

The Establishment of Islamic Khilafah: How the Classical and Modern Scholars Interpret its Functions

Fadzli Adam

Associate Professor, Faculty of Islamic Contemporary Studies,
Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Malaysia

Abstract: The word 'leader' in the early Muslim society was commonly associated with the term khalifah or imam. Islam perceived that its community was in need for a leader that served the function of Muslim affairs. Due to this notion, an elected Muslim khalifah or imam, starting from the period of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) until now, was appointed to uphold the implementation of Islamic law. Indeed, the existence of a khalifah or imam in the community certainly facilitated the implementation of various functions as addressed by many Sunni and Shi'i scholars. Thus, the objectives of this paper were twofold which aimed to highlight the importance of caliphate in the history of Muslim civilization and to put forward argument by Sunni and Shii scholars on the function of Islamic khilafah in the Muslim world.

Key words: Khalifah • Classical • Modern • Muslim scholars • Imam • Islam • Sunni • Shi'i

INTRODUCTION

The early Muslim community believed that it benefited from ideal leadership under the divine guidance given to the Prophet Muhammad. But the organization of Muslim society became problematic with the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 11/632: some Muslims apostatized and others refused to pay zakat (alms tax). However, stability was restored by the appointment of Abu Bakr (11/632-13/634), the first of the four rightly-guided caliphs in 11/632 as the khalifat rasul Allah at a general meeting held in Saqifah Bani Sa'idah [1]. After Abu Bakr's death, another three caliphs, 'Umar (13/634-23/644), 'Uthman (23/644-35/656) and 'Ali (35/656-40/661) were given the responsibility to lead the Muslim community. The khilafah of these four caliphs was based on several procedures such as designation, shura (consultation) and bay'ah (pledge of allegiance). This circumstances provided significant evidence of how important the appointment of a trusted khalifah in the early Muslim community in serving various functions and duties to the people.

Many views and writings from various Muslim perspectives agree to the notion of the necessity of having one particular leader in the Muslim community.

Both Sunni and Shi'i scholars have agreed on this principle, except that they have argued over who should have been elected after the death of the Prophet. In spite of this theoretical disagreement, they have generally justified the necessity of leadership based on its functional importance: leadership is necessary in order to implement the shari'ah of Allah and preserve justice and order in the Muslim community. In other words, the khilafah is certainly essential and is an outgrowth of the phenomenon of the community and its dynamism and complexity. It was both natural and logical that the establishment of the Muslim community should necessitate some form of leadership, as has been argued by Manzooruddin Ahmed [2]:

Once the moral and psychological foundations of the ummah are laid on the primordial covenant between man and God, the next step in developing the ummah is the emergence of organised authority.

The function of this organized authority is to facilitate the further development of the ummah and to achieve various goals and objectives. The Prophet and his Companions succeeded in effectively fulfilling this role and therefore it follows that later generations should do the same for the benefit of the Muslim community.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This article that highlighted the importance of establishing caliphate office in the Muslim community is written based on the qualitative method using content analysis approach. In this study, an overview of Islamic caliphate history during the early Muslim community is elaborated based on the available literatures. Many writings regarding the history of Islamic caliphate from both Sunni and Shi'i scholars did narrate the historical facts during golden Islamic era starting from the period of early Islam conveyed by the prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) until the era of the Ottoman Caliphate in Constantinople. The analysis also presented some arguments by Muslim scholars on the functions of the khalifah with special quotation from Sunni and Shi'i scholars. Apart from that, the relationship and conflict between Sunni and Shi'i in the process of upholding the khalifah's function in the Muslim community was also significantly discussed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Functions of the Khalifah/imam According to Classical Muslim Scholars: A number of classical Muslim scholars have explored the functions of the khalifah. The existence of a khalifah or imam in the Muslim community certainly facilitated the implementation of various functions. Without these functions, the position of imam is superfluous. Although the functions may vary according to the situation and condition of the society itself, the implementation of certain religious functions, such as the practice of justice and observance of the divine laws, is considered one of the fundamental duties of the caliph.

According to historical evidence, the first two khalifahs were persons who exercised wide authority in matters of war and peace. They are believed to have had the final say in the interpretation of the revealed text of the Qur'an and the practice of the Messenger of Allah. In addition, they successfully implemented the right and duty to lead and establish prayer and to settle disputes. In other words, they were responsible for all legislative, executive, judicial and military authority. While the caliph was absent, the implementation of these functions was vested in his representative. However, only the khalifah could delegate some of these functions to commanders of armies or qadis and any authority not derived from him was invalid [3].

According to the common doctrine of the Sunnis, the duties of the imam were defined in the writings of Arnold [4] and Madelung [5] as:

Guarding the faith against heterodoxy, enforcing law and justice between disputing parties, dispensing legal punishments (hudud), protection of peace in the territory of Islam and its defence against external enemies, conducting the jihad against those resisting the supremacy of Islam, receiving the legal alms, taxes and the fifth of booty, distributing the revenue in accordance with the law and the appointment of reliable and sincere men in delegating authority.

The majority of Sunni scholars acknowledged these functions; there were also several other duties, which for the purpose of space, have not been discussed here. In order to show the agreement of the majority of Sunni scholars, we will cite and discuss their observations regarding the functions of the khilafah. One of those scholars is al-Mawardi, who defined the establishment of the khilafah as being for the purpose of replacing prophecy in the defence of the faith and the administration of the world [6]. He further underlined the functions of the khalifah as quoted by Behzadi [7].

The defence and maintenance of religion, the decision of legal disputes, the protection of the territory of Islam, the punishment of wrong-doers, the provision of troops for guarding the frontiers, the waging of jihad against those who refused to accept Islam or submit to Muslim rule, the organisation and collection of taxes, the payment of salaries and the administration of public funds, the appointment of competent officials and lastly, personal attention to the details of government.

Al-Ghazali [8] also stressed the fundamental function of the khalifah in the Muslim ummah, claiming that, unfortunately, the justification of its function was being misused during his time and the legitimisation of rights was acquired by force. In general, al-Ghazali held that the caliphate system at that time was merely based on military power, due to the fact that the ruling caliph decided the function according to his own interests.

We consider that the function of the caliphate is contractually assumed by that person of the 'Abbasid house who is charged with it and that the function of government in the various lands is carried out by means of sultans, who owe allegiance to the caliphate. Government in these days is a consequence solely of military power and whosoever he may be to whom the possessor of military power gives his allegiance, that person is the caliph [9].

Ibn Khaldun went further, as he assumed that the main function of the khalifah was to represent the Prophet, but as he would not receive revelation, his prime duty was to maintain the practices instituted by the Prophet. This view is in accordance with the perception of the title 'khalifat rasul Allah' (the caliph of the Messenger of Allah) used by the first four khalifas of Islam. In addition, he must perform other relevant duties of the Prophet. Regarding this view of the caliph, Ibn Khaldun noted.

The khalifa is the representative (na'ib) of the Prophet, the exponent of the divinely inspired law (shari'ah) and his functions are the protection of religion and government of the world; he must belong to the tribe of the Kuraysh and possess the other personal qualifications laid down by al-Mawardi [10].

Moreover, He Clarified the Caliph's Function in Terms of the Implementation of Religious Law: It should be known that all the religious functions of the religious law, such as prayer, the office of judge, the office of mufti, the holy war and market supervision (hisbah) fall under the "great imamate", which is the caliphate [11].

In fact, the functions of the caliph between the 2nd/8th and the 4th/10th centuries, that is, during the golden age of the 'Abbasids, are easily determined using information found in the classical records. The caliph was then seen as the guardian of dogma and in this capacity opposed any action leading towards bid'ah (heresy). He was thus permitted to play a part in the formulation of doctrine, but did not participate in the formulation of law [12]. Many examples of this situation may be cited from historical events of that time, such as al-Mahdi's (d. 785) order to persecute the atheists (zindiqs). Another example is that of al-Ma'mun's (d. 833) preference and enforcement of the Mu'tazilite doctrines. In 833, the caliph instituted the mihna (inquisition) partly in order to enforce his claim to legal absolutism. Moreover, the mihna was also used by the caliph to promote his dogma of the 'created' Qur'an. Only the supporters of this dogma were permitted to official positions [1].

Theoretically, the caliph should be an excellent individual, worthy to conduct the Friday Prayers. In the same way, the caliph was expected to lead the military expeditions against infidelity, as personally performed by Harun al-Rashid (d. 809) and al-Ma'mun. He is also responsible to lead campaigns against rebels; but normally delegated this task to an effective regent when it had to deal with particularly forceful enemies.

The maintenance of order was in fact one of the normal obligations of the caliph, who was obliged to defend the community against all types of subversion. It was also the caliph who was obliged eventually to deal with those governors who demanded financial autonomy and the hereditary status of their office. Furthermore, it was his duty to ensure the nomination of his successor, as the practice had been established since the start of the Umayyad caliphate. Finally, the caliph ensured the wellbeing of the state, though this concept was to some extent ignored in the middle period of Islam [12].

The Shi'is, on the other hand, did not discuss the functions of the imam in detail. Momen [13] noted that the Shi'is were mainly inclined to the imamate of 'Ali b. Abi Talib and his descendants, of which they were held to have been deprived by the Umayyads. To conclude the discussion, we can say that the majority of Muslim sects agree on the importance of the caliph's or imam's functions in society. Although there have been disagreements about some particular aspects, it should be noted that none of these differences deny the essential function of the caliph. The Shi'is, as well as the Sunnis, acknowledge these functions although they do not discuss this matter thoroughly in their examination of the concept of imamah.

The Functions of the Khalifah/imam According to Modern Muslim Scholars: Compared with the classical justifications of the functions of a khalifah, the moderns' views seem to be more simple and easily predicted, but they tend to be influenced by the spirit of the re-emergence of the Islamic caliphate. Consequently, the modern scholars particularly stress the importance of the khalifah's functions and duties in the Muslim ummah. Among these scholars was Muhammad Rashid Rida (d. 1935), who totally agreed with the classical justification of the necessity of the khilafah according to divine source (nass), hadith, ijma' of the Companions and rational consideration. He believed that without the office of khilafah, the law cannot be enforced and the welfare of the community will not be protected [14]. Moreover, he was firmly convinced that, through the restoration of the khilafah, the unity and identity of Islam as well as its defence against its enemies would be preserved. Rida shared the opinion of his master, Muhammad 'Abduh and of the classical scholars, that the khilafah was the substitution for the prophethood (nubuwwah). Leading the people, protecting them and guiding them towards their eternal destiny are among the khalifah's functions [15], as he underlined.

It is his function to protect Islam from innovation and to promote its law and beliefs, with the aid of the community, which is given through the process of consultation [16].

Believing that it was essential to re-institute a form of Islamic khilafah, Rida proposed a plan for the reform of the caliphate during the turbulent first quarter of the twentieth century. Following this call by him and other intellectuals, a caliphal congress was held in Cairo and Mecca in 1925, the year after the abolition of the Ottoman caliphate. However, it was an unsuccessful effort since the congress decided to drop the matter until circumstances became more favourable. This decision caused the initial rejection of a plan presented to the congress recommending the full restoration of the caliphate.

Abu A'la al-Mawdudi, the founder of Jama'at-i Islami in the Indian sub-continent, was another important figure concerned with the significance of the khalifah's duty and function in the Muslim ummah. His real role, according to al-Mawdudi, is to protect the religion and the territory of the Islamic state and to put an end to all evils; his more basic function is to foster a balanced system of social justice and encourage every kind of virtuous deed. Al-Mawdudi also promoted the theory of the 'great man', whereby the notion of the necessity of leadership is a logical outgrowth of the theory of social change. According to this theory, the character of a social order flows entirely from the top down to the bottom [17]. This indicates that the establishment of the society and the achievement of its goals are determined according to the credibility of its leaders. Therefore, the moral and religious qualities of a leader are more important than socio-economic, political and institutional considerations in ensuring the achievement of the goals of the society.

It seemed obvious to al-Mawdudi that the existence of inequality and injustice in a society is a result of the leader's lack of religious and moral orientation. If this situation occurs in a society, al-Mawdudi recommends that the inadequate leader should be replaced by a better one. The need for a good and religiously oriented leader who can fulfil his responsibilities is strongly emphasised by al-Mawdudi [18].

Ali Shari'ati (1933-77), a prominent and distinguished modern Iranian Shi'i scholar, also supported the idea of the importance of leadership. In addition, he argued that the Muslim community has its special goals, which are only achievable under the supervision of an elected leader. However, the achievement of the goals of the

ummah can be ensured by a harmonious and peaceful administration and so the leader must produce a clear vision and practical strategies. For their part, the followers must give him their full support and unequivocal obedience, as had been done by the first generation of Muslims. Shari'ati [19] justified this idea by saying.

Imamah is the leadership of the ummah towards its common goals. Hence, the necessity of the imam is one hundred percent implicit in the notion of ummah.

Accordingly, he reinterpreted the functions of the imam, in radically modernistic fashion, as quoted by Algar [20].

A committed and revolutionary leadership, responsible for the movement and growth of society on the basis of its worldview and ideology and for the realisation of the divine destiny of man in the plan of creation.

Ayatollah Khomeini (1902-89), the leading figure in the Iranian Revolution of 1979, asserted that the appointed imam is vested with particular duties and functions. First of all, he is the person who administers the office of imamah and thus determines the smoothness of its functioning. Furthermore, the implementation of the divine laws (shari'ah) is also one of his main duties. In fact, Khomeini stresses that no community could manage to undertake the practice of shari'ah without the existence of an imam. Consequently, the development of Islam as a religion and the expansion of its empire could not take place. In other words, the implementation of the shari'ah and the dissemination of Islam can only be preserved by a securely established imamah. With regard to some of the functions and duties shouldered by an imam, Mozaffari [21] quoted a statement by Khomeini which says.

The just imams and jurisconsults (fuqaha') are under the obligation to utilise the organisation and the formation of the government to apply divine prescriptions, establish the equitable regime of Islam and serve the people.

Khomeini [22] believed that his right to the title of imam was entirely based on the fulfilment of the above duties. While leading the revolution from his exile, Khomeini broke sharply with Shi'i traditions and sometimes borrowed radical rhetoric from foreign sources, including Marxism. He also presented a bold appeal to the public based not on theological themes, but on real economic, social and political grievances. In other words, he transformed Shi'ism from a conservative, quietist faith into a militant political ideology that challenged both the imperial powers and the country's upper class [23].

Despite many views that support the need for the khalifah and his office, modelled upon the ideal caliphate of the four rightly-guided caliphs, its necessity is sometimes completely denied. A very controversial view is that advanced by the Egyptian, ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Raziq (1888-1966) in his treatise *al-Islam wa usul al-hukm* (Islam and the Principles of Government) published in 1925, asserting the separation between religion and political power. He took full advantage of the abolition of the Ottoman caliphate in Turkey to launch a forceful attack on the entire traditional school of Islamic political thought. He contests the views of not only the orthodox ‘ulama’, but also modernists like Rashid Rida [24]. ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Raziq’s central argument is that the caliphate has no basis, whether in the Qur’an, the traditions or the consensus (ijma’). He argues that the Qur’an nowhere makes any mention of the khalifah in the specific sense of the political institution known in history and, therefore, Muslims are not bound to accept its establishment. In presenting his argument, he deals in detail with the major pieces of evidence, which are normally drawn from these three sources to establish the obligatory nature of the caliphate [25].

CONCLUSION

Muslim world does not put serious criticism against the need of establishing Islamic caliphate as it has been fully exposed through authoritative sources namely the Qur’anic verses, the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, his companions’ views and the verdicts of many great scholars. All arguments against its necessity are baseless and without foundation and that Muslims are required to accept wholeheartedly the duty of establishing Islamic caliphate. Due to the importance of its establishment, our discussion concluded that the main function of appointing a khalifah or imam in the Muslim community is to implement the shari’ah of Allah and preserve justice and order in the Muslim community. Difference of views between classical Muslims scholars and modern Muslims scholars regarding the roles of khalifah or imam in Muslims community has existed and argued until present days. The classical scholars believed that the functions of khalifah may vary according to the situation and condition of the society itself, the implementation of certain religious functions such as the practice of justice and observance of the divine laws. On the other hand, from the modern scholars, they expressed that the functions of khalifah is someone who lead, protect and guide the Muslims towards Islam.

REFERENCE

1. Crone, Patricia and Hinds, Martin, 1986. *God’s Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam*, Cambridge, New York, Port Chester, Melbourne and Sydney: Cambridge University Press.
2. Ahmed, Manzooruddin, 1971. Key Political Concepts in the Qur’an, *Islamic Studies*, 10(2): 85.
3. Ishaque, Khalid, M., 1965. *Al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyyah: Laws of Government in Islam*, *Islamic Studies*, 4(3): 275-314.
4. Arnold, Thomas, 1965. *The Caliphate*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press.
5. Madelung, W., 1971. Imama, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 3: 1163-1169.
6. Rosenthal, E.I.J., 1973. The Role of the State in Islam: Theory and the Medieval Practice, *Der Islam*, 50: 1-28.
7. Behzadi, Hamid, 1971. The Principle of Legitimacy and Its Influence Upon the Muslim Political Theory, *Islamic Studies*, 10(4): 275-290.
8. Al-Ghazali, Abu Hamid Muhammad, 1988. *Al-Iqtisad fil-Itiqad*, Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah.
9. Enayat, Hamid, 1982. *Modern Islamic Political Thought: The Response of the Shi’i and Sunni Muslims to the Twentieth Century*, London and Basingstoke: The MacMillan Press Ltd.
10. Arnold, Thomas, 1987. Khalifa, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 4: 881-885.
11. Ibn Khaldun, 1958. *The Muqaddimah*, trans. F Rosenthal, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
12. Sourdel, D., 1978. Khalifa: The History of the Institution of the Caliphate, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 4: 937-947.
13. Momen, Moojan, 1985. *An Introduction to Shi’i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi’ism*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
14. Kerr Malcolm, H. 1966. *Islamic Reform: the Political and Legal Theories of Muhammad ‘Abduh and Rashid Rida*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
15. Seferta Yusuf, H.R. 1986. The Concept of Religious Authority According to Muhammad ‘Abduh and Rashid Rida, *Islamic Studies*, 30(3): 162.
16. Seferta, Yusuf, H.R., 1985. Rashid Rida’s Quest for an Islamic Government, *Hamdard Islamicus* (HI), 8(4): 40.
17. Adams, J. Charles, 1983. *Maududi and the Islamic State. Voices of Resurgent Islam*, J. L. Esposito, New York: Oxford University Press, pp: 99-133.
18. Maududi, Abu Ala, 1967. *Islamic Law and Constitution*, trans. Khurshid Ahmad, Lahore: Islamic Publication, pp: 1967.

19. Shariati, Ali, n.d. *Ummat va Imamat, Jab-al-high*, the collection of speeches (The Union of Islamic Societies in Europe, America and Canada).
20. Algar, Hamid, 1995. Imam, in *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Modern Islamic World*, ed. John L. Esposito, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp: 182-183.
21. Mozaffari, Mehdi, 1987. *Authority in Islam: From Muhammad to Khomeini*, New York, London: M.E. Sharpe, Inc.
22. Imam Khomeini, 1985. *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations*, trans. and annotated Hamid Algar, London: KPI Ltd.
23. Abrahamian, Ervand, 1993. *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*, London: I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd. Publishers.
24. Abd al-Raziq, Ali, 1966. *Al-Islam wa Usul al-Hukm: Bahth fil-Khilafah wal-Hukumah fil-Islam*, ed. Mamduh Haqqi, Beirut: Dar Maktabah bil-Hayah.
25. Abd al-Raziq, Ali, 1983. *The Caliphate as a Political Institution*, in *Contemporary Arab Political Thought*, ed. Anouar Abdel-Malek, trans. Michael Pallis,, London: Zed Books Ltd, pp: 41-44.