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### Islamic Political Thought: Relevance of Classical Ideals in Contemporary Governance

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#### ABSTRACT

*The paper, "Islamic Political Thought: Relevance of Classical Ideals in Contemporary Governance," explores the enduring influence of classical Islamic political theories in modern governance. It emphasizes the crucial role of historical Islamic principles in addressing current socio-political challenges. Key themes include the ethical frameworks of governance and the application of concepts like 'Maslaha' (public interest), emphasizing justice, accountability, and the common good as foundational for ethical governance. The paper also discusses the dynamic nature of Islamic political thought, characterized by its adaptability and relevance across different historical and contemporary contexts. It delves into the roles of key figures such as al-Farabi and Ibn Khaldun, highlighting their contributions to political thought and the concept of social cohesion and unity as essential for political power. Furthermore, the document critically analyzes how classical principles can inform current debates on governance, suggesting that insights from Islamic political thought can foster enhanced governance frameworks in Muslim societies. It calls for a nuanced appreciation of these ideals to navigate modern governance complexities effectively.*

**Keywords:** Islamic Political Thought, Classical Ideals, Contemporary Governance, Ethical Frameworks, Maslaha, Social Cohesion, Justice, Accountability

#### Introduction

Political principles serve as continuous companions that accompany the ongoing evolution of societies through history.

Understanding the guiding principles that were formulated in the past is essential, as they have had a lasting impact on societies across the globe. This relevance is not merely due to the possibility of fitting historical principles into contemporary contexts; rather, it is crucial for establishing a bridge that connects classical thoughts with pressing modern-day issues (Bhat et al.2023). If these bridges are not constructed thoughtfully, one risks abandoning the invaluable insights and wisdom found in classical theories or, alternatively, becoming irrelevant in the face of the complexities of the modern world we navigate today. In accordance with this perspective, and as a deliberate attempt to illuminate the practical dimensions of Islamic political theory, this paper will delve into the foundational principles upon which Islamic political thought has been established since its illustrious golden age. By questioning and critically analyzing these principles, political theorists can begin to assess the relevance and applicability of classical foundations when addressing the multifaceted issues that challenge contemporary society. This exploration may offer pathways to reconcile the wisdom of the past with the demands of the present (Alizadeh, 2024).

Most Muslim societies today are, unfortunately, characterized by widespread corruption, systemic oppression, ongoing conflicts, and a troubling overall disintegration. This disheartening reality illuminates an urgent and pressing need for these societies to effectively articulate and implement a comprehensive ethical framework that ensures good governance. Such a framework must be firmly founded on a broadly agreed-upon conception of the public interest, which serves as a guiding principle for decision-making and policy formulation (Ali et al.2024). This paper aims to demonstrate that the rich Islamic tradition, with its profound wisdom and teachings, contains invaluable insights and enduring ethical values. These can be instrumental in assisting Muslim societies to navigate the complex and significant governance challenges they confront in the present day. Emphasizing the importance of these traditional values could lead to a renewed commitment to governance that prioritizes justice, accountability, and the common good.

The paper illustrates that the Islamic tradition encompasses a dynamic nature that envisages two essential roles of government: governance and politics. While governance is seen as an eternal principle, politics is understood to be temporal and subject to change. Moreover, the study delves into how such core principles could engage with and respond to the current theoretical debates surrounding political theory, particularly in the realm of

governance issues that are increasingly relevant today. To provide a comprehensive analysis, the paper is meticulously divided into five distinct parts: Firstly, an Analysis of the Concept of Governance, secondly, a discussion on Governance Ethics drawn from Islamic Ideals, followed by an exploration of Governance and Maslaha, and more. Each section aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how Islamic teachings can inform and enhance modern governance frameworks in Muslim societies.

### **Historical Foundations of Islamic Political Thought**

Political traditions within Islam began with the significant life of Prophet Muhammad and the foundational scriptural compilations that took place during the first two crucial centuries of Islam. The Qur'an along with the Hadith form the primary sources and core basis for all subsequent Islamic political theory and ideology. However, the task of interpreting and applying these sacred texts led to a rich diversity of political theories and beliefs. In-depth analysis of the Qur'an, as well as the political perspectives and views of the Prophet himself, were thoroughly discussed by various Imams, companions of the Prophet, and their followers (Rahman, 2023). The contents of these enlightening discussions, debates, and interpretations are primarily documented in Hadith compilations, which provide valuable insights into the political thinking prevalent at that time. Early Muslim religious leaders, along with the subsequent caliphs and various dynasties, during their ongoing struggle to establish, consolidate, and maintain power, seized upon both the Qur'an and Hadith to justify and legitimize their rule over the people (Salaudeen & Dukawa, 2021). This led to a wide range of interpretations that are often still debated today. Consequently, the political thought and ideas stemming from Islam have become deeply intertwined with contemporary historical events, reflecting both the past and ongoing evolution of Islamic governance and authority.

Taking into account the profound relevance of these important historical materials, our current era, and in particular, reflects in many significant ways the era when classical Islamic political thought first emerged and developed. We will carefully distinguish between different historical periods before classifying the various interpretative traditions that arose from each of them. The political thought and ideas within Islam have, over the centuries, been intricately integrated with the socio-political fabric of diverse localities, and as a result, a multitude of different forms of Islamic theories have emerged through this complex interplay (TC, 2024). Islamic political theory has continuously evolved and metamorphosed, frequently entering into and emerging from

contact with other historical traditions and contexts; this process of historicization should remain at the forefront of any intellectual exploration within the vast history of ideas. Consequently, Islamic political theory can be understood as a fragmented synthesis of aristocratic, monarchal, republican, and communal ideas that have been variously amalgamated and intertwined with Islamic normative political concepts over time. It proves to be quite challenging, if not impossible, to provide a comprehensive account of each and every Islamic political tradition that has existed. Nonetheless, each tradition posits different forms of instantiation and interpretation of the ideal political system, emphasizing the rich and diverse landscape of Islamic political thought (Namazi, 2022).

### **Key Concepts in Islamic Political Thought**

Justice, mercy, and the ongoing quest for the common good are multifaceted concepts that are broadly examined in the realm of Islamic political thought. Moreover, an integral aspect of the comprehensive consideration of political authority lies in the question of legitimacy, which raises the essential inquiry regarding the source from which rulers derive their rightful authority to govern. Scholars of Islam have identified four distinct theories of sovereignty that shape this discourse: the sovereignty of God, the authority of the prophet, the collective power of the community, and the expertise of the jurist (Iqtidar & Scharbrodt, 2022).

Fundamental to the political structure is the ideal of a system of consultation known as *shura*, which emphasizes the importance of mutual discourse and participation in governance. This notion fosters the creation of a legitimate government that is accountable to the people. Arguably, this esteemed ideal, along with the structural possibilities it entails, represents the continuity that has influenced the vision and development of Islamic societies as well as the broader landscape of Islamic political thought throughout history and into modernity (Hilal et al.2023).

Within this broader framework, the religion of Islam fundamentally derives its legitimacy from a rich and complex interplay between its various moral tenets and ethical principles. These foundational elements may be accessed through different avenues, including revered sacred scriptures, human reasoning, or indeed through a thoughtful synthesis of both approaches. Such diverse principles provide a robust and steadfast foundation that guides the conduct of governance as well as the intricate relationship between rulers and the ruled. This dynamic interaction reflects deeply held Islamic values that resonate profoundly within the hearts and minds of individuals, families,

and communities alike. The intertwining of faith and reason further enriches this tapestry, ensuring that the tenets of Islam are not only understood in a theoretical context but are also applied practically in everyday life (Elmahjub, 2021).

This theory of political authority makes imperative the primacy of social justice and the key to governance, where for Islamic political thought today, as in yesteryears, the shariah shall come sans any injustice toward humanity given by the Creator. The idea of an Islamic state or an Islamic government in Islam is premised on principles embodied in a particular conception of ummah, or community, and certain historical events relevant to its formation, not on a necessary endowment of a particular territory or representation by officials particularized by place. It should be noted that the concern of theocracy towards the interpretation of the state was a mere concern (Barazili & Syukur, 2023).

Contrasting these cornerstones with the principles of secular political theories, one can claim that these theories tend to suffer from the universality of skepticism, utopianism, and constructivism as to accomplishing the dreams, desires, aspirations, and ambitions of mankind. A reestablishment and revitalization of democracy, if possible, government through reasoned truth and civil criticism is therefore a *sine qua non* to meeting the challenges of coordination of the whole fashioned towards what is morally excellent. The cornerstones of Islamic political thought are still relevant as far as good governance in this regard is concerned today.

### **Classical Islamic Political Theorists**

Perhaps one of the most important classical Islamic political theorists in history is undoubtedly al-Farabi. He is widely recognized as the founder of Islamic political science, and his contributions to this field have left a significant mark on political thought. Al-Farabi is predominantly remembered for his several significant contributions that have shaped the discourse in political theory. Firstly, he achieved the remarkable feat of creating three distinct ideal types of cities, which he categorized as the city of blame, the virtuous city, and the city of desire. Among these, the greatest achievement of his thought can be seen in his ability to provide a compelling argument for the moral value inherent in the virtuous city (Siddiqui et al. 2024).

Al-Farabi made an essential and fundamental distinction between theoretical sciences and practical sciences, which is a critical aspect of his philosophical outlook. Similarly to his contemporary Ibn Sina, al-Farabi believed that the regulation of society and the study of political sciences ultimately lead to the attainment of absolute

happiness for individuals. In his ethical works, al-Farabi seeks to illustrate the profound connection that exists between the inner happiness of human beings in this world and their ultimate happiness in the afterlife (Usman and Shamija2022). This brief summary of al-Farabi's philosophical positions, unfortunately, does little to capture the grand and intricate architecture of his political thought, which is vast and complex. Therefore, in the future, we will delve deeply into his ideas and discuss them at length and in comprehensive detail to fully appreciate their significance and relevance.

Another immensely influential Islamic political scholar was the esteemed Ibn Khaldun. In his celebrated historical work, known for its depth and insight, he demonstrates with compelling clarity that social cohesion and unity are not merely important but indeed the very foundations of political power. The relevance of his formidable erudition and his penetrating deliberations, which are recognized as early forms of political sociology, still holds considerable currency in contemporary discourse. The arguments presented by theologians, while intellectually stimulating, made minimal impact on the broader debates within Islamic political thought. Thus, we must bear in mind that they did not play any significant role in shaping the way Muslims understood governance and the intricate workings of the political system. However, they must certainly be considered, simply because of the extensive galleries of religious works that permeate Islamic society; the judge, for instance, was required to have a profound knowledge of canon law to effectively carry out his duties and responsibilities.

- **Al-Farabi**

Al-Farabi is one of the central figures in political thought, particularly within the Islamic context. His ideal virtuous city provides the classroom in which fare is conducted into the texts of the historical associations of Islam and Aristotle in classical antiquity. Al-Farabi attributes its governance no longer to the philosophy of the Greeks, but to philosophy as transmitted by the final and greatest of the prophets of the city. This and other versions of Platonic-Aristotelian teaching traditions of the classics are sometimes seen as finalized expressions of political thinking or taken as legacies of his ideas, although he is seen as an insignificant figure in the history of Western political thought. The centrality of the model of the virtuous regime among the revolutionaries of Islamic political thought reflects the canonization of the city of education as an effective and evocative

analogy for understanding social and political features of governance (Yuslih2022).

The development of Islamic political thought draws greatly from early Islamic political theorists in developing a timeless political thought that builds on Prophetic Wisdom. Al-Farabi follows the Greeks in attempting to construct a parallel argument between the parts of the soul and the polis. But, where the Greeks such as Plato and Aristotle use philosophy from the outset to criticize the unjust or vicious city for the sake of itself, or for a wider conception of humanity, Al-Farabi specifically aims philosophy at the ruler who makes the wise decisions of the virtuous city. He desires his audience, most of whom belong to the Muslim ruling elite, to see the wisdom and beneficence in a city conducted by a king who makes his determinative judgments and laws in accordance with our judgment. The nature of the city they ought to live in is in accordance with our study and politics which we here lay down. As in the text of the Politics, the 'we' and 'our' refer to those concerned with a full life of civility which we wish to promote throughout the ethnological study (Getachew & Mantena, 2021). Full justice within the state, therefore, is not "just appropriate forms of democracy or any of the other conceptions of good institutions," before considering the perfect regime.

- **Ibn Khaldun**

Although the primary focus of Ibn Khaldun was on the intricate social history and the historical processes that encompass various tribal groups and dynasties located in West Asia and North Africa, the functional approach that he employed, along with his analysis from a political perspective, has garnered significant interest and following over time. In the study of history, the particular focus of Ibn Khaldun is often termed as occasionalism, a concept that highlights the importance of specific events and circumstances. In his prologue, he meticulously describes his unique distinction and formulation of facts from events or what he refers to as 'Ibareye.' According to Ibn Khaldun's framework, 'umur' encompasses the realm of facts which are stable and enduring, whereas 'adrya' or events pertain not only to those that are temporary in nature but also to occurrences that tend to recur over time. This cyclical notion of historical events is crucial to understanding his broader theories. Furthermore, political theory, as he posits, is fundamentally a theory centered around human nature, coupled with an exploration into the essence of state power in relation to society at large. Therefore, the core emphasis is placed on two key concepts: 'Wallaya,' which denotes the notion of power, and 'Khalafaya,' referring to authority. Both of these elements serve as

integral components of his comprehensive analysis of the interplay between politics and society (Heywood & Chin, 2023).

Ibn Khaldun has used the word 'Asabiyyah' to mean both kinship and social cohesion. 'Asabiyyah' here is used to describe either a feeling or attachment that people have for those who are their blood kin or people who share with them a sense of their common identity. In his socio-structural analysis or social cognition, it is a political dot and reliable breach in agreement which together allow for the explanation of political order and, given auxiliary factors, its stability or its self-destruction. Political structure is a conceptual system constituted differently under different economic environmental variables. Basically, economic variables vitiate or mitigate the order-political structure continuum. Ibn Khaldun's theories are tacitly constructed. He clearly suggests the ordering of civilization and 'asabiyyah'. He also elaborates the reasons for the disintegration of political structure. Overall, his analysis of the structure of a tribal (Khairulyadi et al.2021).

### **Islamic Governance Structures**

Islamic governance, as suggested by classical scholars, evolved over time and gradually transformed into various models, including the caliphate, sultanate, sheikhdом, emirate, and numerous other forms of Islamic leadership at different historical junctures. This intricate historical reality demonstrates that all the Islamic principles, rules, and regulations concerning governance were not implemented in a literal or uniform manner in any particular society. Throughout the ages, the ruling systems have been consistently modified and adjusted in accordance with the prevailing circumstances, the inherent nature of the people, the prevailing ideologies of the times, the varying pressures of one kind or another, and the available resources or materials possessed by the current or aspiring rulers. It is only in contemporary times that a genuine attempt has been made to establish an Islamic political system that reflects its true essence, which has unfortunately encountered significant challenges stemming from financial, economic, and military pressures that have impeded its development and realization (Samier & ElKaleh, 2021).

Islamic political thought has historically been intertwined with the specific political developments that have occurred in various regions and eras; consequently, this reflection leads to a remarkable diversity in the forms of administrative and rulership structures of different states. The concept of authority in Islamic governance is intricately linked to Mazhab (religious school of thought), which means that decisions made within one school can

be recognized and executed by the adherents of another, creating an environment where there is no significant feeling of resentment or discord. In the context of Islamic polity, the ruler is granted nearly absolute authority, which in practice is often upheld for relatively brief periods. Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that the ruler himself bears the weight of responsibility, both directly and indirectly, for safeguarding and ensuring the rights and welfare of the masses (Umami and Puspita2024). Throughout history, many Islamic governments have struggled to effectively tackle the complex problems stemming from their own structures of authority, and they have also faced challenges in meeting the public interest and facilitating general welfare in their societies. This brings us to a significant question: do the medieval models of Islamic political thought maintain any relevance in today's context of rapid globalization? If they do possess relevance, to what degree can these historical frameworks be regarded as useful in addressing contemporary political and social challenges?

### **Contemporary Applications of Islamic Political Thought**

Tension between Islamic ideology and liberalism continues to persist significantly in diverse Muslim-majority regions, where classical Islamic political thought is increasingly employed to justify contemporary governance practices. In these societies, Islamic law and its underlying principles have been reinterpreted, modified, and, in many instances, integrated into governance structures that vary greatly across different cultures. Critics, as well as some advisors to the governments in both Malaysia and Indonesia, express concerns regarding the viability and effectiveness of such liberal applications of Islamic thought in practice. They argue that the blend of liberal principles with Islamic tenets often leads to confusion and raises questions about the legitimacy of governance (Dzutsati & Wuthrich, 2024). However, there are individuals who staunchly argue that the pluralism inherent within Islamic political thought provides it with the necessary flexibility to adapt and maintain relevance in varied contexts and circumstances; this adaptability is evidenced through insightful comparisons that can be drawn between different countries and their unique approaches. The distinctions observed can be seen not only in the differing interpretations and implementations of Islamic principles but also in the varying impact that these Islamic states have on global discussions and discourses surrounding human rights and the critical issue of social justice. The contrast between these nations and their governance styles further highlights the complexities of integrating Islamic ideology with liberal frameworks.

The application of Islamic values in governance constitutes a substantial and notable part of contemporary political activity within the Muslim world. In countries such as Turkey and Pakistan, the Islamic political identity is actively sustained and promoted through the involvement of various Islamic parties in the political landscape and through the influential voices of Islamic scholars. Furthermore, Islamic movements across Turkey, Iran, and Egypt have initiated significant transformations in how Islam relates to the concepts of nation-state and the broader political structure (Qorib & Afandi, 2024). Nevertheless, in spite of the formalized approaches to Islamic governance, various tensions continue to persist in the majority of Muslim-majority countries, often arising between secular and non-secular forms of governmental leadership. These complex challenges are centered on the apparent contradictions that exist between classical Islamic political ideas and what are commonly viewed as essential attributes necessary for a functioning democratic state. Such a landscape invites ongoing debate and conflict as societies navigate the intersection of faith and governance in searching for paths forward.

### **Islamic Ethics and Governance**

One of the most significant and vital considerations in the rich and profound realm of Islamic political heritage is undeniably the moral or ethical principles that govern the sphere of governance. In this context, Islam stands out as being unique in how it maintains and nurtures an intimate and interconnected relationship between ethics and the realm of politics or governance. This close and intrinsic link between the moral and the political dimensions was not something that existed merely as an external aspect to the political authority that exercised dynastic rule within the framework of Islamic governance. Instead, Islamic politics, in general, is fundamentally guided by the principle of moral accountability, which functions as a defining and pivotal feature of political responsibility. The moral and ethical ideals which have been adopted and embraced as core Islamic principles are not merely theoretical; they must find practical realization in the everyday life of the Muslim community (Nasution et al.2023). These ideals significantly shape not only their political engagements but also their diverse activities across all areas of life. The expectation is that these ethical tenets will be actively manifested, influencing their actions, decisions, and interactions in the broader society to create a just and equitable environment.

Maslahah, a concept of Islamic political doctrine, connotes the subjective good of the Muslim community. Basically, while Islam

defines righteousness and evil in substantive terms, the political application of this ethical yardstick in the context of governance ascribes certain rights to citizens and imposes on rulers certain obligations. This substitutes the power of the state for the power and glory of the long-dead rulers (Syamsuar et al.2024). The political process appears to be answerable to thought; political theory restricts politics by attributing to it a range of moral and ethical imperatives. Islam, in its teachings about governance and rulers, enunciated moral imperatives that informed its prescriptions enjoining individuals as well as the rulers to behave in accord with ethical values. Muslims, by and large, believe that the moral behavior of a ruler is the very basis of and is co-terminus with the function of governance. Governors, in an Islamic moral framework of responsibility, are accountable to the governed.

### **Challenges and Critiques of Applying Islamic Political Thought in Governance**

Since governance is inherently performed by governance actors who are actively implementing their own ideals and interests, the possibility of differing perspectives and divergent interests frequently leads to the emergence of new problems and complex disputes within the multidisciplinary spheres of democratic governance or the concept of Islamic good governance. In the context of implementing Islamic political thought in Hukumnadhwa practices, it is crucial to consider the various constraints that exist within the Islamic Ummah at large (Bridoux & Stoelhorst, 2022). These constraints include but are not limited to the ideological divisions that fragment unity among the Muslim community, different sectarian beliefs that can lead to conflict, and the lingering influence of colonial arrangements that continue to suppress and complicate the already existing differences within the traditional political structure of Islam. Additionally, the dynamic political landscape in Muslim-majority countries further complicates the situation. Observers note that there exists a fundamental incompatibility between democracy and the tenets of Islamic law. Many scholars in the Muslim world argue that classical forms of Islamic governance exhibit significant disparities when compared to modern democratic principles and practices. These discrepancies are particularly pronounced in areas such as the nature of authority, the systems of leadership, as well as weighing the pros and cons inherent in both governance frameworks.

The implementation of good governance cannot be achieved easily due to interpretation and development stemming from different backgrounds, cultural, social, and various equally valid interests,

but also because the developmental features of contemporary society have further reinforced conflicts between space and micronationality. However, we must understand that politics is a dynamic and real science due to its various interests and approaches (Health Organization, 2022). Therefore, those of us who practice political life must always ask how to understand politics. What is the criticism of some experts about the concept of Islamic governance? The ideal of Islamic governance warns of the danger of exploiting religion or receiving political support by using religious symbols, thereby threatening the freedom of ordinary people. They also accuse the governments of Muslim-majority countries of being violators of the principles of justice and good governance, as reflected in the conditions of these countries. In addition, they emphasize that Islamic governance is irrelevant when applied to solve contemporary political problems and interests because classical Islamic ideals cannot quickly respond to the various and abnormal interests that develop today. However, the fact that always overlaps in the polemics of this opposition is the excessive criticism and advice from them concerning genuine struggles or the red threads of Islamic analytical solutions.

### **Conclusion**

Islamic political thought is an important source of inspiration for contemporary governance. This is a significant conclusion that we reach from the foregoing discussion. Classical Islamic political thought, which understandably addresses a state of affairs quite different from ours, confronts a range of structural and moral issues relevant to our times. However, data on the state of affairs in the modern nation-state exhibits the same concern, and in the advanced nation-states, there has been evidence of a retreat from the state-centric viewpoint to the individual. Loss of values is increasingly becoming a cause of concern for politics and governance in the contemporary world. In recent years, political leaders, theoreticians, and scholars of ethics of governance have evinced a renewed interest in revisiting the classical maxims and enriching our understanding of political and administrative leadership.

The constitutional provisions of the advanced liberal democracies, particularly of Western Europe, attest to the validity of integrating the non-Western classical and contemporary ideals relating to governance. The classical injunction to the governors and the governed undergirds educational, alimentary, and security dimensions. These ideals could be a need of our contemporary times while addressing the soft state syndrome with reference to addressing the issues of poverty, alienation, existential security,

corruption, and inefficiency, if the fundamental framework of the propositions of morality, modernity, and Islamic ethics for ethical considerations are rectified. In addition to the aforesaid, the institutional capacity for moving an idea into action calls for an inter-discourse that draws on philosophy, economics, theology, political science, ethics of governance, history, adult education, ethics in public relations, and associated disciplines.

The recommendations for furthering the placement of Islamic political thought in governance and governance sciences, advocacy, research, and praxis are several. Such a position needs to be a consequence of inter-discourse of ideas, followed by a process of analysis to mold an idea into action. Practice, together with its academic and action dimension, should seek to evaluate the efficacy of the approach being suggested. More research is needed to develop moral strategies to further the dialogue and discourse as well as a better understanding of more opportunities for the nexus between Islamic political thought and corporate governance. A thorough understanding of the notion of Shura and its interpretation, and greater use of the concept in management literature needs to be explored. Non-theistic points of view are welcome for their contribution. We coined the term 'ethics contributing to governance', the application of ethical standards and expectations in the delivery of government services to provide background and context to a set of recommended actions. In conclusion, governance may be seen broadly from a three-tier viewpoint, namely, ethical governance, effective governance, and efficient governance. The old values of Islamic political thought tempered by modern requirements are alive today and can result in a transformed present. In this present age, mutual recognition and a more humane and just arrangement in the polity are essential. It is to be kept in mind at all times that our interpretations of the Islamic political writings are critically dependent on the resources of contemporary political theory that we use as our foundation. Any interpretation that is more concerned about affirming the power differentials in a given setting rather than refuting them has to be rejected.

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