

**A Review of Parliamentary Privilege  
with an Approach to Iranian Legal System**

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**Abstract**

The necessity of immunity of parliament and its Members has led to a determination and assurance of particular privilege in the Constitutions or ordinary laws in the great majority of countries. This legal institution serves to provide freedom of speech and to maintain the independence of representatives in the exercise of their duties without undue interference or fear.

To define and justify the necessity of it, different theories like "the prestige of representatives' legal personality" and "doctrine of necessity" have been introduced.

The legal supports which observe the parliamentary privilege can be generally studied in two categories with distinct descriptions and effects: first, demonstration of the benefits and utilization of privilege by the representatives before their statements, opinions and the votes cast in the exercise of their functions, which is idiomatically "the principle of non - liability". Second, it supports the Members of Parliament (MPs) before legal prosecution, arrest, imprisonment and the rest judicial measures, unless by the permission and allowance of the respective Parliament, because of irrelevant exercises and extralegal parliamentary acts and prevents the possibility of immediate prosecution of MPs because of the attributed crimes. This kind of immunity, which practically is the logical trailer of the non - liability principle of

representatives before their parliamentary duties, is named "the principle of inviolability".

The stand of every country in relation to the various forms of parliamentary privilege is a little bit different. In certain countries, one of these two forms is accepted, and in other countries both of them are accepted to guarantee the whole immunity of MPs. The first approach is called solo and the second one is called integrative, respectively. In Iran, the first approach depended on the non-liability of representatives because of their statements, has been accepted in Article 86 of Constitution. The accuracy of this acceptance from the dynamic Fiqh's (Jurisprudence) point of view is approvable and the expediencies and accidental necessities require going along with the rest of countries, which accepted the principle of parliamentary privilege.

**Keywords:** Parliamentary Privilege, Constitutions and Ordinary Laws, Representatives' Prestige of Legal Personality, Doctrine of Necessity, Principle of Non - liability and Principle of Inviolability.

### **1. Definition and theoretical bases of parliamentary privilege**

The privilege of Parliament is immunity conferred in order to ensure that the duties of Members as representatives of their constituents may be carried out without any fear of intimidation or punishment, and without improper impediment.

The term "privilege", in relation to parliamentary privilege, refers to immunity from the ordinary law, which is recognized by the law as the right of Parliament and its Members. This privilege, in fact, is to a certain extent an exemption from general law.

However, without parliamentary privileges MPs could not discharge their function, efficiently and effectively. These privileges developed to allow Parliament to proceed with the business of making legislation and reviewing the activities of the Executive

without undue interference [1; pp.123 -124]. Parliamentary privileges have the effect of ensuring that Members, witnesses and others cannot be sued or prosecuted for anything they say or do in course of parliamentary proceedings. Further, Members of Parliament are supported before legal prosecution, arrest, imprisonment and other judicial measures, except by the permission and allowance of the respective Parliament, because of extralegal parliamentary acts thereby preventing the possibility of immediate prosecution of them.

Generally, a definition of parliamentary privileges is grounded in the doctrine of necessity. The content and extent of these privileges have evolved with reference to their necessity. The privileges of Parliament include those rights, which are absolutely necessary for the execution of its power.

It is important to bear in mind that the purpose of parliamentary privilege is to secure the proper dignity, efficiency and independence of the legislature and not to protect individuals from due process. This legal institution is not a personal immunity; it is an occupational immunity, which is provided to ensure that the duties of representatives may carry out perfectly. This immunity is not meant to place a Member of Parliament above the law, but to protect him from possible groundless proceedings or accusations that may be politically motivated; thus it is not a discriminatory institution.

It is a noteworthy point that in the course of codifying the Constitution of Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, some of those who were present emphasized "the principle of parliamentary privilege is for the position and duty, not for the person" [2; p. 933].

Another theoretical basis to justify parliamentary privilege is a definite and unquestionable rule in jurisprudence necessary to override other important interests. The free expression of opinion and facts in Parliament is so important to our democratic way of life that this freedom (protected by absolute privilege) overrides any private right or interest of the person who might be defamed [3; p. 241]. In other words, the privilege protects statements made in circumstances where the public

interest in securing a free expression of fact or opinion outweighs the private interest of the person about whom the statements are made [4; p. 526].

But in Iran the opponents, especially the jurists of Guardian Council, have not accepted these theoretical foundations. This institution, with regard to its great authorities and rights, is the greatest opponent of parliamentary privilege in Iran. It must be noted that under Art. 4 of Constitution of Islamic Republic of Iran "all civil, penal, financial, economic, administrative, military and political laws, etc. shall be based on the Islamic standards. This article and also other laws and regulations and this shall be at the discretion of the jurists of Guardian Council"[5]. The jurists argue, for example, parliamentary privilege has no Islamic origin, and all are equal in the eyes of law and shari'a [6; pp. 307-308]. Moreover, the Iranian courts in their votes usually heed the views of Guardian Council. The Administration of Justice in Tehran, for example, in an announcement in 2001, stated that the representatives of Islamic Consultative Assembly have no absolute privilege of freedom of speech, and they are equal with others in the eyes of law [7]. Thus, we see Members of Assembly may be convicted by court because of their speeches.

Albeit, the pursuit of justice and equality is an idea rooted in the conscience of the Islamic community from the beginning. It is ordained in the Qur'an and the tradition of the Prophet. God says: "oh. Mankind! Lo, we have created you male and female and have made you nations and tribes that you may know one another. Lo, the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the best in conduct".<sup>1</sup> This approach is reflected explicitly in Islamic Republic of Iran's constitution (Art. 19).

The tradition of the Prophet is equally insistent upon justice and equality. The Prophet says: "men are equal as the teeth of a comb [8; p. 579].

It seems, however, that the opponents of parliamentary privilege only rely on pure justice. Mathematically and by virtue of special evidences they try to justify their

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1. Surat al- Hujurat; Verse: 13.

viewpoint, yet pure justice is sometimes not only value but also injustice. Incidentally, God in the Qur'an has emphasized that savants and ignorant persons are not alike.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the privilege of representatives is an explicit privilege and in democratic systems, such as Iran, people themselves have accepted it.

## **2. Legal basis of parliamentary privilege**

In the great majority of countries, parliamentary privilege is guaranteed by the Constitution. In Iran, Art. 86 of Constitution provides: "the representatives of Majlis shall as such be free in expressing their views and giving votes and shall not be prosecuted nor arrested for their views as expressed in the Majlis or the votes given in the discharge of their duties as such". Also, Art. 84 of Constitution provides: "representatives shall be individually responsible before the people and shall have the right to express their views on all domestic and foreign issues of the country".

In New Zealand, the Russian Federation and Sri Lanka parliamentary privilege is established by another legal instrument. In Sri Lanka by *act of parliament*, in New Zealand by *statute law*, in the Russian Federation by a federal law on *the status of the Deputy of Council of Federation and the status of Deputy of the state Duma of the Federal Assembly of Russian Federation*.

In the United Kingdom and Canada, *freedom of speech* is not explicitly codified [9; p. 1].

## **3. The scope of parliamentary privilege**

Most national systems provide for dual protection of Members of Parliament:

- ***Non-liability or non-accountability*** for votes cast and opinions expressed in the performance of their duties, and;

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1. Surat al- Zomar; Verse: 9.

- ***Inviolability*** that supports the Members of Parliament before legal prosecution, arrest, imprisonment and other judicial measures because of irrelevant exercises and extralegal parliamentary acts, unless by the permission and allowance of respective Parliament. This form of immunity is such that, unless Parliament gives its authorization, no Member may be arrested or prosecuted for acts carried out in the performance of his duties.

Now, we study these principles in detail. The scope of non-liability normally covers protection against all kinds of public penalties for acts committed in the performance of Members' duties or, more colloquially, concerns Members' freedom of speech. In general, MPs are not liable in civil or criminal terms for the acts encompassed within this form of immunity [10]. The chief feature of parliamentary privilege is, in fact, freedom of speech [11; p. 116]. It allows Members of Parliament to debate any matter they wish, provides them with immunity from prosecution and protects them from actions in defamation for any comments which are made in the course of a "proceeding in Parliament" [12; p. 157].

The protection against public penalties afforded by non-liability does not, however, exclude Members from disciplinary liability within the scope of Parliament or, in principle, from the application of measures of political or partisan nature, which may go to the point of exclusion. With regard to acts covered by non-liability, included are votes and opinions expressed. The majority of Constitutional texts, such as the Constitution of Iran, make use of the concept of opinions expressed "in the exercise (discharge) of duties.

In most countries, non-liability is considered to belong to the public sphere, and a Member of Parliament cannot, therefore, relinquish it of his own free will. In the United

Kingdom, however, since the Defamation Act 1996 entered into force, members have been permitted to forgo their privilege in defamation trials [10].

In Iran, the principle of non-liability before statements or votes cast in the exercise of duties, despite the objections, has been expressed under Art. 86 of Constitution.

Another aspect of protection of Members of Parliament, as stated, is that the principle of inviolability varies according to the degree of protection afforded to Members; it may be the case, unless the Parliament concerned has given its prior authorization, that Members are protected only from arrest or from enforcement of particular measures such as searches or from summonses before a court or, more broadly still, from summonses before a court or, indeed, any form of criminal proceedings. Some legal systems exclude from the sphere of inviolability certain categories of offence considered more serious [10]. For example, Art.89 of the Portuguese Constitution, under certain conditions, excludes premeditated offences punishable by imprisonment of more than three years.

However, these parliamentary systems are unanimous in considering that, in the case of *flagrante delicto*, inviolability must be waived, at least partially. *Flagrante delicto* encompasses cases in which a person is encountered during or in direct connection with the commission of a punishable offence. For example, the Constitution of Belgium, Art. 45, provides: "no Member of either of the two Houses may, during the session, be prosecuted or arrested as a punishment save with the permission of the House to which he belongs, except in the case of *flagrante delicto*."

In Iran, in the course of final enactment of the new Constitution of November 15, 1979, which followed the victory of the Islamic Revolution on February 11, 1979, and was approved by referendum in December 1979, the principle of inviolability was not anticipated. The opponents of this principle rejected it during negotiations and codifying of Constitution.

However, before the Islamic Revolution and by the Constitution of the previous regime, the principle of inviolability had been accepted. Under Art. 12 of the previous Constitution: "no Member of the National Consultative Assembly shall be prosecuted in any manner whatsoever without the consent of the Assembly, unless he commits a misdemeanor or felony and is found in *flagrante delicto*. In the event of his arrest in this manner, however, the Assembly must be notified". Also, under Sec. 175 and 176 of the previous parliamentary law Act 1953, the necessity of notifying the Assembly had been expressed [13], whilst we don't see such a protective shield for Members of the Islamic Consultative Assembly now.

#### **4. Procedure**

The procedure for waiving parliamentary immunity is normally regulated by parliamentary rules of procedure, although, in some countries, such as Ireland and the United Kingdom, no procedure exists at all.

In most member states of the European Union, requests to waive immunity are drawn up by the prosecution services, but in some countries may be drawn up by other authorities

(the courts having jurisdiction, for example). Requests are sent to the speaker of the house concerned either directly or, in some cases, via another such as the minister of justice or prime minister. The request, once received, is forwarded to the competent committee. This may be specially formed to assess each specific case or a permanent committee. The latter is more common. The decision of the Chamber concerned is usually based on recommendations of the competent committee.

In the parliaments of some member states there are specific rules imposing certain limitations on the debates, specifically targeting house speakers, who are allowed to take part. In the Bundestag, the members under scrutiny cannot participate in the substantive debate. On the other hand, debates on questions of immunity take place "behind closed doors" in some parliaments (such as the Luxemburg Chamber of Deputies and the European Parliament). The decisions of the parliamentary assemblies on requests concerning the lifting of immunity are taken by secret ballot in Spain, Greece, Italy and Portugal.

One of the most important variations connected with the procedures for waiving parliamentary immunity stems from the fact that, in some systems, a time limit is established within which the chamber concerned must grant or refuse the authorization requested and determine the specific consequences arising from the non-observance of that time. The Greek Constitution, for example, states that, if the Chamber does not decide on the request for authorization within a period of three months, the request is considered rejected [10].

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, regrettably, such as the United Kingdom, no procedure exists at all, and a Member of the Islamic Consultative Assembly may be prosecuted, searched, arrested or placed on trial without the prior consent and authorization of the Assembly, whilst, as stated before, under Art. 12 of the previous Constitution there was specific procedure and rules for waiving parliamentary immunity.

### **5. Breach of parliamentary privilege**

When any of the rights and immunities, both of the Members, individually, and of the Assembly, in its collective capacity, which are known by general name of privilege, are disregarded or attacked by any individual or authority, the offence is called a breach of privilege, and is punishable under the law of Parliament. In most countries, the parliaments claim the right to punish actions as well, which, while not breaches of any specific privilege, are offences against its authority or dignity, such as disobedience to its legitimate commands or libels upon itself. Such actions, though called "breaches of privileges" are more properly distinguished as "contempt".

In Iran, there is no sanction before breach of parliamentary privilege.

### **Conclusion**

Parliamentary privilege is a concept recognized in the great majority of countries. This privilege has evolved over hundred of years and originates from the many battles which Parliament has fought in order to establish and secure its right to be free from interference.

It is widely understood that the principle of non-liability (the privilege of freedom of speech), which is confirmed by Art. 86 of Iran's Constitution, is enjoyed by Members of Islamic Consultative Assembly, one consequence being that that no civil or criminal proceedings may be instituted against a Member of the Assembly in respect of anything said or done by him. The word anything, in fact, is equivalent to everything. Thus, if a Member of the Assembly makes a statement, which is defamatory of a citizen, no action can be taken by a citizen for defamation against such Member. However, in some countries, such as Iran, the legislatures have considered a mechanism enabling people to seek some redress when their reputations have been damaged under the protective cloak of parliamentary privilege. Parliamentary law of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, for example, gives a right of reply to citizens whose reputations have been attacked under parliamentary privilege.

Additionally, it seems freedom of speech is not limited in location, being accorded both outside as well as inside the parliamentary estate. The privilege is, in this case, limited to the execution of the Members' parliamentary mandate more than to the location where the contested words were spoken. The adherents of absolute privilege in Iran are in favor of this point of view.

Finally, it must be said that in the Islamic Republic of Iran, as a democratic country, there is no perfect protective framework of parliamentary privilege for representatives. The status of parliamentary privilege in Iran after the Islamic Revolution in 1979, generally, in comparison with its status before the Revolution has been shaken;

whilst, as we know, parliamentary privilege is the backbone of parliamentary democracy, the sight of which must never be lost to preserve the sovereignty of the people.

Parliamentary privilege is not for gratifying the ego of the individual parliamentarian, but for enabling the Member to perform duties is manifestly beneficial to the public at large.

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