interpreted as a procedural method rather than a normative ideology, selective harmony may emerge—particularly in contexts where popular participation is permitted under the supervision of religious authority during the occultation of the infallible Imam. The article concludes that the extent of compatibility between democracy and the Imamate system depends on the interpretive lens—whether democracy is treated as an axiological end in itself or as an instrumental framework subordinated to divine law.

Keywords: Shi'ite Imamate, Western democracy, Mulla Ṣadrā, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, general will, popular sovereignty, wilāyah, political theology.

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Publisher: Urwat al - Wuthqa International Academic Research Institute
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22034/jspt.2025.508985.1083>

Introduction

Since the emergence of the earliest political societies and the initial discourses on governance, one of the most enduring and significant issues has been the role of the people in shaping the ruling political system, legislating its governing laws, and administering society. Despite a general consensus on the necessity of public participation, the nature and scope of this role have been interpreted differently—often in conflicting ways—across various intellectual traditions and political systems. This divergence arises from the fact that the essence and dimensions of public participation are defined within each school of thought according to its distinct principles and values. This fundamental difference forms the basis of numerous doubts and critiques directed at the concept of popular sovereignty in religious governance, particularly within the framework of Shi'ite Imamate. These critiques are often advanced by those who lack a proper understanding of the essential and structural differences between the system of Imamate and liberal democracy. From time to time, they raise concerns about an alleged incompatibility between religious governance and popular legitimacy, portraying the Shi'ite Imamate as inherently opposed to democracy and public participation. Accordingly, the present study aims to explore and analyze the notions of democracy and Shi'ite Imamate by drawing upon the perspectives of **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** and **Mulla Ṣadrā**, respectively, and to clarify their boundaries and conceptual frameworks. To this end, we first examine the nature of democracy as formulated by Rousseau—particularly as articulated in his theory of the **social contract**, which is intrinsically linked to the ideas of **republicanism** and **popular sovereignty**, and encompasses features such as **civil authority**, **individual freedom**, **general will**, **rule of law**, and **equality**. Subsequently, we elaborate on Mulla Ṣadrā's understanding of the Shi'ite Imamate system, its necessity and the method of appointment of the Imam, as well as the role of the people within this system. In the final analysis, we investigate the relationship and points of convergence or divergence between these two paradigms of governance as presented by Rousseau and Mulla Ṣadrā.

- A) Research Background

Based on an extensive review of books, scholarly articles, and academic theses related to the topic of "Democracy and Imamate," it can confidently be stated that **no comprehensive study has yet been conducted** specifically examining the relationship between **Western democracy** and the **Shi'ite doctrine of Imamate** with a **comparative focus on the views of Rousseau and Mulla Ṣadrā**. Although Mulla Ṣadrā has presented scattered reflections on the concept of Imamate, and Rousseau has thoroughly discussed democracy and popular sovereignty—particularly in his seminal work *The Social Contract*,

which underpins his sociopolitical thought—no integrated or systematically structured comparative analysis of their views on this subject has been offered to date. Moreover, existing studies in contemporary times, including published books and articles, have primarily centered on the **incompatibility between Islam (as a whole) and democracy**, while relatively few have focused specifically on the **Shi'ite doctrine of Imamate**. Even among those that have addressed this area, most adopt a **purely descriptive approach** or fail to provide a clear depiction of the debate, its proponents, and their arguments. Alternatively, some analyses have treated the topic from a **jurisprudential-historical** perspective, rather than a **philosophical-theological** one. Nevertheless, the major relevant works—both direct and tangential—have been referenced in the sources section of this paper. Among the limited number of studies that partially intersect with the subject of this research are the following:

1) *The Relationship Between Islam and Democracy According to Contemporary Shi'ite Thinkers*, authored by **Mohammadreza Rahimi** (2005).

2) *Religion and Democracy in the Thought of Political and Religious Thinkers in Contemporary Iran (1920s–1970s)*, authored by **Jamal Kamyab** (2000).

3) *The Social Contract and Its Relation to Alienation in Rousseau's Philosophy*, authored by **Mohsen Tehrani** (2012).

4) *The Transformation of the Concept of Liberty in the Context of the Social Contract Theory, with Emphasis on Rousseau's Thought*, authored by **Faezeh Akhundi** (2017).

- B) Methodology

Since this study aims to reconstruct Rousseau's ideas on democracy and compare them with the Shi'ite Imamate envisaged by Mulla Ṣadrā, the methodology for data collection has been **library-based**. This involved consulting authoritative books, articles from peer-reviewed scholarly journals, and published materials from research institutions. The present work adopts a **descriptive-analytical and critical approach**. Initially, relevant data are systematically collected and comprehensively described. Subsequently, they are analyzed and interpreted through the lens of the selected theoretical framework and methodological tools.

- C) Research Innovation

The novel contributions of this study include:

1) **Unprecedented Comparative Examination:** No prior research has specifically explored the relationship between **Western democracy** and the **Shi'ite Imamate**, with a structured comparative focus grounded in the views of **Rousseau and Mulla Ṣadrā**.

2) **Reinterpretation of Shi'ite Imamate via Mulla Ṣadrā:** The study

offers a refined interpretation of the Shi'ite Imamate grounded in Mulla Ṣadrā's thought. It asserts that modern governance, based on what may be termed "pseudo-democracy," is inadequate and contested. It proposes that **true democracy** aligns with **religious popular sovereignty** within the Shi'ite Imamate framework, which the author argues is the **only redemptive model** for humanity's contemporary challenges.

3) Compatibility of Rousseau's Majoritarian Democracy with Shi'ite Governance: The study demonstrates that Rousseau's model of **majoritarian democracy** is not incompatible with religion and Sharia. On the contrary, it can actively support religious governance. Even in areas of Sharia deliberation where rulings are silent, permissible, or discretionary, popular sovereignty may **reinforce religion and religiosity**. This is corroborated by numerous Islamic sources emphasizing the importance of reason, consultation (*shura*), equality before the law, social justice, governmental transparency, accountability of rulers, political oversight, and the injunction of enjoining good and forbidding wrong (*amr bi'l-ma'rūf wa nahy 'an al-munkar*).

What distinguishes this research from existing works is its **interdisciplinary nature**, integrating philosophical-theological analysis alongside jurisprudential-historical study. Through in-depth articulation of both systems—with supporting philosophical and theological evidences—the study rigorously explores the interface between **Western democracy and Shi'ite Imamate** in the respective frameworks of Rousseau and Mulla Ṣadrā.

1. Conceptualization of Democracy

The term **democracy** derives from the Greek *demokratia*—combining *dēmos* (people) and *kratos* (power)—indicating a system of governance in which, unlike monarchies or aristocracies, power rests with the people (Held, 1999: 14). Political philosophers have not produced a definitive, all-encompassing definition of democracy, as the concept lacks a fixed essence and has evolved historically. Nevertheless, the most prevalent definition describes it as a system "in which the people govern themselves" (Kohen, 1994: 22). Carl Kohen identifies various definitions—government by consent, rule of the majority, equal rights, and popular sovereignty—but notes that while concise, these are insufficiently comprehensive. (ibid.) Anthony Arblaster, recognizing the conceptual ambiguity of democracy, argues that all such definitions—despite their nuances—share a core idea: the **collective exercise of power**, where authority or political legitimacy is located in the people (Arblaster, 2000: 23). Another definition emphasizes **popular participation**: democracy as the ideal that decisions affecting a community should be made collectively, and all members should have equal rights to participate (Beetham & Boyle, 1998: 17).

A composite view asserts that democracy is "collective governance in which community members, directly or indirectly, participate in decisions that affect them" (Kohen, 1994: 22).

In summary, democratic theories can generally be grouped into two categories:

1-1. Realist Theories

Realists have always been wary of **majoritarian tyranny**, the suppression of minority viewpoints, political extremism from mass mobilization, and the transformation of popular will into authoritarian rule. They emphasize safeguarding **individual rights**, the moderating influence of education and enlightenment on majority rule, **negative liberty** (freedom from arbitrary power), and the primacy of individual welfare. Realists view power as inherently dangerous, necessitating legal constraint; thus, democracy, in their view, is essentially **government of law**. Joseph Schumpeter, a notable realist, proposed the **elitist theory of democracy**. He argued that democratic politics should channel popular participation into **rule changes via legal elections**, thereby limiting mass activism and mitigating pluralist democracy's shortcomings (Beshiriyeh, 2001: 37).

1-2. Maximalist Theories (Idealist)

Maximalist or idealist conceptions of democracy align with classical democracy, emphasizing **individual liberty, universal political participation, civic virtue, positive freedom, common good, and majority rule**. According to this view, "the voice of the people is the voice of God," and the majority is never wrong: public opinion is always correct, and popular reason is equated with true reason. Consequently, all offices should be elected, and referenda should be regular tools in democratic governance. Jean-Jacques Rousseau embodies this idealist approach through his notion of the **general will (volonté générale)**—a contract-based public consent embodying collective sovereignty. To Rousseau, the general will is sacred and the foundation of all legitimate rights (Jones, 2004: 937). He defines democracy as the political system in which governance is entrusted to the entire nation or its majority, ensuring the number of rulers equals the number of the ruled, or minimally a majority plus one (Rousseau, 2001: 79).

2. Conceptualization of Imamate

The term **Imam** is rooted in the trilateral Arabic root "أ-م-م," with the initial alif hamza and a doubled mīm. Its plural form is "A'immaḥ." Initially, it appeared as "A'immaḥ" paralleled to "Amthilah." The kasra under the first mīm shifted to the hamza, and the two mīms merged. Some altered the hamza

into *yā'* ("Iyma"), a form criticized by certain scholars (Fayyūmī, 1993 AH, vol. 2, p. 23). In **Muḥararāt fil-Lughāt**, Rāghib al-Isfahānī defines the word **Imam** comprehensively: "An Imam is that which is followed, whether it is a human—for their speech or actions are imitated—or a book or any other entity; and it makes no difference whether what is followed is true or false" (Rāghib al-Isfahānī, 1992 AH, p. 20). Shi'ite scholars, in defining **Imamate**—a defining feature of Twelver Shi'ism—have employed three principal approaches: the **Hadithic**, the **Theological**, and the **Philosophical**.

2-1. Hadithic Approach

This approach relies primarily on reports from the Ahl al-Bayt (the Prophet's household), particularly statements of Imam Reza (peace be upon him), to elucidate the significance of Imamate. The focus is predominantly on the Imam's attributes and the conditions required of the Imamate office, as seen in works by Fayḍ Kashānī, Sheikh Ḥurr al-'Āmilī, and others (Fayḍ Kashānī, 1986, vol. 3, p. 482; Ḥurr al-'Āmilī, 1996, vol. 1, p. 385).

2-2. Theological (Kalamic) Approach

Following the lead of theologians, this style synthesizes hadithic sources into a definition also found in Sunni theologians such as 'Izz al-Dīn 'Ajī and Sa'd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī: "Al-Imāmah is the general leadership (*ri'āṣah 'āmah*) in matters of religion and this world." This formulation dates back to Ṣayyid Murtaḍhā in the fifth century AH, and was subsequently adopted by theologians like Khwājah Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d. 1274 AD), Ibn-Maytham al-Bahrānī, and Allāmah Ḥillī (Ṭūsī, 1985, p. 426; Ibn Maytham, 1997, p. 72; Ḥillī, 1989, vol. 12).

2-3. Philosophical Approach

Delving deeper into the meaning of **Imamate**, scholars discovered that the earlier definition is insufficient. Thinkers such as Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī and Shahīd Muṭahharī emphasise elements like **divine vicegerency**, **absolute authority**, **divine appointment**, and the Imam's status as the **perfect human**—highlighting the philosophical dimensions often overlooked by the prior approaches (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 2001, vol. 1, p. 264; Muṭahharī, 1985, p. 167). In Ṣadrā's philosophy, **walī** (plural: *awliyā'*) literally means "one who is close," deriving from the root **w-l-y**, and denotes someone more competent and worthy of managing affairs. The same root produces **walī** (protector) and **mawlā** (patron), both roles implying guardianship (Shīrāzī, 2000, vol. 4, p. 226). Thus, **wilāyah** (proximity/ authority) refers in technical usage to closeness to God's intent. Ṣadrā defines **wilāyah** as **intimacy** and **superintendence**—which may or may not coincide. For example, Fatimah al-Zahrā' and 'Abbās (peace be upon

them) hold a station of *wilāyah* (closeness to divine knowledge) but do not qualify as Imams. Conversely, in the case of the infallible Imams, **wilāyah** includes priority in authority and thus coincides with Imamate.

3. Rousseau and Maximalist Democracy (Based on the *Social Contract*)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract*, published in 1762, alongside *Émile*, was highly influential during the French Revolution and remains foundational to modern political philosophy.

3-1. Rousseau's Purpose

Rousseau wrote the *Social Contract* to demonstrate how to establish the principles of a legitimate government. The social contract, he argues, is the union of individuals to solve the problems of life and secure personal safety. Through this pact, individuals unite to protect not only property and life, but also to ensure that each individual obeys only their own will—retaining the freedom afforded by natural life (Rousseau, 2001, p. 415).

4. Core Features of Rousseau's Social Contract Theory

4-1. General Will (*Volonté Générale*)

For Rousseau, the **General Will** is the authentic governing force—the bond between sovereign authority and the people. He urges readers to differentiate between **general will** (legislation binding the whole community) and **executive authority** (which enforces compliance)—the former possessing legislative power, the latter executive power (Rousseau, 2001, p. 251).

4-2. Primacy of Common Consent

Legitimacy in democratic governance rests upon citizens' consent. Rousseau posits that because individuals were free in the state of nature, no one can be governed without their consent. The "social contract" implies universal approval by the populace, thereby grounding state authority in the collective consent of free individuals (Tāherī, 2014, p. 56). In Book II of the *Social Contract*, Rousseau affirms that the **General Will** guides the state. Those who do not obey it will be compelled to do so, rooted in the fact that the General Will *is* the will of the people (Rousseau, 2001, p. 972).

4-3. Law and Legality

Rousseau reasons that after forming the governing body via the social contract, it must be animated through legislation: "We give the governing body existence, but we must give it movement and will through laws" (Rousseau, 2001, p. 184).

He introduces the concept of the **legislator**—a figure above mere political

office, who founds the state but is not part of its structure. The legislator must be extraordinary because any lawgiver who is also a ruler risks embedding personal desires into law—resulting in tyranny rather than justice (Rousseau, 2001, p. 49).

4-4. Civil or Civic Religion

In the Fourth Book's conclusion, Rousseau discusses religion's place in polity. He identifies three deficient religious models: *personal religion*, *national religion*, and *priestly religion*—each inadequate. He proposes a fourth model: **civil religion**, a formal religion established by the state, with doctrines determined as civic principles rather than theological mandates. While it is not coercive, the state may expel those deemed hostile to the civic order (Rousseau, 2001, p. 513).

4-5. Liberty

For Rousseau, freedom is vital. He asserts, “To abandon one's liberty is to abandon one's dignity as a human being” (Rousseau, 2001, p. 81). His social contract aims to reconcile individual liberty with a structured political order.

Rousseau differentiates three types of freedom:

- 1) **Natural liberty:** bound only by individual capacities.
- 2) **Civil liberty:** constrained by the General Will and collective law.
- 3) **Moral (or ethical) liberty:** following laws one has prescribed for oneself. Only moral liberty ranks as true freedom, as it requires subjecting one's personal desires to collective rationality (Rousseau, 2001, p. 125).

4-6. Civil Society

Rousseau sees civil society as the result of collective participation in the General Will to pursue the common good. Before the social contract, humans are amoral and undisciplined; after, they become rational and rule-following, guided by interests beyond fleeting instincts—anticipating long-term wellbeing (Rousseau, 2001, p. 120).

5. Mulla Ṣadrā and the System of Imamate

Mulla Ṣadrā extensively discusses Imamate and the political authority of the Imams. His crucial exegesis is found in his commentary on *al-Usūl al-Kāfī*, especially in addressing the hadith in the *Kitāb al-Hujjah*: “Is it possible for there to be an age without an Imam on earth?” “No,” comes the reply. “Is it then possible to have two Imams at once?” he asked, “No—unless one leads silently.”

Ṣadrā elaborates by surveying sectarian views and their rational proofs regarding Imamate, concluding there is no doubt among Islamic sects (apart

from a fringe group) about the necessity of an Imam following prophethood. Disputes concern the philosophical and juridical grounds rather than its necessity, and Ṣadrā classifies sects into six camps:

1) Those holding **religious obligation** of appointing an Imam for the community (majority Sunni, many Mu‘tazilites).

2) Those asserting **rational obligation** for appointing an Imam (e.g., al-Jāhiz, al-Ka‘bī, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī).

3) Those asserting **rational obligation** for appointing an Imam upon God (Shi‘a position).

4) Those denying any obligation for Imamate (a subset of the Kharijites, e.g., Banī Najdah).

5) Those asserting obligation to appoint an Imam *only during times of oppression* (e.g., Abū Bakr al-Aṣamm, a Mu‘tazilite).

6) Those holding appointment necessary for preserving religious rites during times of justice (so people follow and avoid discord).

Following this enumeration, Ṣadrā critiques the theological coherence of the **Twelver Shi‘ite**, **Mu‘tazilī**, and **Ash‘arī** doctrines—in his system imamate stands as a rationally and religiously warranted position for sustaining order post-prophethood (Shīrāzī, 1988, vol. 2, p. 469).

6. The Necessity of the Imam’s Presence in Society and Supporting Proofs

Mullā Ṣadrā presents a series of independent philosophical arguments in *Sharḥ al-Uṣūl al-Kāfi* to demonstrate the perpetual obligation of Imamate at all times. These include:

1) Analogy with the Heart (from the hadith of "necessity of proof")

In interpreting the third hadith under the heading “Necessity of the Proof (*al-Idṭirār ilā al-Ḥujjah*)”, Ṣadrā references a parable: just as the heart—regarded as the rational *Imam*—must exist to reconcile conflicting sensory input and resolve epistemic uncertainty, so too must an Imam exist within the Muslim community. Because it is beneficial for the heart to harmonize contradictory senses, God has not neglected its creation. Analogously, since it is expedient for the Muslim community to have a central authority to resolve societal doubts and crises, the perpetual existence of an Imam is both beneficial and necessary. Moreover, God necessarily realizes what is beneficial, so the appointment of an Imam at all times is obligatory (Shīrāzī, 1988, vol. 6, p. 401).

2) Divine Beneficence (from the first hadith in the same chapter)

Commenting on “The Earth Will Never Be Void of a Proof” (*lā tukhlā al-arḍ min ḥujjah*), Ṣadrā adopts the Imāmī theologians’ reasoning: appointing an Imam is an act of God’s grace, because it steers people away from vice

and toward virtue. Since bestowing grace obliges the Gracious to bless, the establishment of the Imam is therefore a divine necessity (*ibid.*, p. 474).

3) Human Fallibility and the Need for Guidance

In another narration of *lā tukhlā*, Ṣadrā argues that due to human susceptibility to error—both embellishing and diminishing the religion—a perfect guide is required to correct and complete religious understanding. Responding to objections that reason suffices, he notes that philosophers often arrive at contradictory conclusions. Moreover, esoteric truths transcend rational faculties, requiring divine guidance (*wilāyah* or prophecy). Thus, human reason alone cannot eliminate the need for an Imam (*ibid.*, p. 478).

4) The Role of Divine Knowledge via the Learned Imam

In interpreting the fifth narration of the same chapter, Ṣadrā refers to a hadith narrated by Abī Baṣīr from Imam al-Bāqir or Sādiq: “God will never leave this earth without a scholar; otherwise, truth and falsehood would not be distinguished” (*al-Kūlīnī*: vol. 1, p. 252). Ṣadrā clarifies that “scholar” here denotes one endowed with *lādnī* (unmediated) divine knowledge. Without such a scholar—meaning an Imam or Prophet—no one in an intellectually confused time could preserve the criteria to distinguish truth from falsehood (Shīrāzī, 1988, vol. 6, p. 483).

5) Fundamental Need Surpassing Basic Sustenance

Commenting on the sixth narration of *lā tukhlā*, Ṣadrā argues that humanity's need for an Imam is more critical than the need for food or clothing. If God were to leave an era without an Imam, it would imply ignorance of human need, inability, or divine stinginess—all of which are untenable. Thus, every age must have an Imam (*ibid.*, p. 483).

6) Theological Imperative from Divine Justice

Interpreting the eighth hadith—“God is too mighty to leave Earth without a just Imam” (narrated by Abī Baṣīr in *al-Kūlīnī*, vol. 1, p. 252)—Ṣadrā asserts that “Imam” here includes both Prophets and their successors. A Prophet or Imam is necessary for people to know their Creator and distinguish between actions that draw one nearer to or further from God. Without this guidance, religious obligation is abolished—a regression to animalistic ignorance. Continuity of an Imam prevents this moral collapse (Shīrāzī, 1988, vol. 6, p. 485).

7) Ontological Hierarchy Argument

Using the metaphysical principle of graded existence, Ṣadrā notes that creation proceeds from lower levels to higher ones, with each higher level as a goal for its subordinates. For humans, this apex is the Imam or the *Insān al-Kāmil*. Since all creation exists to fulfill its relationship to that goal, existence without an Imam would contradict the natural hierarchy of creation; thus no period can be Imam-less (*ibid.*, p. 487).

8) The “Most Noble First” Principle

In comment on the hadith “If only two men lived on Earth, one of them would be the proof” (*lākinah ūlinā min humā'l-ḥujjah*), Ṣadrā reasons that the entire hierarchy of creation is ordered from the most noble downward. The *Insān al-Kāmil*, the Imam, occupies the highest place. The world, being contingent upon this apex, could not exist if that apex did not exist. Therefore, the perpetual presence of the Imam is necessary (ibid., p. 502).

9) Narrative Evidence for the Twelve Imams

Ṣadrā further offers a narrative-based proof for the Twelve Imams. Quoting a plurality of transmitted hadith—considered **mutawātir** (extremely reliable)—from both Sunni and Shi‘ite sources, he concludes that the succession of leadership continues through exactly twelve Imams, culminating with the Twelfth Imam (*al-Mahdī*). These traditions confirm that no era will be without one of these Twelve, thus ensuring continuous divine guidance on Earth (ibid., p. 479).

7. Qualities and Attributes of the Imam

In his *Sharḥ al-Uṣūl al-Kāfi*, Mullā Ṣadrā attributes key qualities to the Imams, such as being the *ḥujjah* (proof) for creation, a *shahīd* (witness) over their followers, a guide (*hādī*) and legitimate authority (*walī amr*), and the guardian of knowledge (*khāzin al-‘ilm*) (Shīrāzī, 1988, vol. 6, pp. 587–616). In *al-Shawāhid al-Rubūbiyyah*, he further describes necessary characteristics that, in his view, must be held by the Prophet or his rightful successor as supreme head of governance. These qualities define the political and spiritual legitimacy of such leadership.

7-1. Essential Perfections of the Imam or Ruler

1) **Rational faculty** (*quwwah ‘āqilah*): The Imam must possess a fully actualized intellect (*‘aql fi ‘āl*).

2) **Imaginative faculty** (*quwwah mutakhayyilah*): Must be fully developed in its natural capacity.

3) **Sensory-motor faculties** (*quwwah ḥassasah and muḥarrikah*): Also require full perfection, as these enable the Imam to enact divine rulings, resist enemies, and uphold the virtuous order (Shīrāzī, 1983, p. 563).

7-2. Secondary Attributes of Perfection

Innate and natural qualities include:

- ✦ Swift and accurate understanding of received knowledge.
- ✦ Strong memory to preserve insights and sensory perceptions.
- ✦ A sound temperament and robust disposition.
- ✦ Eloquence and powerful expression.

- ✦ A passion for knowledge and wisdom, with no aversion to intellectual effort.
- ✦ Restraint toward sensual desires, avoiding indulgence.
- ✦ Nobility, self-respect, and disdain for vice, choosing honor over base inclinations.
- ✦ Compassionate toward all creatures, intervening kindly against wrongdoing without intrusive enforcement.
- ✦ Bravery and fearlessness in the face of death.
- ✦ Generosity, reflecting the abundance of divine mercy.
- ✦ Inner joy and delight during spiritual communion, rooted in knowledge of the Divine.
- ✦ Firmness in promoting justice and strong refusal of injustice (Shīrāzī, 1981, p. 488).

Ṣadrā distinguishes between:

- ✦ **Essential qualifications** (*kama'l awwal*) like prophetic intellect and moral perfection;
- ✦ **Secondary actualizations** (*kama'l thanawī*) which arise from those primary attributes.

He applies this dual structure to justify the infallible nature and authority of an Imam even during absence—God grants what is essential regardless of worldly support, while active governance depends on communal acceptance (Shīrāzī, vol. 2, p. 461). Thus, Ṣadrā's political theology stands on two pillars:

- 1) **Divine legitimacy**—appointment by God;
- 2) **Popular consent**—necessary for actual governance.

8. Correspondence between Democracy and the Shi'ite Concept of Imamate

Democracy, broadly defined as “government by the people,” entails principles such as civil sovereignty, public will, freedom, rule of law, equality, consent of citizens, separation of powers, and respect for human rights.

Imamate, from the Shi'ite and Ṣadrā's perspective, is a sacred, divine office marked by infallibility, superiority, and complete knowledge, appointed through revelation as a continuation of prophethood. If prophecy ends (*khatm*), the need for leadership persists through Imamate, governed by divine appointment (*nuzūl*) and endowed with political authority (*wilāyah*).

The comparison concerns identifying areas of overlap and tension between Western democracy and Shi'ite Imamate.

8-1. Democratic Elements Compatible with Imamate

A. Collective Authority

- ✦ Authority (*sayṭarah*) in Ṣadrā's model originates not from individual or elite will, but from the community's trust in a divinely appointed, competent

Imam. This reflects collective authority because it requires public consent, competence, and communal support.

✦ Rooted in Qur'anic designations of Imams as guides by God—"We made them leaders who guide by Our command" (21:73; 32:24)—Shi'ite Imamate aligns with democratic concepts of communal governance and legitimacy.

B. Public Participation: Shi'ite Imamate affords political participation in three dimensions:

1) Imamic selection and legitimization: Though Imams are divinely appointed, public allegiance (*bay'ah*) remains a significant mechanism for acknowledging and reinforcing their authority. Qur'an confirms this, e.g., "Those who pledge allegiance to you pledge allegiance to Allah" (48:10).

2) Consultation (*shūrā*): While final decisions rest with the Imam, popular input and advisory councils are embraced through Qur'anic injunctions like "their affair is by mutual consultation" (42:38) and "Consult them in the matter" (3:159). Imams themselves, notably 'Alī, valued collective reasoning.

3) Accountability & Supervision (*amr bi'l-ma'rūf wa nahī 'an al-munkar*): This principle enjoins collective oversight: "You are the best nation brought forth... enjoin the good and forbid the evil" (3:110), and further reinforces societal responsibility to sustain moral order (3:104). These principles form the foundation of civic oversight in governance.

8-2. Democratic Elements Incompatible with Imamate

A. Popular Sovereignty Over Divine Appointment: Democracy asserts that legitimacy stems from the will of the people. In Shi'ite Imamate, legitimacy arises from divine appointment, not popular election; therefore, the concept of sovereignty rests with God rather than the masses.

B. Individualistic Utilitarianism: Liberal democracy, as articulated by thinkers like J.S. Mill, emphasizes individual sovereignty and the utility of personal choice. Ṣadrā's theory rejects this premise—individuals do not inherently know their own good better than the divinely knowledgeable Imam. Freedom is viewed as instrumental, not absolute; moral and social boundaries are recognized, contrasting with liberal individualism.

Conclusion

In summary, it can be stated that on the one hand, *Imamate* is compatible with certain components of Western democracy—such as collective authority and public participation. In this sense, it embraces the characteristics of collective authority and facilitates avenues for public involvement in political life through three foundational principles: **consultation (*shūrā*)**, **pledging of allegiance (*bay'ah*)**, and **societal oversight (supervision and accountability)**. As a result, the Shi'ite conception of Imamate is fundamentally incompatible

with authoritarian and autocratic models of governance and, indeed, possesses the capacity to support a people-centered political system. This is because the system of Imamate acknowledges the legitimacy of majority opinion, albeit within a framework of specific **conditions and limitations**, the most important of which is that **majority decisions must align with religious principles and teachings**. Put differently, democracy and majority rule should not entail the retreat or marginalization of religion and its laws. Rather, it is religion and its doctrines that should define the parameters within which the will of the majority may be exercised. During the occultation of the infallible Imam, the people may, by considering religious values and necessary qualifications, directly or indirectly select their ruler and take part in governance and political oversight. On the other hand, Imamate stands in tension with certain other elements of democracy—such as **popular consent (public satisfaction) and utilitarianism**. Therefore, the model of Imamate diverges from democratic theories that are founded upon the principle of legitimacy derived from public satisfaction or consent. Consequently, this model does not accept **public satisfaction** as a defining component of legitimacy. Moreover, **Imamate is fundamentally incompatible with utilitarianism**, at least in two critical respects, which call into question the alignment of its moral and epistemological foundations with utilitarian political theory. Thus, the final conclusion is that **one cannot claim an absolute compatibility or incompatibility between democracy and the system of Imamate**. The relationship between the two depends fundamentally on the **interpretative lens** through which the **conceptual components of democracy** are examined. It is according to which elements are emphasized that any comparison or judgment regarding the compatibility between Imamate and democracy must be made.

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