

ETHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF POLITICAL LEGITIMACY IN MUHAMMAD ‘IMĀRAH’S THOUGHT

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the concept of political character in the thought of Muhammad ‘Imārah, emphasizing its role as the ethical foundation of political legitimacy in Islam. Responding to modern political reductionism that separates power from morality, the study argues that ‘Imārah conceptualizes Islamic politics not as an ideology of power or merely a legal-formal system, but as an ethical praxis grounded in tawḥīd, trust (amānah), justice, and human moral responsibility as khalīfah. Employing a qualitative library research method with a normative-philosophical approach and intellectual history, this study analyzes ‘Imārah’s major works in dialogue with classical and contemporary Islamic political thinkers, particularly al-Māwardī, Fazlur Rahman, and Alija Izetbegović. The findings demonstrate that ‘Imārah advances Islamic political thought beyond prevailing normative discourses by reorienting fiqh al-siyāsah from an institutional and stability-centered paradigm toward a critical political ethics in which moral character constitutes the primary source of political legitimacy. By articulating the concept of al-dawlah al-madaniyyah bi marja’iyyah islāmiyyah, ‘Imārah offers a mediating framework that challenges both normative secularism and Islamic political formalism, thereby enriching contemporary debates on the ethical foundations of governance in Muslim societies. While his framework remains largely normative-philosophical and lacks detailed institutional elaboration for modern political systems, this limitation underscores the article’s contribution in repositioning Islamic political ethics as a dynamic field of moral critique rather than a fixed legal or ideological project. Ultimately, this study contributes to contemporary Islamic political ethics by proposing a character-based, humanistic, and justice-oriented model of political legitimacy that responds to ongoing ethical crises in modern Muslim politics.

INTRODUCTION

The discourse on political character in Islam necessarily entails an intrinsic relationship between the normative dimensions of religious teachings and the practice of power in social life. Within the landscape of contemporary Islamic thought, Muhammad ‘Imārah emerges as an intellectual who consistently sought to articulate Islamic politics as an ethical and civilizational project, rather than merely an ideology of power (‘Imārah, 1989). Through his scholarly works, such as *Kitāb al-Islām wa Falsafat al-Ḥukm* and *Fī al-Niẓām al-Siyāsī al-Islāmī: al-Khilāfah, al-Dawlah*

al-Madaniyyah, *al-Shūrā*, *al-Dīmuqrāṭiyyah*, *al-Muwāṭanah*, ‘*Imārah* asserts that politics in Islam is grounded in *tawhīd*, justice, and the moral responsibility of human beings as *khalīfah*, rather than in domination or the absolutization of power.

From ‘*Imārah*’s perspective, the political character of Islam is constructed upon the unity of creed ‘*aqīdah* and ethics *akhlāq*. Politics is understood as a trust *amānah* that must be exercised with moral integrity and a commitment to the public welfare *al-maṣlahah al-‘āmmah*. He explicitly criticizes secular political models that separate religious values from the public sphere, while simultaneously rejecting forms of theocracy that constrain deliberation *shūrā* and human freedom. This position is clearly reflected in his critique of the legacy of modern Arab secularism and his defense of the concept of *al-dawlah al-madaniyyah bi marja’iyyah islāmiyyah*, a civil state grounded in Islamic normative values (‘*Imārah*, 2008). *Muhammad ‘Imārah*’s thought demonstrates both continuity with and renewal of the classical Islamic political tradition, particularly when compared with *al-Māwardī*. In *Al-Aḥkām al-Sulṭāniyyah*, *al-Māwardī* emphasizes political stability and institutional order as prerequisites for the preservation of religion and worldly affairs (Muien et al., 2025). Meanwhile, ‘*Imārah* shifts the emphasis from the legal-formal dimensions of power toward the cultivation of political character grounded in ethics, social justice, and popular participation. In other words, whereas *al-Māwardī* represents the paradigm of institutional political fiqh, ‘*Imārah* embodies the paradigm of civilizational political ethics.

Furthermore, ‘*Imārah*’s thought exhibits a strong intersection with that of *Fazlur Rahman* in placing moral values at the core of Islamic politics. *Fazlur Rahman* emphasizes the significance of Qur’anic ethics and moral ideals as the very spirit of the Islamic socio-political system (Hanafi et al., 2020). In line with this, ‘*Imārah* asserts that law and authority lose their legitimacy when detached from the values of justice and humanity. The distinction lies in their approaches: *Fazlur Rahman* operates within the framework of Qur’anic moral hermeneutics, whereas ‘*Imārah* primarily engages in ideological polemics and the discourse of contemporary Islamic politics. The affinity of ‘*Imārah*’s thought can also be traced to *Alija Izetbegović*, particularly in their critique of modern political reductionism. *Izetbegović* rejects politics divorced from morality and spirituality, as evidenced in *Islam Between East and West* (Izetbegović, 1993). For him, politics must reflect human moral freedom. This view aligns with ‘*Imārah*’s assertion that the political character of Islam is measured not by the mere effectiveness of power, but by fidelity to the values of truth, justice, and human dignity.

Despite the growing body of scholarship on *Muhammad ‘Imārah*’s political thought, existing studies have largely focused on his ideological position within the debates on Islamism, secularism, and the Islamic state, or have examined his views through a legal-formal and institutional lens. Consequently, the ethical-philosophical dimension of political character as a foundational source of political legitimacy in his thought remains underexplored. In particular, few studies have systematically analyzed how ‘*Imārah* reconfigures Islamic political discourse by foregrounding moral character as the nexus between faith, power, and social responsibility. This article addresses this gap by offering a normative-critical analysis of *Muhammad ‘Imārah*’s concept of political character, positioning it as the ethical foundation of political legitimacy in Islam. By shifting the analytical focus from institutional arrangements and political stability toward moral agency, ethical responsibility, and civilizational values, this study advances contemporary debates in Islamic political ethics beyond prevailing normative and legalistic frameworks.

Thus, the political character according to *Muhammad ‘Imārah* can be understood as a synthesis of faith, ethics, and social responsibility. He offers a model of politics that avoids entrapment in the pragmatism of power or the formalism of law, instead positioning human beings as moral agents in history. Studying his thought is relevant for addressing the ethical crises in contemporary Muslim political life, while also enriching the corpus of Islamic political theory with a humanistic and justice-oriented approach.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative systematic literature review (SLR) to identify, assess, and synthesize research findings on Qur'anic character education in the context of digital madrasah. The study stages were structured transparently, adhering to the PRISMA 2020 reporting principles (Page et al., 2021) and literature review guidelines as a research methodology (Snyder, 2019). The results of this research were obtained through the application of a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, following the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework to the literature discussing Quran-based character education in the context of digital madrasah. The research approach was qualitative-descriptive, with peer-reviewed journal articles as the units of analysis. This research consisted of relevant scientific documents that met the inclusion criteria, thus focusing on mapping the methodology, findings, and trends of previous research.

This study employs a qualitative library research design focusing on the analysis of *Muhammad 'Imārah's* political thought. This approach is deliberately chosen because the object of inquiry consists of ideas, concepts, and normative constructions concerning political character in Islam, rather than observable empirical phenomena or institutional practices. Accordingly, the scope of analysis is analytically limited to the level of ethical principles, philosophical arguments, and conceptual frameworks articulated in *'Imārah's* writings, without extending to empirical assessment of political behavior, governance outcomes, or policy implementation in contemporary Muslim societies. The analysis combines a normative-philosophical approach with an intellectual history framework. The normative-philosophical approach is employed to examine political character as an ethical category, encompassing core principles such as *tawhīd*, *amānah* (trust), justice, deliberation (*shūrā*), and public welfare (*maṣlahah*) in *'Imārah's* thought. Meanwhile, the intellectual history approach situates these ideas within their socio-political context and within the broader trajectory of classical and contemporary Islamic political thought, allowing for a contextualized interpretation of *'Imārah's* normative arguments.

The data sources consist of primary and secondary materials. Primary sources include Muhammad *'Imārah's* major works, such as *Kitāb al-Islām wa Falsafat al-Hukm* and *Fī al-Nizām al-Siyāsī al-Islāmī: al-Khilāfah, al-Dawlah al-Madaniyyah, al-Shūrā, al-Dīmuqrāṭiyyah, al-Muwāṭanah*. Secondary sources comprise classical and contemporary Islamic political literature as well as relevant peer-reviewed journal articles. Data were collected through critical reading and thematic note-taking, and analyzed through concept categorization, conceptual interpretation, and limited comparative analysis across selected thinkers. To enhance analytical rigor, the study employed source triangulation and internal consistency checks of arguments across texts. It is important to acknowledge the limitations inherent in this methodological design. As a normative-philosophical inquiry, this study does not provide empirical validation of how *'Imārah's* ethical framework operates within actual political institutions or contemporary governance practices. Consequently, the findings should be understood as a conceptual and ethical contribution to Islamic political theory rather than as an evaluative account of political realities. Nevertheless, by clearly delineating its analytical boundaries, this study offers a theoretically grounded and systematic reconstruction of political character in *Muhammad 'Imārah's* thought, which may serve as a foundation for future empirical or interdisciplinary research on Islamic political ethics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Politics as a Moral Trust in Muhammad 'Imārah's Thought

In *Muhammad 'Imārah's* thought, politics is built upon the foundations of Islamic ethics and theology, framing authority as a moral trust *amānah* rather than an end in itself. Within this framework, politics is not understood instrumentally or procedurally, but as an integral aspect of

human responsibility as *khalīfah*, tasked with realizing justice and promoting the common good *maṣlaḥah* in collective life (‘Imārah, 2008). Thus, political legitimacy is determined not merely by the effectiveness of power, but by the moral quality accompanying its exercise. This view underscores that politics cannot be separated from the ethical dimension, as authority divorced from moral values has the potential to give rise to domination and injustice.

Conceptually, ‘*Imārah* grounds Islamic politics in the principle of *tawḥīd*, which entails a rejection of the absolutization of human power. *Tawḥīd* necessitates that authority be constrained by moral values and laws, ensuring that no political power is sacred or beyond critique (‘Imārah, 1988). From this perspective, *tawḥīd* does not remain confined to a purely theological or transcendent dimension; rather, it carries concrete political implications in the regulation of power, the legitimacy of authority, and the enforcement of justice within society and the state. Politics is understood as a space for *ijtihād* and deliberation *shūrā*, where reason, social experience, and the values of the Sharia interact dynamically. Consequently, Islamic politics is not static, but responsive to historical contexts while retaining its ethical and transcendent orientation.

‘*Imārah*’s conceptual framework resonates strongly with the theory of political ethics in the classical Islamic philosophical tradition, particularly with al-*Māwardī*’s view that the purpose of authority is to safeguard religion and regulate worldly affairs *ḥirāsat al-dīn wa siyāsat al-dunyā* (Al-Mawardi, 2016). However, unlike approaches that tend to emphasize institutional stability, ‘*Imārah*’ places greater emphasis on the normative and critical dimensions of Islamic politics. According to him, authority must always be evaluated against the principles of justice *al-‘adl*, public welfare *al-maṣlaḥah*, and the protection of human dignity, so that politics is not reduced to mere power management.

Furthermore, ‘*Imārah*’s thought aligns with contemporary normative political theory, which positions ethics as the foundation of political legitimacy, akin to the concept of moral authority in modern political philosophy (Raz, 1988). Within the Islamic context, such legitimacy does not derive merely from legal authority, social contract, or majority will, but from the alignment of political practice with objective and transcendent moral values. Thus, in Muhammad ‘*Imārah*’s view, politics constitutes an ethical praxis that requires the integration of authority, moral responsibility, and humanitarian objectives, while simultaneously serving as a critique of modern politics, which tends to separate power from ethics.

Table 1: The Difference Between Moral Authority, Legal Authority, and Factual Power

Concept	Basis of Legitimacy	Nature
Power	Ability to Coerce	Faktual
Legal authority	Law and Procedure	Formal
Moral authority	Ethical Values and Justice	Normative

A regime can possess legal authority without moral authority when power is legally valid but ethically unjust. Within this framework, moral authority is understood as an ethical trust that binds rulers to the principles of *tawḥīd*, justice, and the Public welfare. Authority gains legitimacy not from the sacredness of the ruler, but from their fidelity to moral values and divine law, so that societal obedience is based on ethical recognition rather than merely on law or coercion. In this context, moral authority serves to affirm that power is relative and open to critique. The resonance between ‘*Imārah*’s thought and that of *Alija Izetbegović* is particularly strong in their critique of modern political reductionism. *Izetbegović* rejects politics that separates power from morality and spirituality, as this reduces human beings to objects of manipulation. He emphasizes the fundamental distinction between religious ethics and utilitarian ethics: secular ethics evaluates goodness based on consequences and benefits, whereas Islam regards goodness as inherent in the moral value itself (Izetbegović, 1993). Public welfare and stability remain important, but they are subordinate to

moral principles. When public welfare conflicts with moral truth, it is the welfare consideration that must be corrected.

This perspective demonstrates that the critiques advanced by ‘*Imārah* and *Izetbegović* are not merely normative–theological in nature, but also constitute a philosophical challenge to the ethical foundations of modern political thought. In this context, Islam is positioned as a value system that rejects the relativization of morality in the name of the efficiency of power. As emphasized by *Alija Izetbegović*, politics detached from moral commitment inevitably leads to dehumanization, insofar as human beings are treated merely as instruments for collective ends (*Izetbegović*, 1993). This view is consonant with *Azyumardi Azra*’s analysis, which underscores that Islamic political ethics situates justice and trustworthiness as intrinsic principles, rather than as mere instruments of political legitimation (*Azra*, 2000). This implies that the subordination of morality to utilitarian rationality constitutes a defining feature of the crisis of modern political ethics and stands in fundamental opposition to the Islamic paradigm, which integrates power, values, and transcendent responsibility (*In’amuzzahidin*, 2016).

Furthermore, the critique of the reduction of political legitimacy to procedural dimensions alone reveals a deeper crisis in the meaning of power in modern politics. When legitimacy is understood merely as the outcome of electoral mechanisms and compliance with positive law, power loses its transcendent orientation that functions as an internal source of moral restraint. *Azyumardi Azra* emphasizes that within the Islamic political tradition, legitimacy is never detached from the principles of justice and trust (*amānah*), as well as the ethical responsibility of rulers toward society and God; consequently, procedural legality must always be measured against substantive moral standards (*Azra*, 1996). Within *Muhammad ‘Imārah*’s framework, this condition reflects the dominance of secular rationality that separates politics from the horizon of divine values, rendering ethics no longer the primary evaluative of political action but merely a discursive supplement. As a result, the exercise of power tends to become opportunistic and pragmatic, even while remaining formally legal. This paradigm stands in direct opposition to Islamic political thought, which conceives power as a historical and spiritual trust, accountable not only in public and legal terms, but also in moral and eschatological ones.

Ideal Political Character as the Core of Political Legitimacy

In *Muhammad ‘Imārah*’s thought, political character constitutes the normative foundation that determines the quality, direction, and legitimacy of authority. Politics, within ‘*Imārah*’s framework, is not understood merely as a technical mechanism for managing the state or as an instrument for the pursuit of power, but as a space for the actualization of human moral responsibility as *khalīfah* (*‘Imārah*, 2009). Therefore, political success is measured not merely by stability, administrative effectiveness, or procedural victories, but by the extent to which authority is exercised justly, responsibly, and in favor of the public interest. The formulation of ideal political character occupies a central position in *Muhammad ‘Imārah*’s thought. This character encompasses the moral integrity of leaders, a commitment to social justice, and dedication to the public welfare. ‘*Imārah* emphasizes that honesty, trustworthiness, and responsibility are not merely personal virtues, but structural prerequisites and systemic foundations for the proper functioning of a just political system (*‘Imārah*, 2008). Authority exercised without moral character, even if legally valid, loses its substantive legitimacy.

Furthermore, deliberation *shūrā* and freedom are inherent elements of Islamic political character. Political freedom is not understood as limitless liberty, but as a responsible freedom bound by the values of truth and justice (*‘Imārah*, 1988). Deliberation is not merely a technical mechanism for decision-making, but an ethical expression of recognition of human dignity and the community’s participation in determining the course of political life. This is clearly reflected in the words of Allah : “وَأْمُرْهُمْ شُورَىٰ بَيْنَهُمْ” (QS. al-Shūrā [42]: 38), which the exegetes understand as a moral characteristic of a believing society in managing collective affairs (*Apriadi & Muttaqin*, 2020). This phrase indicates

that the management of public affairs must take place through participation, dialogue, and shared responsibility, thereby preventing unilateral domination and authoritarian tendencies in authority.

Furthermore, the ethical dimension of deliberation is emphasized in QS. Āli ‘Imrān [3]: 159 through the direct command to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ: “وَشَاوِرْهُمْ فِي الْأَمْرِ” (“And consult them in the matter”). Even though the Prophet possessed prophetic authority and guidance from revelation, this command to consult was not based on any technical limitation of leadership, but rather on cultivating the ethical education of the community in political matters. Exegetes emphasize that this command aims to instill respect for human beings, foster a sense of collective responsibility, and affirm the community’s participation in determining the course of socio-political life (Apriadi & Muttaqin, 2020). Thus, deliberation (shūrā) functions as an ethical expression of recognition of human dignity (karāmah al-insān) and as a moral mechanism to prevent arbitrariness in governance.

This finding becomes particularly significant when related to contemporary political realities, which tend to reduce legitimacy to procedural and legal-formal aspects. Many actors and political parties obtain power legitimately through democratic mechanisms, yet subsequently govern in a corrupt, manipulative, or repressive manner. From *Muhammad ‘Imārah’s* perspective, such legitimacy is partial and fragile because it lacks the ethical dimension that should constitute the core of Islamic politics. Politics without character, even if legally valid, remains morally deficient. This ethical transcendental conception of power also implies a critical stance toward the technocratic management of politics that dominates contemporary governance. When political action is increasingly framed in terms of efficiency, stability, and performance indicators, moral judgment is displaced by managerial calculation. From the perspective articulated by *Muhammad ‘Imārah* and reinforced by *Azyumardi Azra*, such a shift represents not progress but regression, as it transforms politics into a value-neutral technique rather than a moral practice oriented toward the common good. *Alija Izetbegović* similarly warns that modern political rationality, when detached from ethical and spiritual commitments, reduces governance to a functional system devoid of moral meaning. Islamic political ethics, by contrast, insists that governance is inseparable from moral intentionality *niyyah* and ethical accountability, thereby rejecting the assumption that administrative effectiveness alone can justify political authority.

Moreover, this framework highlights the importance of character *akhlāq* as a central category in evaluating political leadership. The legitimacy of authority, therefore, cannot be sustained solely through institutional compliance or electoral success, but must be continuously reaffirmed through ethical conduct and moral consistency. *Azyumardi Azra* emphasizes that in the Islamic tradition, leadership is fundamentally moral in nature, grounded in justice, trustworthiness, and responsibility before God and society (Azra, 2016). In this sense, the crisis of modern political ethics is not merely institutional but anthropological, reflecting the marginalization of moral subjectivity within political life. Islamic political thought responds to this crisis by re-centering the moral agent as both bearer and guardian of power, affirming that political authority devoid of ethical character ultimately undermines its own legitimacy, regardless of its formal or legal foundations.

Critical Dialogue with Classical Fiqh al-Siyāsah: al-Māwardī and the Question of Stability Stability as Pragmatic Legitimacy in Classical Fiqh al-Siyāsah

In dialogue with the classical Islamic political tradition, *Muhammad ‘Imārah’s* thought can be understood as an internal critique of the *Fiqh al-Siyāsah* paradigm, which emphasizes stability and order as the primary objectives of politics. In *Al-Aḥkām al-Sulṭāniyyah*, *al-Māwardī* positions authority as an instrument to safeguard religion and regulate worldly affairs (Al-Mawardi, 2016). so that social order becomes a prerequisite for the continuity of collective life. Consequently, this approach potentially allows for tolerance of authority that is not fully morally ideal, as long as it can prevent disorder *fitnah* and ensure political stability. This approach can be understood as a pragmatic

response to the socio-political context of the medieval period, characterized by fragmented authority and the threat of protracted conflict (‘Imārah, 1989).

Ethical Limits of Stability-Oriented Politics

‘Imārah questions the ethical consequences of this approach, particularly when stability becomes a justificatory discourse for structural injustice. He argues that Islamic politics cannot be confined to the minimalist logic of *dar’ al-mafāsīd* (avoiding harm), but must be oriented toward the substantive realization of *jalb al-maṣāliḥ* the promotion of public welfare (‘Imārah, 1997). Stability achieved through repression, legal manipulation, or corrupt power contradicts the *maqāṣid al-sharī‘ah*, especially the protection of justice and human dignity.

From Order to Moral Evaluation of Authority

At this point, ‘Imārah reorients Islamic politics from maintaining order toward ethically evaluating authority. A regime may be secure yet oppressive, orderly yet corrupt, and therefore lack substantive legitimacy. Political power, in his view, cannot be justified by administrative efficiency alone, but must be measured by its realization of justice, responsible freedom, and public rights. Stability thus becomes a consequence of justice rather than its substitute.

Normative-Critical Reconstruction of the Tradition

Theoretically, this position marks a shift from the defensive logic of *Fiqh al-Siyāsah* toward a normative-critical Islamic political ethics. ‘Imārah does not reject *al-Māwardī*, but reinterprets the classical legacy within a more rigorous moral horizon. His dialogue with tradition is therefore reconstructive rather than ruptural, aimed at preventing Islamic politics from degenerating into conservatism that merely legitimizes the status quo.

Contemporary Implications of the Stability-Justice Tension

By foregrounding ethical evaluation over institutional continuity, ‘Imārah offers a framework for critiquing modern authoritarian regimes that instrumentalize Islamic symbols while perpetuating injustice. In line with *maqāṣid*-based governance (Auda, 2017), legitimacy in Islam requires accountability to justice and human dignity, not merely procedural stability (Kholif, 2025). Islamic politics thus emerges as a dynamic ethical project requiring continuous moral vigilance.

Civil State Based on Values: al-Dawlah al-Madaniyyah bi Marja‘iyyah Islāmiyyah Rejecting Theocracy and Secularism

Muhammad ‘Imārah articulates his political model through the concept of *al-dawlah al-madaniyyah bi marja‘iyyah islāmiyyah*, which affirms the civil character of the state while rejecting both theocracy and value-neutral secularism. The state is conceived as a public institution managing collective affairs, guided but not ruled by Islamic ethical values (Fakhrudin, 2017).

Islam as Moral Reference, Not Legal Domination

‘Imārah distinguishes religion as a source of values from the state as a mechanism of authority. He rejects the notion that Islamic governance requires clerical rule or the sacralization of power (‘Imārah, 1988). Islamic values function as a *marja‘iyyah akhlāqiyyah* guiding legislation, policy, and political ethics, rather than as a rigid legal code insulated from social change. (‘Imārah, 1988). Islamic values function as a *marja‘iyyah akhlāqiyyah* guiding legislation, policy, and political ethics, rather than as a rigid legal code insulated from social change.

Reviving Values without Replicating Historical Forms

This model seeks to revive the ethical spirit of the Rashidun Caliphate—accountability, deliberation, and openness to criticism without reproducing its institutional forms (‘Imārah, 2009a).

The state is understood as a civil institution managed by citizens through collective and rational mechanisms, while remaining oriented toward ethical objectives derived from Islamic teachings.

Values as the Basis of Legitimacy

Accordingly, political legitimacy is measured not by religious symbolism or formal claims to *Sharī'ah* implementation, but by the realization of justice and public welfare. *Al-dawlah al-madaniyyah* becomes a shared ethical space that accommodates plural citizenship while preserving Islam as a moral compass in public life.

The Rashidun Caliphate as a Model of Character-Based Politics

Authority as Moral Trust

During the Rashidun period, authority was understood as a public trust bound to moral responsibility. *Abu Bakr's* inaugural address, emphasizing openness to criticism, illustrates that legitimacy was conditional upon justice and accountability ('Imārah, 1989). His rejection of the title *Khalīfatullāh* further affirms the non-sacral nature of political authority. *Abu Bakr's* stance demonstrates that, from the outset, Islamic political tradition rejected the concept of absolute power. The caliph's authority did not derive from personal sanctity or divine claim, but from public trust, which must be continuously maintained through moral integrity and accountability. In this context, public criticism is not a threat to political stability, but an ethical mechanism to safeguard the purity of entrusted authority. This principle aligns with 'Imārah's idea that Islamic politics is essentially participatory and open to moral correction.

Justice as the Foundation of Political Sustainability

'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb's leadership exemplifies justice-oriented governance through strict oversight, rejection of privilege, and openness to criticism ('Imārah, 2009a). For 'Imārah, this demonstrates that political effectiveness arises from moral character, not from authoritarianism or repressive control. Authority becomes strong because it is trusted, not feared. Public trust grows from the consistency between values and the exercise of power, making politics an instrument of service rather than domination. Thus, the experience of the Rashidun Caliphate is not merely a historical narrative, but an ethical reference affirming that the essence of Islamic politics lies in the moral integrity of leaders and the critical participation of the community in overseeing authority.

Contemporary Relevance of Character-Based Politics

In contrast to modern technocratic governance detached from ethics, the Rashidun model shows that institutions function effectively only when animated by virtuous leadership and public vigilance (Harvey et al., 2025). Moral character is thus a functional necessity for preventing the normalization of injustice. Moreover, contemporary Islamic political theorists argue that reviving the ethical foundations of leadership does not imply romanticizing the past, but rearticulating its moral logic within modern political realities. The principles of *amānah*, *adālah*, and *muhāsabah* (accountability) remain relevant as normative frameworks for evaluating power in Muslim societies today. (Willoughby, 2012) Public participation, criticism, and moral contestation, exemplified during the Rashidun period are increasingly recognized as integral to political resilience and legitimacy. In this sense, Islamic political ethics offers a critical corrective to both authoritarian religiosity and value-neutral secular governance, affirming that sustainable political order emerges not from coercion or symbolism, but from the continuous alignment of power with moral responsibility.

Dynastic Politics and the Degradation of Moral Character

From Moral to Factual Legitimacy

The transition from the Rashidun Caliphate to the Umayyad dynastic system marked a decisive shift in Islamic political ethics, where authority moved from a collective trust under

communal oversight to hereditary rule justified by lineage(‘Imārah, 1997). This transformation narrowed public participation, weakened mechanisms of moral correction, and relocated political legitimacy from justice and trustworthiness to elite loyalty, administrative stability, and military power. While effective in maintaining order and territorial expansion, this system precipitated a gradual erosion of the moral character of leadership. From an ethical standpoint, this period reflects a shift from normative to factual legitimacy, wherein authority was deemed valid due to its capacity to endure and control rather than its moral integrity. *Muhammad ‘Imārah* warns that such logic normalizes injustice in the name of stability, resembling an early form of *raison d’état* that prioritizes power over ethical responsibility and public welfare(Bainus & Rachman, 2018).

Ethics Power Tension in the Abbasid Period

During the Abbasid era, this tension intensified: despite significant intellectual and legal advancements, ethical values were not consistently internalized within political practice. Scholars often remained moral critics outside state power, while rulers governed through domination and control, reinforcing a structural divide between ethics and authority(‘Imārah, 1989). According to ‘Imārah, the decline of Muslim political life cannot be explained merely by institutional change, but by the degradation of political character—namely, the loss of awareness that authority must remain subject to moral values and communal accountability. When politics becomes detached from character, stability itself becomes fragile, and civilizational progress loses its ethical foundation. Consequently, political revival requires reconstructing the moral character of authority, not merely reforming political structures. This vision aligns with his reading of Muḥammad ‘Abduh’s principle of *tajdīd al-dunyā bi-tajdīd al-dīn*, which affirms that worldly renewal depends on authentic, rational, and context-sensitive religious reform(‘Imārah, 1989).

Contemporary Resonance

Contemporary scholarship corroborates this analysis by framing early Islamic governance as a moral-political project rather than a purely imperial one. Studies argue that Umayyad rule institutionalized obedience as political necessity instead of moral consent, with law, religion, and bureaucracy serving to stabilize authority rather than restrain it(Al-Jarhi, 2016). This configuration weakened the normative force of *amānah* and diluted participatory ethos, demonstrating that political order can persist even as its ethical substance erodes. Parallels can be drawn with modern authoritarian contexts, where stability and development justify ethical compromise, producing what scholars describe as “managed legitimacy”(Surahman et al., 2025). In contrast, the Islamic ethical tradition conceives legitimacy as a continuous moral process grounded in accountability, participation, and critical discourse—rendering Muhammad ‘Imārah’s critique a vital normative framework for reorienting contemporary Islamic politics toward justice-centered governance.

Implications and Limitations of Muhammad ‘Imārah’s Thought

Muhammad ‘Imārah’s thought is highly relevant for analyzing contemporary politics, which is often marked by corruption, populism, and tendencies toward authoritarianism that are frequently justified in the name of stability or short-term interests. In his view, such practices reflect politics without character—that is, authority that is legally and formally legitimate but lacks a commitment to trustworthiness (*amānah*), honesty, and justice. ‘Imārah also criticizes populism that manipulates identity and religious symbols as a tool for legitimizing power, as this runs counter to the moral character of Islamic politics (‘Imārah, 2023). Therefore, political reform cannot be pursued solely through changes in systems and regulations; rather, it must begin with the formation of the moral character of political actors and an ethical culture of power, so as not to produce hollow legality and deviations in new forms.

Nevertheless, *Muhammad 'Imārah's* thought also has limitations that warrant critical attention. The framework he offers is primarily normative-philosophical and lacks sufficient elaboration on institutional mechanisms to ensure the internalization of political character within complex modern political systems. *'Imārah* does not systematically address how the values of trustworthiness, justice, and deliberation can be operationalized in the context of political parties, state bureaucracy, systems of accountability, or the relationship between the state and the public. The absence of such an operational framework risks reducing the concept of political character to the level of ideal ethics, without strong structural binding power in practical governance. Consequently, in *'Imārah's* perspective, the relationship between religion and the state tends to be understood as merely symbiotic: religion functions as the source of moral values and ethical orientation for authority, while the state becomes the space for actualizing these values (Fakhruddin, 2017).

Meanwhile, the historical experience of classical Islam demonstrates that political character can erode when not supported by adequate social and institutional mechanisms. This indicates that the formation of moral character, though fundamental, cannot stand alone without institutional designs that prevent the abuse of power. Therefore, further study should focus on integrating *Muhammad 'Imārah's* political ethics with modern governance theories, such as good governance, checks and balances, and public accountability and testing them through empirical studies in the context of contemporary Islamic states. Thus, *Muhammad 'Imārah's* thought provides a strong normative foundation for the reconstruction of Islamic political ethics, but it still requires further development to function effectively within the pluralistic, complex, and institutional realities of modern politics.

CONCLUSION

Muhammad 'Imārah's political thought posits that politics, from an Islamic perspective, cannot be understood merely as a mechanism of power, a legal procedure, or a strategy for stability; rather, it is an ethical praxis rooted in *tawḥīd*, *amānah*, and the moral responsibility of humans as *khalīfah*. For *'Imārah*, political legitimacy is normative-substantive rather than merely legal-formal or factual. Authority derives its validity not from effectiveness, procedural victory, or claims of majority representation, but from its fidelity to the values of justice, public welfare, and human dignity. *'Imārah's* thought further demonstrates that *tawḥīd* carries direct political implications, particularly in rejecting the absolutization and sacralization of human authority. No political power is immune from critique, as authority remains relative and continuously accountable to moral law and transcendental values. Within this framework, Islamic politics becomes a dynamic arena of *ijtihād* and deliberation, in which *Sharī'ah* values, rational reflection, and socio-historical experience interact without losing their ethical orientation. Politics detached from ethical commitments, even when legally valid, is therefore morally deficient.

This study also shows that *'Imārah's* ideas represent a significant shift within the Islamic political tradition, moving away from the defensive and stability-oriented paradigm of classical *fiqh al-siyāsah* toward a normative-critical political ethics. In this framework, political stability is not treated as an ultimate objective, but as a derivative outcome of justice, moral accountability, and the integrity of political character. The concept of *al-dawlah al-madaniyyah bi marja'iyyah islāmiyyah* formulated by *'Imārah* offers a mediating position between normative secularism and Islamic political formalism. The state is conceived as a civil, participatory, and rational institution, while Islamic moral values function as a shared ethical reference rather than a rigid ideological instrument. Islamic politics is thus articulated as a politics of values rather than a politics of symbols, religious populism, or domination in the name of religion. *'Imārah's* critique of populist manipulation of religious identity reinforces the argument that political legitimacy in Islam is grounded in moral integrity and substantive justice, not in emotional mobilization or symbolic religiosity.

Nevertheless, this study also identifies important limitations in *'Imārah's* framework. His ethical-political vision remains largely normative-philosophical and does not provide sufficient

institutional elaboration regarding how political character can be sustained, reproduced, and protected within the complexities of modern political systems. Islamic historical experience itself suggests that moral authority is vulnerable to erosion when not supported by durable institutional arrangements. Accordingly, future research should move beyond normative articulation by exploring how Islamic political ethics, as formulated by ‘Imārah, can be systematically integrated into contemporary governance structures. This includes examining the compatibility of ethical concepts such as *amānah*, justice, and accountability with modern institutional mechanisms such as constitutionalism, checks and balances, public accountability, rule of law, and participatory governance. Comparative studies between Islamic ethical frameworks and contemporary political theory may also offer constructive pathways for institutionalizing moral responsibility without reducing ethics to mere legal formalism. In conclusion, *Muhammad ‘Imārah’s* principal contribution lies in rearticulating Islamic politics as an ethical and civilizational project rather than a power-centered ideology or a purely legal system. His thought provides a robust normative foundation for critiquing ethical crises in contemporary Muslim politics, while simultaneously opening a fertile research agenda for developing a more institutionalized, humanistic, and contextually responsive theory of Islamic political governance.

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