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Political Tafsir and the Construction of Governance Discourse: Qur'anic Hermeneutics in Raja Ali Haji's *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah*

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Abstract: Qur'anic interpretation is inseparable from the historical, intellectual, and socio-political contexts of its interpreter. In the nineteenth-century Malay world, the Qur'an functioned not only as a religious text but also as a source of legitimacy for political authority, legal institutions, and systems of governance. Yet the role of Qur'anic interpretation in shaping Malay political thought remains underexplored. This article examines Raja Ali Haji's *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah* to analyse its interpretive method, epistemological foundations, and forms of Qur'anic reception within the Riau-Lingga Sultanate. This qualitative library-based study employs Qur'anic reception theory and social construction theory within a Critical Discourse Analysis framework. The findings indicate that Raja Ali Haji adopted a predominantly *tahlili* approach grounded in *ra'y* (reasoned interpretation), characterised by a socio-literary orientation and sensitivity to local political realities. His interpretations were shaped by three interrelated influences: his experience as a royal adviser, a religious worldview informed by the *Khalidiyyah-Naqshbandiyyah* Sufi tradition, and engagement with al-Ghazali's *Nasihat al-Muluk*. These influences enabled him to formulate a Qur'an-based vision of governance that integrated political authority, legal order, and ethical leadership. The study further demonstrates that Qur'anic reception in *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah* is predominantly performative-functional. Qur'anic verses are employed as normative foundations for political, legal, and statecraft discourses while simultaneously informing regulations and socio-political practices. By showing how scriptural interpretation was transformed into mechanisms of governance, this article highlights the Qur'an's role as a source of knowledge production, political legitimacy, and social transformation in the nineteenth-century Malay world. The findings contribute to broader discussions on the relationship between scripture, authority, and political culture in Islamic societies.

Keywords: Raja Ali Haji; *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah*; Political Tafsir; Malay Sultanate; Islamic Political Thought

Abstrak: Penafsiran al-Qur'an berkaitan erat dengan konteks sosial, budaya, politik dan intelektual yang melingkupi seorang mufasir. Karya-karya tafsir memperlihatkan bahwa pemaknaan al-Qur'an senantiasa dipengaruhi oleh subjektivitas mufasir sekaligus orientasi tertentu yang berkontribusi dalam pembentukan wacana sosial-politik. Fenomena tersebut juga tampak dalam tradisi intelektual Melayu, khususnya di Kesultanan Riau-Lingga abad ke-19M, ketika al-Qur'an digunakan sebagai landasan legitimasi politik, hukum dan ketatanegaraan. Riset ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi model pemaknaan al-Qur'an Raja Ali Haji dalam *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah*, menganalisis konstruksi epistemologis pemaknaannya dan menelaah resepsi al-Qur'an dalam naskah tersebut. Riset ini menggunakan metode kualitatif berbasis studi kepustakaan dengan teori resepsi al-Qur'an dan konstruksi sosial sebagai pisau analisis didukung dengan paradigma Analisis Wacana Kritis. Hasil riset mengungkapkan bahwa Raja Ali Haji menerapkan metode tahlili dalam penafsiran teks al-Qur'an dengan bersumber pada *ra'y*, bercorak adabi ijtima'i dan menggunakan pendekatan kontekstual. Penafsiran tersebut terkonstruksi melalui dinamika politik Kesultanan Riau-Lingga, epistemologi paham keagamaan yang dipengaruhi tradisi tasawuf Naqshabandiyah Khalidiyah dan adanya intertekstualitas dengan *Nasihat al-Muluk* karya al-Ghazali. Resepsi al-Qur'an dalam *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah* tergolong ke dalam bentuk resepsi performatif-fungsional yang memosisikan al-Qur'an sebagai legitimasi normatif bagi berbagai wacana dalam aspek politik, hukum dan ketatanegaraan sekaligus mentransformasikannya ke dalam regulasi serta praktik sosial-politik. Riset ini berkontribusi pada pengembangan studi tafsir di dunia melayu abad ke 19M dengan menunjukkan bagaimana teks al-Qur'an dalam *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah* dihadirkan sebagai sumber pengetahuan, mengkonstruksi wacana politik-keagamaan, meneguhkan legitimasi kekuasaan serta merefleksikan relasi antara teks, penafsir dan dinamika sosial-politik yang melingkupinya.

Kata Kunci: Raja Ali Haji; *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah*; Tafsir Politik; Kesultanan Melayu; Pemikiran Politik Islam

INTRODUCTION

The interpretation of the Qur'an is profoundly shaped by the cultural context, subjectivity, socio-cultural environment, and the intellectual and political dynamics surrounding any interpreters (Al-Jahsh, 2023). Contemporary exegetes adopt methodological approaches that are equally conditioned by ideological conditions and specific social realities (Farouki, 2006). Various ideologies play a constitutive role in shaping interpretation, and the interpreter's *worldview* is powerfully reflected in the character of their exegesis—whether it takes the form of reformism, Sufism, or fundamentalism. In this sense, tafsir is at once an act of intellectual activity and a medium through which ideological and social dispositions find expression (Ayoub, 1984). Moreover, theological schools of have exerted a significant influence on the dynamics of interpretation, as evidenced by the dominance of the *Mu'tazilite* tradition during the Abbasid dynasty, which gave rise to a distinctive exegetical tradition of that era (Crone, 2008). In the modern era, the interaction between tafsir and secular nationalism, Islamism (Albayrak & Coruh, 2023), feminism, and modernity has further enriched the landscape of contemporary Qur'anic interpretation (Khan, 2019). All of this affirms that tafsir represents a complex web of relationships among text, ideology, and socio-political structures (Pink, 2010), while simultaneously reflecting the cultural subjectivity of the interpreter, which in turn shapes religious discourse within society (Rahman, 1982).

A number of previous studies have examined *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah* from a range of scholarly perspectives. Mahdini, in a study entitled *Konsep Raja dan Kerajaan dalam Kitab Tsamarat al-Muhimmah Karya Raja Ali Haji (Analisis Intertekstualitas)*, uncovered the socio-cultural context that shaped Raja Ali Haji's ideas and traced the intertextual connections between his work and earlier writings (Mahdini, 2002). Another study by Aris Bintania et al., titled *Judicial System in the Islamic Judicial Heritage in the Malay World (the Study of Tsamarat al-Muhimmah, Written by Raja Ali Haji)*, examined the judicial proceedings (*fiqh al-qadha*) dimensions embedded in the Malay judicial system (Bintania et al., 2024). Arba'iyah binti Mohd Noor, in her study *Literary and Intellectual Life in Nineteenth-Century Penyengat Island, Riau: the Works of Raja Ali Haji*, examined Raja Ali Haji's contributions to the development of the Malay intellectual tradition, literature, and historiography in the nineteenth century through a historical and historiographical approach (Noor, 2021). Meanwhile, Muhd Norizam Jamian et al., in *In Search of a Just Leader in Islamic Perspective: An Analysis of Traditional Malay Literature from the Perspective of Adab*, highlighted how traditional Malay literature functions as a vehicle for articulating concepts of just leadership from the perspective of Islamic notion of *adab*. (Jamian & Radzi, 2013) In addition, studies on political tafsir have generally focused on how exegetes critique social, political, and religious issues in Indonesia, including the patterns of interpretive construction and their broader implications as seen in Islah Gusmian et al.'s study *Criticism of Social, Political and Religious Problems in Indonesia: A Study on al-Iklil fi Ma'ani al-Tanzil by Misbah bin Zainil Mustafa (1917–1994)* (Gusmian & Abdullah, 2023). Political tafsir scholarship has also extended into the dimension of Sufi tafsir, as demonstrated by Mykhaylo Yakubovych in his work titled *Tafsir for the Crimean Khan and Ottoman Sultan: Politics and Religion in the Sufi Exegetical Legacy of Ibrahim al-Qirimi (d. 1593 CE)*, which examines the exegetical legacy of al-Qirimi and reveals the relationship between politics and religion in the context of the sixteenth-century Islamic imperial world (Yakubovych, 2026).

Based on the scholarship mentioned above, it can be seen that there is no existing study has situated *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah* within the context of Qur'anic reception in the nineteenth-century Malay world. This study therefore sets out to explore Raja Ali Haji's model of Qur'anic meaning-making in *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah*, to analyse the epistemological construction of his engagement with the Qur'an, and to examine how Qur'anic reception is expressed throughout the text. This research is of particular significance given that *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah* stands as a foundational record of the concept of governance and constitution that underpinned the Riau-Lingga Sultanate, a political order whose foundations were deeply rooted in Qur'anic values.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative library-based research design. The analysis is informed by two complementary theoretical frameworks. First, Qur'anic reception theory is used to examine how Qur'anic verses function as sources of legitimization for the political, legal, and governmental ideas articulated in *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah* (Rafiq, 2014). Second, Berger and Luckmann's theory of social construction provides a framework for understanding how these interpretations were produced, institutionalised, and internalised within the socio-political context of the Riau-Lingga Sultanate (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). The study is situated within a critical paradigm that treats texts as socially situated products shaped by particular ideological and historical conditions. Accordingly, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is employed to investigate the construction of political discourse and the relationship between Qur'anic interpretation, authority, and governance in Raja Ali Haji's work (Fairclough, 1992). Data were analysed through qualitative content analysis based on documentary and library sources.

The primary sources comprise *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah* by Raja Ali Haji, *Naṣīhat al-Mulūk* by Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī, and two Malay-Indonesian *tafsir* works: *Tarjumān al-Mustafid* by 'Abd al-Ra'ūf al-Singkili and *Marāḥ Labid* by Nawawi al-Bantani. These texts were selected because of their intellectual relevance, linguistic affinity, and socio-historical proximity to Raja Ali Haji's milieu. Secondary sources include scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles used to contextualise the findings and situate the analysis within broader debates on Qur'anic interpretation, Malay intellectual history, and Islamic political thought.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Raja Ali Haji and *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah*: A Biographical and Historical Overview

Raja Ali Haji's full name was 'Alī Ḥājī ibn Rājā Aḥmad ibn Rājā Ḥājī fī Sabīl Allāh. He was a Bugis-descended nobleman born in 1809 CE on Penyengat Island and raised within the court of the Johor-Riau Sultanate (Hashim, 1986). His father was Raja Ahmad and his mother Encik Hamidah, an aristocratic Malay couple whose lineage conferred upon him a distinguished position within the kingdom's intellectual and political tradition (Hamidy, 1983). His aristocratic status was encoded in the title *rāja*, which signified the assimilation of the Bugis and Malay elites (Junus, 2002). Raja Ali Haji was a prolific author, producing works such as *Gurindam Dua Belas* (Twelve Aphorisms), *Bustān al-Kātibīn* (Garden of Scribes), *Muqaddimah fī al-Intizām Wazā'if Ḥājj al-Mulūk* (Introduction to the Arrangement of Royal Duties), *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah*, *Kitab Pengetahuan Bahasa* (Book of Linguistic Knowledge), and *Tuhfat al-Nafīs* (The Precious Gift), among others. He passed away in 1873 CE on Penyengat Island and was interred in the cemetery complex of Engku Puteri Raja Hamidah (Dahlan, 2015).

Tsamarat al-Muhimmah was composed between 1857 and 1859 CE during the reign of Sultan Sulaiman II Badarul Alamsyah (r. 1857–1883 CE). In the *muqaddimah* (preface) of the Leiden edition, at page 3, lines 6–7, Raja Ali Haji explains the significance of the title and sets out the work's structural organisation:

Subsequently, this is a concise book that I have named *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah Diyāfah li al-Umarā' wa al-Kubarā' li al-Ahl al-Maḥkamah*—that is, important fruits presented as a feast for kings and great personages who hold authority in the courts of justice. I have arranged it in one *muqaddimah*, three *bābs* (chapters), several *faṣls* (sections) therein, and one *khātimah* (conclusion). (Yakni kemudian daripada itu, maka bahwa inilah satu kitab yang mukhtasar yang aku namai akan dia *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah Diyafah li al-Umara wa al-Kubara li al-Ahli al-Mahkamah*, yakni buah-buahan yang dicita-cita hal keadaan jadi jamuan bagi raja-raja dan bagi orang besar-besar yang mempunyai pekerjaan di dalam tempat berhukum. Dan aku aturkan dia satu *muqaddimah* dan tiga bab di dalamnya beberapa pasal dan satu *khatimah*.) (Haji, 1886a)

Etymologically, the phrase *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah* constitutes an *idāfa* (genitive) construction derived from *tsamarah* (fruits/results) and *al-muhimmah* (the important). In semiotic terms, a phrase

carries both denotative and connotative dimensions (Barthes, 1991). Denotatively, *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah* signifies 'important fruits' or 'important outcomes,' while connotatively it refers to the significant ideas and purposes that Raja Ali Haji sought to realise through his writing. *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah* was composed in Malay in Jawi script and published in five editions: Jakarta, Penyengat, Pekanbaru, Leiden, and Kuala Lumpur. Of these, only the Jakarta, Leiden, and Penyengat editions remain accessible today. The Jakarta edition was printed in 1859 CE, comprising 123 pages with 17 lines per page, and is housed at the National Library of the Republic of Indonesia; the Leiden edition was printed in 1886 CE, comprising 79 pages with 17–20 lines per page, and is preserved at Leiden University, the Netherlands (Mahdini, 2002); and the Penyengat edition is held on Penyengat Island in Tanjungpinang (Junus, 2002).

The composition of *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah* is closely connected to the socio-political dynamics of the Riau-Lingga Sultanate following the deposition of Sultan Mahmud IV in 1857 CE, which triggered a rebellion in the Ratah region (Andaya & Matheson, 1979). The work represents Raja Ali Haji's intellectual reaction to the political circumstances of his time. In terms of religious content, the text reflects the depth of its author's command of the Qur'an, Islamic scholarship, Arabic language, and Malay literary tradition (Sulong & Che Pa, 2012). The text served as an ethical guide for rulers in implementing religious teachings and establishing a pious social order, while also realising the Islamic concept of leadership within the Malay system of governance (Noor, 2021).

Raja Ali Haji's Model of Qur'anic Interpretation in *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah*

The interpretive framework embedded in *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah* warrants closer examination through the lens of exegetical methodology, as such an inquiry helps illuminate the hermeneutical logic that underlies the text. Although the text does not formally belong to the *tafsir* tradition, the Qur'anic meanings embedded within it can be explored to uncover the intellectual and historical forces that shaped their articulation, given that every act of textual engagement reflects the author's situated horizon of understanding (Gadamer, 1989). In his treatment of Qur'anic passage, Raja Ali Haji adopts a simplified form of the *tahliili* method, without undertaking a full analytical treatment of every aspect of a given verse such as vocabulary (*mufradāt*), occasions of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), or inter-verse coherence (*munāsabah*). Instead, he selectively elaborates on verses and deploy them to substantiate his own arguments, while still remaining anchored in their textual implications. In its classical formulation, the *tahliili* approach seeks to unpack every dimension of a verse in a systematic and exhaustive manner (Al-Farmawi, 1977). In term of interpretative sources, his exegesis is mainly rooted in *ra'yī* reasoning, an interpretation constructed through the exegete's own rational deliberation (Al-Dhahabi, 2000). Furthermore, an *adabī ijtima'ī* orientation is discernible when he correlates the meanings of verses with socio-cultural realities (Al-Iyazi, 1966). Raja Ali Haji's interpretation also reflects a distinctly contextual approach, positioning the Qur'anic text in dialogue with the socio-political realities as well as socio-cultural dynamics of Malay society (Gusman, 2021). Through this approach, he seeks to preserve the ethical and legal vitality of the Qur'an, ensuring its continued relevance within the evolving social landscape of his time (Saeed, 2006).

With reference to the digital edition of *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah* downloaded from the Khastara portal of the National Library of the Republic of Indonesia (Perpustakaan Nasional RI, 2022), (Haji, 1886b) Raja Ali Haji typically begins his interpretation by advancing an argument and then legitimizing it with a verse, as is evident in his interpretation of Q.S. al-Nisa' [4]: 59. According to him, the appointment of a political leadership (*raja*) in Islam constitutes a collective obligation (*fardhu kifayah*) that may be realized through three mechanisms: first, through the process of *bay'a* (investiture) by the *ahl al-hall wa al-'aqd*. In that process, they declare the following statement:

"We, the *ahl al-hall wa al-'aqd*, having deliberated and reached consensus, hereby appoint so-and-so as our king over this realm and all its territories. The relationship between us and our king shall be governed in accordance with the magnificent Qur'anic verse — the Word of God the Most High in the Great Qur'an (*Kami semua ahlul halli wal 'aqdi kemudian daripada mufakat dan musyawarah yang telah sudah putus mentauliahkan fulan menjadi raja kami di dalam kerajaan*

negeri ini dengan segala takluk daerahnya dan berlakulah antara kami dengan raja kami mengikut seperti ayat Yang Mahamulia, Firman Allah Ta'ala di dalam Qur'an 'adzim:(Haji, 1886)

...أَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا الرَّسُولَ وَأُولِي الْأَمْرِ مِنْكُمْ...

"Obey God, obey the Messenger, and those in authority among you." (Q.S al-Nisā' [4]: 59)

The second mechanism is *istikhlāf* (designation of a successor), as described by Raja Ali Haji in the following passage:

Second, by means of *istikhlāf*—that is, when a king, during his own lifetime, designates a suitable successor through a process of deliberation (*musyawarah*) conducted with the consent of all parties, as was carried out by the Companions of the Prophet (peace be upon him). The just caliph Sayyidina Umar (may God be pleased with him), during his own lifetime, deliberated with a number of Companions to appoint his successor after his death—consulting six senior Companions of the Messenger of God, namely Sayyidina Utsman bin Affan, Sayyidina Ali bin Abi Talib, Sayyidina Zubayr, Sayyidina Abd al-Rahman bin Awf, Sayyidina Sa'd bin Abi Waqqas, and Sayyidina Talha (may God be pleased with them all)—whereupon they selected Sayyidina Utsman bin Affan. (Kedua, dengan sebab *istikhlāf* yakni menjadikan satu raja akan gantinya masa hidupnya pada yang patut menjadi raja, kemudian daripada pekerjaan *musyawarah* dengan ridha segala mereka itu seperti yang telah diperbuat oleh segala sahabat Nabi kita Salallahu Alaihi Wasallam, yaitu khalifatul 'adil Sayyidina Umar radiallah anhu pada masa hidupnya mufakat dan *musyawarah* dengan beberapa sahabat mendirikan gantinya kemudian daripada matinya, yaitu bermusyawarah dengan enam orang sahabat Rasulullah yang besar-besar, yaitu Sayyidina Utsman bin Affan dan Sayyidina Ali bin Abi Thalib dan Sayyidina Zubair dan Sayyidina Abdurrahman bin Auf dan Sayyidina Sa'ad bin Abi Waqqas dan Sayyidina Talhah radiallah anhu, maka memilih mereka itu akan Sayyidina Utsman bin Affan adanya. (Haji, 1886a)

The appointment of a king may also be carried out through another mechanism, as Raja Ali Haji states:

"Third, by means of *taghallub*—that is, by force. A man of sufficient strength who conquers a territory thereupon makes himself its king by his own power. (Ketiga, dengan sebab *taghallub* yakni dengan kekerasan. Seorang laki-laki yang mempunyai kuat mengalahkan satu negeri itu kemudian menjadilah ia raja dengan dirinya sendiri.) (Haji, 1886)

Based on the foregoing explanation, it is clear that Raja Ali Haji positions the verse as legitimation for his argument that the selection of a king may be proceed through three procedures: *bay'ah*, *istikhlāf*, and *taghallub*. Once a king has been duly appointed through a process of consultation, the *ahl al-ḥall wa al-'aqd* are obligated to obey and submit to him, following their obedience to God and His Messenger. This obedience is formally declared through an oath of loyalty sworn before of the king.

With referring to authoritative works of *tafsir*, *Tarjumān al-Mustafid* offers the following explanation of the verse: :

"O you who believe, have faith in God the Most High, and in the Messenger, and in those who hold authority over you from among yourselves—when they command you to obey God the Most High and His Messenger. If you disagree about a matter, refer it to the Book of God the Most High and to the Messenger during his lifetime, and to his *Ḥadīth* after his death, if you truly believe in God and the Last Day." (Al-Sinkilī, 1951)

A similar reading is expressed in the *Tafsir Marāḥ Labīd*, which states that this verse indicates the obligation of following the Qur'an and Sunnah. In this *tafsir*, *ulū al-amr* (those in authority) refers to the scholars among the *ahl al-ḥall wa al-'aqd*, trustworthy leaders, and just rulers, while an oppressive ruler does not fall within the category of *ulū al-amr* to whom obedience is obligatory. Should a disagreement arise regarding a matter whose ruling is not stipulated in the Qur'an, Sunnah,

or *ijmā'* (scholarly consensus), the matter is to be referred back to analogous cases, whether in terms of outward form or underlying character (Nawawi, 1897).

Both *tafsīr* works affirm that the verse addresses the obligation of obedience to God through the fulfilment of His commands, and that compliance with the Messenger constitutes a manifestation of complete faith. Obedience to those in authority is conditional, contingent upon the personal character and the nature of the policies they formulate. Such obedience becomes obligatory only when their directives are consistent with Qur'anic values and arise from independent collective decision-making.

The Epistemological Construction of Raja Ali Haji's Qur'anic Interpretation

Raja Ali Haji's interpretation is a product shaped by the interplay among text, thinker, and the historical context. The Qur'anic meanings in *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah* were constructed by the socio-political dynamics of its time, the religious epistemology of its author, and his engagement with the writings of al-Ghazali. The Malay Archipelago at the time was governed by the Riau-Lingga Sultanate, which had been under colonial influence since the Riau War (1782–1784 CE) (Hussin, 2012). The Dutch occupation began with the defeat of Raja Haji Fisabilillah, who led that conflict (Barnard, 1997). This event marked the beginning of a series of one-sided political contracts that curtailed the sovereignty of the Riau-Lingga Sultanate. As a result, resistance from various regions became inevitable, ranging from armed struggle to non-armed resistance through intellectual ideas and discourse, led by the '*ulamā'*' who served as the vanguard of a religiously and intellectually grounded opposition (Matheson, 1986).

The socio-political dynamics of the Riau-Lingga Sultanate positioned Raja Ali Haji as a royal advisor for more than forty years, from the period of Yang Dipertuan Muda VII Raja Abd al-Raḥmān (1831–1844 CE) to the period of Yang Dipertuan Muda X Raja Muhammad Yusuf (1858–1899 CE). He also held roles as judge (*hākim*), religious scholar ('*ālim*'), and man of letters (Sham, 1987). In the Islamic kingdom, the function of '*ulamā'*' extended beyond advising rulers to encompassing the reinforcement of Islamic law in practice (Burhanudin, 2017). This position afforded him considerable esteem among the people of Penyengat Island, while simultaneously rendering him a perceived threat to the Dutch authorities, owing to his firm stance and rejection of European influence (Netscher, 1870). In this capacity, Raja Ali Haji embodied a dual identity as both a religious scholar and a political actor, reflecting the broader role of the '*ulamā'*' within the Malay sultanate system, where their involvement frequently extended beyond religious affairs to encompass various aspects of political governance (Woodward, 2004).

Tsamarat al-Muhimmah stipulates that the selection of a king should be based on his capacity to govern, his moral integrity, and his commitment to preserving established traditions and customary law (*adat*). These qualities are exemplified in the figure of Sultan 'Abd al-Raḥmān Muazzam Syah (1819–1832 CE), whom Raja Ali Haji portrays as a pious, generous, and socially responsible ruler committed to accountability. He is further depicted as embodying humanistic, egalitarian, and inclusive values in his relations with society. Similar attributes are ascribed to his deputy, Yang Dipertuan Muda Raja Ja'far, who is credited with administering governmental affairs effectively while promoting educational development through the strengthening of scholarly activities and the cultivation of intellectual exchanges between the '*ulamā'*' and '*umarā'*' (religious scholars and rulers). Raja Ja'far is likewise characterised as visionary, humble, devout, generous, and committed to preserving established traditions and customary law (*adat*) (Haji, 1982). Raja Ali Haji's intellectual engagement with both figures shaped his interpretive horizon in reading Q.S Ibrāhīm [14]: 42. This influence is reflected in *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah*, where he develops a typology of kingship consisting of three categories: the *rājā agama* (king of religion), the *rājā pemelihara* (guardian king), and the *rājā sesat* (errant king). The *rājā agama* refers to a ruler who grounds his policies in the teachings of the Qur'an, whereas the *rājā pemelihara* is characterised by adherence to the shari'a and by the ability to align the administration of government with the principles of Islamic law (Haji, 1886).

The final category, the *rājā sesat* (errant king), is portrayed as a ruler whose moral decline has undermined his understanding of the nature, purpose, and responsibilities of political authority. In this condition, power ceases to function as a means of promoting public welfare and instead becomes an instrument for the pursuit of personal interests and desires. Such a ruler governs without regard for the ethical, moral, and spiritual principles that should guide political conduct, disregarding distinctions between the lawful and the unlawful (*ḥalāl–ḥarām*), reward and punishment (*ṭhawāb–‘iqāb*), as well as the normative prescriptions of the *sharī‘a*. The predominance of worldly desires consequently fosters a hedonistic orientation, manifested in excessive consumption and the unrestrained gratification of carnal passions (Haji, 1886). These characteristics are represented by Sultan Mahmud (1835–1857 CE), who is portrayed as having deviated from the principles of leadership and justice. His appointment at a politically premature age was inseparable from the influence of the royal family. In his daily life, he tended to adopt a luxurious lifestyle in Singapore and Johor, abandoning the traditional way of life on Penyengat Island. His propensity to display opulence and imitate a European style of living was regarded as a repudiation of the Malay ethos of simplicity (Matheson, 1972). Sultan Mahmud is also characterised as unwilling to deliberate with his ministers, disregarding the advice of the royal elite, and prioritising personal interests over the welfare of the people and the stability of the sultanate (Haji, 1982). His destructive political conduct ultimately resulted in his deposition through Dutch intervention, with the support of a faction of the Penyengat elite (Andaya & Matheson, 1979). These dynamics appear to have shaped Raja Ali Haji’s horizon of understanding in interpreting the Qur’an, particularly in his emphasis on the *rājā pemelihara* (guardian king) as the ideal ruler who consistently upholds Islamic law. This emphasis is rooted in the view that the *sharī‘a* derives from a divine will whose authority is absolute in nature (Sha‘labī, 1958). Within the Islamic intellectual tradition, law is inseparable from its theological foundations, as legal norms ultimately derive their legitimacy from divine revelation. Consequently, every legal determination must remain within the framework of the *sharī‘a*. From this perspective, even a judicial ruling does not attain full validity solely by virtue of its formal issuance; rather, its legitimacy depends upon its conformity with the normative prescriptions of Islamic law (Asad, 1980).

These ideas are inseparable from the intellectual milieu that shaped Raja Ali Haji’s life particularly the emergence of Penyengat Island as a vibrant centre of Islamic learning during the reign of Sultan Abd al-Raḥmān Muazzam Syah (1819–1832 CE). This period witnessed the active dissemination of Islamic knowledge by scholars from diverse regions, including Shaykh Aḥmad Jibratī, Shaykh Muḥammad Arsyad, and Shaykh Shaqaf, whose presence contributed to the cultivation of a dynamic scholarly atmosphere on the island. Although no extant source explicitly documents a direct teacher–student relationship between Raja Ali Haji and these figures, *Tuḥfat al-Nafīs* records that he later taught Yang Dipertuan Muda Raja ‘Abdullāh several *kitābs* that had previously been transmitted by these scholars (Haji, 1982). This account suggests his familiarity with the intellectual traditions circulating within the scholarly networks of Penyengat. The evidence of Raja Ali Haji’s religious learning can also be seen in his teaching activities. *Tuḥfat al-Nafīs* notes that he taught *Umm al-Barāhīn* to Yang Dipertuan Muda Raja ‘Alī, indicating a strong grounding in Sunnī theology (*‘aqīdat ahl al-sunnah wa al-jamā‘ah*) (Haji, 1982). His engagement with Islamic scholarship extended to the field of Qur’anic studies, in which he studied under Shaykh Sayyid ‘Abdullāh Baḥrayn, a formative influence on his understanding of the Qur’an and its interpretation (Haji, 1982).

Raja Ali Haji’s religious epistemology was also shaped by his engagement with the *Naqshbandiyyah Khālidiyyah ṭarīqa*, a Sufi tradition that flourished within the Riau-Lingga Sultanate. The order was introduced by Shaykh Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ al-Zawāwī, a scholar of North African origin, through his work *Kayfiyyat al-Dhikr ‘alā Ṭarīqat al-Naqshbandiyyah al-Mujaddidiyyah al-Aḥmadiyyah* (Bruinessen, 1992). The text promotes spiritual purification through the rejection of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (the unity of being) while emphasising the harmonious integration of exoteric religious obligations (*sharī‘a*) and esoteric spiritual reality (*ḥaqīqa*) (Muhyi et al., 2023). Such teachings formed an important part of the intellectual and spiritual environment in which Raja Ali Haji developed his

religious outlook. The central practice of the *ṭarīqa* consisted of collective *dhikr* (ritual remembrance of God) conducted under the supervision of a *murshid* (spiritual teacher) (Syahid, 2005). Raja Ali Haji himself occupied this position and played an active role in guiding the spiritual life of the community. As one of the order's *murshidīn*, he regularly led and taught *dhikr* gatherings attended by Yang Dipertuan Muda Raja 'Abdullāh, members of the royal household, and the Malay aristocracy on Penyengat Island (Haji, 1982).

Raja Ali Haji's political thought reflects a substantial engagement with the classical tradition of Islamic political literature, particularly al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* and *Naṣīḥat al-Mulūk*, as well as al-Māwardī's *al-Aḥkām al-Sulṭāniyyah* (Andaya & Matheson, 1979). The presence of these intellectual influences in Tsamarat al-Muhimmah illustrates a broader process of knowledge transmission through which concepts developed within the classical Islamic scholarly tradition were appropriated and reformulated within the intellectual milieu of the Islamic kingdoms of the Malay Archipelago. Rather than functioning as a mere reproduction of earlier ideas, Raja Ali Haji's work demonstrates how inherited political concepts were adapted to local concerns of governance, authority, and moral leadership.

The influence of al-Ghazālī appears to have reached Raja Ali Haji through his studies under Tuan Shaykh Ismā'il of Java (Haji, 1982). This intellectual connection is particularly evident in the convergence of their views on leadership and governance (Noor, 2021). In *Naṣīḥat al-Mulūk*, al-Ghazālī advances the argument that the prosperity and stability of a polity depend fundamentally upon the justice of its ruler; just governance generates security and public welfare, whereas tyranny and oppression lead to social disorder and decline (Al-Ghazālī, 1977). A comparable line of reasoning can be observed in Raja Ali Haji's interpretation of Q.S. Ibrāhīm [14]: 42. He argues that a ruler who neglects the prescriptions of the *sharī'a* becomes a source of corruption and social destruction, while a ruler who remains committed to Islamic law is more likely to enact policies directed toward the common good (*maṣlaḥa*) (Haji, 1886).

A further point of convergence between al-Ghazālī and Raja Ali Haji can be identified in their understanding of *amr ma'rūf nāhy munkar* (enjoining good and forbidding evil). For al-Ghazālī, this obligation extends beyond personal piety and finds concrete expression in the ruler's responsibility to secure the welfare of the people. Such responsibility includes the equitable distribution of resources through the public treasury, protection from oppression, and the maintenance of social order, as neglect of public welfare may give rise to instability and disorder (Al-Ghazālī, 1977). A comparable perspective is evident in Raja Ali Haji's interpretation of Q.S. Āl 'Imrān [3]: 104, where *amr ma'rūf nāhy munkar* is framed as a central obligation of political leadership. In his view, rulers fulfil this responsibility through educational initiatives and *da'wa* policies designed to preserve the moral integrity of society and ensure the stability of the sultanate (Haji, 1886).

The same intellectual affinity is reflected in their respective conceptions of kingship. Al-Ghazālī portrays the ruler as the guardian of justice and the principal overseer of governance, working in concert with ministers (*wuzarā'*) and judges to maintain political order and social well-being (Al-Ghazālī, 1977). Raja Ali Haji advances a closely related vision in his interpretation of Q.S. al-Baqara [2]: 246, where the king is simultaneously conceived as *khalīfa* (vicegerent), *hākim* (judge), and *imām* (religious leader). These interconnected roles place upon the ruler the responsibility of upholding the *sharī'a*, administering justice, and serving as a moral exemplar for the community (Haji, 1886). Viewed together, these parallels underscore the extent to which classical Islamic political ethics informed Raja Ali Haji's conception of authority, governance, and moral leadership.

Qur'anic Reception in Raja Ali Haji's *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah*

The Qur'anic interpretation articulated in *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah* reflects an understanding of scripture not only as a religious text but also as a normative foundation for political authority, legal order, and governmental practice. Through this interpretive endeavour, Raja Ali Haji sought to embed Qur'anic values within the socio-political fabric of Malay society, particularly in the governance of the Riau-Lingga Sultanate. His reading of the Qur'an affirms its role as a source of normative knowledge capable of shaping systems of value, authority, and social regulation in

accordance with the historical circumstances in which it is received (Ahimsa, 2012). From this perspective, Raja Ali Haji's engagement with scripture may be understood as a form of Qur'anic reception, whereby the sacred text is actualised within the lived realities of the community (Rafiq, 2014). The Qur'an thus functions simultaneously as a source of guidance, inspiration, and knowledge that informs social and political life (Gill, 1985).

The political sphere represents one of the principal arenas in which these Qur'anic values are translated into institutional practice. A particularly significant example is Raja Ali Haji's discussion of the pledge of allegiance (*ikrar*) undertaken by the *ahl al-ḥall wa al-'aqd*, through which the appointment of a ruler is recognised as an essential component of the Islamic political order. In his view, political authority must be established on the foundations of the *sharī'a*, deliberation (*musyawarah*), and the legitimate conferral of power. The appointment of a ruler therefore constitutes a collective obligation (*farḍ kifāya*) that may be fulfilled through three recognised mechanisms: *bay'ah* (pledge of allegiance), *istikhlāf* (designation of a successor), and *taghallub* (the acquisition of power through force). Among these, the *bay'ah* is administered by the *ahl al-ḥall wa al-'aqd*, comprising community leaders, holders of authority, and respected religious scholars whose collective deliberation confers legitimacy upon the ruler. As recorded by Raja Ali Haji, the declaration states: 'We, the *ahl al-ḥall wa al-'aqd*, having deliberated and reached consensus, appoint so-and-so as king of this realm and its territories. The relationship between us and the king is affirmed in accordance with the Word of God the Most High in the Great Qur'an':

...أَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا الرَّسُولَ وَأُولِي الْأَمْرِ مِنْكُمْ...

"Obey God, obey the Messenger, and those in authority among you." (Q.S al-Nisā' [4]: 59)

A second mechanism for the appointment of a ruler is *istikhlāf*, namely the designation of a successor through a process of consultation and collective deliberation aimed at identifying the most suitable candidate for leadership. Raja Ali Haji illustrates this principle through the precedent of 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, who consulted six prominent Companions – 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān, 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, Zubayr ibn al-'Awwām, 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn 'Awf, Sa'd ibn Abī Waqqāṣ, and Ṭalḥa (may God be pleased with them all) – before the eventual selection of 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān as his successor. And the third mechanism is *taghallub*, whereby political authority is acquired through military conquest, allowing the victor to assume rulership over the territory brought under his control.

Despite the diversity of these mechanisms, Raja Ali Haji emphasises that political legitimacy ultimately depends upon the qualifications of the ruler. A prospective king must therefore possess a combination of religious, intellectual, and moral virtues, including Islam, legal competence (*taḳlīf*), justice (*'adāla*), the capacity for independent legal reasoning (*ijtihād*), rhetorical skill, responsiveness to public aspirations, courage in decision-making, personal integrity, and sound judgement (Haji, 1886).

Beyond outlining the procedures through which authority is established, Raja Ali Haji also develops a normative typology of kingship and its implications for governance. Drawing upon the views of the *ahl al-ḥikma* (scholars of wisdom), he distinguishes between three forms of leadership: the *rājā agama* (king of religion), the *rājā pemeliharā* (guardian king), and the *rājā sesat* (errant king). The *rājā agama* represents the ideal ruler whose governance is firmly grounded in the *sharī'a*, rendering obedience to his commands obligatory because they derive from Islamic law. Closely related to this model is the *rājā pemeliharā*, a ruler who not only avoids actions prohibited by the *sharī'a* but also succeeds in harmonising worldly administration with preparation for the hereafter. His authority is considered worthy of obedience because it is directed toward public welfare and the preservation of human dignity. In exercising power, he maintains a balance between the two essential instruments of governance: the pen, symbolising regulation and administration, and the sword, symbolising authority and political order.

In contrast, the *rājā sesat* embodies the degeneration of political leadership. Raja Ali Haji describes such a ruler as one who has lost sight of the nature, purpose, and responsibilities of authority, reducing power to a vehicle for the pursuit of personal desires. Governed by passion

rather than ethical restraint, he disregards the distinctions between the lawful and the unlawful, becomes absorbed in worldly pleasures, and neglects the obligations entrusted to him. This moral decline ultimately extends beyond the ruler himself, fostering corruption within society and the institutions of the kingdom. Preoccupied with frivolous pursuits and indifferent to the condition of his realm, he undermines social order and invites divine punishment (*adhāb*) in both this world and the hereafter, as affirmed by the Qur'an (Haji, 1886):

وَلَا تَحْسَبَنَّ اللَّهَ غَافِلًا عَمَّا يَعْمَلُ الظَّالِمُونَ إِنَّمَا يُؤَخِّرُهُمْ لِيَوْمٍ تَشْخَصُ فِيهِ الْأَبْصَارُ

"And do not suppose that God is heedless of what the wrongdoers do. He only grants them respite until the Day when eyes will stare in horror." (Q.S *Ibrāhīm* [14]: 42)

Consistent with his typology of kingship, Raja Ali Haji further emphasises the ruler's responsibility to uphold the principle of *amr ma'rūf nahy munkar*. Within this framework, political leadership functions not merely as an administrative institution but as a moral instrument through which Qur'anic values are embedded in the social order. The king is therefore entrusted with fostering the ethical and spiritual development of society through policies directed toward education, character formation, and the cultivation of religious consciousness. Rather than relying exclusively on coercive authority, this vision of governance seeks to shape social conduct through the internalisation of moral and theological values.

For Raja Ali Haji, the implementation of *amr ma'rūf nahy munkar* begins with the strengthening of educational institutions. The ruler is obliged to allocate resources from the royal treasury for the establishment of religious schools (madrasas), the provision of educational materials, and the support of students' welfare. Such measures are intended to nurture a learned and morally cultivated generation throughout the realm. In his view, the absence of educational institutions grounded in the *sharī'a* and Qur'anic learning results in the erosion of religious understanding, the decline of moral integrity, and the weakening of God-consciousness, conditions that ultimately create fertile ground for various forms of criminal behaviour (Haji, 1886).

This emphasis on education reflects Raja Ali Haji's broader understanding of social regulation. Although criminal conduct may be addressed through punitive measures such as arrest and imprisonment, he regards such approaches as insufficient when employed in isolation. Social control founded solely upon fear of political authority is inherently unstable, as criminal behaviour may re-emerge once surveillance and enforcement diminish. More enduring social order, he argues, can only be achieved through the cultivation of theological consciousness, whereby individuals voluntarily refrain from reprehensible conduct because they possess the knowledge necessary to distinguish right from wrong. In this respect, moral transformation precedes legal enforcement. Raja Ali Haji further maintains that such an approach accords with the methods employed by the prophets and righteous leaders in guiding their communities, a principle that he regards as affirmed by the Qur'an:

وَلْتَكُنْ مِنْكُمْ أُمَّةٌ يَدْعُونَ إِلَى الْخَيْرِ وَيَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ

"Let there be among you a community that calls to the good, enjoins what is right, and forbids what is wrong." (Q.S *Āl 'Imrān* [3]: 104)

The realisation of *amr ma'rūf nahy munkar* also depends upon the active presence of religious scholars within society. Raja Ali Haji maintains that every realm must contain individuals dedicated to *da'wa*—teaching, promoting virtue, and preventing wrongdoing. Within this framework, the *'ulamā'* function not merely as transmitters of religious knowledge but as moral agents whose role is essential to the preservation of social order. Through instruction and guidance, they cultivate God-consciousness among the people, encourage adherence to religious obligations, discourage transgression and criminal behaviour, and reinforce ethical conduct through reminders of divine reward and punishment. Equally important is their responsibility to deepen public understanding of the prescriptions of the *sharī'a*, thereby fostering receptivity to Islamic teachings and nurturing the moral disposition of the community. For Raja Ali Haji, a society shaped by such religious guidance is more likely to attain both social stability and divine blessing (Haji, 1886).

The success of this moral project, however, requires institutional support from political authority. Raja Ali Haji therefore argues that rulers must allocate adequate resources to sustain

educational and religious initiatives, including the activities of the *'ulamā'*. Such expenditure constitutes a moral obligation of governance and reflects the ruler's commitment to public welfare, whereas neglect of these responsibilities is associated with the vice of miserliness (*bukhl*) (Haji, 1886). In this formulation, political authority, religious instruction, and social order are mutually reinforcing elements within an integrated vision of Islamic governance.

This concern with the preservation of moral and social order extends into the legal sphere, where Raja Ali Haji elaborates upon the role of the *qāḍī* (Islamic judge) within the judicial system. Etymologically, the term *qāḍī* refers to one who renders or ratifies legal judgments. In the Islamic legal tradition, however, the office carries a broader significance, denoting an individual entrusted with adjudicating disputes in accordance with divine law. The institution of the *qāḍī* is regarded as a collective obligation (*farḍ kifāya*), the fulfilment of which depends upon the needs of the community in maintaining justice and legal order. For this reason, the implementation of God's law through qualified judicial authority occupies a central place within Raja Ali Haji's conception of governance, a principle that he regards as firmly grounded in the Qur'an:

وَأَنْ أَحْكُمَ بَيْنَهُمْ بِمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ...

"Judge between them by what God has revealed." (Q.S *al-Mā'idā* [5]: 49)

Raja Ali Haji places considerable emphasis on the office of the *qāḍī* as a central institution in the administration of justice. Because the implementation of Islamic law depends upon the competence and integrity of judicial authorities, he outlines a comprehensive set of qualifications for those entrusted with the office. A *qāḍī* must be Muslim, legally mature (*bāligh*), of sound mind, free, male, and just (*ādil*). Beyond these foundational requirements, he must possess extensive knowledge of the legal rulings (*aḥkām al-shar'iyya*) derived from the Qur'an, Sunnah, and *ijmā'*, be familiar with juristic disagreements, capable of *ijtihād*, proficient in Arabic, knowledgeable in Qur'anic exegesis, and endowed with the intellectual and physical capacities necessary for judicial service, including sound judgement, reliable memory, acute hearing and sight, and competence in legal documentation. Equally important is personal integrity, which ensures that judicial authority is exercised in accordance with the ethical demands of the *sharī'a* (Haji, 1886).

The appointment of a *qāḍī* begins with formal investiture by the ruler, through which judicial authority is delegated to adjudicate disputes within the jurisdiction of the sultanate. The appointee subsequently declares acceptance of the mandate, thereby ratifying the appointment and rendering the investiture legally valid. Raja Ali Haji notes that comparable procedures may be applied to other administrative offices within the kingdom (Haji, 1886). This emphasis on institutional procedure reflects the broader importance of law in the political order he envisioned.

The effectiveness of such arrangements was, in Raja Ali Haji's view, evident in the experience of the Riau-Lingga Sultanate. The implementation of Islamic law within the kingdom and in the daily life of the Penyengat community proceeded with considerable effectiveness, while the relationship between the *sharī'a* and customary law (*adat*) developed with relatively little conflict. Rather than functioning as competing legal systems, Islamic law and *adat* interacted dynamically and flexibly, allowing both to operate within a shared normative framework (Buskens, 2000). In some circumstances, Islamic law was applied comprehensively without recourse to customary provisions, while in others the two traditions coexisted in mutually reinforcing ways (Nurlaelawati, 2010).

Beyond the judicial sphere, *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah* develops a broader conception of state administration through its discussion of the ruler as *khalīfa*, *sultān*, and *imām*. These designations do not represent separate offices but rather interconnected dimensions of political leadership within the Islamic tradition. As *khalīfa*, the ruler continues the prophetic mission by safeguarding Islamic teachings and implementing God's law as derived from the Qur'an, Ḥadīth, and *ijmā'*. As *sultān*, he is entrusted with enforcing justice and maintaining order in accordance with the commands of God and His Messenger. As *imām*, he serves as a moral and political exemplar whose conduct and policies are to be followed by the community, provided they do not lead to unbelief (*kufur*) or disobedience

(*ma'siya*). These responsibilities require the ruler to possess refined character (*adab*), integrity, and courage, enabling him to respond effectively to the challenges confronting the realm.

Taken together, these three dimensions of leadership reveal Raja Ali Haji's conception of governance as an integrated framework that combines religious authority, political power, and moral responsibility. This ideal of leadership is illustrated through the Qur'anic account of the Children of Israel after the death of Prophet Mūsā (Moses), when they petitioned for the appointment of a king who would lead them in striving in the path of God. Raja Ali Haji invokes this narrative as a model of legitimate authority grounded in divine guidance and collective welfare, as reflected in the following Qur'anic passage:

...إِذْ قَالُوا لَنَبِيِّ آلِهِمْ أَيْعِثْ لَنَا مَلِكًا نَقْتُلَ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ...

"When they said to their prophet: 'Appoint for us a king so that we may fight in the cause of God.'"
(Q.S al-Baqara [2]: 246)

According to Raja Ali Haji, the prophet sent to the Children of Israel was Samuel (Nabi Sāmū'īl), while the ruler subsequently appointed over them was Saul (Ṭālūt) (Haji, 1886). This Qur'anic narrative serves as an important illustration of legitimate leadership, demonstrating the relationship between divine guidance, political authority, and communal welfare.

Alongside his elaboration of the ruler's roles as *khalīfa*, *sultān*, and *imām*, Raja Ali Haji also delineates the limits of royal authority. Within the framework of *fiqh al-siyāsa* (Islamic political jurisprudence), political power is neither autonomous nor absolute; rather, it remains subject to the normative constraints of the *sharī'a*. For this reason, authority must be understood proportionally and exercised within clearly defined ethical and legal boundaries. An excessive understanding of power risks transforming political leadership into a source of domination detached from its religious foundations.

This position is consistent with both classical and later Islamic political thought, which do not recognise the ruler as a figure endowed with unrestricted authority. Raja Ali Haji therefore rejects conceptions of kingship that elevate the ruler beyond the limits prescribed by Islamic law. Such views, he argues, encourage exaggerated forms of political veneration in which the king is treated as possessing an authority comparable to that of God. Beyond its political implications, this tendency constitutes a theological problem because it undermines the principle of *tawḥīd* (divine unity) and risks corrupting the foundations of Islamic belief (*'aqīda*).

At the heart of Raja Ali Haji's critique lies the conviction that sovereignty ultimately belongs to God alone. Any attempt to equate the ruler's will with divine will represents a distortion of both political authority and religious doctrine. Political obedience is therefore conditional rather than absolute, deriving its legitimacy from conformity to the *sharī'a* rather than from the personal status of the ruler. To reinforce this argument, Raja Ali Haji cites a Qur'anic passage that challenges claims to unrestricted human authority and reaffirms the supremacy of divine sovereignty:

فَعَالٍ لِّمَا يُرِيدُ

"Doer of whatever He wills." (Q.S al-Burūj [85]: 16)

A ruler who has been legitimately appointed and who faithfully fulfils the responsibilities of leadership occupies the highest political authority within the realm. Under such circumstances, obedience to the ruler becomes obligatory for both the populace and those entrusted with the enforcement of law and public order. Raja Ali Haji maintains that refusal to comply with the ruler's commands is impermissible so long as those commands remain consistent with the ethical and religious principles of Islam. In this formulation, political obedience is neither unconditional nor absolute; rather, it is contingent upon the ruler's adherence to the normative framework of the *sharī'a*. Collective resistance to legitimate authority is categorised as *durhaka* (insubordination), while organised opposition assumes the status of *bughāt* (rebellion), a category that classical jurisprudence subjects to legal sanction, including armed suppression when necessary (Haji, 1886).

This position may be read as part of Raja Ali Haji's broader engagement with questions of political legitimacy and authority. While affirming the obligation to obey a lawful ruler, he simultaneously rejects conceptions of kingship that elevate political authority beyond the limits

prescribed by Islamic law. His argument therefore stands in a complex relationship to the notion of *dawla*, a model of political authority historically grounded in religious legitimation (Lewis, 1988). Within the Malay political tradition, the ruler was frequently portrayed as possessing a sacred dimension, functioning as a representative of divine authority on earth in a manner that resonates with the concept of *andeka* found in earlier Buddhist political traditions (Wilkinson, 1932). This understanding viewed political power as a manifestation of divine favour bestowed upon the ruler (Errington, 1975), legitimising the belief that kings governed by virtue of a heavenly mandate (Taib, 1981).

The sacralisation of kingship was further reinforced through royal titles such as *zill Allāh fi al-‘ālam* (“the shadow of God on earth”), a designation attested in the *Hikāyat Rājā-Rājā Pasai* (Hill, 1960). Such titles served important political functions by elevating the symbolic status of the ruler, strengthening the theological foundations of political authority, and distinguishing the king from his subjects (Kratz, 1993). Yet Raja Ali Haji’s political thought stops short of endorsing an unrestricted form of sacral kingship. Although the ruler occupies a privileged position within the political order, his authority remains accountable to the *sharī‘a* and cannot be equated with divine sovereignty itself. In this respect, Raja Ali Haji seeks to reconcile royal authority with the theological principle of *tawhīd*, preserving both political order and the supremacy of divine law.

Within this broader framework of governance, Raja Ali Haji also examines the role of ministers (*wuzarā‘*) as key administrators responsible for translating royal authority into effective government. The appointment of ministers falls within the prerogative of the ruler, who may select qualified individuals from among scholars and members of the royal administration. Acting as extensions of royal authority, ministers are entrusted with responsibilities that largely concern the fulfilment of collective obligations and the management of public affairs. Because of the significance of this office, Raja Ali Haji establishes rigorous criteria for appointment. Prospective ministers must be Muslim, legally competent, male, free, capable of *ijtihād*, skilled in administration, honest, trustworthy, morally upright, professionally competent, and free from reprehensible conduct (Haji, 1886).

The importance of ministerial office is reflected in the etymology of the term *wazīr*, which denotes one who assists, bears burdens, and supports the conduct of government. For Raja Ali Haji, the relationship between ruler and minister is not merely administrative but also moral and functional, since effective governance depends upon cooperation between political authority and competent advisers. To illustrate this principle, he invokes the Qur’anic account of Prophet Mūsā (Moses), who prayed that God appoint a trusted companion from among his family to assist him in confronting Pharaoh:

وَأَجْعَلْ لِّي وَزِيرًا مِّنْ أَهْلِي * هُزُونَ أَجِي * أَشْدُدْ بِيْ أَرْزِيْ * وَأَشْرِكْهُ فِيْ أَمْرِيْ

“Appoint for me a minister from my family—my brother Aaron. Strengthen my back through him, and let him share in my task.” (Q.S *Tāhā* [20]: 29–32)

For Raja Ali Haji, effective governance depends upon cooperation between the ruler and competent ministers. A king cannot govern in isolation, as the responsibilities of leadership exceed the capacity of a single individual. The appointment of ministers therefore represents not merely an administrative necessity but a mechanism for ensuring the effective implementation of governance. Upon investiture, the ruler formally delegates authority to the minister to assist in managing the affairs of the state, while the minister accepts this mandate as a trust to be carried out with loyalty and sincerity (Haji, 1886). Through this reciprocal relationship, political authority is translated into practical administration, allowing the functions of government to operate in an orderly and coordinated manner.

The broader significance of *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah* lies in the manner in which it transforms Qur’anic teachings into a framework for governance. The text exemplifies a form of functional Qur’anic reception in which scripture serves not only as a source of religious guidance but also as the normative foundation for political authority, legal institutions, and administrative practice. Through this process, Qur’anic values are translated into concrete regulations, leadership principles, and mechanisms of governance that shape the socio-political order of the Riau-Lingga Sultanate. The

Qur'an thus emerges as a living source of knowledge whose influence extends beyond the realm of belief into the organisation of public life.

This reception cannot be reduced to the interests of political power alone. Available historical evidence provides little indication of a power-based relationship between the sultan and the religious scholars or of specific political interests that determined the content of the text. Rather, Raja Ali Haji's interpretation appears to have been shaped by the convergence of several intellectual influences: his experience as a royal adviser, his formation within Islamic scholarly and Sufi traditions, and his engagement with the broader corpus of Islamic political thought, particularly al-Ghazālī's *Naṣīḥat al-Mulūk*. These influences collectively informed his effort to articulate a model of governance grounded in Qur'anic ethics while remaining responsive to the realities of the Malay world.

Equally significant is Raja Ali Haji's decision to communicate these ideas through the Malay language, thereby making Qur'anic teachings accessible to a wider audience. As a local intellectual engaging with a local socio-political context, he sought not merely to interpret scripture but to facilitate its social internalisation. Methodologically, his interpretation reflects a predominantly *tahlīlī* approach grounded in *ra'y* (reasoned judgment), characterised by a socio-literary orientation and a contextual sensitivity to the circumstances of the Riau-Lingga Sultanate. Through this interpretive process, Qur'anic meanings were transformed into governing principles, institutional norms, and social practices, demonstrating how scriptural interpretation could function as an instrument for shaping political and social life in a nineteenth-century Malay Islamic kingdom.

Table 1. Qur'anic Reception in *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah*

No.	Theme	Qur'anic Verse Interpreted	Discourse Constructed
1	Politics	Q.S al-Nisā' [4]: 59	The oath of allegiance (<i>ikrar</i>) of the <i>ahl al-ḥall wa al-'aqd</i> to the king
2	Politics	Q.S Ibrāhīm [14]: 42	Typologies of royal leadership and their governance implications
3	Politics	Q.S Āl 'Imrān [3]: 104	The king's role in upholding <i>amr ma'rūf nāhy munkar</i>
4	Law	Q.S al-Mā'idā [5]: 49	The role and qualifications of the <i>qāḍī</i> (Islamic judge)
5	State Administration	Q.S al-Baqara [2]: 246	The conception of the king as <i>khalīfa</i> , <i>sultān</i> , and <i>imām</i>
6	State Administration	Q.S al-Burūj [85]: 16	The limits of royal authority
7	State Administration	Q.S Ṭāhā [20]: 29–32	The role and qualifications of the minister (<i>wazīr</i>)

Table 1 demonstrates that the Qur'anic interpretations presented in *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah* are primarily directed toward three interconnected domains: politics, law, and statecraft. Although Raja Ali Haji does not explicitly classify Qur'anic verses according to these thematic categories, a close reading of the text reveals a consistent effort to employ scripture as a normative framework for the organisation of political authority and public order. In several instances, verses that are not explicitly political in their textual context are reinterpreted to support broader arguments concerning governance and leadership. Through this process, the political, legal, and administrative discourses articulated in *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah* are elevated beyond matters of practical governance and positioned as expressions of divine command and normative obligations binding upon rulers and state officials.

Among these themes, political discourse occupies the most prominent place. Raja Ali Haji develops a range of discussions concerning the structure and legitimacy of political authority, including the pledge of allegiance between the *ahl al-ḥall wa al-'aqd* and the ruler, the oath of loyalty undertaken by royal officials, and the ruler's responsibility to uphold *amr ma'rūf nāhy munkar*. Taken together, these discourses constitute a coherent framework for regulating relations between authority, governance, and society. They also reveal Raja Ali Haji's own positionality within the political order of the Riau-Lingga Sultanate. As a member of the royal elite and part of the *ahl al-ḥall*

wa al-'aqd, he wrote not as a detached observer but as an intellectual actively engaged in the formulation of political norms. While some arguments are advanced through his own reasoning, others draw upon the authority of classical scholars and established literary traditions, illustrating the interplay between local political realities and broader currents of Islamic intellectual thought.

The political vision articulated in *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah* was not produced in isolation. Rather, it emerged from the convergence of socio-political experience, religious formation, and intellectual transmission. Raja Ali Haji's position as a royal adviser provided direct familiarity with the practical workings of governance, while his religious outlook was shaped by the scholarly environment of Penyengat Island, participation in religious discussions with members of the royal administration, and involvement in the *Naqshbandiyyah Khālidiyyah ṭarīqa*, whose teachings emphasised moral discipline and ethical leadership. Equally significant was his engagement with al-Ghazālī's *Naṣīḥat al-Mulūk*, which furnished an important intellectual framework for his reflections on governance, justice, and the ethical responsibilities of rulers.

The significance of these discourses lies not only in their formulation but also in their social and political reception. Evidence from *Tuhfat al-Nafīs* indicates that judicial officials (*qāḍīs*) were appointed directly by the ruler and entrusted with the administration of justice in accordance with the principles outlined in Raja Ali Haji's political thought (Haji, 1982). Likewise, his understanding of *amr ma'rūf nahy munkar* found expression in the policies of Sultan Sulaiman Badarul Alam Syah II (1857–1883 CE) and Yang Dipertuan Muda Raja 'Abd al-Raḥmān (1899–1911 CE), both of whom contributed to transforming Penyengat into a centre of Islamic learning through the expansion of mosques, religious education, and the establishment of *Maṭba'at al-Riyāwiyyah*. These developments suggest that the Qur'anic discourses articulated in *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah* extended beyond the realm of textual interpretation and became embedded in the institutional and social practices of the Riau-Lingga Sultanate. In this respect, the text exemplifies how Qur'anic interpretation can function as a medium through which religious knowledge is translated into concrete forms of political organisation and social transformation.

CONCLUSION

This study situates *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah* as a significant manifestation of Qur'anic reception within the intertwined domains of politics, law, and governance in the nineteenth-century Malay Sultanate. Rather than treating the Qur'an solely as a religious scripture, Raja Ali Haji mobilizes it as an ethical and normative framework through which political authority, legal order, and state administration could be articulated and legitimized. In this regard, the text reflects an intellectual effort to formulate a distinctly Malay model of governance grounded in the principles of *sharī'a*, justice, and public welfare (*maṣlaḥa*). By analysing the work comprehensively, it reveals that Raja Ali Haji employs a simplified form of the *tahliḥī* method while relying predominantly on *ra'y*-based reasoning (*ijtihād*). His interpretive orientation is characterised by an *adabī ijtīmā'ī* approach that seeks to relate Qur'anic teachings to the socio-political realities of the Riau-Lingga Sultanate. Although his interpretations emerge through rational reflection and contextual engagement, the meanings he advances remain firmly aligned with established exegetical authorities. Consequently, his readings neither depart from nor challenge the broader tradition of *tafsīr*; rather, they represent a contextual adaptation of that tradition within the intellectual landscape of the Malay Archipelago.

Raja Ali Haji's interpretation in *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah* emerged from the intersection of multiple intellectual and socio-historical influences. His experience as a royal advisor provided direct engagement with the practical realities of governance, while his formation as a scholar, practitioner of Islamic learning, and murshid of the *Naqshbandiyyah Khālidiyyah ṭarīqa* shaped the religious epistemology through which he approached the Qur'an. Equally significant was his engagement with al-Ghazālī's *Naṣīḥat al-Mulūk*, which contributed to the formation of his intellectual horizon concerning the ethics of power, justice, *amr ma'rūf nahy munkar*, and Islamic leadership. Together, these influences illustrate the transmission and reinterpretation of ideas from the classical Islamic scholarly tradition within the intellectual context of the Malay world.

Within this framework, the Qur'anic reception articulated in *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah* can be understood as a form of performative-functional reception. The Qur'an functions not merely as a source of religious authority but as the normative foundation through which political authority, legal order, and statecraft are legitimised and translated into concrete socio-political practices. This process is evident in the application of Q.S. al-Nisā' [4]: 59 as the basis for the oath of allegiance between the *ahl al-ḥall wa al-'aqd*, Q.S. Ibrāhīm [14]: 42 as the basis for the constructing typologies of royal leadership and their governance implications and Q.S. Āl 'Imrān [3]: 104 as the normative basis for the ruler's obligation to uphold *amr ma'rūf nahy munkar*. Through these formulations, Qur'anic teachings are transformed into institutional norms and governing practices that regulate political life within the sultanate. Viewed in this light, *Tsamarat al-Muhimmah* demonstrates how the Qur'an operates simultaneously as a source of knowledge, political legitimation, and ethical guidance. Its significance lies not only in its interpretation of scripture but also in its capacity to translate Qur'anic values into a normative framework for governance, thereby revealing the transformative social role of the Qur'an in the construction of a distinctly Malay Islamic political order.

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