

Islam Works – Part 4

Why Islam? Because Islam works. Among the life principles that Islam taught us which have the power to make us winners in this world and the next is the principle of Shura or Consultative Decision Making. The object of making any decision is not merely to make the decision but to have it implemented with sincerity and enthusiasm. If a decision is made by the leader alone without the participation of his/her followers, the chances are that they will not be committed to implementing it and when it fails, they will blame the leader. We see this all the time in all kinds of situations, be it in families, corporations, NGO's, or different societal groupings. This happens especially when the leader is powerful and charismatic and has a core following which are willing to cheer him along. What he and his followers don't realize or choose to ignore is that others who are silent are not committed to the decision. But to succeed, the decision needs the wholehearted cooperation of everyone on the team and so the decision fails, though it may have been a good decision.

Silence is not a sign of agreement. It is most often the most reliable sign of disinterest and disagreement. People choose to remain silent instead of voicing their disagreement. Similarly, dissent is not necessarily disagreement but often the most reliable sign of commitment. Only those who are interested in the outcome are interested enough to speak about it. Reflecting on our meetings in different contexts, you can see how often we manage to get it wrong and ignore the silent and treat dissenters with

suspicion and worse. The Islamic principle of Shura is the safety net that helps us to avoid these traps and to build teams of committed people, focused on the success of the mission.

The Shura Principle is based on three fundamentals. First, that all people in society are equal in terms of human and civil rights. Secondly, that public issues are best decided not just by the involvement of the majority but by taking into consideration minority concerns and views. And third, that the principles of justice, equality, and human dignity, which are Islam's core principles, are best served by using the Shura Principle in both personal and public life. Shura is therefore recommended even at home in what would be considered purely domestic decisions. And it is the preferred way in all public decision making.

Rasoolullah ﷺ made all his decisions in consultation with his Sahaba unless it was a matter in which Allah ﷻ had ordained something. It was common among the Sahaba to ask Rasoolullah ﷺ if a certain advice was from Allah ﷻ or from himself ﷺ. Rasoolullah ﷺ encouraged this and didn't get offended when someone asked him this. One of the most famous incidents when Rasoolullah ﷺ used the Shura was when about a day's journey before reaching Badr, Rasoolullah ﷺ held a council of war to review the situation and decide on a plan of action. His army consisted of both Muhajiroon and Ansar. The commitment of every single soldier was critical to success because they were far fewer than the enemy in number and ill equipped.

Rasoolullah ﷺ told them that he had received intelligence that the caravan of Abu Sufyan which they had planned to raid, had escaped and that instead, if they continued onwards to Badr, they would face an army of Quraysh. The alternative was to return to Madina without going on to Badr at all.

Abu Bakr (R) was the first to speak at the meeting and he reassured Rasoolullah ﷺ about his and the support of the Muhajiroon. 'Umar ibn Al-Khattab (R) was next, and he spoke in similar vein. Then, al-Miqdad ibn 'Amr (R) got up and said: “Ya Rasoolullah ﷺ! Proceed where Allah ﷻ directs you to, for we are with you. We will not say as the Bani Israel said to Musa (AS), “Go you and your Rabb and fight and we will stay here.”

قَالُوا يَا مُوسَىٰ إِنَّا لَن نَّدْخُلَهَا أَبَدًا مَّا دَامُوا فِيهَا فَاذْهَبْ أَنْتَ وَرَبُّكَ
فَقَاتِلَا إِنَّا هَاهُنَا قَاعِدُونَ

Maidah 5: 24 They said: O Musa! We shall never enter it as long as they are there. So go you and your Rabb and fight you two, we are staying right here.

Rather we shall say: “Go you and your Rabb and fight and we will fight along with you.” By Allah ﷻ ! If you were to take us to Birk al-Ghimad, we will still fight resolutely with you against its defenders until you conquered it.” Rasoolullah ﷺ praised him and made dua for him, but the three who had spoken were of the Muhajiroon, who only constituted around one third of the Muslim men in Madina.

Rasoolullah ﷺ wanted the opinion of the Ansar, because according to their pledge at Al-Aqaba they had committed to supporting Rasoolullah ﷺ and fighting for him within the boundary of Madina only and not outside it. Here at Badr, they were not bound by that pledge. The Arabs of the time didn't have standing armies or central command. They skirmished and raided each other, but didn't fight sustained campaigns, unlike the Romans and Persians. The Arab tribes didn't obey an Army Commander. They obeyed their tribal leaders. If the tribal leader ordered them to disengage and leave, they would do that even during or before a battle. That is why Rasoolullah ﷺ wanted to ensure that he had the full support of everyone before the battle.

It was much later, during the Khilafa of Omar ibn Al-Khattab (R) that a standing army was created, and Khalid bin Waleed (R) was the first commander to lead a successful campaign. As an interesting aside in history, the question to ask is how someone without any experience of planning or leading a sustained campaign over distances of hundreds of miles, Khalid bin Waleed (R) was able to do it, flawlessly and defeat the greatest army of the time, the Eastern Roman Empire?

So, Rasoolullah ﷺ asked for other opinions. His intention was to get the leaders of the Ansar to speak. Sa'd ibn Mu'adh (R), the head of Aws, understood and asked for permission to speak. He said: "Ya Rasoolullah ﷺ, we believe in you, and we bear witness that what you brought is the Truth. We give you our firm pledge of obedience and sacrifice.

We will obey you most willingly in whatever you command us, and by Allahﷻ Who sent you with the Truth, if you were to ask us to throw ourselves into the sea, we will do that most readily and not a man of us will stay behind. We are not afraid of an encounter with the enemy. We are experienced in war, and we are trustworthy under command. We hope that Allahﷻ will show you through our hands those deeds of bravery which will please your eyes. Kindly lead us to the battlefield in the Name of Allahﷻ.” Rasoolullahﷺ was very pleased with this response and ordered the army to march forward to Badr.

This shows the importance of Shura. Though Rasoolullahﷺ had the ultimate command, and the Sahaba would have obeyed him no matter what he ordered, he didn't presume on this and consulted them. In this consultation, his seeking their counsel was genuine and not a sham. Had he made up his mind without consultation, one could not have faulted him for it because he was guided by Allahﷻ directly. Yet he consulted his people because Shura is not about the leader being right or wrong but about the followers feeling valued and trusted. Genuineness is critical to success and any pretense of consulting when your mind is already made up will not only be counterproductive but will destroy all trust in the leader and the process. When people are sincerely heard and their concerns addressed, they feel committed to the goal, even if the decision is not what they may have wanted.

When the Muslims reached Badr, there was another famous incident before the battle. Rasoolullah ﷺ ordered them to camp in a certain area. One of the Sahaba, Al-Hubab ibn al-Mundhir (RA) asked him, “Ya Rasoolullah ﷺ is this what Allah ﷻ ordered you or is this your opinion?” Rasoolullah ﷺ said, “This is my opinion.” Al-Hubab ibn al-Mundhir (RA) said, “In that case, I have a different opinion. I suggest that we camp keeping the water source in our control. That way we will be better resourced, and the enemy will not have access to the water.” Rasoolullah ﷺ agreed and changed his order. The Muslims camped around one of the wells and destroyed the other wells on the road to Madina which they could not have controlled or protected. That way the Quraysh had no access to water which played a major role in their defeat, the following day. Rasoolullah ﷺ’s openness and treatment of his companions with dignity, helped to create an atmosphere of trust where people felt free to express their opinions, even if they were contrary to his. This was a major force in building the Brotherhood of Faith, the Ummah.

Allah ﷻ considered Shura so important that He revealed Qur’an about it.

وَالَّذِينَ اسْتَجَابُوا لِرَبِّهِمْ وَأَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَأَمْرُهُمْ شُورَى بَيْنَهُمْ وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَاهُمْ يُنْفِقُونَ

Shura 42: 38 And those who answer the Call of their Rabb [accept Islam], and establish As-Salat, and who (conduct) their affairs by mutual consultation, and who spend of what We have bestowed on them.

I always marvel at how Allahﷻ mentions elements of conduct along with Salah and Zakat. This shows us that Islam is not merely a set of prayer rituals but a complete way of life in which everything we say or do has the potential to benefit us in this life and earn rewards for us in the Aakhirah. In another place Allahﷻ revealed an even more comprehensive Ayah. Heﷻ said:

فَبِمَا رَحْمَةٍ مِّنَ اللَّهِ لِنْتَ لَهُمْ وَلَوْ كُنْتَ فَظًّا غَلِيظَ الْقَلْبِ لَانفَضُّوا مِنْ
حَوْلِكَ فَاعْفُ عَنْهُمْ وَاسْتَغْفِرْ لَهُمْ وَشَاوِرْهُمْ فِي الْأَمْرِ فَإِذَا عَزَمْتَ
فَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُتَوَكِّلِينَ

A'al Imraan 3: 159 And by the Mercy of Allah, you dealt with them gently. And had you been severe and harsh-hearted, they would have broken away from about you. So, pass over (their faults), and ask (Allah's) Forgiveness for them; and consult them in the affairs. Then when you have taken a decision, put your trust in Allah, certainly, Allah loves those who put their trust (in Him).

There are many lessons about Shura and leadership in this Ayah which are well worth reflecting on. We may never be called upon to take the momentous decisions that Rasoolullahﷺ had to take, but it doesn't hurt to learn to do something well. And who is a better teacher than Allahﷻ?

Allahﷻ praised Rasoolullahﷺ's kind and accommodating nature and said that this was a special blessing on him from Allahﷻ and that had he been severe and harsh, his companions would not have stayed with him.

Allahﷻ advised Rasoolullahﷺ to forgive the faults of his followers and to make dua for them and to consult them in matters which affect them. So, three things to learn: First, the leader must be patient and kind and listen to people. Second, it is understood that not everyone will be tactful and communicate well, so the leader must be prepared to forgive his followers if they say or do something inappropriate. Not only that, but Allahﷻ reinforced it by advising Rasoolullahﷺ to make dua for them. Third, Allahﷻ advised Rasoolullahﷺ to seek the opinions of his followers in whatever matter was under consideration. Reflect on this: Rasoolullahﷺ received Wahi, and his Sahaba had complete faith in him. If there was someone who did not need to consult anyone, it was Rasoolullahﷺ. Yet Allahﷻ advised him to make Shura with his Sahaba. This shows that Shura is not so much about the leader's capability but about winning his followers' commitment. The most capable leader will be rendered null and void if his followers desert him. Shura is as much guarantee as you can get against this eventuality. Finally, Allahﷻ advised that this consultation must have a timeframe and once a matter had been decided, then the decision must not be changed, and that we must place our trust in Himﷻ. Allahﷻ declared that He loves those who trust Him. Decisiveness is a leadership quality that consultation doesn't dilute but reinforces. Decisiveness by trusting Allahﷻ is Tawakkul.