

THE CONCEPT OF WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN SURAH AN-NAML VERSES 22-40 IN THE TAFSIR AL-MISHBAH AND ITS RELEVANCE TO CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC EDUCATION

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Abstract

The issue of women's leadership in the public sphere, including the field of education, remains a topic of debate from both theological and sociological perspectives in Indonesia. This study aims to examine how M. Quraish Shihab, in his Tafsir Al-Misbah, interprets women's leadership through the story of Queen Balqis in Surah An-Naml verses 22–40. This research employs a literature study method with an analytical Tafsir Maudhu'i approach. The analysis focuses on four dimensions of Balqis's leadership: wisdom, deliberative practice, orientation toward peace and prosperity, and intelligence in strategic decision-making. The findings reveal that Quraish Shihab interprets the narrative as legitimizing the idea that leadership quality is determined by professionalism and competence rather than gender. This concept is highly relevant to the dynamics of contemporary Islamic education, where female leaders often face dilemmas between professional demands and socio-religious constraints. The study recommends implementing a Competency-Based Prophetic Leadership (CBPL) model that emphasizes the characteristics of al-amīn and al-fathīn as the foundation of leadership, rather than gender factors.

Keywords: Islamic Education, Tafsir Al-Misbah, Women's Leadership



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INTRODUCTION

The Islamic education system in Indonesia, from madrasas and Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) to Islamic Religious Colleges (PTKI), plays a central role in shaping the character of society. With social change and advancement, the demand for adaptable, transformative, and strategically competent leadership is becoming increasingly urgent. In the context of management, leadership is the key to all organizational activities. However, leadership positions in Islamic institutions are often dominated by men, despite the increasing number of competent female human resources, particularly at the managerial and academic levels (Mauludah dkk, 2023).

Arguments often used to limit women's authority in public leadership positions generally rely on textual readings of several verses of the Quran and Hadith. These interpretations, which fail to consider the historical context or a more comprehensive hermeneutical approach, often create social legitimacy for limiting women's roles in the public sphere (Rohmatika & Syukkur, 2023). This situation has implications for the emergence of complex theological and sociological dilemmas for Islamic education, particularly in efforts to prepare competent graduates as leaders and administrators of educational institutions. Islamic education management faces the challenge of producing professional education managers without discrimination based on gender, while certain religious narratives are still understood literally and act as obstacles to women's emergence as leaders (Greenleaf, 1977).

In the Qur'an there are many stories about leadership, for example the story of the leadership of Queen Balqis, ruler of the land of Saba'. This story describes a woman who has the brilliance of thinking (Marlina dkk, 2024). She is a queen who has power, but that power does not prevent her from obeying the truth, which is depicted in the Al-Qur'an Surah An-Naml: 22-44. In the story, Queen Balqis' leadership was a wise government that liked peace. Queen Balqis was awarded everything that could make her power strong and great. For example, having fertile land, an obedient population, strong armed forces, and a stable government. Ratu Balqis is a picture of independence in the political field.

The discourse that is often used as a basis for limiting the role of women at the level of public leadership is generally rooted in textual readings of a number of verses from the Koran and hadith. This literal interpretation often fails to take into account the socio-historical context of the revelation of the verse (asbab al-nuzūl) or the principles of maqāṣid al-syarī'ah, which can lead to normative conclusions that limit women's scope for strategic decision-making (Husein, 2016). Consequently, the theological legitimacy of women's subordination in leadership is often accepted as "social truth" without hermeneutical critique, even though a number of contemporary commentators, such as Quraish Shihab, have emphasized that leadership ability is determined not by gender, but by integrity, competence, and professionalism (Quraish, 2007).

This situation poses significant theological-sociological challenges for the Islamic Education Management Study Program (MPI). As an academic institution charged with producing competent graduates in educational management, MPI must confront dual demands: on the one hand, the professional paradigm demands equal opportunities for men and women; on the other, some members of society still adhere to restrictive religious interpretations (Nurdin, 2019). This ambivalence creates epistemological and pedagogical challenges in formulating a curriculum that is inclusive, progressive, and rooted in authentic Islamic ethics.

Thus, the dilemma that arises is not only conceptual but also impacts educational practice. The Indonesian Muslim Student Association (MPI) is required to develop a competency-based educational management approach that is free from gender bias and provides a theological foundation that can liberate women from leadership stereotypes. Scholarly studies of women's leadership from a contemporary exegetical perspective are crucial to addressing this tension (Zumaro, 2024).

The exploration of women's leadership in the interpretation of Al-Misbah has been extensively explored by previous researchers, including the study by Fazri et al. While previous researchers only interpreted the text, this study analyzes the operational causal relationship between the interpretation of Al-Misbah and managerial practices in Islamic educational institutions, making it relevant for Islamic education policymakers (Mizan dkk, 2024). A reevaluation of the concept of women's leadership in the Qur'an is needed through a more contextual, interdisciplinary, and comprehensive interpretation approach. Such interpretation is crucial to address contemporary challenges and go beyond the textual reading that has dominated religious discourse (Nafisah & Fandana, 2024). The Qur'anic narrative about Queen Balqis in Surah An-Naml, verses 22–40, provides a historical representation of the success of a woman's leadership in the political and diplomatic spheres, which is acknowledged and presented positively within the structure of the Qur'anic narrative. Therefore, Tafsir Al-Misbah by M. Quraish Shihab was chosen as the primary reference due to its moderate interpretation, responsiveness to current developments, and its attempt to link the Qur'anic messages with the social realities of contemporary society.

Thus, it seems quite relevant to instill character values in leadership through the exemplary behavior of figures depicted in the Qur'an, such as Queen Balqis. In reviewing this research on "Women's Leadership," the author draws on the Tafsir Al-Mishbah (Amal & Imawan, 2024). This interpretation explains the vocabulary deemed necessary to explain the relationship between a verse and the previous verse. The Tafsir Al-Mishbah uses a style of language that is easily understood by all groups.

In Islamic thought, leadership is not understood solely as a matter of power, domination, or structural position. Rather, leadership is viewed as a humanitarian duty with profound ethical, spiritual, and social responsibility dimensions (Putri dkk, 2023). Its conceptual foundation is rooted in several Qur'anic principles that serve as moral pillars for every individual in a leadership role. Among these principles are amanah, which affirms that every form of authority is a divine trust for which accountability is essential; shūrā, which requires leaders to involve collective participation and wisdom in decision-making; 'adl, which obliges leaders to uphold justice in every action and policy; hikmah, which demands the ability to accurately understand reality and act wisely; and maslahah, which makes the welfare of the community the ultimate goal of leadership.

Thus, leadership in Islam is not merely a matter of structural legitimacy, but a moral and social process that requires leaders to uphold the values of justice, beneficence, and public responsibility (Mawaddah dkk, 2024). The ideal leader in this perspective is a figure who not only has integrity and firmness of character, but also administrative competence, managerial skills, and the capacity to manage an organization or society towards progress and shared prosperity.

According to Quraish Shihab, the principles of leadership include:

1. Amanah (Trust and Responsibility)

From an Islamic perspective, a leader is understood as holding a significant trust for which he will be held accountable, both socially and spiritually. The concept of amanah entails strong demands on personal integrity, honesty in action, and responsibility oriented toward the interests of the community (Hidayat & Nugroho, 2022). Therefore, the principle of amanah makes integrity a non-negotiable quality that must be inherent in every individual who carries out leadership functions. Integrity is understood not only as a moral aspect but also as a fundamental competency that determines the legitimacy and validity of a leader from an Islamic perspective (Quraish, 2007).

2. Shura (Deliberation and Participation)

From an Islamic perspective, a leader is understood as holding a significant trust for which he will be held accountable, both socially and spiritually. The concept of amanah entails strong demands on personal integrity, honesty in action, and responsibility oriented toward the interests of the community (Siregar dkk, 2021). Thus, the principle of trustworthiness makes integrity a non-negotiable element that must be inherent in every individual who carries out leadership functions. Integrity is understood not only as a moral aspect but also as a fundamental competency that determines the legitimacy and validity of a leader from an Islamic perspective.

The Quran places strong emphasis on the practice of deliberation as the foundation for managing public affairs. This principle is not simply understood as a simple consultative process, but as a decision-making mechanism that involves the contributions of various parties, resulting in wiser and more representative decisions (Rahman dkk, 2021). By prioritizing shura, Islam encourages a leadership model that is participatory, collaborative, and open to the exchange of ideas. This simultaneously emphasizes that collective knowledge and shared experience have strategic value in determining policy direction, so that a leader is not positioned as a sole authority but rather as a facilitator in developing decisions that reflect the collective will and common good (Barlas, 2002).

3. 'Adl (Justice)

Justice ('adl) is a central principle that underpins the legitimacy of all leadership from an Islamic perspective. In the context of decision-making, a leader must prioritize balance, equality, and fair treatment of all parties within their leadership. Justice does not only mean adhering to formal rules, but also requires a deep understanding of the conditions and needs of society, so that every policy or action taken reflects moral integrity and social ethics. By upholding the principle of 'adl, leadership not only gains legal and procedural legitimacy but also earns the trust, support, and loyalty of the community, ultimately strengthening social stability and harmony in communal life (El-Fadl, 2001).

A just leader does not make decisions solely based on personal or group interests, but always considers the interests of all parties involved. In practice, this means that every policy, regulation, and action taken must reflect balance, impartiality, and provide equal treatment for all members of society and subordinates. By upholding the principle of justice, leadership becomes credible and is able to build trust and social harmony within the environment it leads (Mauludah dkk, 2023).

4. Wisdom and Prudence

Wisdom, or hikmah, is a leader's ability to make decisions that are not only practically sound but also aligned with prevailing moral and ethical values. A wise leader is able to assess a situation holistically, consider various consequences, and position decisions in the most appropriate context, both from the perspective of societal interests and moral and spiritual interests (Yusuf & Hasan, 2022). Thus, wisdom is not solely about intellectual intelligence or political strategy, but also about sensitivity to the principles of justice, truth, and the public good.

In the tradition of prophetic leadership, hikmah is one of the key characteristics that distinguishes effective leaders from mere rulers. Prophetic leaders are known for their ability to integrate pragmatic policies and religious values, so that every action brings benefits and minimizes harm to society (mahmood & Rahman, 2020). Wisdom in this context also demands reflective and evaluative skills, where leaders continually learn from experience, adapt their approach to social dynamics, and maintain harmony between individual interests, community interests, and upheld moral principles (Wadud, 1999).

5. Maslahah (Public Benefit)

Maslahah reflects a leader's orientation toward the interests and welfare of society at large. From an Islamic leadership perspective, every policy or action is considered valid and legitimate if it provides tangible benefits to the public while minimizing harm or harm (Ahmad & Latif, 2021). This principle emphasizes that leadership should not be egotistical or exclusive, but rather should always favor the collective good, thus creating a balance between individual and collective interests.

Within the framework of *maqāsid al-sharī'ah*, *maslahah* serves as the primary benchmark for assessing a leader's success and legitimacy. Effective leadership is leadership that is able to formulate strategic policies that align with the objectives of sharia, namely safeguarding the religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property of the community. By prioritizing the principle of *maslahah*, a leader not only ensures social stability and harmony but also upholds justice, prosperity, and sustainability in every aspect of public life (Quraish, 2007).

Maudhu'i Interpretation and Al-Misbah's Contribution

M. Quraish Shihab's *Al-Misbah* interpretation is known as an interpretation based on *adabi ijtimai'* (social literature) and places a strong emphasis on the contemporary context. Shihab often interprets verses with social realities in mind, thus making his interpretations of sensitive issues such as women's leadership more inclusive and progressive.

Shihab emphasizes the contemporary context in his interpretations, taking into account current social realities (Wahyuni & Rahman, 2022). He often interprets verses with modern societal conditions in mind, avoiding being trapped by purely textual interpretations. This approach enables *Al-Misbah's* interpretation to connect the messages of the Quran with current issues, including ongoing social, political, and cultural dynamics, making it more applicable and understandable to readers.

When addressing sensitive issues such as women's leadership, *Al-Misbah's* interpretation demonstrates an inclusive and progressive approach (Sari & Zainuddin, 2023). Shihab not only emphasizes normative boundaries but also views verses from the perspective of the social context, opportunities, and benefits that women can provide in leadership. This approach reflects *Al-Misbah's* ability to balance traditional values with the needs of modern society, resulting in a broader, more just, and more relevant understanding.

Maudhu'i exegesis is an approach to interpreting the Quran that focuses systematically on a specific theme or topic. Unlike verse-by-verse interpretation (*tafsir mufrad*), *maudhu'i* exegesis gathers all verses related to a particular theme and then interprets them comprehensively. For example, if the theme being discussed is "social justice," an exegete will examine all verses that discuss justice, rights, and social responsibilities and then compile them into a coherent understanding (Shihab, 2007).

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative method with a Library Research approach. The approach used is Analytical-Critical *Maudhu'i* Interpretation. The primary data consists of verses 22-40 of Surah An-Naml from the *Tafsir Al-Misbah* and other works by Quraish Shihab. Secondary data includes scientific journal articles, theses, and books discussing women's leadership, Islamic education management, and the style of the *Tafsir Al-Misbah*.

Data analysis was conducted through a) editorial analysis and *Asbabun Nuzul* (Revelation of the Prophet): Tracing the editorial of the verse and the context in which it was revealed (although the story of Queen Balqis is a historical story, the context in which it was conveyed to the Prophet remains important). b) *Tafsir* analysis: Identifying and analyzing in-depth Quraish Shihab's views on Queen Balqis' leadership. c) Contemporary synthesis:

Connecting the interpretation findings to current managerial issues in the Islamic Religious Education (MPI).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Profile of Queen Balqis in Surah An-Naml, Verses 22-40

The story of Balqis, the Queen of Saba, is recorded in the Qur'an in Surah An-Naml, verses 22-40, which depicts her as a ruler with a vast kingdom and immense power. The Qur'an states that Balqis was "given everything" (wa ūtiyat min kulli syai' – An-Naml: 23), emphasizing her opulence, abilities, and influence. This positions Balqis as a strategic and powerful leadership figure, capable of managing resources and exercising royal authority effectively (Karimah & Hasanuddin, 2024).

In the narrative, Prophet Solomon (peace be upon him) faced a complex leadership challenge: how to interact with a ruler wielding immense power without causing direct conflict. Rather than using force to destroy Balqis's kingdom by force, Prophet Solomon chose a strategic and diplomatic approach through letters of da'wah, containing messages of invitation and explanation of the truth. This strategy demonstrates that effective leadership does not always rely on military power or coercion, but also on intelligent communication, diplomacy, and a persuasive approach.

Balqis's reaction to the da'wah letter becomes a key point in assessing leadership, both for herself and for the Prophet Solomon. Balqis's actions, thoughts, and decisions after receiving the communication reflect a leader's ability to weigh information, evaluate risks, and make wise strategic decisions (Nasution & Fadli, 2024). Thus, this story emphasizes not only the aspects of power and influence, but also the values of diplomacy, wisdom, and wisdom in leadership, which are relevant as lessons for contemporary leadership.

Analysis of Al-Misbah's Tafsir on Balqis' Leadership

Quraysh Shihab states in his Tafsir al-Misbah that leadership is not only for men, but women can also be leaders, as stated in Q.S. an-Naml [27], verses 22-40. At that time, a country was led by a queen named Queen Balqis. Here, we can see that women can also lead, especially in today's modern era where men and women are equally capable. In surah an-Naml 22-23;

فَمَكَتْ غَيْرَ بَعِيدٍ فَقَالَ أَحَطْتُ بِمَا لَمْ تُحِطْ بِهِ وَجِئْتُكَ مِنْ سَبَأٍ بِنَبَأٍ يَقِينٍ إِنِّي وَجَدْتُ امْرَأَةً تَمْلِكُهُمْ وَأُوتِيَتْ مِنْ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ وَلَهَا عَرْشٌ عَظِيمٌ

Meaning: Not long afterward (the hoopoe arrived), and it said, "I have learned something you did not know. I have come to you from Saba with important and certain news. 23. Indeed, I found a woman ruling over them (the people of Saba). She has been given everything and has a great throne. (Q.S. an-Nam: 22-23)

Quraish Shihab views the story of Queen Balqis in these verses as more than just a historical narrative, but also full of leadership messages and moral lessons. In Al-Misbah, Shihab emphasizes that the core of this story relates to Prophet Solomon's diplomacy, political acumen, and leadership dynamics (Sulaiman & Abdullah, 2021). He interprets the news of the hoopoe in verse 22 as the beginning of strategic communication. Solomon received important information about a country and its female leader, and this laid the foundation for subsequent diplomatic steps.

Shihab describes Balqis as a wise, intelligent, and democratic leader. According to the interpretation of Al-Misbah, when Solomon sent her a letter, Balqis did not immediately surrender or show weakness: she invited the dignitaries of her kingdom to consult and consider their responses to the preaching (Huda & Kartanegara, 2020). This makes her leadership a positive example of female leadership: not authoritarian, but listening to the opinions of others. Furthermore, Shihab notes that Balqis prioritized the welfare of the people

and the public interest in every policy. She rejected arrogance and preferred peace over confrontation. This reflects the ideal principles of Islamic leadership: wise, communicative, and pragmatic.

In the following verses (around verses 38–40), Shihab highlights the superiority of knowledge. A learned man offers to quickly bring Balqis's throne to Solomon, faster than the Ifrit genie. According to Shihab, this is not merely a miraculous story, but a symbol that human knowledge, when bestowed by God, is of immense value and can transcend ordinary worldly powers (Ali & Ibrahim, 2023). When the throne was before Solomon, he tested her by disguising its position so that Balqis would have difficulty recognizing it. This test, according to Shihab, was not only a matter of physical recognition but also a test of Balqis's faith and wisdom in decision-making. Shihab interprets this verse as evidence that Balqis was a democratic leader who prioritized consultation. She was not authoritarian, but rather positioned the leaders as strategic partners in decision-making. In the context of the Islamic Religious Leaders Association (MPI), this means that female leaders must be catalysts for a collaborative and open work culture.

From his interpretation, Quraish Shihab concludes that Balqis's story provides strong evidence that women can be effective and religiously legitimate leaders, provided they possess competence, reason, and community support. Academic studies of Al-Misbah's interpretation (e.g., research on women's leadership) state that, according to Shihab, female leadership is permissible if "it is agreed upon by many and they possess the capability to be leaders."

Although many modern scholars support female leadership based on competency criteria, some still limit it by citing the verse *al-rijālu qawwāmūna ‘ala an-nisā’* (Quran, An-Nisa, 34) or the Hadith prohibiting women from entrusting affairs to women. This phenomenon creates ambivalence in society, where a female manager may be accepted for her professionalism, but rejected in the highest positions for conservative theological reasons.

CONCLUSION

M. Quraish Shihab's interpretation of the story of Queen Balqis (Quran, An-Naml: 22-40) in his *Tafsir Al-Misbah* affirms the theological legitimacy for women to hold leadership positions. According to Shihab, the essence of leadership is not determined by gender, but rather by a leader's qualifications and managerial capacity. These key factors include wisdom in decision-making, the ability to deliberate to reach balanced solutions, an emphasis on peace and the welfare of society, and strategic acumen in facing complex challenges.

Shihab emphasizes that these principles are directly relevant to contemporary Islamic Education Management (IEM) practices, which demand adaptive and responsive leadership to both theological dilemmas and the challenges of digital innovation. Leadership in this context does not rely solely on formal authority but also requires professionalism, social intelligence, and the ability to balance moral values with the demands of modernizing educational institutions. Modern leadership theories (transformational, ethical, and servant leadership) are substantive in their alignment with Islamic principles. However, the important difference is the source of legitimacy, in the Islamic framework legitimacy also refers to normative-religious sources (Qur'an and Hadith) and the goal of welfare (*maqāṣid*), so that practitioners of Islamic educational leadership need to integrate moral-theological foundations into managerial practice.

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