

Transparent government based on Nahj al-Balagha and social trust among Muslim citizens



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As per the teachings of Islam, social trust involves placing others as the pillars of the Islamic countries, which needs to be maintained. Therefore, any promise or action that undermines the social trust of the people as a social capital is one of the most important anti-social factors that must be dealt with. In view of that, Islam is struggling against hypocrisy as an antisocial trend, because it damages social trust when a hypocrite preaches one thing and does another; in other words, the deeds do not confirm the words. That is why citizens cannot believe and trust in their promises, because such individuals do not fulfil them at any time. In this context, officials are suggested to respect the principle of transparency in the governance of Islamic societies in order to improve citizens' social trust. Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate the role of transparent governance based on the teachings of Nahj al-Balagha in creating social trust among 428 Iranian Muslim citizens in 2022. In sum, the results indicated that transparent governance has a significant positive effect on citizens' social trust in the officials of Islamic societies, as calculated by structural equation modelling in Linear Structural Relations (LISREL) (path coefficient = 0.58; *t*-value = 5.54).

Contribution: This study provided a new insight into the role of transparent governance in creating and strengthening social trust among the officials and citizens of Islamic societies, which deserves further attention by governments and researchers.

Keywords: Trust; social trust; Islam; Muslim citizens; transparent governance; Islamic teachings; Nahj al-Balagha.

Introduction

Because of its novelty, the concept of good governance (GG) has, to date, been interpreted differently. In this sense, some scholars or institutions have defined GG along with its attributes, and others have introduced this concept together with its elements (Farazmand 2000). This emerging concept drew the researchers' attention since the early Nineties. Actually, the concept of GG found its place as one of the drivers of growth and development in different economies once international aid agencies realised that poor and developing countries were facing numerous challenges in this respect (Ngobo & Fouda 2012).

Of note, GG is a complicated concept whose literal meaning has been constantly questioned among different scholars. Various definitions have been accordingly presented from diverse perspectives and sources, each one with a certain trend. As a normative concept, GG is a golden issue that deals systematically with the efforts made by citizens in a country (Omenugha, Uzuegbunam & Omenugha 2014). In an ideal world, GG is often associated with democracy under the current modern conditions; therefore, it has gained much popularity among liberal democracies and theorists. Over the last few decades, this has been also a key concept for democratic progress in many countries around the globe (Omenugha et al. 2014).

Good governance incorporates some governance criteria, standards, procedures and principles through which governments are equipped to conduct public affairs, control existing resources and guarantee human rights and citizenship. Against this background, transparency, accountability, participation, rule of law and flexibility in governments have been established as the building blocks of GG. Additionally, GG is closely linked to democracy and democratic processes; in other words, it refers to a series of practical criteria and indicators of democratic political systems in procedural, structural and substantive dimensions. Good governance denotes the transparent and accountable management of human beings, nature, as well as economic and financial resources to achieve fair and sustainable development (Australian National Audit

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Office 2003). It is also utilised by governments in managing socio-economic resources for further growth and development. Besides, GG involves the application of economic, political and administrative power for the administration of a country, which contains mechanisms, processes and institutions through which citizens and groups can express their own interests, exercise their legal rights, fulfil their obligations and mediate their differences. The outcome of GG is simply development that gives emphasis to reducing poverty, promoting women's empowerment and advancement, protecting the environment and, above all, creating great job opportunities and sustainable livelihoods (Kamijani & Salatin 2010). Put differently, some valuable features of GG can be considered the determinants of the success or failure of governance in the public sector, which consequently shape the performance of public services (Mohamad, Daud & Yahya 2014). Of note, a partnership and sometimes an alliance rising above it are created between the government, civil society and the private sector during GG, in terms of carrying out the necessary activities (UNDP 2000).

Among the underlying issues in today's Western societies and those influenced by Western culture is the loss of social capital, including social trust as one of its basic components. At present, the decline of social trust has resulted in a cultural identity crisis, gaining much attention among sociologists. Islamic societies also have the benefit of this capital to the extent that it adheres to Islamic teachings.

As human beings innately resort to social life to meet their various needs, general or social culture is often formed in the course of this lifestyle and its social interactions, which can represent the typical way of life, thoughts and actions of the people in a society. In this context, culture encompasses various components, including conscious and unconscious values and norms dominating interpersonal relationships. The culture in the communication between people in various societies and even among subcultures is also different, and it is formed largely under the influence of religious and moral teachings in a society, particularly in religious ones. As a social practice, Islam lays focus on self-regulation and above all highlights collective life; therefore, a large part of Islamic teachings centres on reforming the culture of communication and regulating people's social interactions. Considering the importance of the issue, the present study aims to investigate how transparent governance based on Nahj al-Balagha affects social trust among Iranian Muslim citizens in 2022.

Governance in Islamic teachings

In the Holy Qur'an, the main religious holy book of Muslims, several ayats refer to government. In the Holy Qur'an, the government of Allah is presented on a wide level in front of the government of 'tyrant', and the prophets and laws have come to destroy the government of 'tyrant' and make the government of Allah universal. And replacing the government of Allah instead of the government of 'tyrant' is for those who have a divine aspect and are known as the Khalifah of Allah on earth, to rule and shorten the hand of the

tyrant from government of society. Among these, the following can be mentioned as examples:

We have made you our Khalifah and successor on earth, so establish your rule on the basis of truth and justice, and avoid following your desires that lead you astray. Those who deviate from the right path and go astray will face the most severe difficulties, because they have forgotten the day of inspection. (Surah Şad, Ayat 26)

We have sent you the Qur'an and the Sharia, so that you may rule among the people according to the divine religion. (Surah An-Nisa, Ayat 105)

Have you not seen those who believe in what [from the heavenly books] was revealed to you and to the predecessors, but they want to go to the Taghut and false judges for judgment?! Even though they were ordered to disbelieve in Taghut. But the devil wants to lead them astray, and throw them into faraway paths. (Surah An-Nisa, Ayat 60)

God is the protector and guardian of those who believe; He takes them out of the darkness to the light. [But] those who disbelieved, their guardians are the tyrants; that take them out of the light, towards the darkness; They belong to the fire and will always remain in it. (Surah Al-Baqarah, Ayat 257)

It is worth mentioning that there are many such verses in the Qur'an that assert the sovereignty of Allah over society and fight and oppose any kind of tyranny. Therefore, it is appropriate to pay more attention to the concept of governance in Islamic society.

Transparency in Islamic teachings

Transparency has existed in religious literature, along with many concepts that were popularised and developed in the modern era, which unfortunately have been induced for various reasons; such concepts are born of the post-Renaissance era and the modern era, and their origin is also the West. Islamic religious teachings are full of instructions for the correct management of the society. The following are some of the examples of such teachings: 'And do not compare truth with falsehood! And don't hide the truth even though you know it!' (Surah Al-Baqarah, Ayat 42); 'Do not follow what you do not know' (Surah Al-Isra, Ayat 36).

In the Qur'an, obedience is based on awareness and transparency of human information, and blind obedience is condemned. Therefore, people have the right to obey the government based on their knowledge. In short, the more transparent the government is, and the more people are aware of it, the more likely they will obey the government.

In a part of his speech, Imam Ali (peace be upon him) advised Malik Ashtar not to distance himself from the people, especially for a long time, and emphasised the necessity of transparent face-to-face dialogue, and he considered this distance to be a factor in creating people's suspicion towards him. Hakim says. In fact, the most disastrous consequence of the lack of transparency is the reduction of people's trust in the government which leads to the weakening of social capital. (Nahj al-Balagha, Letter 53).

Transparent government and corruption

Governance means the act or function of governing and ruling (Biginia et al. 2011). In the vein of all concepts in social sciences, governance is not a novel one. In fact, the term 'governance' was first utilised in France in the 14th century, where it meant 'the centre of government'. Simultaneously, the same use of the term 'governance' in the sense of a nonpolitical character, namely, not interested in political affairs, was found valuable in criticising the deterrence with which the World Bank tried to intervene in the political decisions made by the debtor nations (Shirvani 2011).

Governance is thus a multifaceted system of interactions between structures, traditions, functions, responsibilities and processes, characterised by three key values, namely transparency, accountability and participation. Accordingly, the government and civil society (i.e. socio-economic activists, community-based institutions, structured and unstructured groups, media, etc.) need to understand it at all local, national, regional and global levels (Doornbos 2004). In view of that, academic circles have defined governance based on a set of goals and presuppositions. Governance literally means managing and regulating affairs and, above all, establishing the relationship between citizens and rulers (Midari 2004).

One definition for governance is the establishment of formal and informal processes, structures and regulations that outline the methods by which individuals and organisations can exercise power over decisions that might shape their well-being and quality of life. Governance is thus assumed as a continuous process in which the conflict of interests is settled and cooperative action is assumed (Klijn 2010). It also takes account of official institutions and systems that have gained enough power to ensure compliance with the law, as well as official agreements between the people and institutions or those understood to be of their interests. In line with this, governance has been represented as the behaviour of public institutions to shape public policies and private-sector goods and services, while corruption can be the main attribute of poor governance (Avram 2014).

The success rate of most systems is currently measured based on the realisation of two significant qualities, namely efficiency and effectiveness, which are associated with doing things right and doing the right things, respectively (Robbins 2021). Accordingly, the evaluation of GG can be planned within the two dimensions of efficiency and effectiveness, which are in a two-way interaction, and their balance is the underlying condition for the accomplishment of GG.

From an economic perspective, corruption is one of the main obstacles in the path to economic growth and development, which can cause inefficient policies, a reduction in investment and, as a result, a decrease in economic performance in governments (Dehmardeh, Alizadeh & Zaidizadeh 2011; Rose-Ackerman & Palifka 2016). Moreover, administrative

corruption, as a chronic condition and the oldest known form of damage to the administrative system, is a cognate phenomenon of the government. In other words, administrative corruption has emerged following internal interactions between the organisation and the environment since the time the human activities have been systematised (Khodadad Hosseini & Farhadinejad 2001). Of note, administrative corruption is not limited to a single country or a specific social system, but it can be evident in many countries and organisations (MacDonald & Majeed, 2011). Given that administrative corruption causes a decline in investment, productivity and social services, especially for the poor and low-income people; a rising trend in the cost of living; a decrease in economic growth; and ultimately a further growth in corruption, there will be no ray of hope for the growth and development in a country and its economy, and above all the citizens' well-being and quality of life, if this global issue is not tackled properly (Shafipour 2016).

Currently, administrative corruption is a major challenge facing governmental organisations in many countries across the world. In this regard, the main objective of implementing an anticorruption strategy is to raise morale, trust and respect between the government and the people. There is mutual respect and a positive work environment where trust, integrity and a shared vision are valued. Once implemented, this strategy can have a long-term effect on governance, development and progress and even implications for social change (Sungbeh 2017). The increasing prevalence of administrative corruption in developing countries is nowadays one of the main concerns. Because of the economic, political and structural consequences of administrative corruption, imposing huge financial and spiritual costs on societies, it is of utmost importance to develop strategies to deal with this sinister phenomenon. The *Law on Promoting the Health of the Administrative System and Fighting Corruption* is one of the effective strategies in ensuring the rights of citizens (Hamidian 2016).

Various indicators have been so far proposed for GG, including participation, consensus, transparency, accountability, effectiveness and efficiency, fairness, inclusiveness and rule of law. During this form of governance, corruption is minimised, the views of minorities are taken into consideration, the voices of the most vulnerable groups are heard and the present and future needs of the society are met. In this respect, Huther and Shah (2000) described several indicators, such as citizen participation, government-centredness, social development and economic management for GG and believed that the society could approach GG to the degree in which success was achieved in meeting such indicators. Correspondingly, the World Bank (1992) identified four major indicators of GG, namely public sector management, accountability, legal frameworks for development and information transparency. In addition, the Asian Development Bank (1995) pointed out transparency, accountability, predictability and participation as the indicators of GG. In this vein, the Australian National Audit Office (2003) identified the specific indicators of GG for the public sector, including accountability, supervision, direction and control. The United Nations Development

Program also introduced the indicators of GG as participation, legal rules, transparency, accountability, strategic vision, consensus, equity, effectiveness and efficiency (Atory 2007). The constant utilisation of such indicators is thus of utmost importance, because the principles of internal dynamic governance are taken into account, clear information is provided to the society, all members feel accountable for the decisions made and the participation of the interested groups in the decision-making process and compliance with the law when exercising power are encouraged. These indicators can be indirectly generalised to GG in other governmental organisations. In most cases, 40 different dimensions have been developed to demonstrate the characteristics of GG, including commitment, and the majority of them can be used to strengthen public-sector governance (Ruhanen, Ramesh & Jayakrishnan 2010).

Transparency enables stakeholders to investigate and review any process. Clarifying the government performance accordingly helps to reduce corruption and inefficiency among employees and then improves their overall functioning (Trakulmututa & Chaijareonwattana 2013). Corruption is a universal phenomenon, threatening the administrative systems of all countries, with a history as old as early human societies. Administrative corruption can thus facilitate inactivity in all dimensions and hinder the growth of healthy competitions by damaging development. As the determinants of corruption are multidimensional, various reasons can be mentioned in this context, such as legal, judicial, inspective and supervisory, economic and political ones. Corruption is not a unified and centralised force that can be controlled with a one-dimensional solution but requires the use of holistic and multidimensional strategies that include all the mentioned dimensions. Corruption is sometimes considered a social phenomenon, that is, the unfair use of one's positions by officials for self-interest (Gholami 2017). It is not a newly emerged phenomenon, but its development is as deep-rooted as the history of human societies, organisations and institutions. All societies have accordingly undergone layers of corruption, and no history and civilisation of human life has been an exception. From this viewpoint, it has been acknowledged that corruption, referring to the misuse of available resources for personal gain, is a widespread phenomenon in all societies. It also affects governance, institutions, services and structures in all countries (Sungbeh 2017).

Today, the administrative system in all countries, even the most democratic, developed and underdeveloped ones, is suffering from corruption in all aspects. It means that such systems across the world are exposed to some degrees of corruption. Characterised by its cultural, political and economic components, corruption in any system takes certain forms, for example, paying a bribe at work to use some privileges or have permissions; receiving rewards for good service; not respecting clients; exploiting available documents in line with personal, familial, ethnic, racial and special class interests; buying off administrative agents; wasting public property for personal gain; altering documents; underperforming; or overlooking organisational duties (Khalaf Khani 2009).

In this regard, administrative corruption is a form of social deviance, placed in the category of white-collar organisational deviations; in general, it refers to a behaviour in which a person acts out of the framework of official duties in order to gain one's personal interests and achieve greater welfare or better positions (Hassan Dost Farkhani & Yazdanpanah 2011).

Transparent government and social trust

If the law leads to more transparency of existing structures or current mechanisms, namely the clarification of property rights, information, opportunities, costs, benefits and the like, there is a ray of hope that further steps are being taken toward an institutional reform whose product is reducing corruption and exchange cost economics (Akai 2006). In this way, transparent governance can help citizens build social trust.

Trust is a multidimensional concept with different meanings in various sources, such as confidence, predictability, ability, competence, expertise, benevolence, open management, interest, acceptance, reality and so on. Attention to this concept began to expand during the Eighties and is being investigated from different perspectives (Hassanzadeh 2004).

Although the concept of trust is rooted in Aristotle's literature, there is still little agreement about what trust is and how trust can be achieved (Dieks & Ferrin 2001). Trust here means having confidence in the intentions and actions of others, which is a key factor in mutual relationships. In this vein, trust in leaders plays a vital role in accomplishing goals in a society. Thus, it is possible to maintain effective cooperation in different parts of society only when communication is clear at all levels, and this happens when mutual trust and confidence are established. Confidence refers to broad knowledge that incorporates important concepts because it is able to coordinate human behaviour. Trust is thus assumed as a means for maintaining interpersonal relationships in various contexts (Zarei Matin & Hassanzadeh 2004).

In the trust literature, three components have been so far reflected:

- **Ability:** This is defined as a collection of skills, competencies and qualities that enable an organisation or institution to influence others in a specific domain. Because the trusted person may have high proficiency in some skills that increases the possibility of others trusting them, ability can have a certain range and scope. In any case, the trustee may have a small amount of proficiencies and talents as well as lived and working experiences in other fields, outside that specific extent.
- **Benevolence:** This denotes the domain in which the trustee believes in doing something good for the trustor. Here, there is no motivation to give a benefit to the trustee, because they provide specific achievements for the trustor. An example is the communication between the

trustor and the trustee. The trustee intends to help the trustor, although the trustee is not obligated to help and there is no external reward for the trustor.

- **Honesty or integrity:** This means that the existence of a relationship between honesty and trust depends on the trustor's perception of the trustee's integrity and whether or not the trustor follows a series of principles that the trustee considers acceptable. Based on previous research, these components as the main effective factors can create trust (Alwani 2010).

According to the research literature, the following hypothesis is presented:

H_1 : Transparent governance based on the teachings of Nahj al-Balagha has a significant effect on social trust among Muslim citizens.

Research method

This research was conducted with the aim of determining the effect of transparent governance based on the teachings of Nahj al-Balagha on the social trust of Iranian Muslim citizens in 2022. For this purpose, 428 Iranian Muslim citizens were selected as the statistical population, using convenience sampling. After distributing the questionnaires, 402 persons were found appropriate and the rest were excluded from the analysis (because of the lack of correct completion). The demographic characteristics of the statistical population are provided in Table 1.

Research instrument

To measure transparent governance based on the teachings of Nahj al-Balagha, the 58-item questionnaire developed by Rastgar and Mousavi Davoudi (2022) was administered. This could evaluate transparent governance based on four indicators, namely religious transparency, behavioural transparency, structural transparency and economic transparency. The 29-item questionnaire designed by Yaqoubi (2011) was additionally used to reflect on social trust, via three indicators of ability, benevolence and honesty. Cronbach's alpha coefficient in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS; IBM Corporation,

TABLE 1: Demographic characteristics of the statistical population.

Variable	Index	Value
Level of education or occupation	Master's degree	166
	PhD	189
	Faculty member	47
Age (years old)	Under 30	171
	31–40	170
	Over 40	61
Gender	Male	244
	Female	158
Marital status	Single	114
	Married	288
Province	Mazandaran	119
	Tehran	140
	Qom	78
	Semnan	65

Armonk, New York, United States) was further used to measure the reliability of the research tool, whose results are listed in Table 2.

To determine the validity of the questionnaire, confirmatory factor analysis was also used. According to Table 3, the research instrument had good validity.

Findings

The structural equation modelling (SEM) outcomes are illustrated in Table 4 and Figure 1, indicating that transparent governance based on the teachings of Nahj al-Balagha has a significant positive effect on social trust among Iranian Muslim citizens.

A path coefficient of higher than 0 indicates a positive relationship between research variables, and a t -value of higher than 1.96 indicates a significant relationship between research variables.

Discussion

This study investigated the role of transparent governance based on the teachings of Nahj al-Balagha in creating social trust among Iranian Muslim citizens in 2022. The study results demonstrated that transparent governance as per the teachings of Nahj al-Balagha has a significant positive effect on social trust (path coefficient = 0.58, t -value = 5.54).

Of note, governance is the art of steering societies and organisations. There is no right answer regarding whether the word 'steering' is fitting or not, but no doubt governance involves interactions between structures, processes and practices that ascertain how power is exercised, decisions are made and citizens and other stakeholders express their opinions. Governance is not far off from power, relationships and accountability; that is, those who can be influential and make decisions are held

TABLE 2: Cronbach's alpha coefficient values.

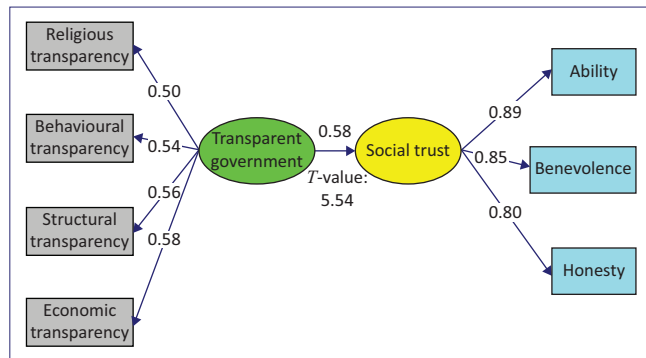
Indicator or variable	Items	Cronbach's alpha value
Religious transparency	8	0.77
Behavioural transparency	28	0.85
Structural transparency	15	0.82
Religious transparency	7	0.73
Transparent governance based on Nahj al-Balagha's teachings	58	0.91
Ability	14	0.80
Benevolence	8	0.79
Honesty	7	0.76
Social trust	29	0.90

TABLE 3: Validity assessment of research tools.

Fitness indices	Values
Chi-square or degree of freedom	2.6574
P -value	0.0000
Root mean square error of approximation	0.0065
Goodness-of-fit index	0.0091
Adjusted goodness-of-fit index	0.0090

TABLE 4: Results of research hypothesis testing.

Number	Hypothesis	Path coefficient	t-value	Result
1	Transparent governance based on the teachings of Nahj al-Balagha → Social trust	0.58	5.54	Confirmed

**FIGURE 1:** Structural equation modelling.

accountable. Good governance and human rights are mutually reinforcing. In this way, strengthening democratic institutions, improving service delivery, establishing rule of law, fighting corruption, encouraging public participation and boosting accountability among officials all help in promoting human rights.

To evaluate GG, there is a need to shed light on the relationship between what is done (i.e. activities, decisions and measures) and what is planned to be achieved (viz. goals and values). In fact, GG requires finding tools that are relevant and appropriate to values. For this purpose, looking for the features that explain sources and processes, and above all include the results and effects, is of importance. Good governance is a means to achieve one or more desirable goals. Its indicators are further identified by determining proper instruments and desired outcomes.

To meet their needs, human beings in any society have to establish relationships with others. Any communication accordingly demands prerequisites, including trust, for being guaranteed along with its effectiveness. Trust is a fundamental element in maintaining social life and order, as well as generating bonds between members in any society. Literally, the term 'trust' means reliance, confidence and belief, and connotatively, it is a kind of faith and belief in something ahead. Trust can thus help express a perception and mental expectation of the people about the future and the future actions of a person, an institution and a social relationship. The principles of trust can also form social capital, because trust moves people toward finding a desire to participate and interact positively with others, and the networks of social relationships are shaped through which human needs in social life are met, and the social energy necessary for strengthening the society is obtained. Trust is the main factor affecting unity, cohesion, stability and order. From this point of view, trust can be in a dual relationship with society; on the one hand, it is created through the

interaction of people with others. In other words, trust is the product of lived experiences in any society. On the other hand, higher social trust creates a more cohesive society. Against this background, the level of social trust is significantly correlated with the level of development and economic equality. Mainly, more developed societies with higher levels of social justice show a higher level of social trust. At the same time, trust is an extremely individual concept; that is, it is formed in one's mind, but it is also an extremely social concept, caused by the experience of interactions with others. When someone gains a positive experience from others in interpersonal and intragroup communications, it becomes more possible to build trust and strengthen it. Accordingly, trust requires a trustee and trustor and their inter-relationships. In conclusion, trust ends if each party violates the rules of this relationship and its effectiveness to satisfy others' needs.

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Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Authors' contributions

A.A.R. contributed to the supervision, editing and conceptualisation; S.M.M.D. contributed to the writing of the original draft; R.S.M. and I.M. were responsible for investigation.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for carrying out research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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Data availability

Data is available on request from the corresponding author.

Disclaimer

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