

## Obligingness to Leadership: A Case Study of the Qur'ān

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### ABSTRACT

We can divide human beings into two categories: Leaders and Followers. Leaders are a few, the rest of the overwhelming majority of the human beings are followers. They show an earnest tendency of following or obligingness towards their leaders. This capacity of the following is exploited and abused by the egoist and toxic leaders to bring destruction to their followers and the world. The author of the paper tries to explore and determine the motives of obligingness or complaisance of blind following. The author studies this phenomenon in the light of theories of the hierarchy of needs by Abraham Maslow, The Situational Factor by Philip Zimbardo, the Function of Labeling by Albert Bandura and Ego Depletion by Michael Cholbi. These theories have earned good acceptance from the experts. The theories are found helpful to understand the mentality of leaders and their followers as described by the Qur'ān. These theories are applied to some selected cases from the Qur'ān to reach a better understanding of the phenomenon.

The Qur'ān at many places describes and discusses this human tendency. It presents dialogue between the leaders and their blind followers in the life hereafter, the person of Pharaoh, his maneuvering, his courtiers, the common people of Egypt, the followers of pagan chieftains and their opposition to the prophets give us ample description to know how blind following actually works under the influence of leadership. The author hopes that this study helps understand the mentality of the present day leaders and their blind or complaisant followers.

**Keywords:** *Following; Obligingness; Hierarchy of Needs; Self-Actualization; Ego Depletion; Situational Factor.*

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**Introduction:**

Human beings show a strong tendency of following or obligingness towards their leaders. It is observed that once they accept someone as their leader, they submit their will to him or her and seldom willing to review their decision or alter their choice, no matter what. This helps the egoist and the toxic leaders to exploit their followers quite easily. The author studies this phenomenon of obligingness in the light of theories of the hierarchy of needs, situational factor, the function of labeling and Ego Depletion. The findings are, then, applied to some cases from the Qur'ān to reach a better understanding of the phenomenon.

**The Psychology of Following:**

We can divide human beings into two categories: leaders and followers. Some people tend to lead, others tend to follow. Leaders manipulate followers, and the followers, let themselves be manipulated. We try to ascertain the motives of this blind following or obligingness of masses in the light of some studies of motives and the Qur'ān.

In 1961 Stanley Milgram (August 15, 1933 – December 20, 1984), the professor of Yale University made some experiment on a closed group to judge the conflict between the obedience to authority and the personal conscience. 40 participants from different occupations participated in the experiment. In this experiment the participants had to deliver electric shocks from minor to higher voltage to a person (the learner) on giving the wrong answer from the multiple choice questions. The learner was sitting in another room and communication was made through microphones. The result was shocking. 26 of the participants delivered the electric shocks up to the maximum level to the poor victim at the orders of the authority (the experimenters) while only 14 stopped delivering shocks before they reached the maximum level of shocks. In other words, more than two third of the participants were delivering electric shocks up to the maximum level, at the orders of the authorities, to the learner against his unwillingness, agitation, complaining of having heart trouble,

pleading to let him free and above all, silence from him that no response was coming from him. It was observed that despite feeling agitated the subjects continued to follow the orders until the end. Stanley Milgram while concluding his results, remarks on the state of obligingness:

*What is the limit of such obedience? At many points we attempted to establish a boundary. Cries from the victim were inserted; not good enough. The victim claimed heart trouble; subjects still shocked him on command. The victim pleaded that he be let free, and his answers no longer registered on the signal box; subjects continued to shock him. At last the outset we had not conceived that such drastic procedures would be needed to generate disobedience, and each step was added only as the ineffectiveness of the earlier techniques became clear. The final effort to establish a limit was the Touch-Proximity condition. But the very first subject in this condition subdued the victim on command, and proceeded to highest shock level. A quarter of the subjects in this condition performed similarly.<sup>1</sup>*

Professor Milgram showed his dismay concluding the shocking results of obligingness to the authority as:

*The results, as seen and felt in the laboratory, are to this author disturbing. They raise the possibility that human nature... cannot be counted on to malevolent authority. A substantial proportion of the people do what they are told to do, irrespective of the content of the act and without limitations of conscience, so long as they perceive that the command comes from a legitimate authority.<sup>2</sup>*

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**The Tendency of Dependency:**

Man is a dependent being. In his childhood, he depends on his parents. In the later stages of his life, he needs leaders to replace his dependency on his parents. Dr. Jean Lipman-Blumen<sup>3</sup> writes, “*The psychological needs most relevant to our yearning for leaders are structured as a need for authority figures to replace our parents and other early caretakers*”.<sup>4</sup>

This dependency emerges in two forms:

- In the form of fear
- In the form of needs.

**Fear Begets Leaders:**

Life is uncertain. Fragility makes people look for some protection and stability. People need someone to rest their fears with him and feel relaxed, though this trust in their leader is an illusion, but man is prone to live with his illusions to avoid hard realities. Thomas Nadelhoffer<sup>5</sup> writes:

*There is gathering data from social psychology that suggest that illusions are quite prevalent in our everyday thinking and that some of these illusions may even be conducive to our overall wellbeing.*<sup>6</sup>

Shelley E. Taylor<sup>7</sup> (born 1946) and Jonathon D. Brown<sup>8</sup>, on such delusional behaviour of man, write:

*Evidence from social cognition research suggests that, contrary to much traditional, psychological wisdom, the mentally healthy person may not be fully cognizant of the day-to-day flotsam and jetsam of life. Rather, the mentally healthy person appears to have the enviable capacity to distort reality in a direction that enhances self-esteem, maintain beliefs in personal efficacy, and promotes an optimistic view of the future.*<sup>9</sup>

People need a leader to comfort their fear. The studies on people's need of leaders by Lipman-Blumen suggest that, "*Strong yearnings for leaders percolate up from our unconscious, where psychological needs send us in search of leaders who can comfort our fears.*"<sup>10</sup> Further, she writes:

*"Situational fears" give rise to an increased need for certainty and orderliness. Leaders who promise us an orderly, predictable, and controlled world can seem very attractive when everything around us appears to be disintegrating.*<sup>11</sup>

Fears are invented, if ready ones are not available, to make people vulnerable and thus the uncritical follower.

We note that the Pharaoh used the same tactic. He told his people that Moses' invitation to faith in the One God is actually his quest to grab the power and to oust the Egyptians from their own land:

﴿قَالُوا إِنْ هَٰذَا إِلَّا سِحْرٌ يُرِيدُنَا أَنْ نُخْرِجَكُم مِّنْ أَرْضِكُمْ بِسِحْرِهِمَا وَيَذْهَبَا بِطَرِيقَتِكُمُ الْمُثَلَىٰ﴾<sup>12</sup>

*Saying [to one another]: "These two are surely sorcerers' intent on driving you from your land by their sorcery, and on doing away with your time-honoured way of life.*

This propaganda of fear worked, though, one can find not a single trace of such an idea in Moses' campaign. Yet the Egyptians believed the Pharaoh without questioning his allegation against Moses. They fell to victim to insecurity.

### **Needs Beget Leaders:**

Human beings are not always able to fulfill their needs by themselves. They need someone who can either fulfill their needs or promise them to fulfill or at least provide them illusions to meet them. The model of the hierarchy of needs as presented by Abraham Maslow<sup>13</sup> serves us as a good pattern to see the function of needs in

creating the longing in the people for a leader to follow, so as to fulfill their needs. These needs start from the very basic level of physiological needs to the higher need of self-actualization.

Abraham Maslow presented a model of the hierarchy of human needs according to which man chooses to behave in a certain way. These needs emerge in order unless impeded by some factors. According to him there is a hierarchy of five basic human needs:

1. Physiological needs
2. Safety needs
3. Love need
4. Esteem needs
5. The need for self-actualization

Maslow writes:

*Human needs arrange themselves in hierarchies of pre-potency. That is to say, the appearance of one need usually rests on the prior satisfaction of another, more pre-potent need. Man is a perpetually wanting animal. Also, no need or drive can be treated as if it were isolated or discrete; every drive is related to the state of satisfaction or dissatisfaction of other drives.<sup>14</sup>*

More or less the needs come in the same order, but the reversal is too possible for individuals for some other factors.

*Followers are also driven by more pragmatic needs. Thus, we often stay with toxic (evil or malevolent) leaders because working for them fulfils an assortment of practical needs – like shelter, food, and doctor's bills.<sup>15</sup>*

The Pharaoh used this fear of basic needs to deviate his people from Moses and kept them following him:

﴿وَنَادَى فِرْعَوْنُ فِي قَوْمِهِ قَالَ يَا قَوْمِ أَلَيْسَ لِي مُلْكُ مِصْرَ وَهَذِهِ الْأَنْهَارُ  
تَجْرِي مِن تَحْتِي أَفَلَا تُبْصِرُونَ أَمْ أَنَا خَيْرٌ مِّنْ هَذَا الَّذِي هُوَ مَهِينٌ﴾<sup>16</sup>

*And Pharaoh called out among his people; he said, "O my people, does not the kingdom of Egypt belong to me, and these rivers flowing beneath me; then do you not see? Or am I [not] better than this one who is insignificant.*

There underlaid the threat in his declaration that if they followed Moses, they would be deprived of the benefits of their citizenship of Egypt. Their basic physiological needs would go unfulfilled. This threat worked and the Egyptians kept following their leader, the Pharaoh and refused to listen to Moses.

### **Existential Anxiety or Meaningful Living:**

Life seems to be meaningless unless someone gives some meaning to it. And when someone gives meaning to it, the people love to hear from him more, and tend to follow him. Lipman-Blumen writes:

*The second set of internal needs, our existential needs, stems from the painful awareness of our own mortality...The consoling hope that our existence will have served some meaningful purpose allows us to move forward, without succumbing to paranoia and despair. Toxic leaders mollify this desire by persuading us that we belong to "The Chosen."<sup>17</sup>*

Hitler intoxicated them with the slogan of Nordicism, the master race, which deserves to rule the world. He filled the vacuum of their disappointment and frustration with the air of ambition. He was quite succeeded in blinding his nation, but eventually led them to greater defeat and humiliation in the WW II.

Moses used this tactic to revitalize the children of Israel, who were living a purposeless life, first, during their plight of misery in

the shackles of subjugation in Egypt, and then their wandering in the desert of Sinai.

﴿وَإِذْ قَالَ مُوسَىٰ لِقَوْمِهِ يَا قَوْمِ اذْكُرُوا نِعْمَةَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ إِذْ جَعَلَ فِيكُمْ  
 أَنْبِيَاءَ وَجَعَلَكُمْ مُلُوكًا وَآتَاكُمْ مَا لَمْ يُؤْتِ أَحَدًا مِّنَ الْعَالَمِينَ﴾<sup>18</sup>

*And [mention, O Muḥammad], when Moses said to his people, "O my people, remember the favor of Allāh upon you when He appointed among you prophets and made you possessors and gave you that which He had not given anyone among the worlds.*

### **Self-Actualization and Illusion of Grandiosity:**

A nation, which is satiated in its needs as described in the hierarchy of needs from physiological needs to esteem needs, steps forward for self-actualization. At this stage, they want to explore themselves further. They want to make themselves feel, get distinguished among the comity of nations. This need contains the wish for grandiosity as integral. A leader of an otherwise satiated nation just needs to ignite their need for self-actualization and grandiosity to make them follow him.

Another aspect of this theory of self-actualization is that it is not the people but the leaders, who in their quest of their own self-actualization and lust for grandiosity rein their people to the goals, they want to achieve for themselves. Batty Glad<sup>19</sup> writes:

*Using theories from Heinz Kohut, Post (1993) noted that tyrants' followers are apt to need to immerse themselves in the grandiose leader as a means of achieving their own grandiose goals. The leader, for his part, needs his followers as a mirror to reinforce his elevated notions of himself.<sup>20</sup>*

In the examples of Napoleon Bonaparte and Hitler, these dictators and their nations, both were using each other for their self-actualization and grandiosity.



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**The Situational Factor and Function of Labeling:**

The Situational Factor is the factor that influences an individual or a crowd or group to behave in a specific way. Such behaviour continues until the situational factor lasts. Under such factor, an individual, mob, or a group embarks upon such actions and behaviour, which they cannot expect of themselves. The Cambridge dictionary of psychology defines situation factor as:

*... a situational attribution (factor) is made when it is assumed that the person has behaved in such a way because of something very specific to the situation the person was in (rather than influenced by some part of his or her personality or other internal factors).<sup>21</sup>*

Such a situation is created with the function of labeling. This function is well explained by Albert Bandura<sup>22</sup> through his experiment of labeling. He set up an experiment in which he took two groups of students. Both the groups had to deliver electric shocks to one another through a device on giving a wrong answer. Intensity and duration of shocks to deliver depended upon the discretion of the groups. Before the experiment, Bandura casually put in the ears of a group his remarks about the other group of students as “animals”, and he put in the ears of the second group that the other group was “nice”. This created a noticeable change in the response of the two groups of students to each other. This change in response was observed in their length of time and intensity of electric shocks they gave to each other on giving wrong answers. Those who were labeled as animals received more intense and longer shocks than those who were labeled as nice.<sup>23</sup>

It proves that the labeling plays a great role in moulding the behaviour of man to decide his attitude towards the other person or a group of people.

This situational factor is well observed by Philip Zimbardo<sup>24</sup> (born March 23, 1933) in the behaviour of hostile mobs. Philip Zimbardo noted that genteel people of Hutus of Rwanda turned into

savage brutes to machete their peaceful neighbours, Tutsi, 1994, under the influence of the situational factor. This situation was created by the function of labeling. Their politicians created the racial hatred against their peaceful minority community, Tutsi, that they were their national enemies. The Hutus people followed their leaders for their racial affinity with them, without criticizing the logicity of the invented label. Once the situation took place, the arguments were no longer needed. All the Hutus people participated in the carnage of the Tutsi with national enthusiasm.<sup>25</sup>

The Pharaoh used this psychological tactic of labeling against Moses to discredit him. He levied a number of labels upon him. The masses never thought to analyze his allegations and accusations.

### **Ego Depletion**

The Ego Depletion is defined as:

*“The core idea behind ego depletion is that the self’s acts of volition draw on some limited resource, akin to strength or energy and that, therefore, one act of volition will have a detrimental impact on subsequent volition.”<sup>26</sup>*

People after submitting to their leaders are subject to Ego Depletion. They feel fatigue to bring their leader’s actions into question, or criticize him to alter their decision of following or not following him having reviewing and assessing his actions and performance. They diminish their will power and cognition in front of a man, whom they once glorified and grandiose in their eyes. Cholbi writes:

*Our fears that we are personally powerless to challenge bad leaders also contribute to our reluctance to confront them. These and still other psychological needs make followers seek and respond to leaders who assure us they can fulfill those longings.<sup>27</sup>*

The same goes for the courtiers and the people of the Pharaoh. The Pharaoh in response to Moses' simple and clear, logical arguments and manifest miracles, levied nonsensical objections and false allegations to Moses. The masses followed the Pharaoh instead of Moses. They did not ask the Pharaoh to prove his allegations; they just believed him because they had depleted their ego before him, halted their cognition and followed him uncritically. This state of obligingness is referred in the Qur'an as:

﴿فَاسْتَخَفَّ قَوْمَهُ فَاطَاعُوهُ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا قَوْمًا فَسِيقِينَ﴾<sup>28</sup>

*Thus he made fool of his people, and they obeyed him. Surely they were a sinful people.*

### **The Psychology of Followers as Depicted by the Qur'an itself:**

It is interesting to note that the psychology of the obligingness makes people so vulnerable and flaccid that in the following verse we note that in their statement of disowning their toxic leaders (Tabarr'), the followers still follow their leaders: they could disown them only when their leaders disown them!

﴿إِذْ تَبَرَّأَ الَّذِينَ اتَّبَعُوا مِنَ الَّذِينَ اتَّبَعُوا وَرَأَوْا الْعَذَابَ وَتَقَطَّعَتْ بِهِمْ  
وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ اتَّبَعُوا لَوْ أَنَّ لَنَا كَرَّةً فَنَتَبَرَّأَ مِنْهُمْ كَمَا تَبَرَّأُوا مِنَّا الْأَسْبَابُ  
كَذَلِكَ يُرِيهِمُ اللَّهُ أَعْمَالَهُمْ حَسَرَاتٍ عَلَيْهِمْ وَمَا هُمْ بِخَارِجِينَ مِنَ النَّارِ﴾<sup>29</sup>

*[On that Day] it will come to pass that those who had been [falsely] adored shall disown their followers, and the latter shall see the suffering [that awaits them], with all their hopes cut to pieces! And then those followers shall say: "Would that we had a second chance [in life], so that we could disown them as they have disowned us!" Thus will God show them their works [in a manner that will cause them] bitter regrets; but they will not come out of the fire.*

Also, it is interesting to note in the Qur'an that how far this obligingness works. The Qur'an tells that the followers in the hellfire

even after experiencing the destruction brought about by their toxic leaders, request them to help them out of the hellfire:

﴿وَإِذْ يَتَحَاجُّونَ فِي النَّارِ فَيَقُولُ الضُّعْفُؤُا لِلَّذِينَ اسْتَكْبَرُوا إِنَّا كُنَّا لَكُمْ

تَبَعًا فَهَلْ أَنْتُمْ مُغْنُونَ عَنَّا نَصِيبًا مِّنَ النَّارِ﴾<sup>30</sup>

*And lo! They [who in life were wont to deny the truth] will contend with one another in the fire [of the hereafter]; and then the weak will say unto those who had gloried in their arrogance, "Behold, we were but your followers: can you, then, relieve us of some [of our] share of this fire?" –*

This phenomenon can be observed in the human history. The French people after having defeated and faced humiliation brought about by the wrong moves of Napoleon, looked towards him again to save them from the destructions he had caused. And Napoleon led them to another greater destruction: Defeat of Waterloo<sup>31</sup> and when he was imprisoned again, the fear was still there till his death, that he might escape from his prison to lead his nation once again!

The blindness of obligingness is seldom found removed before the destruction of the followers.

﴿يَقُولُ الَّذِينَ اسْتُضِعِفُوا لِلَّذِينَ اسْتَكْبَرُوا لَوْلَا أَنْتُمْ لَكُنَّا مُؤْمِنِينَ قَالَ

الَّذِينَ اسْتَكْبَرُوا لِلَّذِينَ اسْتُضِعِفُوا ائْحْنُ صَدَدْنَاكُمْ عَنِ الْهُدَىٰ بَعْدَ إِذْ

جَاءَكُمْ بَلْ كُنْتُمْ مُجْرِمِينَ وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ اسْتُضِعِفُوا لِلَّذِينَ اسْتَكْبَرُوا بَلْ مَكْرُ

الْيَلِ وَالنَّهَارِ إِذْ تَأْمُرُونَنَا أَنْ نَكْفُرَ بِاللَّهِ وَنَجْعَلَ لَهُ أَنْدَادًا وَأَسْرُوا النَّدَامَةَ

لَمَّا رَأَوْا الْعَذَابَ وَجَعَلْنَا الْأَعْلَلَ فِي آعْنَاقِ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا هَلْ يُجْزَوْنَ إِلَّا مَا

كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ﴾<sup>32</sup>

*Those who disbelieve say, "We will never believe in this Qur'ān, nor in that which was before it." But if only you could see when the wrongdoers will be made to stand before their Lord, repulsing words (of blame) to one another! Those who were held as weak will say to the*

*overbearing, "Had you not been there, we would have been believers." Those who were overbearing will say to those weak, "Had we stopped you from (accepting) guidance after it came to you? Rather, you yourselves were guilty." And those weak will say to those overbearing, "But (it was your) intriguing day and night (that stopped us from accepting guidance), when you were directing us to disbelieve in Allāh and to set up rivals to Him." And all of them will conceal (their) regrets when they will see the punishment. And We will place iron-collars around the necks of those who disbelieved. They will not be recompensed except for what they used to do.*

**Conclusion:**

The need for leader comes from the natural dependency of human beings. They depend on their leaders to mitigate their fears and needs. The needs have a hierarchy as presented by Abraham Maslow. The hierarchy of needs starts from physiological need to the highest need of self-actualization. The author finds the very basic (physiological needs) and the highest need (self-actualization) as the more vulnerable ones to be exploited by the leaders to make people follow them. The motive of obligingness can be explained with the help of 'ego depletion', which implies that people stops using their cognitive capacity once they submit their will to someone they grandiose in their eyes. They feel fatigue using their cognition to criticize and analyze the deeds of their leader.

The business of leadership runs through the function of labeling. Human beings are prone to act according to the label. The leaders make a label and the function of labeling creates a situation and makes a group and people, under the pressure of a situation, follow the demands of that particular situation. This way they are instructed to act according to the collective mind of the mob or group, he or she becomes a part of. In that situation the individuality diminishes and collective behaviour makes an individual do what he

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or she cannot expect of himself or herself in their individual capacity. The findings, then, are applied to some episodes from the Qur'ān and history.

This human capacity of the following has been badly exploited and abused by the toxic leaders of the world, for example, the Pharaoh, Napoleon and Hitler. This tendency has been one of the main causes behind the denial of the people, who denied the prophets' invitations to faith in One God and the life hereafter. The Qur'ān speaks against such a blind following. The Qur'ān gives no excuse to the blind followers for their halting their cognitive capacity in recognizing and deciding the right from the wrong. The human beings should understand these and the other motives of obligingness to avoid blind, unconditional and uncritical following, so that, they may justify deserving the status of the rational being.

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