

# The Principles of Governing in Islam

## From the speech of Abu Bakr al Siddiq

By  
Sheikh ‘Abd al Hamid Ibn Badis

[Chapter 9 of Prof. Charles Kurzman, *Modernist Islam, a Sourcebook*, Oxford University Press, 2002]

‘Abd al-Hamid Ibn Badis (Algeria, 1889-1940) was an Islamic reformer, nationalist leader, and founder of the Association of Algerian Scholars. Ibn Badis was born in Constantine to a prominent Berber family and received religious education. In 1908 he joined the Zaytuna Mosque in Tunis, where he was exposed to the reformist ideas of Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Sheikh Muhammad Abduh. After graduation, Ibn Badis returned to Algeria in 1913 to devote his career to Islamic reform, education, and nationalism. In response to the alienating policies of the French and the Francophile tendencies of the Algerian “*évolués*” (assimilationists), Ibn Badis formulated a program that asserted the Arab and Islamic identity of Algerians, stressed Arabic and Islamic education, and prepared Algerians for independence from the French. In addition, he proposed a modernist interpretation of the Qur’an that attributed the decline of Islamic society to mystical practices<sup>1</sup>, intellectual stagnation, disunity, and political despotism. Ibn Badis articulated his views in several books and in his newspapers *al Muntaqid* (The Critic) and *al-Shihab* (The Meteor). In 1931 he established the Association of Algerian Scholars to promote Algerian identity and Islamic reform and to combat the Sufis orders and the assimilationists. The Association opened hundreds of free Arabic and Qur’anic schools, advocated cultural and social reform, and combated practices that it viewed as corrupt. The article presented here reflects Ibn Badis’s non conventional response to the abolition of the Ottoman caliphate<sup>2</sup>, which he held responsible for the repression and injustice of Muslim societies.

“When Abu Bakr al-Siddiq (may God be pleased with him) was sworn in as a caliph (in the year 632) he ascended the pulpit and addressed the people with a speech that included the principles of governance. These principles have only recently been achieved by some nations, albeit with inconsistency.

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<sup>1</sup> Sheikh ‘Abdel Hamid’s concerns were not the mystical practices as such, but the deviations witnessed among most Algerian people and the well spread innovations threatening the true Unicity (Tawhid) by giving a special status and extra powers to people seen as intercessors and eventual saviors. It is essential to underline as well that the French colonial power, for obvious reasons encouraged superstition among the colonized.

<sup>2</sup> Suggesting that Sheikh Ibn Badis did not make any particular objection to the abolition of the caliphate is going too far in the speculation process of many writers on Islamic history. On the other hand arguing that the following text support or reflect a “*non conventional response to the abolition of Ottoman Caliphate*” is a challenge to the circumspect reader, who will certainly judge by himself if the statement made by Prof. Kurzman is sustainable.

This is the text of Abu Bakr's speech:

O people! I was entrusted as your ruler, although I am not better than any one of you. Support me as long as you see me following the right path, and correct me when you see me going astray. Obey me as long as I observe God in your affairs. If I disobey Him, you owe me no obedience. The weak among you are powerful (in my eyes) until I take away from them what is due to others. I say that and seek God's forgiveness for myself and for you.

### **The first Principle**

No one has the right to assume any of the affairs of the *Umma* (Muslim community) without their consent. It is the people that have the right to delegate authority to the leaders and depose them. No one can rule without the consent of the people. Rule cannot be bequeathed nor be based on personal considerations. This principle is derived from Abu Bakr's statement "I was entrusted as your ruler". In other words, I was entrusted by others; and that is "you."

### **The second Principle**

He who manages an affair of the Muslim community should be the most qualified in this matter and not the best in behaviour. If two persons share good behaviour and qualifications, but one is better in good behaviour and the other is more qualified for this matter, the one who is better qualified should be entrusted with this matter. Undoubtedly, qualification varies with the circumstance and the position. Someone might be qualified in a specific matter and position for possessing the characteristics suitable for that position. In this case, he should be entrusted with that post. On this basis, the Prophet appointed 'Amr ibnu al'As (died in 663) to lead the army of Dhat al-Salasil and supported him with Abu Bakr, 'Umar ibn al-Khattab (died in 644) and Abu 'Ubayda ibn al-Jarrah (circa 571-639), who were all under his command, though they were better than him. He also appointed Usama ibn Zayd (died circa 673) as a commander of an army that included Abu Bakr, and 'Umar. This principle is based on the statement, "although I am not better than any one of you."

### **The Third Principle**

Assuming the affairs of the people does not make the ruler better than anyone else. Preference is achieved through merit and deeds. If Abu Bakr was better, this was not due to his rule over them but because of his deeds and stances. This principle is also derived from the statement, "although I am not better than any one of you."

### **The Fourth Principle**

The people have the right to monitor those in charge because they are the source of their authority and preserve the right to appoint or depose them.

### **The Fifth Principle**

The responsibility of the people toward the ruler lies in offering assistance to him as long as they see him following the righteous path. They must support him, as they share with him the responsibility. This principle, as the previous one, is derived from, "Support me as long as you see me following the right path."

### **The Sixth Principle**

The responsibility of the people also relies in advising and guiding the ruler and pointing the righteous path to him when he deviates. The people must correct him if he misbehaves. This principle is based on the statement, "correct me when you see me going astray."

### **The Seventh Principle**

The people have the right to question their rulers, hold them accountable for their actions, and make them follow the choice of the nation, not their own. The people have the final word, not the rulers. This is a result of the people's right to hold the rulers accountable and correct them when they are convinced that the rulers are not following the right path, and cannot convince the people otherwise. This is derived from the statement "correct me when you see me going astray."

### **The Eighth Principle**

Any one who assumes an affair of the people should declare the plan he is going to follow, so that the people become aware of and agree to it. He is not allowed to lead the people as he pleases, but as they please. This principle is based on the statement, "obey me as long as I observe God in your affairs."

His plan is the obedience of God. The people knew what the obedience of God in Islam entailed.

### **The Ninth Principle**

The people will not be governed except by the law they voluntarily adopt, the law that realises their interest. The rulers only implement the will of the people, who obey the law because it emanates from them, not because it is imposed on them by any other authority, be it of an individual or of a group. This makes the people feel free to manage their affairs on their own. Everyone in society will share this feeling. Freedom and sovereignty are a natural and legitimate right of every individual in society. This principle is derived from the statement, "obey me as long as I observe God in your affairs. If I disobey Him, you owe me no obedience." Thus, they do not obey the ruler per se, but they obey God by following the law that He has revealed and that they have accepted for themselves. The ruler is delegated by them to apply this law to everyone, including himself. Therefore, if he deviates, he forsakes their obedience.

### **The Tenth Principle**

All are equal before the law, regardless of their strength or weakness. The law should apply to the strong without fear of their strength and to the weak without leniency for their weakness.

### **The Eleventh Principle**

The state should protect the rights of the individuals and groups in society. The rights of the weak should not be forsaken because of their weakness, and the strong should not usurp the right of anyone because of their strength.

### **The Twelfth Principle**

The state should maintain a balance in society when protecting the rights of its members. The dues should be fairly taken from the strong without transgression or weakening them. The rights of the weak should be granted to them without favour due to their weakness, so that they do not transgress against others. The principle and the two previous ones are derived from the statement, “The weak among you are powerful in my eyes until I get them their due. The powerful among you are weak in my eyes until I take away from them what is due to others.

### **The Thirteenth Principle**

There should be a realisation of a mutual responsibility of the ruler and the ruled in reforming society. They should always feel the need to continue working strenuously and seriously, and seek forgiveness from God, who oversees them. This is based on the statement, “I say that and seek God’s forgiveness for myself and for you.

This is what the first caliph in Islam stated and implemented fourteen centuries ago. Are the civilised nations close to this today? Was Abu Bakr making these statements on his own? No, he was inspired by Islam. He addressed the Muslims at that time with what they already knew; had he done otherwise, they would not have accepted his speech. Were these principle known to or practiced by other nations? No, nations were immersed in the darkness of ignorance and deterioration, suffering the chains of humiliation and enslavement under monarchical and clerical rule. These principles were not devised by men but were revealed by God, the All-Knowing and Wise. We pray to God to rescue us and all of humanity and grant us success in returning to these principles, without which there can be no salvation.