

***Governance in Islam: An Overview on Work and
Management***

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“A man’s behavior is the index of his mind”
Imam Ali

Introduction

The major purpose of human existence in Islam is acting as a viceroy on earth: “*When your Lord said to the angels: "Indeed I am going to set a viceroy on the earth" (The Cow,30).*

While entrusted with the role of stewardship, man is to act in justice, develop societies, preserve resources, work diligently and manage responsibly in an attempt to reach perfection and harmony with the universe. Deeds are the tools by which those goals get achieved. Their results will be assessed: “*Then We placed you as overlords on earth after them, so We might see how you would act.*” (*Yunes, 14*)

This paper briefly presents two dimensions of governance in Islam, Work and Management. It addresses work and Management as viewed in the Quran and the Prophetic Rule. It also outlines an application to these concepts with select quotes from Imam Ali’s *Ashtar Covenant*.

1. Work in the Holy Quran

The Holy Quran included tons of verses that stressed work, its importance and the quality expected from human beings as it is the path to reach development at earth and righteous life. In Quran, work was invariably associated with faith. Good deeds are the manifestations of real faith. Each person bears the sole responsibility for his/her work: *“Every soul is a pledge for its own deeds” (Al Mudather, 38)*. And work will not go unnoticed: *“And say, Go on working: Allah will see your conduct, and His Apostle and the faithful [as well], (Twbah,105)*. People are to work and the result of their performance will be seen (in the sense of evaluation, recognition and judgment) in the eyes of the stakeholders, thus creating a complete system of governance coupled with an equitable compensation and reward system irrespective of the gender: *“Then their Lord answered them,“ I do not waste the work of any worker among you, whether male or female; you are all on the same footing”*. (Al Omran, 195). All aspects of work are accurately assessed, be good or wicked, minute or grand: *“So whoever does an atom’s weight of good will see it, and whoever does an atom’s weight of evil will see it.” (Zelzalah, 7-8)*. The results of these actions are reflected on people themselves: *“And a soul and Him Who perfected it and inspired it (with conscience of) what is wrong for it and (what is) right for it. He is indeed successful who causeth it to grow, and he is indeed a failure who stunteth it” (The Sun, 7- 10)*.

In Islam, man assumes the whole responsibility of the formation, structure, and development of the society, yet the start is with the self: *“Allah changeth not the condition of a folk until they (first) change that which is in their hearts” (The Thunder, 11)*. Prophet Mohammad confirmed the seriousness of this principle when he said to his daughter Fatima: *“O Fatima, work for yourself, I spare nothing from Allah away from you.”*

2. Management in Islam

Islam, in the Quran and the Prophetic Rule, gave directions for the main managerial tasks, like: planning, recruitment, organizational structure, fair compensation, and characteristics of administration.

a. Planning:

The story of Prophet Yusuf in the Holy Quran presents a model including the identification of the problem, action planning including time frame and budgeting: *“He said: Ye shall sow seven years as usual, but that which ye reap, leave it in the ear, all save a little which ye eat. Then after that will come seven hard years which will devour all that ye have prepared for them, save a little of that which ye have stored.”* (Yusuf, 47-48). Also Imam Ali Bin Abi Talib drew the attention to the importance of planning and the long run return of planning by saying *“Today there are deeds and no judgment, and tomorrow there will be judgment and no deeds”*.

b. Recruitment:

Recruitment is a delicate process upon which Islam specified fairness in practicing it. Prophet Mohammed said: *“the one who hires an employee from between a number of people although he knows that there is a better person for the job then he is betraying God, the Prophet and the believers.”*

c. Structure:

The concept of organizational structure is used in Islam as part of the general order in the society and it is used in the Holy Quran: *“We have apportioned among them their livelihood in the life of the world, and raised some of them above others in rank that some of them may take labor from others; and the mercy of thy Lord is better than (the wealth) that they amass”* (Al Zukhruf, verse 32). Imam Ali Bin Abi Talib stressed the importance

of team members and the company by saying *“Ask about the companion before (asking about) the path”*.

d. Fair compensation:

As work is sacred in Islam, it is considered that the one who withhold the rights of the worker as “enemy of God” and is performing an act of great abomination and “will not smell the odor of Heaven” as per a Prophetic saying. Prophet Mohammed has also determined the timing of payment: “Offer the employee his wage before his sweat dries”

e. Characteristics of Administrators in Islam:

Islam presents the basic characteristics of successful administration. Here are four basic ones from the Quran:

1. Strength: *“One of the two women said, ‘Father, hire him. Indeed the best you can hire is a powerful and trustworthy man’” (The Stories, 26).*
2. Knowledge: *“He said: Set me over the storehouses of the land. Lo! I am a skilled custodian” (Yunes, 55).*
3. Humbleness: *“And lower thy wing (in kindness) unto those believers who follow thee” (The Poets, 215).*
4. Integrity: *“Indeed Allah commands you to deliver the trusts to their rightful owners and when you judge between people to judge with fairness. Excellent indeed is what Allah advises you. Indeed Allah is all-hearing, all-seeing.” (The Women, 58)*

3. Application of Islamic Governance: “The Governors Covenant” of Imam Ali to Malek Al Ashtar

Imam Ali Bin Abi Taleb was the fourth Islamic Caliph. He ruled from year 656 to 661. He was respected for his honesty, wisdom, knowledge, courage, equal treatment of all those whom he ruled and generosity in forgiving his defeated enemies. During his tenure

as Caliph, he appointed Malik Al Ashtar as a Governor of Egypt in year 658 and provided him a set of guiding principles on how to rule. Those were known as “The Ashtar Covenant”.

Select quotes of those guidelines and other sayings of Imam Ali were featured in a UNDP report titled “Arab Human Development Report 2002, creating opportunities for future generations”. Under the title “Imam Ali bin Abi Taleb on Governance.” These six advices were (bold titles were added by the author of this article for easy reference):

1. Leadership by Example: *“He who has appointed himself an Imam of the people must begin by teaching himself before teaching others. His teaching of others must be first by setting an example rather than with words, for he who begins by teaching and educating himself is more worthy of respect than he who teaches and educates others.”*

2. Development Strategy: *“Your concern with developing the land should be greater than your concern with collecting taxes, for the latter can only be obtained by developing; where as he who seeks revenue without development destroys the country and the people.”*

3. Team Membership: *“Seek the company of the learned and the wise in search of solving the problems of your country and the righteousness of your people.”*

4. Active Participation: *“No good can come in keeping silent as to government or in speaking out of ignorance.”*

5. Characters of Leaders: *“The righteous are men of virtue, whose logic is straightforward, whose dress is unostentatious, whose path is modest, whose actions are many and who is undeterred by difficulties.”*

6. Traits First: *“Choose the best among your people to administer justice among them. Choose someone who does not easily give up, who is unruffled by enmities, someone who*

will not persist in wrongdoing, who will not hesitate to pursue right once he knows it, someone whose heart knows no greed, who will not be satisfied with a minimum of explanation without seeking the maximum of understanding, who will be the most steadfast when doubt is cast, who will be the least impatient in correcting the opponent, the most patient in pursuing the truth, the most stern in meting out judgment; someone who is unaffected by flattery and not swayed by temptation and these are but few.”

“The Ashtar Covenant” provides advices related to dealings with people from all walks of life. I choose those related to public servants. Imam Ali outlined characteristics for each category and related tasks. The major highlights are:

a) Ministers

Imam Ali said to Malek Al Ashtar: “Your worst ministers will be the men who had been ministers to the despotic rulers before you and who had been a party of atrocities committed by them. Such persons should not be taken into your confidence and should not be trusted because they have aided sinners and have assisted tyrants and cruel rulers” “One more thing about ministers: You must remember not to select them for very important posts and not to trust them completely simply because you have found them honest, diligent, trustworthy and intelligent and have formed a good opinion about them because there are some people who, when it suits them, pretend honesty, diligence and fidelity and can put on the garb of piety and virtue and thus find their ways in the hearts of the rulers, though actually they are neither honest nor diligent nor wise nor sagacious.”

b) Advisors

Imam Ali directed Malek Al Ashtar not to accept the advice of misers as “they will try their best to keep you away from acts of kindness and from doing well to others. They will make you frightened of poverty. Similarly he warned him against the advice of cowards “because they will make you timid in enforcing your orders, will scare you from handling important affairs boldly and will make your enterprises and invasions timid and timorous attempts. He also directed him to avoid greedy and covetous advisors as they

would “teach you how to exploit the community and how to oppress people to get their wealth.”

c) Senior employees

Imam Ali says to Malek: “You must supervise their (employees’) work. They must be appointed after a careful scrutiny of their capabilities and characters. These appointments must be made originally on probation without any kind of nepotism being shown or influence being accepted. Otherwise tyranny, corruption and misrule will reign in your State.”

d) Observation and Control

Imam Ali directs Malek to “appoint trustworthy and honest men to keep a watch over the activities of these officers. The knowledge that they are being watched will keep them away from dishonesty, misrule, malpractice and tyrannizing the subjects”. He also stressed the importance of being in permanent contact with his people: “Don’t stay away from your people for long.”

e) Fairness

Imam Ali says: “Keep them (your employees) also well-paid so that they may not be tempted to lower their standard of morality”. Imam Ali stresses clarifying expectations from employees “Appoint the role of employees by which you will hold them to account later for.”

Conclusion

Justice is one of the pillars of Islam. It starts with a degree of individual sensation then grows towards the group. Subsequently, justice nurtures within the society. Stewardship on earth requires attaining Justice, thus being at harmony with the universe.

Individuals are responsible for the welfare of the society according to the Prophetic principle: *“You are all pastors and every pastor is responsible for his congregation”*. In Islam, justice is equaled to faith and faith is never complete but with good intentions as well as actions. Intentions are as important as deeds though “every arrow does not hit the mark, nor every prayer granted” as per Imam Ali but “a man’s worth depends upon the nobility of his aspirations”. But as actions speak louder than words socio-economic justice is reconfirmed in the Prophetic rule: *“He who sleeps sated and his neighbor is hungry doesn’t believe in God and the Day After”*. Governance in Islam is all about justice. Deeds are the tool to attain that. Through them human beings laboriously seek the realization of God’s will – being his mirror image and viceroy on earth.

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