

## A Key note Address: Islamic Perspectives on Good Governance

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*Bismillah Walhamdulillah Was Salaatu Was Salaam 'ala Rasulillah  
Assalamu Alaikum wa Rahmatullah wa Barakatuh*

### The Chairman, Brothers, and Sisters

It is indeed a privilege for me to be invited to talk about Islamic Perspectives on Good Governance today, particularly because of the commitment to business ethics and good governance advocated and demonstrated by Universiti Brunie Darussalam.

To begin, I want to propose something that may be surprising to you. And that is, my firmly held belief that there really is no such thing as “business ethics.” Or, “medical ethics,” “religious ethics,” or “political ethics.” There is only ethics, plain and simple. In my mind ethics cannot be compartmentalized, with personal behavior in one box of life, and our professional behavior in another. There’s only **an ethics** (if you will) that pervades all aspects our of life, serving as an unambiguous guide – a clear, shining beacon – for our thoughts, activities and behaviors – both public and private. Narrates Quran: “verily in the messenger of Allah ye have a good example for him who looketh unto Allah and the Last Day, and remembereth Allah much” (33:21).

It appears the world to have suddenly woken up to the importance of ethical conduct. While the shift is taking place in people’s ideas about what the key business assets actually are today, the question of ethics in public policy is a fundamental philosophical question, which is relevant to all states and societies.

Good governance has become the buzzword of international financial institutions as a key factor for sustained economic growth. This has also been picked up as a slogan by almost every government, particularly in developing countries.

Huge resources and billions of dollars are now being rallied to conduct research and institutionalize good governance. This very conference has collected experts from all over the world!

Moreover, good governance and ethics are featured instruction at the university levels. Many Western business schools have already incorporated ethics in their coursework. Good governance, or actually the failure to implement it, is even becoming a hot subject for fiction writers. Tales of corruption are selling books.

However, we have yet to see tangible results of the instruction approach to ethics. We earlier saw failure of the legal approach. Simply because ethics can hardly be taught by a set of classroom courses. Rather, it needs to be imbued through training and real-life examples and experience.

I believe contemporary Western values – the belief that business and ethics are two distinct parallels of an operation– that are founded on the English and French civil common laws are at the root of the problem. Those laws notoriously lacked the very spirit of ethical conduct, and ethical governance for that matter. In stark contrast, Islamic teachings are firmly built upon ethical conduct in each and every thought decision and action.

Well, what about the Golden Rule, the Monotheism (*Tawheed*), the source of all the good? That is the whole law: the rest is but commentary. Common ethical ground? I would say so! Pragmatic? Down to earth! Teachable? Certainly!

What's needed, then, is recognition that there is a core set of enduring, universal values that can and **must** be taught.

Religious codes had identified this issue long ago and demonstrated its success and longevity over the ages. Islamic philosophy in all its dimensions ultimately goes back to the principle of Monotheism (*Tawheed*). Allah is the source of all knowledge, all guidance, all existence and all morality.

I emphasize here that good governance is merely a by-product of an Islamic system. Islamic teachings are Divinely prescribed eternal principles to establish and maintain ethics and good governance. They offer both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to implement the unswerving Good (with a capital “G”), since the time of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

In the Quran, we read of this principled strategy:

As I noted, religious codes had identified this issue long ago. In fact, religions prior to Islam promoted ethical conduct, too. Prophet Jesus said, **“All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them, for this is the law and the prophets?” Talmud puts it, “That which you hold as detestable, do not do to your neighbor”.**

Let me point out 9 general Islamic perspectives on good governance. My colleagues’ papers today, *inshaAllah* promise to highlight and address the relevant issues in greater depth.

1<sup>st</sup> In making selection of public officials, only merit matters. The Prophet has warned; “When trusts are wasted, then wait thou for the Day of Judgment.” It was asked, ‘And how will trusts be wasted?’ He (pbuh) said, ‘When affairs are assigned to those who are not worthy.’ (Bukhari).

2<sup>nd</sup> Management powers are prudently disciplined, checked, and rule of law are ensured through supremacy of Allah’s directives, “And whosoever does not govern by that which Allah has revealed, such are the wrongdoers” (5:45).

3<sup>rd</sup> Islam implants collective decision-making, tolerance, civil and political liberty, and resolve. Albeit, with compassion. Narrates Quran: “And by the Mercy of Allah, you dealt with them gently. And had you been severe and harsh-hearted, they would have broken away from about you; so pass over (their faults), and ask (Allah’s)

Forgiveness for them; and consult them in the affairs. Then when you have taken a decision, put your trust in Allah, certainly, Allah loves those who put their trust (in Him)" (3:159).

4<sup>th</sup> Islam categorically calls for transparency, and abhors conflict of interests. The Quranic admonition is, "And do not devour your wealth among yourselves through falsehood, and offer it not as bribe to the authorities that you may knowingly devour a part of the wealth of other people with injustice." (2:189).

5<sup>th</sup> Contracts are binding and enforceable in a good government, "If you fear treachery from any people throw back (their covenant) to them (so as to be) on equal terms (that there will be no more covenant between you and them). Certainly Allah likes not the treacherous". (8:58).

6<sup>th</sup> Islamic system urges integrity and honesty in the management, He said, "There is no governor who rules Muslim subjects and dies, having played foul with them, but Allah will forbid him Paradise". (Bukhari).

7<sup>th</sup> Providing welfare, protection, and needs to every being under one's jurisdiction are a basic requisite of good governance. The Prophet said, "if he does not strive diligently to promote their welfare, he will not enter Paradise with them." (Bukhari). **Caliph Omar (ra) declared that if a mule falls on a rocky mountain as a result of unpaved road, at the bank of Tigris, he is answerable to Allah.**

8<sup>th</sup> Islam is uncompromising about independent justice, "Verily, Allah commands you to make over the trusts to those entitled to them. And that when you judge between them, you judge with justice." (4:58).

Lastly, the Islamic system ensures airtight accountability! One in this world and the other in the Hereafter, both inter-related. The latter, though very close and thorough, is very personal and not visible to others whereas the former sets an example in this very world. Both good and evil never go un-accounted for. Guaranteed!!

But while we are interested in ethical conduct and good governance, there is a serious concern about whether we are doing anything about it.

In my view, the existence of corruption and inefficiency has been facilitated by the severance of the organic link between our moral philosophy and its Metaphysical roots in the Monotheism. A proper apprehension of Allah, His Beautiful Names (*al-asma' al-husna*) and His Exalted Attributes (*as-sifat al-'ula*) must necessarily transform our ethics so that we not only search for the path to moral good, but also we actually are moved, compelled, to follow it in all aspects of life, and in all situations, public and private – externally and internally. What we call in management, "intrinsic and extrinsic motivation."

When Islamic system and values are reduced to excessive manifestations, it becomes, for its inflexible advocates, a provocative tool against the rest of the world, and the West in particular. It becomes the focus of the impending clash of civilizations, and a convenient excuse for setting its advocates apart from power brokers, and who, like the majority of the population, become renegades to be fought to the end.

This strongly advocates, I believe, for another way for advocating the Islamic system and values, which looks at a unique tradition of refined and sophisticated thinking and practice. The Islamic methodology (*Sahri'at or fiqh*) has produced innumerable compendia of practices.

So, instead of reducing system the Islamic System to a few provocative acid 'Islamic' tests, one can question the uprooting of a whole tradition and the people who have supported and carried it through. To see the practical demonstration of good governance, one only needs to go through the shining examples set by the Islamic leaders. They ruled over continents, with all the complexities of public administration in far more demanding situations than today.

In contrast, what about the world situation today? More and more Enrons and Worldcoms are being reported about – and it seems that not much can be done about it. The root causes are found in the very misguided life view held by so many today. It's what I said earlier: ethics cannot be compartmentalized, with personal behavior in one box of life, and our professional behavior in another. All the verbal gymnastics in the world can't make something right in the mind . . . when the HEART clearly knows (and feels) that is clearly wrong.

Unfortunately, though, too many people today just don't resonate with this truth.

To illustrate, let's reflect on an area – FRAUD -- that is dramatically growing in complexity and importance. A recent KPMG survey indicates that 76% of the largest American companies acknowledged having been victimized during the previous year. Reports of fraudulent practices, child labor, exploited Asian workers, and environmental damage have spotlighted the failures of some of our best-known leaders. Evidence for this wouldn't take much more than looking at the news headlines.

And, look at the current educational institutions. "Who's Who Among American High-School Students" asked more than 3,000 of the best and brightest whether they cheated to pass exams. That year, after 29 years of asking the same question, a new record was set: 80% admitted to cheating on exams. Why? The top answer, given by 56%, was "competition for good grades". But a nearly equal number (53%) said that cheating "didn't seem like a big deal". They simply didn't understand the importance (and the TRUTH) of ethics.

In another survey by the Pinnacle Group, 66% of respondents said they would lie to achieve a business objective.

You may think we are only talking about students. We're not. We are talking about future managers, about CEOs, about leaders of society and about heads of major organizations in the next few years.

Is the fault with the children? I don't think so. What's going on then? Why do they feel this way? Why are the so-called modern educational systems carrying us into a situation in which even the most fundamental concepts of honesty, responsibility, and respect for others are not being taught?

So, don't be under any illusion that somehow one can be unethical in personal financial matters but ethical as the manager of an organization or office. Don't be under any illusion that a state official can say, "Oh, that is my private life. Judge me as an official". There is simply no place for these verbal gymnastics, plain old bad judgment, and bad behavior in an Islamic framework of life or Islamic view of life itself.

As I move toward the close of my talk with you, let me reiterate what I said earlier, the vital ingredients of good governance in Islamic system focuses on merit, rule of law and discipline of authority, collective decision-making, tolerance, compassion, basic rights, transparency, and enforceability of the contracts, integrity, community welfare, fairness and justice, and . . . **accountability**. Absolute and all pervasive. Moreover, they must be sought with perfection (*ehsan*).

Finally, let me humbly offer a bit of advice and a promise. First . . . the advice. [Say hadeeth in Arabic first for impact] "Fear of Allah is the core of wisdom". That is, a FEAR based on SINCERE LOVE of Allah, the Divine principles revealed and given to us. That kind of FEAR is based on trepidation to displease the one we love – our Creator and Sustainer (the Rab Al-alameen). And now . . . the Promise. May I ask everyone to keep this advice in his consciousness, all the time? If so, then with Allah's permission, and our prayers, **I promise** our world will be a lovelier place for all.

*Thank you,  
And Assalamu Alaikum wa Rahmatullah wa Barakatuh.*