

POLITICAL ETHICS IN THE THOUGHT OF ABU HAMID AL-GHAZALI

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the concept of political ethics in the thought of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and its relevance to contemporary governance discourse. The research is motivated by the increasing crisis of political morality, corruption, abuse of power, and the separation between ethics and politics in modern political systems. Using a qualitative *library research* method with a normative-philosophical approach, this study analyzes Al-Ghazali's major works concerning leadership, justice, authority, and the relationship between religion and state. The findings demonstrate that Al-Ghazali viewed politics as an ethical instrument aimed at realizing public welfare (*maṣlaḥah*), justice, social harmony, and political stability. According to Al-Ghazali, religion serves as the moral foundation of society, while political authority serves as its guardian, maintaining order and preventing social chaos. Ethical leadership, therefore, must be grounded in justice, responsibility, spirituality, and public accountability. This study also finds that Al-Ghazali's political ethics remain relevant in addressing contemporary governance challenges, particularly in promoting moral integrity and social justice. This study offers a normative model of political ethics integrating moral-spiritual values with governance principles. Consequently, Al-Ghazali's thought provides an important ethical framework for developing a more humane, just, and morally responsible political order in the modern era.

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INTRODUCTION

In today's world, political ethics seem to be obsolete, even disappearing. The reality is that politics is a battleground for power and interests, leading to a general tendency to justify any means to achieve goals. Friedrich Nietzsche, a renowned postmodernist, stated that ethics is built into politics and is determined by judgments of good and evil (Visser, 2019). However, political pragmatism has already undermined politicians' ethical

standards. One example is the practice of money politics (political transactions) carried out by politicians during general elections. This behavior of the political elite is truly uneducated by the people (Diana dkk., 2018). They are setting a bad example in politics. If this continues, there will be no ethics in politics (A. Muslimin, 2020).

The main analytical gap in the discussion of political ethics today lies in the dominance of descriptive and empirical studies that focus on political pragmatism, money politics, and democratic degradation, while still lacking a deep normative-philosophical reconstruction of political ethics itself. Existing studies generally explain political ethical decline as a consequence of weak law enforcement, democratic institutional failure, or elite transactional behavior. However, they rarely explore ethical foundations capable of restoring morality in political practice (Mukharrom & Abdi, 2023).

Furthermore, the dominance of political pragmatism has led to a degradation of the ethical quality of political actors, as reflected in the widespread practice of money politics in electoral democratic processes. Political transactions involving the exchange of material goods for political support not only violate the principles of justice and equality but also undermine the integrity of the democratic system itself. Such practices demonstrate that democratic mechanisms, grounded in public rationality and substantive participation, are reduced to short-term economic transactions (Dahl & Robert A, 1989).

A further implication of this phenomenon is the emergence of a crisis of role models in political leadership. Opportunistic and transactional elite behavior not only impacts the low quality of public policy but also creates a political culture that is permissive of ethical deviations. In the long term, this condition has the potential to erode society's collective awareness of the importance of ethics in political life. If no serious normative reconstruction is undertaken, the foundation of political ethics for just governance will continue to erode (Habermas J, 2024).

Political ethics is a branch of philosophy that emerged in Greece at a time when traditional political structures were gradually weakening and collapsing. With the collapse of Athenian society, various questions arose about society and the state, such as how society should be organized, who should organize it, and what the state's purpose is. And so on, two thousand years later, approximately five hundred years ago, political ethics gained momentum (Yasmin dkk., 2020).

Political ethics plays a greater role by demanding that all claims to the right to organize society be grounded in basic moral principles. Claims of legitimacy from all kinds of power, whether direct or hidden behind normative justifications, must be rationalized with general truths. Political philosophy encourages affirmative action that is not questioned on the surface but still forces ideological demands to prove themselves philosophically, thereby becoming reflective and open to criticism, or indeed being exposed as an ideological smokescreen for certain interests (Husni Mubarak, 2008).

Islam and politics are two elements that combine to form a system that governs the lives of people, from leaders to the people who make up a state. Therefore, Islam and the state are two inseparable elements that shape the ethics of both leaders and citizens. One figure who made a significant contribution in this field was Imam Al-Ghazali, a great

scholar who integrated Islamic jurisprudence, Sufism, and philosophy into a comprehensive framework (Patricia Crone, 2004). In his work *Nasihah al-Muluk*, Al-Ghazali specifically discusses how political power should be exercised in accordance with morality and religious responsibility.

Furthermore, Al-Ghazali's thoughts in this work also reflect the close relationship between religion and the state, where both complement each other in maintaining social stability and the well-being of society. This view implicitly critiques the secular political model that separates religious values from the practice of power. Therefore, studying Al-Ghazali's political ethics in *Nasihah al-Muluk* is crucial for exploring the concept of leadership that is not only administratively effective but also moral and oriented towards social justice (Al Ghazali, 1998).

In addition, most contemporary discussions on political ethics are heavily centered on Western political philosophy and modern democratic theory. In contrast, the contribution of classical Islamic political thought, particularly Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's ethical-political framework, remains underexplored. In fact, Al-Ghazali offers an integrative model that combines morality, religion, authority, justice, and social stability within a unified political-ethical system. As a major political perspective, it is highly relevant to responding to the contemporary crisis of political morality, especially in Muslim societies facing increasing political pragmatism and ethical degradation (Sahri, 2021).

Another gap can be identified in the limited discussion regarding the relationship between political stability and moral criticism. Many studies tend to treat obedience to authority and political criticism as contradictory. However, Al-Ghazali's thought demonstrates a balanced framework in which obedience to rulers is important for maintaining social order, yet remains conditional upon justice and moral responsibility through the principle of enjoining good and forbidding evil. This balance between authority and accountability has not been sufficiently analyzed in contemporary political ethics studies (Silvano, 2024). Therefore, an in-depth study is needed to reconstruct a political paradigm that is not only oriented towards power but also based on ethical values, particularly from the perspective of Islamic political thought.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a library research method. This approach was chosen because the study is conceptual-normative in nature (Kanggas, 2025). This study examines the political ideas proposed by Al-Ghazali. The data used in this study are sourced from primary and secondary literature. Primary literature includes Al-Ghazali's works, such as *At-Tibrul Masbuk fi Nasihatil Muluk*, and secondary sources include journals, websites, and related books. This method allows the author to outline the ideological and operational bases of both systems systematically and to identify their strengths and weaknesses in light of the normative principles contained in Islamic teachings.

To ensure a rigorous systematic review, the collected qualitative data are analyzed

through three consecutive stages: data reduction, categorization, and interpretation.

- First, data reduction involves selecting, focusing, and simplifying the raw texts from primary and secondary sources to isolate core concepts related to political ethics and authority.
- Second, categorization organizes these reduced data into specific themes, such as justice, obedience, and moral criticism (*amr bil-ma'ruf nahi 'an al-munkar*).
- Third, interpretation is conducted to extract deeper meanings from these categories, linking Al-Ghazali's classical framework to contemporary political challenges.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Understanding Ethics and Its Relation to Politics.

This research aims to identify the forms of social and word ethics, which are taken from the Greek word *ethos* (Fahdri dkk., 2023), which has many meanings: usual residence, habits, customs, morals, stable, pasture, character, feelings, attitude, way of thinking (Diana dkk., 2018). Moreover, the word that has the same meaning as ethics is moral. The word moral comes from the Latin *mos* (plural: *mores*), which means custom or habit. So, etymologically, both words have the same meaning, namely, custom. However, the origins of the two words are different. The word ethics comes from Greek, while the word moral comes from Latin (K. Bertens, 2005).

Rather than merely functioning as a collection of moral prescriptions, ethics constitutes a critical philosophical inquiry into the foundations of human conduct and social order. Although the term ethics derives from the Greek *ethos* and is often equated with morality, reducing ethics to customary norms oversimplifies its intellectual role. Morality generally operates at the practical level by prescribing what individuals ought to do, whereas ethics examines the rational legitimacy, coherence, and implications of those moral prescriptions (Nufus & Mazid, 2021). Thus, ethics serves not merely as a guide for behavior but as a reflective framework through which concepts of justice, responsibility, authority, and the common good are evaluated.

Within political life, the role of ethics becomes particularly significant because politics fundamentally concerns the exercise of power and the organization of collective life. Political authority without ethical restraint tends to produce domination, corruption, and instability, while ethical ideals without political mechanisms often remain ineffective in shaping public order. Therefore, the relationship between ethics and politics should not be understood as two separate domains, but rather as mutually dependent dimensions of governance (Idrissi, 2025).

Modern political discourse, especially within secular democratic traditions, frequently places procedural legitimacy and institutional effectiveness above moral and spiritual considerations. Thinkers such as Niccolò Machiavelli distinguished political

realism from moral idealism by emphasizing the preservation of power as the state's primary objective. In contrast, classical Islamic political thought, particularly the ideas of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, rejects this dichotomy between morality and authority. Synthesizing Al-Ghazali's works, it can be argued that politics is not merely a mechanism for controlling society, but an ethical instrument aimed at realizing justice, preserving religion, and maintaining social harmony (Mohammad Arif Fasihi Dawlatshahi, 2025).

Ethics cannot be reduced to merely an additional element in the construction of moral teachings. However, it must be understood as a philosophical reflection that is critical, analytical, and fundamental to the entire system of moral values and norms (Saputri & Hidayat, 2024). In this framework, ethics is a scientific discipline that seeks to study, evaluate, and reconstruct moral principles rationally, so that, ontologically and epistemologically, it differs from normative-prescriptive morals (Maloko, 2023).

Moral teachings essentially function as a set of practical guidelines that direct human behavior in everyday life, namely, answering normative questions about what should be done. In contrast, ethics operates at a reflective level by examining the rational foundations, conceptual structures, and legitimacy of the values underlying these guidelines. In other words, if morals serve as an operational guide to action, then ethics acts as a theoretical framework that explains the internal logic and justification of those actions (Amirullah dkk., 2025).

Conceptually, this distinction demonstrates that morality is oriented toward the practical dimension, while ethics operates within a broader theoretical-critical realm. Therefore, morality tends to answer the question "what should be done." At the same time, ethics seeks to elaborate on the more comprehensive question of "how a good life can be formulated and realized rationally and meaningfully" (Patricia Crone, 2004).

Ethics certainly encompasses all aspects, and politics, the pursuit of power, is shaped by the plurality of humankind and the desire to live alongside others, driven by a sense of mutual need. Ethics, on the other hand, guides values and norms related to good and bad in interpersonal relationships (Prayogi dkk., 2024). Ethics serves as a tool for decision-making by those in power. Because ethics is a branch of philosophy, few rulers understand it. Discussions of ethical philosophy have been extensively studied by philosophers, whether or not they are government officials (Zein, 2022.).

Political Ethics in the Thought of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali

Synthesizing Al-Ghazali's major works, particularly *At-Tibr al-Masbūk fī Naṣīḥat al-Mulūk* and *Iḥyā' Ulūm al-Dīn*, it can be argued that Al-Ghazali developed an integrative model of ethical politics that seeks to balance stability, justice, and morality simultaneously. Unlike political theories that prioritize state power alone, Al-Ghazali conceptualized governance as a moral responsibility directed toward achieving public welfare (*maṣlahah*) and preventing social destruction (*mafsadah*) (Fadel, 2018).

For Al-Ghazali, justice constitutes the central pillar of political order. A stable state cannot survive through coercion alone, because the durability of political authority depends upon public trust and moral legitimacy. His famous formulation, "religion depends on power, power depends on the army, the army depends on wealth, wealth

depends on development, and development depends on justice” illustrates the interdependence among morality, economic prosperity, and political stability. In this sense, justice is not merely an ethical virtue but also a structural requirement for sustaining civilization.

This perspective differs significantly from modern secular political theories that often separate religion from governance. Al-Ghazali instead formulated a symbiotic relationship between religion and the state. Religion provides moral orientation and legitimacy, while political authority functions as the institutional guardian that protects social order and enables religious life to flourish. Therefore, the collapse of morality within political leadership inevitably threatens both social stability and religious integrity.

In the book *At-Tibrul Masbuk fi Nasihati al Muluk*, Al Ghazali laid the foundation for the concept of justice, emphasizing the importance of preventing harm. For Al Ghazali, justice and tyranny determine a nation's fate. People can experience a safe, peaceful life, and all affairs are managed with wisdom, as stated by Al Ghazali:

"Justice is the key, and without it, power is only temporary, waiting for the time to collapse," said Hujjatul Islam.

Then, in the next statement:

"Know that the previous kings had strong ambitions and determination to develop their territories after their reigns ended. It is reported that the more prosperous a territory, the more loyal and grateful its people were. They understood that what the scholars and intellectuals said was undeniably true: "Religion depends on power, power depends on the army, the army depends on wealth, and wealth depends on the development of the nation. The development of the nation depends on justice towards the people."

Justice is a necessity because the government was formed, among other things, to create a just and prosperous society, or, in Islam, it is called "baldatun thayyibatun wa rabbun ghafûr". For Al Ghazali, a leader must know the boundaries that a leader must not violate, and know what dangers and destruction he will face if he carries out leadership incorrectly (Rahmat Saleh, 2015). As stated by Al Ghazali in the book *Ihya' Ulumiddin*, which reads:

والسياسة في استصلاح الخلق وإرشادهم إلى الطريق المستقيم المنجي في الدنيا والآخرة

It means, *"Politics is a system to improve the welfare of the people and guide them to the right path so that they are safe in this world and the hereafter"* (ابو حامد محمد بن محمد (الغزالي, 1998).

Leadership is inherent in human nature. Allah SWT sent two types of people: prophets and rulers. Prophets are tasked with conveying the message, while leaders are tasked with overseeing its implementation and protecting against persecution/injustice. Therefore, every ruler must be guided by existing sharia law and must follow it, as long as they adhere to it (Nizar, 2024).

The Concept of Appointing Leaders and Sharing Power

Al-Ghazali emphasized that justice is the primary foundation of leadership. The appointment of a leader must be based on competence, moral integrity, and purity of faith. In practice, power is distributed to uphold justice, preserve religion, and achieve social

welfare. The ulama serve as advisors, while the military maintains stability and order, thus preventing the practice of injustice (Amirullah dkk., 2026).

The mechanism for appointing leaders is a fundamental element in ensuring the formation of legitimate and just political authority. Within it is normative framework, A leader must meet several essential prerequisites, including intellectual maturity (‘aql), maturity (bulūgh), independence, adequate intellectual capacity, the ability to enforce the law effectively, and moral integrity reflected in noble character.

Furthermore, Al-Ghazali constructed three models of legitimacy for appointing leaders: (1) direct appointment by the Prophet, (2) delegation of authority through appointment by previous leaders, and (3) collective legitimacy through the authority of ahl al-ḥall wa al-‘aqq (the elite of scholars and community leaders), particularly in response to political emergencies and power instability (Nizar, 2024).

From a legitimacy perspective, the appointment process is not only procedural, but also requires normative approval from religious authorities (ulama), so that the power formed obtains sharia validity and is recognized socio-politically (Hakim, 2018). In the context of the relationship between religion and the state, Al-Ghazali constructed a symbiotic paradigm that positions religion as the foundation of legitimacy. In contrast, the state serves as an instrument for implementing those values. This relationship reflects a structural interdependence, where the survival of religion requires political protection, and state stability requires religious legitimacy. Therefore, the dysfunction of either element will directly weaken the overall social order.

Furthermore, the division of roles between the ulama and the umara within Al-Ghazali's framework demonstrates a functional differentiation within the power structure. The ulama serve not only as guardians of religious orthodoxy but also as moral checks on political policy. At the same time, the umara are tasked with implementing those policies in practice. Synergy between the two is a prerequisite for achieving just and sustainable governance.

Ultimately, Al-Ghazali's ideas on leadership reflect an ethically oriented model of governance, where power is not an end in itself but a means to realize justice and prosperity. In this perspective, the legitimacy of power is not only determined by political procedures, but also by the extent to which it represents the values of justice, maintains social stability, and prevents society from various forms of injustice and structural inequality.

Moreover, Al-Ghazali's emphasis on balancing stability and justice remains highly relevant for contemporary Muslim societies facing ideological fragmentation and political instability. While some modern political movements prioritize revolutionary change without sufficient regard for social order, Al-Ghazali warns that uncontrolled conflict may produce greater destruction than imperfect governance itself. However, his emphasis on stability should not be interpreted as unconditional support for oppressive rulers. Rather, it reflects his broader commitment to preserving public welfare and preventing societal collapse.

Compared with Al-Ghazali's approach, political idealism and political realism

occupy middle positions. Unlike utopian ethical theories that overlook the realities of power, he recognized the practical necessity of authority and social order. However, unlike purely pragmatic political theories, he insisted that power must remain subordinated to ethical and religious principles. This synthesis represents the central contribution of Al-Ghazali's political ethics: a governance model that harmonizes moral responsibility, social stability, and political legitimacy within a unified ethical-political framework (Gabriel, 2022).

Ultimately, Al-Ghazali's thought demonstrates that the crisis of politics is fundamentally also a crisis of morality. Therefore, solutions to political disorder cannot rely solely on institutional reform but must also involve ethical reconstruction within both leadership and society. His ideas continue to provide a significant intellectual foundation for developing a morally grounded political philosophy capable of responding to the ethical challenges of modern governance.

Theoretical and Practical Implications for Society

Within this framework, obedience to rulers is positioned as an instrument to prevent anarchy. Al-Ghazali realistically recognized that not all rulers would meet the ideal standards of just and wise leadership. Nevertheless, he argued that the existence of less-than-ideal rulers is still preferable to the absence of authority, which can create a power vacuum. This vacuum has the potential to lead to horizontal conflict, social disintegration, and a loss of public security. Therefore, society is encouraged to maintain political loyalty as a form of commitment to social order (Yasmin dkk., 2023).

However, this obedience is not absolute. Al-Ghazali emphasized the existence of clear normative boundaries: obedience applies only to matters that do not conflict with religious teachings. If the ruler commands disobedience, then the obligation to obey is waived. Thus, the concept of obedience in Al-Ghazali's thought is conditional and rooted in the principle of the supremacy of sharia values. This demonstrates that the legitimacy of power in Islam does not stem solely from political authority but also from its conformity with moral and religious norms, and that responsibility is a characteristic of the individual (Prayogi dkk., 2024).

In addition to emphasizing the importance of obedience, Al-Ghazali also underscored the urgency of enjoining good and forbidding evil as a mechanism of social control over power (Abozaid dkk., 2026). This concept is a key pillar of Islamic political ethics, balancing authority and accountability. In Al-Ghazali's view, ulama and society have a collective responsibility to correct deviations committed by the ruler. This responsibility is not only moral but also a religious obligation that cannot be neglected. Such actions include the wise use of natural resources, reducing pollution and waste, and supporting efforts (Bria dkk., 2025).

However, Al-Ghazali placed particular emphasis on the method for implementing the command to do good and forbid evil. He rejected a confrontational approach that could trigger open conflict, especially in the form of armed rebellion. He believed that such actions could potentially cause greater damage than the intended benefits. Therefore, advice to rulers must be delivered wisely (hikmah), persuasively, and thoughtfully. This

approach reflects Al-Ghazali's orientation, which prioritizes the public good (*maslahah*) over short-term interests.

In this context, the role of the *ulama* (Islamic scholars) becomes highly strategic. They serve not only as guardians of societal morals but also as advisors to rulers. They are expected to convey constructive criticism without causing political instability. In Al-Ghazali's perspective, the relationship between *ulama* and rulers must be based on the principle of complementarity, in which the *ulama* provide moral legitimacy. In contrast, the rulers provide protection and security for the people. This synergy forms the foundation for creating governance oriented toward justice and prosperity (Andriansyah & Riyanto, 2023).

Furthermore, Al-Ghazali paid serious attention to bureaucratic ethics. He recognized that the success of a government is determined not only by the quality of its supreme leader, but also by the integrity of the apparatus that runs the state administration. Therefore, state officials are required to possess high moral character, such as honesty, justice, and responsibility. They must carry out their duties with full trust and avoid any form of abuse of power.

The practices of corruption, bribery, and the oppression of the people are forms of injustice strongly condemned in Al-Ghazali's thought. He viewed these acts not only as damaging to the social order but also as eroding public trust in the government. In the long term, this loss of trust can weaken the legitimacy of power and trigger political instability. Therefore, the moral integrity of state officials is an absolute requirement for the realization of social justice.

Furthermore, Al-Ghazali also emphasized the importance of humility in leadership. An official must not be trapped by arrogance or feel superior to his people. Instead, he must view himself as a public servant tasked with meeting public needs. This service-oriented leadership paradigm aligns with the Islamic principle of justice, which views power as a trust that must be accounted for in this world and the hereafter.

From a broader perspective, Al-Ghazali's thoughts on the relationship between rulers and subjects reflect a political concept based on balance (*tawazun*). He does not seek absolute domination by one party, but rather harmonious interaction and mutual oversight. Rulers have an obligation to govern fairly and transparently, while the people have the right to oversight and provide constructive criticism. This mechanism can be understood as an early form of the concept of checks and balances in the modern political tradition.

However, unlike modern approaches, which are often institutionalized, the control mechanisms in Al-Ghazali's thought emphasize ethical and moral dimensions. He believed that the success of a political system depends heavily on the quality of the individuals involved. Therefore, moral development is an integral aspect of political development. Without a strong moral foundation, any political system is vulnerable to deviation.

In contemporary society, Al-Ghazali's ideas remain relevant for study. The ethical crisis in modern politics, such as corruption, abuse of power, and social polarization,

demonstrates that moral issues remain a major challenge in state governance. Al-Ghazali's thought offers a perspective that emphasizes the importance of integrating power and morality and of balancing stability and justice.

State and Community Security

According to Imam Al-Ghazali, the security of the state and society is a non-negotiable value that cannot be separated from religion (Riyanta & Handayani, 2024). A legitimate government is obligated to create stability to prevent chaos, bloodshed, and poverty. Religion serves as the foundation, while the state/power is its guardian, ensuring that people live safely and can worship. This reflects his well-known principle that religion and state are inseparable entities: religion is the foundation (*al-dīn aṣl*), and power or government is its guardian (*al-sultān ḥāris*). Without a stable political authority, religious values cannot be properly implemented, whereas power without religion risks leading to tyranny and injustice. Therefore, the existence of a just and stable government becomes essential to ensure public welfare, social harmony, security, and the freedom of individuals to perform religious obligations peacefully (Kirabaev & Al-Janabi, 2019).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Al-Ghazali's political ethics emphasizes that political power must be grounded in morality, justice, and religious values rather than mere authority. The legitimacy of leadership depends on the ruler's ethical commitment to protecting public welfare, maintaining social stability, and preventing injustice. Obedience to rulers is important for preserving order, yet it remains conditional and balanced by the principle of enjoining good and forbidding evil as a form of moral supervision.

This study demonstrates the continued relevance of Al-Ghazali's political thought for addressing contemporary political crises, including corruption, pragmatism, and the decline of ethical values in governance. His concept of balance between authority and accountability provides an alternative framework for developing a more just and humanistic political system. Therefore, future studies should further explore the application of Al-Ghazali's political ethics within modern democratic governance and contemporary state institutions in order to formulate practical models of ethical and sustainable political leadership.

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