Reconstructing the Nature of Principles and Values of Public Administration in Islam

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This article examines the conception and practice of public administration from Islamic perspective. It attempts to achieve this objective through careful identification and discussion of the fundamental values and principles that guided the practice of public administration in the state of Medina under the Prophet and his four immediate successors known as the Caliphs. Further analysis of these fundamental principles and values of public administration shows that they have become, in modern time, the standard indicators of assessing the effectiveness or otherwise of a public organization. By focusing attention on the practices that obtained in the early state of Medina under the leadership of the Prophet (SAW) and the Rashidun Caliphs, it is pointed that public administration, in that period, was not only effective, efficient, and responsive, but was also cost-effective and anchored on the principles of new-managerialism which many states in modern times are presently attempting to adopt. Consequently, modern societies have a lot to learn from the lessons of that period.

Keywords: Islam, Prophet Muhammad, Rashidun Caliphs, Medina, Public Administration, Accountability, Public duties.

INTRODUCTION

This article reconstructs the conception and practice of public administration in Islam. To achieve this objective, I draw examples from the state of Medina during the time of Prophet Muhammad and the Rashidun Caliphs. The purpose is to show that the Islamic state had in that period developed what approximated to an efficient, effective, and performance driven public administration system (Von Grunebaum, 2013). This system, the article argues, was not only an excellent response to the needs of the emerging Islamic state, but was also cost effective, competent, responsive, and accountable. These elements today form the bedrock of the concept of new managerialism being espoused by public administration theorists as an effective alternative to the traditional public administration which is encumbered by red-tapism, excessive legality, and overbearing centralization (Moynihan & Herd, 2010). The article focuses on investigating Islamic conception of public duty as trust – amana, as well as the practice and management of public responsibility. In so doing, emphasis is given to the examination of core principles and values such as...
recruitment, accountability, performance, and competence which have today become the hallmark of an effective and efficient administrative system.

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: A CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

When talking about public administration in modern times, both as a practice and as an academic discipline, it is possible to make few generalized statements (Zaman, Afridi, & Saleem, 2013). First, public administration as conceived today to mean a professionalized, apolitical and hierarchically structured organization responsible for translating public policy into tangible reality is a new development evolving out of the desire to ensure that governmental responsibilities are efficiently discharged (Olowu, 2010). Second, this emphasis on the values of professionalism, hierarchy, and neutrality combined to give public administration a near-universal identity that made its conceptualization practically common across all political systems (Naqvi, 2013). This character that developed out of the bureaucratic model developed by Max Weber, a German sociologist, was to have a very extensive influence upon the conception and practice of public administration in modern period, especially in the newly decolonized states of Asia and Africa. This remained the case until the beginning of this century when other theorists and students begun advocating for a more responsive and competitive model of public management (Lane, 2000). Third, notwithstanding this ongoing debate on reform, public administration and the new public management at the highest level are essentially concerned with public policy implementation (Berkley & John, 2004).

It is therefore easy to say that the idea of public administration is basically one in which best practices are devised (Gibb, 2013), effective mechanisms institutionalized, and efficiency in performance assured in discharging public responsibilities by the government (Cooper, et. al., 1998). Robert Laporte (in Abdul Hye, 2006) defines public administration as the entire “processes, organizations, and individuals acting in official positions associated with carrying out laws and other rules” related to the general performance of the political system. In essence, public administration can be described as the muscle-man of the state with the responsibility to ensure that its will is done within the society. As a distinct organization separate from the policy making arm, but dependent on it, values of neutrality, permanence, equality, merit, professionalism, hierarchy, accountability and internal regulations guide the activities of public administration in discharging its public functions and obligations (Moten & Islam, 2011).

One important point that needs clarification here is that as an organization, the idea of public administration is predicated upon institutionalizing principles, values and practices which make it distinct organization within the state. As a result, this has now come to be seen as a measure of its development as an institution. Institutionalization however has led to what many students of public administration consider its growing unaccountability, excessive legality, inefficiency and under-performance (Moten & Islam, 2011). One seemingly reformative response to this state of modern public administration is the idea of adhocracy. Adhocracy is a new administrative structure that seeks a break from the traditional practice of public administration by de-emphasizing the value of strict adherence to formalized rules and regulations. This system is underlined by its temporality, flexibility, absence of formal procedures and organization and emphasis on efficiency and performance. Evan Sycramnias (2008) defines adhocracy as a “structural system that breaks from the traditional ways of bureaucracy by not holding formal rules or regulations, [and] is usually void of hierarchies, has no standardized procedures for dealing with routine problems, is low in formalization and is organized for a temporary life. The major highlight of this system is its flexibility and responsiveness in dealing with all sorts of situations quickly and efficiently, particularly in dynamic environments.” I consider it possible, when examining the way state affairs and policies were pursued in the Prophetic era and in the succeeding decades under the Caliphs, to draw parallels with this adhocratic structure and principles. Elements of its emphasis on efficiency, competence, and results were manifest in various decisions and actions taken in that period. This also appeared in the way concern
with excessive formality, procedure, and hierarchy were relegated in the background for the greater objectives of performance and achieving organizational goals.

NATURE OF THE ISLAMIC STATE

Although opinion differs among scholars on the necessity of state in Islam, the focus of this debate is more on the justification for its existence rather than its essence. Scholars such as Ibn Khaldun (2005) argued that state is necessary because of the needs for human security and interdependence. Others such as al-Mawardi (1996) and ibn Taymiya (1982) maintained that the state is necessitated by the dictates of divine law. From whichever angle one chooses to view the justification for state in Islam, we should do well to recall that the first act of the Prophet after his Hijra to Medina was to draw the first fundamental principles, albeit in rudimentary form which established the state of Medina. In contradistinction (Visser, 2013), non-Islamic conception of the state and its essence veers outwardly in divergent angles. For instance, for Marxists the idea of a state is in itself a negation of human freedom and equality (Adebayo & Hassan, 2013). It entrenches an exploitative system where one social class – the bourgeoisie – dominates the other class – the proletariat. The essence of the state is simply to exploit, often by force, the masses (Curtis, 1981; Moten, 1996).

In order to best understand the importance of the state as well as its functions from Islamic juridical perspective, there is the need to first understand Islamic conception of politics. Islam is not a religion in the minimalist sense of the term where religion is narrowly defined in terms of rites and rituals between a person and his lord. For Muslims, Islam is a way of life, a socio-political ideology complete with prescriptions on all forms of social, political, economic, and cultural interactions (Lambton, 1981, p. 13). This ideology has no clearly defined boundary between what is religious and sacral and what is temporal and mundane (Kirabaev, 2009). The religious and the secular are united in seeking to create a society on earth in conformity with Islam’s distinctive ontology based on the revealed laws contained in the Holy Qur’an and prophetic traditions.

Evidently, therefore, any form of organization which emerges from this conception is bound to be sufficiently encompassing and would essentially strive towards the realization of its ideological principles and values. Islamic conception of politics is a negation of the instrumentalist conception as well as the rejection of the secularism that characterizes politics in modern states. State in Islam has as its basis security of its members, defence of the faith, promotion of social justice and equality, and forbidding evil in all its manifestations. Abdul Rashid Moten (1996) lists ten values and principles that undergird Islamic culture generally and determine the disposition of Muslims to public responsibilities particularly. These values are tawhid, khilafah, ibadah, ilm, halal, haram, adl, zulm, istislah, and daya.

THE PRACTICE OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN MEDINA

The Prophet’s Hijra from Mecca to Medina (622 CE) is significant in Islam not only because it provides the basis for calculating the Muslim calendar, but because it marked a watershed in defining the place of politics in Islam. In Medina, a bevy of challenges confronted the Prophet. The most daunting concerned the new responsibilities which he had to assume as the chief of a distinctive community – Ummah. In Mecca, the Prophet’s responsibility was limited to propagating his message to the unbelievers. In Medina, additional responsibilities developed with his Hijra. There were the responsibilities of designing a strong, solid and united community capable of defending its faith. There were the responsibilities of evolving a distinctive code of interaction, a sort of an Islamic foreign policy, for dealing with non-Muslim communities within and without Medina. And even within the Ummah, there were the needs for outlining in a comprehensive way a system of inter-personal relations and obligations. In essence, Muhammad had to shoulder different responsibilities and assume different public offices. Effectively, in addition to being a prophet, a messenger, and a teacher, Muhammad also became a judge, a diplomat, a statesman, a war commander, and above all, a lawgiver and a leader (Feldman, 2008).
Each of these responsibilities and role marched perfectly the personality and disposition of the Prophet and nothing supports this view more than the near-universal consensus of historians that this period witnessed the best example of human leadership and social organization that approximated the ideal state (Moten, 1996). This state developed by the Prophet and which came to be known as the Medina polity, was a simple political structure devoid of the latter day complexities that attended modern nation states. Perhaps, the greatest distinction that can be made concerning this structure is the issue of role differentiation. Modern political systems and organizations are characterized by role differentiation, itself a function of professionalization, in which personnel performed specific jobs in an organization. The Islamic state of Medina was dramatically different in this regard. This difference was indicative of its nature and process of evolution which although rudimentary, was nonetheless effective and efficient.

It was not until later when Islamic civilization reached an advanced stage under the Abbasids that a more sophisticated system of administration with all the trappings which this institution is associated with in modern period developed. For instance, the office of Muhtasib as a separate organization detached from the Caliph’s responsibility was established during the Abbasid reign of Caliph Abu Ja’far al-Mansur in 157AH (Ibn Taymiya, 1982). In the early days of the state under the Prophet and Caliphs, recruitment into administrative roles followed the exigencies of the time – religious, political, economic or military. Thus, a diplomat in one occasion may find himself leading troop contingents in another occasion. Similarly a commander in one military expedition may find himself in another expedition fighting in the ranks.

But because the underlying principle of the state, which constituted its political and administrative philosophy was service for the pleasure of Allah, every person strove to discharge his assigned role diligently. In fact, the entire community under the Prophet and the Caliphs was a one big reservoir of recruits from which the political leadership drew its staff when there was the need. Modern principles of neutrality, hierarchy and permanence were unknown in that period. For in subscribing to the Islamic faith, a person is not only entering a religion, but was essentially and more importantly declaring his socio-political commitment, his values, and his partisanship to the Ummah (Moten, 1996, pp. 63-76). He cannot be aloof to its fate and destiny but must take proactive interest in its security and well-being. Another distinction that can be made with regards to the early Islamic conception and practice of administration relates to permanence of the public employees.

Although appointments into public offices were by the discretion of the caliph, yet it can be said that security of tenure was entirely dependent on the good conduct of the appointee (DenBoer, 2013). Good conduct here refers to personal and moral integrity, suitability to the office in question, piety, and human relation. At no time were these standards brought to bear more heavily than during the administration of Umar ibn Khattab. History books are rich with anecdotes of how Caliph Umar exerted a near unbearable pressure on public officials and expected a practically impossible conduct from them. One of such remarkable cases where Umar relieved a state official of his appointment pertained to the dismissal of Khalid bin Walid from the command of the Islamic Army of Syria (Akram, 2011). This demonstrates the fact that permanence or security of job was not dependent on the political leadership that made the appointment as is obtained in most countries today.

Hierarchy and internal regulations are two other principles that need elaboration here. Islamic legal system is such that all sources of law derived wholly from the Qur’an, the traditions of the Prophet, independent reasoning of scholars – Qiyas, and consensus of the scholars – Ijma (Lambton, 1981). Thus, at different times, codes of conduct were drawn by the Prophet and by the Caliphs to guide the behavior of state functionaries in their relations with Muslims and non-Muslims alike. For example, it is known that the Prophet had drawn a code of conduct for his armies. Similarly, Caliph Abubakar had also issued a code of conduct for the army to serve as a guide in its marches and operations against the disbelievers (Al-Zuhli, 2005). Thus, while the army was not institutionalized until very much later, its code or internal regulations for the officers as well as the
rank and file were very much developed and codified (Khadduri, 1965).

Hierarchy in Islam is an interesting case study. Basically, Islam is an egalitarian ideology that recognizes the equality of all believers. The hierarchical structure was loosely defined such that there was no rigid enforcement. However, in matters related to management of public affairs precedence is given to those that are competent. There are two explanations for this situation. First, as we said, Islam is inherently egalitarian. Two, the principle of consultation practically makes all state affairs a matter of public interests and thus diluted the issue of hierarchical structure. Nevertheless, in matters related to specialized assignments such as leading delegations, war, and supervision, when leaders were appointed all others were duty bound to obey. Again, it is interesting to remark that precedence is not often given to status or nobility. For instance before his death, the Prophet had commissioned an army under Usama bin Zayd in which among the rank and file soldiers were such notable companions like Umar (Akram, 2011, p. 143). This was indicative of how hierarchical structure was basically tied to the exigencies of any particular period of time.

Sources of Law, Authority and Power

It should be clear from our discussion of internal regulations that unlike most modern governments that derive laws, power, authority and by implication their legitimacy from the people, government in Islamic derives its laws from the Qur’an whose divine origin is never questioned by the Muslims. The holy Qur’an provides in broad, particular, and universalistic terms the outline of the legal and legitimate basis of law, order, power and authority in an Islamic state (Lambton, 1981). And it was upon this fundamental principle that the first state of Medina was established by the Prophet (Rosenthal, 1968). In his life time, the Prophet was the sole recipient of this law in the form of revelation. After his death this revelation was compiled in a single book as the Qur’an and together with traditions and precedents, in the form of the Prophet’s examples, actions, and speeches generally constituted the main canons of Islamic law (Rosenthal, 1968). It was these sources that legitimate power and authority of the government and state in Islamic.
accountability makes no distinction between public and private.

Administrators are accountable at two levels. The first being their mundane responsibilities in which they account for their actions to the Ummah. Al-Mawardi (1996, p. 17) holds that leaders who commit immoral acts, are suspected of unbelief, or fall prey to the pursuit of pleasure to the detriment of public responsibilities should be disqualified from positions of authority. The second level of accountability may be termed spiritual and relates to the accounting which every being will render before his Creator in the Day of Judgment. Rooted in Islamic theology, Muslims hold the belief that every being will be called to render account of his worldly life before Allah, the Almighty, on the Day of Judgment. Those that have lived their lives in accordance with the divine dictates would be rewarded with eternal bliss, while those who rebelled against the laws of their Lord would be condemned to eternal torment.

Equality

For Muslims, the idea of social inequality is antithetical to the teachings of the Holy Qur’an and those of the Prophet (Watt, 2013). The view is universally shared by all sources of Islamic law that Muslims are equal irrespective of social status. In the polity of Medina, this view was given practical demonstration through the actions of the Prophet himself as well as those of his Caliphs. The entire structure and machinery of government revolved around the concept of social equality in which, legally speaking, members are treated equally. Beside the Qur’anic injunctions that enjoined equality among all believers, it is instructive to note that the first Constitution of Medina adopted by the Holy Prophet upon his arrival after the Hijra recognized the principle of equality among all the believers irrespective of social status or race. In fact, the idea of the Ummah excludes all form of inequality among believers (Moten, 1996, pp. 90-91).

So pervasive was this notion of equality in that period that in all religious matters, sanctions and edicts never distinguished men from women, or rich from poor. This was indeed one of the excellent qualities upon which the social structure of the state was conceived and built by the Holy Prophet and later consolidated by his four righteously guided successors (Bannerman, 2013). In matters of the state, precedence was always given to competence, skills, and commitment rather than appointment by selection based on social status, family lineage, or kinship. This was based on established practices of the Prophet and those of the Rashidun Caliphs in selecting and making appointments to all positions of trusts, authority, and responsibility within the state.

There were innumerable cases were freed-slaves rose to the highest positions of authority in those early days of the Islamic state through dint of hard work, skills, courage, and faith. Even today, the case of Bilal ibn Rabah, a freed-slave, who held the office of the chief Mu’azzin of the Prophet, is truly remarkable. Another remarkable case was that of Salman, the Persian, who came to Medina as a slave but eventually died as its governor during the Rashidun Caliphate. There were other equally astonishing cases were persons of lower social status in the pre-Islamic Arabia rose to higher positions in the Islamic state on account of their piety and commitment to their faith. In fact, nothing underscores this point succinctly than the Prophet’s admonishment in his farewell sermon delivered in the Urana Valley in the field of Arafat during his last pilgrimage. In what could be considered as the final attempt to lay down the fundamental principles of the state in Islam, the Prophet pointed that all believers are equal, and that positions of authority should only be decided on merit not racial and social status of individuals.

Competency

The third important value of public administration which this paper examines is that of competence. Together with the values of accountability and equality, this is part of the dominant features that determine the character, principle and level of efficiency of any particular public organization. To say that the early state of Medina valued competency is indeed to undertake an extensive review of the history of its formation and transformation (Heper, 2013). For it can be said that the entire political edifice and other structures of governance, ranging from the appointment of scribes, diplomatic missions, ambassadors, teachers, judges, to generals and other commanders of war, were exclusively based on merit, ability, and competence(Laxman, Ansari, &
Zawawi, 2014). One striking feature of this state that defined the early nature of its political participation was the absence of dynastic character. Leadership position and indeed all other state positions were selected purely on merit. To a significant degree its remarkable success were directly linked to the efficiency of its administrators in discharging their public obligations without fear or favor. The justness of Umar’s administration has overtime become stuff of legend for the efficiency, competence, and incorruptibility of the state officials (Al-Mawardi, 1996, p. 103).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper as outlined in the introductory part was to reconstruct the conception and practice of public administration in the Islamic state of Medina during the time of the Prophet as well as the immediate period when his first four successors governed. The objective was to identify and analyze some of the most important values and principles which guided the conception and practice of public administration in those days. Those values and principles of governance and administration though derived from the Holy Qur’an and Hadiths of the Prophet constituted what many modern societies are striving to introduce and institutionalize as cardinal features of their public administrations.

It is noted that although administration was in that period characterized by the absence of well institutionalized machinery, what in modern terms is called public administration, civil service or bureaucracy, the period nevertheless witnessed the development and skillful employment of the fundamental tenets of new managerialism and advocacy in public administration. It is the position of this paper that this system not only served the emerging Islamic state well because it was cost-effective, efficient, responsive, and dynamic, but also because it was essentially rooted in the abiding belief that human action in all its form is subject to accountability in the day of judgment. Looking at those values and principles, it is quite evident that the Islamic state was indeed ahead of its time in evolving simple, yet effective means and institutions of dealing with issues related to public management.

REFERENCES


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