

Conditions and Procedures for the Selection of a Caliph or Imam in Islam

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Abstract

Islam is a complete and international religious which has the information and prediction regarding every aspect of life, it's a complete religion because it covers each and every affair a human life here and hereafter.

This study explores the Islamic outline for appointing a leader—Imam or Caliph—within the broader context of religious obligation, political authority, and legal responsibility. Drawing upon classical Islamic jurisprudence and historical precedents, it critically examines the role of Ahl al-Hall wa al-'Aqd, the lawfulness of leadership through consultation, and the legal need (or lack thereof) of witnesses in validating leadership. The study emphasizes that leadership in Islam is not based on hereditary succession or popular mass election, but rather on merit, consultation, and adherence to the Sharia.

This study is important for all Islamic and non-Islamic states, because Islam political system is a complete and reliable worldwide system, which has predicted each and every aspect of life, at the same time this study lets us know how leaders are appointed in Islamic society.

The aim of this study is to clarify the procedure of selecting a Muslim leader, and what are the requirements of Islamic Caliph.

We have conducted this study library based, we have tried our best to use the well-known citation format, after all we have studied well enough regarding literature review and have mentioned them as well.

The findings of the study shows that a leader can be appointed in Islam political system; Appointment by Ahl al-Hall wa al-'Aqd (People of Authority and Decision-Making), and the requirements for selecting a Muslim leader are: Islam, justice, Quirshi, masculinity, physically and mentally well, and mujtahid.

Key words: Islam, political, system, Imam.

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Aim of the Study

Each research is conducted for a specific aim, and the primary aim of this study is to analyze and clarify the Islamic principles and jurisprudential basis for appointing a Caliph or Imam, focusing on the roles and qualifications of *Ahl al-Ḥall wa al-ʿAqd*, the procedural legitimacy of appointment, the historical precedents from the time of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, and the scholarly opinions regarding the necessity of witnesses in the appointment process.

Research Methodology

This research is conducted based on library method, and employs a qualitative, descriptive-analytical methodology. It relies on primary sources, including the Qur'an, Hadith, and early Islamic historical accounts, as well as classical jurisprudential texts by scholars such as al-Māwardī, al-Qurṭubī, Ibn Taymiyyah, and Imam Nawawī. Contemporary academic contributions to Islamic political theory are also examined. The methodology involves textual analysis, comparative evaluation of juristic opinions, and interpretation of relevant events in early Islamic history.

Importance of the Study

This study is one of the foremost crucial studies to be discussed, because nowadays the world looks up the Muslims countries that are being involved in internal disputes and their authorities cannot answer the needs and necessities of their people, as the answer is clear enough. After all, they have left the rules and regulations of Islam political system aside and have governed as their own way.

In an age where governance models in Muslim societies are frequently debated, this study contributes by revisiting authentic Islamic principles regarding leadership, offering clarity on misconceptions about democracy, monarchy, and the Islamic model. It enables modern scholars, jurists, and policymakers to better understand the Islamic concept of legitimate authority and provides a framework for addressing leadership disputes and political fragmentation in the Muslim world.

Research Questions

1. What are the main Islamic principles governing the appointment of an Imam or Caliph?
2. What is the role and legitimacy of *Ahl al-Ḥall wa al-ʿAqd* in this procedure?
3. Is testimony (shahāda) by witnesses a necessary requirement for validating the leadership?
4. How Islamic leadership differs from democratic or monarchic systems?

Literature Review

Classical scholars such as al-Māwardī (d. 1058) in *Al-Aḥkām al-Sultāniyyah* emphasized the importance of consultation and outlined detailed criteria for leadership. Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328) and Imam Nawawī (d. 1277) examined the reality of de facto rulers and the legitimacy of authority under coercive conditions. Modern scholars, including al-Qaraḍāwī (b. 1926) and Haqqani (2011), have explored the continuity of Islamic leadership models in light of modern state structures.

Contemporary studies have debated the role of democracy and secular authority in Muslim-majority countries, highlighting tensions between traditional Islamic governance and Western political systems. This study positions itself within these debates, advocating for a return to scripturally and juristically grounded leadership principles.

1. Definition of the Islam Political System or Islamic Government

Islam political system is the combination of three terms (Islam, political and system), so we will discuss them individually and later on we will go to Islam political system.

1.1. Introduction to Islam

For the better understanding about Islam we are going to discuss its literally concept first then the definition of Islam.

a. **The literal meaning of Islam.** Literally Islam means submission, pay attention, or to comply¹.

b. **Definition of Islam.** As Islam is a comprehensive and inclusive term, that is why Islam has got lots of definitions, from all the definition I would better prefer the definition of Hazrat Muhammad peace and blessings of Allah be upon him that he has defined Islam while he was asked by Gabriel May Allah be pleased with him, so this definition is famed by the Gabriel Hadith.

1.2. Introduction to politics:

a. **Literal definition of politics:** the word politics basically comes from Arabic Language (س و س) and it is derived from ((سأس، يسوس، سياسه)) which means to manage, order, or to fix, it means to reform something for instance Arab people say (وست الرعيه سياسه) means that I have reformed the residents with politics².

b. **Definition of politics.** About the definition of politics , Imam –Ibn- -Al-Bejrami³ blessings of Allah be upon him, Imam –Ibn- Abidain Blessings of Allah be upon him and Imam –Ibn- Alqayum Blessings of Allah be upon him have defined politics differently, each and every definition is very better, meanwhile, Abdul Wahab Khelaf has extracted a single definition out of the above mentioned scholars' definitions, which is as follow:

(Legal politics is the managing of public activities for the state affairs to be attained and harms to be prevented , not to be contrary with the common principles of Sharia, no matter if these activities are not acceptable by the saying of scholars).

1.3. Introduction to system:

a. **Literal definition of system :**In Arabic language the synonym of system is (Nizam/نظام) which is taken from (نظم) regularity, means to tie and to manage , for instance to hold on the pearls in the sting⁴.

b. **Definition of system:** system is the collection of all those things that are tied and collected with each other firmly, and has the resistance and stability⁵.

The definition of Islam political system: is a comprehensive heavenly guidance strategy that the activities of here and hereafter are managed through it⁶.

2. Subject of the Islam Political System

The subject of the Islam political system is the enforcement of Allah's revealed law upon His servants on earth and the creation of His complete sovereignty. It also involves abolishing all man-made or tyrannical laws that deny divine legislation.

The aim of Islamic governance is to guarantee human welfare in both material and spiritual dimensions, uphold the rights of Allah and the rights of people, remove injustice and oppression, defend the weak from the hands of oppressors, promote Islamic da'wah, and create justice in its true form. It seeks to eliminate corruption, build a morally refined society on sound technical and ethical foundations, and implement Islamic values, civilization, and culture while eradicating all systems that oppose human dignity. (Gohar al-Rahman, 1390 AH)

3. Importance and Benefits of Islam Political System

Since human beings are created as Allah's vicegerents (khulafā') on earth, it is essential to establish governance so that religion can be upheld in society. Through governance, people's affairs are organized, enabling them to devote themselves to worship and the contentment of their religious duties in peace and order.

Classical academics like; Ibn al-Humām (d. 861 AH) emphasized that worldly governance—for instance, collecting capital legitimately and distributing it justly, eradicating injustice, and safeguarding rights—is a secondary goal that supports the primary goal of freeing people to fulfill their religious obligations.

Without governance, the concept of khilāfah cannot be realized, because the foundation of human vicegerency is the enforcement of Allah's commands and prohibitions. Therefore, people must unite under a leader who can handle their problems and get their disputes solved meanwhile apply divine laws, and ensure justice.

Exegetes such as Imam al-Ṭabarī cites from Ibn Mas'ūd and Ibn 'Abbās (may Allah be pleased with them) that the essence of khilāfah is ruling among people according to the command of Allah. The first vicegerent was Prophet Adam (peace be upon him), and every just ruler who applies divine law is considered his inheritor. (Haqqani, 1427 AH)

4. Qualities of the Imam or Caliph in the Islam Political System

In the Islam political system, the Caliph (Imam) is the leader of the Muslims who bears the responsibility of applying the Sharī'ah and guiding the people toward the Islam.

4.1. The Methods of Appointing Imam or Caliph in Islam political system

In an Islamic government, the appointment and selection of the leader of state (Imam or Caliph) is not stick to any specific legal or political convention. The leader is responsible for managing public affairs and certifying the well-being and interests of the nation within the context of his tasks. However, Islam outlines certain methods for selecting a leader of the Muslim Ummah, which include the following:

4.1.1. Appointment by Ahl al-Hall wa al-'Aqd (People of Authority and Decision-Making):

The Caliphate is not a inherited system as found in monarchies or dictatorial regimes, nor should it be handed over to the unqualified masses as often happens in democratic systems. Rather, the appointment must be carried out by knowledgeable and capable individuals—scholars and experts—through shared consultation (shūrā) with the Muslim community. If a limited group unilaterally selects a leader without community consultation, both the appointer and appointee risk being counted illegitimate, as implied by the statement of ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (may Allah be pleased with him).

4.1.2. Nomination by a Righteous Predecessor:

Another way involves a just Caliph choosing a successor from among a group of qualified personalities. This was experienced when Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq (may Allah be pleased with him) appointed ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (may Allah be pleased with him) as his successor. (Haqqani, 2011)

4.1.3. Appointment by a Designated Group via Will:

In this method, the incumbent Caliph appoints a group that possesses the necessary qualifications for leadership and advises that one among them be selected as the next Caliph after his death. However, this method is subject to scholarly disagreement and lacks consensus as well.

4.1.4. Witnesses for the Validity of the Selection

The legitimacy of the Caliph’s employment may require the presence of witnesses. Some scholars declare that valid testimony is needed, especially to ensure certainty and prevent future disagreements. Others claim that since there is no explicit textual evidence (naṣṣ) demanding witness testimony, it is not mandatory. Those who require witnesses usually stipulate at least two or four individuals, including the appointer, the appointee, and a few others present during the appointment ceremony. ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb delegated the responsibility of appointing the next Caliph to a six-member council. Among them, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn ‘Awf role was as the contracting agent, selecting ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān as Caliph, while the remaining four acted as witnesses. Some scholars infer from this that a minimum of two witnesses suffices, while others claim on four. After all, this inference is weak, as noted by scholars such as al-Qurṭubī and Ibn Kathīr. (al-Qamāsh, 2009)

4.1.5. The importance and need of witnesses:

- a) Justice: Witnesses must be upright and reliable in their religious and personal affairs.
- b) Capability: They must own a sound understanding of the qualifications for leadership.
- c) Multiplicity: Typically, two to four witnesses are considered enough for credibility.
- d) Faith: Witnesses must be Muslims who are well-informed about the principles of Islam and committed to truthfulness.

These factors underscore the significance of witnesses in legitimizing leadership in accordance with Islamic jurisprudence.

Some scholars oppose the requirement of witnesses on the grounds that there is no

definitive proof necessitating them. Others support the requirement to prevent future claims that the appointment occurred secretly or without consensus, which could lead to division and conflict.

4.1.6. Obedience to Two Contending Leaders (Mutaghallibīn)

According to Imam Nawawī, the statement “Obey him in what is obedience to Allah” indicates that obedience is obligatory even if the ruler seized power by force, without consultation or formal agreement. (al-Qamāsh, 2009)

However, Islamic teachings do not allow obedience to two leaders simultaneously. The existence of two simultaneous Imams opposes the fundamental principles of Islamic governance. Some may cite the dual allegiance given to both ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and Mu‘āwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān (may Allah be pleased with them) as justification, but this is not a valid argument. The legitimate Caliph was ‘Alī, and Mu‘āwiyah’s entitlement to leadership was a result of his own *ijtihād* (independent reasoning), which scholars like Imam Nawawī described as an error, albeit sincere, supported by the people of Shām (Syria).

4.1.7. The Role of the Majority among Ahl al-Hall wa al-‘Aqd (اهل العقد)

It is important that the majority of the *Ahl al-Hall wa al-‘Aqd* support the appointed leader. The following narration supports this:

“Know that the hadith indicates that the legitimacy of the Caliph is tied to the majority of the Muslim community. If only one, two, or three individuals pledge allegiance, this is not sufficient unless the majority—or at least the majority of the *Ahl al-Hall wa al-‘Aqd*—agree.” (Harawī, 2015)

In *Al-Aḥkām al-Sulṭāniyyah*, it is narrated:

“As for the appointment through the choice of *Ahl al-Hall wa al-‘Aqd*, it is only valid when the majority of them agree. Imam Aḥmad, as narrated by Ishāq ibn Ibrāhīm, said: ‘The Imam is the one whom all of the *Ahl al-Hall wa al-‘Aqd* agree upon.’ This implies that the leadership is legitimate when chosen by their consensus, and absolute majority agreement is needed”

5. Conditions of Leadership (Imamate) in Islam

The Caliph (Imam) must be a distinguished personality in terms of experience, knowledge, justice, piety, and capability. Since the Islamic state is fundamentally an ideological and principled state, both Shariah and reason necessitate that its leader should embody Islam in both thought and practice. At the very least, he must meet the basic conditions of being a righteous believer. Classical scholars, based on textual and rational evidence, have mentioned the following requirements:

5.1. The one who leads the Muslim community must be Muslim.

The foremost and fundamental condition is that the ruler must be a Muslim. The Qur’an commands:

(يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا أَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا الرَّسُولَ وَأُولِي الْأَمْرِ مِنْكُمْ (النساء، 59)

Translation: “O you who believe! Obey Allah and obey the Messenger, and those in authority from among you.” (Qur’an 4:59)

The phrase “from among you” indicates that the leader must be a believer, as non-Muslims cannot be granted authority over Muslims. Furthermore, obedience to rulers is only obligatory as long as they themselves obey Allah and His Messenger.

5.2. The Caliph must be male

The Qur’an states:

الرِّجَالُ قَوَّامُونَ عَلَى النِّسَاءِ بِمَا فَضَّلَ اللَّهُ بَعْضَهُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ وَبِمَا أَنْفَقُوا مِنْ أَمْوَالِهِمْ (النساء، 34)

Translation: “Men are the guardians and maintainers of women, because Allah has given one more strength than the other, and because they support them with their wealth.” (Qur’an 4:34)

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) also said, upon hearing that the Persians had appointed the daughter of Kisra as their ruler: “A nation that entrusts its affairs to a woman will never prosper.” (Bukhari, 1423 AH)

Islamic scholars have reached consensus that women cannot hold the position of Caliph. This is not a matter of belittling women but rather a recognition of the distinct natural roles assigned by Shariah. Leadership in prayer, Friday gatherings, Eid congregations, and the battlefield are responsibilities given to men due to their physical and social suitability.

5.3. The Muslim leader must be physically sound

The ruler should be free from physical disabilities that would hamper his ability to lead. Leadership entails heavy responsibilities, including governance, military command, and the management of public affairs. The Qur’an mentions in the story of Tālūt: “Allah has increased him abundantly in knowledge and stature.” (Qur’an 2:247) Thus, physical capability is a necessary condition.

5.4. The Imam must be mature (بالغ)

Since accountability in Shariah begins at puberty, a minor cannot handle leadership. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said:

“The pen is lifted from three: from the sleeper until he wakes up, from the child until he reaches puberty, and from the insane until he regains sanity.” (Abu Dawud, 1409 AH)

If a child cannot manage his own wealth, he cannot be entrusted with the affairs of an entire community as well.

5.5. The Imam must have intellectual soundness (عقل)

Leadership requires wisdom, understanding, and intellectual soundness. A mentally ill person cannot manage his self so, he is totally unable to govern on others also. Ibn Hāzim stated that the ruler is appointed to lead prayer, collect zakat, enforce laws, and defend Islam—all responsibilities that demand intelligence and competence.

5.6. The Imam should be from Quraysh tribe

The majority of Ahl al-Sunnah scholars consider Qurayshi lineage a requirement for the Caliphate, based on authentic reports in which the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “The leaders shall be from Quraysh.” (Musnad Ahmad, Sahih Muslim). However,

if the Quraysh fail to maintain justice, scholars agree that a non-Qurayshi may assume leadership if he possesses the required qualities of faith, knowledge, and justice.

5.7. The Muslim Imam must be a Mujtahid (مجتهد)

Since the ruler is accountable for implementing Shariah, he must possess knowledge and the ability of ijtihad (independent juristic reasoning). The Qur'an refers to the capacity of istinbat (استنباط):

"...If they had referred it to the Messenger or to those in authority among them, those who are able to draw conclusions would have understood it." (Qur'an 4:83)

Though some later scholars allowed a non-mujtahid to be an Imam, they stressed that such a ruler must surround himself with qualified jurists.

5.8. The Imam of Muslim be experienced and must sound judgment

The Caliph should be wise, farsighted, and able of preservation the interests of the community. He must also be familiar with military affairs to defend the Muslim lands and repel aggressors.

5.9. The Imam of Muslim must enforce the Hudud (penal laws) without any fear

A true leader must not hesitate or fear in implementing divine laws, ensuring justice and security for all. The protection of rights and freedoms requires firm and impartial application of the Shariah.

5.10. The Imam must be just (عادل)

Justice is one of the core basics of the Islamic state. The ruler must be free from major sins, persistent minor sins, and from oppression. He should embody piety, integrity, and fairness, ensuring that every right is given to its rightful owner.

The Qur'an states:

(وَلَا تُطِيعُ مَنْ أَغْلَلْنَا قُلُوبَهُ عَنْ ذِكْرِنَا وَاتَّبَعَ هَوَاهُ وَكَانَ أَمْرُهُ فُرُطًا) (الكهف، 28)

Translation: "My covenant does not include the wrongdoers." (Qur'an 2:124)

Hence, a fāsiq (open sinner) cannot be entrusted with leadership. Imam Ibn Hajar defined a just leader as one who places everything in its proper place according to the commands of Allah.

Conclusion

The appointment of an Imam or Caliph is not merely a religious duty but also a political, legal, and social responsibility. For the unity of the Islamic Ummah, the establishment of justice, and the implementation of Sharia, there is a pressing need for strong and just leadership. The fundamental criterion is that such leadership must serve the collective interest of the Ummah, uphold the Sharia, and ensure the rule of justice.

In an Islamic government, the appointment of the head of state is not governed by specific legal or political mechanisms. Rather, the leader is entrusted—within the bounds of his recognized responsibilities—with managing the general affairs of governance and promoting the welfare of the people and the nation. Nevertheless, certain legitimate methods exist for the selection of a leader for the Muslim Ummah.

One important aspect of legitimizing the Imamate is the presence of witnesses. While some scholars argue that definitive textual evidence (qaṭʿī dalīl) requiring witnesses is lacking, others insist that testimony is essential to prevent discord and civil strife, especially in cases where a pledge of allegiance (bayʿah) is claimed without public acknowledgment. Those who advocate for witness testimony generally consider two witnesses sufficient.

By its nature, the Islamic state is an ideologically principled system; thus, both in terms of religious law and rational judgment, it is necessary that its leader be a living embodiment of Islamic practice—distinguished by his religious conviction and conduct.

According to the Sunni tradition, the selection of an Imam or Caliph is carried out through consultation by the *Ahl al-Ḥall wa al-ʿAqd* (the people of authority and decision-making). These are individuals endowed with knowledge, insight, piety, and public credibility. Acting as representatives of the Ummah, they hold the authority to appoint a qualified individual as the leader of the Muslim community. Once such a selection is made, it becomes obligatory upon the rest of the Muslims to pledge allegiance. This process is based on consultation (*shūrā*), consensus, and the collective will of the people—leaving no room for coercion, conspiracy, or authoritarianism.

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² Abu Fazal Jamaluddin Muhammad Bin Makram Bin Manzoor Almesree lesan alarab first Volume Publication: Dar Sabir, Beroot, Lebnan aljaza sixth Chapter pg107

³ Albajramee: Ahmad Bin Ahmad Bin Ahmad Bin Muhammad Albajramee is one of the greatest Shafee Jurisconsult-he is egyptin- Bajreem is a village in Egypt, died in 1197-

⁴ Ali Bin Muhammad Bin Ali Alsayed Alsharif Jejani, Majam altarif pg203, article 1904.

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