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Revisiting Islamic Leadership: Clarifying Theoretical Issues

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ABSTRACT

Introduction/Main Objectives: Theory of Islamic Leadership emerged as a form of counter-hegemony to western perspectives of leadership. **Background Problems**: However, the lack of clarity in Islamic leadership theories, has put Islamic leadership in a dangerous ambiguity due to its overlapping nature to other contemporary constructs. **Novelty:** This study contributed on the mapping of the Islamic leadership on the world of leadership studies, to some extent the Islamic leadership has significant impact of the well-being followers. **Research Methods**: This research aims to clarify such issue by using employing integrative review as a method to critically examine the academic interpretation of Islamic Leadership and provide distinguishing features of Islamic Leadership. **Finding/Results**: This paper argue that 4 (four) features are critical to define Islamic leadership concept: first, the requirement of Islamic morality as the primary moral foundation; second, leadership is a requirement for every human being; third, the presence of outward and inward dimension of leadership and last, leadership as a means rather as an end. **Conclusion**: This paper concludes by discussing limitation and future research agenda to advance Islamic leadership.

1. Introduction

Theory of Islamic leadership joined academic research discussion as a form of counter-hegemony of prevailing western-based perspective in leadership. However, in relatively recent period, several contemporary leadership constructs have emerged to enrich our understanding of leadership dynamics. Such development, while unarguably beneficial, has put Islamic leadership in a dangerous ambiguity due to its similar nature to other contemporary constructs especially to moral and ethical leadership construct. This unfortunate condition may be attributed to our approach of understanding leadership through partial observation which classify leader or non-leader through observable traits or characteristics instead of examining the conceptual foundation (see for example: Marbun, 2013; Rafiki & Wahab, 2014).

This paper argued that Islamic leadership imposes several distinguishing conceptual features that render Islamic leadership theories distinct compared to other moral and ethical leadership construct. The objective of this paper is to ensure that researcher and commentators alike would be able to conceptually distinguish Islamic leadership as opposed to other contemporary leadership construct. Such objective is deemed to be important as religion is inextricably linked to leadership studies (Gümüsay, 2019) which would enrich our perspective of understanding context. As such, to present the argument, the author starts first by analyzing how Islamic leadership emerged in leadership theories by being a form of culture and religion. The first step would be important to provide reader with Islamic leadership location within the context of leadership research. Second, the author would discuss how Islamic leadership possess several unique features compared to other leadership theories. Lastly, the author would summarize the argument in conclusions and explore future suggestions.

2. Literature Review

There is a myriad of leadership definitions in academia caused by its arbitrary and subjective nature as a social science construct (Luthans & Doh, 2015; Yukl et al., 2013). Within the continuum of literature, leadership concept can be distinguished either as a trait and personality (such as the Great Man Theory) with the emphasis on certain personalities that distinguish leader with non-leader (Northouse, 2010) or the examination of complexities with the emphasis on social context and situational fit (Davidson et al., 1976; Fry, 2003; Hunter et al., 2007).

This paper follows the latter which recognizes that leadership involves *social process* rather than being a concept in vacuum. As such, leadership could only occur with existence of followership and the asymmetric influence between them (Hanges et al., 2016).

Through such conceptualization, *leadership* can be defined as "a process whereby an individual influence a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (Northouse, 2010: 6), while *leading*, within such a definition, can be considered as one of managerial roles (Mintzberg, 1973).

The emergence of Islamic leadership, as a part of leadership theories, can be regarded as a counter hegemony in leadership research which was previously dominated by western-based ideology and practices. However, the avenue to which Islamic leadership appear can be considered as a product of cultural and religious dimension of leadership.

2.1. How Culture Shaped Leadership Research

The attempt to incorporate cultures in the domain of leadership and management emerged due to two interrelated causes. First, Hofstede (1983) argues that the possibility of convergence of management practice had diminished because of the existence of different values between national cultures. Second, there is an impediment with generalizability of leadership theories which had been mainly developed in the US, as argued by numerous scholars (den Hartog et al., 1999; Yukl, 2008) which reflects the North American ethnocentrism (Ayman & Korabik, 2010; Dickson, 2003). This discomfort is based on the notion that the US is considered as an individualistic society (Smith & Peterson, 1988), in which people tend to interpret and attribute actions around them in terms of individual trait or style. To offset these issues, the domain of leadership is pushed to be inclusive by employing emic and etic perspectives (Davidson et al., 1976). The emic approach studies leadership within the culture while etic concerns the validations of leadership theories across cultural settings (Ayman & Korabik, 2010). This inclusivity of other cultures, including Southeast Asia, leads to the domain of cross-cultural leadership.

The landmark study of cross-cultural leadership can be ascribed to GLOBE Project (den Hartog et al., 1999), which is multi-phase, multi-method projects whose goal is to describe and predict the impact of specific cultural variables on leadership and organizational processes (House et al., 2002). Using nine cultural dimensions, GLOBE examined 62 countries (divided into 10 distinct clusters) to analyze whether they approached leadership differently (Javidan et al., 2006). The findings of GLOBE Project show that culture affects how effective leadership behavior and attributes are perceived across different cultures (Northouse, 2010). Furthermore, the project shows that there are universally desirable and undesirable leadership attributes (Javidan et al., 2006) aligning with House et al (1997).

While these findings provide significant contribution for our understandings, culture itself can be segregated into two different layers (Ayman & Korabik, 2010). First, the visible characteristics on the surface such as physical characteristics (such as skin colors) or a country's geographical boundaries. Second, the invisible or deeper level of layer such as values and personalities (Ayman & Korabik, 2010). As such, it is possible that people possess different sets of values while sharing similar visible characteristics. Cohen (2009) describes that such phenomenon can be observed in religious groups within one country. He argued that members of religious group like Islam and Hinduism have distinct psychological process. Hence, religion, like other forms of culture, affects how leadership is perceived by influencing the cognitive categorization of its members (Lord et al., 1978; Shaw, 1990).

2.2. How Religion as a Form of Culture Shaped Leadership Research

From the above discussion so far, the following conclusion can be drawn: (i) religion is a form of culture and (ii) culture affects the cognitive process of how its group members perceive leadership. Hence, this part further analyzes how religion, as form of culture, is connected to leadership understandings.

Firstly, the concept of religion is relatively underdiscussed, if not neglected,

and disregarded compared with the concept of spirituality within leadership and management disciplines (Fry & Slocum, 2008; Tracey, 2012). The origin of such a neglect is the belief that religion is seen as divisive with a danger of coercion toward outer groups (Fernando & Jackson, 2006; Korac-Kakabadse et al., 2002), as reflected in the mantra 'spirituality unites but religion divides' (Hicks, 2002). While this argument has its own historical reasoning, the intentional tendency to separate both concept within academic investigation is criticized as 'artificial reductionism' (Bailey, 2001) which failed to acknowledge religious diversity (Hicks, 2002) because both are inextricably linked with shared historical intimacy (Korac-Kakabadse et al., 2002). As such, for the purpose of discussion, this paper stands with Gümüsay (2019, p. 9) who posits that "religion can shape spirituality, as it may be a source of specific spiritual practices, values, and beliefs."

To understand how religion influences leadership behaviors, explanation could be pursued through two avenues. First, which rather tangible, religious values could shape and dictate distinctive business values, environment, and activities (Harris & Moran, 2000; Rodrigues, 1996). As leaders attempt to reach organizational goals by gaining support from subordinates or followers, leaders adjust their behavior to be consistent and acceptable rather than demonstrating conflicting behaviors with the collective values (Brodbeck and Eisenbeiss, 2014). Second, which is intangible, religious values shape people's worldview (Browaeys & Price, 2015). Once these values are internalized consciously or unconsciously, it will serve as a criterion for guiding a leader's conduct (Rokeach, 1970). Furthermore, different from other forms of culture, it is

asserted that religion, with its spiritual dimension, provides leaders with ultimate purpose that supplement their procedural and substantive rationality (see: Simon, 2000); thus, behaving 'rationally' in this sense would involve affection and conation rather than simple cognition (Fernando & Jackson, 2006).

Religious values are also indirectly associated with leadership behavior mainly through ethical, servant, and authentic leadership construct by providing moral identity (Eisenbeiss, 2012; Gümüsay, 2019). Mendonca and Kanungo (2007), for example, narrated a biblical story of the Good Samaritan as an example of altruistic behavior which provides a moral standard for a leader's motives. Such altruistic and/or spiritual motives are also expected to drive leaders to have inner conviction or sense of calling to 'serve' others, leading them to be a servant leader (Eva et al., 2019). Authentic leadership is closely related with morality as it includes an internalized moral perspective within their definition to foster self-awareness and self-acceptance (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Regarding authentic leader, Gümüsay (2018) argued that religious scriptures could provide leaders with a framework of authenticity by providing behavior guidelines and hence, the consistency between scripture and outer behaviors serve as evidence of leader's authenticity.

2.3. *How Islam as a Form of Religion Shaped Leadership Research*

The author suggests that the emergence of Islamic influence in leadership discussion can be classified into 3 sequential stages. The first stage is the effort to blend Islamic perspectives into conventional theories that are closely related to leadership such as

motivation and ethics. The second stage relates to the effort to formally integrate Islamic knowledge and perspective directly into leadership construct and thus producing a concept of Islamic leadership. The last stage relates to analyzing and exploring Islamic leadership concept in multilevel of context (such as geographical areas, organizational types, or industry) which mainly concern testing validity of theory based on empirical studies.

The first major academic discussion could be traced as back as far as 1998 when Alawneh published his paper entitled "Human Motivation: An Islamic Perspective". He discusses a major approach of motivation in psychological domain and providing arguments that religion plays a major role in shaping human motivation. He argues that the primary source of motivation of a Muslim is faith (Iman). Faith is an internal controlling mechanism to which humans should bound his or her behavior. He concludes by describing 5 characteristics of Islamic motivation, namely: hierarchical nature of motives, clarity of aims, vitality of aims, realism, and comprehensibility. While not directly linked to leadership concept, this paper provides a fundamental influence for further research as it factors Islam as a source of effect of motivation which is a component of leadership requirement.

As seminal research with the title "Islamic Ethics and Implication for Business", Rice (1999) shares the Islamic perspective of ethics in the business domain by describing the Islamic ethical system and its component using Egypt as an illustrative case. The author also mentions the concept of "moral filter" such as unity, justice, and trusteeship, which merchant or any Islamic businessman need to possess to conduct commercial activities. In the same tone with

Alawneh's paper, the effort to link Islamic perspective and conventional perspective provide an exciting prospect for fruitful research in multicultural context. But still, the paper does not directly link Islamic perspective within leadership territory as it focuses on business ethical domain.

In the second stage of Islamic leadership emergence, the first integrative approach to create Islamic Leadership Theory, as far as our research suggest, can be referred to Toor's work entitled "Merging Spirituality and Religion: Developing an Islamic Leadership Theory" in 2008. By mostly mentioning authentic and spiritual leadership as a construct that comes with many similarities with Islamic teaching, he aims to develop a distinct framework to identify Islamic leadership by first explaining the building blocks of Islam: belief, practices, and code of life before proposing the framework. The framework consists of 4 variables namely: Muslim leaders, Muslim followers, spiritual variable, and mediating variables.

Beekun (2012) also strongly contribute to Islamic leadership theory by analyzing Quranic verses and Hadith stating Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as a role model of authentic transformational leader. However, while this is a novel approach of providing a conceptually sound of Islamic leadership framework by considering contemporary leadership theories within the analysis framework, it does not put enough emphasis on distinguishing features of Islamic leadership beyond the dimension of "surrendering to Allah" in a more philosophical and structured manner.

Beekun (2012) also argued that a serious disadvantage would arise if our focus were put too much emphasis on the exoteric characteristics or traits as to examining a

conceptual difference, since the latter could be perceived to be "harder and difficult" to access as we need to examine the primary sources of Islamic knowledge (which originally written in Arabic) that may intimidate non-Arabic researcher and reader.

3. Method, Data, and Analysis

Integrative review (Snyder, 2019) is used to establish conceptual difference of Islamic leadership by analyzing Islamic leadership literature and comparing to other seminal contemporary leadership literature. Integrative review, as a research method, aims to provide insights and to further possible extent in developing a theory on a topic by synthesizing knowledge available in various communities of practices (Cronin & George, 2023). This paper chose integrative review as a knowledge-synthesis vehicle to fit its purpose of redirecting our current approach of understanding Islamic leadership within contemporary leadership context. However, this research primary goal is not to examine leadership through the analysis of foundational text of Islam (such as Quran and Hadith) or historical evidence as large number of published studies has provided (see for example: Ali, 2009; Marbun, 2013; Rafiki, 2020; Toor, 2008). This research argues that no significant value will be delivered if continued with this approach since enormous Islamic leadership literature has established common characteristics of Islamic leaders based on uniform method of Quran and Hadith inference. Instead, this research aims to analyze the content of the academic interpretation of Islamic leadership from those studies to provide more valuable findings and new insights to advance theoretical discussion of Islamic leadership.

This study is conducted by analyzing contemporary leadership literature related to Islamic leadership. This is done by thorough reading of main Islamic leadership literature in reputable peer-reviewed journal and book publishers such as Emerald and Springer, in which the author examines contemporary leadership papers that discuss or mention Islamic leadership as a part of its analysis. This includes Islamic-related topics such as: leadership attributes, leadership model competencies, management, leadership ethics, and prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) biography. Since the topic focuses on Islam, this paper excludes other Abrahamic or non-Abrahamic religions as part of constructs comparison. Next, authors seek to identify which conceptual gap exists by reviewing the interpretation of Islamic leadership in these papers and books. To provide an efficient way of reviewing other leadership concepts, this research collects and prioritizes papers which provide review and synthesis of these leadership theories in reputable journals. This is to minimize any error and bias in our understanding of the concept by adding 360 degrees of perspective and analysis.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1. *Islamic Leadership Distinguishing Feature 1: the Requirement of Islamic Morality as the Moral Foundation*

Religiously, Islam means submission, surrender and obedience to Allah (Abuznaid, 2006; Badawi, 2001). It is built upon two sources of knowledge: Quran, which is the revelation of God or Allah and Sunnah, which is the sayings and observed behavior of the Prophet Muhammad (Hallaq, 1997; Rahman, 1979). Since Islamic revealed knowledge are considered to permeate all major aspect of human life (Ahmad, 2009; Badawi, 2001), any interpretation of period of lifetime of the Prophet (PBUH) should be derived from these sources. Methods of interpreting such emergences can be

categorized either as consensus by scholars (ijma) or analogy (qiyas) (Beekun & Badawi, 2005; Rahman, 1979). The domain of leadership research mainly falls within both categories, in which scholars attempt to synthesize Qur'anic verses and Sunnah which explicitly or implicitly provide guidance toward the construct of leadership and its attributes.

The requirement to follow and adhere to these Islamic sources of knowledges serves as a primary distinction between Islamic leadership with other theories such as authentic, ethical, and servant leadership. In authentic leadership, Avolio and Gardner (2005) suggested that positive moral perspective is an inherent quality of an authentic leader. In our view, such definition of "positive moral" leaves a considerable room for variation which make it difficult to operationalize authentic leadership in research. Such issues persist due to cross-cultural factor in studying leadership in which moral reference may vary from place to place or time to time. Furthermore, ethical leadership could be demonstrated through "engaging in behavior that is seen as normatively appropriate…" (Brown et al., 2005), but what is normatively appropriate is arguably non-universal as it involves cultural factor while Islamic leadership insists that their moral groundings, mainly Quran and Hadith, is their main reference of norms in all time and places. On the other hand, servant leadership core values lie in its ability to put self-interest behind follower's interest (van Dierendonck, 2011). In this similarity, Islamic leader is also emphasized to serve their follower (Beekun & Badawi, 1999) only if their follower interest aligns with Islamic moral standards. Hence, the "priority filter" for Islamic leader is to first ensure whether their values and interest align with Islamic guidance before serving their follower.

This concept of Oneness of God (tawhid) in Islam further implies that being authentic, ethical, servant, or transformational is a mere consequence of being Islamic; and thus, the primary objective, nonetheless, rests in the submission to Allah (Toor, 2008). Exhibiting such virtues of honesty, integrity, and justice, insofar mandatory, cannot be a sole justification to attribute someone as Islamic leader. What constitutes an Islamic leader, hence, is the coexistence of faith in Allah (Iman) and behavior (amen ul saleh). Such requisite serves as an important demarcation between Islamic leadership and other form of leadership theories as the latter stress the importance of behavior while showing minimum discernment on the grounding moral values (Beekun, 2012) as the origin of those behaviors. Bass and Steidlmeier (1999, p. 184) indirectly respond to such concerns, contend that "authentic transformational leadership must rest on a moral foundation of legitimate values". Islamic leadership behaviors or attributes, thus, constitute as an outcome of values based on the Islamic revealed knowledge, which rejects blind acceptance and encourage critical thinking (Galanou & Farrag, 2015) to avoid falling into philosophical speculation susceptible to changing circumstances (al-Attas & Wan Daud, 2014).

4.2. Islamic Leadership Distinguishing Feature 2: Leadership is a Requirement of Every Being

In the lens of Islam, humans are made to worship Allah (Quran 20:14) and act as a vicegerent (khilafah) of Allah in this world (Qur'an 2: 30); and hence, all human affairs are a mean to achieve salvation from Allah in Here (dunya) or Hereafter (akhirah). This essence of Islamic worldview, which constitutes the reality and truth for Muslim (follower of Islam), leads to several axioms, with tawhid (Oneness of God) located in the epicenter (Egel & Fry, 2017; Rice, 1999). Since

tawhid requires human beings to submit to the decree set forth by Allah, they must undergo a purification process (tazkiyah) to govern his/her wants since man is bestowed with both knowledge and free will (Alawneh, 1998; Asutay, 2007b). In such process, leading oneself to avoid unlawful aspects while endeavoring Islamic objectives is an unavoidable consequence. Being a leader, then, is not an arbitrary decision of oneself but rather the nature of human beings; whether they succeed or not in being so, is a matter of choice. As Islam notices that such requirements of being a leader is a heavy task, Islam compensates such effort by 'rewards' in Hereafter.

Regarding this feature, no other leadership theories made it clear or explicit whether leadership is a requirement for each individual or not. The notion of current leadership mainly focuses on the "emergence" which means that leadership is primarily seen as a "potential" rest in each individual as opposed to being a requirement.

4.3. Islamic Leadership Distinguishing Feature 3: the Presence of Outward and Inward Dimension of Leadership

Continuing the above argument, it should be noted that in Islam, leadership is a multidimensional construct as it does not cover only outward social dimension between leader-followers or leader-society or leader-organization, but also inward dimensions between two opposing inner forces of knowledge and free-will in the leader to guide their behavior as well. In authors' examination, two other leadership theories namely authentic and spiritual leadership, have a similar concept in regard to this inward dimension despite in less explicit manner and different approach.

While authentic leadership proposes that self-regulation or control is a part of their characteristic (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) which aligns with Islamic values, it remains undecided to what standard leaders should comply or regulate their intrinsic values. Such dilemma can be mitigated in Islamic point of view by referring to the first distinguishing features above which is prioritizing Islamic moral knowledge as the main moral standard. As such, Islamic leaders by definitions cannot be authentic to their true nature (which human nature itself is also a difficult subject to approach) as their "true self" is bounded by Islamic moral standards (such as Quran and Sunnah). Another improvement to counter the lack of inner dimension with several leadership construct present in the concept of "inner life" in spiritual leadership (Egel & Fry, 2017) which can be defined as a "process of understanding and tapping into a power greater than oneself" and draw that power to live a better life. This is an important remark shared by Islamic leadership, that there is a higher order that every individual should submit themselves before leading others despite it remains unclear to what "power" we should submit ourselves in spiritual leadership concept.

Other leadership theories are less explicit compared to Islamic, authentic, and spiritual leadership regarding the requirement of self-regulation as a part of their characteristic. For example, in transformational leadership, it has been suggested that idealized influence, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, to be an inherent characteristic (Bass, 1990). The characteristic of this type of transformational leadership is mainly acknowledged by their strong influence on the followers without acknowledging explicitly how leaders first should "regulate" themselves to any agreed standards. This may lead to what we define as pseudo transformational leader in which

transformational characteristic lack moral dimension.

4.4. *Islamic Leadership Distinguishing Feature 4: Leadership as a Means*

On the articulation of being a vicegerent of Allah, humans are accountable for their conduct both to Allah and fellow beings, as tazkiyah (purification) requires harmony (Abbasi et al., 2010; Moten, 2011). Such concept assumed dyadic relationship between leader and follower to be incomplete; as within this, the existence of Allah is the prime influence on the dynamic nature of the relationship. While the asymmetric power between leader and follower indeed exists, either in legalistic or psychological sense, leader and follower assume an equal position in the eye of Allah (Khan, 1994; Moten, 2011). As such, leaders in Islam are considered as primus inter-pares (first among equals) locating him or herself as a servant both for Allah and fellow beings (Ahmad, 2009; Moten, 2011). In this context, an Islamic leader should utilizes the power to serving well-being followers in dunya and akhirah, by maintaining a just socio-economic order in all scales (Ali, 2009; Asutay, 2007a) and such, leadership can be justified as a means rather than an end.

In this manner, the Islamic leadership is perceived that is more critical compared with other leadership concept since the Islamic leadership hold responsibility of the current and future purposes. The current purpose address to the interests in this world, meanwhile the future purpose focuses on the hereafter (Rafiki, 2020) cannot be taken in their face (simplistic) value which may ignite misunderstanding that hereafter is the main purpose and neglect the concept of submission to Allah as the true purpose. What we mean as an end in our argument is that Islamic leadership seeks to fulfill our duty to Allah by leading others and hope to be rewarded accordingly with paradise.

5. Conclusion and Suggestion

As knowledge progresses, society tends to be more critical to define what constitutes as "positive moral". However, it is unfortunate that the discussion on moral component within leadership domain rarely puts critical examination on the influence of religious axioms to leadership foundation. While it is understandable to some extent, we argue that it has put significant obstacle on the understanding of these contemporary constructs such as authentic, transformational, and ethical leadership. The integration of religious knowledge would be beneficial in leadership research as many of what we call a "positive leadership" (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) an outcome of religious foundation. In specific context of Islamic leadership, for example, we could substitute authentic leader to Islamic leader as the "root construct" of positive leadership attributes such as individualized consideration, altruism, and intellectual stimulation.

In conclusion, this paper aims to provide researcher and readers with interest in Islamic leadership to better understand its conceptual dimension and to avoid confounding Islamic leadership concept with other types of leadership. This paper aims to move forward from analyzing Islamic leadership through Islamic sacred scripture by further analyzing their emerging conceptual interpretation compared to contemporary leadership construct. This paper argues that there are 4 features critical to define Islamic leadership concept. First, the requirement of Islamic morality as the primary moral foundation. Second, leadership is a requirement for every human being. Third, the presence of outward and

inward dimension of leadership. Lastly, leadership as a means rather as an end.

We also acknowledge that one major limitation of our paper is that it is subjective by nature. However, we insist that such approach is required to ensure a healthy progression in validating Islamic leadership by questioning its theoretical base.

Moving forward, we hope that our research on the academic interpretation of Islamic leadership could contribute to a stronger theoretical base for empirical works such as developing questionnaire or scale to measure Islamic leadership properties. The depth of empirical research in multitude of context (e.g., industry or country) would benefit academics to identify factors behind Islamic leadership dynamic and broaden our knowledge.

Acknowledgement

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