



The Reforms of Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz in the Umayyad Caliphate

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Abstract

After approximately four decades of Umayyad rule, several political, administrative, and moral problems emerged within the caliphate. Some rulers were perceived as moving away from the ethical foundations of Islamic governance, creating injustice, nepotism, and social tension. This article describes the reforms of Caliph Umar bin Abdul Aziz within the Umayyad government by strengthening the original manuscript through a qualitative library research design, historical-content analysis, and recent secondary literature. The revised analysis shows that Umar bin Abdul Aziz's reform was not merely moral advice, but a structured governance agenda: protecting the weak, correcting nepotism, replacing unjust governors, restoring public assets to the Bayt al-Mal, strengthening accountable administration, and directing power toward public welfare. Although his reign was brief, the reform model remains relevant for discussions on clean government, social justice, bureaucratic reform, and ethical leadership.

Keywords: *Umar bin Abdul Aziz, Umayyad Dynasty, reform, Islamic governance, Bayt al-Mal, justice.*

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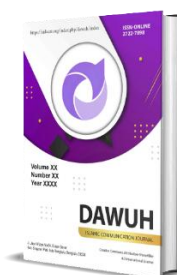


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INTRODUCTION

Umar bin Abdul Aziz understood that restoring Islamic values to governance could not be achieved merely through theory, speeches, or political slogans. Reform had to begin with the leader himself, proceed through the restructuring of the administration, and be demonstrated in policies that directly impacted the lives of the people. It is within this context that the initial draft of this article positions reform at the heart of his administration: an effort to rescue the state from malfeasance, revive justice, and mend the relationship between the ruler and the populace (Cholil, 2026).

Historically, the Umayyad Dynasty was the first major dynasty in Islamic history to vastly expand its territory, establish a formal administrative structure, develop the economy, and intensify the spread of Islam across various regions. The dynasty also marked a significant shift from the more collective leadership model of the preceding era to a hereditary monarchy centered in Damascus. While this transition brought administrative progress, it simultaneously gave rise to substantial political, social, and ethnic issues (Wati et al., 2025) (Maulidan et al., 2024).

One key policy implemented by the Umayyad Dynasty prior to the reign of Umar bin Abdul Aziz was the Arabization of administration, currency, and state symbols. Although this policy strengthened Arab-Islamic political identity, in certain regions it also fostered inequality between Arab Muslims and mawali (non-Arab Muslims). Meanwhile, nepotism, the dominance of the ruling family, inequitable power distribution, and an increasingly authoritarian style of governance eroded the Umayyads' political legitimacy. Consequently, the rise of Umar bin Abdul Aziz as Caliph cannot be viewed merely as a change of leadership, but rather as a moral and structural correction of a system that had begun to go astray (Wati et al., 2025) (Istighfari & Sudjatnika, 2025).

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach, specifically utilizing library research. A qualitative approach was selected because the subject matter—comprising historical events, leadership concepts, government policies, and reform values—requires in-depth interpretation rather than statistical measurement. In qualitative research, theories and literature sources serve as guides for understanding meanings, contexts, and the patterns of relationships between events (A'yun et al., 2025).

The data sources for this study consist of both primary and secondary sources. The primary source is the initial article titled "Reformasi Umar bin Abdul Aziz dalam Pemerintahan Bani Umayyah" (The Reforms of Umar bin Abdul Aziz under the Umayyad Caliphate), along with the classical historical references cited therein—such as the works of al-Tabari, Ibn Kathir, Ibn al-Athir, Ibn Sa'd, al-Baladhuri, al-Suyuti, and Ibn Khaldun. Secondary sources include the accompanying articles discussing the Umayyad Dynasty, Arabization, Umar bin Abdul Aziz's political and economic policies, qualitative research models, bureaucratic reform, public service, legal reform, political conflict, and Islamic education.

Data collection was conducted through document analysis. All articles were read, classified, and categorized according to the following themes: (1) the history and dynamics of the Umayyad Dynasty; (2) the political and economic reforms of Umar bin Abdul Aziz; (3) the



concept of reform in Islam; (4) governance and public service; and (5) the relevance of reform to education and society. This data collection method aligns with the library research approach, which utilizes books, journal articles, historical documents, and existing references as materials for analysis (Muliadi et al., 2025).

Data analysis was performed using historical content analysis. The analytical process involved reading sources, reducing repetitive information, grouping data by theme, comparing classical and contemporary sources, and formulating a synthesis. Content analysis was employed because historical research necessitates the examination of written documents, whether in the form of classical texts, scholarly articles, or policy descriptions. The validity of the study is ensured through source triangulation—specifically, by comparing information from primary manuscripts, classical historical literature, and contemporary scholarly articles (Maulidan et al., 2024).

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

The Historical Context of the Umayyads and the Need for Reform

The Umayyad dynasty emerged following the era of the Rashidun Caliphs, becoming a major political power that expanded Islamic territory from the Levant, North Africa, and Andalusia to the eastern regions. This expansion demonstrated formidable military, diplomatic, and administrative capabilities. However, such vast territorial growth brought new burdens: bureaucracy became increasingly complex, tensions rose between the Arab elite and non-Arab populations, and overseeing regional governors became more difficult (Maulidan et al., 2024).

This article asserts that after approximately forty years of Umayyad rule, political maladies emerged that threatened the survival of the Caliphate. These ailments manifested in acts of oppression, the misappropriation of wealth, the appointment of officials based on kinship, and weak oversight of governors. Contemporary literature on the Umayyad dynasty also indicates that social inequality between Arabs and non-Arabs, sectarian conflict, nepotism, and authoritarianism were key factors that eroded public support for the dynasty (Wati et al., 2025).

It was against this backdrop that Umar bin Abdul Aziz ascended to the caliphate. He was not merely an heir to power but a reformer who sought to realign the government's orientation toward justice. Literature on Islamic economics notes that Umar bin Abdul Aziz reigned from approximately 717 to 720 CE; he is recognized as the eighth Umayyad caliph who, despite his brief tenure, brought about significant change (Khairunnisa et al., 2021).

Helping the Weak and Upholding Justice

The first step in Umar bin Abdul Aziz's reforms was to champion the cause of the weak and oppressed. Early accounts recount the story of a group of Bedouins who complained that their land had been seized by al-Walid bin Abdul Malik and given to his relatives. Umar ruled in favor of the Bedouins, deeming God's law more worthy of adherence than title deeds born of unjust authority. This incident demonstrates that Umar's reforms were grounded in the principle that the rights of the people supersede the interests of the ruling elite (Cholil, 2000).

This principle of justice aligns with an ideal leadership style that rejects the hoarding of wealth, prioritizes egalitarianism, and positions religious scholars as moral advisors. In the context of Fahrudin Faiz's thought, Umar bin Abdul Aziz is viewed as a leader who did not



regard his office as a means to indulge in power, but rather as a sacred trust to protect the community (Anzaikhan & Idani, 2022).

From the perspective of modern governance, the protection of ordinary citizens can be seen as an early form of equitable public service. Reforms are meaningless if they merely alter structures without providing the public with a sense of security and access to justice. Literature on bureaucratic reform emphasizes that public service lies at the heart of good governance, as it bridges the state's obligations with the rights of the people (Wibowo & Kertati, 2022).

Eliminating the Practice of Nepotism

The initial draft of the article identifies the elimination of nepotism as one of the key reforms introduced by Umar bin Abdul Aziz. Prior to his administration, the practice of favoring relatives was deeply entrenched. Umar demonstrated the courage to remove officials from his own family when they failed to discharge their duties fairly. This stance illustrated that the criteria for holding office were not based on kinship, but rather on capacity, integrity, and the ability to uphold justice (Cholil, 2000).

Within the framework of good governance, these policies reflect principles of meritocracy, accountability, and oversight. Articles regarding Umar bin Abdul Aziz's political policies note that he appointed trustworthy governors, established clear plans, exercised oversight, upheld justice, engaged in consultation, and remained accountable for the authority he wielded (Muliadi et al., 2025).

Modern bureaucratic reform also prioritizes the eradication of corruption, collusion, and nepotism. The objective is to create a bureaucracy that is responsive, professional, transparent, and service-oriented. Thus, the reforms of Umar bin Abdul Aziz can be viewed as a historical example of governance that severed the link between power and familial interests (Mendrofa et al., 2025).

Fire the Zalim Governor and Replace him with a Trustworthy Official

Umar bin Abdul Aziz realized that reform could not succeed as long as regional administrations remained under the control of oppressive governors. Consequently, he dismissed governors and tax collectors known for oppressing the populace. Historical records note the dismissal of officials such as Usamah bin Zaid al-Tanukhi, Yazid bin Abi Muslim, and al-Jarrah bin Abdullah (of Khurasan) due to unjust policies—specifically, the continued collection of the jizyah tax from individuals who had converted to Islam.

These actions demonstrated administrative courage. A reformist leader cannot simply proclaim values; they must also have the courage to replace officials who undermine those values. In analyses of Umar bin Abdul Aziz's political policies, the oversight of officials and the appointment of trustworthy governors are viewed as keys to the success of his administration's reforms (Muliadi et al., 2025).

This policy of replacing governors can also be compared to principles of modern legal reform. Legal and regulatory reforms struggle to be effective if procedures lack transparency or if the substance favors narrow interests. Therefore, reform requires not only new rules but also implementers who possess integrity (Sutrisno & Poerana, 2020).



Returning State Property to Baitulmal

One of the most notable reforms was the return of state assets to the Baitulmal (public treasury). Umar bin Abdul Aziz refused the luxury vehicles and amenities prepared for the caliph, returned unlawfully acquired lands and assets, and required his family to surrender wealth derived from state privileges. These actions demonstrated that public office must not become a means for personal enrichment (Cholil, 2000).

These policies were reinforced by an Islamic economic orientation that emphasized distributive justice. Studies on the economic transformation under the Umayyad Caliphate note that Umar bin Abdul Aziz ensured the equitable distribution of zakat, abolished unjust taxes, curbed corruption, and redistributed resources to foster social balance (Nurhalisa et al., 2024).

Other articles regarding Umar bin Abdul Aziz's economic policies also highlight the success of his administration in managing zakat and boosting prosperity; indeed, the era is described as one where it was difficult to find zakat recipients because the people's basic needs had already been met. While such narratives require a critical historical perspective, the core message is clear: equitable economic governance strengthens state legitimacy (Khairunnisa et al., 2021).

Making the Government a Center of Divine Guidance and Exemplary Conduct

Early texts explain that Umar bin Abdul Aziz sought to transform the government into a center of divine guidance. The government was not merely an institution of power but a moral exemplar. He structured the administration around four key pillars: governors, judges, treasurers, and the Caliph. All four were required to set an example for society, as the people would judge both religion and the state based on the conduct of those entrusted with authority.

This idea aligns with the concepts of *islah* (reform) and *tajdid* (renewal) within the Islamic tradition. Reform in Islam is not simply a matter of altering forms; rather, it is an effort to rectify deviations, revitalize the principle of justice, and align social practices with the fundamental values of the Qur'an and Sunnah. Thus, the reforms of Umar bin Abdul Aziz can be understood as a *tajdid* of governance—a renewal rooted in core values rather than one severed from Islamic identity (Dacholfany, 2015).

Literature on contemporary Islamic reform also indicates that Islamic renewal consistently navigates the tension between upholding fundamental principles and the need to rationally interpret new realities. This pattern is evident in the approach of Umar bin Abdul Aziz: he did not reject state administration but instead directed it toward justice, trustworthiness, and the public good (Syamsuddin, 2006).

Be careful of Royal Treasures

Umar bin Abdul Aziz's prudence regarding state assets is illustrated by the story of the lamp. When discussing public affairs, he used a lamp provided by the Baitulmal (public treasury); however, when the conversation shifted to personal matters, he would extinguish the state-provided lamp and light his own. While the story may seem simple, it carries profound significance: the boundary between public and private assets must be strictly maintained.

This type of ethical conduct forms the foundation of clean governance. In modern bureaucratic reform, the quality of public service is measured not only by the speed of procedures but also by accountability, transparency, responsiveness to complaints, and the



prevention of misconduct. Thus, the story of Umar bin Abdul Aziz's lamp serves as a symbol of integrity in public administration (Mendrofa et al., 2025).

In the realm of public service, a lack of clarity regarding service standards, costs, procedures, and timelines often creates opportunities for corruption or illicit levies. Studies on bureaucratic reform and public service emphasize that service standards are crucial instruments for preventing misconduct and providing certainty to the public. This principle is rooted in a moral stance that aligns with Umar's cautious approach to the use of state resources (Wibowo & Kertati, 2022).

The Impact of the Reformation on the Faith Community and the State

Historical accounts indicate that the reforms of Umar bin Abdul Aziz fostered security, prosperity, and general well-being. He raised the salaries of low-income officials, ensured the financial needs of religious scholars and jurists were met so they could focus on their studies, paid off the debts of the destitute, assisted the poor with marriage expenses, ransomed Muslim captives, cared for orphans, improved agriculture, developed water sources, built roads, and provided waystations for travelers.

These initiatives demonstrate that Umar's reforms extended beyond individual morality to encompass public policy. He linked a leader's character to economic distribution, administrative quality, and the protection of vulnerable groups. In the study of the Umayyad era, the success of the administration was heavily influenced by just leadership, an inclusive governance system, and the ability to respond adaptively to socio-political challenges (Wati et al., 2025).

Another outcome was the easing of social tensions. Equitable policies regarding the mawali (non-Arab converts) and marginalized groups reduced the inequalities previously entrenched by the Umayyad social system. In the context of Arabization, Umar's reforms can be viewed as a corrective to tendencies toward political and ethnic exclusivism, as he prioritized Islamic principles, justice, and trustworthiness over tribal identity (Istighfari & Sudjatnika, 2025).

The Relevance of Umar bin Abdul Aziz's Reforms to Modern Governance

The reforms of Umar bin Abdul Aziz hold significant relevance for modern governance. First, reform must begin with the integrity of the leader. Without setting an example, structural changes risk becoming mere slogans. Second, reform requires restructuring the administrative apparatus by appointing trustworthy officials, dismissing unjust ones, and maintaining consistent oversight. Third, reform must yield tangible improvements in public welfare rather than focusing solely on bureaucratic efficiency.

Fourth, reform necessitates the management of elite conflicts. Literature on internal political party conflicts during Indonesia's Reformasi era indicates that organizational strife often arises from personalistic-oligarchic leadership, weak institutionalization, and ineffective formal rules. Although the contexts differ, parallels can be drawn with the Umayyad era: when power is monopolized by families and factions, public justice is easily overshadowed by group interests (Budiatri et al., 2017).

Fifth, reform requires social education. Studies on cooperative learning models demonstrate that social attributes—such as cooperation, empathy, responsibility, and



communication—can be cultivated through interaction and collaboration. Applied to governance, Umar's reforms did not merely change personnel; they instilled a new social culture characterized by concern for the people, the avoidance of injustice, and a sense of responsibility (Virnanda et al., 2025).

Sixth, reform demands a learner's mindset. Research into the mindset of youth during Indonesia's independence movements and the Reformasi era underscores the importance of knowledge and moral courage in transforming unjust social orders. Umar bin Abdul Aziz exemplified this mindset: he had the courage to alter power structures that benefited his own family in the pursuit of truth and the common good (Wijaya, 2013).

Seventh, reform in Islamic governance must be contextualized within the challenges of the times. Discussions on Islamic educational reform in the face of globalization emphasize that renewal must harness the benefits of change without sacrificing core values. Thus, the example set by Umar bin Abdul Aziz should not be revered merely as a romanticized historical ideal; instead, it must be translated into concrete practices regarding governance ethics, character education, and public policies rooted in justice (Dacholfany, 2015).

CONCLUSION

The reforms implemented by Umar bin Abdul Aziz during the Umayyad Caliphate serve as a powerful example that political renewal must be grounded in moral integrity, legal justice, sound administrative governance, and the welfare of the people. He championed the vulnerable, eradicated nepotism, dismissed oppressive governors, restored state assets to the public treasury, strictly separated personal wealth from public funds, and established the government as a model of conduct. Despite his brief tenure, he succeeded in creating an enduring historical legacy of a leader who was just, ascetic, and dedicated to the public good.

Contemporary analyses demonstrate that Umar bin Abdul Aziz's reforms remain relevant across various domains, including good governance, bureaucratic reform, public service delivery, legal reform, the management of elite conflicts, social education, and Islamic renewal. The key takeaway is that reform cannot rely solely on changing regulations; it requires moral courage, trustworthy officials, robust oversight, and the tangible delivery of justice to the community.

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