

The Relationship between Islam and ideology in the Political Thought of Sayyid Qutb

Introduction

Sayyid Qutb was one of the most significant cleric, author, poet, and political ideologist of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB), who still has a lasting influence on the people in the Muslim world. He is known as a political ideologist of the MB among other things. He vigorously rejects cultural Westernization, secularism, all forms of *jahiliyya*¹ systems, materialistic and human-made ideologies, especially in his later writings. Since his birth, 1906, he was aware of the political and religious issues around him, because his family has also engaged in politics. One of the most important things those shaped Qutb's political ideology were British colonialism in Egypt, his education in Colorado, his strong ties with the Egyptian MB, Egyptian nationalist struggle and his prison years. The term *jahiliyya*, ignorance of the sovereignty of Allah on earth in pre-Islamic era, holds a central position in Sayyid Qutb's writings. He certainly holds the opinion that the materialistic systems are the primitive and modern form of ancient jahiliyya in Arabian Peninsula. Furthermore, this modern form of jahiliyya is not better than the former one (Shepard, 2006, p.39). His ultimate aim is to regulate political system in accordance with the Islamic principles, in particular, to provide concrete proofs those show Islam is the best antidote for this jahiliyya systems, in general. Having served this purpose, he represents a clear antithesis between Islam and all other materialistic, human-made ideologies. Then he focuses on the prescriptions for the illnesses of the Egyptian society those are the results of the disastrous effect of the materialistic ideologies. He clearly aims to demonstrate that Islam is the most applicable system for all times, places, races, and nations. The roots of his ideology that Islam is the most applicable system compared to human-made ideologies can be found in his most well-known books, the *Social Justice in Islam* and the *Milestones*.

¹ This is an Islamic term that refers to the beliefs and concepts that prevailed in pre-Islamic Arabia, but it is often used by Islamic writers to refer to all non-Islamic social practices and traditions. The word is derived from the root '*Jahl*' which means ignorance. Thus, it has come to mean a state of mind associated with ignorance. (Qutb, 1954, p.175)

Islam is a social, economic and political system in Sayyid Qutb's political thought. For Qutb, although materialistic ideologies consider religion as an obstacle in the path of the wealth, there is no need to show hostility to religion, yet Islam has to be recognized as a leading figure in political arena (Enayat, 2005, p.150-2). The line between political and religious is permeable in Qutbian terminology. There is no doubt that the issues around Qutb have brought significant changes in Qutb's political thought. In retrospect, in 1930s, Qutb was more secularist rather than Islamist, in 1940s, he can be considered as moderate radical Islamist, and in 1950s, radical Islamism became more visible in his political thought (Watson, 2005, p.25-49). The main purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between Islam and *jahiliyya* systems in Sayyid Qutb's political thought, in general, to analyze how Sayyid Qutb perceives Islam as a perfect antidote to the all human beings, in particular. In the first part, the meaning of Islam will be given, and in the second part, the term of *jahiliyya* will be analyzed in accordance with Qutbian philosophy, then in the following parts, the concepts of sovereignty, action and Islamic revival will be addressed.

The meaning of Islam in Qutb's Political Thought

Certainly, it is very important to understand the very meaning of Islam, in general, and politics, in particular, in Qutb's thought in order to make a relevant connection between Islam and ideology. There is no doubt that Islam is at the core of Qutb's political thought. Sayyid Qutb clearly perceives Islam as a comprehensive system, which completely covers the every part of the human life, rather than only a religion and a belief system living just in people's mind (Donohue & Esposito, 1982). Moreover, Islam came to organize the people's life, and restore the harmony between this life and other life (Tripp, 1994). Having mentioned the meaning of Islam in Qutb's thought, he perceives politics as a tool to establish the most applicable system and the divine community (Tripp, 1994). In fact, he puts an organic connection between politics and Islam which is based on the early days of Prophet and the

Quran (Bergersen, 2008, p.1-42). In other words, Islam is a coherent system which based on the Quran and the *hadith* (prophets' tradition), and it is applicable to all times and places (Enayat, 2005, p.150-2). From this point of view, politics can be considered as a vehicle which is necessary to achieve uniformity of community (Tripp, 1994). In this regard, it is very crucial to have a closer look to the *Milestones* and the *Social Justice in Islam* to better understand the very meaning of the Islam in Sayyid Qutb's thought.

In Qutb's Islamic ideology, *tawhid* (unity) takes a significant place. Spiritual and materialist dimensions are not distinguishable (Watson, 2005, p.25-49). For him, there is not a convincing reason to distinguish Islam and society. Nor the French secularism, based on the separation between religion and authority, or communist ideology should be followed by the Muslim countries. Furthermore, the society and political system has to be regulated by the principles of Islam and the Divine rule, *Sharia* (Donohue & Esposito, 1982). By doing so, unification of political and religious will redeem Islam from the bankruptcy of the secular West (Shepard, 1987).

Sayyid Qutb uses two specific terms to describe what Islam really means: (i) system (*nizam*) and (ii) method (*manhaj*). In this regard, Islam is a worldwide system existing in the very nature of the society like socialism and capitalism. The concept of *manhaj* is more relevant to express Sayyid Qutb's thought. *Manhaj* is more ideational and abstract one which outlines the programme, procedure, method to be followed. It might be claimed that Islam is a *manhaj* of life in Qutbian philosophy (Shepard, 1989).

Islam as an antidote for materialistic ideologies

Sayyid Qutb's political ideology was significantly affected by the Pope Benedict XVI's criticism against the Catholic Church. With reference to Benedict XVI, Catholic Church has

lost the original form of Christianity and spiritually corrupted (Bergersen, 2008). The criticism of Benedict XVI against the Catholic Church made a huge impact on Sayyid Qutb's thought. In addition, rationalism, Marxism, and empiricism paved the way of spoiling the pure form of Christianity. In Qutb's engagement with Benedict's account, Qutb strongly claims that Christianity and other forms of Western secularist thoughts are corrupted. Having made this argument, although the West came up with many technological inventions, he states that the West is soulless, rootless and empty, so Muslim communities have to be governed in accordance with the original principles of Islam not Western systems (Tripp, 1994). In this regard, Islam is the perfect antidote to the pressures of the modern life.

In Qutbian thought, Islam was perceived is the best antidote for the collapse of Ottoman Empire and the rise of the Western cultural, intellectual, and economic imperialism (Euben, 1987). The most remarkable divergence between Islam and the other systems (Communism and Capitalism) and religions (Christianity, and Judaism) is that while Islam does not distinguish human beings as materialistic and spiritual, the other systems and religions do it in a proper way. That is to say, Islam supports the undistinguishable characteristic of the human nature, yet, political and religious ones should not be separated.

For Qutb, the life of the modern human being is covered by the corrupted forms of religions. Nor socialism or capitalism is able to solve the challenging problems of the modern people (Qutb, 1976). Sayyid Qutb clearly supports the claim that Islam provides healthier solutions more than socialism and capitalism. Sayyid Qutb usually uses a comparative method in order to support his claim in a proper way. While Western separation of religious thoughts refers to *"Leave it Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's"*, in Qutbian philosophy, it means *what is Caesar's is God's and leave it Caesar to take it from God* (Bergersen, 2008). In the *Social Justice in Islam*, Qutb makes a comparison between Islam and communism, materialism, capitalism, and empiricism in terms of equity. He strongly claims that Islam is

the most equity and powerful system which the human being has never seen. For Qutb, while communism provides equity in wages, Islam goes beyond merely the economic values and covers the every sphere of the life (Qutb, 1976). In short, he is against the white men's civilization, the materialistic civilization which spoils the very nature of the human being.

Qutb makes a clear distinction between Islam and the *jahiliyya* systems in terms of individualism and communitarianism (Khatab, 2006). Qutb does not only draw distinction between jahiliyya beliefs and Islam, but also he criticises their very forms of imagination. While socialism places a greater emphasis on community, Qutb aims to establish a fruitful individualism which has to be based on social justice. Although Qutb states that social benefit, and social responsibility is very crucial; he does not let any form of individualism to harm the society. At the same time, he really states that individualism makes sense in such a condition that political and social system is regulated by the Islamic law, Sharia, under the sovereignty of Allah (Tripp, 1994). Then, he claims that it is not possible to build bridge Islam and *jahiliyya* systems, so he calls all human beings to the truest way, Islam.

When taking the information yielded above into consideration, it must be noted that the main purpose of Sayyid Qutb is to transform Islam from just a religion to an active force providing workable solutions to modern problems (Enayat, 2005, p.150-2). In fact, Qutb tries to revive the original nature of the purist form of Islam. He also aims to establish a system which is based on nor socialism or capitalism, so he never used the concept of Islamic Socialism or moderate Islam. The reason why he places greater emphasis on Islam is that Islam is the only divine, uncorrupted and universal system, whereas communism, capitalism, socialism are *jahiliyya* system and human-made. For him, human-made systems need to be revised according to current circumstances, but Islam does not require revision even it is minor (Enayat, 2005, p.150-2). Western centric ideologies do not provide any true values for the guidance of the human, so Islam is the only legitimate system working for the benefits of all

people on earth. In addition, he repeatedly claims that, while socialism and capitalism humiliate and exploit the very nature of the human, Islam guarantees the real freedom of men and women. (Qutb, 1976). Living under the sovereignty of Allah refers to real freedom; this does not mean Lockean freedom (Euben, 1999, p. 64). In the light of the information mentioned above, it is reasonable to say that Qutb perceives Islam as practical and reasonable alternative for human-made systems.

Sovereignty of Allah

The notion of the sovereignty, sovereignty of Allah, takes a really significant place in Sayyid Qutb's political thought in order to strengthen that Islam is the only acceptable system for every human being. In *Milestones*, (*Ma'alim Fi'l Tariq*), Qutb defines Islam is a complete way of life under the sovereignty of the oneness of Allah (Qutb, 1990). In putting forward this proposition, he claims that Islam is more than a political system based on *jahiliyya* system in which sovereignty is the hand of the men not Allah (Khatab, 2006.a). He clearly claims that every single creature will live in an equal world if sovereignty belongs to oneness Allah not human being.

According to Qutb's political thought in his later works, specifically *Milestones*, every single member of the Islamic community is responsible for the establishment of the Allah's sovereignty on earth. The greater to extent to which the political system is based on the sovereignty of Allah, the less injustice and inequality will threaten people. In this view, political system has to be regulated in accordance with the pure principles of Quran and prophet's tradition in seventh century. In his political thought, Allah is the most divine and the highest, so everyone else is his creation. From this point of view, every single person has to be forced to recognize the absolute sovereignty of Allah (Bergersen, 2008).

Oneness of the God is at the heart of Qutbian political thought in terms of his understanding of sovereignty. For Qutb, it is an undeniable fact that Allah is one and the highest, so there has to be a global community based on no social, racial or national differences (Bergesen, 2008). The equality and social justice might be provided to all human being in such a condition that sovereignty of Allah exist in the whole realm of human being.

In comparison with the understanding of sovereignty in Qutb's political thought and western understanding, Qutb's understanding of sovereignty is opposed the one men's lordship over the other which brings tyranny and oppression (Qutb, 1990). The only sovereign is Allah, nor state or any other institution, so Qutb does not leave any sovereignty for Caesar. Sayyid Qutb holds the opinion that demolishing men's sovereignty on men will pave the way of establishing the real freedom of human being from servitude. This issue depends crucially on establishing sovereignty of Allah on earth (Donohue & Esposito, 1982). Qutb attaches an importance to Sharia which is invariable and eternal, whereas human-made, materialistic systems suspend the sovereignty of Allah on earth. Overall, the notion of sovereignty is perceived the most significant issue which makes Islam more acceptable and applicable system compared the socialism and capitalism.

The revival of Islam

Qutb really believes that the success of the Islamic ideology can occur in such a condition that Islamic revival is succeeded through establishing the Sharia. In his later works, he strongly claimed that all of the Muslim countries in all over the world are non-Islamic. For him, all of the Muslims have to complete a special mission through their life: to establish the Islamic state and accept the oneness of the God (Shepard, 1989, p.31-50). Qutb places greater emphasis to the notion of *action* to revive Islam for the benefit of all human being. In this regard the concept of *action* means get up, go out and actualize the principles of true religion.

For him, Islam is a revolutionary ideology and the only system to be followed (Euben, 1999, p.49-93). In this regard, Qutb directly criticizes socialism and capitalism as being infertile and failed in terms of social and political perspectives (Qutb, 1990). These failed and degenerated materialistic ideologies are not able to provide solutions to mankind any more. In this perspective, Islam is able to provide high ideals and values to human being. He precisely defines Islam is the most suitable alternative for the humankind, which is practicable, constructive and positive. From this point of view, Qutb underlines that there is an immediate need to revive Islam.

The idea of Islam is the best antidote for all human being is explained in a comparative way in Sayyid Qutb's works. Sayyid Qutb makes a compelling argument for the idea of Islam is the most applicable and acceptable system all over the world. For instance, Qutb supports the claim that all chauvinistic and nationalistic ideologies, which are the product of the materialistic ideologies, have lost their credibility and vitality (Qutb, 1990). At the same time, the concepts emerged in the age of enlightenment do not have a recipe for the whole realm of the human life. While, these materialistic ideologies do not have a remarkable ability to adapt changing conditions, Islam is *progressive* and revolutionary (Qutb, 1990). Because of the reasons mentioned above Qutb offers Islam as a solution in this regard.

Conclusion

Islam is a complete way of life in Qutbian philosophy. This essay mainly focused on his writings which provide a radical critique of materialistic ideologies, and the alternative solutions of jahiliyya systems highly suggested by Sayyid Qutb. In Qutb's political thought, there is a divine system to all human being which cannot be demolished. This divine system has to be regulated by the principles of the holy Quran and the *hadith*. As the other materialistic ideologies explained earlier are corrupted and a practice of the *jahiliyya* system,

such an explanation surely deserves that Islam is the only *nizam* providing wealthy solutions and the real freedom for all human being. Consequently, I made a deliberate attempt to analyse carefully that Sayyid Qutb strongly suggest that Islam is the most applicable and acceptable system all over the world.

For Qutb, as mentioned earlier in previous chapters, materialistic systems are not certainly related to very nature of the Islamic communities, so there has to be a *manhaj* which betrays the method to be followed. From this point of view, Qutb's major project is an act of reviving Islam that is based on the sovereignty of Allah. Qutb strongly claims that political system has to be regulated in accordance with the *Sharia*. This Sharia will abolish the slavery one men over another. Indeed, Sayyid Qutb here calls Muslim communities for an *action*, which is the most significant mobilizing force, in order to establish the Islamic system that is the truest system all over the world.

Sayyid Qutb aims to achieve harmony between heaven and earth and bring stability to the all human beings with establishing the truest system, Islam. In his works, he uses a comparative method to demonstrate that Islam is the most coherent and comprehensive system which works the benefit of humankind. Having argued this, he certainly fights against the modern form of jahiliyya systems. Furthermore this modern jahiliyya system is worse than the previous one, because the previous one is more likely a simple ignorance, while the modern one is based on more conscious denial. Consequently, he finds nor capitalism or socialism acceptable.

In conclusion, the idea of Islam, which rejects the all form of jahiliyya systems, is at the heart of the political thought of Sayyid Qutb. Islam, as a system, has to cover every part of the life, thus human beings can live in a more equitable and just-world.

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