

**FIGHTING AGAINST CORRUPTION**  
**(A Political Biography of ‘Umar Ibn ‘Abd al-‘Aziz)\***  
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*Abstract*

*Umar ibn Abd Aziz was a great leader throughout Islamic history. He has shown an outstanding role in the Umayyad Dynasty. He differed from some of his corrupt, unkind and injustice predecessors. This Caliph, well-known as Umar II, usually made popular policies to his people. He is the legendary leader who has many interesting historical evidences that encourage researchers to make further studies. His policies were always based upon Al-Qur’an and Hadits. On the one hand, he led and treated his people with justice; and on the other, he was very strict to his officials or people who corrupt or violate Allah’s rules. This study reveals various political decisions that were made during his leadership. Based on the various sources, many political decisions that he made may become references to be followed by Moslem leaders today and in the future time.*

*الخلاصة*

يعتبر عمر بن عبد العزيز، عن حق، أحد أعظم القادة عبر التاريخ الإسلامي من خلال دوره المحوري خلال فترة الخلافة الأموية. لقد مثل عمر بن عبد العزيز حالة جد مختلفة عن سابقه من الخلفاء الذين عرف بعضهم بالجور والفساد. لقد كان ذلك الخليفة، الذي كان ينادى بعمر الثاني، يرسم من السياسات العامة ما يمس قلوب الناس من حوله. هذا، وتحفل السيرة الذاتية لذلك الخليفة بالأدلة التاريخية على مقاومته للفساد الإداري؛ تلك الأدلة التي يفترض أن تحث الباحثين على القيام بدراسات أكثر عنه. لقد أرسى الخليفة عمر الثاني دعائم سياساته على أساس متين من القرآن والسنة، كما عرف عنه معاملته العادلة الرحيمة لرعيته، إلى جانب شدته على من يخالف قوانين العدالة والرحمة الإلهيين. تحاول هذه المقالة إزاحة الستار التاريخي عن تشكيلة من قراراته السياسية التي اتخذها على مدار فترة خلافته القصيرة. واعتماداً على دراسة تلك التشكيلة، رأيت المقالة فيها مثلاً ينبغي أن يتخذي به القادة المسلمون في الحاضر والمستقبل على حد سواء.

**Keywords:** Economic policy, government system, social welfare, and justice

*A. Introduction*

The transition of the power centre from Medina to Damascus was followed by the change in the governmental system from Caliphate to kingdom. After establishing their power, 'Umayyah did not want that power

They regarded that the power was in the hands of their family and should be circulated from a father to his children or from to his family. The court wealth was not distributed for the sake of the people's interest. Instead, most of them were used to uphold the Umayyah dynasty and the prestige of court family. Well-known as Umar II, Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz was different from his predecessors who paid less attention to the prosperity of their peoples and their religious life. In fact, Umar II had no ambition to hold the caliphate position. He was fully aware that the position was not a gift but responsibility. He was also aware that he should be in the midst between the rich and the oppressed poor and give their rights.<sup>1</sup>

It can be said that one of the reasons why his stance toward caliphate was different from his predecessors is his genealogical relation with 'Umar ibn Khattab. His mother was Ummu 'Âshim binti 'Âshim ibn Umar ibn Khattab.<sup>2</sup> He was often identified with Umar ibn Khattab in their shared justice.

### *B. A brief Biography*

Hasan Ibrahim Hasan explains that Umar bin Abd al-Aziz was born in Hulwan when his father, Abd al-Aziz, was governor of Egypt.<sup>3</sup> He spent his youth in his hometown. In spite of aristocratic by origin, he lived his simple life. He was typically pious, well-knowledge, clever. After their death of his father in 704 A.D, he married Fatimah binti Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan.

Umar II seemed to try to remedy the negative image of his predecessors for their unjustly having dealt with *mawali* (non-Arabs), especially of Berbers. They thought that Umar's predecessors set up inhuman and unjust rules as illustrated by al-Mas'udi, al-Ya'qubi, and al-Fida as follows: "when Berbers gave to birth a baby, Umayyad regulated *jizyah* (poll tax by non-Muslims) for especially that baby. [In

fact] in the times of the Prophet and *al-Khulafa' al-Rashidun* the *jizyah* was ruled out only for a non-Muslim adult man.”<sup>4</sup> Umar was frequently asked a political asylum by Iraqis oppressed by Hajaj ibn Yusuf. Since Umar II defended them, Hajjaj asked those given asylum by Umar II to be returned home. Failed to do so, al-Walid I fired Hajjaj. Besides that, Umar did not continue Hajjaj’s proposal to invalidate the will of Abd al-Malik saying: “After al-Walid I, Sulayman ibn al-Malik should be crowned”.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps this was the fruit of the support Umar II had ever given to Sulaiman.<sup>6</sup>

As a matter of fact, at first Umar II refused the appointment by Caliphate Sulayman to the position of caliphate. After convinced, he finally accepted it. Instead of saying *al-hamd li-Allah* for receiving the position, he said “*innâ lillâhi wa innâ ilaihi râji' ûn*” as if calamity would have happen.

After the appointment, Umar II handed in all of his property to the state’s administration. He also submitted the property of his wife, Fatimah bint ‘Abd al-Malik, inherited from her father which included gold rings valued 10.000 dinar. He regarded that as long as women in the country had not managed to have gold rings as valued as those of the Lady of the country, they did not deserve to use them.<sup>7</sup>

In making his decisions, Umar II always consulted the Prophet’s companions who were still alive and other ulama so as not to deviate from the Islamic sources of teaching (the Quran and the *hadith*). He was aware that his family had to administer the state based on Islamic ways.<sup>8</sup> He returned the Fadak (or Fidak) farm, which belonged to the Prophet given on behalf of peoples, to the Prophet’s family (*ahl al-bayt*) which was privately possessed by the Caliphate Marwan ibn Hakam during his reign. He abolished the imprecation toward ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib and his family as ever ruled out by the Caliphate Mu‘awiyah in every Friday prayer sermon.

During Umar II’s reign, the Khawarij group had never rebelled as they had ever done before. He invited the Khawarij leaders to discuss instead. They once asked about his Caliphate position: “Who had given you the Caliphate position?” He replied that he only had the position for provisional times until people chose his more

appropriate and capable successor. When the time came, he would step down wholeheartedly from the position and give it to his successor. Listening to his reply, they said: “you are true and we fully support you.”<sup>9</sup>

Unfortunately, his brilliant policies were not continued by his successors. Firstly, none of his successors continued his popular policies in developing people’s prosperity. Instead, they corrupted their position and failed to realise people’s welfare. Secondly, his leadership was too tolerant even toward the political rivals of the Umayyad dynasty, including Khawarijis and Shi‘is. As a result, the underground movements of these groups could easily consolidate their power which peaked in the fall of the dynasty. Concerning this, P.K. Hitti said: “although with the modest intention, Umar’s policy did not (work well)”.<sup>10</sup>

After his death, his successor, Yazid ibn Abdul Malik, ordered Umar II’s wife to take back her husband’s property from the state’s administration. She refused, since it would break the order of her husband. Yazid II was weak and could not manage administration well. Soon after his appointment to the Caliphate, rebellions and conflicts between tribes and races happened throughout the country until his death in 724 A.D.

### *C. Political Policy*

‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, with his revolutionary attempts, could keep the harmony between human and nature. That is the true meaning of Islam that God revealed to all prophets. Islam is a submission of human soul and existence to the Creator and His rules. In other words, it is human’s engagement with *sunnah* which moved nature to its ultimate goal and his participation in the everlasting journey within the line of truth and justice.<sup>11</sup> Inanimate and animals are submitted to *sunnah* and follow the natural law. By contrast, with his mind and reason, human can follow *sunnat Allah* or disobey it.<sup>12</sup>

A revolutionary history started with a journey, not to pass a certain distance but spiritual path. In this journey, a man thought of his destiny and his nation with his deep yearning. Then he endeavoured to bring his destiny to justice and truth. He was not attracted by mundane temptation that will lead him to the lowest level of life. That is the figure of Umar II who had made a spiritual revolution in his reign.<sup>13</sup> He was very modest. It is said that he often wore torn clothes. One day his youngest son met him for complaining about the dress he wore. He said, “O, my sons, do you like delicious food, while your father enter the hell?”<sup>14</sup>

Umar II’s policy in managing his administration focused on twofold: 1) giving safeguard guarantee to people. He did not continue his predecessors’ attempts to make territorial expansions. 2) He established neutral and egalitarian policies. At the early times of his reign, the Umayyah and their financial administration were suffering from decrease. In coping with this situation, they established a tax regulation for *mawali* and *dhimmi* through the payment of *kharaj* and *jizyah*. They depended heavily only on Arabs who opposed and supported Ali’s family and *ansars* who had helped the Prophet and His companions to migrate from Makkah to Madinah. At the beginning era of their reign, Umayyah rulers undermined and looked down those who were at the time of *al-Khulafâ al-Râsyidûn* known for their piety.<sup>15</sup>

As the caliphate, Umar paid much of his attention to the reform of internal affairs. Among his policy was to establish a better management for local as well as centre officials. He implemented the rules consistently. He established the equal rights for Arabs and *mawali*. He fired incapable, dishonest, and corrupt officials. Alternatively, he installed pious, honest and egaliter officials. Even he installed officials from conflicting tribes, Mudar and Himyar tribes. For instance, from Mudar tribe, Adi ibn Artath was appointed as governor of Basra, Abd al-Hamid ibn Abd al-Rahman in Kufa, Umar ibn Hubairah in Mesopotamia, and Jarrah ibn Abdullah as governor of Khurasan. From Himyar tribe, al-Samah ibn Malik became governor in Andalus, and Isma’il ibn Abdullah in Qayrawan.<sup>16</sup>

In appointing a local head, Umar II always consulted local people. One example is the appointment of a candidate governor of Khurasan (who succeeded al-Jarrah). Local people chose a number of candidates about whom Umar II did not know. He then consulted them to get to know about their capability and integrity. After a governor was appointed, Umar II ordered people to obey their leader as long as he was trustworthy and could perform his task well. In contrast, if he did not conduct his task and duties, they had to tell Umar. Later, this governor was proved incapable. They told Umar and he hired him.<sup>17</sup>

Another example is the case of Yahya al-Ghassani, new governor of Mousul. One day Umar asked him about law enforcement in his region: “did you punish someone with suspicion and accusation or with evidence and practised *sunnah*?” Umar told that if people could not be called for the good, Allah will never make them well.” He ordered the governor to punish whoever makes others inconvenient. After the governor did the order, Mousul became the best and the safest city in the history of the Umayyah.<sup>18</sup>

Umar paid much attention to law enforcement. He punished heads of regions and local officials. Yazid ibn Muhallab, the governor of Khurasan, was fired and punished for being unable to prove the accusation of misusing tax of the province. He was exiled to Cyprus and his position was taken over by Jabi ibn Abdullah. He could not escape after bribing the head of the Cyprus jail. He then made rebellion, but failed. He was caught and put into jail in Aleppo.<sup>19</sup> The same case was that of the governor of Andalusia, al-Hur, appointed by Sulaiman. He was fired for his incapability, greedy and tyranny, and was replaced by al-Salama.<sup>20</sup>

Not only with the law enforcement, was Umar II also very concerned with the moral development. He was the only Umayyah caliph who could overcome conflicts among groups and sects. He paid much more attention to the development and Islamizing the country than expanding his power and collecting money. The period of

Umar II was that of the heyday of Islamic promulgation. Over the history of the dynasty, only in his era did people of the country enjoy justice and equality.<sup>21</sup>

As stated above, Umar II had never hope the caliphate position. This can be seen in his speech as follows:

“I am tested with the caliphate, without being informed, without asking and without being consulted. So, I refused to receive ‘*bai‘at*’ (oath) and ask them to determine their own decision. But they did not want the other to hold the position.”<sup>22</sup>

This is different from his predecessors’ attitude as W.M. Watt has stated:

If sons of Marwan met [their enemies], they unsheathed the sword of wrath for the sake of God’s religion, with its sharp they paid the victory of Islam; the sword was only for those who disbelieved that earth is God’s possession entrusted to His vice; who rules the world victoriously. God has given you His caliphate and leadership; God’ will can never change.<sup>23</sup>

Umar II even had chosen his successor, as suggested by his father Sulayman Abd al-Malik, Yazid ibn Abd al-Malik. However, he did know that Yazid was not capable of holding the position. Fortunately, he died before the due time.<sup>24</sup> He opposed feudalism. He did not agree on the why feudalists controlled lands for the sake of the royal family. He gave a huge piece of land to *bayt al-mal*. He was not subscribed to the vast amount of salary the royal family received for they even did not work at all. Muawiyah, the founder of the Umayyah dynasty, permitted to take the state’s property up to the half. To Umar II, this was injustice and, therefore, should be abolished.<sup>25</sup>

Umar II monitored his assistants so intensively that he could take an immediate replacement when officials made misuse of their positions. Al-Jarrah, who was appointed in the era of al-Walid I, was replaced after 17 months of his rule for being injustice to *mawâli*.<sup>26</sup>

### *C. Economic Policies*

Umar II was a simple Caliphate. He only took 2 dirham from his total property. Even though, he was actually well-to-do. He owned farm lands in Hijaz, Syria, Egypt and Bahrain from which his total income could reach 40.000 dinar per year. When died, he only owned 17 dinar which was used to manage his burial, 5 dinar for buying shroud and 2 dinar for burial ground. The remaining 10 dinar was distributed to his 11 offspring.<sup>27</sup> Before he died, he ordered his family to give their property to the state. Even he ordered to return all people's rights seized by his predecessors to the state for the sake of the people.<sup>28</sup> Before the era of Umar II, *jizyah* and *kharâj* were paid by *mawâli* (non-Arabs). Umar abolished them on the ground that the Prophet was sent not to collect taxes and wealth, but to establish religious norms and morals. Before adhering to Islam, a *mawâli* had to pay *kharâj* and *Jizyah*. After embracing Islam, he had to pay only '*ushr* (10%) of the harvest for farmers.

To solve economic condition of the country, Umar II regulated that *kharâj* was a joint property of Muslims and joint possession of the communities.<sup>29</sup> He adopted the policy made by Umar II in Sawad concerning *jizyah* and *kharâj* for *dzimmî* (non-Muslims). *Jizyah* was paid as land tax, while *kharâj* was tax for security. As such the policy was equally applied for both Muslims and non-Muslims. This equality attracted non-Muslims to embrace Islam. He stopped the wave of urbanization. This was related to the myriad *mawali* in Iraq who left their home to migrate to cities. Umar asked them to return and to work on in their own lands.<sup>30</sup> Arabs bought *dzimmî*'s land. This tempted *dzimmî* to migrate to cities, Arabs enjoyed crops without paying *kharâj*. As a result, many *dzimmî* adhered to Islam just to avoid *kharâj*. Such a condition deteriorated economy. To cope with this, Umar II consulted ulama and made a policy: "Muslims who enjoyed the land of *kharâj* and paid the land of '*usyr* as tax, since 100 A.H (9718-719 A.D), must not do land transaction." In this, it was not allowed to change *kharâj* land into the land of '*usyr*'. Land transaction without the government's permission was invalid. If a converted *mawali* rent a land, he did not have to pay *kharâj* tax. Instead he was just to pay it in cash.<sup>31</sup> The salary of labours

was half that of state officials. This was a proof that Umar II was careful about the poor people's prosperity.

In short, justice was the basis of Umar II's leadership. There were no different rights and services. He forbade death and hand-cutting sentences only for un-clear reasons. He said, "One must not be sentenced even only once, until he has been asked (about a related case) and given defence".<sup>32</sup>

At the first, 'Umar II's economic policy caused decreasing income. However, after he renewed it, economic condition increased. Unfortunately, this renewed policy was not continued by his successors and the situation reversed as it was before his era: greed of power and corruptive.<sup>33</sup>

#### *D. Conclusion*

Policies and governmental system of Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz was identical with the prosperity of people and the enforcement of Islamic rules. His administration was duplication of that of Umar bin Khattab. While Umar I was tough, Umar II was smoothed in engendering his administration.

Umar II dedicated his power to humanity for all people, regardless of their races and social status. He replaced all dishonest, unjust and incapable governors with the honest, just and capable. Umar II was the trustful, just, and ascetic caliphate. However, this does not mean that he had no rivals. They did not like his policies in combating corruption, collusion and nepotism and struggling for justice. During his short termed reign (2 years, 5 months), he had been successful.

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<sup>1</sup> K. Ali (1976), *Islamer Itihash*, Dhaka: Ali Publication, pp. 390-391, M. A. Shaban (1 993), *Sejarah Islam Dalam Penafsiran Baru 600-750*, terj. Machnun Husein, Jakarta: Raja Grafindo Persada, pp. 194-195 and Ahmad Syalabi (1971), *Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Islam I*, trans. Muchtar Yahya and Sanusi Latif, Jakarta: Djembatan, Cet. II, p. 65.

- <sup>2</sup> Muhammad al-Khudlari. Beg, (1976), *Muhâdldarât Târikh al-Umam al-Islâmiyah*, Kairo: al-Maktabah al-Tijariyah al-Kubrâ, Jilid II p. 180.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibrahim Hasan (1989), *Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Islam*, terj. Djahdan Humam, Yogyakarta: Kota Kembang, p. 95.
- <sup>4</sup> Shaikh Muhammad Lutfar Rahman (1977), *Islam*, Dhaka: Bangla Academy.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*; Reza-I-Karim, (1972), *Arab Jatir Itihash*, Dhaka: Bangla Academy, Ibrahim Hasan, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 95-96; dan M. A. Shaban *Op. Cit.*, pp. 171 dan 192.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibrahim Hasan (1989), *Op. Cit.*, p. 96.
- <sup>7</sup> Reza-I-Karim (1972), *Op. Cit.*, p. 216.
- <sup>8</sup> M. A. Shaban (1993), *Op. Cit.*, p. 195.
- <sup>9</sup> Reza-I-Karim (1972), *Op. Cit.*, p. 217.
- <sup>10</sup> Hitti, Philip K. (2005), *History of The Arabs*, terj. R. Cecep Lukman Yasin dan Dedi Slamet, Jakarta: Serambi. p. 273.
- <sup>11</sup> ‘Imâd al-Dîn Khalîl (1971), *Malâmih al-Inqilâb al-Islâmî fî Khilâfah ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Aziz*, Bairut: al-Dâr al-‘Ilmiyah, Cet II, pp. 15-16.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.
- <sup>14</sup> Imâd al-Dîn Khalîl, (1971), *Op. Cit.*, pp.29-30, Syed Mahmudul Hasan, (1975), *Islamer Itihas.*, Dhaka: Glob Library, p.343, dan Hitti, *History*, p. 277.
- <sup>15</sup> K. Ali (1976), p. 391-392.
- <sup>16</sup> K. Ali (1976), p. 392.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup> Jalal al-Dîn al-Suyûthi (1974), *Târikh al-Khulafâ*, Bairut: Dâr al-Fikr, p. 221.
- <sup>19</sup> Sayed Mahmudul Hasan (1995), *Islamic History*, Delhi: Adam Publishers, pp. 338-339 & M. Abdul Karim (2006), *Islam di Asia Tengah: Sejarah Dinasti Mongol-Islam*, Yogyakarta: Bagaskara, p. 17.
- <sup>20</sup> Sayed Mahmudul Hasan dan Shamsur Rahman (1991), *Uttar Afrika O Spainer Musalmander Itihash*, Dhaka: Jahana Book House, p. 191.
- <sup>21</sup> Sayed Mahmudul Hasan, *Islamer Itihash*, Dhaka; Glob Library, pp. 332-335 dan Shaikh Muhammad Lutfar Rahman *Op. Cit.*, pp. 28-29.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.
- <sup>23</sup> W. Montgomery Watt (1990), *Kejayaan Islam: Kajian Kritis dari Tokoh Orientali*, terj. Hartono Hadikusumo, Yogyakarta: Tiara Wacana, pp. 57-58.
- <sup>24</sup> Carl Brockelman (1949), *History of Islamic Peoples*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, p. 73. See also, M. Abdul Karim (2006), *Sejarah Islam di Asia Tengah : Sejarah dinasti Mongol-Islam*, Yogyakarta: Bagaskara, p. 19.
- <sup>25</sup> Reza-I-Karim, *Op. Cit.*, p.217.
- <sup>26</sup> Abu Ja’far Muhammad al-Jarîr al-Thabari (1979), *Tarîkh al-Umam wa al-Mulûk, Jilid VIII*, Bairut: Dâr al-Fikr, p. 134.
- <sup>27</sup> Sayed Mahmudul Hasan, *Op. Cit.*, p. 345.
- <sup>28</sup> Sayed Mahmudul Hasan dan Shamsur Rahman (1991), *Op. Cit.*, p. 93.
- <sup>29</sup> S. A. Q. Husani (1949), *Arab Administration*, Madras: Soldent & Co., pp. 136-137.
- <sup>30</sup> K. Ali *Op. Cit.*, p. 396, Lombard, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 116, 166, 197, and 202; also Reza-I-Karim (1972), *Op. Cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> S. A. Q. Husani *Op. Cit.*, pp. 135-136 dan Ali, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 396-397.

<sup>32</sup> K. Ali *Op. Cit.*, p. 401.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 404.

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