Thought Paper No. 4

Digital Shūrā in 'Islamic Governance': Expanding the Political Space in the Fifth Domain¹

Abdul Malik Omar²

Shūrā, or consultation, is an Islamic tradition broadly defined as a consultative approach by a leader to a unit of politically elected, or appointed, representatives to secure *naṣīḥah* (counsel or advice) in governing a polity. In the Qur'ān, two verses are key – "...and seek their council in all affairs" (*Sūrah Ali 'Imran*: 159), and "...[for those] whose affairs are settled by mutual consultation" (*Sūrah ash-Shūrā*: 38).³ *Shūrā* is an important custom left behind by the Prophet ﷺ, who "...emphasised the importance of collective and democratic decision making."⁴ This consultative governance approach has led to notable victories for the Islamic polity, including the famous Trench War. In the battle, Salmān al-Fārsī successfully raised the unorthodox idea of digging trenches around Madīnah to the Prophet ﷺ. The Prophet ﷺ approved the strategy and the Muslims won the battle. This anecdote illustrates that by expanding the political space to allow people to input different ideas, the Prophet ﷺ and his ﷺ companions secured the best solution to an issue. Moreover, the anecdote also shows that everyone, regardless of their background, has gems of wisdom that can solve various issues, provided that authority, accountability, and power of decision-making remain with the leader or state. As such, *Shūrā* is gaining ascendancy in 'Islamic Governance', a governance system which deploys Islamic ideals, values, and principles to protect and promote collective *maṣlaḥah* (social benefits) and prevent *mafsadah* (social ills).^{5, 6}

¹ How to Cite: Abdul Malik Omar. "Digital Shūrā in 'Islamic Governance': Expanding the Political Space in the Fifth Domain. Thought Paper Series No. 4." Journal of Islamic Governance, (2020). islamicgovernance.org/tp4

² The author is a PhD Candidate in Public Policy at the Institute of Policy Studies UBD

³ Al-Qur'ān, translated by A. Ali (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993) cited in Shavit, Uriya, Is Shūrā a Muslim Form of Democracy? Roots and Systemization of a Polemic, Middle Eastern Studies, volume 46, issue 3, 2010, pp. 349-374

⁴ Khan, Muqtedar, What is Islamic Democracy? The Three Cs of Islamic Governance, Caliphates and Islamic Global Politics, 2014, p. 79

⁵ Mahani Hamdan, Pg Khairul Rijal Pg Haji Abdul Rahim, Hajah Asiyah az-Zahra Haji Ahmad Kumpoh, Shūrā: From Principle to Practice, The Journal of Islamic Governance, issue 4, 2018, islamicgovernance.org/jig4-p4/

⁶ Abdul Aziz, A., Governance in a Contemporary Islamic Negara, The Journal of Islamic Governance, issue 1, 2015, pp. 1-9, available at: <http://islamic-governance.org/IssueDownload.aspx?id=1> cited in Abdul Rahman, Hanif, Amin Abdul Aziz, Muhamad Adib Ibrahim, Noor-Arpah Suhaili, Ahmad Zahid Daud, and Lin Naing, Development and

The *Shūrā* concept currently needs re-articulating to adapt to the digital age. The four major crisis faced by Arab states in the last decade, namely the 2011 Arab uprisings, the 2014–2016 decline in oil prices, the 2019 protests in Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Sudan, and the Coronavirus pandemic, are upending the old Arab order,¹ and in effect, the Muslim world. In particular, the Arab Spring brought home the pressing need to reorient how Muslim nations could be governed. Central to governing a young society – 60% of Muslims are under 30² – is digital technology, particularly social media. Social media is a tool enabling individuals to share and produce content and engage digitally with one another. While the utility of social media as a driving force of the Arab Spring has been contested, it nevertheless gave the platform for discontent youths to express their frustrations on various matters, including education, viable employment, and marriage and family formation.³ There are even warning signs of the increasing irreligiosity in the Middle East. A survey identified an uptick of people describing themselves as “not religious” – from 11% in 2012-2014 to 18%.⁴ To overcome these issues, governments should engage with the population using digital technology. The prominence of the technology should not be underestimated. As of 2019, 51% of the global population are plugged into social media.⁵ Governments should, therefore, meet the youth at the digital domain as a means to nurture and develop their engagement levels.⁶ As such, Muslim governments must incorporate *Shūrā* in the digital domain to empower people, not only to participate politically on the open-access anonymous platform, but also, to nurture critical thinkers in the process⁷ in a whole-of-nation approach.⁸ These truths, regardless of how subjective they may seem, may contain the gems of wisdoms (or what Nate Silver calls ‘signals’⁹) needed by the state to tackle its most pressing issues. As such, the term Digital *Shūrā* is presented as a contribution to the ‘Islamic Governance’ model in this thought paper.

Validation of Islamic Governance Examination Tool in Healthcare Settings, International Journal of Health Governance, volume 25, issue 1, 2020, pp. 57-67

¹ Mulderig, Chloe M., An Uncertain Future: Youth Frustration and the Arab Spring, 2013

² Brian, J. G., and Mehtab, S. K., The Future Global Muslim Population, Projections for 2030, 2010

³ Mulderig, Chloe M., An Uncertain Future: Youth Frustration and the Arab Spring, 2013

⁴ BBC, The Arab World in Seven Charts: Are Arabs Turning Their Backs on Religion?, 2019, retrieved 24 sept 2020

⁵ Social, We Are, Hootsuite (2020), Digital 2020-July Global Statshot report, 2020, <https://wearesocial.com/blog/2020/07/more-than-half-of-the-people-on-earth-now-use-social-media>

⁶ Cammack, P., Dunne, M., Hamzwy, A., Lynch, M., Muasher, M., Sayigh, Y., & Yahya, M., Arab Fractures: Citizens, States, and Social Contracts, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, 2017

⁷ Alawi Shahrin & Iznani Tarip, More Critical Thinkers for Islamic Governance, Thought Paper Series No. 2, The Journal of Islamic Governance, 2020, islamicgovernance.org/tp2

⁸ See a case study done on Brunei at Abdul Malik, The Whole-of-Nation Approach: The Case of Brunei Darussalam, Wawasan 2035, and the 4th Industrial Revolution, in Global Challenges to Improving Public Services and Government Operation, IGI Global, 2020 (To be published)

⁹ Silver, Nate, The Signal and the Noise: Why So Many Predictions Fail--but Some Don't, Penguin, Harvard, 2012

Digital Technology as an Empowering Force in Governance

Although digital technology in the Islamic world tend to be associated by Western political scientists as a 'liberation technology'¹, such views are reductive in managing Muslim states that rooted in its own unique political ideology and socio-cultural context. For one, while a Muslim state may not be overtly democratic in the Western sense, it nevertheless practises *Shūrā* as a decision-making culture, thus incorporating a democratic decision-making in realising the Maqāsid of the Sharī'ah.² In addition, the increasing tech-aware global population makes it unavoidable for states to ignore social media, given how influential it is to young people. Gusatvo Mesch hypothesised how young people's identities are now largely shaped by the internet.³ Starting from five years old, or older, of the post-2000 children, young people are consuming online content, which has the capacity to influence their social identities, their political and, to a certain extent, their religious views, values, and aspirations. Failing to respond to the growing internet influence may spell trouble, as certain information can be manufactured to mislead and undermine people's trust in their government and may even contribute to the regression of socio-religious norms and political order.

A way to overcome the aforementioned issues is to identify and engage with 'digital *ulamā*'. For one, popular social media websites, top online boards, bloggers, and/or 'influencers' serve as the digital conduit to reach out to the digital masses. Strategically, these platforms can be digital *mushāwarah* (meeting) places, where ideas or policies can be contested and *naṣīḥah* (advice) can be proffered by netizens to the state. Moreover, certain tech-savvy individuals, or content creators, could be treated as the "*ulamā*", or representatives of a given community. Whilst the term '*ulamā*' may have its roots in those who are well-versed in Islamic scriptures, Hassan al-Turabi in his work, 'Islamic State',⁴ broadened the term to include those who are well-versed in other fields. In his view, all knowledge comes from Allah, and hence, chemists, engineers, and economists could be termed as '*ulamā*'. This paper will use the definition to include expert users of social media, particularly tech-savvy opinion-formers and intellectuals. These individuals would be key in shaping online discourse, effectively socialising society to move towards a certain ideal, to strengthen existing norms, and to imbue the populace loyalty to their home countries or community. Moreover, they can serve as platforms to channel people's opinions, or ideas, for the government to take note of, or even better, take action on. This "bottom-up participation" can boost people's morale to engage with and get empowered in turn by the government.

Governments can play a proactive role in investigating these ideas and complaints, and subsequently fixing them where possible. Studying the merits of ideas discussed online will also be crucial as it helps to feed ideas for the state. While the ideas may not be perfect and may be

¹ A technology that will usher in democracy. See Diamond, Larry, Liberation Technology, Journal of Democracy, volume 21, issue 3, 2010, pp. 69-83

² Objectives of the Sharī'ah, namely the preservation and promotion of Faith, life, intellect, progeny, and wealth. See Abdul Aziz, A., Governance in a Contemporary Islamic Negara, The Journal of Islamic Governance, issue 1, 2015, pp. 1-9, available at: <http://islamic-governance.org/IssueDownload.aspx?id=1>

³ Mesch, Gustavo S., The Internet and Youth Culture, The Hedgehog Review, volume 11, issue 1, 2009, pp. 50-60

⁴ Al-Turabi, Hasan, Ziauddin Sardar, Mahmood Jamal, and Marc Zuber, The Islamic State, Voices of Resurgent Islam 241, 1983

in need of “purification and representation”¹ given the “noise” on the internet, just by opening up or encouraging the expansion of the political space will further fuel participation. In the end, it would be the state’s prerogative to act on the counsel or not. Doing so would help to overcome any potential hurdles, such as handling, or rejecting, ideas that may not be practical or in line with the state’s interest. Overall, while digital technology is neutral, it can be used as a means to enhance the governance process. This view is echoed by Ralf Klischewski, who argues how social media can act as a ‘change agency’ and mediator to transforming government-citizen relationship in the Arab world² – and by extension, the Muslim world.

Importance of Sustaining an Open Digital Space

It would also be alluring to take drastic actions, where serious political discussions may be held online. However, taking into account the principles of *Shūrā*, such a move could be counter-productive because by putting down people who hold opposing, or different, ideas, no matter how silly, or unorthodox, they may seem, would only stifle a community from further engagement and debate. Mark Granovetter argues ‘weak ties’ is a key area to secure innovation,³ as engaging non-conforming and opposing ideas tend to force individuals, or communities, to ‘think outside the box’. To reiterate the Battle of the Trench anecdote, building trenches surrounding a city in the middle of the desert sounds illogical. First, it may have never been done before in that specific geographical and historical context. Second, it would take too much work. However, the battle tactic worked. Next, closing online discussions will reduce participation from minorities who may have their own ideas, but are not as privileged as others. Salmān al-Fārsī was a former slave and an ‘outsider’. Had the Arabs closed the ‘political space’ from him to contribute his ideas because of his different background, Islam may have a different history today. Embracing a Digital *Shūrā* thus expands the political space for people to share their ideas and participate politically. It would then be the government’s responsibility to collate and analyse the messages being discussed, with the public policy aim of extracting issues and solutions that can help the society to advance. Embracing details and discussions would give governments a much-broader sense needed to secure signals, so as to avoid having a false sense of reality on the ground.

On the note of signals, social media users can help policymakers to read the general populace’s moods. But experts will unpack and identify the patterns of people’s needs. Big Data, Content Analysis, and other advanced software can unpack the meaning of their engagement online and are fitting as a state instrument to gauge people’s changing interest, or priority, on social media and in cyberspace in general. Having people’s interests taken into account with their lists of priorities identified, governments can then take action on what matters the most. Tackling strategic issues backed up with evidence could help governments channel their finite resources to deliver the best results. Social media can then deepen the ties between the state and citizens through shared online information, as long as it is taken care of “...in terms of shaping political

¹ Bernstein, Richard J., The Normative Core of the Public Sphere, *Political Theory*, volume 40, issue 6, 2012, pp. 767-778

² Klischewski, Ralf, When Virtual Reality Meets Realpolitik: Social Media Shaping the Arab Government–Citizen Relationship, *Government Information Quarterly*, volume 31, issue 3, 2014, pp. 358-364

³ Granovetter, Mark, The Strength of Weak Ties: A Network Theory Revisited, *Sociological Theory*, 1983, pp. 201-233

communication and shaping the media itself in order to serve well as mediator among citizens and between citizens and government.”¹ By identifying the people’s popular moods, the government can then take action on what actually matters, not what it ‘thinks’ should matter. Consequently, this action would result in greater innovation, a key aspect needed in this rapidly changing world.

Engaging Netizens may also reverse any form of identity, or ideological, crisis they may face after a prolonged consumption of untoward information. By actively identifying and socialising with online communities, states could share information to shape public opinion and socialise digital users to understand the basic realities of their socio-economic and political contexts. A concerted effort by the state has to take part in engaging directly with these online communities to combat misinformation or ‘active measures’ perpetuated in the online space. There are plenty of suspicious websites, proclaiming themselves to present the truths, which are patently wrong and are seditious against the state. While it should not be a general policy to censor these sites, it would be best for the state to habitually present reasonable and factual based rebuts, and to aggressively tackle fake news. To publish them in Old Media (like newspapers, radio, and TV) is no longer sufficient. It takes a government-netizen (gover-netizen), or netizen army, to share this information and engage directly with the public in popular cyberspace conduits. Even if the gover-netizen may disguise himself as another netizen, it is crucial to engage with the public if the message is to reach out to the masses to nip fake news, or misinformation, in the bud.

Digital *Shūrā*: The Way Forward?

Digital *Shūrā* is a concept that can contribute to the increasing significance and development of ‘Islamic Governance’. Embedding political participation with technology to govern the Muslim state, and to strengthen relations between state and citizens, would go a long way in building a cohesive and robust community, thus strengthening its socio-religious and political status in the process.² In light of the increasing embeddedness of people on the internet, coupled with the rising expectations in the 21st century, technology should then serve as a means to contribute constructively to the polity, in line with the Maqāṣid of the Shar’ah. It is then a policy recommendation for states, not necessarily Muslim states, to treat individuals online, not as mere bots, bytes, and data, but humans behind the computer screen, each with their own hopes and dreams to contribute to the community. Instead of repressing, or censoring, popular online outlets, states should monitor online conversations to identify topics, or issues, that can be dealt with. By expanding the political space too, the governments can unlock new ideas arising from the robust online discussions among the digital ‘*ulamā*’. It must, however, be noted that the ultimate decision shall rest on the state to implement policy actions, not based on the *naṣīḥah* of the netizens.

¹ Klischewski, Ralf, When Virtual Reality Meets Realpolitik: Social Media Shaping the Arab Government–Citizen Relationship, *Government Information Quarterly*, volume 31, issue 3, 2014, pp. 358-364

² Another case study done on the effective deployment of Digital Technology by a state is by the Brunei Government. See Omar, Abdul Malik, Digital Era Governance and Social Media: The Case of Information Department Brunei, In *Employing Recent Technologies for Improved Digital Governance*, IGI Global, 2020, pp. 19-35