



**Reclaiming Justice: Abu Zayd’s Contextual Hermeneutics and the Political Ethics of the Qur’an**

**Abdur Rozaq<sup>1\*</sup>, Hadziq Mubarak<sup>2</sup>, Moh Asnal Marom<sup>3</sup>, Fauzy Ramadhan<sup>4</sup>**

<sup>1,2</sup>UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, Indonesia

<sup>3</sup>Al-Ahgaff University Mukalla, Yemen

<sup>4</sup>Al-Azhar University Cairo, Egypt

abdurrozaq2309@gmail.com

hadziq1998@gmail.com

asnalmarom4@gmail.com

fauzyramadhan1998@gmail.com

\* Corresponding Author.

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**Abstract:** This paper applies Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd’s contextual hermeneutics to four Qur’anic verses often invoked in Islamic political discourse: QS. al-Nisā’ [4]:59, QS. al-Baqarah [2]:30, QS. al-Shūrā [42]:38, and QS. al-Mā’idah [5]:44. Traditional interpretations have frequently endorsed literal and authoritarian readings, framing obedience, governance, and divine law as rigid imperatives. By engaging Abu Zayd’s concept of *tārīkhiyyat al-dalālah* (the historicity of meaning), this study reinterprets these verses through their socio-historical contexts and ethical substance. The analysis finds that each verse contains dynamic ethical imperatives: conditional obedience, ecological stewardship, participatory governance, and values-based jurisprudence. Abu Zayd’s methodology reframes Islamic political thought as a field grounded not in legal absolutism, but in moral dialogue. This approach supports a pluralistic, just, and context-sensitive reading of the Qur’an, offering new possibilities for integrating Islamic teachings with contemporary values of justice, human rights, and ethical leadership

**Keywords:** *Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, hermeneutics, Qur’anic ethics, Islamic political thought, justice*

**INTRODUCTION**

Throughout Islamic history, Qur’anic verses have been foundational in shaping political authority and governance models across various Muslim societies. These sacred texts are frequently invoked not only as spiritual guidance but also as frameworks for statecraft and leadership. The inherent authority of the Qur’an provides potent legitimacy for rulers, scholars, and political movements alike. Numerous scholars have emphasized the close entwinement of Islamic theology and politics, underscoring how religious principles are used



to establish governing legitimacy. For instance, Ullah (2024) argues that the Qur'an serves not only as a spiritual text but also as a source of ethical governance, emphasizing accountability, justice, and collective responsibility in leadership. Political actors, such as the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), actively utilize Qur'anic references to validate their campaigns and ideological agendas, exemplifying how Qur'anic exegesis remains deeply intertwined with contemporary political movements (Zarif, 2022). This trend illustrates the enduring role of scripture in legitimizing political ideologies and state-building aspirations.

At the core of this political instrumentalization lies a variety of interpretative traditions. Classical Islamic scholars have long recognized the political implications embedded within Qur'anic discourse. Thinkers such as Abu Nasr al-Farabi incorporated Qur'anic references within broader philosophical systems to present governance as a divinely inspired and intellectually sound pursuit (Taufik, 2021). Over time, this narrative evolved, responding to the changing needs of Muslim societies. In contemporary times, interpretations of key political values—such as justice, consultation, and human stewardship—are increasingly seen through the lens of democratization and pluralism. Mujamil and Wafa (2023) note that the principle of *shūrā* (consultative governance), rooted in the Qur'an, is often appropriated as a democratic ideal in modern constitutions like Indonesia's Pancasila. These developments show how classical doctrines have been reformulated to accommodate evolving political realities, underlining the Qur'an's flexible engagement with historical and modern governance structures.

However, this adaptive flexibility is not always embraced. A prominent critique leveled at traditional interpretations of Qur'anic political verses is their frequent reliance on literalist readings that ignore historical and social contexts. Such readings risk perpetuating authoritarianism and structural inequality. A striking example can be found in debates over women's political participation. Some traditionalists have argued that Qur'anic authority should be confined to male leadership, reinforcing patriarchal norms. However, voices like Ayatollah Jannaati have rejected this premise, calling for reinterpretations that affirm women's political rights based on holistic readings of the Qur'an (Goudarzi, 2025). Similarly, Islamic feminist scholars such as Constance (2023) critique classical tafsir that marginalizes women's roles, arguing instead for inclusive hermeneutics rooted in equity and shared responsibility. These critical perspectives emphasize the ethical limitations of static interpretations and call for reengagement with the Qur'an's social and moral dimensions. Reformist scholars, most notably Muhammad Abduh, have also advocated for a dynamic reading of scripture, asserting that classical interpretations, though historically grounded, may no longer suffice in addressing contemporary social and political challenges (Ahmad, 2023; Constance, 2023).

In response to these interpretive dilemmas, the work of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd offers a compelling alternative rooted in hermeneutic critique. Abu Zayd's thought centers on the inseparability of text and context—a principle he terms *al-qira'ah al-siyaqiyyah* (contextual reading). According to Abu Zayd, the Qur'an should not be viewed as a fixed linguistic product but as a dynamic discursive process shaped by the socio-political environment of its revelation and reception (Surahman, 2018). He distinguishes between *ma'na* (textual meaning) and *maghzā* (contemporary significance), arguing that interpretation must first uncover the meaning in its original historical context (*tārikhiyyat al-dalālah*), before applying it meaningfully in new settings (Mufid et al., 2023). This interpretive stance not only guards against anachronistic readings but also opens the Qur'anic discourse to ethically responsible engagements that remain relevant in modern political life.

Applying Abu Zayd's hermeneutics to Islamic political thought brings forth transformative implications. His framework dismantles the rigidity of conventional readings, allowing for a plurality of interpretations that can accommodate diversity and social change. This interpretive flexibility becomes especially valuable in addressing pressing concerns such as human rights, gender justice, and inclusive governance. For example, Abu Zayd's emphasis on dynamic meaning-making resonates with scholars like Akbar (2020) and Tamer (2011), who argue that hermeneutics enables Islamic thought to evolve alongside democratic values. This aligns with broader trends in Islamic reformist circles that seek to bridge the gap between classical jurisprudence and contemporary ethical imperatives. By fostering a culture of interpretive renewal, Abu Zayd's approach reinvigorates Islamic political discourse, making it more attuned to the complexities of the modern world.

Despite its intellectual richness, contextual hermeneutics remains underutilized in mainstream Islamic scholarship, especially concerning political verses. Much of the current research still centers on classical commentaries, with limited engagement in applying contemporary political theories to Qur'anic interpretation. López-Farjeat (2024) observes that this gap reflects a broader resistance to modernist methodologies in religious studies, which is compounded by institutional conservatism and the politicization of religious discourse. Additionally, while some scholarship has acknowledged the relevance of context in Qur'anic interpretation, many fail to address the systemic issues—such as patriarchy, authoritarianism, and epistemic exclusivity—that demand more robust, contextual readings (Falyouna, 2020). Abu Zayd's hermeneutics offer a pathway to respond to these issues, yet few empirical studies have operationalized his approach in concrete political settings. As Akbar (2020) notes, the lack of real-world application limits the transformative potential of hermeneutical theory, making it an urgent task for researchers to translate these insights into actionable frameworks for governance and legal reform.

This study seeks to address that gap by offering a contextual interpretation of selected political verses in the Qur'an using Abu Zayd's hermeneutical methodology. The verses selected for analysis—QS. al-Nisā' [4]:59, QS. al-Shūrā [42]:38, QS. al-Baqarah [2]:30, and QS. al-Mā'idah [5]:44—are frequently invoked in debates surrounding Islamic governance, law, and political authority. By analyzing these verses through Abu Zayd's interpretive lens, the study aims to uncover ethical and inclusive meanings that challenge literalist, politically expedient readings. In doing so, this paper contributes to the growing field of Islamic political hermeneutics by demonstrating how critical, contextual interpretation can safeguard scripture from authoritarian misuse while offering viable alternatives for ethical statecraft. The novelty of this approach lies in integrating Abu Zayd's theoretical framework with a systematic analysis of verses commonly used in political discourse, thereby producing a dialogical reading between divine text and human realities.

This research argues that the Qur'an, when read through the lens of contextual hermeneutics, can serve as a source of inclusive political ethics rather than an instrument of religious absolutism. Abu Zayd's methodology not only preserves the integrity of revelation but also enhances its relevance in contemporary governance. By reframing political verses through historical and ethical inquiry, the study hopes to foster a richer engagement with scripture—one that is both faithful to tradition and responsive to the moral imperatives of the modern age.

## METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach rooted in critical hermeneutic discourse analysis, particularly within the context of Islamic studies. The fundamental basis of this methodology is the recognition that religious texts are not inert or fixed entities but dynamic discourses shaped by and responsive to historical, cultural, and political forces. As such, interpretation becomes an inherently dialogical process in which the meaning of a text emerges not solely from its literal content but through interaction between the reader and the surrounding context.

Critical hermeneutics, informed by theorists such as Hans-Georg Gadamer, holds that the act of interpretation is always mediated by the historical consciousness and situatedness of the interpreter. This framework acknowledges the fusion of horizons between text and reader, where each reading is conditioned by ideological structures, preunderstandings, and socio-political influences (Soedrajad & Tohir, 2022; Gusmian & Abdullah, 2023). The method does not seek to dismiss traditional interpretations but to critically examine them through the lens of power, language, and history. In doing so, it exposes the latent assumptions and ideological undercurrents that may have informed certain exegetical traditions, especially those deployed to reinforce hegemonic religious or political authority.

In this research, the critical hermeneutic methodology is operationalized through the lens of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's approach to Qur'anic interpretation. Abu Zayd's framework offers a robust structure that recognizes the Qur'an as both a linguistic and historical product. He insists on a reading of the Qur'an that begins by acknowledging its embeddedness within the specific socio-historical conditions of seventh-century Arabia. Central to Abu Zayd's approach is the differentiation between *al-naṣṣ* (the text), *al-ma'nā* (the semantic content), and *al-maghzā* (the contextual significance), which together facilitate a layered understanding of the Qur'anic discourse that resists reduction to a single, timeless interpretation (Soedrajad & Tohir, 2022).

This method begins with identifying the historical circumstances and situational context (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) of the political verses under study. Establishing this contextual foundation is crucial for uncovering the original intention or communicative act embedded within the verse (Dozan & Basir, 2020). Following this, a structural and linguistic analysis is conducted to identify semantic patterns, metaphors, and syntactic elements that may carry ideological implications. For instance, Abu Zayd critiques the literalist interpretation of verses on polygamy and argues that these must be understood as responsive to specific social realities of the time, which, when recontextualized today, might support a moral and ethical preference toward monogamy (Dozan & Basir, 2020). Such an approach reinforces the principle that ethical ideals of justice and equality remain paramount and must guide contemporary interpretation.

Applying this methodology to political verses involves not only a philological and historical reading but also a reflection on the function of such verses in present-day discourses around governance, law, and authority. The verses analyzed in this study—QS. al-Nisā' [4]:59, QS. al-Shūrā [42]:38, QS. al-Baqarah [2]:30, and QS. al-Mā'idah [5]:44—are strategically selected due to their recurring use in legitimizing theocratic or authoritarian structures in Muslim-majority societies. Each verse is scrutinized within its original context and then reinterpreted using Abu Zayd's principles to evaluate its significance in contemporary political thought.

Despite the methodological clarity offered by critical hermeneutics, significant challenges remain in the broader field of Qur'anic studies, especially concerning political discourse. One of the major gaps identified is the lack of engagement with modern political developments that demand updated interpretive frameworks. Anas (2024) and Irawan (2020) both highlight the dominance of classical jurisprudential interpretations that often disregard the epistemological evolution occurring in modern Islamic societies. This gap underscores the pressing need for studies like this one that explore how Qur'anic exegesis can adapt to and inform present-day socio-political realities.

Moreover, the socio-political implications of Abu Zayd's hermeneutical approach remain insufficiently explored, especially concerning issues such as gender, minority rights, and civic participation. While there has been growing interest in gender-inclusive interpretations of the Qur'an, the political ramifications of such interpretations have not been adequately theorized or empirically assessed (Naupal, 2019). For example, it remains unclear how inclusive readings affect policy decisions, public law, or the everyday political agency of Muslim women and marginalized groups. There is also a paucity of field-based studies that examine how hermeneutic principles are implemented in actual political or legal reforms. Akbar (2020) and Muttaqin (2021) both note this disconnect between theoretical developments in Islamic hermeneutics and their real-world applications.

Therefore, this study not only applies Abu Zayd's methodology to classical texts but also seeks to engage critically with their implications for contemporary Islamic political thought. By re-reading political verses through a contextual and historically grounded lens, the research aims to offer an interpretive framework that is ethically responsive and epistemologically robust. Such an approach not only critiques the misappropriation of religious texts for political control but also opens pathways for reimagining governance structures in ways that are rooted in Islamic principles yet aligned with universal values of justice and equality.

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

### Verse on Authority – QS. al-Nisā' [4]:59

The verse QS. al-Nisā' [4]:59 — “*O you who believe! Obey Allah, and obey the Messenger, and those in authority among you*” — has long served as a foundational text in the legitimization of political and religious authority in Islam. Classical exegeses, particularly those by al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr, interpret *ulī al-amr* (those in authority) as a reference to rulers, scholars, or commanders who are appointed or divinely guided to govern the community. Al-Ṭabarī posits that obedience to these figures is not only necessary but divinely mandated, a position that emphasizes social cohesion through compliance with religiously endorsed leadership. Ibn Kathīr further strengthens this view by equating disobedience to rulers with a form of disobedience to God and His Messenger, reinforcing a paradigm of centralized authority and unqualified loyalty (Mufid et al., 2023; Saptono et al., 2023).

These interpretations developed in historical contexts that prioritized stability and unity, especially under caliphal rule. The early Muslim community, particularly during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, used QS. 4:59 to frame political obedience as religious obligation. Rulers cited the verse to assert divine legitimacy, equating loyalty to the caliphate with religious piety and insubordination with moral deviance (Muchlis, 2017). The effect was the establishment of a political theology that fused religious obedience with political submission, suppressing dissent under the guise of maintaining communal order.

However, these classical views have come under increasing scrutiny by contemporary scholars, most notably Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. In his seminal work *Naqd al-Khitāb al-Dīnī*, Abu Zayd deconstructs the theological absolutism embedded in traditional interpretations of *ulī al-amr*. He critiques the simplistic conflation of authority and obedience, arguing that obedience in Islam must be morally earned, not blindly granted. Authority, in this framework, is not sacrosanct; it is conditional, functional, and always subject to ethical accountability. Abu Zayd emphasizes that obedience (*tā'ah*) must be contingent upon justice and communal welfare, not merely institutional or religious hierarchy (Abu Zayd, 1994, pp. 51, 74; Камаев, 2019).

Abu Zayd's hermeneutic model urges interpreters to situate the verse within the socio-political context of its revelation. The verse was revealed in Medina during a time when the early Muslim community faced internal dissent and external threats. Leadership structures were evolving, and cohesion was essential for survival. As Moch (2022) explains, the directive for obedience was as much a pragmatic call for stability in a fragile political environment as it was a theological statement. Thus, read contextually, QS. 4:59 is less about institutional hierarchy and more about maintaining justice and order during societal transition.

Contemporary reformist scholars extend this argument by connecting obedience with ethical performance. Muchlis (2017) and Fuadi (2024) assert that Islamic authority must reflect the values of equity and justice, suggesting that obedience is invalidated when leadership becomes oppressive. This resonates with Abu Zayd's view that Qur'anic authority is ethical, not autocratic. It legitimizes dissent when rulers violate divine principles of justice. In his analysis, Abu Zayd writes: "A text must be interpreted with attention to the temporal conditions of its revelation and the shifting meanings it may take in different social structures" (Abu Zayd, 1994). Such a statement reinforces the necessity of dynamic interpretation grounded in context and ethics.

A significant point of comparison emerges between Abu Zayd and Khaled Abou El Fadl. While both advocate for justice-based legitimacy, their methodologies differ. Abu Zayd foregrounds hermeneutics and the role of historical context in shaping textual meaning, while Abou El Fadl emphasizes legal theory and moral authority through *ijtihād* (Abou El Fadl, 2001, 2014). Both scholars reject authoritarian readings of the verse but frame their critiques differently: Abu Zayd through textual-historical analysis, and Abou El Fadl through a jurisprudential lens of ethical governance (Fuadi, 2024; Jong & Ebrahimzadeh, 2024). Their combined perspectives offer a robust critique of traditionalist rigidity and a shared call for moral accountability in leadership.

Modern political movements continue to invoke QS. 4:59 in diverse ways. While some Islamist groups still use the verse to demand obedience to religious leaders, newer interpretations increasingly emphasize conditional authority, participatory governance, and ethical standards. This shift aligns with Abu Zayd's view that Qur'anic guidance should be approached as a living discourse, responsive to evolving political and social contexts. Abu Zayd's approach opens pathways for pluralistic political theory that is rooted in the Qur'anic tradition yet committed to democratic engagement and communal welfare (Akbar & Saeed, 2022; Akbar, 2020).

Abu Zayd's contextual reading of QS. 4:59 disrupts the traditional conflation of religious legitimacy and political power. It transforms the verse into a dynamic principle of ethical governance, where obedience is justified only when authority is exercised justly and transparently. This approach reframes Islamic political thought as a space for justice-driven accountability, ethical pluralism, and meaningful civic participation—values increasingly crucial in the governance of contemporary Muslim societies.

### **Analysis of Contextual Meaning (*Siyāq*) Vicegerency and Ethical Responsibility – QS. al-Baqarah [2]:30**

The concept of *khalīfah* (vicegerent or steward), drawn from QS. al-Baqarah [2]:30, forms a foundational pillar in Islamic political philosophy. The verse recounts God's proclamation to the angels: “Indeed, I will place upon the earth a *khalīfah*”, which has traditionally been interpreted as a divine appointment of humanity to a position of moral and functional leadership. Classical scholars often emphasized this role as a symbol of dignity and preeminence, granting human beings the authority to lead, rule, and judge on Earth. However, the richness of this concept extends far beyond political authority—it implies a deep ethical responsibility toward justice, balance, and stewardship over creation (Johnderose, 2024; Basri et al., 2024; Zuhdi et al., 2024).

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's hermeneutic approach reshapes the interpretation of *khalīfah* by situating it within a moral-ethical framework rather than a juridico-political one. In *Naqd al-Khiṭāb al-Dīnī*, Abu Zayd critiques traditional readings that overemphasize human domination over nature and other beings. He argues that *khalīfah* is best understood not as sovereign power but as a relational responsibility anchored in trust (*amānah*) and ethical restraint. Humanity's vicegerency, in this view, is not about control but about care—humans are not rulers *over* creation, but trustees *within* it (Abu Zayd, 1994).

This ethical reading is affirmed and expanded in contemporary scholarship, which increasingly aligns the concept of *khalīfah* with environmental ethics and social justice. Scholars emphasize that the Qur'anic call to stewardship includes three interlinked ethical dimensions: *khilāfah* (stewardship), *mīzān* (balance), and *amānah* (trust). These values reflect a theology of responsibility in which human beings must manage resources with sustainability and equity, ensuring harmony not only among themselves but also with the natural world (Basri et al., 2024; Zuhdi et al., 2024). *Khalīfah*, in this context, becomes a profound expression of justice—toward God, humanity, and the environment.

Abu Zayd's hermeneutics call for this layered understanding. He urges a reading of QS. 2:30 that engages both the linguistic structure and socio-historical context of the verse. His critique of literalist interpretations challenges views that treat humans as absolute rulers and instead advocates for a theology grounded in mutual responsibility. This reorientation transforms *khalīfah* from a static political title into an ethical mandate that evolves with changing human and ecological realities. As environmental degradation, climate change, and systemic inequality intensify in the modern world, Abu Zayd's interpretive lens equips Muslims to see *vicegerency* as an urgent moral imperative.

This evolving understanding has concrete applications. Recent literature emphasizes that acknowledging humanity's stewardship role should shape public policy, environmental legislation, and personal behavior. For instance, Ali & Agushi (2024) argue that Islamic ecological ethics can guide Muslim-majority nations in forming policies aligned with sustainability and biodiversity preservation. Similarly, Jaiyeoba et al. (2024) propose the integration of *khalīfah*-based ethics in educational curricula to foster generational responsibility toward society and nature. These developments demonstrate that Qur'anic ethics are not confined to abstract theology but can actively shape public life.

Furthermore, *khalīfah* has emerged as a critical concept in Islamic discourse on global citizenship. Elbanna & Syukur (2025) observe that contemporary interpretations frame stewardship as not only an internal Islamic principle but also a foundation for global cooperation. Muslims are called to participate in international efforts for ecological and social well-being, bringing with them a Qur'anic ethos of balance, accountability, and justice. Such

interpretations showcase the universal relevance of *khalifah* and its ability to bridge faith-based commitments with shared human values.

### **Collective Decision-Making – QS. al-Shūrā [42]:38**

The Qur'anic principle of *shūrā* (consultation), referenced in QS. al-Shūrā [42]:38—“*and those whose affairs are [determined] by consultation among themselves*”—represents one of the most ethically rich concepts in Islamic political thought. From its early application in the Prophet Muhammad's governance to its contemporary reinterpretations, *shūrā* embodies the Islamic vision of inclusive, just, and participatory decision-making. During the Prophet's time, consultation was not ceremonial but practical; it included decisions related to military strategy, diplomacy, and community disputes. His engagement with the companions in difficult moments—such as at the Battle of Uhud and during the appointment of Abu Bakr as the first caliph—illustrates an early form of deliberative governance rooted in trust and ethical responsibility (Ramzar, 2025; Soage, 2014).

However, as Islamic rule transitioned into dynastic systems under the Umayyads and Abbasids, the participatory essence of *shūrā* diminished. The practice was retained in rhetoric but increasingly used to justify decisions made unilaterally by caliphs, rather than as a genuine mechanism of public consultation. Though some rulers preserved symbolic advisory councils, political authority largely became centralized, sidelining collective input from the broader community (Ali, 2018; Fananie & Mulyana, 2021). The historical evolution of *shūrā* thus reflects a broader tension in Islamic political history—between prophetic ideals of shared responsibility and post-prophetic tendencies toward absolutism.

Although Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd does not directly comment on QS. 42:38 or the concept of *shūrā*, his hermeneutical framework—particularly in *Mafhūm al-Naṣṣ* and *Naqd al-Khiṭāb al-Dīnī*—supports a value-based reading of governance principles. From his emphasis on justice, historical context, and ethical accountability, one can infer that *shūrā*, when read through his methodology, should be understood not merely as a procedural tool but as a moral obligation grounded in justice, mutual responsibility, and participatory leadership (Abu Zayd, 1990; 1995; Omar, 2020; Parray, 2023).

This framework aligns with and is further advanced by contemporary scholars such as Rachid Ghannouchi, who similarly conceptualizes *shūrā* as a cornerstone of Islamic democracy. Ghannouchi integrates *shūrā* with modern political pluralism, insisting that true Islamic governance must allow for political diversity, dissent, and public deliberation. For Ghannouchi, *shūrā* is indispensable not only to ethical governance but also to the institutionalization of democratic ideals within Islamic systems (Ghannouchi & March, 2023). Both thinkers thus converge in advocating for the revitalization of *shūrā* as a participatory principle grounded in justice and moral legitimacy, rejecting any interpretation that enables authoritarianism under religious pretense.

Abu Zayd's contextual hermeneutics underscore that the Qur'anic articulation of *shūrā* was not abstract; it emerged from concrete socio-political realities of Medina, where pluralism, tribal negotiation, and consensus were essential for survival and unity. He argues that a return to this dynamic reading can serve contemporary Muslim societies well—especially those grappling with authoritarianism, sectarianism, or postcolonial governance challenges. His view encourages Muslims to interpret *shūrā* not as frozen precedent, but as a living ethical norm, adaptable to evolving political and social needs (Abu Zayd, 1994).



Modern constitutional frameworks in Muslim-majority countries reflect varying degrees of engagement with the idea of *shūrā*. Countries like Tunisia and Egypt have incorporated it into their constitutions or legal discourse to signal their alignment with Islamic principles and democratic aspirations. However, the practical application of these provisions often depends on political will and civil society engagement (HK, 2022; Almohamadawe, 2023). Where *shūrā* is reduced to formality, its transformative potential is lost. Where it is tied to accountability and inclusivity, it strengthens democratic culture from within an Islamic ethical frame.

Furthermore, *shūrā* has become increasingly important within Islamic feminist and postcolonial political theory. Muslim feminist scholars argue that the Qur'anic imperative of consultation demands the full inclusion of women in decision-making processes. By rooting their critique in *shūrā*, these scholars push against patriarchal interpretations and institutions that marginalize female agency. At the same time, postcolonial theorists invoke *shūrā* as a counter-hegemonic discourse, advocating for plural authority, community-centered governance, and decolonized political ethics (HK, 2021; Alisakun, 2020). Both strands of thought demonstrate how *shūrā* can serve as a platform for ethical reformation across intersecting dimensions of gender, power, and legitimacy.

QS. al-Shūrā [42]:38, as interpreted through Abu Zayd's hermeneutics, transcends proceduralism and becomes a moral grammar for participatory governance. It situates the act of consultation not as optional advice but as a duty of justice and an obligation to empower communities. Abu Zayd's reading revives *shūrā* as a Qur'anic ethic that affirms inclusivity, encourages accountability, and dignifies the act of shared decision-making—making it essential not only to Islamic political revival but also to broader global democratic discourses.

### **Divine Law and Human Interpretation – QS. al-Mā'idah [5]:44**

QS. al-Mā'idah [5]:44 states: “*And whoever does not judge by what Allah has revealed—then it is those who are the disbelievers.*” Traditionally, this verse has been read as a strong affirmation of the supremacy of divine law over human legislation. Classical jurists often interpreted it as a theological warning: those who disregard divine commands are committing *kufr* (disbelief), *fisq* (transgression), or *zulm* (injustice), depending on the nature and intent of their deviation. This gradation of moral and legal infraction reflects classical legal reasoning that aimed to distinguish between outright denial, moral failure, and structural injustice, thereby creating a spectrum of accountability (Massoud & Moore, 2020; Maram et al., 2024).

However, such interpretations have often been deployed to assert rigid views of Islamic governance, equating political authority and legal legitimacy with unqualified application of *sharī'ah*. Many classical scholars argued that divine revelation should wholly shape legal systems in Muslim societies, viewing any deviation from Qur'anic injunctions as both illegitimate and sinful. This framework was later co-opted by religious movements and political regimes seeking to ground their authority in theological absolutism. It contributed to a perception that *sharī'ah* is a fixed code to be enforced rather than a moral framework to be interpreted and adapted (Maram, nd).

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd offers a sharply different reading. In *Naqd al-Khiṭāb al-Dīnī*, he critiques the static and literal application of legal verses by emphasizing that revelation must be understood through its historical context. Central to his approach is the concept of *tārīkhiyyat al-dalālah* (the historicity of meaning), which posits that the meanings of Qur'anic texts are not fixed, but emerge through dynamic interaction between text and context. Abu Zayd asserts that the legal verses of the Qur'an, including QS. 5:44, were revealed in response

to particular conditions in seventh-century Arabia and must be reinterpreted in light of contemporary social and moral realities. For him, revelation is not merely a body of immutable law, but a source of ethical guidance that must continually speak to human dignity and justice in new contexts (Abu Zayd, 1994).

This framework allows for a values-based approach to *sharī'ah*, prioritizing ethical outcomes over formalistic compliance. Abu Zayd cautions that conflating divine revelation with fixed jurisprudence risks transforming a living religious tradition into a stagnant legal code. Instead, he urges scholars and jurists to re-engage the Qur'an with tools of hermeneutic inquiry, emphasizing its overarching goals: justice, compassion, and the preservation of human welfare (Hakim & Munawir, 2023).

Scholars like Mohammad Hashas and Abdullah Saeed extend this line of thought. Hashas advocates for harmonizing Islamic principles with universal human rights, arguing that the ethical foundations of Islam—justice (*'adl*), dignity (*karāmah*), and compassion (*rahmah*)—must inform any interpretation of Islamic law. Similarly, Saeed promotes a humanist interpretation of *sharī'ah* that foregrounds public interest (*maṣlaḥah*) and moral responsibility over dogmatic legalism. Both scholars propose frameworks where Islamic jurisprudence is not abandoned, but recalibrated to better serve ethical governance and pluralist societies (Massoud & Moore, 2020).

Abu Zayd's emphasis on historical consciousness challenges the dichotomy between divine and secular law. He rejects the notion that fidelity to revelation requires a theocratic legal system. Rather, he envisions a society where religious ethics inspire public morality without monopolizing legislation. In this model, justice becomes the central criterion for legitimacy, not textual literalism. Thus, judging by "what Allah has revealed" means upholding divine values—equity, mercy, and dignity—not enforcing rigid codes detached from context.

This debate resonates deeply in contemporary Islamic legal theory, particularly in relation to governance. Traditionalists often resist the separation of religion from state law, fearing moral relativism. Reformists, on the other hand, including Abu Zayd, argue that distinguishing religious ethics from legislative compulsion is essential for cultivating inclusive, democratic societies. For them, *sharī'ah* serves not as a penal system, but as a set of guiding principles for justice and human flourishing.

These tensions are visible in various Muslim-majority countries where constitutional references to Islamic law coexist with civil legal systems. The challenge lies in moving beyond symbolic invocations of *sharī'ah* toward genuine engagement with its ethical substance. As Abu Zayd's methodology suggests, this requires rethinking Islamic authority not as the rigid application of ancient rules, but as an ongoing process of moral deliberation, sensitive to changing historical and cultural landscapes.

QS. al-Mā'idah [5]:44, when interpreted through the lens of Abu Zayd's contextual hermeneutics, ceases to be a mandate for legal absolutism and becomes an appeal for ethical integrity. It affirms that judging by what God has revealed involves more than textual literalism—it requires a commitment to justice, a recognition of historical change, and a willingness to engage in critical reflection. This reading upholds the Qur'an's relevance in the modern world, not by freezing its legal verses in time, but by reviving their moral pulse for each new generation.

## CONCLUSION

This study re-examines four politically significant Qur'anic verses—QS. al-Nisā' [4]:59, QS. al-Baqarah [2]:30, QS. al-Shūrā [42]:38, and QS. al-Mā'idah [5]:44—using Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's contextual hermeneutics to uncover their ethical and political dimensions. Through this framework, the Qur'an is interpreted not as a rigid legal code but as a dynamic discourse responsive to historical change and moral reasoning. Abu Zayd's principle of *tārīkhiyyat al-dalālah* highlights the historical situatedness of meaning, allowing legal and political verses to be revisited through the lens of justice, inclusivity, and accountability.

The findings reveal that traditional interpretations often reduce the Qur'an to instruments of political legitimation, endorsing authoritarian or patriarchal structures. In contrast, contextual hermeneutics recast these verses as calls to ethical leadership, participatory governance, stewardship, and a justice-centered conception of law. Authority (QS. 4:59) is no longer absolute but conditional upon justice. Vicegerency (QS. 2:30) becomes moral stewardship. Consultation (QS. 42:38) is revived as inclusive governance. Divine law (QS. 5:44) is reframed as ethical guidance rather than juridical imposition.

This study contributes to Islamic political thought by demonstrating how Abu Zayd's hermeneutics provide a viable interpretive framework that reconciles Qur'anic authority with democratic and pluralistic values. It also challenges the dichotomy between tradition and reform by showing that ethical reinterpretation is not a deviation from revelation but a return to its moral core. In an era marked by ideological polarization and political misuse of religious texts, this approach offers a compelling alternative—one rooted in the Qur'an, yet open to dialogue with modern conceptions of justice, human dignity, and accountability.

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