

# Allama Iqbal's Critique of Western Democracy

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## Abstract

The shallow glamour of the western democracy hipped up a kind of intellectual hysteria in the Muslim world. Inspired by the skin-deep allure of Western institutions, the Muslims rushed into the indiscriminate importation of liberal ideas to their home countries. Democracy was one of those ideals to have held the Muslim academia, and laymen alike spellbound. Dr. Allama Muhammad Iqbal, a distinguished poet, and Muslim philosopher, having dug deep into the realm of western philosophy, admonished his co-religionists to guard themselves against democracy characterizing it as an infernal bane, and a mirage which had in its garb the Caesarean, and tsarist despots masqueraded as democrats. It offered nothing else but 'old wine in new bottles'. What was more, it was wholly stripped of an ethical, and spiritual orientation whereby it was rendered superficial, and suicidal. Also, it left the most vital affairs of human life to the vagaries of uncouth, and untamed masses who lacked even a bit of wisdom to judge their own good, let alone the collective good of the society. As a substitute for the western democracy, Allama put forward the Quranic ideal of "Spiritual Democracy". He termed it a genuine democratic order in which he felt no qualms about exploitation, manipulation, and loot. This paper attempts to weigh the contemporary democracy from the perspective of Iqbalian philosophy of spiritual democracy.

**Keywords:** Democracy, Allama Iqbal, West, Spiritual Democracy, Islam.

## Introduction:

Democracy traces its lineage to the city states of Greece such as Classical Athens. With state undergoing radical transformations, democracy also evolved on rather gradual lines. In the modern sense, inspired by the idea of liberty, equality, and fraternity in revulsion against the inequalities of the French class society, the democratic republican states came to the fore in the post French Revolution France. Then, the same ideals travelled across the Europe. The popular sovereignty coupled with a divorce between state, and church was stressed as the cardinal principles. Monarchies, and other such systems ruling the roost singlehandedly were demonized, and belief in human liberty, and judgment was passionately upheld. The quest for more and more political emancipation ended up in the 'Universal Adult Franchise', the ornament of the contemporary democracy.

Dr. Muhammad Iqbal fondly called Allama Iqbal (1877-1938) was a renowned poet, and the Muslim thinker of the sub-continent. The enviable place he catapulted to at the apex of human thought points vividly to his sublime stature. Whereas Allama is chiefly referred to as a poet extraordinaire, his thought underlying his poetic genre puts him on a par with some of the finest Muslim sages. As a matter of fact, his poetry, and philosophy complement each other. Dr Iqbal is affectionately hailed as Muffakir-e-Pakistan (architect of Pakistan), Shair-e-Mashriq (The Poet of the East), and Hakeem-ul-Ummat (The Sage of Ummah).

Allama Muhammad Iqbal assumed on himself the mammoth task of the Muslims' salvation from the monster let loose in the west in the form of trio: democracy, nationalism, and imperialism. Having drunk in profoundly the corpus of the western, and eastern philosophies, he began to pick apart the contemporary western civilization, and its various offshoots dubbing them rotten to their very core. He came squarely out in condemnation of the socio-political, and economic institutions of the west fashioned out of a civilization which was barren of an ethical, and spiritual foundation. He contented with his conviction that the Muslims would be doomed to disaster if they persisted in blinding aping the alien ways. He was very much perturbed to see his co-religionists bask in emulating the western civilization. Democracy was one of those ideals which had left a deep impression in the Muslim world. Iqbal studied democracy in good depth, and having dissected it, took to apprising the Muslims no to be fallen for this cult, as it was a hoax, and nothing else.

## Assumptions of Western Democracy:

Democratic governments are those in which the people and the government are in perfect harmony as to how, and who rules. The government, and the governed are connected. Ellen Grigsby(2008) describes it as a system in which people are "self-governed".

Patrick (2006) traces its origin in the classical city-states of the ancient times. Over 2500 years back, there was a rule (kratia) by the people (demos) in Athens, and in other city states of Greece. Democracy, as we call it today, was then nomenclature as “demokratia” to denote ‘rule by people’. It was an alternative to such traditional government as monarchical one based on rule by one, and oligarchic one based on the rule by the few.

Upon the ruled and the rulers brought together by means of 1) elections which elicit the former’s say on whether to install or depose government officials, 2) access to government by people, and 3) adopting such policies as truly reflect the interests of a self-governing people, then it is crystal clear that people and the government are connect in terms of inputs. Then, the government can be said to be democratic. (Grigsby, 2008, p.165)

The word democracy has sparked much controversy among the gurus of political science, as there is hardly any consensus developed about what actually constitutes a democracy. To Schumpeter (1942), “the institutional arrangement to reach political decisions in which individuals acquire the decision power thru a aggressive struggle for public’s vote.” (p. 250)

Then, the technical complexities springing up from the nuances of the term make rather thornier for scholars to develop an agreement among themselves as to its indicators, and their extent. Obviously, a kind of scientific experiment in a laboratory sense to gauge the gauge the degree to which its indicators, say, sovereignty devolving on masses, are in place, cannot be executed. With its wide and varied connotations, democracy always eludes attempts to evolve a universally plausible definition for it.

Corry and Abraham (1958, p.26) enumerate the following indicators indispensable to a democratic culture:

- 1 Respect for individual personality
- 2 Individual freedom
- 3 Belief in rationality
- 4 Equality
- 5 Justice
- 6 Rule of Law
- 7 Constitutionalism

Nevertheless, every political system, however repressive, flamboyantly takes pride in projecting itself as democratic. Even the authoritarian regimes have notoriously designated themselves as democracies or people’s governments. Abraham Lincoln’s famous enunciation which has now been a catchphrase “democracy being the government of the people, for the people, by the people” itself falls hazy. The problem arises as to who are people, by whom, and by what manner a government is to be installed, and how their interests are to be articulated and integrated.

On the other hand, to capture a precise picture of a democratic order, it can be said that a state having democracy rests on the will of the ruled institutionalized through an electoral machinery which operates on the basis of free and fair public opinion. Accordingly in the opinion of Bassett (1935), it is a mechanical devise intended to reconcile the liberties with the canons of law to meet the requirements of law and order, and is a political mechanism provided to a large chunk of population to freely exercise their say in arriving at joint agreements whereby the collective good of the community can be ensured.

A true democratic setup may be anchored in a constitution which is a framework for limited government guaranteeing rule of law, the political, and economic rights of citizens, different liberties: of speech, of press, of petition, of assembly, and that of association. The factors discriminating it from a non-democracy are constitutionalism, representation in government, and individual rights to all those freedoms central to human life.

Democracy as understood today does not necessarily entail the formation of an ideal government. As put by Acemoglu & Robinson (2006), a non-democracy is seen representing a political inequality. Whereas in a democracy, everyone is entitled to vote, and at least potentially, can participate in decision making process one way or the other, a non-democracy is characterized as an elite junta, or one person at the helm of affairs. However, it should not be misleading us. Democracy may not necessarily correspond to an ideal political equality. In fact, apparently operating on adult universal suffrage, many successful democracies of today are far from being ideal. There the moneyed classes monopolizing the state resources may easily shoot down the so-called mandate of the majority, and manipulate policies to their own interests by dint of lobbying, and force or fraud. (p.18)

### **Allama Iqbal’s Critique of Western Democracy:**

Allama Iqbal was a philosopher of an outstanding stature. He chewed over all the contemporary ideologies emanating from the west. His belief in the human dignity was so strong that any impingement on the same in any corner of the world distressed him. He resented the western materialistic pursuits due to which the mankind was teetering on the verge of spiritual, and economic bankruptcy. His criticism was not flimsy. Rather, in berating the West for letting loose a monster in the form of democracy he had some finest arguments based on pragmatism, and philosophical insight. His criticism of democracy held good even during his lifetime at the onset of one of

the bloodiest episodes of the last century, WW1. He vehemently cried that under the mask of democracy in every nook and corner of the earth, the essence of human dignity, and liberty were being trampled underfoot. The so-called advocates of human rights, and statesmen to whom was entrusted the state of affairs of people proved satans of bloodbath, and oppression.

Allama was highly scathing about the so-called democracies which shackled the disadvantaged peoples politically and economically within and outside themselves. The exploitation of man at the hands of those democrats was unprecedented. Nevertheless, he never lost his faith in the essence of democracy- something integral to Islam. (Dr. Riffat, 2010)

Iqbal's revulsion at democracy appears to have been induced by a multitude of factors. What is more, his views on democracy remain scattered over a multiplicity of sources both in poetry and prose. Therefore, more often than not, what happens, predicating their conclusions upon a specific theme drawn from some of verses of Iqbal, scholars happen to clog up the formation of a realistic picture, and screw up the texture of his thought. Allama's outlook in every aspect of life was entirely Quranic. He never sat in defeatist acquiescence to objurgate any creed nurtured beyond the lap of Islam. However, it was not at all that he sat on his hands to praise the positive aspects of ideologies even if coming from the west. Obviously, his faith must have wielded a powerful impact on his thought. But he was ever up to embrace those of the aspects of democracy he found wholly in line with the tenets of Islam, and canons of rationality.

### 1. Devoid of a Spiritual and ethical orientation:

Democracy of the West was stripped of a spiritual and ethical foundation. Rooted in materialistic mold, it provides a royal road for the unscrupulous and dishonest politicians to cling on to the ladder of power in a cringe-worthy way. The absence of moral and spiritual values renders democracy repulsive. This was the fundamental objection Iqbal leveled against it. In Bale Jibreel Allama writes that enough of devils inhabit the earth in the person of politicians that Satan's presence is no longer needed.

سیاست اربابِ بیس ابلیس کے جمہور  
افلاک تہ ضرورت میری اب نہیں باقی

*"In democracy are enough devils in the form of politicians that satan's presence not needed on earth." (Iqbal, Bale Jibreel)*

In Zabur-i-Kalim (2015, p.672) Allama has pours criticism on democracy in the strongest terms viewing that by inventing democracy, the West has let loose a monstrous demon. The democracy the west bangs on about frenziedly wears around its neck the beads of imperialism threaded with aggression, and capitalism. Iqbal sees it as the causes of all ills.

سیاست اربابِ بیس ابلیس کے جمہور  
افلاک تہ ضرورت میری اب نہیں باقی  
*"Slavery, slavishness, the root of our ailment,  
And of theirs, democracy." (Iqbal, Zarb-e-Kaleem)*

### 2. Uncurbed Democracy: A Bane:

Iqbal from the get go had a very low opinion of the uncouth masses. He believed that they were not fully equipped with the sense of intellect to be left with the most crucial affairs of life, they lacked proper training, and education. "Masses wanting intellect is the recurring theme of Iqbal's thesis on democracy. He had deep qualms about the unbridled importation of the western liberal ideas, for politics if left to the vagaries of every Tom, Dick, and Harry would prove suicidal.

In Payam-e-Mashriq Allama sarcastically puts the illiterate and ignorant masses to his poetic shafts saying that two hundred donkeys cannot match the wisdom of a wise man.

جوئی فطرتاں دوں از بیگانہ معنی متاع  
آ نمی سلیمانے طبع شوخی زموران  
شو کارے پختہ غلام جمہوری طرز از گریز  
آید نمی انسانے فکر خر صد دو مغز از کہ

*"You look for the jewels of the alien ideal from the unwise common men, as the crawling ants on the ground cannot attain the heights of wisdom of Hazrat Sulayman (The Prophet of God). You should give up the pursuits of democracy and come to the domain of the perfect man (the Holy Prophet), as two hundred donkeys cannot bring forth the brain of a man." (Iqbal, 1923)*

Needless to say, what farce takes place in democracy is skillfully depicted by Iqbal in the following verse of Zarb-e-Kaleem underlining one of the major defects in this creed. There is always a looming possibility that a man of insight may be overshadowed owing to a number of reasons to make it to a top-notch position, and get superseded by a bunch of illiterate, and coarse people. The same notion was reflect by Sir Winston Churchill in quite a witty quip that the best argument against democracy was a five minute conversation with an average voter.

فارش کیا نے فرنگی مرد اک کو راز اس  
کرتے نہیں کہولا اسے دانا کہ چند ہر  
میں جس کہ ہے حکومت طرز اک جمہوریت  
کرتے نہیں تولا بیس کرتے گنا کو بندوں

*"By some European sage this secret has been disclosed, even though the men of wisdom tend not to reveal it. Democracy is a form of government wherein men are counted, and not weighed."* (Iqbal, Zarb-e-Kaleem)

### 3. Instrument of Secularism:

Allama Iqbal's adverse views on democracy were also shaped by the atheistic nourishment of the latter. An ideology born out of the womb of atheism could never refine, and elevate the human thought. He came to discern in the western democracy the deep rooted seed of secularism, and atheism. Secularism involves a dichotomy between state, and religion- something Iqbal could never digest. An order which reduced the religion to an immaterial state of personal life teeters on the edge of the social, and moral decay. In addition, such a nation is doomed to a perpetual disgrace. Iqbal could never reconcile himself with such a creed. In Bal-e-Jibreel (2015, p.373), he cogently decries such an order divorced from the religion as no better than the worst tyranny.

چنگیزی ہے جاتی رہ تو سے سیاست دیں ہو جدا ہو تماشاً جمہوری کہ ہو بادشاہی جلال

*"Statecraft in which faith cut off from politics to reign of terror leads, Though it be a monarch's regime, or farce of a democracy."* (Iqbal, Bal-e-Jibreel)

A society built upon the bricks of secular order is destined to crumble. Iqbal was firmly resolved in his conviction that such societies never take root, and it was this secular democracy which unleashed unto the world a torrent of damage. The creed perpetuates infidelity, and has brazenly met a total fiasco to mitigate the sufferings of the people no matter where it has been espoused. (Dr. Qureshi, 1983, p. 218)

According to Iqbal, secular politics which the Europe has introduced is pestered with countless ills. By it the West has unchained a monster to eats away at the fabric of the world.

دیں لا سیاست یہ ہے میں نگاہ مری

ضمیر مردہ و نہاد دوں و ابرمن کنیز  
آزاد حاکمی سے کلیسا ترک ہے بوئی  
زنجیر ہے دیو ہے سیاست کی فرنگیوں

*In my opinion, politics divorced from religion, Is no more than devil's slave, has no qualms, but low breed.* (Iqbal, Zarb-e-Kaleem)

Armaghan-e-Hijaz (2015, p.704) Allama characterizes the western democracy as having the ugliest inside with a superficial exterior comparing its evils to the horrors of Genghis.

تر تاریک سے چنگیز اندروں، روشن چہرہ. نظام جمہوری کا مغرب نہیں دیکھا کیا ہے تو  
*The democratic system of the West have thou not observed?*

*Though has it a brilliant face, its interior is darker than Genghis's.* (Iqbal, Armaghan-e-Hijaz)

### 4. Playing field of conflicting ambitions:

Iqbal's another charge against democracy that it breeds a dog-eat-dog competition for a bunch of unscrupulous scoundrels to dabble in politics with a view to gaining reins of power only to maximize their vested interest holds true given the realities of the real-politic. A country morphs into a theatre of war for the dishonest and incompetent rogues to plot against each other for getting into the corridors of power dividing the entire nation into parties, and factions. To Iqbal, such a system creates deep schisms among the Ummah on false and fragile lines. It breeds moral corruption, and vitiates the soul, and takes away the conscience of men striving for power. Unimaginable evils are legitimized in the garb of liberal principles of democracy. A Passage from "Speeches and Statements of Iqbal (1948)" sheds light on the underlying motive for rejection of the creed:

*"Democracy means rows. If anybody thinks the approach to democracy means sailing into a kind of lotus land, he has not read a word of history. The truth is exactly the opposite. Democracy let lose all sorts of aspirations, and grievances and arouses hopes and ambitions often quite unpractical".*

### 5. It offers old wine in a new bottle:

Iqbal believed that the cult of democracy had nothing new to give to the humanity. It was the same old system, of tyranny, and exploitation presented as a messiah. At its best, it served old wine in new bottles. It did not cure. Instead, it afflicted both body and soul. It plunged the mankind into the appalling deprivation even further; instead of alleviating their sufferings.

In 1926, he contested election to the Punjab Legislative Council, and made it there. It provided him an opportunity to gain a first-hand experience of the working dynamics of democracy. It is asserted by many that getting into the assembly was below his dignity. They seem to lose the light of the fact that he himself did not covet for it. Second, he knocked even the policies of the party on whose seat he entered the house. Third, had he

not been in the assembly, he would not have observed the divisive, and deceptive nature of democracy at close quarters. The following verses he penned during the course of his membership of the Punjab Legislative Council:

است نہاد جمہوری آئین فرنگ  
است کشاد دیوے گردنِ از رسن  
وتار درتگ کاردانے چورھزن  
تاز و تگ در نائے بہرہا شکم  
است کمین در راگردھے گردھے  
است چنیں کارش اگر یار خدایش  
پیامے را مغرب اہل وہ زمن  
نیامے بے تیغ است جمہور کہ

*Europe by adopting Democracy has thus unchained a demon,*

*A caravan is passionately in search of another caravan, like a thief. It is out to snatch a loaf.*

*A group of people is lying in wait to catch other groups. God help it if this be its performance. Convey my message to the West that government of the people is like a sword out of its scabbard, killing ruthlessly. (Iqbal, Zabur-i-Ajam)*

### **Spiritual Democracy:**

While pointing out the inherent flaws of the western democracy, Iqbal had in mind the vision of an ideal Islamic polity unpolluted by the banes which characterize the former, and which was free from all the fallacies of the contemporary democracy. He deemed it the end-point of human quest for a durable and efficacious political order. The West would someday realize the impracticality, and fragility of democracy, and would be not be sitting on its hands to appreciate the unique framework for governance provided by Islam.

### **Allah says in the Holy Quran:**

*"...and consult them upon the conduct of affairs. And when you have taken a decision, repose your trust in Allah." (Al-Imran: 159)*

The close perusals of the holy Quran points to the fact that Islam patronizes any system which recognizes the worth of a man, and accommodates his/her say in running the affairs of the state. However, Islam has just drawn up a broad framework to be tailored to meet the political exigencies of different times, and spaces. But regrettably, basing upon some of the historical political instances in the Muslim world, the arguments are hurled to insinuate that Islam condones monarchy and oligarchy. Added to it, the Islamic model of a polity is very often prejudicially conflated with what is notoriously dubbed in the West "Theocracy". This confusion or deliberate fabrication comes from the fact that in Islam the full-fledged legislation rests with Allah alone Who Himself is the supreme law-giver. A limited scope of legislating laws has been accord to fill a gap in those areas left by the Quran, and Sunnah. The charge sheet is utterly smitten by a baseless western bias. Syed (1953) remarks that the institutionalized priest-craft which constitutes the indispensable contour of theocracy, and which was emblematic of the Medieval European theocratic state, has never been in place at any point in the Islamic history.

Islam came up with the diadem of human equality leading a standard of revolt against all disparities, and segregations based on race, caste, creed, and color. In his last sermon, the Apostle of God unrelentingly declared: *"Today all customs, and principles of the day of the ignorance are under my feet. O Man! Your God is one. Your father is also one. An Arab is no superior to an Ajami, and likewise a white is no better than a black except in righteousness."* (Saleem Ke Khatoot, p.31)

Allama Iqbal stood for a polity deriving inspiration from the canons of Shariah, and guidance from Sunnah of the Prophet. His was a democracy unimpeded by petty tumultuous party politics, and strove for nothing else but bringing to the rules the good of this world, and the hereafter. It was partisan to none, and trampled on none's rights. Justice under it was cheap. Rule of law flourished. Allama Iqbal attempted to make a case for the Quranic democracy, the spirit of which had been visualized in the Quran. However, its form and structure might be styled in view of the requirements of the contemporary political realities.

Iqbal believed that God himself is the repository of absolute sovereignty. Nevertheless, as enjoined by Allah, a limited sovereignty for accountability mechanism has been approved of. Dismissing the parliaments as talking-shops which yielded but follies only, he proposed the constitution of an assembly of enlightened men well-versed in both modern scholarship, and Islamic jurisprudence. The same may be equipped with the authority to exercise Ijtihad' to find a way out to the quandaries tormenting the modern world. Allama Iqbal favored a limited franchise, idealizing a government by the men of expertise, and veritable integrity.

It is pertinent to mention here that his ideal government was "Khilafat" (Caliphate). He turned to the Sunnite concept of caliphate to illustrate his ideal of a perfect democracy. Drawing inspiration from the period of Khilafat-e-Rashida, he held, democracy was put in place in letter and spirit. Dr Hassan (2010) notes "Yet, regardless of the fact that he underscored the gross limitations of democracy, he did not altogether abandon his hope in it, based on his sharp observations believing that democracy had some concomitant handicaps which

however could be best surmounted.

### Conclusion

To Iqbal, in the Islamic caliphate was exemplified a perfect model of a democratic government, what was more, uncontaminated by the scourges which the contemporary democracy was home to. Democracy in his eyes was the most important aspect of Islam. The underlying spirit of Tauheed was equality, and liberation- something today identified as the avatar of democracy. Any system tinged to the slightest degree with the element of absolutism, and authoritarianism was objectionable. Such systems as monarchy, aristocracy, and the present democracy were but a crude fraud, and treachery. He upheld the khilafat as the protection of the will of Allah. However, in view of the needs of the modern age, Iqbal believed the republicanism was not merely wholly in harmony with the essence of Islam, but was a practical necessity of the day.

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