

Categories of Obedience to the Leaders

Question: Is it compulsory to comply with everything that the leaders command or is it the case that some commands are obligation upon us and some merely recommended? How do we distinguish between them, may Allah reward you?

Answer: The commands from the leaders are of various categories:

The First Category is those commands that it’s not permissible to obey them in – that is, if a leader commands something of disobedience to Allah such as ordering one to shave his beard or commands other sinful acts. Regarding such things, there’s no obedience to him because Allah (ﷻ) says:

﴿ يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا أَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا الرَّسُولَ وَأُولِي الْأَمْرِ مِنْكُمْ ﴾

Oh you who believe, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you.

[Sūrah al-Nisā’, 4:59]

He connected the obedience to those in authority to the obedience of Allah and his Messenger without repeating the action (the verb: “obey”) again, indicating that the obedience to those in authority is conditional based upon the obedience to Allah and his messenger (صلى الله عليه وسلم). The prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) also said:

إِنَّمَا الطَّاعَةُ فِي الْمَعْرُوفِ

“Obedience is in that which is good.”¹

1 The full text and details of the ḥadīth are given in the following footnote, no. 32.

Meaning whatever does not contain anything of sins. The prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) once sent a man on an expedition and instructed the people with him to obey him. One day, they angered the man so he ordered them to gather wood and they did. He then ordered them to start a large fire and they did. He then commanded them to throw themselves in it. They refused saying, “We only followed the messenger (صلى الله عليه وسلم) out of fear of the fire!” When they returned to the prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم), they informed him of the incident to which he said:

إِنَّهُمْ لَوْ دَخَلُوهَا مَا خَرَجُوا مِنْهَا، إِنَّمَا الطَّاعَةُ فِي الْمَعْرُوفِ

“Indeed, had they entered it, they would never have come out from it. Obedience is only in that which is good.”²

That’s the first category.

The Second Category is when the leader commands whatever Allah commands or His Messenger of acts of worship. So if they are religious obligations such as instructing the people to observe congregational prayer, then obedience here is mandatory from two perspectives:

1. Such acts are obligations in the Islamic legislation even if the leader had not ordered it.
2. The obligation is reinforced even more when the leader also commands it.

The Third Category is when he orders the performance of acts of worship that are not obligations yet are still legislated. An example would be if he were to order the people to fast saying, “Oh people, fast tomorrow because we are going to all collectively pray to Allah for rain tomorrow and the supplication of the fasting person is accepted, so fast tomorrow.” In this case, obedience to him is not explicitly compulsory because this is an

2 Recorded by al-Bukhārī (no. 4085) and Muslim (no. 1840).

act of worship between the individual servant and his Lord, so obedience is not a direct obligation.

The Fourth Category is when the leader commands that which helps to preserve public safety and security and the general well-being of the society. In this case, obedience to him is an obligation even if Allah and His Messenger did not explicitly order it, and as long as it contains nothing of sin. An example is the laws prevalent now which have been accepted; they do not contradict Islam at all. It's required to obey the leader regarding such laws, and whoever breaks these laws and opposes them, he's a sinner. This is what comes to mind right now of the categories of obedience to the leaders.

There is an issue now: some people, out of their pride and honor for the religion of Allah (ﷻ), if they see crimes and evil deeds among the people which may be circulated in the newspapers, radio stations, or seen on some satellite channels, they begin attacking and accusing the government of falling short and being responsible for these things. They go and publicize the faults of the government among the people, inciting the hearts against the leadership. In turn, this causes the people to begin hating the authorities over them. This is actually a very serious mistake contradictory to Islamic legislation, dangerous to the society, and a cause for future trials and tribulations. If such people would only rush to advise and correct the society starting with themselves, it would have been better for them. For example, those things circulated by the various means of communication, whether written, heard, or seen – these people should rather warn others from those specific issues (instead of warning against the government). For example, they could warn against certain magazines, against watching certain shows which are harmful to one's religion and life. They could warn people from dealing with usury, for example. If the whole society begins to rectify and improve itself, the leader, as part of this society, would likewise improve whether he's aware of it or not.

As for those who pour out their so-called pride and honor for Islam upon the leaders in order to incite the people's hearts against them, this results only in evil and corruption and is without doubt a wrong approach. You all know the great afflictions that occurred during the time of 'Alī (ﷺ). Rather, it even began earlier during the time of 'Uthmān (ﷺ)

which resulted in major calamities and people began declaring lawful the taking of other people's blood and wealth. For these reasons, we hold this approach for reform (opposing and criticizing the leadership) to be incorrect and forbidden by Islam. If a person really had true pride and honor (for this religion), then he would direct others to that which is good. But amazingly, you find some people complaining and accusing the leaders, while there're people in his society making Shirk, worshipping others besides Allah (ﷻ). Yet about this he doesn't say a word. Shirk is much greater than whatever sins committed by the leaders. Or he may come and try to twist the meanings of some verses of the Quran to be in accordance with his desires. So for example, he quotes the verse:

﴿ وَمَنْ لَمْ يَحْكَمْ بِمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ فَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْكَافِرُونَ ﴾

And whoever does not rule by that which Allah has revealed – those, they are the disbelievers.

[Sūrah al-Mā'idah, 5:44]

He then says that based upon this, every law and statute that opposes Islamic legislation is disbelief! This is also very wrong. Even if we were to assume the extreme – that a leader is a disbeliever, does this then mean we can incite the people to oppose him, even if it causes revolt, chaos, and killing? This is definitely wrong. The kind of rectification and improvement desired will never come by this approach. Rather, the only thing it will bring is great corruption because if, for example, a group of people rise up in opposition to the leaders of some country and those leaders have strength and authority that the opposing insurgents do not have, what will happen? Will this insignificant minority prevail? It will not. On the contrary, the opposite will happen. Evil and anarchy will result and the public affairs will be in complete disorder. It is essential that an individual looks first from the Islamic legislative point of view and not just blindly look at the texts (of the Quran or sunnah) from a single perspective. We should consider all the texts together.

A person should also look at the situation with the eye of intellect and wisdom. What will come about from this thing? So, we believe these ways of rectification (criticizing the leaders, rebellion, etc.) to be wrong and very dangerous. It is not permissible for anyone to support or assist someone in such things. One must instead clearly reject these

methods. We don't speak directly against the government, but we speak in general terms.

With regards to this government (of Saudi Arabia), thanks to Allah, this is a country ruled according to the Islamic legislation. The judges do not pass rulings except based upon Islamic legislation. Nation-wide fasting is established, the pilgrimage is established, religious lessons are given in the mosques. As for whatever crimes or problems occur, then we must prevent the further evil and its causes. And if we look at our country, thanks to Allah, we don't see things like tombs and monuments being built over graves, religious rites being performed at gravesites, or other heretical Sufi innovations. Sure, some individuals may practice some aspects of Sufism and similar things, but they aren't public and apparent. Every society has problems, but if we compare this kingdom to other countries close to it, we see a big difference. In other countries, alcohol is publicly served and sold in the grocery stores, restaurants remain open during the days of Ramaḍān, people eating and drinking as they like. You even find prostitutes out in the open. Some people told me that when tourists visit certain countries, as soon as they leave the airport, they are confronted with young girls and even boys – we seek refuge with Allah from this. They are asked, "What would you prefer, a young boy or girl?" This is open in public! How far Allah is above deficiencies.

So the individual must look at the reality of his government and country and not go around publicizing and spreading the faults of his rulers, whether they are excused due to some reasons or not. These people are often blind to the overall well-being and benefit of the nation. Such a government may have something of good within it. Overlooking this and focusing on its faults is not justice and Allah (ﷻ) says:

﴿ يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُونُوا قَوَّامِينَ لِلَّهِ شُهَدَاءَ بِالْقِسْطِ وَلَا يَجْرِمَنَّكُمْ شَنَاٰنُ قَوْمٍ عَلَىٰ أَلَّا تَعْدِلُوا اعْدِلُوا هُوَ أَقْرَبُ لِلتَّقْوَىٰ ﴾

Oh you who believe, stand up firmly for Allah and be just witnesses and don't let the enmity and hatred for others cause you not to do justice. Be just, that is closer to righteousness.

[Sūrah al-Mā'idah, 5:8]³

³ Taken from the cassette, Aḥdāf al-Ḥamalāt al-'Ilāmiyyah ʔid Wulāh wa 'Ulamā' Bilād al-Ḥaramayn. See also the book: Naẓarāt Taṣṭīyyah by Doctor Sulaymān Ibn 'Abd Allah Abū al-Khayl, the vice president of Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University (pg. 473).