The Legitimacy of Leadership within the Framework of *Fiqh Watan* According to the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah Methodology Based on the Hadith *'Al-Sultan zillulLah fi al-ard'*

Arieff Salleh Rosman[*1,2], Fakhrul Irfan Ishak[1], Akmaliza Abdullah[1], Azhar Jaafar@Ramli[3], Ahmad Luqman Zulkefli[4]

[1]Islamic Civilization Academy, Faculty of Social Sciences & Humanities, University Technology Malaysia, [2]Center of Research for Fiqh Science & Technology (CFiRST), University Technology Malaysia, [3]International Institute for Islamic Civilization (III-C), UCYP University Malaysia, [4]Research Assistant, Islamic Civilization Academy, Faculty of Social Sciences & Humanities, University Technology Malaysia

* Corresponding Author Email: aswar@utm.my

Abstract

The question of political legitimacy remains a central yet contested issue in contemporary Islamic governance discourse. While classical Sunni jurisprudence affirms the necessity of political authority to preserve religion, social order, and justice, modern analyses often fail to integrate prophetic traditions with emerging frameworks such as *Fiqh Watan*. This article examines the concept of leadership legitimacy within the framework of *Fiqh Watan* grounded in the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah (ASWJ) methodology by analysing the meaning and implications of the Prophet's hadith: *"al-Sultan zillulLah fi al-ard."* This hadith constitutes an important foundation in Islamic political theory, affirming that leadership is a divine trust entrusted to uphold justice, security, and the well-being of the people. According to the ASWJ methodology, leadership legitimacy is not limited to political obedience; it is equally anchored in moral authority, justice, and the public interest (*maslahah*), which form the core of *siyasah shar'iyyah*. The *Fiqh Watan* approach further expands this notion of legitimacy within the context of the modern nation-state, wherein the ruler plays a vital role as the guardian of sovereignty, unity, and social harmony in a multi-religious and multicultural society. This study asserts that the principle of *al-sultan zillulLah fī al-ard* can serve as a conceptual foundation for developing an Islamic Leadership Legitimacy Model that integrates spiritual values, principles of state ethics, and modern constitutional norms.

Keywords: Leadership Legitimacy, *Fiqh Watan*, Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah (ASWJ) Methodology, *al-Sultan ZillulLah fi al-Ard*, *Siyasah Shar'iyyah*, Islamic Leadership

Introduction

The issue of leadership legitimacy is one of the most significant themes in Islamic political discourse, as it relates directly to the Shari'ah, moral, and social validity of a leader's authority to govern, as well as the people's obligation to obey him. In the history of Islamic civilisation, discussions on legitimacy were not merely political in nature; they were also grounded in faith (ʿaqidah) and ethics, as they deal with questions concerning the origin of authority, the responsibility of trust (amanah), and the relationship between leaders, God, and the people. In the contemporary context, this question has become increasingly important as Muslim societies face modern nation-state structures, political secularisation, and a growing crisis of confidence in governing institutions. Thus, revisiting the concept of leadership legitimacy through the framework of *Fiqh Watan* based on the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaʿah (ASWJ) methodology is both an intellectual and practical necessity for building an Islamic political order that is stable, just, and constitutionally grounded.

The hadith of the Prophet ﷺ narrated by Abu Bakrah RA: "Indeed, the sultan (ruler) is the *zillulLah* on earth. Whoever honours him, God will honour him; and whoever humiliates him, God will humiliate him" (reported by al-Tirmidhi and al-Bayhaqi) provides a theological foundation for understanding the relationship between political authority and divine will. The term *"zillulLah fi al-ard"* does not imply that a ruler possesses divine attributes; rather, it functions as a metaphor for the role of leadership as a manifestation of God's justice and mercy on earth. Through just leadership, God manifests His protection; and through tyranny, divine mercy and social harmony deteriorate. Hence, the hadith underscores that political authority is a divine trust that must be exercised with justice and responsibility, not merely a legal entitlement to rule.

Despite extensive social science research on political legitimacy as a foundational concept in modern governance, the specific role of religious texts -particularly hadith 'al-Sultan zillulLah fi al-ard'- in normatively grounding political legitimacy within Islamic jurisprudence remains under-researched. Contemporary studies in political science and sociology emphasise legitimacy as a multi-dimensional construct involving institutional trust, social belief systems, normative justification, and public perception, yet they rarely integrate text-based religious authority as a core source of legitimacy in Muslim political contexts (Huda Khan et.al, 2026).

In broader socio-political theory, legitimacy is understood as the justification and acceptance of authority, rooted in both institutional performance and normative values that grant oughtness to political power. Contemporary work conceptualises legitimacy through sociological perceptions vs normative justification, arguing that legitimacy is neither purely descriptive nor purely legal but deeply transactional between rulers and the ruled (Çapar, 2025). However, most of these frameworks are secular by design and insufficiently account for religious normative sources that remain salient in many Muslim societies. Although social sciences recognise religion as a potential source of political legitimacy, extant research largely treats religion as a social identity, mobilising force, or cultural narrative rather than a jurisprudential source of political authority grounded in canonical texts (Setiawan et.al, 2025).

This is particularly significant given empirical evidence that religious figures and institutions influence political preferences, especially in Muslim-majority contexts where ulama remain pivotal in political discourse and voter behaviour. For example, recent research

on regional elections in Indonesia demonstrates the strong sociopolitical influence of religious scholars (ulama), indicating that religious authority actively shapes legitimacy perceptions beyond secular institutional outputs (Wardana et.al, 2025)

Yet no existing high-impact empirical study within the political legitimacy literature systematically examines how specific religious texts, especially the Prophetic hadith "al-Sulṭān Ẓillullāh fī al-arḍ", function as normative foundations of political legitimacy within Islamic legal theory (fiqh). This creates a significant gap in both Islamic legal scholarship and broader political legitimacy research.

The ASWJ methodology has shaped a balanced and moderate framework for understanding political legitimacy. Scholars such as al-Mawardi, al-Baqillani, al-Juwayni, al-Ghazali, and al-Razi emphasised that the validity of leadership rests on three core pillars: divine mandate (*al-tafwid al-Ilahi*), justice (*al-ʿadl*), and public welfare (*al-maslahah*). As long as the ruler upholds these principles, obedience to authority becomes a religious obligation. This principle also indicates that legitimacy is not absolute; it is bound by Shariʿah and ethical conduct, in accordance with the Qur'anic command: "Obey Allah, His Messenger, and those in authority among you" (Quran; al-Nisā': 59). In this regard, the ASWJ tradition rejects extreme approaches, such as that of the Khawarij—who revoked a leader's legitimacy due to personal sin—and that of the Murjiʾah, who granted unconditional obedience devoid of moral requirements.

In navigating the realities of the modern nation-state, the concept of leadership legitimacy must be rearticulated within the framework of *Fiqh Watan*, a jurisprudence that embodies loyalty, responsibility, and justice towards one's homeland in line with the objectives of Shariʿah (*maqasid al-shariʿah*). *Fiqh Watan* is not simply an Islamic expression of patriotism; it is an intellectual framework that connects the principles of *siyasah sharʿiyyah* with the constitutional structures of the modern nation-state.

Fiqh Watan refers to a fiqh-based approach that is grounded in the lived realities of the homeland, recognizing geographical conditions, customs, culture, and the social fabric of society as essential elements in the realization of Islamic rulings (Ramli et al., 2025). In the context of the state of Pahang and Malaysia, it draws upon the local wisdom of the Malay community and serves as a reflection of a strong collective identity rooted in religious and moral values (Kamil et al., 2025). In this regard, Fiqh Watan plays a role in interpreting local customs in harmony with legal principles that take into account customary practice ('urf), public interest (maslahah), and the objectives of Islamic law (maqasid al-shariʿah), rather than relying solely on a literal understanding of legal texts (Azman et al., 2025). The Fiqh Watan approach demonstrates that Islamic law is dynamic and capable of engaging with changes in time and place without compromising its foundational principles. It is anchored in classical legal maxims such as *al-ʿadah muhakkamah* (custom has legal authority), *istislah* (consideration of public interest), and *taghayyur al-fatwa bi taghayyur al-zaman wa al-makan* (the change of fatwas according to changes in time and place) (Ramli et al., 2025).

Within the context of Malaysia and the broader Muslim world, this fiqh necessitates viewing leadership as an institution that safeguards sovereignty, constitutional order, and social unity, consistent with the meaning of *"zillulLah"* as an embodiment of divine justice. It

emphasises that honouring institutions of leadership is not political fanaticism but a Shariʿah obligation for the stability of the ummah and the preservation of the homeland.

This article aims to: (1) explore the foundational concepts of leadership legitimacy in Islam based on the hadith *al-Sultan zillulLah fi al-ard*; (2) analyse the ASWJ methodology in assessing the validity and responsibility of leadership as a divine trust and an instrument of social justice; and (3) evaluate the relationship between leadership legitimacy and *Fiqh Watan*, particularly in the context of building modern nation-states grounded in Islamic values.

This study adopts a qualitative approach based on textual and conceptual analysis. Three primary methods are employed:

1) Classical document analysis, involving the examination of key Islamic political texts such as *al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyyah* by al-Mawardi, *Ghiyath al-Umam* by al-Juwayni and *Nasihat al-Muluk* by al-Ghazali, with particular attention to scholarly interpretations of the hadith *al-sultan zillulLah fi al-ard* and the concept of leadership legitimacy.

2) Hermeneutical and contextual analysis, interpreting the meaning of the hadith *al-sultan zillulLah fi al-ard* within contemporary settings through the lens of *maqasid al-shariʿah* and the theory of *Fiqh Watan*, including how the concept of *"zillulLah"* is understood as a metaphor of protective justice and security.

3) Comparative analysis between the Islamic framework of leadership legitimacy (as articulated in the ASWJ tradition) and modern legitimacy theories such as rule of law, good governance, and constitutional legitimacy.

Literature Review

Although direct journal articles on Quran and hadith legitimacy of rulers remain sparse, there is substantive theoretical work on the normative foundations of political authority and legitimacy in Islamic thought. Belhaj (2025) provides a comprehensive intellectual history of how conceptions of sovereignty have evolved in Islamic political thought—from divine sovereignty (ḥākimiyyah) to notions that emphasise popular legitimacy. This work highlights that Islamic political ethics situate legitimacy not merely in textual authority but within broader ethical commitments to justice and accountability. This article shows that modern debates about legitimacy incorporate popular reference points, such as human welfare and ethical governance, suggesting a bridge between classical hadith-based authority and democratic principles. However, it does not systematically evaluate specific hadith texts like "al-Sulṭān Ẓillullāh fī al-arḍ".

Azeez et al. (2025) detail the foundational normative principles of governance in Islam; justice (ʿadl), consultation (shura), accountability (muhasbah), equality (musawat) and public welfare (maslahah), drawing explicitly on Quranic and Prophetic sources for political legitimacy. This aligns suggestively with this article focus on hadith as normative foundation, but does not engage in straight hadith analysis for legitimacy. Its emphasis on values illustrates the gap in focused Hadith jurisprudential evaluation.

A limited number of comparative or Islamic law-oriented studies address political legitimacy from Islamic sources in the contemporary context. Moktar & Ghani (2025) explore bayʿah (pledge of allegiance) as a traditional institutional mechanism for political legitimacy,

noting that modern interpretations are fragmented and often used rhetorically rather than as substantive legal basis. This study highlights a conceptual gap between textual sources and modern legitimation practices—reinforcing the need for this article focused jurisprudential analysis of the hadith al-Sulṭān Ẓillullāh within fiqh watan.

Rosidi (2025) examines the shift from decentralized mufti authority to institutionalised fatwa bodies in Malaysia and beyond, demonstrating that institutional legitimation mechanisms in contemporary Islamic legal systems are evolving and contested. This research underscores that institutional legitimacy in Islamic law now extends to legal-administrative practices, not just traditional doctrines.

Despite multiple analyses of governance values, ethical foundations, and institutional legal authority, there are no identified articles that systematically analyse the hadith al-Sulṭān Ẓillullāh fī al-arḍ or similar prophetic texts as primary legal proof for political legitimacy. Existing work either treats governance theory broadly or discusses Bayʿah/Consent without deep hadith jurisprudential analysis e.g., Moktar & Ghani (2025). This analysis also identified a gap between normative textual sources and contemporary state legitimacy models, while justice, shura, and maslahah are extensively discussed in governance literature (Azeez et al., 2025), their integration with a specific hadith textual legitimisation model grounded in fiqh watan methodology remains underdeveloped. Also a gap, under-representation of sunni creed-based jurisprudential methodology in modern legitimacy debates as works like From Divine to Popular Sovereignty draw philosophical connections, but do not deploy Sunni usūl al-fiqh analysis to build a legitimacy framework, unlike what this study proposes.

Through this systematic review there is no consolidated jurisprudential study that evaluates the hadith al-Sulṭān Ẓillullāh fī al-arḍ as a foundational proof for political legitimacy within Fiqh Watan. Secondly, key related literature deals with governance values, normative ethics, and institutional legitimacy, but does not provide a Sunnī hadith–usūl al-fiqh integrated model, make this research innovative and necessary. There form this study fills a clear gap by offering a methodology that combines hadith textual analysis, Sunni jurisprudential methodology (Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaʿah), and contemporary political legitimacy concepts—making a significant contribution to both Islamic legal theory and modern governance discourse.

The Concept of Leadership Legitimacy

The term *legitimacy* originates from the Latin word *legitimus*, meaning "lawful or morally justified" (Weber, 1978). In political discourse, legitimacy refers to the validity of a leader's or government's authority based on moral, legal, and social acceptance. In Arabic, this concept is commonly rendered as *al-mashruʿiyyah*, derived from the root *sharʿa*, meaning "to prescribe a law" or "to establish something on the basis of Shariʿah" (Ibn Manzur, 1988: 8/175). Thus, from an Islamic perspective, legitimacy denotes the validity of authority or action grounded in the divine law of Allah SWT—not merely legal approval or popular consent.

According to modern political theorists such as Max Weber (1978), political legitimacy is built upon three primary foundations: traditional legitimacy, which is rooted in historical customs and inherited authority; charismatic legitimacy, which derives from personal

leadership qualities and moral appeal; and rational-legal legitimacy, which is grounded in laws and formal institutions. However, within the Islamic context, the concept is far more comprehensive, as legitimacy is not solely dependent on social acceptance but is also anchored in Shariʿah validity (*al-tafwid al-Ilahi*), which binds leaders to the divine responsibility of upholding justice and ensuring the welfare of the people (al-Ghazali, 1988).

In the Islamic political tradition, leadership legitimacy is grounded in the principle that governing authority is a divine trust (*amanah*) bestowed by Allah SWT for the establishment of justice, rather than an absolute right belonging to any individual or group. This principle is based on the Qur'anic command: "Indeed, Allah commands you to render trusts to whom they are due, and when you judge between people, judge with justice." (Quran; al-Nisā', 4:58). Al-Mawardi (d. 450H) explains that the primary purpose of leadership is to uphold the religion and administer worldly affairs with justice (1985: 5). He emphasises that the appointment of an imam or sultan is obligatory because it serves as the mechanism through which the laws of Allah are implemented on earth. Therefore, leadership legitimacy in Islam does not depend on lineage, popularity, or political power, but rather on the leader's ability to uphold the *maqasid al-shariʿah*—the preservation of religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property (al-Mawardi, 1985).

In the framework of the modern nation-state, leadership legitimacy is typically derived from three fundamental sources: the rule of law, the constitution, and the consent of the governed (Harel & Shinar, 2023). However, in Muslim-majority states, these foundations must be integrated with the principles of divine accountability and the *maqasid al-shariʿah*, ensuring that political authority does not become absolute and that governance remains anchored in religious and ethical values. According to Muhammad Asad (1980: 47), political legitimacy in Islam is valid only when the ruler "acts as God's representative on earth in upholding justice and safeguarding the welfare of the people."

In this context, *Fiqh Watan* emerges as a contemporary approach that affirms loyalty to one's homeland as part of one's Shari'ah obligations. Fiqh al-Watan may be defined as the body of knowledge and practice concerning the principles of governance and administration of the homeland, guided by Islamic creed (ʿaqidah), law (shariʿah), and ethics (akhlaq). It is implemented with due consideration of the historical and local cultural contexts that have existed across generations. In addition, it engages with contemporary developments and current needs in order to preserve the sovereignty, harmony, and sustainability of the homeland (Institut Ilmu Darul Makmur, 2025).

Within the Malaysian context and the broader Muslim world, this concept implies that constitutionally mandated leadership institutions serve as a modern embodiment of *"al-sultan zillulLah fi al-ard"*, whereby leaders function as a form of "divine shade" that balances political authority with divine values. Hence, leadership legitimacy in *Fiqh Watan*, grounded in the ASWJ methodology, may be defined as: "the validity of governing authority grounded in Shariʿah mandate, moral justice, and public consent, aimed at upholding the maqasid al-shariʿah and protecting the nation from tyranny and disunity."

Analysis of the Hadith *"Al-sultan zillulLah fi al-ard"*
Text of the Hadith and Its Status

Abu Bakrah reported: "I heard the Messenger of Allah ﷺ say, 'Indeed, the sultan (ruler) is the *zillulLah* on earth. Whoever honours him, Allah will honour him; and whoever humiliates him, Allah will humiliate him.'" This hadith is narrated by Ibn Abi ʿAsim al-Shaybani (d. 287H) (1980: 492), al-Bayhaqi (d. 458H) (2003: 9/478), and al-Suyuti (d. 911H) (n.d.: 13/383). Al-Albani classifies this hadith as *hasan* (Al-Albani, 1980: 492; Al-Albani, 1995: 5/375–376).

ʿAbd Allah ibn ʿUmar reported: "The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, 'Indeed, the sultan (ruler) is the *zillulLah* on earth, a refuge for every servant who is wronged. When he acts justly, he earns reward, and the people are obliged to show gratitude. But when he acts tyrannically, the sin is upon him, and the people are obliged to exercise patience.'" This hadith is narrated by Ibn Zanjuyah (d. 251H) (1986: 1/77) and al-Khatib al-Tabrizi (d. 741H) (1985: 2/1097).

Al-Suyuti records a version of this hadith through the narration of Abu Hurairah with slight variations in wording. Abu Hurairah reported: "Indeed, the sultan (ruler) is the *zillulLah* on earth; he is the refuge of the weak, and through his authority, the oppressed attain victory. Whoever honours Allah's sultan in this world, Allah will honour him in the Hereafter on the Day of Judgment." (Al-Suyuti, n.d.: 13/384)

Anas ibn Malik reported that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: "When you pass through a land without a ruler (sultan), do not enter it. Indeed, the sultan (ruler) is the *zillulLah* on earth and the instrument of His authority on earth." This hadith is narrated by al-Bayhaqi (2003: 8/281) and al-Suyuti (n.d.: 4/79).

ʿAbdullah ibn ʿUmar reported that the Prophet ﷺ said: "Indeed, the sultan (ruler) is the *zillulLah* on earth, a refuge for every servant who is wronged. When he acts justly, he earns reward, and it is the duty of the people to show gratitude. But when he acts unjustly, oppresses, or is biased, the sin is upon him, and the people are obliged to exercise patience. When rulers are tyrannical, the heavens withhold rain; when zakat is neglected, livestock perish; when fornication spreads, poverty and destitution emerge; and when covenants (protections) are violated, authority will be given to non-believers." This hadith is classified as weak (daʿif) and is reported by al-Bazzar (d. 292H) (2009: 12/17), al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi (d. 320H) (n.d.: 4/153), al-Bayhaqi (2003: 9/475), Ibn Hajar al-ʿAsqalani (d. 852H) (1998: 10/77), and al-Suyuti (d. 911H) (n.d.: 13/384).

Abu Hurairah reported that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: "Indeed, the sultan (ruler) is the *zillulLah* on His earth. Whoever sincerely advises him will be guided, and whoever deceives him will go astray." This hadith is narrated by Abu Nuʿaym al-Isfahani (d. 430H) (1997: 140) and al-Bayhaqi (d. 458H) (2003: 9/480). Abu Nuʿaym and al-Suyuti also report this hadith through the narration of Anas ibn Malik with slight variations in wording. Anas ibn Malik reported that the Prophet ﷺ said: "Indeed, the sultan (ruler) is the *zillulLah* on earth. Whoever advises them and prays for their welfare will be guided, and whoever deceives them and prays for their harm will go astray." (Abu Nuʿaym al-Isfahani , 1997: 142; al-Suyuti, n.d.: 13/383)

Abu Bakrah reported that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: "Whoever honours Allah's sultan (the ruler appointed by Allah) in this world, Allah will honour him on the Day of Judgment; and whoever humiliates Allah's sultan in this world, Allah will humiliate him on the Day of Judgment." This hadith is classified as weak (da'if) and narrated by Ahmad ibn Hanbal (2001: 34/79). Abu Bakrah also reported that the Prophet ﷺ said: "Whoever honours Allah's sultan, Allah will honour him on the Day of Judgment." This hadith is classified as *hasan* and narrated by Ibn Abi ʿAsim (1980: 492).

Interpretation and Meaning of "ZillulLah" According to Classical Scholars

The hadith *"The sultan is the zillulLah on earth"* serves as a crucial reference for understanding leadership legitimacy and responsibility within the Islamic tradition, particularly in the framework of *Fiqh Watan* based on the ASWJ methodology. The term *zillulLah* reflects the metaphysical, ethical, and socio-political dimensions of leadership, emphasising the ruler's role as an intermediary in the implementation of justice and the welfare of society (Ibn Qarqul, 2012: 3/305).

In the context of the hadith *"The sultan is the zillulLah on earth"*, the term *zil* is used metaphorically (*isti'arah*), not literally (*ḥaqiqah*) (al-Tibi, 1997; Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, 1959), referring to several key concepts that illustrate the status of a leader in Islam. The following explains the meaning of *zil* in this context:

1) **Shade or protection**: *Zil* is likened to a shade that provides protection to the people, similar to how shade cools someone from the scorching sun. This indicates that the leader functions as a guardian, shielding the people from oppression and harm (al-Tibi, 1997; al-Qari, 2002; al-Munawi, 1988).
2) **Honour and respect**: Attributing the term *zil* to Allah signifies the elevated status of the leader. In this context, the leader is regarded as Allah's caliph on earth, entrusted with the duty to uphold justice and goodness (Ibn Qarqul, 2012; al-Nawawi, 1972; al-Tibi, 1997; Ibn Rajab al-Hanbali, 1996).
3) **Special status**: *Zil* indicates the leader's distinguished position, in which they bear significant responsibility in guiding society and ensuring justice is maintained. It also signifies that the leader must act in accordance with the attributes that Allah desires (al-Tibi, 1997; al-Qari, 2002; al-Munawi, 1988).
4) **Moral responsibility**: The term *zil* also implies that the leader holds a trust (*amanah*) to govern justly. Failure to fulfil this responsibility constitutes a betrayal of the position granted by Allah (Ibn Rajab, 1996; al-Tibi, 1997; al-Qari, 2002).
5) **Hereafter implications**: A just leader will receive reward in the Hereafter, whereas a tyrannical leader will bear sin. This indicates that *zil* is not merely a status, but also reflects the actions and moral character of the leader (al-Tibi, 1997; al-Qari, 2002; al-Munawi, 1937).

Overall, in the context of this hadith, *zil* illustrates the leader's position as a protector, a bearer of justice, and an individual honoured by Allah, bearing significant responsibility to ensure the welfare of society. A leader who successfully fulfils this responsibility will remain under Allah's shade, both in this world and in the Hereafter. According to al-Nawawi (1972), a just leader belongs to the category of those who attain *zillulLah*, meaning they receive honour, protection, and shade from Allah. In his commentary on the hadith concerning a just ruler, al-Nawawi explains that a leader who acts justly will be under Allah's shade on the Day

of Judgement: "Allah honours the just leader and places him under His shade and protection; from this comes the statement: 'The sultan is the *zillulLah* on earth.'" (al-Nawawi, 1972: 16/123)

This concept emphasises the moral and spiritual responsibility of a leader to safeguard the welfare of the people through justice. The hadith is metaphorical, indicating that humans feel at ease under the justice of a ruler just as they find comfort under the shade of the sun, and conversely, they feel oppressed under tyranny (al-Tibi, 1997: 8/2587–2588; al-Munawi, 1937: 4/142). The term *zillulLah* is not merely symbolic but signifies the rank and distinction of a leader appointed by Allah as His caliph on earth.

Al-Tibi explains the meaning of the hadith narrated by 'Abdullah ibn 'Umar: "Indeed, the sultan (ruler) is the *zillulLah* on earth, a refuge for every servant who is wronged…" (a weak hadith narrated by al-Bazzar (2009: 12/17), al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi (n.d.: 4/153), al-Bayhaqi (2003: 9/475), Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani (1998: 10/77), and al-Suyuti (n.d.: 13/384), "just as humans feel cool and comfortable under the shade of the scorching sun, so too they feel cool and at ease under the justice of a ruler" (al-Tibi, 1997: 8/2587–2588).

Ibn Rajab al-Hanbali explains, "This is the greatest benefit to the servants of Allah; for when the imam (leader) is just, the entire populace will also experience goodness. It is reported that the leader is the *zillulLah* on earth because all creatures find refuge under the leader's protection. When he acts justly towards them, Allah places them under His shade through his justice" (1996: 6/46).

This hadith also emphasises the ethical dimension of leadership. Ibn Rajab al-Hanbali elaborates that a just leader restrains personal desires, exercises patience in fulfilling responsibilities, and prioritises the welfare of the people. The justice of the leader not only brings mercy and benefit to society in this world but also elevates the leader in the Hereafter, placing him upon a pulpit of light honoured by Allah (1996: 6/46). This concept aligns with Allah's command to Prophet Daud: "Indeed, We have made you a vicegerent on earth, so judge between the people with justice and do not follow your desires" (Quran; Ṣād: 26).

This hadith also underscores the role of the people within the leadership system. A just leader functions as a protector of the people, and those who honour and respect the leader will be honoured by Allah in the Hereafter. Conversely, opposing the leader or disrespecting their position can have negative spiritual and social consequences, as the order and continuity of religion depend on obedience to a legitimate ruler (al-Munawi, 1937; 1988). This emphasises the symbiotic interaction between leadership and the people, wherein the obedience and respect of the people ensure the stability of peace, order, and the implementation of Shari'a.

Furthermore, the hadith highlights the relationship between the justice of a leader and the well-being of creation. Al-Munawi (1937) states that the injustice of a leader leads to the suffering of the people, disruption of natural order, drought, and economic decline. Conversely, a just leader brings mercy and prosperity. Thus, *zillulLah* not only reflects a metaphysical status but also embodies concrete socio-political responsibility, linking worldly order with the spiritual values and ethical obligations of leadership.

In synthesis, based on a systematic review of the commentaries on the hadith *"The sultan (leader) is the zillulLah on earth"*, three main dimensions are emphasised: (1) the metaphysical dimension, whereby the leader is a caliph honoured by Allah; (2) the ethical dimension of leadership, with justice as the foundation of the leader's dignity and tyranny as a violation of that dignity; and (3) the socio-political interaction, wherein the people receive protection and welfare under the justice of the leader. This hadith establishes a normative framework for leadership legitimacy within *fiqh al-watan*, affirming that a just leader embodies mercy, while injustice brings sin and trial, yet remains within Allah's wisdom to teach the people patience and gratitude.

Principles of Leadership Legitimacy In The Ahlu Sunnah Wa Jama'ah (ASWJ) Approach

The ASWJ methodology emphasises that leadership is both a religious and social institution that must be upheld to safeguard religion and worldly affairs. Leadership is not merely a political matter but forms part of the sharī'ah obligation to establish justice and prevent societal disorder. Al-Mawardi (d. 450H) states: "The imamate is established to succeed prophethood in safeguarding religion and administering worldly affairs" (Al-Mawardi, 1985: 5).

The ASWJ approach rejects extremist positions, whether the Khawarij who revolt against rulers committing sins, or the Murji'ah who allow unconditional obedience regardless of the ruler's morality. Instead, ASWJ situates leadership legitimacy on a principle of balance between obedience to the leader and adherence to shari'ah. This is grounded in the Prophetic hadith: Abu Hurairah reported that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: "Whoever obeys me has obeyed Allah, and whoever disobeys me has disobeyed Allah. Whoever obeys the leader has obeyed me, and whoever disobeys the leader has disobeyed me". Narrated by al-Bukhari (1311H: 4/50) and Muslim (1955: 3/1466).

Al-Bukhari's narration further adds: "…Indeed, the imam (leader) is a shield; people fight behind him and use him as protection. If he commands obedience to Allah and justice, he will be rewarded for that. But if he commands otherwise (i.e., injustice or sin), he bears the sin of that command" (al-Bukhari, 1311H: 4/50).

In the history of Islamic political thought, the Khawarij were among the first groups to oppose Muslim rulers based on an extremist theological interpretation of major sins (*kaba'ir*). They held that individuals who committed major sins had effectively left Islam and were therefore no longer qualified to hold political authority. Based on this belief, the Khawarij rebelled against Caliph ʿAli ibn Abi Talib following the arbitration (*tahkim*) after the Battle of Siffin, accusing ʿAli of sin for accepting reconciliation with Muʿawiyah RA.

Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari (d. 324H) stated that the Khawarij considered every major sin as an act of disbelief (*kufr*), consigning the sinner to hell, and thus revolted against ʿAli's leadership, deeming sinful rulers liable to be overthrown (al-Ash'ari, 1980). This perspective is further detailed by ʿAbd al-Qahir al-Baghdadi (d. 429H), who explained that the Khawarij viewed any imam who committed a sin as an unbeliever and subject to removal from office (al-Baghdadi, 1977). Al-Shahrastani (d. 548H) emphasized that the core doctrine of the Khawarij was the excommunication of major sinners and opposition to leaders who committed major sins on that basis (al-Shahrastani, 1993).

In modern scholarship, W. Montgomery Watt explains that the Khawarij movement emerged as a radical religious reaction to issues of sin and political justice, holding that a sinful leader lacked both religious and political legitimacy to govern (Watt, 1968). Similarly, Philip K. Hitti emphasizes that the Khawarij arose as a puritanical movement rebelling against ʿAli due to alleged sins, deeming him and his followers apostates (Hitti, 1970).

Therefore, it can be concluded that the Khawarij's rebellion against the ruler stemmed from their takfīr-based understanding regarding major sinners, which made personal sin the basis for rejecting political legitimacy. This extremist approach is clearly contrary to the principles of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaʿah, which assert that obedience to a ruler remains obligatory in matters of good governance (*maʿruf*), and is not nullified due to personal errors or sins (al-Mawardi, 1985).

In contrast to the Khawarij, the Murji'ah school, which deferred judgment regarding sin and separated actions from the essence of faith, has left a profound impact on the discourse of Islamic political thought throughout history. In the context of *fiqh al-siyasah*, this perspective gave rise to a form of unconditional obedience to rulers, devoid of moral or shariʿah boundaries. They argued that as long as a leader acknowledges the oneness of Allah and does not manifest disbelief, they are considered a legitimate Muslim in the eyes of Shari'ah, even if unjust or deviant (al-Shahrastani, 1993).

Such an approach allowed political authoritarianism to be cloaked in religious legitimacy. It fostered a political culture that rejected public oversight of the ruler, as any form of critique was viewed as opposing divine will or undermining communal unity. In this regard, the ASWJ firmly rejects the Murji'ah stance, emphasizing that obedience to rulers is conditional upon compliance with Shari'ah. As the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) stated: "There is no obedience to a creature in disobedience to Allah" Narrated by Ahmad (2001: 2/333).

From this foundation, the legitimacy of leadership according to the ASWJ methodology is established on the following five main principles:

1) First Principle: Divine Mandate (al-Tafwid al-Ilahi)

The first foundation of political legitimacy is the recognition that governing authority constitutes a divine trust, rather than a product of sheer force, lineage, or political inheritance. The ruler functions as God's vicegerent (*khalifah*) on earth, entrusted with the implementation of law and justice. Al-Ghazali (1988) emphasises that political authority is merely a "*tafwid bi al-sharʿ*," namely a mandate granted by God through the mediation of the community, rather than an absolute sovereignty independent of the divine law. Accordingly, a ruler's mandate is valid only when exercised within the bounds of obedience to the Shari'ah and sustained commitment to the *maqasid al-shariʿah*. Within the framework of *Fiqh al-Watan*, this signifies that leadership legitimacy must be grounded in theocentric values, rather than resting solely on legal or constitutional formalities.

2) Second Principle: Justice as the Foundation of Authority

Justice constitutes the central axis of political legitimacy within the ASWJ tradition. In the absence of justice, governance loses its character as "The sultan (leader) is the zillulLah on earth" as articulated in the prophetic tradition (al-Nawawi, 1972; al-Tibi, 1997; al-Qari,

2002; al-Munawi, 1988). Al-Mawardi (1985) asserts that one of the essential conditions for the validity of an imam's authority is ʿadl (justice), for it is justice that engenders social stability and secures public acceptance of the ruler. The conception of justice here extends beyond legal fairness to encompass social and economic justice, including equitable distribution of wealth, opportunities, and the protection of citizens' rights. Within the framework of *Fiqh al-Watan*, justice serves as the foundational principle for cultivating an ethical constitutional polity, consistent with the Qur'anic command: "Indeed, Allah enjoins justice and excellence." (Quran; al-Naḥl 16:90)

3) Third Principle: Consultation and Public Participation (al-Shura)

According to scholars of the ASWJ, *al-shura* (consultation) constitutes a legitimate mechanism for establishing the validity and accountability of political leadership. God declares: "Their affairs are conducted through mutual consultation among them." (Quran; al-Shura 42:38). Al-Qurtubi (1964) interprets this verse as the foundational evidence that Islamic governance must involve the community through collective deliberation, public input, and oversight of state policies. Historically, this principle was exemplified in the selection of the early caliphs: Abu Bakr al-Siddiq was appointed through the consensus of the Companions; ʿUmar was designated via the nomination of the preceding caliph; and ʿUthman's appointment resulted from a formal *shura* council.

Within the framework of *Fiqh al-Watan*, this principle underscores the obligation of citizens to participate actively and responsibly in democratic processes, insofar as such participation does not contravene the Shari'ah. Consequently, the legitimacy of modern leadership encompasses the mandate of the people, grounded in religious values and justice.

4) Fourth Principle: Conditional Obedience (al-Taʿah bi al-Maʿruf)

Scholars of ASWJ maintain that obedience to political authority is obligatory, yet conditional—namely, it is binding only so long as the ruler does not command acts of disobedience to God. The Prophet ﷺ declared: "There is no obedience in matters involving sin; obedience is only in what is recognised as good (al-maʿruf)." Narrated by al-Bukhari (1311H: 9/88) and Muslim (1955: 3/1469). Al-Baqillani (d. 403H) emphasises that obedience does not imply passive submission, but rather a form of principled commitment to social stability and communal wellbeing. Citizens are obliged to offer sincere counsel to their leaders with wisdom, and not to resort to rebellion except in circumstances where egregious injustice abolishes the rule of God (al-Baqillani, 1987).

Accordingly, the principle of *al-taʿah bi al-maʿruf* within *Fiqh al-Watan* serves as a cornerstone of political stability and civic morality, fostering a reciprocal relationship between citizens and rulers grounded in shared responsibility toward the nation.

5) Fifth Principle: Safeguarding the Public Interest (Maslahah ʿAmmah)

The ultimate objective of leadership within the ASWJ framework is the attainment of the public good (*maslahah ʿammah*) in alignment with the *maqasid al-shariʿah*. Al-Ghazali defines *maslahah* as "the preservation of the objectives of the Shari'ah through safeguarding the five essential values: religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property" (al-Ghazali, 1993: 1/286). Hence, a government that fails to secure the welfare of its people—despite possessing legal or constitutional legitimacy—ultimately forfeits its moral and Shari'ah-based legitimacy.

Ibn Khaldun underscores that justice and public welfare constitute the defining markers of legitimate authority, whereas injustice and corruption signal the downfall of a state (Ibn Khaldun, 1986). Within the *Fiqh al-Watan* paradigm, the principle of *maslahah* obliges leaders to safeguard national integrity, social justice, and communal unity. A regime that produces widespread harm (*mafsadah*) to religion or the nation, even if politically powerful, can no longer be regarded as *zillulLah fī al-arḍ*.

Based on the five foundational principles outlined above, the concept of political legitimacy within the ASWJ framework in *Fiqh al-Watan* transcends mere procedural or legal recognition. Legitimacy is not solely derived from formal institutional authority or compliance with political conventions; rather, it constitutes a multidimensional *Shari'ah-based and moral legitimacy* (*mashruʿiyyah sharʿiyyah*) that integrates divine trust (*amanah*), justice (*ʿadl*), consultation (*shura*), conditional obedience (*al-taʿah bi al-maʿruf*), and the pursuit of public welfare (*maslahah ʿammah*). This framework situates political authority within an ethical, spiritual, and socio-political matrix that prioritises communal welfare and the moral responsibilities of governance.

The prophetic ḥadīth *"al-sultan zillulLah fi al-ard"* serves as a normative and symbolic benchmark, portraying a legitimate ruler as a reflection of God's mercy on earth. In this conception, the ruler is not merely an administrative functionary, but a moral agent whose authority embodies justice, protection, and the promotion of public well-being. Critically, this establishes a dual accountability: rulers are answerable not only to the legal and institutional frameworks of governance but also to divine norms and ethical imperatives that safeguard the collective interests of the ummah.

Respect for leadership, therefore, is reframed as a recognition of this divinely mandated responsibility rather than passive compliance or uncritical obedience. Blind loyalty is explicitly discouraged; instead, citizens are encouraged to exercise ethical engagement, provide counsel, and resist acts of injustice that contravene Shari'ah principles. This approach aligns with contemporary theories of responsible governance, participatory legitimacy, and social contract theory, while remaining firmly embedded in the normative parameters of Islamic jurisprudence.

Furthermore, this multidimensional conception of legitimacy provides a critical lens for evaluating modern political systems within Muslim-majority contexts. A regime may possess legal or institutional authority, yet it may lack *mashruʿiyyah sharʿiyyah* if it fails to uphold justice, protect communal welfare, or observe the moral boundaries established by divine law. Conversely, a government that embodies these principles, even amid limited procedural mechanisms, retains normative legitimacy in the eyes of the ASWJ tradition.

In sum, political legitimacy in *Fiqh al-Watan* under the ASWJ framework is a holistic construct, integrating legal, ethical, and religious dimensions. It envisions leadership as a covenantal institution in which rulers and citizens are mutually accountable, ensuring that governance functions as a vehicle for justice, moral integrity, and societal well-being. This paradigm offers a substantive alternative to purely procedural or secular models of legitimacy, highlighting the interplay between divine mandate, ethical governance, and participatory political culture in sustaining the legitimacy and stability of the state.

Together, these five principles articulate a cohesive epistemic framework that integrates divine authority, ethical governance, public participation, conditional loyalty, and the pursuit of collective welfare. Analytically, the ASWJ model offers a distinctive contribution to contemporary political theory by synthesising metaphysical legitimacy with empirical governance outcomes. It positions political leadership as a covenantal relationship grounded in shared moral responsibility between rulers and citizens. In the context of modern nation-states, this framework provides a robust foundation for a contemporary *Fiqh al-Watan*—a jurisprudence of citizenship and governance that aligns Islamic normative principles with constitutional structures, democratic participation, and national development.

Conclusion

This study critically examined the foundations of political legitimacy within the framework of *Fiqh al-Watan* according to the ASWJ methodology, with the prophetic hadith *"al-sultan zillulLah fi al-ard"* as its normative reference. The analysis demonstrates that legitimacy in Islamic governance is inherently multidimensional, encompassing Shari'ah-based and moral legitimacy (*mashruʿiyyah sharʿiyyah*) that integrates divine mandate, justice, consultation, conditional obedience, and public welfare. Unlike purely procedural or legalistic conceptions of authority, ASWJ political theory situates legitimacy within a moral-ethical and theological framework, where the ruler's authority is contingent upon adherence to both normative principles and the welfare of the community.

The discussion highlights three critical insights. First, political legitimacy in this framework is fundamentally theocentric: authority is granted as a divine trust (*amanah*), and rulers are accountable not only to institutional mechanisms but to God and the ethical imperatives of Shari'ah. This contrasts with modern secular models of legitimacy, which often prioritize procedural compliance over moral or ethical accountability. Second, justice (*ʿadl*) and public welfare (*maslahah ʿammah*) are non-negotiable criteria for legitimizing leadership. A government that is legally recognized but fails to uphold justice or protect communal interests cannot be considered legitimate within the ASWJ framework. Third, *al-shura* and *al-taʿah bi al-maʿruf* operationalize participatory and conditional mechanisms, balancing citizen engagement with stability and preventing absolute obedience that could enable tyranny. These principles demonstrate that ASWJ theory provides a built-in system of checks and balances grounded in ethics and moral accountability.

The implications of this study are twofold. Theoretically, it provides a robust normative model for integrating Islamic jurisprudence with contemporary concepts of governance, democracy, and accountability. Practically, it offers a framework for evaluating political authority in Muslim-majority contexts, emphasizing that legitimacy is not conferred solely through legal-rational mechanisms but through the alignment of governance with ethical, social, and theological imperatives. This framework also underscores the critical role of civic responsibility, where citizens are obligated to engage ethically, provide counsel, and oppose governance that contravenes divine principles.

In conclusion, the principle of *al-sultan zillulLah fi al-ard* serves as both an ethical compass and a normative benchmark for evaluating leadership. True legitimacy, as articulated in the ASWJ methodology, is achieved not merely through the possession of power or formal authority, but through justice, moral integrity, participatory accountability, and the

protection of public welfare. This study reinforces the enduring relevance of classical Islamic political thought, illustrating its capacity to inform contemporary debates on ethical governance, state legitimacy, and sustainable political systems.

Acknowledgement

References

Al-Quran al-Karim

Abu Nuʿaym al-Isfahani, A. ibn ʿA. ibn A. ibn I. ibn M. ibn M. (1997). *Faḍāʾil al-ʿādilīn min al-wulāt* (M. Ḥ. M. Sulaymān, Ed.). Dār al-Waṭan.

Ahmad ibn Hanbal. (2001). *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal* (S. al-Arnaʾūṭ, ʿĀ. Murshid, et al., Eds.). Muʾassasat al-Risālah.

Al-Albani, M. N. al-D. (1980). *Ẓilāl al-jannah fī takhrīj al-sunnah*. In A. ibn A. ibn al-Ḍaḥḥāk ibn Mukhlad al-Shaybānī, *Kitāb al-sunnah*. al-Maktab al-Islāmī.

Al-Albani, M. N. al-D. (1995). *Silsilat al-aḥādīth al-ṣaḥīḥah wa shayʾun min fiqhihā wa fawāʾidihā*. Maktabat al-Maʿārif.

Al-Ashʿari, A. al-Ḥ. (1980). *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn wa ikhtilāf al-muṣallīn*. Dār al-Maʿrifah.

Al-Baghdadi, ʿA. al-Q. (1977). *Al-farq bayn al-firaq*. Dār al-Āfāq al-Jadīdah.

Al-Baqillani, A. B. (1987). *Al-tamhīd*. Dār al-Fikr.

Al-Bayhaqi, A. B. A. ibn al-Ḥ. (2003). *Shuʿab al-īmān* (ʿA. al-ʿA. A. al-Ḥ. Ḥamīd, Ed.). Maktabat al-Rushd.

Al-Bazzar, A. B. A. ibn ʿA. al-ʿAtakī. (2009). *Musnad al-Bazzār* (ʿĀ. ibn S. Ed.). Maktabat al-ʿUlūm wa al-Ḥikam.

Al-Bukhari, M. ibn I. (1311 AH). *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. al-Maṭbaʿah al-Kubrā al-Amīriyyah.

Al-Ghazali, A. Ḥ. (1988). *Al-iqtiṣād fī al-iʿtiqād*. Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah.

Al-Ghazali, A. Ḥ. (1993). *Al-mustaṣfā min ʿilm al-uṣūl*. Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah.

Al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi, M. ibn ʿA. (n.d.). *Nawādir al-uṣūl fī aḥādīth al-rasūl* (ʿA. al-R. ʿUmayrah, Ed.). Dār al-Jīl.

Al-Khatib al-Tabrizi, M. ibn ʿA. (1985). *Mishkāt al-maṣābīḥ* (M. N. al-Albānī, Ed.; 3rd ed.). al-Maktab al-Islāmī.

Al-Mawardi, A. al-Ḥ. (1985). *Al-aḥkām al-sulṭāniyyah wa al-wilāyāt al-dīniyyah*. Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah.

Al-Munawi, ʿA. al-R. (1937). *Fayḍ al-qadīr sharḥ al-jāmiʿ al-ṣaghīr*. al-Maktabah al-Tijāriyyah al-Kubrā.

Al-Munawi, ʿA. al-R. (1988). *Al-taysīr bi sharḥ al-jāmiʿ al-ṣaghīr* (3rd ed.). Maktabat al-Imām al-Shāfiʿī.

Al-Nawawi, Y. ibn S. (1972). *Al-minhāj sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj* (2nd ed.). Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī.

Al-Qari, ʿA. ibn S. M. (2002). *Mirqāt al-mafātīḥ sharḥ Mishkāt al-maṣābīḥ*. Dār al-Fikr.

Al-Qurtubi, M. ibn A. (1964). *Al-jāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān*. Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyyah.

Al-Shahrastani, M. ibn ʿA. al-K. (1993). *Al-milal wa al-niḥal*. Dār al-Maʿrifah.

Al-Suyuti, J. al-D. (n.d.). *Jāmiʿ al-aḥādīth* (ʿA. Jumʿah et al., Eds.).

Al-Tibi, S. al-D. Ḥ. ibn ʿA. (1997). *Sharḥ al-Tībī ʿalā Mishkāt al-maṣābīḥ* (ʿA. al-Ḥ. Hindāwī, Ed.). Maktabat Nizār Muṣṭafā al-Bāz.

Asad, M. (1980). *The principles of state and government in Islam*. Islamic Book Trust.

Azeez, I., Yousufi, M., Ali, M. B. T., & Habib, M. (2025). The Islamic political system: Values and principles. *Journal of Media Horizons, 6*(5), 1223–1232.

Azman, Y., Ibrahim Majdi, M. K., Amran, M., & Rahimin Affandi, A. R. (2025). Fiqh al-waṭan dan legitimasi Islam tempatan. *International Journal of the Malay World and Civilisation, 13*(3), 53–64.

Belhaj, A. (2025). From divine to popular sovereignty. *Religions, 16*(5), Article 622.

Çapar, G. (2025). The service conception between sociological and normative legitimacy. *Jurisprudence*, 1–36.

Harel, A., & Shinar, A. (2023). Two concepts of constitutional legitimacy. *Global Constitutionalism, 12*(1), 80–105.

Hitti, P. K. (1970). *History of the Arabs*. Macmillan.

Huda Khan, Z., Khan, Z., Wood, G., & Shenkar, O. (2026). Socio-political legitimacy. *Journal of World Business, 61*(1), 1–32.

Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, A. al-F. (1959). *Fatḥ al-bārī sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. Dār al-Maʿrifah.

Ibn Manzur. (1988). *Lisān al-ʿArab* (3rd ed.). Dār al-ʿIlm li al-Malāyīn.

Institut Ilmu Darul Makmur. (2025). *Fiqh al-waṭan*. IIDM.

Moktar, M. S., & Ghani, M. H. (2025). Political legitimacy through bayʿah. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science, 9*(30), 339–342.

Watt, W. M. (1968). *Islamic political thought: The basic concepts*. Edinburgh University Press.

Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology* (G. Roth & C. Wittich, Eds.). University of California Press.