

Leadership, Consultation and Decision Making

Allah says in the Qur'an :

You who have iman!¹ obey Allah and obey the Messenger
and those in command among you.

If you have a dispute about something,
refer it back to Allah and the Messenger,
if you have iman in Allah and the Last Day.

That is the best thing to do and gives the best result. (*Qur'an* : 4. 58)

Abdullah ibn 'Umar reported that the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, "Each of you is a shepherd and each of you is responsible for his flock. The amir² who is over the people is a shepherd and is responsible for his flock; a man is a shepherd in charge of the members of his household and he is responsible for his flock; a woman is a shepherdess in charge of her husband's house and children and she is responsible for them; and a man's servant is a shepherd in charge of his master's property and he is responsible for it. So each of you is a shepherd and each of you is responsible for his flock." (*Sunan of Imam Abu Dawud*: 13.1089.2922).

Ibn 'Umar reported that 'Umar said, "I shall not appoint a successor, for the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, did not appoint any successor, although I could appoint a successor, for Abu Bakr appointed a successor." He (Ibn 'Umar) said, "I swear by Allah, he did not mention anyone except the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, and Abu Bakr. So I learnt that he would not equate anyone with the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, for he did not appoint any successor." (*Sunan of Imam Abu Dawud*: 13.1096.2933).

'Abd'ar-Rahman ibn Samurah said, "The Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said to me, "Abd'ar-Rahman ibn Samurah, do not ask for the position of amir, for if you are given it after asking you will be left to discharge it yourself, but if you are given it without asking you will be helped to discharge it." (*Sunan of Imam Abu Dawud*: 13.1090.2923).

Malik related to me from 'Abdullah ibn Dinar that 'Abdullah ibn 'Umar said, "When we took an oath of allegiance with him to hear and obey, the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said to us, 'In what you are able.'" (*Al-Muwatta* of Imam Malik : 55.1.1).

Malik related to me from Muhammad ibn al-Munkadir that Umayma bint Ruqayqa said, "I went to the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, with the women who took an oath of allegiance with him in Islam. They said, 'Messenger of Allah! We take a pledge with you not to associate anything with Allah, not to steal, not to commit adultery, not to kill our children, nor to produce any lie that we have devised between our hands and feet, and not to disobey you in what is known.' The Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, 'In what you can do and are able.'"

Umayma continued, “They said, ‘Allah and His Messenger are more merciful to us than ourselves. Come, let us give our hands to you, Messenger of Allah!’ The Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, ‘I do not shake hands with women. My word to a hundred women is like my word to one woman.’” (*Al-Muwatta* of Imam Malik : 55.1.2).

Malik related to me from ‘Abdullah ibn Dinar that ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Umar wrote to ‘Abd’al-Malik ibn Marwan, making an oath of allegiance. He wrote, “In the Name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate. To the slave of Allah, ‘Abd’al-Malik, the amir al-mu‘minin,³ Peace be upon you. I praise Allah to you. There is no god but Him. I acknowledge your right to my hearing and my obedience according to the sunna⁴ of Allah and the sunna of His Prophet, in what I am able.” (*Al-Muwatta* of Imam Malik : 55.1.3).

Nafi‘ reported that ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Umar visited ‘Abdullah ibn Muti‘ in the days at Harra in the time of Yazid ibn Mu‘awiya. Ibn Muti‘ said, “Place a cushion for Abu ‘Abd’ar-Rahman,” but he replied, “I have not come to sit with you. I have come to you to tell you a hadith⁵ which I heard from the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace. I heard him say, ‘Whoever withdraws his hand from obedience will have no excuse when he stands before Allah on the Day of Judgment, and whoever dies without having bound himself by an oath of allegiance will die the death of one belonging to the days of the Jahiliya.’”⁶ (*Sahih* of Imam Muslim: 766.4562).

The basic Islamic model of governance as exemplified by the Salaf⁷ is that where there is a group of Muslims – whether it be the Umma,⁸ or a country, or a region, or a town, or a community, or a family – a leader should be chosen from amongst its members. After shura,⁹ consultation, it is the leader who makes the final decision. This decision may reflect a unanimous view, a majority view, or a minority view – but ultimately it is up to the leader to decide which view is followed, not a majority vote.

The sunna is to accept the leader’s decision, provided it is within the boundaries of what is acceptable to Allah, even if a person ‘accepting’ the decision does not agree with it. If a leader’s decision contradicts the sunna and shari‘a,¹⁰ then there is no obligation to follow it.

There can be various levels of consultation, depending on what has to be decided. In the normal course of events, it would be for the leader to decide what level of consultation was necessary.

Needless to say, the Islamic model only works well in practice where there is trust between members of the group and trust in the leader of the group. A good leader is one who is loved, respected and feared. Only a leader who loves and fears Allah is loved and feared by those who love and fear Allah.

Islamic history indicates that there have been both good and bad khalifs¹¹ and amirs – and that their terms of office have always been subject to their having the support of a majority of the members of the communities of which they have been leaders.

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Notes:

¹ *iman*: belief, faith, acceptance in the heart of Allah and His Messenger. Iman consists of believing in Allah, His angels, His Books, His Messengers, the Last Day, the Garden and the Fire, and that everything, both good and bad, is by the decree of Allah.

² *amir*: the one who commands, the source of authority in any situation; a ruler, a military commander, a governor, a leader.

³ *amir al-mu'minin*: the commander of the believers, a title usually given to the *khalif*; *mu'minin* is the plural of *mu'min*, a believer, someone who possesses *iman*, who trusts in Allah (see note ¹²).

⁴ *sunna*: the customary practice of a person or group of people. It has come to refer almost exclusively to the practice of the Messenger of Allah and of the first generation of Muslims.

⁵ *hadith*: reported speech of the Prophet.

⁶ *Jahiliya*: the time before the coming of the Prophet and the revelation of the Qur'an.

⁷ *Salaf*: the early generations of the Muslims.

⁸ *Umma*: the body of Muslims as one distinct Community.

⁹ *shura*: consultation. In early Islamic history, this designates the board of six electors constituted by 'Umar before he died to elect his successor from amongst themselves. Thereafter *shura* variously designated a council of state, or advisers to the sovereign, a parliament (in modern times), and sometimes a court of law with jurisdiction over claims made by citizens and public officials against the government.

¹⁰ *shari'a*: lit. road, the legal modality of a people based on the Revelation of their Prophet. The final *Shari'a* is that of Islam.' Islam can be defined briefly as: 'submission to the will of Allah, the way of life embodied by all of the Prophets, given its final form in the guidance brought by the Prophet Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace.'

¹¹ *khalif*: (the Arabic is *khalifa*, plural *khulafa*); Caliph. Someone who stands in for someone else, in this case the leader of the Muslim community, although it is sometimes used for the deputy of someone in a higher position of authority.

¹² *iman*: belief, faith, acceptance in the heart of Allah and His Messenger. Iman consists of believing in Allah, His angels, His Books, His Messengers, the Last Day, the Garden and the Fire, and that everything, both good and bad, is by the decree of Allah.

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