6th World Congress of Muslim Librarians and Information Scientists 2011

Intellectual Transformation:
Harnessing and Preserving Islamic Knowledge and Resources towards the Renaissance of Ummah

Cultural Activity Centre,
International Islamic University Malaysia
16 - 17th November 2011 / 20 - 21 Zulhijjah 1432H

Organised by:

In collaboration with:
Enhancing the Renaissance of Ummah Through Effective Information Governance

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Abstract: Accountability of governance has become of central concern to members of the public across the globe. Good governance is not new to Islam, indeed. The strength of a nation relies on the ability of its government to govern and demonstrates its accountability in performing the task. A government that has been elected by the people of the country is not only responsible for the governed, but also exposed to public scrutiny that demands more transparency and accountability. A trusted government is one that can demonstrate its accountability and transparency and is continually striving to improve value delivery and increase cost-effectiveness. Trust fulfils the innate desire to be assured that those voted into power will serve the people and they failed to do so, there will be recourse to correct this. The freedom of information demands governments to be more transparent and accountable for their actions and decisions. Information governance is essential in ensuring the availability of evidence of good governance. To this end, it must embrace accountability, transparency and trustworthiness to ensure the accuracy and integrity of information. Therefore, it is imperative for information management professionals, in the Muslim world particularly, to scrutinise their present role and approach in performing managing information whilst achieving organisational goals and fulfilling national agendas. Arguably, the stability and sovereignty of Islamic nations leads to the renaissance of ummah.

Keywords: Accountability, information governance, records management, renaissance of ummah, transparency

Introduction

The strength of a nation relies heavily on its government’s ability in governing the country whilst demonstrating its accountability in performing the task. A government must be able to attain the trust of the people in order to gain support and succeed in governing the nation. Trust fulfils the innate desire to be assured that those voted into power will serve the people and they failed to do so, there will be recourse to correct this. Accountability of governance has become of central concern to members of the public across the globe. A government that has been elected by the people of the country is not only responsible for the governed, but also exposed to public scrutiny that demands more transparency and accountability. Good governance is not new to Islam. The concept of governance in Islam embraces three main areas, namely: accountability, transparency and trustworthiness (Mustapha & Salleh, 2002). Information governance has a significant role in ensuring the transparency and accountability of a government ok Although records provide
evidence of administration and operation, their importance only surface when triggered by an accountability process that is intimately related to the responsibility of the government.

**Islam, governance and government**

It is evident that Muslim peoples want Islam to play some role in the governance of their country. With the three core underpinning values such as accountability, transparency and trustworthiness, the foundation of good governance is apparently spelled out. In the Western countries, many found the relationships between accountability, transparency and responsibility are extremely complex and the terms sometimes used interchangeably (Laffan, 2003; Kaler, 2002; and Mulgan, 2000). And this leads to complicated and confusing relationship between governance and government. Sternberg (1998) shows how corporate governance contrasts with government by stating that governments are backed by the use of its state’s coercive power, and public policy objectives are legitimately chosen and implemented only by those who are publicly accountable to the electorate.

Government, be it democratic or autocratic, is responsible to the people that demand good governance. Government is directly accountable for the performance of public organisations and indirectly accountable for the performance of private organisations through laws and regulations that it imposes. To this end, governance is dynamic human activity, not just a structure on paper. It is also open to change, adaptation, and improvement (Wyatt, 2005). Sternberg (1998) further argues that corporate governance is not about the ‘relationship of corporation to the society’, nor about the regulation of corporations in the interests of society, as regulation is backed by the force of law which is subject to civil government, not corporate governance. The relationship between governance and government has been made more complex by the rise in corporate failures either in the private sector or more especially in public organisations. Government is seen to be directly responsible for ensuring good governance and may well over-react.

A trusted government is one that can demonstrate its accountability and transparency and is continually striving to improve value delivery and increase cost-effectiveness. Freedom of Information (FOI) legislation demands governments to be more transparent and accountable for their actions and decisions. O’Neill (2002) argues that openness and transparency are set to replace traditions of secrecy and deference, at least in public life. In a democratic nation, it is essential for the government to deliver corporate governance as it promotes values which are important in gaining and retaining the people’s trust.

Records, and the evidence they contain, are the instruments by which governments can promote a climate of trust and demonstrate an overall commitment to good government. Hence, accountability and transparency can only be demonstrated if records, which are the foundation of accountability, are well-managed. Ironically, good record keeping is not only for demonstrating good governance but also for hiding mis-management such as in the case of the collapse of Enron, when external auditors compromised their professionalism by manipulating records (Healy & Palepu, 2003).

Physical records have proved their significant contributions to the efficiency and effectiveness of public administration. However, their contributions have become less easy to identify since conventional administration tasks, manually performed by humans, have been automated by the use Information and Communication Technology (ICT). As opposed to the benefits of ICT in terms of easy storage and speedy retrieval of information, there are drawbacks in the form of new and critical challenges in the management of the creation and preservation of information to ensure its authenticity. The authenticity and reliability of electronic records are best ensured by...
embedding procedural rules in an agency-wide records system and by integrating business and documentary procedures; instituting procedures that tighten the archival bond; integrating management of non-electronic and electronic records systems (Duranti, 2001b; InterPARES, 2001). This means that governments with coercive power should be able to establish and implement procedures to ensure records are well-captured and preserved to retain their authenticity as evidence of governance.

Accountability of governance

Accountability is not merely seen as a crucial link in the chain between governors and governed; effective democracy, it is argued, implies a system that ensures that the former are accountable to the latter (Day & Klien, 1987). Equally accountability is increasingly seen as a means of stretching scarce resources; if better value for money is to be achieved in the public sector, it is argued, then an effective system of accountability is needed. Also, accountability is the process of being called ‘to account’ to some authority for one’s action, and to be ‘accountable’ is to be ‘answerable’ (Jones, 1992). However, answerability requires records that present evidence of the accountability process.

Records may not exist if the issue of accountability, which is more fundamental, has not been addressed. Accountability has to be understood as providing answers, as reporting or, more obviously, ‘giving an account’ that he claims as informative concept (Kaler, 2002). In the context of a democratic state, the key accountability relationships is ‘to account’ to some authority for one’s actions, that is between the citizens and the holders of public office and, within the ranks of office holders, between elected politicians and bureaucrats (Mulgan, 2000).

Members of the public have the rights to know about the balance between accountability and efficiency, and about distinctions between political and managerial accountability. In addition, as society became more complex, there is an increasing demand for transparency and accountability. Apparently, today’s modern complex government has greater demands for accountability as government through ministries and local governments are constantly exposed to public scrutiny. If governments are to be held accountable and if the public are to have legally enforceable rights of access to government information, then that information must be accurately and securely preserved to ensure that there is evidence of what has been done (Thurston and Cairn, 1998). Without reliable and authentic documentary of evidence, government cannot demonstrate to society that it has used state resources responsibly and that it has fulfilled its mandate to the people.

Accountability mechanisms such as audit and ombudsmen provide essential checks and balances. Accountability mechanisms set guidelines for government activities, for checking that results have been achieved, and for checking that due process has been observed. They include internal administrative procedures (requirements that activities or requests be recorded in writing), comprehensive processes such as audits and evaluations of an agency’s performance, or new forms of procedures such as whistle-blowing (which can encourage public servants to expose wrongdoings committed by others or to say no when asked to do something inappropriate).

Accountability can be divided into political accountability and managerial accountability. Political accountability is about those with delegated authority being answerable for their actions to the people, whether directly in simple societies or indirectly in complex societies (Day and Klien, 1987). In contrast, managerial accountability is about making those with delegated authority answerable for carrying out agreed tasks according to good criteria of performance. Both audit and ombudsman must be conducted by people with proven integrity and not subject to
political influence to avoid bias and to convince the public that the outcomes are purely managerial accountability and not political accountability. Common sense suggests that it is often useful for operations to be checked by different people and audit practitioners are not trying to be deceptive when they seek the benefits of the assurance that auditing provides, even if they cannot be precise about these benefits (Power, 1997).

The usage of ‘accountability’ has been extended, and now commonly refers to the sense of individual responsibility and concern for the public interest expected from public servants (‘professional’ and ‘personal’ accountability) (Mulgan, 2000). Secondly, accountability as ‘control’ is a feature of the various institutional checks and balances by which democracies seek to control the actions of governments even when there is no interaction or exchange between governments and the institutions that control them. Thirdly, accountability as ‘responsiveness’ is the extent to which governments pursue the wishes or needs of their citizens regardless of whether they are persuaded to do so through processes of authoritative exchange and control. Fourthly, accountability as ‘dialogue’, that refers to public discussion between citizens on which democracies depend, even then there is no suggestion of any authority or subordination between the parties involved in the accountability relationship. In other words, today’s governments are exposed to public scrutiny from various quarters, and governments must be concerned with their administrative and record keeping to ensure that they are prepared when their actions are challenged.

Accountability enables the identification of aspects of responsibility (Marshall and Moodie, 1959), but accountability was certainly not expected to cover the whole range of activities and processes covered by responsibility. It is the question of how far public servants should rely on their professionalism and sense of personal morality and how far they should simply be following instructions from their political masters (Friedrich 1940; Finer 1941). Responsibility is null when nobody knows who is responsible. Nor, can it be divided without being weakened (Mill, 1962). Responsibility can be delegated but accountability remains with senior management or board of directors. Therefore, official designation of responsibility is a must in order to ensure accountability.

**Transparency and trust**

Transparency requires reliable, relevant and timely information about the activities of government to be available to the public (Kondo, 2002). Transparency is closely associated with ideas of accountability. However, transparency alone does not empower, and, paradoxically, may even serve to pacify and neutralise other possible forms of accountability, such as those based on answerability. At the extreme, audits, which have become tightly interwoven into regulatory programmes, can do more to promote obscurity than transparency (White and Hollingworth, 1999). Audit and ombudsmen have a critical role in achieving transparency. From the Islamic perspective, transparency is not difficult to achieve as long as trust is not betrayed. Once trust is betrayed, transparency will be jeopardised.

The essence of transparency is far more important than the audit process itself, particularly in today’s circumstances where members of the public are so concerned with government’s actions and decisions. Transparency sheds light on practices, which enhances ethical and effective operations and facilitates oversight by the public and others (GAO, 2005). Transparency is seen both as an instrument for ensuring accountability and combating corruption, while in some cases its main purpose is to promote democratic participation by informing and involving citizens.
The media plays a key role in generating demand for more transparency and accountability by exercising its role of scrutiny (OECD, 2000). The establishment of Freedom of Information (FOI) legislation, in many developed countries, means citizens are more likely to have greater opportunities to challenge decisions on grounds of equity and fairness. In this context, scandals or wrongdoings that came to light can be seen as a positive sign that such accountability controls are working. It is essential to remember that making more information available to the public does not mean the more transparent an organisation is.

Furthermore, the sustainability of an organisation is underpinned by cost-effective operation and competitiveness and not mainly by the higher level of transparency. The types of information to be made available to the public can be determined by risk management as it is crucial to balance the risk of keeping and not keeping information; the risk of disclosing and not disclosing information. The judgement must be made based on risk analysis that can only succeed with the availability of adequate and reliable records. Hence, it is crucial to have an effective and efficient record keeping system to support the needs of risk management.

The demand for transparency is mainly the result of lack of trust in government, however being transparent alone does not guarantee a higher level of trust, because transparency also can encourage people to be less honest, increase deception and by so doing reduce trust, particularly those who know that everything they say or write is to be made public may massage the truth (O’Neill, 2002b). Transparency certainly destroys secrecy but it may not limit the deception and deliberate misinformation that undermine relations of trust. To restore trust, deception and lies must be reduced rather than secrecy, as some sorts of secrecy indeed support deception (O’Neill, 2002a).

Transparency and openness may not be the unconditional goods that they are fashionably supposed to be. By the same token, secrecy and lack of transparency may not be the enemies of trust. Like accountability mechanisms, trust, also, has to be supplemented by mechanisms that contain the risk of misplaced trust. Law and social institutions are viewed as mechanisms to coordinate expectations, which make the risk of loss of trust more bearable. If a government institution has had a breach of trust case, it is then the role of the law and social institutions to judge whether or not they are guilty and the types of sanction to impose.

Trust is an ethical issue and a social phenomenon that has to be studied at an interpersonal, inter-organisational and systematic level, rather than as an aspect of individual personality (Lane, 1998). This suggestion is less helpful as trust, also, has to be seen as individual personality, as trust has positive effects on performance, and the absence of trust leads to economic backwardness or underdevelopment, and a nation’s ability to compete is conditioned by the level of trust inherent in a society (Fukuyama, 1995). Indeed the strength of an organisation relies on trust in employees to execute their jobs responsibly. Policies, regulations and procedures would not lead to the success of an organisation in the absence of trust. It is a requirement for every new employee to agree to terms and conditions of employment, which is an institutional mechanism to place trust in employees.

Trust, particularly in the public sector, is more likely to be strong when there is openness and transparency in decision making, and decisions are made based on evidence (Kondo, 2002). Assessing information from various aspects will help institutions reach a fair judgment that can satisfy most parties, if not all. In addition, consideration of public values is also essential to retain trust. Whenever mistakes occurred, quick acknowledgement and recovery actions are helpful in regaining public confidence and trust. Creating institutional safeguards, such as the re-
introduction of an oath for a civil servant is good for increasing the sense of responsibility and accountability to their jobs and the public (Meijer, 2003).

Freedom of information

Freedom of Information (FOI) legislation demands governments to be more transparent and accountable for their actions and decisions. Today is an era where openness and transparency are set to replace traditions of secrecy and deference, at least in public life O’Neill (2002). In a democratic nation, it is essential for the government to deliver corporate governance as it promotes values which are important in gaining and retaining the people’s trust. Records, and the evidence they contain, are the instruments by which governments can promote a climate of trust and demonstrate an overall commitment to good government. Hence, accountability and transparency can only be demonstrated if records, which are the foundation of accountability, are well-managed.

The fallen of governments in few Muslim countries, particularly in the Middle East, is partly due to lack of transparency, which eventually leads to people questioning their accountability and trustworthiness. People’s power is undeniable and unstoppable. The fallen of Egypt’s former President Hosni Mubarak, for instance, was an evident of the intensity of people’s power. While many developed countries have implemented FOI, it is hardly found among Muslim countries though Islam embraces accountability, transparency and trustworthiness. Democracy may not be the only way to govern a nation, but being accountable and transparent is mandatory. Usage of public fund must be of value for money. The prosperity must be shared with the people in many ways and not certain quarters only. To this end, FOI demands governments to be accountable should their governance is questionable.

Effective information governance ensures the availability of information and records as evidence transactions and decisions. With policies, procedures, rules and regulations the process of capturing records and evidence of governance would be consistent and reliable. Should their decisions or actions are challenged it is not difficult for the organisation to defend themselves. Arguably, fake evidence cannot be fabricated as it does not possess credible contextual information that underpins the integrity of the evidence. Supposedly, Muslim countries must implement FOI should those who govern the country possessed accountability, transparency and trustworthiness.

Information governance

Information governance is perhaps a new term in managing information. It is defined as the specification of decision rights and an accountability framework to encourage desirable behaviour in the valuation, creation, storage, use, archival and deletion of information. It includes the processes, roles, standards and metrics that ensure the effective and efficient use of information in enabling an organization to achieve its goals (Logan, 2010). Information governance enhances the role of records management, which is the backbone in ensuring the availability of authentic and accurate information as evidence of transactions and decisions.

Records are evidence of business operations and transactions as well as organisation’s corporate memory. Many organisations have lost their records and found themselves repeating errors made in the past (Davies, 1999). Failure to establish an effective record keeping system impedes the efficiency of daily operations. To date, there is a growing awareness of value of knowledge and
experience and the need to capture it for the organisation to use when the people in whom it resides have left its organisation. Public organisations are the back bone of the government performance. A string failure in the public sector may decrease the trust of the people. Therefore, ensuring good governance as well as demonstrating transparency and accountability is essential for the government to retain its coercive power.

The state of records management in the public sector can only be enhanced by fostering the awareness of the essence of record management for good governance among senior civil servants and perhaps, ministers too. Arguably, persuading senior management is the biggest obstacle in implementing good record keeping practice. Hence, it is not a surprise that despite a decision by the government on 9 November 2005 that all ministries should have an archive officer, the actual implementation is extremely slow. This is not a surprise as many corporate executive were inclined to regards records management as a discretionary endeavour, one unrelated to the overall success of the business and therefore unworthy of serious management attention (2005). Perhaps, the mindset of ministers and senior civil servants need to change in order to facilitate the creation of the position in their departments respectively. They have to acknowledge that records management is central to the effectiveness and efficiency of government machineries. Not least important is the notion of managing records is no more about managing paper records but embraces both analogue and digital formats.

The role of archive officer must be expanded from its tradition managing non-current records to managing current records too. This facilitates the process of managing semi- and non-current records at later stages. With this awareness, then only the significance role of archive or records officers emerged or paid attention. Effective record keeping systems ensure the authenticity, integrity and up-to-date records are available for daily operations, decision making and for the government to be more responsive in the Parliament. In addition, one could not deny that effective record keeping system also facilitates organisations to acquire or retain International Standard Organisation (ISO) certification.

Systematic record keeping and documentation is a requirement for acquiring ISO certification. Ironically, the benefit of good record keeping is not spread organisational-wide despite being ISO-certified for several years. This would be interesting to research in order to understand the underlying reasons why records management is not given adequate attention despite being a prerequisite to acquire ISO certification. Perhaps, this is mainly because senior management are often more concerned with business processes rather than documenting those processes.

Even, when mismanagement or maladministration was detected, their main focus is to identify the weaknesses or loopholes in their business processes and less attention is given to strengthen the documentation of those processes. Indeed, there must be a champion particularly among the senior management to initiate an effective records management program. Records management is not just about keeping records but also destroying them as well in order to achieve economic efficiency. This is to say that records management is not expensive to implement but economic should a strategic approach used.

Not all processes generate records. Therefore, the cost of keeping records should not be the greatest concern, but more importantly is the ability to identify risks that are associated with them. Records management is an integral part of information systems or knowledge management systems that underpin business process management, which in turn underpins risk management (Azman, 2006). It requires neither tactical nor operational but a strategic solution to identify critical functions, level of importance and related risks. Records of these critical functions must
be given appropriate attention equivalent to the level of the likelihood and impact of risk. Legal risk is commonly of greatest concern of most employers.

However, it is dangerous to confine risk management to compliance as risk management is about clarity and the ability to not only identify the correct opportunities but also to maintain discipline in pursuing them (Sharon, 2006). Hence, the biggest risk of all is to take no risk and thereby fail to take opportunities. This is to say that a concerted effort at involving senior managers, business managers, legal experts and records management professionals is required if an organisation is to be certain about its performance as well as risk exposure. This is not impossible to achieve but needs a true champion to lead the effort for the benefit of the organisation.

Conclusions

The renaissance of ummah relies on the ability of Muslim community to develop and govern their nations to be at par if not better than developed countries. Their governments must be transparent to demonstrate accountability, which in turn develop trust among the people. Trust fulfils the innate desire to be assured that those voted into power will serve the people and they failed to do so, there will be recourse to correct this. A trusted government is one that can demonstrate its accountability and transparency and is continually striving to improve value delivery and increase cost-effectiveness. Muslim community cannot afford to move forward in the inexistence of trust and accountability. The freedom of information demands governments to be more transparent and accountable for their actions and decisions. Effective information governance is essential in ensuring the availability of evidence of good governance. To this end, it must embrace accountability, transparency and trustworthiness to ensure the accuracy and integrity of information. Therefore, it is imperative for information management professionals, in the Muslim world particularly, to scrutinise their present role and approach in performing their task with accountability, thus enables achieving organisational goals and fulfilling national agendas. Arguably, the stability and sovereignty of Islamic nations leads to the renaissance of ummah.
References


