

Tarbiyah Resource Development

Jumada at-Thani, 1446 | December 2024

The Role of Shura: Consultation in Decision Making and Governance Practices



The concept of Shura - شورى is integral to leadership, governance, and decision-making processes in Islam. Derived from the Qur'an and exemplified in the actions of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, Shura is a process that involves mutual consultation and collective discussion. It is a principle deeply rooted in the Islamic tradition, aimed to ensure that leadership decisions and governance practices are not centralized within the authority of a few select individuals, but are shared collectively among the people and invites the wisdom and thought processes, along with experiences of the community. This similar principle extends to the realm of individual guidance and decision making, where an individual makes istikhara prayer - صلاة الاستخارة, and seeks the guidance of Allah تعالى و سبحانه, and simultaneously this process is also in tandem with استشارة - istishara, a word which uses the same root of 'shura', which involves seeking counsel and discussing the feedback from trusted elders or knowledgeable people within one's community. That in fact even in making individual decisions, Muslims turn to Allah تعالى و سبحانه, but are not alone in their decision-making, and seek the support of their own community. These well-established principles, along with well-developed processes in Islam, both at the micro and macro level, show us that the importance of Shura extends beyond decision-making that is swayed by the wills, desires, and perhaps personal whims of individuals, but rather that it is a moral and spiritual obligation that connects the governance of the community (and self-direction) to the will of Allah تعالى و سبحانه. This paper is an exploration of the role of Shura in Islam, its basis in the Qur'an and the Sunnah, and its practical implications for decision-making and governance, both historically and in contemporary contexts.

1. The Concept of Shura in the Qur'an

Shura, as a principle of mutual consultation, is explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an. In Surah Ash-Shura (42:38), Allah سبحانه وتعالى commands believers to conduct their affairs through consultation:

وَالَّذِينَ اسْتَجَابُوا لِرَبِّهِمْ وَأَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَأَمْرُهُمْ شُورَى بَيْنَهُمْ وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَاهُمْ يُنْفِقُونَ



"And those who have responded to their Lord and established prayer and whose affair is [determined by] consultation among themselves, and from what We have provided them, they spend."

Qur'an, 42:38

This verse not only emphasizes the importance of consultation but also connects it to some of the broadest and most important principles of faith – namely obedience to Allah سبحانه وتعالى, and establishing prayer. The best interest, as well as opinions of the community as a collective must be a part of the governance of society.

Connecting shura to obedience of Allah سبحانه وتعالى, and establishing prayer also implies that the collective decision and governance needs to be aligned with worship of Allah سبحانه وتعالى, and good governance cannot be in contradiction to righteousness and worship of Allah سبحانه وتعالى. It is not possible for one to be obedient to Allah سبحانه وتعالى, establish prayer, and engage in consultative deliberation and for the decision to be in contradiction to what is pleasing to Allah سبحانه وتعالى. Shura reflects the belief that Tawheed (the oneness of God) should guide all aspects of human life, including governance. Tawheed, which asserts that ultimate authority belongs to Allah سبحانه وتعالى alone, provides the framework for governance. Shura ensures that decisions made within the community are in accordance with divine wisdom, reflecting a moral system that is fundamentally distinct from human-centric decision-making, but protects the best interest of all of creation. It is not just about seeking advice; however, it encompasses a responsibility to make decisions that take into account the needs, wisdom, and rights of all members of society and creation. This process ensures that governance remains participatory and accountable.

In the time of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, Shura was integral to the management of community affairs. For example, the Prophet ﷺ famously consulted his companions on various matters, despite his own divine knowledge. One such instance occurred before the Battle of Uhud, where the Prophet ﷺ sought the advice of his companions on whether to fight the enemy outside Medina or remain within the city. Although the Prophet ﷺ had received divine guidance, he chose to consult his companions to ensure that the decision reflected the collective will and wisdom of the community. This act of seeking consultation,

even when the Prophet ﷺ was aware of the divine plan, demonstrates the importance of inclusivity and collective decision-making in governance.

The Prophet's practice of Shura also illustrated that leadership should be based on justice and accountability, not on arbitrary authority. The decisions of the Prophet ﷺ were always made with the welfare of the community in mind, and through consultation, he ensured that the needs and concerns of the people were considered.

2. The Politically Engaged Muslim

The Islam of a Muslim is not complete until they are politically aware, concerned with the affairs of his/her nation, and passionate about its wellbeing. Islam necessitates that Muslims be politically aware and engaged with the affairs of their community and nation. Islam is a lived way of life and a Muslim's practice of faith inculcates a genuine concern for the welfare of his/her society and this is evident within the Quran and sunnah. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ himself emphasized that Muslims should be active participants in the affairs of their community and engage in actions that contribute to the collective well-being of society.

Governance is not a separate or isolated entity that exists outside of Muslim life, but is completely integrated within the moral and spiritual values of Islam. Governance, in this sense, becomes a manifestation of divine wisdom and justice. When a judge gives a decision in a matter, that judge may set a precedent on decision-making that may be utilized in the future. The weight of this impact on society is not taken lightly in Islam, and this can be seen within the hadith that was reported by 'Amr ibn al'As (ra) who said that he heard the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ saying:

حَدَّثَنَا يَحْيَى بْنُ يَحْيَى التَّمِيمِيُّ، أَخْبَرَنَا عَبْدُ الْعَزِيزِ بْنُ مُحَمَّدٍ، عَنْ يَزِيدَ بْنِ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ بْنِ أَسَامَةَ بْنِ الْهَادِ عَنْ مُحَمَّدِ بْنِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ، عَنْ بُسْرِ بْنِ سَعِيدٍ، عَنْ أَبِي قَيْسٍ، مَوْلَى عَمْرِو بْنِ الْعَاصِ عَنْ عَمْرِو بْنِ الْعَاصِ، أَنَّهُ سَمِعَ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ " إِذَا حَكَمَ الْحَاكِمُ فَاجْتَهَدَ ثُمَّ أَصَابَ فَلَهُ أَجْرَانِ . وَإِذَا حَكَمَ فَاجْتَهَدَ ثُمَّ أَخْطَأَ فَلَهُ أَجْرٌ " .



When a judge gives a decision, having tried his best to decide correctly and is right, there are two rewards for him; and if he gave a judgment after having tried his best (to arrive at a correct decision) but erred, there is one reward for him.

This hadith stresses the importance of seeking knowledge and applying wisdom in decision-making, with the understanding that even well-intentioned decisions may sometimes be imperfect, but the process of consultation and striving for the best solution is rewarded. Paramount to this is that good governance is a form of worship for the Muslim who seeks its reward from Allah تعالى و سبحانه , who is indeed the Most Just and Most Merciful.

3. Shura in Practice: Examples from Islamic History

Throughout Islamic history, the concept of Shura has been a fundamental part of governance, as seen in the decisions made by the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and his companions. Although Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was the best of creation who divinely guided and was receiving direct revelation from Allah سبحانه و تعالی, he would still consult with the companions. One such example can be found where the Prophet ﷺ consulted his companions before the Battle of Uhud. While he himself was of the opinion that the disbelievers of Makkah should be fought from within the city of Madinah, he chose to follow the opinion of the majority, which was to march out and meet the enemy on the battlefield. The consultation process allowed for a decision that reflected the collective wisdom of the community.

We find another example where the companion Salman Al-Farsi(ra) advised the Prophet ﷺ with a new strategy that was hitherto unknown to the Muslims of Madinah and build a trench along the passages that would prevent the enemies from penetrating and attacking, thus protecting the Muslims. In this case, we find that the advice of a single individual within the community was taken as a means of benefit for the rest of the community.

In another example, we find Abu Bakr al-Siddiq (ra's) consultation with the companions during the crisis following the death of the Prophet ﷺ. When many of the believers were rising in rebellion and there arose a need to stand up against them. Abu Bakr(ra) consulted with the companions and the majority of the companions objected to the proposal to engage in ridda (apostasy) wars. Despite their objections, Abu Bakr(ra) decided to engage in the battles to preserve the unity of the Muslim ummah. In this example, we see that he consulted the community, and he understood the objections of the community, and took a decision to move forward with the same purpose to protect and preserve the wellbeing of the Muslim ummah for both the contemporary and future generations.

These examples from Islamic history demonstrate how the process of shura is enacted in different ways within the community. The binding nature of Shura decisions are situation-based, and its implementation takes into account the context and the needs of the community. Ultimately, it is a commitment to uphold what is right in the cause of Allah سبحانه و تعالی within the community.

4. Shura and the Individual Voice

The concept of shura is in fact what gives space for individual and minority voices, and opinions to exist. These individual voices are in collective pursuit of the Truth. Once discussion has taken place, and all opinions of individuals who have insight into the matter are taken into consideration, then the decision must be made in accordance to the purpose of the Muslim, which is to follow the path of Truth. When truth is clarified, whether it was the majority or minority opinion, it must be accepted and adhered to, with unity.

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا كُونُوا قَوَّامِينَ بِالْقِسْطِ شُهَدَاءَ لِلّٰهِ وَلَوْ عَلَىٰ أَنفُسِكُمْ أَوِ الْوَالِدِينَ وَالْأَقْرَبِينَ ۚ إِن يَكُنْ
غَنِيًّا أَوْ فَاقِيرًا فَاللّٰهُ أَوْلَىٰ بِهَمَّا ۚ فَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا الْهَوَىَٰ أَن تَعْدِلُوا ۗ وَإِن تَلَوُّهُ أَوْ تَعْرِضُوا فَإِنَّ اللّٰهَ كَانَ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ
خَبِيرًا



Believers! Be upholders of justice, and bearers of witness to truth for the sake of Allah, even though it may either be against yourselves or against your parents and kinsmen, or the rich or the poor: for Allah is more concerned with their well-being than you are. Do not, then, follow your own desires lest you keep away from justice. If you twist or turn away from (the truth), know that Allah is well aware of all that you do.

Qur'an, 4:135

In the Islamic framework, good governance is guided by a higher principle than serving the desires, whims or aspirations of individuals. The only gain to be had in proper governance and decision-making is to be amongst those who uphold justice and bear witness to the truth.

5. The Role of Partisanship and Its Impact

In today's society, be it non-Muslim states or Muslim states, partisanship has developed as a political tool. The system of partisanship within the political arena entails behaviours adopted through political identities and enacted based on political affiliations. Those behaviours lead towards strong disagreements, and all perpetuates the act of division as the accepted norm. Partisanship, often introduced by colonizing forces, divides communities and undermines the spirit of unity that is central to Islamic governance.

وَأَعْتَصِمُوا بِحَبْلِ اللّٰهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرَّقُوا ۗ وَاذْكُرُوا نِعْمَتَ اللّٰهِ عَلَيْكُمْ إِذْ كُنْتُمْ أَعْدَاءً ۖ فَأَلَّفَ بَيْنَ قُلُوبِكُمْ
فَأَصْبَحْتُمْ بِنِعْمَتِهِ إِخْوَانًا



And hold firmly to the rope¹ of Allāh all together and do not become divided. And remember the favor of Allāh upon you - when you were enemies and He brought your hearts together and you became, by His favor, brothers.

Qur'an, 3:103

Any system not based on the Quran will not bring happiness and peace to humanity.

The Prophet ﷺ warned against divisions and partisanship, stating that such divisions would weaken the community and distract from the common good.

It is found in a hadith narrated by Abu ad-Darda'(ra) that the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said:

حَدَّثَنَا هَنَادٌ، حَدَّثَنَا أَبُو مُعَاوِيَةَ، عَنِ الْأَعْمَشِ، عَنْ عَمْرِو بْنِ مُرَّةَ، عَنْ سَالِمِ بْنِ أَبِي الْجَعْدِ، عَنْ أُمِّ الدَّرْدَاءِ، عَنْ أَبِي الدَّرْدَاءِ، قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ " أَلَا أُخْبِرُكُمْ بِأَفْضَلِ مِنْ دَرَجَةِ الصِّيَامِ وَالصَّلَاةِ وَالصَّدَقَةِ " . قَالُوا بَلَى . قَالَ " صَلَاحُ ذَاتِ الْبَيْنِ فَإِنَّ فَسَادَ ذَاتِ الْبَيْنِ هِيَ الْخَالِقَةُ " . قَالَ أَبُو عَيْسَى هَذَا حَدِيثٌ صَحِيحٌ . وَيُرْوَى عَنِ النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ أَنَّهُ قَالَ " هِيَ الْخَالِقَةُ لَا أَقُولُ تَخْلُقُ الشَّعْرَ وَلَكِنْ تَخْلُقُ الدِّينَ " .



"Shall I not tell you of something better than prayer, fasting, and charity?"

They replied, "Yes, O Messenger of Allah."

He said: "Reconciliation (or making peace) between each other, for indeed, spoiling relations between each other is the Haliqah. I do not speak of what cuts hair, but it severs the religion" [haliqah is also the word used for shaving hair, and so here we see that its implication is clarified within this context]

Politics that Gave Rise to Polarized Democracy & Partisanship as an Extension of Colonialism

A deeper look by several contemporary political analysts at the introduction and rise of democratic practises of polarized politics and partisanship point to the concerning outcomes of political partisanship. Such outcomes include intensified political violence, gridlocked institutions, severe division of society, mutually distrustful political camps, and degradation of social value amongst certain minority groups. Partisanship is almost always strategically connected with racism, and this a roaringly clear example is found in the historical early settler colonial policies to conquer rights over lands and resources in Canada. Colonial powers have used partisanship as a tool to divide many nations including Muslim societies throughout history, creating factions that become easier to control and thus serve a colonial agenda. The Islamic approach to proper political processes and governance seek unity based on collectively joining to serve the cause of Truth.

6. The Islamic Shura System differs from Democracy

Thus, while some similarities can be drawn between the shura and modern democratic system, an Islamic system is *not synonymous* to a democratic system, and its foundational grounding in the divine is the first point of departure from democracy. Shura and governance practises within the Islamic framework seek unity, mutual consultation, and collective decision-making for the establishment of Truth.

Democracy, as practiced in many modern Western societies, is primarily a political system based on the idea of rule by the people, typically implemented through voting and an outcome of majority rule. There is no litmus test to reference the majority vote against and the moral underpinning of the majority is directed by individual and societal standards existing in the moment of decision making. Within an Islamic shura system, the collective endeavour is towards a moral standard for society that aspires to the Truth and wisdom as

given by the Creator or all things and exemplified in the example of the Prophet ﷺ and his companions. That aspiration exists within the continuum of the current time and spatial reality and simultaneously along the axis of reality within the Hereafter, thus making it spatially and temporally wholistic within all realms of existence.

Furthermore, while democracy emphasizes individual rights and freedoms as created, envisioned and directed by human intellect, human desires and human imaginations; an Islamic Shura system is divinely founded and emphasizes the collective responsibility of the community through the wisdom, mercy, and all-encompassing knowledge of the One who created and continues to create. Such a divine reliance allows even a minority voice to find strength if it is bounded in Truth.

7. Conclusion

Shura is a fundamental principle rooted in the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, and it serves as a moral framework for governance, ensuring that decisions reflect divine wisdom and justice. Shura is grounded in a moral and spiritual foundation that seeks to align human affairs with the will of Allah سبحانه وتعالى.

The examples from Islamic history—such as the decisions made by the Prophet ﷺ and the early caliphs—illustrate how Shura was implemented in practice, ensuring that governance was just, accountable, and reflective of the community's collective will to govern according to the greater aspirations of establishing Truth. While Shura may share some similarities with democracy, it is grounded in a tawheed-based moral standard providing a model that is both participatory and rooted in divine wisdom.

In today's world, the concept of Shura remains relevant, and necessary to ensuring the welfare of the people through consultation, justice, and collective responsibility towards what has been ordained by Allah سبحانه وتعالى and therefore leading to the best outcome for all of creation.

إِن أُرِيدُ إِلَّا الْإِصْلَاحَ مَا اسْتَطَعْتُ وَمَا تَوْفِيقِي إِلَّا بِاللَّهِ عَلَيْهِ تَوَكَّلْتُ وَإِلَيْهِ أُنِيبُ



I only intend reform as much as I am able. And my success is not but through Allāh. Upon Him I have relied, and to Him I return.

Qur'an, 11:88

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