

INTERNALISING ISLAMIC PRINCIPLES OF THEOCRACY AS A PEDESTAL FOR GOOD GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA

BY

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Abstract

*Good governance remains the expectation from every political party in power, especially in this democratic dispensation of the Nigerian Nation. The need to ensure that the citizenry enjoy the dividends of democracy as often promised during various electioneering campaigns is envisioned to be the motif for different agendas and political slogans by different administrations. Unfortunately, different political agendas towards security of lives and properties, halting the pillage of the economy by corrupt public officials and creation of employment opportunities for the youths, have a record of setback in the history of political leadership and governance in Nigeria. Therefore, the paper examined the principles of Islamic theocracy in its advocacy for a paradigm shift in the Nigerian political system, with a view to engendering good governance. Islamic political terms such as **Shūrā** (mutual consultation), **‘Adālah** (equality and justice), **Khilāfah** (succession and stewardship) **Majlis ash-Shūrā** (consultative forum) and **Muḥāsabah** (accountability) were espoused as sacrosanct to implementing Islamic theocracy as an alternative system of government in Nigeria. The paper concluded by being flexible on the nomenclature of the suggested political system, considering the multi-religious nature of the country as a political entity. Among other recommendations, infusion of politics into our moral/religious system and not the other way round was considered a good step in the direction of a political paradigm shift for ensuring good governance and guaranteeing its sustainability in Nigeria.*

Keywords: Nigerian Nation, democracy, good governance, Islamic theocracy, paradigm shift.

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Introduction

The Nigerian state from independence has experienced a number of forms in the governance of its citizenry. A cursory assessment of its state politically and socio-economically reveals that it has grown from struggle to trouble and from bad to worse. This recorded retrogression by the nation over a period of its corporate existence as a political entity is to be partly blamed on the systems of government institutionalised so far and partly on the drivers of the institutions engendered by those systems of government.

The above painted background informed our proposal of purely Islamized theocracy as a better alternative system of government capable of orchestrating good governance in Nigeria. This proposal cannot be divorced from the truism that there is a Supreme Being behind the existence and creation of Nigeria as a state. Thus, its affairs should be administered in consonance with the ordinances and dictates of the Supreme Being for result-oriented governance. It must be noted, in respect of this, that

The Kingdom of God is a theocracy. And as it is the only form of government which will redeem and save mankind, it is necessary that every soul should be rightly and thoroughly instructed in regard to its nature and general characteristics. (Orson Patt)

The paradigm shift, as it is the vocal point of this paper, will be examined by briefly looking at governance in Nigeria, democratic rule and the Nigerian nation, theocratic conceptualization of governance and Islamic principles of theocracy towards enhancing good governance in Nigeria. Our discussion of these sub-topics will therefore provoke some recommendations, following a conclusion.

A Brief Survey of Governance in Nigeria

Before independence by the 1st of October, 1960, Nigeria was seen as a sovereign state compartmentalised into three major regions of North, East and West.¹ As it were, each of the regions was politically committed to itself rather than to Nigeria as a state. By this arrangement, projects such provision of basic amenities like good roads, hospitals, industries and education were implemented on regional basis autonomously by each region.²

In the area of revenue generation, it is noted that that each region opened up its area to both local and foreign explorers and investors to maximize its potentials.³ Thus, the Western Region specialized in the production of Cocoa, Rubber, Timber, Palm Cannel and Palm Oil while the North focussed on exportation of

products such as Cotton, Groundnut, Tin and Colon bite among others. As for the Eastern Region, attention was given to production of Coal, Palm oil, Palm Cannel and local fabrications.⁴

The mutual rivalry among these regions, especially in the provision of social amenities snowballed and metamorphosed into a great potential for Nigeria to stand as a state rather than fragmented regions. This, in specific terms, happened in 1960 when an independence movement succeeded in gaining independence for Nigeria.⁵ This produced Tafawa Balewa and Nnamdi Azikwe as the First Prime Minister and the First Head of State respectively. As gladdening as the first republic of Nigeria in 1963 was, it succumbed to military rule three years after, following a bloody military coup d'état.⁵ After a three-year- civil war precipitated by a separatist movement who formed the Republic of Biafra.⁶ In 1979, Nigeria became a republic once again subsequent upon a new constitution written in that year.⁷ After a period of another four years, the republic was truncated by the military's seize of power.⁸ Subsequently, another republic was planned to be established in 1993 but was dissolved by General Sanni Abacha whose death in 1998 signalled the birth of a fourth republic and ended three decades of intermittent military rule in Nigeria.⁹

Democratic Rule and the Nigerian Nation

Democracy is a universal concept, the practice which varies from country to country. This variation is measured and determined with regards to power acquisition and institutional arrangements. So, as we hear of American democracy, British democracy, Irish democracy and Canadian democracy, we can as well say and hear of Nigerian democracy. A lot has been written and documented about democracy in Nigeria but this segment will just appraise in brief, the Nigerian nation and features of its democratic experience.

To start with, the general belief that the welfare of the people is the epicentre of democracy wherever it is practised appears unspeakable of Nigeria. This submission is borne out of the fact that the Nigerian democracy has succeeded in widening the gap between the “haves” and the “have nots”, instead of bridging the gap between them. This was engendered by socio-economic and political inequality which has become a parameter for judging the so called nascent democracy of Nigeria. This norm which characterises the democracy of Nigeria is described by Ajayi and Ojo as follows:

While some countries aspire to and do indeed practise democracy for the socio-economic benefit of the generality of the people or at least as many as people as possible, others like Nigeria make their own brand of democracy government of the few by the few and for the socio-economic benefit of the few. Indeed, the most outstanding feature of

Nigerian democracy is mind boggling and unpardonable waste of public funds on the comfort of a few Nigerians. The democracy of waste practised in Nigeria invests first and foremost, in the comfort of officials rather than in human and material resources.¹⁰

Another feature that characterises our democratic rule in Nigeria is the increasing rate of corruption without any viable institution capable of stemming its tide in place, For examples, all charges of corruption against different personalities and political office holders during the administration of President Jonathan are still yet to be charged for proper prosecution.¹¹ The propensity to stop the menace of corruption in the democratic rule of Nigeria is often greeted with disdain, pessimism and hopelessness. This is reflected in the expression of Alex Akinyele, a former Minister of Information and Culture that only the Sango and Ogun deities can stop corruption in Nigeria.¹² To this, we are adding that only absolute return unto Allah, probably through a holistic drive of the Islamic principles of theocracy, can bring the desired change in our system of governance.

Lack of justice in the judicial system institutionalised by the Nigerian democracy is the bane of all problems intrinsically associated with our democratic rule. Where there is no administration of justice in place, no other institutions put in place in a democratic dispensation can thrive and function effectively. In fact, it is a poison which kills our democracy faster than then the system consumes it. Just because of the collapse of our judicial system under democratic rule, our moral values which should constitute a major support and defence for our democratic norms and principles are also fast eroding. Quoting Chief Obafemi Awolowo in his assessment of the first year of Nigeria's independence, he found as an outstanding feature of the newly independent country

a dangerous decline in moral values where honesty was at a discount and corruption and mediocrity had a high premium. A large percentage of monies which were noted for expenditure on public projects found their ways into pockets of certain individuals.¹³

The import of the above quotation is that the failure observed in the administration of justice in our judicial system is as old as democratic rule in Nigeria. What we also witness today is a further decline and collapse of those institutions. This, of course, is expected, with an unprecedented continuous fall in moral standard among groups and individuals charged with the responsibility of defending and protecting our democracy in Nigeria. If only this is to be considered, there is an urgent need to chart a new course and shift paradigm in our system of governance!

Theocratic Conceptualization of Governance

To start with origin and evolution, the word theocracy originates from the Greek *theokratia*.¹⁴ The components of the word are *theos* which means “god” and *Kratein* which means “to rule”, hence rule by god or government by god.¹⁵ The concept known as theocracy was first coined by the historian Flavins Josephus (37CE – c.100CE).¹⁶ In explaining the organization and political system of the Jewish commonwealth of his time, Josephus contrasted theocracy with other forms of government such as monarchy, oligarchy and republics. In the process, he ordained the Jewish government as theocratic by ascribing the authority of power to God and by persuading all the people to have a regard to Him as the author of all good things.¹⁷

It is observed that the concept of theocracy that we have now, as will be examined later in this paper, is a product of manipulation witnessed by the old concept of theocracy alongside few other concepts.¹⁸ This oldest meaning, as conceived by Josephus, is the one in which ministers, judges or priests are not to assume political power as reflected in modern concept of theocracy.¹⁹ A good example of this is the perception of theocracy as a state in which priest exercise political power or more precisely, a state ruled by ministers.²⁰

Theocracy is said to have existed throughout history. It is known among the ancient people of Egypt and Tibet where kings represented and incarnated the deity.²¹ For instance, during the Pharaonic Era in Egypt, the king was considered a divine or semi-divine figure who ruled largely through priests. History also records this of the early American Civilization such as Mayas, Toltecs, Aztecs and Natchez.²²

In Christianity, the rule of Girolamo Savonarola in the republic of Florence (1494-1497) was theocratic in nature. Then and there, God was made the sole sovereign and the Gospel constituted the law.²³ Other established theocracies after the Protestant Reformation of the 16th Century include that of John Calvin’s regime (1509-1564) in Geneva and that of Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531 in Zurich.²⁴ Upon the migration of the Puritan to New England in the 1630s, theocratic governments were also established in what became Massachusetts and Connecticut.²⁵ Also during the Puritan Revolution in England (1640-1660), precisely after the execution of King Charles 1 in 1649, theocracy was established as a form of government by some zealous puritans.²⁶

Coming to Islam, the community established by Prophet Muhammad (c. 570-632) in Madinah was purely theocratic as he (S.A.W.) served as both the spiritual and temporal leader of his people which could be regarded as a state.²⁷ The first successor of the Prophet, Abu-Bakr (c. 573-634) also ruled based on theocratic principles.²⁸ In the history of Islam generally, the largest and best known theocracies were witnessed during the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750) and the early Abbasid (750-1258). During these eras, state and religion were closely intertwined.²⁹

Generally speaking, the term theocracy signifies belief in governance by divine guidance, a form of regime in which religion or faith plays the dominant role.³⁰ It also denotes a political unit governed by a deity or by officials thought to be divinely guided.³¹ Theocracy as a system of government is prone to so many definitions and meanings. Each is guided by the perspective from which it is viewed. Take for example, Encyclopaedia Britannica defines it as a government by divine guidance or by officials who are regarded as divinely guided.³² This definition clearly shows that the laws and principles guiding the administration and governance of the state under theocracy are drawn from a divine scripture which can either be the Qur'ān or the Bible among other scriptures. Not only that, the drivers of the institutions fashioned out of the divinely guided constitution should be men and women of knowledge of the divine book, otherwise known as clergymen or '*Ulamā*' as the case may be. This interpretation is corroborated by Webster's New Lexicon Dictionary in its definition of theocracy as a government by priests or men of God claiming to know the will of God.³³

By the standard expected of true theocracy, it is our argument that ordinary claim is not enough to determine those that will run the affairs of a theocratic state, they must be confirmed and certified reliable custodians of the scriptural knowledge applicable to the state. This therefore brings to bear the unification of the political authority in the personae of someone with a direct connection to god, a feature identified with the purest form of theocracy as pointed out by Cosgel and Miceli.³⁴

There have been a number of temporary attempts to further conceptualize theocracy, drawing from a variety of old and new sources. These contemporary re-readings of the meaning of theocracy reveal a serious inconsistency and varied disparities in the essence of theocracy as a political concept. Besides, it draws a quick attention to its interpretation according to whims and caprices of individuals, a potential danger to any state employing it. Taking the perception of Swaine for example, theocracy is a model of governance prioritizing a religious conception of the good that is strict and comprehensive in its range of teachings.³⁵ For others, theocracy is used to connote government by a specific institutional faith such as Shia Imams in Iran and the Wahhabi clerics in Afghanistan- with the clergy writing laws and a temple guard to enforcing them.³⁶

As earlier pointed out, it appears theocracy as a form of government points to the source of substantive principles and rules which is Allah's, God's or that of the Supreme Being but without suggesting the "how" of its implementation among the community believers and those under their control. It is in line with this thinking that a connection between the divine will and the divine command in a form reducible to law is said to have been necessary, just like the institutional mechanism for implementing that divine will in legal form.³⁷

Taking the concept of theocracy more holistic and attaching more of divinity to it, it is perceived as a direct rule of the Divine through unalterable and inflexible commands which favourably compares with classic

theocracy where God is the ruler and the priests, judges and prophets through whom He rules have very minimal influence and flexibility concerning the constitution which is divine.³⁸

It becomes axiomatic at this juncture to point out some of the elements which intrinsically describe theocratic governance for better conceptualization. The first and most important of this limitation is the power of government. This limitation is divinely imposed as most of the laws and the norms that will constitute the guiding principles of governance would have been pre-ordained by the and in the divine scripture.³⁹ By a way of distinction, the limitations are categorized into political and structural. While the political limitations include popular sovereignty, political participation by citizens and accountability by agents of the state for their conduct; the structural limitations include process limitations to guard against arbitrary actions, process for the legitimate exercise of state power and substantive rules for the exercise of the state power. The latter, by default, ensures respect for the rights of individuals and the institution of a moral or ethical standard for the state behaviour grounded in what right and just.⁴⁰

Before we conclude this segment, it must be noted that in contemporary times and climes, theocracy has also featured on the pages of history. Such historical records include the regime of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1900-1989) established in Iran in 1979 and the Taliban State in Afghanistan (1996-2001).⁴¹ Similarly, the first decade of the twenty-first century has a record of different fundamentalist Muslim groups in Algeria, Pakistan, Egypt, Sudan and Turkey among others, striving and calling for the establishment of theocratic government in their home countries. The same thing applies to various fundamentalist Christian groups in the United States, Canada, and Australia who advocate aspects of theocratic government, just as several orthodox factions advocate restoring the theocracy of ancient times. Therefore it is apposite to also call for an experimental theocracy which features true principles of Islamic political system in engendering good governance in Nigeria.

Islamic Principles of Theocracy for Good Governance in Nigeria

It must be pointed out from outset that declaration of an Islamic state or total implementation of Islamic political principles under the name *Sharī'ah* Law may generate religious hues and cries in a multi-religious country like ours. The record and evidences are there in the history of *Sharī'ah* in Nigeria. Conversely, dictates and tenets of Islamic law could be ingested in our political system towards ensuring good governance without necessarily tagging it Islamic. This is the form of theocracy advocated in this paper for better Nigeria, politically and socio-economically, that is theocracy garnished with *Sharī'ah* ingredients which ensure good governance at all cost. Such ingredients as enshrined in the *Sharī'ah* radiate absolute justice, equality and protection of human rights among others.

To go down the memory lane a little, the most commonly expressed view is that Islamic, religion and politics are inseparable. By implication, this suggests that Islamic precept informs the design of state institutions just as the state is supposed to be a proper instrument of religious purposes.⁴² A clue from the *Madinah* theocratical system of government adopted by the Prophet (S.A.W), should constitute a model for Islamic political system whose principles give rise to what could be termed “Islamic theocracy” in this paper. In the constitution of that political era of *Madinah*, it is on record that the authoritative model of Islamic precepts of governance was elaborated in a setting where Muslims coexisted with non-Muslim communities. With this civic model, Islam did not enjoy undisputed political authority and yet had preeminent moral authority through the role played by the Prophet.⁴⁴

The above described *Madinah* model is the ideal from the position of this paper. It does not call for declaration of an Islamic or *Sharī‘ah* nation but craves for concepts of Islamic political system as *Shūrā*, *‘Adālah*, *Muhāsabah* and so on to be embedded in our constitution for a guaranteed sustainability of good governance in our dear nation.

Looking at the concept of *Shūrā* from the parlance of Islamic political system, it connotes mutual consultation, drawing inspiration from the scripture, on matters that affect the entire citizenry of a state.⁴⁴ The concept of *Shūrā* is diametrically opposed to people representation in a body like the National Assembly (Houses of senates and Representatives) in Nigeria, where only the interest of the minority matters and the rights of the public trampled upon through formulation of anti-people policies and laws. The *Shūrā* institution involves the election of a leader to head the meeting which discusses national issues based on *mushāwarah* (consultation) and *mudhākarah* (proper guidance). The institution provides a platform for all members to voice their opinions especially on issues of public interest (*maslahah ‘āmmah*).⁴⁵

Implementation of the decisions arrived at by the members of the *Shūrā* committee is binding on every body, however highly placed. This is because such decisions are informed by the guidelines of the Qur’ān and *Sunnah*. In the history of Islam for instance, it is recorded that the prophet (S.A.W) also submitted himself to such a decision emanating from the *Shūrā* concerning the battle of Ditch. On that occasion, the Prophet was faced with the dilemma of either fighting the non-Muslim Arab armies outside of *Madīnah* or wait to fight them when they enter the City. After due consultation with his companions, Salman al-Fārisī suggested the latter decision which was supported by the companions in their majority. Noting that an opinion by the majority of companions is better than the decision of an individual, the Prophet approved of it without hesitation despite his position as the religious and political head of the state.⁴⁶

Linked with *Shūrā*, as required of an ideal Islamic theocracy suggested by this paper, is *Majlis ash-Shūrā*. This term, translated as an advisory council or consultative council, refers to the body in which *Shūrā* itself resides and domiciles. *Majlis ash-Shūrā* is the common term used for elected or co-opted assemblies with advisory or legislative powers, particularly in Muslim-majority countries.⁴⁷ politically speaking, it is an appellation given to either the full legislative body or the upper house of such countries. Thus, it describes a political system where the power of the legislature is excessively consultative.⁴⁸

Majlis ash-Shūrā, fondly shortened as *Majlis* does not have any set of strict guidelines to determine its membership. However, in the context of this paper and for the benefit of good governance, its membership should comprise people of sound mind and good knowledge of Islam. The effectiveness of *Shūrā* and the body described as *Majlis* in ensuring good governance cannot be underestimated. Allah says in the Holy Qur’ān as follows:

.....Those who answer the call of their Lord and establish the prayer, and who conduct their affairs by *Shūrā* (a way of consultation) are loved by Allah).⁴⁹

It says in another portion in an imperative form and instructive manner to the Prophet (S.A.W) as follows:

.... Consult them (the people) in their affairs. Then when you have taken a decision (from them) put your trust in Allah.⁵⁰

From the above verses of the Qur’ān, the need to involve God in the political affairs of a state becomes obvious as a key to good governance and its dividends to the entire citizenry of a state. It also shows that the constitution of a strong *Majlis* instils the spirit of stewardship and accountability in both the leader and the led. Thus, such societal vices as murder, dishonesty and other forms of corruption that characterise the practice of democracy world over will be eschewed almost completely by the implementation of Islamic theocracy. Our stewardship and accountability (*Muḥāsabah*) is ultimately unto Allah as His vicegerents on the earth surface.

Vicegerency (*Khilāfah*) becomes *sine qua non* to ensuring sustainable stable government and guaranteed dividends of good governance to the citizenry. From the concept of *Khilāfah* comes the term *khalīfah* (vicegerent) the plural of which is *khulafā’* (vicegerents).⁵¹ The relevance of this to good governance lies in the quality of leadership which emerges politically to direct the affairs of the state under Islamic theocracy. The *Majlis* in this context, remains the statutory body to elect the *khalīfah* who emerges as the political or and religious head of an Islamic theocratic state. More so that members of the *Majlis*, according to al-Mawardī, must have been people of impeccable character and proven integrity who have enough knowledge

to distinguish a good person from a bad one, the best will definitely emerge to lead the state successfully.⁵² This is unlike political leaders who come to power through dubious and fraudulent means such as rigging, vote-buying, imposition of leaders and other crooked ways. In the proposition of al-Mawardī, in an emergency situation where there is neither a caliphate nor a *Majlis*, the people in the state will have to create a *Majlis* themselves and select a list of candidates suitable to become the *khalīfah* and from the list, the *Majlis* selects the best to rule and direct the “religio-political” affairs of the state.⁵³

The *Majlis* does not only exercise the power to appoint, the power to fire also resides with the authority vested in it. The leader (*khalīfah*) appointed by the *Majlis* is called to self-accountability (*Muḥāsabah*) by the body which appoints him. Thus, the Sunni Islamic lawyers legitimatise and consent to the impeachment of such a ruler when it is obvious that he cannot meet public responsibilities obliged upon him by Islam.⁵⁴ Under this system, impeachment motions are not shrouded in share nepotism, self-centredness and arbitrary exercise of political might by few. In support of this, al-Mawardi states that if the rulers meet their responsibilities to the public, the people must obey their laws, but if they become unjust and severely ineffective, then the leader must be impeached via the *Majlis*.⁵⁵ Among other views to justify the impeachability of a leader by the *Majlis* under Islamic theocracy is that of al-Ghazali which states that oppression by a leader is enough for impeachment.⁵⁶

According to Ibn Hajar al-Asqalāni, the citizens are under obligation to rebel against any leader (Caliph) that acts with no regard for Islamic law. al-Asqalani further argues that overlooking such a leadership and political derailment is completely forbidden (*harām*) in Islam.⁵⁷ Revolution against such a leader, either from within or outside the caliphate is corroborated by al-Asqalani with the following Qur’ānic verses:

And they (the sinners on *Qiyama*) will say, our Lord! We obeyed our leaders and our chiefs who eventually misled us from the right path. Our Lord! Give them (the leaders) double the punishment you give us and curse them with a great curse.⁵⁸

From the above, it could be deduced that the cause of recklessness in our political system /governance as a whole is attributed to lack of proper checks and balances by a strong and effective institutions such as the *Majlis*, which by extension, refers to the electorate or citizenry of a particular state.

In sum and as examined *inter alia*, ‘*Adālah* (equality and justice), *Shūrā* (mutual consultation) and *Muḥāsabah* (accountability) as major forces in driving good governance were demonstrated by the Prophet (S.A.W) as a political and religious leader of the ‘*Ummah* (Muslim Community). Unequivocally, these

characteristics of an egalitarian society have a practical reference in the following hadith narrated by ‘Aishah, the wife of the Prophet (S.A.W):

The people of Quraysh worried about the lady from Bani Makhzum who had committed theft. They asked (consultation) “who will intercede for her with Allah’s Apostle” some said, “No one dare to do except Usāmah b. Zayd, the beloved to Allah’s Apostle. When Usāmah spoke about that to Allah’s Apostle, he (S.A.W) said: “Do you try to intercede for somebody in a case connected with Allah’s prescribed punishments (accountability to Allah)?” Then he got up and delivered a sermon saying,: “What destroyed the nations preceding you was that if a noble amongst them stole, they would forgive him, and if a poor person amongst them stole, they would inflict Allah’s legal punishment on him. By Allah, if Fatimah, the daughter of Muhammad (my daughter) stole, I would cut off her hand (justice).”⁵⁹

Conclusion and Recommendations

To put our nation on the path of good governance, there must be a paradigm shift in our system of governance. This shift as focused in this paper is to explore a system of governance enriched with the principles of Islamic political system, otherwise described as Islamic theocracy in this paper. It is not a condition to give the system any Islamic outlook in terms of appellations such as *Sharī‘ah*, “Islamism” or “Muhhammadanism”, considering the multi-religious nature of the Nigerian state and people. Such principles of Islamic political system, as highlighted in this paper include *‘Adālah*_(equality and justice), *Shūrā* (mutual consultation), *Majlis ash-Shūrā* (consultative forum), *khilāfah* (stewardship) and *Muḥāsabah* (accountability). It is therefore our final submission that a holistic and totalitarian exploration of an Islamic theocracy under the described atmosphere will give birth to a new Nigeria where good governance will reign with its dividends enjoyed by the entire Nigerian people.

In conclusion, the following are recommended for all stakeholders in the political enterprise of good governance in Nigeria to note and reflect upon:

- Politics should be collapsed into our moral/religious system and not the other way round. This is to allow the latter take its full course in ensuring an egalitarian society.
- The power to “hire” and “fire” should be given back to the people who are like the *Majlis* in the true sense of the word. The nomenclature does not matter; a central name and a nomenclature acceptable to all could be adopted.

- Trusted and tested men of religious understanding should be sponsored en masse into the Nigerian politics to make the desired change.
- As a matter of constitutionality, the failure of a leader or a political regime through deviation from the laid down principles and dictates of the divine constitution, should signify an immediate end of his leadership and administration.
- Accountability to the Supreme Being, and thereafter to the common people being governed, should be the bed rock of our political system.
- Leadership positions should not be sought nor contested under an ideal political system which exemplifies Islamic theocracy. Rather, such positions should be given on merit to the most qualified and as a trust which will be accounted for in this world and in the Hereafter.

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