Prophet Muhammad (PBUH): The Savvy Politician

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Abstract

This paper is a preliminary study on the concept of Islamic creative thinking through the life of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). This study is aimed to reassess the creativity of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) specifically in political and statesman point of view. This study also aimed to highlight his creativity in diplomacy, conflict resolution and international affairs. The study employed qualitative method with content analysis approach by evaluating on necessary and relevant reports, articles and texts. It is hoped that this preliminary paper will provide a distinctive perspective on the concept of creativity and innovation and its necessity in contemporary Islamic political approach which should be considered as an important characteristics for both modern Islamic and western worlds.

Keyword: Creative Thinking Problem Solving, Politics, Sunnah, Innovation

Introduction

It is no doubt among Muslims that Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is the perfect creation of mankind, as mentioned by Afzalur Rahman (1980). Some western scholars view Muhammad both as a prophet and politician, as Armstrong (2006) writes “...so he wore himself out in the creative effort to evolve an entirely new solution.” His leadership was most comprehensive and dynamic, from religious leader to political and military leader (Federer, 2008). Ernest Renan; a French critic who famously wrote in 1851, observed that Muhammad was the only religious leader who lived “in the full light of history”.
The Prophet was the leader. As a politician leading a state, he succeeded in establishing the first political entity in the Arab Peninsula. In that new entity, the Arab society from various tribes and clans was united: a great achievement which has never been achieved by an Arab leader before Muhammad. He made Islam a 'cement of civilization' by tying Arab and later on non-Arabs together. His way of dealing in Makkah and Madinah indicates his great political leadership.

Therefore, this paper will critically reassess the creativity of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) specifically from the political and statesman's points of view. This study also aimed to highlight his creativity in diplomacy, conflict resolution and international affairs.

**Muhammad as a Statesman**

A statesman may be defined as someone who has the wisdom and vision to inspire policies and actions with long-term goals in mind; someone with breadth of view and idealism; someone who has the capacity to compromise with dignity, allowing all parties in a dispute to feel they are victorious; and someone who is not short sighted, partisan or opportunistic (Akhter, 2001).

Watt (1961) has coined Muhammad as a far-sighted political strategist. Even Esposito (1984) and Hart (1992) recognized Muhammad as one of the exemplary leaders of all times. Hodgson (1974) also mentioned that Muhammad established the first Muslim state by uniting the Muslims and the non-Muslims. There were no new tribes of believers or revolutionary groups but only heterogeneous group of people with better structure of society as compared to Makkah society. The Prophet had to become a statesman to safeguard his community and protect them from excessive persecution as explained in the Quranic verses below:

“And slay them wherever ye find them, and drive them out of the places whence they drove you out, for persecution is worse than slaughter. And fight not with them at the Inviolable Place of Worship until they first attack you there, but if they attack you (there) then slay them. Such is the reward of disbelievers. But if they desist, then let there be no hostility except against wrong-doers” (al-Baqarah: 191-193).

Although there are countless numbers of event and instances where Prophet Muhammad demonstrated his qualities to deal with the situations creatively and innovatively, the writers decided only to take a few events into account for assessment in this paper.
The Diplomacy of Prophet Muhammad

It is commendable for modern Muslim intellectuals to search for inspiration in managing modern society through the example of the Prophet in Madinah. One policy introduced by the Prophet was to initiate a 'political contract' between the Muslim community and other social groups in Madinah. In Islamic history, this contract is known as 'Mithaq al-Madinah' or the Madinah Charter. An Egyptian writer, Muhammad Husayn Haykal, in The Life of Muhammad (1933), considers this as a 'wathiqah siyasiyyah' or political document guaranteeing the freedom of faith, freedom of opinion, the protection of the country, the rights to live and own property, a judicial system for resolving disputes, and the rights of non-Muslims; the first constitution written and documented as such. Even Clausewitz highlighted in his work, On War, the important and the necessity of entity as a fundamental element in nation building, and how internal dissension could lead to the collapsed of nation.

The Prophet has also developed a very sophisticated intelligence network since the establishment of the Madinah state. This action is to ensure that the Prophet is aware of what is happening around him, and to keep him informed. Through various events that happened afterwards, many literatures mentioned that the Prophet always received news from his agents (not in terms of divine intervention or revelation) in order to make his judgment are correct and fact-based. There is also countless number of reports stating that the Prophet often sought the opinions of his companions and discussed with them before he made any decision. This proved the creativity of the Prophet in terms of diplomacy.

The Case of Hudaybiyyah Treaty

The truce was signed in the year 628CE. It allowed Muslims to make their pilgrimage to Mecca in the following year. In 629CE, the Prophet has established control over the Hijaz and led the pilgrimage to Mecca as scheduled (Esposito, 1984). The conversation that took place between Prophet Muhammad and Suhaib Ibn Amr shows the highest degree of diplomacy demonstrated by the Prophet towards his enemies, what more towards his companions. The four points of treaty also showed the creativity and far sightedness of the Prophet in preaching Islam. No doubt, the treaty benefited the Prophet and Islam in the long run. It also became the cornerstone of the establishment of Islam in Arabia (Ayoub, 1997). However, after twenty-two months, an incident happened. The tribe of Bani with the help of Quraysh took vengeance on the tribe of Khuzaym, thus killing several people. In his response, the Prophet prepared to attack Makkah. Nearly all western scholars and Orientalists wrote with prejudice that the action of the Prophet was morally and politically driven (Pipes, 1999). In fact, the Quraysh violated the treaty, and the Prophet's decision to attack was driven by this motive. This is another event on how Prophet shows his forbearance quality.
Conflict Resolution

The theme of Surah Yusaaf represents a process of conflict resolution between the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the Quraysh who conspired to kill the Prophet, forcing him to emigrate from Makkah to Madinah. Some scholars like (Haykal, 1976; Lings, 1983; Sarwar 1961; and Muhammad Ali, 1972) believed that Prophet Muhammad has already participated actively in the Alliance of Fudul, which later became the principle in trade.

The Case of Black Stone (Hajar al-Aswad)

The creativity of the Prophet Muhammad is further evident when one reads about how he managed to solve a conflict that arose among the Makkah tribes of Qureish with regard to the Black Stone (Hajjara Aswad) incident.

It is reported that the Quraysh tribes of Makkah were rebuilding the walls of the Ka'bah and when the time came to place the Black Stone in its place in the southeast corner of the Ka'bah, each tribe took it upon itself, out of feelings of honor, that it was their right to place the Stone in its designated position (Mahmoud, 1972).

With each tribe bent on placing the Stone in its rightful position before the other tribes had a chance to do so, matters began to escalate to a point where the tribes were on the verge of starting a scuffle, but when a suggestion was made that they should rest for a while and abide by the opinion on the matter of the first person to enter the holy compound, the tribes began to calm down. It so happened that Muhammad (PBUH) was the first person to enter the holy compound, and thus he was asked to be the judge and decide on the matter fairly (Mahmoud, 1972).

His sage solution on this dispute saved the day. The Prophet Muhammad spread his own cloak on the ground and placed the Stone upon it. He then asked an elder representative from each tribe to come forward and lift part of the cloak from one corner. When all the elder representatives lifted their parts of the cloak, the Black Stone began to rise and when it reached the required height from the ground, the Prophet went forward and set it in its designated place in the Ka'bah, thus allowing all the Quraysh tribes, as well as himself, to share equally in the glory and privilege of having placed the Black Stone in its rightful position (Haikal, 1933).

Another lesson that can be learned from this incident is that the collective work of sharing a burden can lead to a collective reward, which in this case was the sharing of the glory of having placed the Black Stone in its designated position in the Ka'bah. The burden will be more much lighter by lifting the stone after placing it on the cloak which allowed each tribe shared equally. If only one tribe had been allowed to lift the stone, it would have been
rather heavy to lift and, furthermore, much dissatisfaction would have ensued among the tribes that were not given a chance to participate in its lifting.

Thus, the decision by the Prophet Muhammad to engage all the tribes was a much-needed intelligent and creative solution that led to the task at hand being completed with relative ease, and quickly ended a dispute that might have escalated into a physical fight with, perhaps, some injuries. In the end, all parties were happy at having been given a chance to lift the stone.

International Affairs

The Case of Hijrah to Abyssinia (Ethiopia)

It must be noted that the decision made by the Prophet allowing Muslims to migrate to Ethiopia twice (in 615 and 616 CE) is merely not due to psychological attachment to his breastfed mother, Ummu Ayman. The migration to Ethiopia is an example of his political skill in seeking alliances with others. When the persecution increased in Makkah and some of his followers found it difficult to live in that environment, he allowed them to migrate to Ethiopia and seek the help of the Christian King there. In Ethiopia, Muslims found peace and they reciprocated the King’s hospitality with prayers, and support for the King and his party. Muslims’ relations were so good with the monarch that he grew to love Islam and before his death he became a Muslim. This is a great example of how two different people and religions were able to live in peace and harmony, thus refuting the “clash of civilizations” theory and indication of the end of racism.

Delegations to Neighboring Monarchs

It is mentioned in sirah books (al-Mukarraz, 1996) that the Prophet sent over 80 envoys to neighboring tribes, monarchs and countries. The Prophet also sent an invitation letter to Islam to Heracleus, the Emperor of Rome. By sending military expeditions to neighboring areas and signing pacts between Madinah and the neighboring countries, the Prophet wanted to signal the emerging power and influence of Islam and break the Quraysh’s dominance over the Arab Peninsula. These expeditions served as vanguards in providing the Prophet with the information he needed to pave the way for the preaching of Islam, not only in Arabia but also in other continent (Gulen, 2005).

The Prophet is also acknowledged as an innovator of the concept of the Prisoner of War (POW) (Gulen, 2005). Although war has started long before the coming of Islam, there was no general guideline regarding the POWs. In fact, the Prophet was the first to set such rules right after the Battle of Badr. It shows that there is no ‘zero sum game’ in Islam, but only pure mercy.
The Creativity and Innovation of Prophet Muhammad for Contemporary Islamic Political Approach

In analyzing the Prophet Muhammad’s (pbuh) creativity in lights of the above discussion, it is of importance to note that the advent of the Prophet has not only changed the political landscape of Arabia but also played a major role in influencing the political course of future history of mankind. This is due to the fact that the religion of Islam encompasses the religious, social, political, and economic dimensions, and the Prophet (pbuh) exemplified the perfect embodiment of Islam on this earth in all facets of life. He was a prophet and at the same time a statesman, a policy regulator, an economic planner, an educator, and a family man.

In the political realm, some of the political creativity and innovation of the Prophet has been highlighted through a few selected cases comprising the aspects of diplomacy, conflict resolution and international affairs, where in each case he was able to institute policies and changes that lead to political and social stability despite the complexity of the multi-religious and multiracial environment of Arabia at that time. Nonetheless, in examining the factors that lead to his success as a statesman and politician, a number of contributing factors, both tangible and intangible, are important to be noted such as the social and economic conditions as well as individual characteristics of leaders, among others.

In this regard, this paper highlights only the extraordinary psychological traits as expressed by the Prophet, through his acts and policies, and his role in instituting political change and stability. In his study of political creativity, Kubiczek (2004) has demonstrated the link between social conditions and individual characteristics. He has also identified two main characteristics which are crucial for political creativity; the mindset and aptitude of the leader. The former is simply defined as the level of willingness of the leader to take extraordinary problems at the individual, group and social level, while the latter is explained as the level of his ability to solve extraordinary problems at the individual, group and social level.

The willingness of a leader includes his level of motivation to launch a project/policy; resilience to accept setbacks without conceding defeat; persistence to work on long term, incremental forms of change; patience; and his ability to stay focused on a problem for a long time with self control. On the other hand, the ability of a leader means his level of open-mindedness to question convention and improve it; intelligence to understand social dynamics; expertise and insight to utilize available resources; influence to persuade and coordinate others to keep them focused; as well as his adaptability to recognize dead ends and shift strategy as needed (Kubiczek, 2004: 103 ff.).
From the cases discussed before, it is evident that the Prophet has demonstrated these two traits of a successful political leader at an extraordinary level. Firstly in term of his mindset, the Prophet has always demonstrated a high level of willingness and motivation in any particular situation. For instance, his determination to spread and implement the messages of God has seen him and his followers been subjected to various kinds of tortures, abuses, embargo and so on during the early years of Islam in Mecca. Nevertheless, the Prophet remained steadfast and unmoved by all the threats and enmities shown towards him. He firmly believed that God is by his side and will help him overcome all the hurdles and difficulties that they were subjected to, as mentioned in the Quran (al-Ma'idah: 67):

"O Messenger! Proclaim what has been revealed to you from your Lord; and if you do not (convey all of it), you will not have conveyed His message; and Allah will protect you from the evil of all men. Allah does not guide the unbelievers."

At the same time, he also encouraged some of his followers to migrate to Ethiopia as a way out from the relentless abuses from the pagans of Mecca. Ethiopia was creatively and carefully chosen by the Prophet as a safe haven for the Muslims due to its peaceful and just ruler who also shared similar theological belief regarding Jesus with the Muslims. It was also a strategic move made by the Prophet so that Muslims can establish their presence beyond the borders of Arabia and gain the psychological and political support of an influential power against the tribal authority in Mecca (Watt, 1974).

In another example, such as the Hudaibiyah Treaty, the Prophet has also shown his patience, self-control and far-sighted political strategy when accepting the treaty imposed upon him by the Quraysh. This treaty, which seemed disadvantageous for Muslims at that time, has proved a disappointment and anger of some of his followers. However, the Prophet is resilient on signing the treaty despite the setback and honor it until eventually it was transgressed by the Quraysh themselves. This has led to the peaceful conquest of Makkah in 8th AH without any bloodshed, in which the Prophet was able to restore stability in the region (al-Mubarakpuri, 1996).

Secondly, in term of his ability, the Prophet was endowed with extraordinary level of intelligence and wisdom in understanding the social and political dynamics among various tribes in Arabia at that time. An excellent example of this can be seen from his creative solution for the Black Stone placement issue which had nearly triggered tribal wars and caused unnecessary conflict in Mecca. Similarly, the Prophet has also succeeded in establishing stability in Madinah through the introduction of the Charter of Madinah in which he included all the existing Arab and Jewish tribes under the banner of the new rule and united them under his political leadership. In this political and social contract, the rights of each citizen were spelt out clearly in addition to their obligations and duties.
towards the Islamic rule. Therefore, this document has given the Prophet a solid foundation towards a peaceful and stable nation building in a city which was once tormented and continuous conflict between the Awr and the Khazraj.

Regardless, the most important factor that served as the basis of the Prophet’s intelligence, creative insight and wise strategy lies in his internal and spiritual strength through his firm belief and faith in Allah SWT. This is, in fact, the main source of his high level of motivation to undertake his duty despite the hurdles that he faced along the way. Divine guidance in the form of revelation was also bestowed upon him to console, clarify, assist and give direction in time of needs as mentioned in the Quran (al-Furqan: 32):

“The unbelievers ask: Why was the Quran not revealed to Muhammad all in one single Revelation at once? The Quran was revealed (gradually) so that We may strengthen your faith (O Muhammad), and We have imparted it to you gradually, in slow well arranged stages”.

Similarly, if the policy or decision made by the Prophet was deemed by Allah SWT as not the best of choices, the revelation also served to remind him of his ultimate objective. For example, in the aftermath of the Battle of Badr, the Prophet has decided, after consulting his Companions, to allow each of the prisoners captured during the battle to redeem themselves through material means. However, Allah SWT has reminded him that it was not commendable since many of the prisoners were arch enemies of Islam and by allowing their release might be harmful for Islam and Muslims. Allah SWT says in the Quran (al-Anfal: 67):

“A prophet may not take captives until he has destroyed as many enemies as possible in his land. You may desire the fleeting gain of this world, but Allah wishes (for you the reward of) the Hereafter, and (remember) Allah is the Almighty, All-Wise”.

In short, in his mission as a messenger of Allah and a leader, the Prophet is a perfect embodiment of the Quran as can be reflected from his traits, characteristics and examples shown throughout his life. In fact he is the role model par excellence; one who should be emulated by Muslims of all ages and times. In one of his works, Watt (1974: 340) is bound to acknowledge him, despite his biased and prejudiced view against him, as:

“a man in whom creative imagination worked at deep levels and produced ideas relevant to the central questions of human existence, so that his religion has had a widespread appeal, not only in his own age but in succeeding centuries.”
Thus, in the political dimension in particular, the Prophet should serve as a model for the modern Muslim political leader, who is not only just and fair, but also creative and innovative in introducing and implementing policies for a peaceful and balanced nation. The two important traits shown by the Prophet on top of his strong faith and belief in Allah, throughout his life and as exemplified in this paper, should be studied and practiced so as to produce Muslim leaders of today and tomorrow capable of expressing political creativity for the benefit of their followers. Although the revelation was completed with the demise of the Prophet, yet through sincere supplication, *taawukul* and *taqwa*, one is guaranteed the assistance and grace of Allah in overcoming the challenges of life.

Conclusion

Many scholars agree that Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was not only a great religious leader, but also a creative, innovative and great political leader. Despite the flourishing literatures on his life and biography, aspects relating to his qualities, skills and virtues in light of contemporary condition are still lacking and understudied. Obviously, this paper only focuses on a few aspects of his life; particularly his creativity in diplomacy, conflict resolution and international affairs as discussed earlier. Thus, it is hoped that this preliminary paper will provide a distinctive perspective on the concept of creativity and innovation of the Prophet and the necessity of its implementation in the contemporary Islamic political approach.

References