

## What makes the Muslim leader

Published in: New Straits Times Monday, 31 May, 2010

A plenary session on leadership at the recent sixth World Islamic Economic Forum explored the traits necessary to overcome new challenges, writes MOHAMMAD HASHIM KAMALI

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Leaders of the states participating in the recently concluded sixth World Islamic Economic Forum: (from left) Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Kosovo President Fatmir Sejdiu, Senegal President Abdoulaye Wade, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, Brunei's Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Maldives President Mohamed Nasheed and WIEF chairman Tun Musa Hitam. — AFP picture

"LEADERSHIP challenges for the new era" was the subject of a plenary session at the sixth World Islamic Economic Forum in Kuala Lumpur. The topic generated a lively discussion among a panel of eminent speakers. Surin Pitsuwan, secretary-general of Asean, moderated and referred in his opening remarks to the Quranic phrase *ulil-amr* (those in charge of affairs, Q.4:59), raising the question as to who were the *ulil-amr* of today, who could usher us into the new era.

The first panellist, Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, rightly stressed the role of education and recounted a question he was asked during a recent visit to the Middle East, on how Malaysia had become a success story among Muslim countries. He responded that Malaysia allocated a big portion of its budget to education, an area where the country set a different record. Then he spoke passionately of the importance of grounding our youth in good values.

The former Pakistan prime minister, Shaukat Aziz, emphasised incorruptibility and transparency. He referred to prevailing problems -- financial crises, terrorism, climatic degradation -- which were the result evidently of bad decisions, and thus a shortage of good leaders.

Dr Ahmad Muhammad Ali, president of the Islamic Development Bank, recommended a bottom-up approach whereby leaders arise from the grassroots as opposed to the elite-based top-down model.

The moderator addressed the floor with a remark on why the young were so preoccupied with qualifications and career matters and uninvolved in public affairs -- only to invoke an energetic rebuttal from many youth speakers: youth everywhere are crying for attention, they want to be involved, but their voices fall on deaf ears. It's the leaders who are not opening up.

In my brief intervention, I explored the Islamic dimension of our discussion a little further, on which I elaborate here. Surin's quotation was reminiscent of another Quranic guideline: "...their (Muslims') affair is a matter of consultation among them" (42:38). Consultative leadership as such entails engagement, communication and partnership, also implying that leaders are connected, interactive, and maintain good relations with their grassroots.

Furthermore, wali al-amr is generic and inclusive of anyone in charge of community affairs. A company director, judge, member of parliament, minister and head of state all qualify. It has in turn been adopted into the juristic usage wilayah (plural wilayaat) to signify public authority. All government authorities are thus known as wilayaat.

The Muslim leader should be friend and protector, and must remain open to sincere advice (nasihah) and constructive criticism (mu'aradah).

A renowned hadith states that "every one of you is a custodian and responsible for what is in his custody... the ruler is responsible for what is in his custody and so is every man and every woman".

The prophet also instructed: "Be not weak in character nor simply do what others do, whether good or bad. Rather make up your own minds: you may follow others in good deeds but not when they do something wrong."

What we see then is open and accessible leadership, not of a single person, but one in which everyone can take charge of what is placed under his custody. The prophet also praised a leader who empathised with his people, reaching out to them and aligning with them around their needs and interests, and denounced leaders who distance themselves from the grassroots.

Humility and dedication to service run through Islam's guidelines on leadership, as in the hadith: "The leader of a people is (veritably) their servant." The second caliph, Umar al-Khattab, added his voice to say that "there is no pomp and ceremony in Islam".

Leaders must also listen. Thus, when someone rudely criticised Umar in the presence of senior companions, one of them asked for permission to deal with the intruder but the caliph responded: "No, let him speak. No good will come of us if we do not listen."

One should also admit perhaps that mediaeval Islamic history is littered with despotic leadership and grave neglect of basic guidelines.

Age is not a determining factor of leadership. Ali, later the fourth caliph, was the youngest of the companions but was a leading voice and a minister to the prophet.

Similarly, when the prophet appointed the 18-year-old Usama Zayd to lead an army expedition, elder Companions acceded, and events showed he was a good choice.

Gender should also not be a hindrance, as there is no prohibitive injunction on it, but issues have arisen due mainly to mediaeval society practices. The prophet's wife Aishah was a learned and leading figure among the companions, and later Caliph Umar appointed a woman, Shifa Abdullah, as market inspector of Madinah.

The only exception Muslim scholars have made is for the head of state, as he leads the army, but material changes in warfare and leadership make it inadvisable now for a head of state to lead the army in battle.

Al-Mawardi (d.1058), author of a renowned text on governance, enumerates many qualities of a good leader, which he summarises into three: knowledge, just character, and wisdom (ilm, adalah, hikmah).

Leadership arises from knowledge, insight and virtue, a vision of the good, courage, humility, commitment, and God-consciousness. These are the ingredients of hikmah in a good leader. Knowledgeable leaders exuberate clarity of purpose and persuasiveness. The Quran thus instructed the prophet: "Take not a stand on something you are not knowledgeable about" (17:36).

Firasah (farsightedness) is a synonym of hikmah, often used in the context of siyasah shar'iyah (judicious policy), which affords the leader flexibility in the management of public affairs -- to make effective decisions in emergencies and fast unfolding scenarios. When calamity strikes, for instance, and looters take people's properties, the leader must act, and not, as it were, await legal technicalities of evidence and proof.

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