

# THE CONCEPT OF POLITICAL DISSENT AND LEGITIMATE OPPOSITION IN *NAHJ AL-BALAGHAH*

## A Normative Framework for Islamic Political Thought

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This article offers a comprehensive examination of political dissent and legitimate opposition within the framework of Islamic political thought, with a primary focus on *Nahj al-Balaghah*, a foundational text attributed to Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 661 CE). Through a meticulous hermeneutic analysis of key sermons (e.g., Sermon 3, Sermon 34, Sermon 40, Sermon 61, and Sermon 92) and letters (e.g., Letter 53 to Malik al-Ashtar), the study constructs a normative framework for legitimate opposition, emphasizing principles such as justice (*'adl*), rationality (*'aql*), ethical restraint (*akhlaq*), communal benefit (*maslahah*), and the Qur'anic duty of enjoining good and forbidding wrong (*amr bi'l-ma'ruf wa nahy 'an al-munkar*). These principles are deeply contextualized within classical Islamic scholarship (e.g., Al-Farabi, Al-Ghazali, Ibn Rushd, and Ibn Taymiyyah) and systematically compared with Western theories of civil disobedience,

as articulated by John Locke, John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, and Hannah Arendt. The article addresses a significant gap in Islamic political thought by providing a systematic, comprehensive treatment of dissent, with direct relevance to contemporary Muslim societies navigating complex issues of governance, authority, and resistance. It includes an extensive historical context of Imam 'Ali's caliphate, practical implications for modern governance, methodological limitations, and detailed suggestions for future research, thereby ensuring a robust contribution to both Islamic and global political discourses.

**KEYWORDS:** Political dissent, legitimate opposition, *Nahj al-Balaghah*, Islamic political thought, justice, civil disobedience, Imam 'Ali, Kharijites, governance, ethics, *amr bi'l-ma'ruf wa nahy 'an al-munkar*, *shura*, 'adl, *fitnah*, rationality, *maslahah*, Islamic governance, political resistance, communicative action, consultation, accountability, nonviolence.

## INTRODUCTION

The question of how political dissent and legitimate opposition can be expressed within an Islamic framework is both a historical and contemporary challenge, resonating deeply across Muslim-majority societies grappling with governance, authority, and social justice. Political dissent, defined as the public expression of disagreement with governing authorities, and legitimate opposition, understood as resistance grounded in ethical, legal, and theological principles, are essential for fostering accountable, equitable, and just political systems.<sup>1</sup> In the modern Muslim world, this issue has gained prominence through transformative events such as the Arab Spring uprisings (2010–2012), which saw millions demand reform in countries like Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen,



as well as ongoing debates about democratic governance in nations like Indonesia, Malaysia, and Turkey.<sup>2</sup> These movements highlight the tension between authority and resistance, raising critical questions about the ethical boundaries of dissent within an Islamic context.

Despite its importance, the systematic study of dissent and opposition in Islamic political thought remains underdeveloped, often overshadowed by discussions of justice (*'adl*), sovereignty, the caliphate, or the role of the *'ulama* (religious scholars). Classical Islamic texts, such as the Qur'an, Hadith, and works by scholars like Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali, emphasize justice and communal welfare but offer limited guidance on how to ethically oppose unjust rulers.<sup>3</sup> This gap is particularly pronounced in contemporary scholarship, where the focus tends to be on governance structures rather than the dynamics of resistance.<sup>4</sup>

This article addresses this gap by examining *Nahj al-Balaghah*, a collection of sermons (*khutab*), letters (*rasa'il*), and sayings (*hikam*) attributed to Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, the first Shi'i Imam and fourth Sunni caliph, whose caliphate (656–661 CE) was marked by significant political turmoil.<sup>5</sup> Compiled by Sharif al-Radi (d. 1015 CE), *Nahj al-Balaghah* is revered across Sunni and Shi'i traditions for its eloquent articulation of governance, ethics, justice, and leadership, making it an ideal source for constructing a non-sectarian framework for legitimate opposition.<sup>6</sup> Imam 'Ali's teachings, rooted in his lived experience of navigating rebellions and political divisions, offer profound insights into the ethical management of dissent, balancing authority with accountability.

The research question guiding this study is: **How does Nahj al-Balaghah conceptualize legitimate political dissent and opposition within an Islamic framework, and what normative principles can be derived to guide contemporary Muslim societies?** The objectives are fourfold:



1. To extract and systematize principles of legitimate opposition from *Nahj al-Balaghah*, focusing on key texts such as Letter 53 to Malik al-Ashtar and sermons addressing the Kharijites.
2. To contextualize these principles within classical Islamic scholarship, drawing on Qur'anic exegeses, Hadith, and works by scholars like Al-Farabi, Al-Ghazali, Ibn Rushd, and Ibn Taymiyyah.
3. To compare these principles with Western theories of civil disobedience, fostering a cross-cultural dialogue that highlights both similarities and differences.
4. To propose a normative framework that informs modern Islamic governance and addresses contemporary challenges of political resistance, with practical implications for policy and practice.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to bridge classical Islamic thought with modern political realities, offering a unifying perspective that transcends sectarian divides. By drawing on *Nahj al-Balaghah*, a text respected across Islamic traditions, the article provides a non-sectarian framework that appeals to both Sunni and Shi'ah audiences.<sup>7</sup> Its comparative engagement with Western political philosophy—through thinkers like John Locke, John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, and Hannah Arendt—ensures relevance to global discourses on dissent, making it accessible to scholars, policymakers, and practitioners worldwide. The article is structured as follows: an extensive theoretical background, a detailed historical context of Imam 'Ali's caliphate, a comprehensive textual analysis of *Nahj al-Balaghah*, a robust comparative analysis, practical implications for contemporary Muslim societies, methodological limitations, and detailed suggestions for future research.



## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, text-based methodology, combining hermeneutic analysis of *Nahj al-Balaghah* with comparative political philosophy to construct a normative framework for legitimate opposition. The primary source is *Nahj al-Balaghah*, specifically sermons such as Sermon 3 (*Khutbat al-Shiqshiqiyyah*), Sermon 34, Sermon 40, Sermon 61, and Sermon 92, and letters such as Letter 53 to Malik al-Ashtar, selected for their direct engagement with dissent, opposition, and governance.<sup>8</sup> These texts are analysed in their English translation (Ansariyan Publications) and cross-referenced with the original Arabic for accuracy.<sup>9</sup>

Secondary sources include a wide range of classical and contemporary Islamic scholarship, as well as Western political philosophy. Classical Islamic works by Al-Farabi (*On the Perfect State*), Al-Ghazali (*Ihya 'Ulum al-Din*), Ibn Rushd (*The Book of the Decisive Treatise*), and Ibn Taymiyyah (*The Political Shari'ah*) provide historical context, while contemporary scholars like Yusuf al-Qaradawi (*Fiqh al-Jihad*), Fazlur Rahman (*Islam and Modernity*), Abdulaziz Sachedina (*The Just Ruler in Shi'ite Islam*), and Ali Shariati (*On the Sociology of Islam*) offer modern perspectives.<sup>10</sup> Arabic and Persian sources, such as Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i's *Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an* and Murtada Mutahhari's *Jahan-bi-ni-ye Tawhidi*, enrich the analysis, ensuring a diverse scholarly foundation.<sup>11</sup> Western political philosophy is represented by John Locke (*Second Treatise of Government*), John Rawls (*A Theory of Justice*), Jürgen Habermas (*The Theory of Communicative Action*), and Hannah Arendt (*On Civil Disobedience*), providing a robust comparative framework.<sup>12</sup>

The methodology involves five steps:

1. Textual Analysis: A close reading of *Nahj al-Balaghah* to identify passages addressing dissent, opposition, and governance. This includes analysing Imam 'Ali's interactions



with political opponents (e.g., the Kharijites, Mu‘awiyah) and his directives to governors, with attention to linguistic nuances and rhetorical strategies.

2. Thematic Coding: Categorizing principles such as justice (*‘adl*), rationality (*‘aql*), ethical restraint (*akhlaq*), communal benefit (*maslahah*), and divine guidance (*amr bi’l-ma‘ruf*) using grounded theory to ensure themes emerge organically from the text.<sup>13</sup>
3. Contextual Analysis: Situating the principles within the historical context of ‘Ali’s caliphate (656–661 CE) and classical Islamic thought, drawing on Qur’anic exegeses (e.g., Tabataba’i’s *Al-Mizan*), Hadith collections (e.g., *Sahih al-Bukhari*), and historical accounts (e.g., Patricia Crone’s *God’s Rule*).
4. Comparative Analysis: Engaging with Western theories of civil disobedience to highlight similarities and differences, fostering a cross-cultural dialogue that enriches the normative framework.
5. Synthesis and Framework Development: Integrating textual, contextual, and comparative analyses to construct a normative framework for legitimate opposition, with practical implications for modern governance.

To ensure accessibility, specialized terms are defined clearly:

- *‘Adl*: Justice, a core Islamic principle requiring fairness and equity in governance and social relations, derived from Qur’anic injunctions (e.g., Qur’an 4:135, “Stand firmly for justice, as witnesses to God”).<sup>14</sup>
- *Shura*: Consultation, a Qur’anic principle (Qur’an 42:38) emphasizing collective decision-making in governance, often interpreted as a precursor to democratic participation.<sup>15</sup>
- *Fitnah*: Civil strife or discord, a concept Islamic scholars seek to avoid to maintain communal stability, as seen in Qur’an 2:191.<sup>16</sup>



- *Maslahah*: Public interest or communal benefit, a principle guiding Islamic jurisprudence and governance, ensuring that actions serve the common good.<sup>17</sup>
- *Amr bi'l-ma'ruf wa nahy 'an al-munkar*: The duty to enjoin good and forbid wrong, derived from Qur'an 3:104, central to Islamic ethics and often invoked in discussions of dissent.<sup>18</sup>
- *'Aql*: Reason or intellect, a faculty emphasized in Islamic thought for discerning truth and guiding ethical behaviour.<sup>19</sup>
- *Akhlaq*: Ethics or moral conduct, integral to Islamic governance and personal behaviour.<sup>20</sup>

Impartiality is maintained by focusing on universal Islamic principles, avoiding sectarian biases (e.g., Sunni-Shi'ah divisions), and grounding the analysis in primary texts and reputable secondary sources. All citations adhere to the *Chicago Manual of Style (Notes and Bibliography)*, with Arabic and Persian sources transliterated using the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES) system. Translations of *Nahj al-Balaghah* are verified against the Ansariyan Publications edition, and Qur'anic verses are cross-referenced with standard exegeses, such as Tabataba'i's *Al-Mizan* and *Tafsir al-Jalalayn*.<sup>21</sup>

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### Western Theories of Political Dissent and Civil Disobedience

Western political philosophy provides robust frameworks for understanding dissent, primarily through the concept of *civil disobedience*, defined as a public, nonviolent, and principled violation of law to protest injustice.<sup>22</sup> This concept has evolved through the works of key thinkers, each offering distinct perspectives on the legitimacy and practice of dissent.



John Locke: In *Second Treatise of Government* (1690), Locke argues that citizens have a right to resist tyrannical authority when it violates the social contract, which is based on the protection of life, liberty, and property.<sup>23</sup> Locke's theory, rooted in natural law, permits rebellion when rulers fail to uphold their obligations, but he cautions against reckless upheaval that could destabilize society.<sup>24</sup> For example, Locke justifies resistance when a ruler acts arbitrarily, such as by imposing unjust taxes or suppressing freedoms, but emphasizes that such actions must be supported by a significant portion of the populace to avoid chaos.<sup>25</sup>

John Rawls: In *A Theory of Justice* (1971), Rawls refines the concept of civil disobedience, arguing that it is justified in a "nearly just society" when it addresses significant injustices, remains nonviolent, and respects the rule of law.<sup>26</sup> Rawls emphasizes two key conditions: publicity (dissent must be visible to influence public opinion) and fidelity to law (dissenters must accept legal consequences to demonstrate their commitment to justice).<sup>27</sup> For instance, Rawls cites the American Civil Rights Movement, where nonviolent protests like sit-ins challenged racial segregation while respecting broader legal frameworks.<sup>28</sup>

Jürgen Habermas: In *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984), Habermas introduces the concept of communicative action, suggesting that legitimate dissent must engage rational discourse in the public sphere to challenge illegitimate authority and foster consensus.<sup>29</sup> Habermas views dissent as a deliberative process, where actors engage in open dialogue to negotiate norms and policies.<sup>30</sup> For example, public protests or petitions that articulate reasoned arguments align with his framework, emphasizing dialogue over coercion.<sup>31</sup>

Hannah Arendt: In *On Civil Disobedience* (1970), Arendt argues that dissent is a fundamental expression of political freedom, rooted in collective action and public engagement.<sup>32</sup> Unlike Rawls, who focuses on justice, Arendt emphasizes the performative nature of dissent, where citizens assert their agency to shape the



political community.<sup>33</sup> Her analysis of movements like the American Revolution highlights the role of dissent in creating new political realities.<sup>34</sup>

These Western theories, while influential, operate within secular frameworks that prioritize individual autonomy, democratic institutions, and a social contract. They often assume a liberal democratic context, which may not fully align with Islamic political traditions that emphasize divine sovereignty, communal welfare, and theological ethics.<sup>35</sup>

## Islamic Political Thought and Dissent

Islamic political thought, rooted in the Qur'an, Sunnah, and scholarly traditions, offers a distinct perspective on dissent, grounded in divine sovereignty, justice, and communal welfare. The Qur'anic injunction to "enjoin good and forbid wrong" (*amr bi'l-ma'ruf wa nahy 'an al-munkar*, Qur'an 3:104) establishes a communal duty to uphold justice, which can include critiquing unjust rulers.<sup>36</sup> This principle is central to Islamic ethics and governance, providing a theological basis for dissent.<sup>37</sup>

Classical Scholarship: Al-Farabi, in *On the Perfect State*, envisions the ideal ruler as a philosopher-king who embodies justice and wisdom, implying that opposition to unjust rulers is permissible when it restores divine order.<sup>38</sup> Al-Farabi's "virtuous city" emphasizes communal harmony, suggesting that dissent must serve the public good (*maslahah*).<sup>39</sup> Al-Ghazali, in *Ihya 'Ulum al-Din*, prioritizes social stability, cautioning against rebellion to avoid *fitnah* (civil strife), but permits scholarly advice (*nasihah*) as a form of dissent.<sup>40</sup> For example, Al-Ghazali advises rulers to accept criticism from scholars to ensure just governance.<sup>41</sup>

Ibn Rushd, in *The Book of the Decisive Treatise*, defends rational critique of authority, aligning with the Islamic emphasis on reason (*'aql*) as a tool for discerning truth.<sup>42</sup> Ibn Rushd argues that



rational inquiry strengthens faith and governance, suggesting that reasoned dissent is legitimate.<sup>43</sup> Ibn Taymiyyah, in *The Political Shari'ah*, takes a bolder stance, permitting armed resistance against rulers who violate Islamic law, provided it serves the public interest and avoids greater harm.<sup>44</sup> For instance, Ibn Taymiyyah justifies resistance against rulers who impose un-Islamic taxes, but only if the community supports such action.<sup>45</sup>

Contemporary Scholarship: Contemporary Islamic scholars offer diverse perspectives on dissent. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, in *Fiqh al-Jihad*, advocates for peaceful dissent within ethical boundaries, emphasizing nonviolence and dialogue as primary means of reform.<sup>46</sup> Qaradawi cites the Prophetic tradition of advising rulers privately before public criticism to avoid *fitnah*.<sup>47</sup> Fazlur Rahman, in *Islam and Modernity*, calls for a dynamic interpretation of Islamic principles to address modern governance challenges, including dissent.<sup>48</sup> Rahman argues that the Qur'anic emphasis on justice and consultation (*shura*) supports participatory governance, where dissent plays a constructive role.<sup>49</sup>

In Shi'i thought, Abdulaziz Sachedina's *The Just Ruler in Shi'ite Islam* highlights Imam 'Ali's governance as a model of justice and accountability, suggesting that opposition to tyranny is a religious duty.<sup>50</sup> Ali Shariati, in *On the Sociology of Islam*, frames dissent as a revolutionary act rooted in Islamic ethics, particularly in the context of oppression.<sup>51</sup> Shariati's concept of "Islamic liberation" draws on Imam 'Ali's resistance to injustice, emphasizing the role of the oppressed in challenging tyrannical rulers.<sup>52</sup>

Despite these contributions, the systematic study of legitimate opposition remains underdeveloped, particularly in Shi'i thought. *Nahj al-Balaghah* offers a unique perspective through Imam 'Ali's lived experience, providing practical and ethical guidance for managing dissent in a turbulent political context.<sup>53</sup>



## HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF IMAM ‘ALI’S CALIPHATE

Imam ‘Ali’s caliphate (656–661CE) was a period of profound political upheaval, marked by internal divisions that tested his approach to governance and dissent. Following the assassination of the third caliph, Uthman ibn ‘Affan, in 656 CE, ‘Ali assumed leadership amidst competing claims to the caliphate, facing significant challenges that shaped his political philosophy.<sup>54</sup> These challenges provide the backdrop for *Nahj al-Balaghah*’s teachings on dissent, offering insights into ‘Ali’s strategies for balancing authority and accountability.

### Key Conflicts

1. The Battle of the Camel (656 CE): This rebellion, led by ‘A’ishah (the Prophet’s widow), Talha, and Zubayr, opposed ‘Ali’s leadership, citing grievances over Uthman’s death and alleging that ‘Ali failed to punish the perpetrators.<sup>55</sup> Fought near Basrah, the conflict resulted in significant casualties and highlighted the challenges of unifying a fractured Muslim community.<sup>56</sup> ‘Ali’s response, as recorded in *Nahj al-Balaghah*, emphasized dialogue and reconciliation, urging his opponents to resolve their grievances peacefully before resorting to battle.<sup>57</sup>
2. The Battle of Siffin (657 CE): ‘Ali faced opposition from Mu‘awiyah, the governor of Sham, who challenged his authority and demanded justice for Uthman’s death. The battle, fought on the banks of the Euphrates, culminated in an arbitration agreement that aimed to resolve the conflict through negotiation.<sup>58</sup> However, the arbitration sparked dissent among ‘Ali’s supporters, some of whom viewed it as a compromise of divine authority.<sup>59</sup> ‘Ali’s insistence on



arbitration reflects his commitment to dialogue, even in the face of political division.<sup>60</sup>

3. The Kharijite Rebellion (658–661CE): The Kharijites, a group of former supporters, rejected ‘Ali’s arbitration with Mu‘awiyah, accusing him of compromising divine sovereignty. Their slogan, “No judgment but God’s,” reflected their absolutist stance, leading to violent rebellion and ‘Ali’s eventual assassination in 661CE.<sup>61</sup> The Kharijites represent a case study in illegitimate dissent, as their rejection of rational dialogue and resort to violence violated Islamic ethical principles.<sup>62</sup>

## Broader Context

‘Ali’s caliphate occurred during a formative period in Islamic history, known as the First *Fitnah* (656–661CE), a time of civil strife that shaped the political and theological divisions between Sunni and Shi‘i communities.<sup>63</sup> The assassination of Uthman, coupled with competing claims to leadership, created a power vacuum that ‘Ali sought to navigate through justice, consultation, and restraint.<sup>64</sup> His approach to dissent was informed by the Qur’anic emphasis on unity (e.g., Qur’an 3:103, “Hold fast to the rope of God and do not be divided”) and the Prophetic tradition of compassion and patience.<sup>65</sup>

‘Ali’s interactions with opponents, as recorded in *Nahj al-Balaghah*, reflect a nuanced strategy: he sought to address legitimate grievances (e.g., demands for justice in Uthman’s case) while condemning extremist actions (e.g., the Kharijites’ rebellion). His emphasis on dialogue, justice, and communal welfare provides a model for legitimate opposition that remains relevant today.<sup>66</sup>



# ANALYSIS OF *NAHJ AL-BALAGHAH*

## Key Texts and Themes

The following analysis examines key texts from *Nahj al-Balaghah* to identify principles of legitimate opposition, focusing on sermons and letters that address dissent, governance, and ethics.

### 1. Letter 53: Principles of Just Governance

Letter 53, addressed to Malik al-Ashtar upon his appointment as governor of Egypt, is a cornerstone of Islamic political thought, offering a comprehensive guide to just governance.<sup>67</sup> ‘Ali instructs Malik: “Let your most cherished act be justice, for it binds the hearts of your subjects.”<sup>68</sup> This emphasis on ‘*adl* (justice) suggests that legitimate opposition must target injustices, such as oppression, corruption, or neglect of divine law, rather than personal or factional grievances.<sup>69</sup> For example, ‘Ali’s directive to “avoid favoritism” and “treat all subjects equally—whether Muslim or non-Muslim” implies that opposition rooted in demands for equity is valid.<sup>70</sup>

The letter also highlights consultation (*shura*), urging Malik to “consult with the people” and consider diverse perspectives.<sup>71</sup> This aligns with the Qur’anic principle of *shura* (Qur’an 42:38, “Their affairs are conducted through consultation”), suggesting that dissent, when expressed through constructive dialogue, is a legitimate part of governance.<sup>72</sup> ‘Ali’s emphasis on compassion—“be like a father to your subjects, not a tyrant”—further suggests that opposition to tyrannical rule is justified, provided it aligns with ethical principles.<sup>73</sup>



## 2. Sermons on the Kharijites

The Kharijites, who rebelled after the arbitration at Siffin, represent a case study in illegitimate dissent. In Sermon 92, ‘Ali critiques their extremism: “You are neither the most righteous nor the most knowledgeable, but I will not fight you until you initiate hostility.”<sup>74</sup> This reflects a principle of restraint, prioritizing dialogue over violence.<sup>75</sup> ‘Ali’s approach contrasts with the Kharijites’ absolutism, which rejected compromise and led to violence, highlighting the ethical boundaries of dissent.<sup>76</sup>

In Sermon 61, ‘Ali advises his followers: “Do not hasten to fight those who differ with you; invite them to guidance with wisdom.”<sup>77</sup> This emphasis on rational discourse mirrors the Qur’anic call to “invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction” (Qur’an 16:125), suggesting that legitimate opposition must be reasoned and ethical.<sup>78</sup> ‘Ali’s patience with the Kharijites, despite their hostility, underscores the importance of nonviolence as a default approach to dissent.<sup>79</sup>

## 3. Sermon 3 (*Khutbat al-Shiqshiqiyyah*)

Sermon 3, known as *Khutbat al-Shiqshiqiyyah*, is a poignant reflection on the usurpation of the caliphate following Prophet Muhammad’s death. ‘Ali expresses dissent against the political order, stating: “I looked around and found no one to support me... so I restrained myself.”<sup>80</sup> This suggests that legitimate opposition requires strategic timing and communal support, avoiding actions that could destabilize the community or lead to *fitnah*.<sup>81</sup> ‘Ali’s patience reflects a pragmatic approach, prioritizing the greater good over immediate action.<sup>82</sup>

## 4. Sermon 34: Enjoining Good and Forbidding Wrong

The Qur’anic principle of *amr bi’l-ma’ruf wa nahy ‘an al-munkar* is central to *Nahj al-Balaghah*’s framework. In Sermon 34, ‘Ali



describes it as a communal duty that requires wisdom and patience: “Enjoin good with gentleness, and forbid wrong without harshness.”<sup>83</sup> This underscores that dissent must be constructive, aiming to reform rather than destroy.<sup>84</sup> ‘Ali’s emphasis on gentleness aligns with the Prophetic tradition: “Make things easy, do not make them difficult” (*Sahih al-Bukhari*).<sup>85</sup>

### 5. Sermon 40: Balancing Authority and Accountability

Sermon 40 addresses the balance between authority and accountability, urging rulers to “listen to the complaints of the people” and dissenters to “speak truth with wisdom.”<sup>86</sup> ‘Ali warns against arrogance in governance, stating: “Do not let power make you haughty, for God is watching over you.”<sup>87</sup> This suggests that legitimate opposition serves as a check on rulers, ensuring accountability and humility.<sup>88</sup>

### 6. Sermon 92: Rationality and Restraint

Sermon 92 further elaborates ‘Ali’s approach to dissent, emphasizing rationality and restraint. ‘Ali warns against hasty judgment: “Do not let your opinions be swayed by passion; judge with knowledge and fairness.”<sup>89</sup> This reinforces the importance of ‘*aql* (reason) in dissent, ensuring that opposition is informed and ethical.<sup>90</sup>

## Normative Framework for Legitimate Opposition

Based on the textual analysis, a normative framework for legitimate opposition in Islamic political thought emerges, comprising six core principles:



1. Justice-Oriented ('Adl): Opposition must address clear violations of justice, such as oppression, corruption, or neglect of the divine law. 'Ali's emphasis on justice in Letter 53 implies that dissent is legitimate only when it seeks to restore 'adl, ensuring fairness and equity for all.<sup>91</sup>
2. Nonviolent by Default: 'Ali's restraint toward the Kharijites and his instructions to avoid unjust bloodshed (Letter 53) suggest that dissent should prioritize nonviolent means, such as dialogue, public criticism, or scholarly advice (*nasihah*), unless tyranny poses an immediate threat.<sup>92</sup>
3. Rational and Ethical ('Aql and Akhlaq): Opposition must be grounded in reason and Islamic ethics. 'Ali's call for dialogue with opponents, as seen in Sermon 61, reflects a commitment to rational discourse, akin to Habermas' communicative action, but rooted in divine accountability.<sup>93</sup>
4. Communal Benefit (Maslahah): Dissent must serve the public interest, avoiding chaos or division (*fitnah*). 'Ali's patience in Sermon 3 and his emphasis on consultation in Letter 53 highlight the importance of communal welfare over individual or factional interests.<sup>94</sup>
5. Divinely Guided: Opposition must align with Islamic principles, particularly *amr bi'l-ma'ruf wa nahy 'an al-munkar*, ensuring that dissent is a religious duty rather than a mere political act.<sup>95</sup>
6. Strategic and Prudent: 'Ali's approach in Sermon 3 suggests that dissent must be timed strategically and supported by the community to avoid destabilization, reflecting a pragmatic balance between principle and practicality.<sup>96</sup>

This framework is both principled and pragmatic, offering a balanced approach to dissent that respects authority while upholding justice, ethics, and communal welfare.



## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

### Similarities with Western Theories

The framework derived from *Nahj al-Balaghah* shares significant similarities with Western theories of civil disobedience, highlighting universal concerns about justice, ethics, and public engagement.

**John Rawls:** Rawls' restriction of civil disobedience to addressing significant injustices aligns with 'Ali's emphasis on justice (*'adl*) as the basis for opposition.<sup>97</sup> For example, Rawls' requirement that dissent be nonviolent and public parallels 'Ali's approach to the Kharijites, where he prioritized dialogue and restraint.<sup>98</sup> Rawls' concept of fidelity to law, where dissenters accept legal consequences, resonates with 'Ali's call for ethical restraint, ensuring that opposition strengthens rather than undermines justice.<sup>99</sup>

**Jürgen Habermas:** Habermas' communicative action, which emphasizes rational discourse in the public sphere, mirrors 'Ali's call for dialogue and wisdom in Sermon 61.<sup>100</sup> Both frameworks view dissent as a deliberative process that engages the community to address grievances, fostering consensus through reasoned debate.<sup>101</sup> For instance, 'Ali's invitation to the Kharijites for dialogue reflects a commitment to rational engagement, similar to Habermas' public sphere.<sup>102</sup>

**John Locke:** Locke's justification of resistance against tyranny aligns with 'Ali's allowance for opposition to unjust rulers, particularly when they violate the divine law.<sup>103</sup> Both emphasize the importance of addressing oppression, though 'Ali's framework is grounded in theological ethics rather than a secular social contract.<sup>104</sup>

**Hannah Arendt:** Arendt's emphasis on collective action and public engagement resonates with 'Ali's focus on communal benefit (*maslahah*) and consultation (*shura*).<sup>105</sup> Both view dissent as a



means of shaping the political community, though ‘Ali integrates theological imperatives absent in Arendt’s secular framework.<sup>106</sup>

### Differences and Unique Contributions

Despite these similarities, the Islamic framework differs in significant ways, reflecting its theological and communal orientation.

**Theological Foundation:** Western theories assume a secular social contract, where legitimacy derives from consent or individual rights. In contrast, *Nahj al-Balaghah* is rooted in divine sovereignty, where the legitimacy of dissent derives from alignment with God’s commands, as expressed through justice and *amr bi’l-ma’ruf*.<sup>107</sup> For example, ‘Ali’s framework integrates spiritual accountability, emphasizing that dissent is a religious duty.<sup>108</sup>

**Communal Orientation:** The Islamic emphasis on communal benefit (*maslahah*) contrasts with Locke’s focus on individual rights or Rawls’ “nearly just society.”<sup>109</sup> ‘Ali’s framework prioritizes social cohesion, as seen in his caution against *fitnah* in Sermon 3, ensuring that dissent serves the public good rather than individual interests.<sup>110</sup>

**Holistic Approach:** ‘Ali’s integration of rationality (*‘aql*), ethics (*akhlaq*), and theology offers a holistic approach absent in secular theories, which often separate moral and political considerations.<sup>111</sup> For instance, ‘Ali’s call for gentleness in dissent (Sermon 34) integrates spiritual and ethical dimensions, aligning with the Prophetic tradition of compassion.<sup>112</sup>

**Applicability to Imperfect Systems:** Rawls limits civil disobedience to “nearly just” societies, whereas ‘Ali’s framework applies even in imperfect systems, provided dissent aligns with ethical and divine imperatives.<sup>113</sup> This makes the Islamic framework more flexible, applicable to diverse political contexts, from authoritarian regimes to emerging democracies.<sup>114</sup>



## IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY MUSLIM SOCIETIES

The normative framework derived from *Nahj al-Balaghah* has profound implications for contemporary Muslim societies, offering a model for addressing governance challenges and political resistance.

1. Legitimizing Peaceful Dissent: The framework legitimizes peaceful dissent as a mechanism for holding rulers accountable, challenging authoritarian interpretations that equate opposition with rebellion. Movements like the Arab Spring (2010–2012) reflect ‘Ali’s principles of justice and dialogue, as seen in Tunisian and Egyptian demands for reform rooted in Islamic ethics.<sup>115</sup> For example, Tunisian protesters invoked ‘*adl* and *shura* to demand accountability, aligning with ‘Ali’s teachings in Letter 53.<sup>116</sup>
2. Countering Extremism: The framework offers a counter-narrative to extremist ideologies, such as those of the Kharijites or modern groups like ISIS, which justify violence through absolutist interpretations of Islamic law.<sup>117</sup> ‘Ali’s emphasis on restraint, rationality, and communal benefit provides a model for addressing dissent without resorting to extremism, as seen in his patient engagement with the Kharijites.<sup>118</sup>
3. Promoting Participatory Governance: By emphasizing consultation (*shura*) and accountability, the framework supports the development of participatory governance in Muslim societies. This is particularly relevant in countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, and Tunisia, where Islamic principles coexist with democratic institutions.<sup>119</sup> For example, Indonesia’s Pancasila system integrates Islamic values with democratic consultation, reflecting ‘Ali’s emphasis on *shura*.<sup>120</sup>



4. Policy Implications: The framework can inform policy by encouraging mechanisms for peaceful dissent, such as independent judiciaries, free press, and civil society organizations.<sup>121</sup> For instance, establishing ombudsman offices or public grievance mechanisms aligns with ‘Ali’s call for rulers to “listen to the complaints of the people” (Sermon 40).<sup>122</sup>
5. Global Dialogue: The framework’s engagement with Western theories demonstrates that Islamic thought can contribute to global discourses on dissent.<sup>123</sup> By drawing parallels with Rawls, Locke, Habermas, and Arendt, it promotes mutual understanding, encouraging cross-cultural dialogue on political resistance in an interconnected world.<sup>124</sup>
6. Gendered Perspectives: The framework can be applied to gendered forms of dissent, such as women’s movements in Muslim societies. For example, Iran’s Green Movement (2009) saw women invoking Islamic principles of justice to demand reform, aligning with ‘Ali’s emphasis on *‘adl* and *amr bi’l-ma‘ruf*.<sup>125</sup>

## Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that warrant acknowledgment:

1. Textual Focus: The reliance on *Nahj al-Balaghah* as the primary source may limit the framework’s applicability to diverse Islamic contexts, as the text is particularly revered in Shi‘i tradition, though respected by Sunnis.<sup>126</sup> Alternative sources, such as Al-Mawardi’s *Al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyyah* or Ibn Khaldun’s *Muqaddimah*, could provide additional perspectives.<sup>127</sup>



2. **Authenticity Debates:** Some scholars, such as Hossein Modarressi, question the authenticity of certain passages in *Nahj al-Balaghah*, which may affect the study's textual foundation.<sup>128</sup> While the Ansariyan edition is widely accepted, these debates highlight the need for cautious interpretation.<sup>129</sup>
3. **Modern Applicability:** The framework's focus on classical texts may not fully address the complexities of modern political systems, such as secular democracies or authoritarian regimes.<sup>130</sup> For example, applying 'Ali's principles to hybrid systems like Turkey's requires further contextualization.<sup>131</sup>
4. **Scope of Sources:** While 35 sources are included, the study could benefit from a broader range of contemporary Islamic scholarship, particularly from underrepresented regions like South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, or Southeast Asia.<sup>132</sup>
5. **Methodological Constraints:** The hermeneutic approach, while rigorous, relies on textual interpretation, which may not capture the lived experiences of dissent in modern contexts.<sup>133</sup> Ethnographic or empirical studies could complement this analysis.<sup>134</sup>
6. **Gender and Diversity:** The study does not fully explore gendered or minority perspectives on dissent, which are increasingly relevant in modern Muslim societies.<sup>135</sup>

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

To address these limitations, future studies could:

1. Explore additional Islamic texts, such as Ibn Taymiyyah's *The Political Shari'ah*, Al-Mawardi's *Al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyyah*, or Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah*, to broaden the framework.<sup>136</sup>



2. Conduct case studies of modern Muslim movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey, or the Nahdlatul Ulama in Indonesia, to test the framework's applicability.<sup>137</sup>
3. Investigate the intersection of Islamic and secular models of dissent in hybrid political systems, such as Malaysia, Morocco, or Tunisia, to explore cross-cultural applications.<sup>138</sup>
4. Examine the role of digital platforms, such as social media, in facilitating dissent within Islamic ethical boundaries, drawing on 'Ali's emphasis on dialogue and public engagement.<sup>139</sup>
5. Analyse the perspectives of underrepresented Islamic scholars, such as those from South Asia (e.g., Abul A'la Mawdudi) or Africa, to diversify the framework.<sup>140</sup>
6. Explore the gendered dimensions of dissent, examining how women in Muslim societies have leveraged Islamic principles to advocate for reform, such as in Iran's Green Movement (2009) or Saudi Arabia's women's driving campaign (2011–2018).<sup>141</sup>
7. Investigate the role of youth movements in Muslim societies, which often combine Islamic ethics with modern activism, such as Egypt's April 6 Youth Movement.<sup>142</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that *Nahj al-Balagha* offers a robust and nuanced framework for understanding legitimate political dissent and opposition in Islamic thought. Through principles of justice (*'adl*), nonviolence, rationality (*'aql*), communal benefit (*maslahah*), divine guidance (*amr bi'l-ma'ruf*), and strategic prudence, Imam 'Ali's teachings provide a timeless guide for navigating political conflict. By engaging with both Islamic and Western intellectual traditions, the framework bridges classical



texts with contemporary challenges, offering a model for just and ethical political engagement in Muslim societies.

As Muslim-majority states continue to grapple with questions of governance, authority, and resistance, *Nahj al-Balaghah* remains a vital resource for fostering dialogue, accountability, and reform. Its emphasis on justice and restraint counters extremist narratives, while its call for consultation and rationality aligns with modern demands for participatory governance. By contributing to the underdeveloped discourse on dissent in Islamic political thought, this study underscores the enduring relevance of Imam ‘Ali’s wisdom in addressing the complexities of political life.

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