

## **Political Equality in Allameh Sayyid Mohammad Hossein Tabataba'i's Political Thought**

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**Research Article**



### **Abstract**

One of the important discussions in the political thought is the equality or inequality of human beings. Any image about equality can have a variety of effects in people's political life. Investigating and explaining the view of Islamic thinkers on this subject can be useful, both theoretically and practically, in strategies of the states and Islamic societies. The main questions here are posed as follows: "What is the view presented by Allameh Tabataba'i as the Islamic philosopher and commentator of the Quran about the political equality?" and "Are the society members equal from the angel of the nature and from the theoretical viewpoint in political participation, administering the society and political power?" The hypothesis of this article is that the political equality has not been used directly as a topic in Allameh Tabataba'i's works; but considering his system of thoughts and posing the social and political issues, we can

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extract his views on political thought. Accordingly, the principles of political equality such as the equal basic rights in relation to others and in the relationship between the state and the individuals and equality before law have been accepted.

This study has used the descriptive-analytical method and content analysis to extract Allameh Tabataba'i's views. In the light of citizen rights, people can – considering their equal role in social administration – choose the ruler and the form of ruling through consultation, and can have the right to policy-making and supervising in making legislation and decision-making related to administering the society. People enjoy equal right and equal votes in ruling and administering the society.

**Keywords**

equality, political equality, political thought, Sayyid Mohammad Tabataba'i.

## Introduction

In all times and all places, human beings have been unequal in their status, power and wealth with difference in financial, educational, relational and occupational positions. The society members are not equal in health, intelligence and emotional balance as well as social positions. Now, the discussion is whether the society members are equal, from the theoretical and natural viewpoints, in political participation and taking over power. It is necessary to specify the views of the Muslim thinkers in this regard. Allameh Tabataba'i is among the thinkers that is unique in the Islamic philosophy and exegesis of the Quran; and exploring the discussions on the political thought and politics in his works can theoretically open the way for understanding and explaining the views of Muslim thinkers regarding the issues of political life, and can help practically the Islamic states in the Occultation Period.

The main questions of this study are posed as follows: "What is the views presented by Allameh Tabataba'i as the commentator of the Quran and the Islamic philosopher regarding the political equality?" and "Are there the principles of political equality in the system of his thoughts?" Considering the existing discussions in *Tafsīr al-Mīzān* and his other works, we may explain his perception of political equality through a descriptive-analytical method and in the form of content analysis.

The hypothesis in this article is that Allameh Tabataba'i has offered discussions in political philosophy and politics under the titles of 'interactive realism' and using the theory of contractual perceptions as well as concepts such as social property, council, religious social state, special perceptions of Quranic addresses, etc. with whose help we can prepare a ground for explaining the principles of political equality.

### **1. Genealogy of the subject matter**

Discussion on political equality and inequality is as longstanding as the political thought. In the ancient Greece, the subject of equality has been discussed, but this subject has been paid especial attention in the modern world. In the Islamic sphere, we can find some discussions on political equality. Among the political thinkers, a variety of views have been stated on political equality. There are two major views on equality (Tinder, 1979, p. 55).

From the viewpoint of some thinkers, equality and inequality are resulted from connection of some people with the transcendental existence or absolute goodness. Plato was the pioneer of adherents of inequality and considered philosophers as having legitimate right for political power due to their knowledge of absolute goodness and connection with divine essence in the light of intellection. He regarded ordinary people as having the duty to obey philosophers in the political life. Similarly, Aristotle would classify the position of human beings in terms of natural hierarchy and level and quality of intellect in political order and administering the society. In his view, philosophers have high faculties of understanding in the natural hierarchy (Aristotle, 2000, p. 88). After them, the natural kings and nobles have the power to judge and, consequently, to rule. In the third place, the natural citizens have some level of political participation. In the next order, there are craftsmen and laborers who must not interfere in political affairs and must be at the service of others as natural slaves.

From the viewpoint of some political thinkers, equality and inequality have just a worldly aspect. Nietzsche, with the idea of 'God is dead', questioned any kind of religious and democratic equality and explained human relations on the basis of dominance and order. This idea is exactly in opposition to that of Stoics who believed that individuals are equal in perceiving the general divine obligations and rules hidden in the universe. The inequalities shaped through order,

power, wealth, intellect, health and beauty are all trivial things before God's splendid grace (Tinder, 1979, p. 58). Among the political thinkers, Thomas Hobbes believed that human beings are essentially equal from the perspective of worldly qualities and would explain that equality without paying attention to religion. Some ideas have been formed in relation to the idea of equality. Socialism, Communism and Liberalism each has explained and interpreted the idea of equality in some form. The French, Russian and Chinese revolutions were formed with the slogan of equality. The early intellectual efforts for explaining political equality in Iran were done by the forces involved in Constitutional Revolution. Two religious thoughts emerged among Constitutionalist scholars regarding the possibility of equality in the Islamic society (Maleki, 1400 SH, p. 267). Sheikh Fazlullah Nouri and Sayyid Abdul-Hossein Lari negated the possibility of equality in legislation and considered the solution in lack of any assembly (Zargari-Nejad, 1378 SH, p. 154). Sayyid Lari did not accept equality in issues related to politics and state, regarding it as a task for jurists (Zargari-Nejad, 1378 SH, pp. 302-408). Among the Muslim thinkers, Na'ini adduced the religious texts and the Prophet's Sunnah to consider all members of the society equal before laws and religious precepts (Na'ini, 1382 SH, pp. 57-58).

These unresolved discussions about political equality were reproduced again in the period after the Islamic Revolution of Iran, and some views were formed regarding the possibility or non-possibility of political equality in the political thought after the Islamic revolution (Maleki, 1397 SH, p. 85). Although there are ample works on Sayyid Mohammad Tabataba'i's political thought, discussed also in various works written by Ahmad Reza Yazdani Moqaddam in detail (Yazdani Moqaddam, 1388), there is no book or article written directly and specifically on political equality, and this is the innovation of the present article.

## **2. The concepts**

### **2-1. Political equality**

Regarding the definition of equality, there is no consensus and there are different definitions for it. Equality is divided into various types, including legal equality, economic equality and political equality (Bashiriya, 1379, p. 25).

Political equality means the right to participate in the political life as the essence of democracy. James Coleman considers equality among the elements and essentials of political development and enumerates three basic components for it: national citizenship, universalist legal order, and norms of success. Based on these three chapters, any citizen enjoys equal basic rights in relations to others; and in the relationship between the state and the citizens, equality before law is an essential idea. Citizens feel that the political system considers them equal before law. Besides, acquired criteria are effective in employment and dedicating political and administrative roles (Coleman, 2015, pp. 123-124).

### **3. Political equality in Allameh Tabataba'i's view**

Allameh Tabataba'i's political thought can open a way for delineating the geometry of political equality through political philosophy approach.

#### **3-1. The state, a contractual entity**

The state is among the contractual entities constructed by human's constructive mind. That is, both its reality and its nature are contractual. The political affair and the state are not pre-human entities; rather, their values, whether fixed or altering, are produced by human's contractual mind. In this case, in the lapse of time and in the course of history, it goes forward with trial and error and public dialogue. As a result, the state has no fixed and everlasting form.

Contractual perceptions are thoughts and perceptions with practical values, are mediums for receiving perfection and merits of life, and are suggestive of external affairs (Tabataba'i, 1363 SH, p. 115). In Allameh Tabataba'i's view, a judgment on civil community and social justice is a judgment that the man has reached due to urgency; and the man's being naturally civil means the same and arises from his employment-seeking spirit (Tabataba'i, 1363 SH, p. 70). In this regard, he explains the concepts of employment, community and justice as follows: "with the guidance of nature and genetics, the man always wants his benefit from all (contract of employment); and wants the benefit of all for his own benefit (contract of community); and wants social justice for the benefit of all (contract of goodness of justice and badness of oppression)" (Tabataba'i, 1368 SH, vol. 2, p. 199). Thus, the affair of state is among the essential contracts and is after the contract of community, which makes sense just with political equality. The existence of community with various human beings and with different goals and wills causes difference and disagreement; and the solution is to create an authoritative power and prohibiting dominance that govern all members of the society, putting each one in their own place (Tabataba'i, 1368 SH, vol. 3, p. 145). Thus, in this view, the man plays role in creating and contracting the state; and gradually, with errors he sees, he tries to modify it; and the nature of the state is a contractual and human reality. This is because contractual affairs are basically human ones. Since contractual affairs are accompanied by human interpretations, free dialogue in the light of human's political equality can prepare new milieus for improving political life.

### 3-1. Social ruling

In a philosophical attitude, based on contractual perceptions and the man's aptitude for employment, the ways to social life is paved through political equality. Ruling, which is dominance over individuals,

is among the essential contracts that the man needs, and it is placed after the contract of community. Due to existence of many individuals with a variety of goals and wills, difference of interests and purposes emerges and there comes a need for a domineering power dominant over all individuals. After establishment of the state, some may capture other as slaves with the intention of employing them and choose monarchy, while social ruling is a communal affair that belongs to all persons with equal political rights. When people saw the kings' oppressions and autocracy, they enacted laws that turned absolute monarchy into constitutional ruling. The necessity of having a leader that is able to manage the nation's affairs is a consensus. But the names and titles are different in various historical and cultural conditions of the nations, and human beings complete and modify it with their reasons. Here, the role of religion is specified with the appearance of prophets and their invitation to surrender before God and confronting with Pharaohs and their social and political oppressions as well as reformation of the state (Tabataba'i, 1368 SH, vol. 3, pp. 144-148). In this analysis of social ruling, the social life is based on an implicit and practical contract to the effect that public benefit and expediency is founded on social justice, and that the politico-social power arises from all members of society and belongs to all of them. Thus, their conversation in the public dialogue regarding something that belongs to all is a necessity.

### 3-2. Council

In Allameh Tabataba'i's philosophical analysis, "social ruling" or sociopolitical power arisen from the community of all individual members of society belongs to people, and must necessarily be exerted according to their will and demand. The political community exerts its political power from a certain center. The mechanism for exerting 'social ruling' is through council, considering that the social



ruling and political power belong to all people, and must be exerted according to their opinions. Any mechanism through which a larger number of true owners of political power are involved in exerting it is more desirable. Today, it can be found in the form of public dialogue and free interaction as well as legal political freedom according to which collective rationality is manifested.

### **3-3. Interactive realism**

According to interactive realism, the man can achieve reality in general. However, this must be done through equal and free social dialogue. The man's perception from the reality is a general one. The man's perception from outside is the product of his external actions and reactions and his perceptive tools; thus, what comes to mind is not merely simple reflection of the outside world in our mind. Our perceptive system along with environmental factors, social traditions, and culture as well as education and propaganda (mass media) are effective in his perception and understanding (Tabataba'i, 1368 SH, vol. 3, p. 208), just as the man's beliefs, culture, morality and actions are effective in his knowledge and insight (Tabataba'i, 1368 SH, vol. 4, pp. 127-134). Thus, the truth is not confined in the hands of a certain person or group; rather, what is in our hand is the truth in a general sense. This is easier in the contractual affairs. This epistemological basis can prepare a foundation for collective rationality in the political milieu. That is, understanding how to administer the political life becomes possible with social thinking and contemplation; in this regard, reason and religion are complementary to one another. Contractual concepts, including government and state, are not concepts existing in the outer world. Rather, they are concepts that the man constructs and contracts. Thus, political equality and interaction of thought and opinion have a special position in understanding, receiving and discovering the truth; and the mere individual thinking is not sufficient for achieving truth.

These discussions in the sphere of politics opens the way to political equality and leaves no room for dominance of power and wealth (totalitarianism).

### **3-4. the Quranic addresses**

From various verses of the Quran, we infer that they address all Muslims for implementing Islamic laws and, thus, religion is a social truth, and God wants equally all members of the community of people to implement Islamic laws. In the scene of practice, the view arisen from a dialogue among the public council of Muslims is considered as important.

“Here, there is another point that is necessary to be considered by the researcher: all verses related to performing worships, rising up for jihad, implementing religious limits, and the like are addressed to believers, not the Prophet... we understand from all these verses that religion has a social color... and God Almighty wants all people to establish religion. Thus, the society formed by all people will be administered by them, without being dedicated to some of them; and the Prophet is equal to others in this regard. God Almighty says, ‘I do not waste the action of any actor among you’ (the Quran, *Āl ‘Imrān*, p. 159). And the verse denotes that the natural effect of the members of Islamic society in their society and before God Exalted is considered legislatively, as God Exalted has considered it genetically” (Tabataba’i, 1368 SH, vol. 4, pp. 121-123 and 1378 SH, vol. 2, p. 198).

Therefore, Islam has a social color and God wants people to implement its laws collectively. From this perspective, Islam is a social religion.

### **3-5. Authority and political equality**

Considering the discussions such as interactive realism, social ruling,

and contractual perceptions in Allameh Tabataba'i's thought, he regards the government as a post-community contractual entity that comes to existence – in view of the talent of employment – after the contract of community so that each owner of right achieves his right and the relationship among the members of society comes to a balance (Tabataba'i, 1363 SH, vol. 2, p. 70 and vol. 4, p. 92). In this way, the validity of the social ruling and government returns to collective rationality. In this theory, the Islamic society – like other societies – needs government and state for its administration and its progress, but the form of government has not been specified in it. In Allameh Tabataba'i's view, the government and authority of the society belongs to people, and they are all equal in this regard. The authority of the nation and their political leadership belongs to the Prophet and he takes over the responsibility for inviting people, guiding them, educating them and administering their affairs in this world and the hereafter as well as their imamate (Tabataba'i, 1363 SH, vol. 4, p. 122). In the Shiites' view, after the Prophet, the Infallible Imams were appointed as caliphs by the Prophet; but the government's responsibility after the Infallibles and in the Occultation Period is on Muslims' shoulders; and they are equal in political rights. However, "the Islamic government after the Prophet and Imam Mahdi's disappearance – like the present time – is no doubt up to Muslims; and we may use God's Book to conclude that it is up to Muslims to determine the ruler in the society according to the Prophet's tradition and way of life, which is the tradition of imamate, not monarchy and empire. And the ruler among them must protect the laws; and he must administer the state in other affairs related to the events of time and place energetically" (Tabataba'i, 1363 SH, pp. 124-125). Similarly, in the discussions related to minor laws about current and transient events, financial and defensive affairs, and civil relations and regulations, he says, "These are entrusted to the ruler's discretion... thus, it is up to the ruler to observe the expediencies of the society in

the domestic and foreign affairs pertaining to war and peace as well as financial and non-financial affairs, and to decide after consulting with Muslims.” (Tabataba’i, 1363 SH, p. 121). Considering the Quran’s verses addressed to all members of society, as well as the religion as a social truth whose implementation is up to all people, administering the society is equally up to all people, and the political power arises from the people’s community; and no one is superior to others in this regard and the ruler must consult people in political issues. Thus, the way is paved for referring to social and political rationality in political life.

### 3-6. Democracy

Regarding whether Tabataba’i accepts democracy as a political system or not, we should notice the point that he does not accept western democracies in some cases, and rejects it in its special sense, i.e. following the irrational emotions of the majority (Tabataba’i, 1378 SH, vol. 2, p. 296 and Tabataba’i, 1360 SH, p. 94). And in some cases, he admires the rules and regulations of the advanced western countries. In his view, the followings are the differences between Islam’s method in administering the society, the western democratic method, and other methods of social administration (Tabataba’i, 1350 SH, pp. 94-97):

1. Since other (non-Islamic) methods are based on material enjoyment, the spirit of employment and exploitation exists in them; accordingly, any method is used for enjoyment and benefit.
2. In Islam, there is no class difference. The only criterion for superiority is piety, not wealth and position and the like. According to the Prophet’s way of life, people are socially equal and equally participate in the civil society.
3. The executive power in Islam (the state) is not a privileged group; rather, all members of the society are responsible for establishing the state and implementing the Islamic laws.

Considering these discussions, Allameh rejects employing and using others in the civilized states. The affair of administering the society is with the Muslims' community, which is administered in the form of council; and this is in line with democracy, of course a kind of democracy wherein the Islamic community must be with social unity and with the thought of establishing religion. Here, we do not claim that Allameh has referred explicitly to the democratic system for administering the Islamic society; rather, altogether, from the collection of his foundations, we may infer some form of religious democracy. In his view, the administration of the Islamic state in the Occultation Period has been relegated to Muslims.

For him the man can organize his social life and compile the required laws by using the God-given intellect. Unlike those who reprehend the intellect, he maintains that God has equipped man with sound reason and good judgment with which he perceives [truth]. Islam has entrusted management of the man's individual and social life to the sound reason and does not allow wrong feelings to interfere, except as much as the intellect prescribes. Thus, Islam has opposed things that weaken the intellect. Intellect is a divine gift that distinguishes human beings from other animals (Tabataba'i, 1378 SH, vol. 2, pp. 94-97). In his view, the man's intellect can find out truths. In many verses, the Quran guides people to the proof of intellect, inviting them to thinking, intellection, and contemplation in the signs of horizons and souls. It also does rational reasoning in case of discovering truths, and no celestial book makes the man familiar with argumentative knowledge like the Quran. For Allameh, the truth of Islamic knowledge is found out with rational reasoning; that is, all true knowledge is understood through rational reasoning (Tabataba'i, 1374 SH, pp. 78-79). "The great blight is where all powers are concentrated in the executive authority of the ruler. That is, when with reliance on his power, people are weakened and there is no force to balance that

power and, thus, his will becomes absolute ruling power over all affairs. And history is full of stories of powerful tyrant individuals who have been dominant unjustly and oppressing them; and there are still many of them” (Tabataba’i, 1378 SH, p. 226). In this regard, Allameh maintains that concentration of power in the hands of executive power weakens people and prevents reflection of their views and their ruling over their own political fate and affairs. This shows Allameh’s view regarding separation or independence of powers and, on the other hand, dominance of force and authority over human relations. Besides, he deals with the dominance of global powers over backward nations and, altogether, regards dominance – whether from the state inside the country or from the domineering powers in the international arena – as negating freedom, nobility and human virtues, considering it as a factor preparing the ground for oppression and inequality (Tabataba’i, 1378 SH, p. 226).

### 3-7. Religion and political equality

In his *Tafsīr al-Mīzān*, Allameh Tabataba’i defines religion as follows: “religion is a collection of knowledge and teachings pertaining to origin [of universe] and resurrection as well as social laws from worship to transaction coming to mankind through revelation” (Tabataba’i, 1363, p. 405). Elsewhere, he considers the truth of religion as a series of beliefs regarding creation of the world and the man as well as a series of practical duties that conforms human life with those beliefs (Tabataba’i, 1378 SH, vol. 2, p. 310). Therefore, for him, in Islam, in addition to knowledge pertaining to origin and resurrection, there are social laws; and it pursues guidance of the society in this way. In addition, religion is the best and the most perfect method that can organize the human society and, more than any other method, forces people to observe social laws (Tabataba’i, 1360 SH, p. 7). The man cannot administer the society completely just using his intellect.

Although human's intellect – with the help from his fellowmen – can administer the society by some regulations; but the intellect needs the help from revelation. The existence of some factors such as power and wealth leads to exploitation of others and disturbs the relational action of the society. The Prophets' goal and the coming of religions was to confront with the reprehensible employment (Tabataba'i, 1417 AH, vol. 4, pp. 92-93).

In Allameh Tabataba'i's view, although the social methods in the West – created by the human's intellect for progress and development as well as observing social laws – are useful, cannot by themselves control his rebellious nature and instinct; rather, they need a more powerful force called religion with a variety of social functions as follows:

1. Any pious person has found out, with the religion's guidance, that his life is not limited to some days in this transient world; rather, he is waiting for an unlimited life that is not ended with death. Indeed, his only way to felicity is to follow the religious rules and regulations brought to us by the prophets. The man knows that God has a complete control over his inner and outer sides, and that he must someday stand before God to respond for his actions. Thus, he does not oppose divine laws – whether individual or social – even in secret.
2. Any person knows that according to his religious beliefs, every religious order that he obeys is obedience to his Lord. Thus, in performing any religious order, he is making a deal freely that is followed by God's consent. Religion has various functions in the man's social life and it cannot be ignored in public rationality and political interaction.

The Quran's orders regarding the worships and other issues are addressed to believers, and religion has a social tint. God wants people to establish religious practices collectively. The political affairs of the

society belong to all, and implementing religious laws is the duty of all people. Naturally, the state and its political power arise from people's will and their consent. Choosing the ruler in the Islamic society is the responsibility of Muslims (Rakhshad, 1385 SH, vol. 4, pp. 410-411). In this way, they can supervise the state and the rulers; and the government has the duty to:

1. Behave among the people according to the Prophet's way of life, and not to be despotic.
2. Implement religious laws in the society.
3. Observe people's expediency all the time.
4. Consult with people in public and governmental affairs as well as administering the society (Tabataba'i, 1417 AH, vol. 4, pp. 124-125).<sup>1</sup>

Tabataba'i makes use of two terminologies of 'social government' and 'socio-religious government' for naming his claim (Tabataba'i, 1360 SH, p. 14).<sup>2</sup> The Islamic ruler and the people have the duty to follow the Prophet's way of life in implementing Islamic laws; thus, religion plays role in the society and directing the state and the government.

For him, the man's intellect can also be efficient in his perfection and progress in political planning and management. However, he does not regard those progressions sufficient (Tabataba'i, 1360 SH, p. 14). In this regard, if he criticizes democracy in some cases, it is due to its imperfection as the desired political method regardless of religion, because for him, religion plays role in government through society.

The man performs his perfectionism in the universe with knowledge and thinking (Tabataba'i, 1368 SH, vol. 1, p. 36), and manipulates the outer world with contractual sciences. With his perception and thought, the man establishes relationship with everything. The distress and employment in the man, which emerges from his creation and

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1. In this discussion, we have used the issues presented in Yazdanai Moqaddam, 1388 SH.

2. These expressions are found in Tabataba'i's various works.



natural systems, leads him to social life so that all participants can take benefits in it. In an equal and right dialogue free from dominance of power and wealth, his perfectionist movement accelerates, but in cases wherein this collective action is threatened by others' dominance in the society and politics, the divine religions – which are the result of sending the prophets – confront with arrogance and oppression, leading the society towards healthy social life, which is the man's progress in relation to society.

### Conclusion

The subject matter of this article is to explain the political equality by considering the intellectual system of Allameh Sayyid Mohammad Hossein Tabataba'i. Considering various views and discussions presented in the political thought, we arrived at the following conclusions:

1. Upon investigating the collection of Allameh's works, we find that the political equality has not been mentioned directly in his works; however, considering discussions such as contractual perceptions, social ruling, council, interactive realism and the like, we may extract his views regarding political equality.
2. In his view, people can choose – considering their equal role in social ruling – the ruler and determine the form of ruling through council; and people have the right to say their opinion and exert supervision in decisions on administering the society; and people have the equal right to vote and choose the society's form of ruling and administration.
3. From Allameh Mohammad Hossein Tabataba'i's view, the majority's opinion does not necessarily lead to discerning the right and wrong or truth and falsehood. In the Islamic society, policy-making in affairs pertaining to society and government is altering and done in proportion to the time and place, and people have an equal right in it.

4. According to former discussions, the government belongs to people and people have an equal right to participate in social decision-makings. They have equal rights in voting and supervising the government, and this foundation has been confirmed by the Quran and traditions as well.
5. Allameh Tabataba'i's philosophical analysis of society and government shows that the theoretical and philosophical foundations of political equality – that people have the right to govern, administering the society must be done according to their opinions, and they are equal in expressing their opinions and supervising the administrations of the society –exists in his philosophical analysis. Of course, this equal role of the people is based on Islamic values.

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