Meaning of Leadership According to Islam

ABSTRACT

Leadership is needed in a society and country. A society without leaders would lose its direction and purpose. Islam has laid down the basic principles of leadership and the Prophet (pbuh) and the Khulafa’ al-Rashidin have proven their superiority and excellence through success in world history. Not everyone is qualified to lead because it is a trust answerable to Allah (swt). Thus, there are several conditions to qualify for leadership, such as being free of physical handicap so as to be fit for active service and possession of knowledge in order to administer properly with fairness and justice because it is the key to peace and harmony in society. Another prerequisite to be a leader is that he/she must be a Muslim, so that he/she may fulfill the obligatory religious demands on a leader.

Key words: Leadership, Islam, language, al-Quran, Hadith, terminology.

Introduction

Islam is a complete and comprehensive religion in its teachings. It is also a system which regulates mankind’s life without separating worldly affairs from the hereafter. Thus, the issue of leadership is a matter which should be given attention so that the trust Allah gives to man may be properly managed. The question of leadership not only lies in a person’s charisma, it also cannot be separated from the environment. In other words, the concept of leadership is one which is reciprocal between two parties, the one who acts and the other who receives the action. This means the effectiveness of leadership depends not only on a person’s special character but also on the existence of the party which receives the action, while the condition of a place also determines the effectiveness of a leader’s action.

Islamic leadership has its own methods without having to copy from any other model. Even though some may claim that Islamic leadership is equivalent to democracy, socialism or capitalism because of some common characteristics, it needs to be asserted that Islamic leadership cannot be equated with leadership which embraces ideology invented by man, because Islam has its own distinction in terms of policy and political rules which can overcome man-made systems. Thus, any similarity between the Islamic system and the democratic system or
Leadership According to Language:

According to Arabic language, several terms are associated with leadership, such as al-Khilafah, al-Imamah, al-Wali, al-Riyasah and al-Zi’amah. The term Khilafah comes from the word al-Khalif which means behind and from al-Khalif comes the word Istakhlafa which means to take the place of another person (Ma’luf, 1957). Khalifah means successor (Madina, 1973) whereas Khilafah is Imamah (Ibn Mandhur, 1968), which means to take the place of someone in leadership. al-Isfahani gives the meaning of al-Khilafah as one who comes after or behind another or replaces him.

al-Khilafah according to Islamic legal terminology means head of the Muslims to conduct affairs of the world or religion (‘Atiyahullah, 1968). The word Khilafah means leadership because the original meaning is successor. He takes over the functions of the person before him to conduct affairs of leadership. Allah says in al-Quran, Surah al-Fatir, 35:39: ‘He it is that has made you inheritors in the earth. And in Surah Sad, 38:26: ‘O David! We did indeed make thee a vicegerent on earth’.

al-Imamah comes from the verb Amma which means in front and is taken from the meaning Amam. When a person is Imam for a certain group or community, it means he is in front. Thus from this position the Imam or Imamah means leadership of a certain community or group. Other persons will follow him, whether based on his actions, words or writing. The word Imam also means the clear path based on its usage in al-Quran, Surah al-Hijr, 15:79, which means: ‘So We exacted retribution from them. They were both on an open highway, plain to see’. Other than that, Imam also means example, such as in al-Nabighah poem: ‘And building the greatness of life on an existing example’. And Labid says: ‘Each community has its way and example’. So also in the words of Allah in Surah al-Furqan, 25:74: ‘...and make us an example for the righteous’.

Imam is also used to mean Kitab (book) or written records as in the words of Allah in Surah al-Isra, 17:71: ‘One day We shall call together all human beings with their (respective) Imams (Kitab).’ Imam is the person in the forefront and appointed by the community to head the group, whether to lead them to the clear path or otherwise astray. He is also an example or paragon to those whom he leads.

al-Imarah is a word which means leadership as practised in traditional Islamic leadership. This word comes from the verb Amma (Ibn Mandhur, 1968), or its derivative Amrun which means to command, the opposite of which is Nahyun, to prohibit. From this word is derived the word Amir which means the person who commands or has the power to command. From this word is formed Imamah (Ma’luf, 1957), which contains the function of leadership and the authority to give commands (Ibn Mandhur, 1968). This is a part of the function of leadership as stated by Ibn Mandhur (1968): ‘a person gives commands when he becomes the leader or chief over others’.

The splitting of the word Amam also forms the word Mu’tamar which means meeting whereby people voice out their opinions and views to resolve problems within society. From it is derived the word which means something undesirable, for example, Mu’tamir, which means to be adamant about one’s opinion and the word Mu’amarah, which bears the meaning pact or meeting to conspire for a bad purpose (Ibn Mandhur, 1968).

The word Za’mah comes from the word Za’ama which means impression or guarantee. From this word is formed the word Za’im which in al-Quran means guarantee which by itself contains the function of leadership. For that reason Ibn Mandhur (1968) says Za’im for a certain clan means chief. al-Za’amah also means weapon. Ibn al’Arabi interprets al-Za’amah as weapon or weaponry, leadership and honour. All the above interpretation are matters important for a leader.

And the word al-Wilayah comes from the word Wali meaning helper as in the words of Allah, Surah al-Imran, 3:68: ‘And God is the Protector of those who have faith’. Wali also means most beloved person or friend (Ibn Mandhur, 1968). al-Wilayah also contains the meaning helper, for one of the duties of wilayah is to give assistance or help to those in need. al-Wilayah also contains the meanings to care for, protect, take charge of, such as in the affairs of orphans. A father is Wali to his daughter in her marriage because he takes care, protects and is her guardian.

In the Dictionary of Social Behavior and Social Research Methods, leadership is explained as: ‘The act of influencing group members and group processes through the role of a leader’. In the Dictionary of Sociology Leadership it is also mentioned among others, that in social psychology, leadership is frequently treated in the analysis of small groups. In sociology, it is defined as the exercise of influence or power in social collectivities (Hill, 1984).

The above explanation clarifies the meanings of the words used in Islamic sources which lead to or support the meaning of leadership. Generally, the function of leadership as reflected in the words used in Islam are functions and duties related to management and administration, for example, in exercising authority or power, executing work and organizing strategy. It also has the functions of ownership, custody, guardianship, directing of affairs, guarantor and director who issues commands for action.
A leader occupies the frontal position and is the focus of his followers. He is also the spokesman for the rank he leads and he has the ability to give directives and commands. In terms of carrying out his tasks, he usually consults and exchanges opinions with other members of society. However, there are also leaders who are hard-headed and adamant over their opinions without accepting others’ opinions. This phenomenon frequently occurs when there exists a conspiracy with a dishonourable purpose at the same time disregarding public interest and welfare.

Leadership According to al-Quran:

al-Quran as the main source of Shariah law, also discusses leadership. Several words in al-Quran bear the meaning of leadership such as al-Wali, al-Khilafah, al-Imamah and al-Za’amah. The word Wali and its plural Awliya’ means protector in the words of Allah, Surah al-Baqarah, 2:257: ‘God is the Protector of those who have faith: from the depths of darkness He will lead them forth into light. Of those who reject faith the patrons are the Evil ones (Taghut): from light they will lead them forth into the depths of darkness. They will be Companions of the fire, to dwell therein (forever)’.

The word al-Wali bears the meaning helper or protector. al-Wali actually carries out the functions of leadership because a leader will defend and give help to persons in his charge. Wali also means a person who conducts the live affairs of others. In Tafsir Ruh al-Bayani it is stated that Wali here may mean a person who administers and Nahyu ‘an munkar (prevents evil). Both these responsibilities cannot be properly implemented if there were no one to organize any plans for their achievement. The word Awliya’ is found in al-Quran, Surah al-Imran, 3:28: ‘Let not the Believers take for friends or helpers Unbelievers rather than Believers: if any do that, in nothing will there be help from God, except by way of precaution that you may guard yourselves from them. But God cautions you (to remember Himself); for the final goal is to God’.

The above verse warns the Believers not to appoint Disbelievers as their chiefs in the affairs of their lives, that is, as their protectors. Khalifah with its plural Khala’if or Khulafa’ also bears the meaning of leadership. In Surah al-Baqarah, 2:30, Allah says: ‘Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: I will create a vicegerent on earth’. Khalifah here means successor to the one before. The word Khalifah (successor) would not be mentioned if there were still someone in authority.

al-Qurtubi and al-Maraghi state that Khalifah implements directives via-a-humans. They assert that the word Khalifah is compatible with executing the responsibilities and tasks entrusted to him. Allah says in Surah al-Baqarah, 2:124: ‘And remember that Abraham was tried by his Lord with certain Commands, which he fulfilled: He said: I will make thee an Imam to the Nations. He pleaded: and also (Imams) from my offspring! He answered: But my promise is not within the reach of evil-doers’.

The word Imam means following in religious matters, as the guide for those who follow. And the word Za’im in al-Quran bears the meaning to protect, guarantee (al-Suyuti, 1983). This also is not outside the function of a chief towards people he manage. In the words of Allah, Surah al-Qalam, 68:40: ‘And ask of them, which of them will stand surety (guarantee) for that! (that they will get in the hereafter the same judgement as for their world)’. Khalifah here means successor to the one before. The word Khalifah (successor) would not be mentioned if there were still someone in authority.

al-Quran has also explained that leaders who are good and serve the society well such as prophets who administered the affairs of the society, among whom were Prophets Daud (David), Sulaiman (Solomon), Yusuf (Joseph) and Zulqarnain (Cyrus/Darius). Allah’s words in Surah Sad, 38:26, means: ‘O David! We did indeed make thee a vicegerent on earth: so judge thou between men in truth (and justice):nor follow the lusts (of thy heart), for they will mislead thee from the Path of God: for those who wander astray from the Path of God, is a Penalty Grievous, for that they forget the Day of Account’. And Allah’s words in Surah Yusuf, 12:54-56 : ‘So the king said: Bring him unto me; I will take him specially to serve about my own person. Therefore when he had spoken to him, he said: be assured this day, thou art before our own presence, with rank firmly established, and fidelity proved! (Joseph) said: “Set me over the store-houses of the land; I will indeed guard them as one that knows (their importance). Thus did we give established power to Joseph in the land, to take possession
therein as, when, or where he pleased. We bestow of our mercy on whom we please, and we suffer not, to be lost, the reward of those who do good’.

From the explanation in the above verses, it is clear that the leadership concept is not something strange in Islam. It can be proven in various expressions of Quranic verses with one clear meaning on leadership. Examples shown in al-Quran clearly prove that throughout the world civilizations, Prophets and Apostles as well as Allah’s sincere servants have played their leadership roles as best as possible. They administered affairs of their countries and society, thus they become the mirror to the political and leadership class for the sake of the human community.

Leadership According to Hadith of the Prophet (pbuh):

There are many hadith by the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) which prove that leadership is part of Islamic teachings. These hadith based on his sayings or actions are referred to for analysis of the leadership concept. One of these sayings is to strengthen the case of the need for leadership in daily life so that it can be organised to achieve the objectives desired by man, is: ‘When three persons set out on a journey, they should appoint one of them as their leader’.

Ibn Taymiyyah (1969) based his judgment on the hadith that the Prophet (pbuh) had made it mandatory to appoint a chief for a small group when travelling. This is a reminder that it is a rule for a group situation. Allah made it obligatory to enjoin good and prohibit evil (Amar ma’ruf wa nahi mungkar), Jihad (holy struggle), implementing criminal law (Hudud), declaration of Eid, helping the oppressed and so on. All these would not be administered without a leader with authority.

al-Mawardi explains that leadership after the Prophet (pbuh) is Khilafah nubuwah which includes mandatory implementation of Islamic public affairs, whether in terms of shariah or what is sensible. The Prophet (pbuh) asserted that each human being is a leader within a certain context as in his saying: ‘Remenber! Everyone of you is a shepherd to his flock and everyone is answerable with regard to his flock. The Caliph is a shepherd of his subjects and he will be questioned about his subjects (as to how he conducted their affairs). A man is guardian over members of his family. A woman is guardian of the household of her husband and children. A slave is a guardian of his master’s property. Beware, everyone is a guardian and everyone shall be questioned with regard to his trust’.

This discussion focuses on state or public leadership. There are hadith which make it obligatory for the public to be loyal to the head. The Prophet (pbuh) in his saying had portrayed an Imam as protected by Allah in the hereafter, whereby the word Imam in the hadith refers to a leader. His saying is: ‘Seven categories of people will be sheltered under the shade of God’s throne on the day when there is no protection except for God’s protection: a just Imam (ruler), a young man who grew up devoted in worship of Allah, a person whose heart is attached to the mosque, two persons who love to meet and depart for the sake of Allah, a man whom a beautiful woman of rank seduces him (for illicit relations) but he rejects her for fear of Allah, a person who gives in charity in secrecy such that the left hand does not know what the right hand gives, a person who remembers Allah in privacy until his eyes shed tears.

Islam as a complete system, explained clearly through revelation as conveyed by the Prophet (pbuh), has determined leadership in every facet of human life. The scope of leadership and the responsibilities are not confined to certain limits but apply to all facets of life from leadership of household to that of national issues. This simply and solely shows that leadership is essential in the development and path of knowledge, jihad, ibadah and so on.

Leadership According to Terminology:

It can be said that Muslim scholars consider leadership as very important from the time of early hijrah to date. In their writings, some have specified books on leadership. This shows that the issue of leadership is a problem related to everyday life which cannot be viewed as incidental. Scholars have named leasership as al-Khalifah, al-Imamah and Amir.

al-Mawardi in his book al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyyah states that Imamah is the successor of the Prophet (pbuh) in safeguarding religion and administering the world by it. The definition given by him consists of the three following elements: i) leader is successor to the Prophet (pbuh), ii) the task of a Caliph is to safeguard religion, and iii) His duty is to administer the world (al-Ris, 1976).

This clearly shows that al-Mawardi places on the leadership the responsibility of safeguarding religion from being distorted or perverted by man. Ibn Khaldun (1984) states that the term caliphate bears the meaning of shouldering the trust of administering shariah in the interest of the world and hereafter because all worldly affairs return to the hereafter. In religious affairs, the leader bears the trust of conveying it to society and guiding them. And in worldly affairs, his task is to safeguard religion in the interest of human development.
And Muhammad Rashid Ridha explains that al-Khilafah, Imamah al-'Uzma and Imarat al-Mu'minin are three words with similar meaning. The word Khilafah covers religious and national interests. Hassan Ibrahim (1964) states that al-Khilafah is the public leader for religious and state affairs as successor to the Prophet (pbuh). Al-Iji defines a leader as a person who heads affairs of the world and religion in the sense of replacing the Prophet (pbuh) after his demise. Even though the definitions given by the above differ, all of the meanings have the same purpose of safeguarding religion and the duty of implementing Allah’s commands since the demise of the Prophet (pbuh).

There are a few words which are frequently used to refer to the meaning of leadership such as al-Imam, al-Khilafa, al-Amir and al-Sultan. Regardless of whether they are so used in the dictionary, al-Quran, hadith and interpretation among scholars, their meanings do not vary from the meaning of leadership. Thus, the reality of a leader and the importance of highlighting this issue to the public become clear, so that the term and notion of true leadership are fully understood and not distorted.

Conclusion:

The conditions laid down by scholars on the appointment of an Imam reflects the concern and thoroughness of Islam on the issue of who qualifies to bear Allah’s trust on the face of this earth. Among these conditions, is that a leader must be highly knowledgeable, an ignorant leader would find it difficult to make an accurate decision of public interest and welfare. A leader is also required to be sensitive to current developments whether within the country or outside so that he is ready to make a standpoint.

A just person would bring happiness to others, even though the leader himself is from among the disbelievers. An oppressive person would not judge fairly on the people, even though the people are of his own kind, because he would lose rationality/objectivity in ruling, whether in passing judgment or in dispensing social and economic justice in society.

Islamic leaders are the successors of prophets to follow through the message of Allah and establish his commands over them. Thus, it is impossible for leaders to execute Allah’s trust in implementing Allah’s commands if the leaders themselves are non-believers.

To specify a certain race as a qualification to be a Khalifah to the extent of denying other races from heading this institution goes against the universality of Islam. Any race loyal to Allah and capable of implementing Allah’s commands would qualify to be a Khalifah if Allah chose to grant him the position. This is verified by the words of Allah in al-Quran, Surah Muhammad, 47:38: ‘If ye turn back (from the path), he will substitute in your stead another people; then they would not be like you!’

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References