

# The Letter

## Preamble

### In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful

This is what Allah's servant 'Ali, Arnir al-mu'minin, has ordered Malik ibn al-Harith al-Ashtar in his instrument (of appointment) for him when he made him Governor of Egypt for the collection of its revenues, fighting against its enemies, seeking the good of its people and making its cities prosperous.

He has ordered him to fear Allah, to prefer obedience to Him, and to follow what He has commanded in His Book (Qur'an) out of His obligatory and elective commands, without following which one cannot achieve virtue, nor (can one) be evil save by opposing them and ignoring them, and to help Allah the Glorified, with his heart, hand and tongue, because Allah whose name is Sublime takes the responsibility for helping him who helps Him, and for protecting him who gives Him support.

He also orders him to break his heart off from passions, and to restrain it at the time of their increase, because the heart leads towards evil unless Allah has mercy.

## **The qualifications of a governor and his responsibilities**

Then, know O' Malik that I have sent you to an area where there have been governments before you, both just as well as oppressive. People will now watch your dealings as you used to watch the dealings of the rulers before you, and they (people) will criticize you as you criticized them (rulers). Surely, the virtuous are known by the reputation that Allah circulates for them through the tongues of His creatures.

Therefore, the best collection with you should be the collection of good deeds. So, control your passions and check your heart from doing what is not lawful for you, because checking the heart means detaining it just half way between what it likes and dislikes.

Habituate your heart to mercy for the subjects and to affection and kindness for them. Do not stand over them like greedy beasts who feel it is enough to devour them, since they are of two kinds, either your

brother in religion or one like you in creation. They will commit slips and encounter mistakes.

They may act wrongly, willfully or by neglect. So, extend to them your forgiveness and pardon, in the same way as you would like Allah to extend His forgiveness and pardon to you, because you are over them and your responsible Commander (Imam) is over you while Allah is over him who has appointed you. He (Allah) has sought you to manage their affairs and has tried you through them.

Do not set yourself to fight Allah because you have no power before His power and you cannot do without His pardon and mercy. Do not repent of forgiving or be merciful in punishing. Do not act hastily during anger if you can find way out of it. Do not say: "I have been given authority, I should be obeyed when I order," because it engenders confusion in the heart, weakens the religion and takes one near ruin.

If the authority in which you are placed produces pride or vanity in you then look at the greatness of the realm of Allah over you and His might the like of which might you do not even possess over yourself. This will curb your haughtiness, cure you of your high temper and bring back to you your wisdom which had gone away from you."

Beware of comparing yourself to Allah in His greatness or likening yourself to Him in His power, for Allah humiliates every claimant of power and disgraces everyone who is haughty.

Do justice for Allah and do justice towards the people, as against yourself, your near ones and those of your subjects for whom you have a liking, because if you do not do so you will be oppressive, and when a person oppresses the creatures of Allah then, instead of His creatures, Allah becomes his opponent, and when Allah is the opponent of a person He tramples his plea; and he will remain in the position of being at war with Allah until he gives it up and repents.

Nothing is more inductive of the reversal of Allah's bounty or for the hastening of His retribution than continuance in oppression, because Allah hears the prayer of the oppressed and is on the lookout for the oppressors.

## **Ruling should be in favour of the people as a whole**

The way most coveted by you should be that which is the most equitable for the right, the most universal by way of justice, and the most comprehensive with regard to the agreement among those under you, because the disagreement among the common people sweeps away the arguments of the chiefs while the disagreement among the chiefs can be disregarded when compared with the agreement of the common people.

No one among those under you is more burdensome to the ruler in the comfort of life, less helpful in distress, more disliking of equitable treatment, more tricky in asking favors, less thankful at the time of giving, less appreciative of reasons at the time of refusal, and weaker in endurance at the time of the

discomforts of life than the chiefs.

It is the common people of the community who are the pillars of the religion, the power of the Muslims and the defense against the enemies. Your leanings should therefore be towards them and your inclination with them.

The one among the people under you who is furthest from you and the worst of them in your view should be he who is the most inquisitive of the shortcomings of the people, because people do have shortcomings and the ruler is the most appropriate person to cover them. Do not disclose whatever of it is hidden from you because your obligation is to correct what is manifest to you, while Allah will deal with whatever is hidden from you.

Therefore, cover shortcomings so far as you can; Allah would cover those of your shortcomings which you would like to remain under cover from your subjects. Unfasten every knot of hatred in the people and cut away from yourself the cause of every enmity. Feign ignorance from what is not clear to you. Do not hasten to second a backbiter, because a backbiter is a cheat although he looks like those who wish well.

## **About Counsellors**

Do not include among those you consult a miser who would keep you back from being generous and caution you against destitution, nor a coward who would make you feel too weak for your affairs, nor a greedy person who would make beautiful to you the collection of wealth by evil ways. This is because although miserliness, cowardice and greed are different qualities, yet they are common in having an incorrect idea about Allah.

The worst minister for you is he who has been a minister for mischievous persons before you, and who joined them in sins. Therefore, he should not be your chief man, because they are abettors of sinners and brothers of the oppressors. You can find good substitutes for them who will be like them in their views and influence, while not being like them in sins and vices. They have never assisted an oppressor in his oppression or a sinner in his sin.

They will give you the least trouble and the best support. They will be most considerate towards you and the least inclined towards others. Therefore, make them your chief companions in privacy as well as in public.

Then, more preferable among them for you should be those who openly speak better truths before you and who support you least in those of your actions which Allah does not approve in His friends, even though they may be according to your wishes. Associate yourself with God-fearing and truthful people; then educate them, so that they should not praise you or please you by reason of an action you did not perform, because an excess of praise produces pride and drives you near haughtiness.

The virtuous and the vicious should not be in equal position before you because this means dissuasion of the virtuous from virtue and persuasion of the vicious to vice. Keep everyone in the position which is his. You should know that the most conducive thing for the good impression of the ruler on his subjects is that he should extend good behavior towards them, lighten their hardships, and avoid putting them to unbearable troubles.

You should therefore, in this way follow a course by which you will leave a good impression with your subjects, because such good ideas will relieve you of great worries. Certainly, the most appropriate for good impression of you is he to whom your behavior has not been good.

Do not discontinue the good lives in which the earlier people of this community had been acting, by virtue of which there was general unity and through which the subjects prospered. Do not innovate any line of action which injures these earlier ways because (in that case) the rewards for those who had established those ways will continue, but the burden for discontinuing them will be on you.

Keep on increasing your conversations with the scholars and discussions with the wise to stabilize the prosperity of the areas under you, and to continue with that in which the earlier people had remained steadfast.

## **The different classes of people**

Know that the people consist of classes who prosper only with the help of one another, and they are not independent of one another. Among them are the army of Allah, then the secretarial workers of the common people and the chiefs, then the dispensers of justice, then those engaged in law and order, then the payers of bead tax (jizyah) and land tax (kharaj) from the protected unbelievers and the common Muslims.

Then there are the traders and the men of industry and then the lowest class of the needy and the destitute. Allah has fixed the share of every one of them and laid down His precepts about the limits of each in His Book (Qur'an) and the *sunnah* of His Prophet by way of a settlement which is preserved with us.

Now the army is, by the will of Allah, the fortress of the subjects, the ornament of the ruler, the strength of the religion and the means of peace. The subjects cannot exist without them while the army can be maintained only by the funds fixed by Allah in the revenues, through which they acquire the strength to fight the enemies, on which they depend for their prosperity, and with which they meet their needs.

These two classes cannot exist without the third class namely the judges, the executives and the secretaries who pass judgments about contracts, collect revenues and are depended upon in special and general matters.

And these classes cannot exist except with the traders and men of industry, who provide necessities for

them, establish markets and make it possible for others not to do all this with their own hands. Then is the lowest class of the needy and the destitute support of and help for whom is an obligation, and every one of them has (a share in) livelihood in the name of Allah. Every one of them has a right on the ruler according to what is needed for his prosperity.

The ruler cannot acquit himself of the obligations laid on him by Allah in this matter except by striving and seeking help from Allah and by training himself to adhere to the right and by enduring on that account all that is light or hard.

## **1. The Army**

Put in command of your forces the man who in your view is the best well-wisher of Allah, His Prophet and your Imam. The chestiest of them in heart and the highest of them in endurance is he who is slow in getting enraged, accepts excuses, is kind to the weak and is strict with the strong; violence should not raise his temper and weakness should not keep him sitting.

Also associate with considerate people from high families, virtuous houses and decent traditions, then people of courage, valor, generosity and benevolence, because they are repositories of honor and springs of virtues. Strive for their matters as the parents strive for their child.

Do not regard anything that you do to strengthen them as big nor consider anything that you have agreed to do for them as little (so as to give it up), even though it may be small, because this will make them your well-wishers and create a good impression of you. Do not neglect to attend to their small matters, confining yourself to their important matters, because your small favors will also be of benefit to them while the important ones are such that they cannot ignore them.

That commander of the army should have such a position before you that he renders help to them equitably and spends from his money on them and on those of their families who remain behind so that all their worries converge on the one worry for fighting the enemy. Your kindnesses to them will turn their hearts to you.

The most pleasant thing for the rulers is the establishment of justice in their areas and the manifestation of the love of their subjects, but the subjects' love manifests itself only when their hearts are dean. Their good wishes prove correct only when they surround their commanders (to protect them). Do not regard their positions to be a burden over them and do not keep watching for the end of their tenure.

Therefore, be broad-minded in regard to their desires, continue praising them and recounting the good deeds of those who have shown such deeds, because the mention of good actions shakes the brave and rouses the weak, if Allah so wills.

Appreciate the performance of every one of them, do not attribute the performance of one to the other, and do not minimize the reward below the level of the performance. The high position of a man should

not lead you to regard his small deeds as big, nor should the low position of a man make you regard his big deeds as small.

Refer to Allah and His Prophet the affairs which worry you and matters which appear confusing to you, because, addressing the people whom Allah the Sublime, wishes to guide, He said:

***O' you who believe! Obey Allah and obey the Prophet and those vested with authority from among you; and then if you quarrel about anything refer it to Allah and the Prophet if you believe in Allah and in the Last Day (of Judgment) -(Qur'an, 4:59)***

Referring to Allah means to act according to what is clear in His Book and referring to the Prophet means to follow his unanimously agreed *sunnah* in regard to which there are no differences.

## **2. The Chief Judge**

For the settlement of disputes among people select him who is the most distinguished of your subjects in your view. The cases (coming before him) should not vex him, disputation should not enrage him, he should not insist on any wrong point, and should not grudge accepting the truth· when he perceives it; he should not lean towards greed and should not content himself with a cursory understanding (of a matter) without going thoroughly into it.

He should be most ready to stop (to ponder) on doubtful points, most regardful of arguments, least disgusted at the quarrel of litigants, most patient at probing into matters and most fearless at the time of passing judgment. Praise should not make him vain and elation should not make him lean (to any side). Such people are very few.

Then, very often check his decisions and allow him so much money (as remuneration) that he has no excuse worth hearing (for not being honest) and there remains no occasion for him to go to others for his needs.

Give him that rank in your audience for which no one else among your chiefs aspires, so that he remains safe from the harm of those around you. You should have a piercing eye in this matter because this religion has formerly been a prisoner in the hands of vicious persons when action was taken according to passion, and worldly wealth was sought.

## **3. Executive Officers**

Thereafter, look into the affairs of your executives. Give them appointment after tests and do not appoint them according to partiality or favoritism, because these two things constitute sources of injustice and unfairness.

Select from among them those who are people of experience and modesty, hailing from virtuous houses, having been previously in Islam, because such persons possess high manners and untarnished honor.

They are the least inclined towards greed and always base their eyes on the ends of matters.

Give them an abundant livelihood (by way of salary) because this gives them the strength to maintain themselves in order and not to have an eye upon the funds in their custody, and it would be an argument against them if they disobeyed your order or misappropriated your trust. You should also check their activities and have people who report on them who should be truthful and faithful, because your watching their actions secretly will urge them to preserve trust with and to be kind to the people.

Be careful of assistants. If any one of them extends his hands towards misappropriation and the reports of your reporters reaching you confirm it that should be regarded enough evidence. You should then inflict corporal punishment on him and recover what he has misappropriated you should put him in a place of disgrace, blacklist him with (the charge of) misappropriation and make him wear the necklace of shame for his offence.

#### **4. The Administration of Revenues**

Look after the revenue (*kharaj* or land tax) affairs in such a way that those engaged in it remain prosperous because in their prosperity lies the prosperity of all others. The others cannot prosper without them, because all people are dependent on revenue and its payers.

You should also keep an eye on the cultivation of the land more than on the collection of revenue because revenue cannot be had without cultivation and whoever asks for revenue without cultivation, ruins the area and brings death to the people. His rule will not last only a moment.

If they complain of the heaviness (of the revenue) or of diseases, or dearth of water, or excess of water or of a change in the condition of the land either due to flood or to drought, you should remit the revenue to the extent that you hope will improve their position.

The remission granted by you for the removal of distress "from them should not be grudged by you, because it is an investment which they will return to you in the shape of the prosperity of your country and the progress of your domain in addition to earning their praise and happiness for meting out justice to them.

You can depend upon their strength because of the investment made by you in them through catering for their convenience, and can have confidence in them because of the justice extended to them by being kind to them.

After that, circumstances may so turn that you may have to ask for their assistance, when they will hear it happily, for prosperity is capable of bearing what ever you load on it. The ruin of the land is caused by the poverty of the cultivators, while the cultivators become poor when the officers concentrate on the collection (of money), having little hope for continuance (in their posts) and deriving no benefit from objects of warning.

## **5. The Clerical Establishment**

Then you should take care of your secretarial workers. Put the best of them in charge of your affairs. Entrust those of your letters which contain your policies and secrets to him who possesses the best character, who is not elated by honors, lest he dares speak against you in common audiences.

He should also not be negligent in presenting the communications of your officers before you and issuing correct replies to them on your behalf and in matters of your receipts and payments. He should not make any damaging agreement on your behalf and should not fail in repudiating an agreement against you. He should not be ignorant of the extent of his own position in matters because he who is ignorant of his own position is (even) more ignorant of the position of others.

Your selection of these people should not be on the basis of your understanding (of them), confidence and your good impression, because people catch the ideas of the officers through affectation and personal service and there is nothing in it which is like well-wishing or trustfulness. You should rather test them by what they did under the virtuous people before you.

Take a decision in favor of one who has a good name among the common people and is the most renowned in trustworthiness, because this will be a proof of your regard for Allah and for him on whose behalf you have been appointed to this position (namely your Imam). Establish one Chief for every department of work.

He should not be incapable of big matters, and a rush of work should not perplex him. Whenever there is a defect in your secretaries which you overlook, then you will be held responsible for it.

## **6. Traders and Industrialists**

Now take some advice about traders and industrialists. Give them good counsel whether they be settled (shopkeepers) or traders or physical laborers because they are sources of profit and the means of the provision of useful articles.

They bring them from distant and far-flung areas throughout the land and sea, plains or mountains, from where people cannot come and to where they do not dare to go, for they are peaceful and there is no fear of revolt from them, and they are quite without fear of treason.

Look after their affairs before yourself or wherever they may be in your area. Know, along with this, that most of them are very narrow-minded, and awfully avaricious. They hoard goods for profiteering and fix high prices for goods. This is a source of harm to the people and a blot on the officers in charge.

Stop people from hoarding, because the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.a.h.p.) has prohibited it. The sale should be smooth, with correct weights and prices, not harmful to either party, the seller or the purchaser; whoever commits hoarding after you prohibit it, give him exemplary but not excessive

punishment

## **7. The Lowest Class**

(Fear) Allah and keep Allah in view in respect of the lowest class, consisting of those who have few means: the poor, the destitute, the penniless and the disabled; because in this class are both the discontented and those who beg. Take care for the sake of Allah of His obligations towards them for which He has made you responsible.

Fix for them a share from the public funds and a share from the crops of lands taken over as booty for Islam in every area, because in it the remote ones have the same shares as the near ones. All these people are those whose rights have been placed in your charge. Therefore, a luxurious life should not keep you away from them.

You cannot be excused for ignoring small matters because you were deciding big problems. Consequently, do not be unmindful of them, nor turn your face from them out of vanity.

Take care of the affairs of those of them who do not approach you because they are of unsightly appearance or those whom people regard as low. Appoint for them some trusted people who are God-fearing and humble. They should inform you of these people's conditions.

Then deal with them with a sense of responsibility to Allah on the day you will meet Him, because of all the subjects these people are the most deserving of equitable treatment while for others also you should fulfill their rights so as to render account to Allah.

Take care of the orphans and the aged who have no means (for livelihood) nor are they ready for begging. This is heavy on the officers; in fact, every right is heavy. Allah lightens it for those who seek the next world and so they endure (hardships) upon themselves and trust on the truthfulness of Allah's promise to them.

And fix a time for complainants wherein you make yourself free for them, and sit for them in common audience and feel humble therein for the sake of Allah who created you. (On that occasion) you should keep away your army and your assistants such as the guards and the police so that anyone who likes to speak may speak to you without fear, because I have heard the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.a.h.p.) say in more than one place, "The people among whom the right of the weak is not secured from the strong without fear will never achieve purity."

Tolerate their awkwardness and inability to speak. Keep away from you narrowness and haughtiness; Allah would, on this account, spread over you the skirts of His mercy and assign the reward of His obedience for you. Whatever you give, give it joyfully, but when you refuse, do it handsomely and with excuses.

Then there are certain matters which you cannot avoid performing yourself. For example, replying to your officers when your secretaries are unable to do so, or disposing of the complaints of the people when your assistants shirk them. Finish every day the work meant for it, because every day has its own work. Keep for yourself the better and greater portion of these periods for the worship of Allah, although all these items are for Allah provided the intention is pure and the subjects prosper thereby.

## **Communion with Allah**

The particular thing by which you should purify your religion for Allah should be the fulfillment of those obligations which are especially for Him. Therefore, devote to Allah some of your physical activity during the night and the day and whatever (worship) you perform for seeking nearness to Allah should be complete, without defect or deficiency, whatsoever physical exertion it may involve.

When you lead the prayers for the people it should be neither (too long as to be) boring nor (too short as to be) wasteful, because among the people there are the sick as well as those who have needs of their own. When the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.a.h.p.) sent me to Yemen I enquired how I should offer prayers with them and he replied, "Say the prayers as the weakest of them would say, and be considerate to the believers."

## **On the Behaviour and Action of A Ruler**

Then, do not keep yourself secluded from the people for a long time, because the seclusion of those in authority from the subjects is a kind of narrow-sightedness and causes ignorance about their affairs.

Seclusion from them also prevents them from the knowledge of those things which they do not know and as a result they begin to regard big matters as small and small matters big, good matters as bad and bad matters as good, while the truth becomes confused with falsehood. After all, a governor is a human being and cannot have knowledge of things which people keep hidden from him.

No writ is big on the face of truth to differentiate its various expressions from falsehood. Then you can be one of two kinds of men. Either you may be generous in granting rights; and then why this hiding in spite of (your) discharging the obligations and good acts that you perform?

Or you are a victim of stinginess; in that case people will soon give up asking you since they will lose hope of generous treatment from you. In spite of that there are many needs of the people towards you which do not involve any hardship on you, such as the complaint against oppression or the request for justice in a matter.

Further, a governor has favorites and people of easy access to him. They misappropriate things, are highhanded and do not observe justice in matter. You should destroy the root of evil in the people by cutting away the causes of these defects. Do not make any land grants to your hangers on or

supporters.

They should not expect from you the possession of land which may cause harm to adjoining people over the question of irrigation or common services whose burden the grantees place on others. In this way, the benefit will be rather theirs than yours, and the blame will lie on you in this world and the next.

Allow rights to whomsoever it is due, whether near you or far from you. In this matter, you should be enduring and watchful even though it may involve your relations and favorites, and keep in view the reward of that which appears burdensome on you because its reward is handsome.

If the subjects suspect you of high-handedness, explain to them your position openly and remove their suspicion with your explanation, because this would mean exercise for your soul and consideration to the subjects while this explanation will secure your aim of keeping them firm in truth.

Do not reject peace to which your enemy may call you and wherein there is the pleasure of Allah, because peace brings rest to your army and relief from your worries and safety for your country. But after peace there is great apprehension from the enemy because often the enemy offers peace to benefit by your negligence. Therefore, be cautious and do not act by wishfulness in this matter.

If you conclude an agreement between yourself and your enemy or enter into a pledge with him then fulfill your agreement and discharge your pledge faithfully. Place yourself as a shield against whatever you have pledged because among the obligations of Allah there is nothing on which people are more strongly united despite the difference of their ideas and variation of their views than respect for fulfilling pledges.

Besides Muslims, even unbelievers have abided by agreements because they realized the dangers which would come in the wake of violation (thereof).

Therefore, do not deceive your enemy, because no one can offend Allah save the ignorant and the wicked. Allah made His agreement and pledged the sign of security which He has spread over His creatures through His mercy and an asylum in which they stay in His protection and seek the benefit of nearness to Him. Therefore, there should be no deceit, cunning or duplicity in it.

Do not enter into an agreement which may admit of different interpretations and do not change the interpretation of vague words after the conclusion and confirmation (of the agreement).

If any agreement of Allah involves you in hardship do not seek its repudiation without justification, because the bearing of hardships through which you expect relief and a handsome result is better than a violation whose consequence you fear, and that you fear that you will be called upon by Allah to account for it and you will not be able to seek forgiveness for it in this world or the next.

You should avoid shedding blood without justification, because nothing is more inviting of Divine retribution, greater in (evil) consequence, and more effective in the decline of prosperity and cutting short

of life than the shedding of blood without justification. On the Day of Judgment Allah the Glorified, would commence giving His judgment among the people with the cases of bloodshed committed by them.

Therefore, do not strengthen your authority by shedding prohibited blood because this will weaken and lower the authority, moreover destroy it and shift it. You cannot offer any excuse before Allah or before me for willful killing because there must be the question or revenge in it.

If you are involved in it be error and you exceed in the use of your whip or sword, or are hard in inflicting punishment, as sometimes even a blow by the fist or a smaller stroke causes death, then the haughtiness of your authority should not prevent you from paying the blood price to the successors of the killed person.

You should avoid self-admiration, having reliance in what appears good in yourself and love of exaggerated praise because this is one of the most reliable opportunities for Satan to obliterate the good deeds of the virtuous.

Avoid showing (the existence of) obligation on your subjects for having done good to them or praising your own actions or making promises and then breaking them because showing (the existence of) obligation destroys good, self-praise takes away the light of truth, and breaking promises earns the hatred of Allah and of the people. Allah the Glorified says:

***“Most hateful is it unto Allah that you say what you (yourselves) do (it) not.” (Qur'an, 61:3)***

Avoid haste in matters before their time, slowness at their proper time, insistence on them when the propriety of action is not known or weakens when it becomes clear. Assign every matter its proper place and do every job at the appropriate time.

Do not appropriate to yourself that in which the people have an equal share, nor be regardless of matters which have come to light with the excuse that you are accountable for others. Shortly, the curtains of all matters will be raised from your view and you will be required to render redress to the oppressed.

Have control over (your) sense of prestige, any outburst of anger, the might of your arm and the sharpness of your tongue. Guard against all this by avoiding haste and by delaying severe action till your anger subsides and you regain your self-control. You cannot withhold yourself from this unless you bear in mind that you have to return to Allah.

It is necessary for you to recall how matters went with those who preceded you, be it a government or a great tradition or a precedent of our Prophet (may Allah bless him and his descendants) or the obligatory commands contained in the Book of Allah.

Then you should follow them as you have seen us acting upon them and should exert yourself in following that I have enjoined upon you in this document in which I have exhausted my pleas on you, so

that if your heart advances towards its passions you may have no plea in its support.

I ask Allah through the extent of His mercy and the greatness of His power of giving a good inclination that He may prompt me and you to advance a clear plea before Him and His creatures in a manner that may attract His pleasure along with handsome praise among the people, good effect in the country, an increase in prosperity and a heightening of honor; and that He may allow me and you to die a death of virtue and martyrdom.

Surely we have to return to Him. Peace be on the Messenger of Allah – may Allah shower His blessings and plentiful salutation on him and his pure and chaste descendants; and that is an end to the matter.

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