

AL-FĀRĀBĪ'S CONCEPTION OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP:
GUIDING THE EXCELLENT CITY TO FELICITY

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to succinctly explore Abū Nasr al-Fārābī's conception of political leadership with particular attention to his three key works addressing this subject. Al-Fārābī was among the earliest thinkers in Islamic intellectual history to place significant emphasis on political leadership and to offer a distinct account of it. Although he lived in a pre-modern period before the emergence of the modern nation-state and the institutionalization of domestic political systems, al-Fārābī envisioned an ideal political community—the excellent city (*al-madīna al-fāḍila*)—led either by a perfect leader or in his absence by an individual or a group of individuals who collectively possess the necessary qualities for rulership. These leaders must embody both innate and acquired virtues that enable them to guide the citizens of the excellent city toward felicity (*al-sa'āda*), which is defined as the highest human perfection. The article examines al-Fārābī's understanding of felicity, the qualifications for rulership, and the ideal execution of political leadership. It argues that while al-Fārābī's views on political leadership are highly idealistic and even utopian by contemporary standards, they nonetheless offer a distinctive synthesis of Islamic principles and Greek philosophical thought.

Keywords: Al-Fārābī, Political Leadership, Collegial Leadership, Felicity

INTRODUCTION

Scholars from different parts of the world have long debated what constitutes ideal and normative political leadership. Arguably, among the seminal contributors to this debate in the Islamic tradition is Abū Nasr al-Fārābī, described as a “little-studied philosopher” (Mahdi, 1990; Parens, 2006). This towering figure occupies a special place, for al-Fārābī was one of the first thinkers in Islamic intellectual history who not only paid serious attention to political leadership but also offered a distinct account thereof (Aydınlı, 2017; Germann, 2021). Indeed, he is widely regarded as the founder of political philosophy in the Islamic world (Mahdi, 2010; Aydınlı, 2017). This is because al-Fārābī, who is deemed the greatest political philosopher of his time, instituted the foundational tradition of Islamic political philosophy and became the first figure attempting to integrate classical political philosophy into a highly different cultural atmosphere under the great influence of Islam (Mahdi, 2010).

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It is also worth noting that he lived in a pre-modern period where the modern nation-state and an institutionalized political system had not yet emerged—nor did there exist, in a contemporary sense, a structured understanding of domestic political governance; nonetheless, he envisioned an ideal political community, the excellent city (*al-madīna al-fāḍila*), led by a perfect ruler or in his absence a collegial leader or a group of collegial leaders.

Against this background, the present study aims to succinctly analyse al-Fārābī's conception of political leadership. While al-Fārābī is believed to have written studies extending from seventy to one hundred and thirteen works (Kaya, 2013; Madkour, 1963, p. 452) and to have dealt with several matters ranging from logic to metaphysics, from rational psychology to music, his political thought is perhaps most comprehensively articulated in three key texts: “Mabādi’ āra’ ahl al-madīna al-fāḍila” (*Principles of the Opinions of the Citizens of the Virtuous City*), “Al-Siyāsa al-Madaniyya” (*The Political Regime*), and “Fusul al-Madanī” (*Selected Aphorisms*). These works, taken together, represent his core ideas on political leadership, by and large.

These texts are analysed through textual analysis. This approach aims to understand texts (Arya, 2020, p. 174)—in this case, the three works in question—as well as to uncover the meanings embedded within these materials (Baxter, 2020, p. 240). Accordingly, the core objective of the study is to conduct a close reading of these works (Arya, 2020, p. 174). In doing so, the analysis examines key concepts, such as felicity and virtue, closely tied to his conception of political leadership (Baxter, 2020, p. 240). This makes it possible to clarify the meaning attached to these concepts and to situate them meaningfully within al-Fārābī's account of political leadership. In addition, the method is employed not merely to describe al-Fārābī's arguments but also to interpret them in light of both theoretical and practical concerns, as will be shown in the concluding section. By drawing attention to the link between his theological assumptions and political arguments, the study interrogates the feasibility of al-Fārābī's account of political leadership. In turn, as the conclusion demonstrates, this allows for an assessment of its limitations in the context of contemporary political systems, thereby positioning the study's findings within the wider debates on political leadership. Building on these points, the first section examines the ethical and metaphysical foundations of al-Fārābī's conception of political leadership, focusing on his understanding of the goal of human existence and politics, as well as the necessity of political associations among people. Then, the second section proceeds to analyse the structure and function of political leadership in the excellent city, with a particular emphasis on the qualities required for its ruler or rulers.

1. THE ETHICAL AND METAPHYSICAL FOUNDATIONS OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN AL-FĀRĀBĪ: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

For al-Fārābī, mankind, by its very nature, requires many things in its daily life in order to preserve itself, on the one hand, and to attain felicity (*al-sa’āda*), on the other. He sees the concept of *felicity*—a central theme in his political philosophy—as the highest degree of personal and societal perfection (*al-sa’āda al-quswā*) (Al-Farabi, 1985, pp. 205-207; Cihan, 2017, pp. 243-244; Fārābī, 10th century/2015, pp. 11-13; Fārābī, 10th century/2017, pp. 47-49). Obtaining felicity is the very reason for the creation of man. Thus, other concepts in al-Fārābī's philosophical inquiry such as merit and goodness are of secondary importance, when compared with felicity (Aydm, 1973, pp. 303-304).

Human beings, according to al-Fārābī, are incapable of satisfying their needs by themselves; therefore, achieving felicity necessitates the formation of political associations (Al-Farabi, 1985, p. 229; Mani, 2015, p. 1251) where individuals mutually depend on one another and cooperate by contributing what is necessary for their collective preservation (Suleimenov et al., 2017, p. 476). As a result of such cooperation within society, all the needs of individuals are met. This is only possible when they come together and live in cities (*al-madīna*) (Germann, 2021).

Al-Fārābī categorizes human associations into two groups: perfect associations (*al-kāmilah*) and defective associations (*ghayr al-kāmilah*). Perfect ones are composed of large, medium, and small associations, the first of which is an association of several nations. Medium associations consist of one nation; the small association consists of cities, which represent, in the first instance, the ranking of perfections. In contrast, associations such as quarters, houses, and streets are viewed as defective (Alfarabi, 10th century/2015, p. 64). In order to make felicity attainable, it is necessary to live in a certain city, that is, *the excellent city* (*al-madīna al-fāḍila*), as the will and choices of mankind may lead them to establish a city where people may cooperate in an effort to attain some evil objects:

The city, then, in which people aim through association at co-operating for the thing by which felicity in its real and true sense can be attained, is *the excellent city*, and the society in which there is a co-operation to acquire felicity is *the excellent society*; and the nation in which all of cities co-operate for those things through which felicity is attained is *the excellent nation* (Al-Farabi, 1985, p. 231, emphasis in the original).

In this regard, al-Fārābī (1985, p. 205) carefully notes that the human soul attains a state of perfection in its existence in which it no longer requires matter for its support. This purpose can only be attained through “certain voluntary actions”—both mental and bodily—which must be purposeful and well-defined. According to al-Fārābī, *al-sa’āda* (i.e. felicity) is the only good pursued for its own sake rather than for the sake of anything else. It is the highest *telos* for human beings to attain and brings about good and noble actions (Al-Farabi, 1985, pp. 207-209; Germann, 2021).

2. THE STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN THE EXCELLENT CITY

Al-Fārābī expects the inhabitants of the excellent city to know about felicity and the ways to gain it under a perfect rulership. However, he also acknowledges that not every individual is capable of doing so independently. Therefore, people are in need of an instructor and a guide; yet, most need an external stimulus to be oriented towards felicity (Alfarabi, 10th century/2015, pp. 78-80). Given that the first ruler (*al-ra’īs al-awwal*) has joined with the active intellect, he becomes the one who can guide the people of the excellent city to reach the ultimate aim through his kingly and political arts (Alfarabi, 10th century/2001, pp. 12-13; El-Farabī, 10th century/2012, pp. 92-94; Fārābī, 10th century/2017, pp. 48-49).

The excellent city, where felicity can be attained, must be ruled by a perfect leader, the most perfect rank of humanity. Al-Fārābī requires two conditions for one to be a ruler of the excellent city (Al-Farabi, 1985, p. 239; Fakhry, 2002, pp. 102-103): (a) an innate predisposition for rulership, and (b) an acquired disposition, namely the habit and the will to rule the excellent city, which is expected to be cultivated over time. Therefore, while the first condition is about inborn abilities bestowed upon the ruler, the second pertains to acquired traits.

Regarding the acquired qualities, for instance, he especially underlines that the ruler of the excellent city is obliged to have reached his perfection and to have been able to reach active intellect through which divine revelation may even become possible. More importantly, the one he describes as the first ruler is also cognizant of every action needed to attain felicity since he has reached this perfection (Al-Farabi, 1985, pp. 241-247).

Regarding the first condition, al-Fārābī, much like Plato (Fakhry, 2002, p. 4) and many traditional thinkers (Açıklan, 2020), meticulously lists twelve innate qualities of the first ruler of the excellent city (Al-Farabi, 1985, pp. 247-249; Wain, 2012, p. 74): (a) healthy limbs and organs allowing him to perform an action with ease; (b) a naturally sharp mind capable of understanding and perceiving everything; (c) a strong mind allowing him to memorize, for instance, what he sees, hears and understands; (d) ready intelligence and vigilance; (e) a fine diction enabling him to clearly express what he has in his mind; (f) a devotedly leaning towards learning and acquiring knowledge; (g) an affinity for truth and truthful individuals; (h) abstinence from earthly pleasures and hatred of such pleasures; (i) a great soul with a strong sense of honour, and a natural inclination towards lofty things or ideals; (j) a disdain for worldly pursuits; (k) a firm willingness to be fond of justice and just people, accompanied by hatred of oppression and oppressors and (l) a determined and resolute mind to execute what he deems necessary.

It seems that it is quite difficult to find a single individual who possesses all twelve qualities; it is, in fact, a rare situation to find a person endowed with this nature. Acknowledging this, al-Fārābī thus proposes that should a man have six or—even five—of these characteristics (excluding visionary prophecy through the faculty of representation), he is to be the ruler of the excellent city (Al-Farabi, 1985, pp. 249-251). However, this raises the question: what if no individual with these six or five qualities can be found? In such a case, provided that there exists an unbroken succession of earlier rulers who have fulfilled the required criteria, their customs and laws can continue to govern the city, as the lack of sovereigns of this type may lead to a deviation from the ultimate goal.

Yet, what happens if such a succession is also absent? Considering how difficult it is to find even a single person with all twelve traits, the feasibility of ensuring such an unbroken chain becomes questionable. In addition to these shortcomings, Bayraklı (2015, p. 141) justifiably contends that al-Fārābī, quite interestingly, does not include “philosophy”—a core condition for the survival of the excellent city—in his list of rulership qualities.

Besides, if this discussion on the personal qualities of the first ruler of the excellent city is only considered, it remains quite uncertain who would rule al-Fārābī’s excellent city after the first sovereigns. All these qualities pointed out above are related to *al-ra’īs al-awwal* of the excellent city.

To overcome this dimension, al-Fārābī comes up with what may be more or less termed “collegial leadership” (Suleimenov et al., 2017, p. 476) by identifying six additional qualities that enable a collegial ruler, following his maturity in the city, to be distinguished for rulership (Al-Farabi, 1985, pp. 247-249; Aydın, 2008, pp. 138-139; Bayraklı, 2015, pp. 145-146): (a) he must be recognized as a philosopher within the city; (b) he must know, remember and apply the customs and laws previously adopted and established by the first sovereigns, and must also have the will to follow them; (c) by way of his deductions of the principles set down by the first rulers, he must, by analogy, surpass in introducing new laws that have not been recorded during their reign; (d) through his good deliberation, taking into account the good of the city, he must deal with new situations on which the first ruler did not enact a law; (e) he must possess rhetorical skills to explain both the inherited and newly introduced laws to the people of the excellent city; (f) he must have a tough physique through which he can become skilled in service and military arts. Again, should these six qualities not be found in a person, two or more people, up to six, who do separately fulfil all these qualities can be the collegial sovereigns of the excellent city. Of these qualities, the first requirement for collegial rulership is a must for the excellent city, as well as for the survival of the city (Al-Farabi, 1985, p. 253; Bayraklı, 2015, p. 141). However, al-Fārābī does not clarify how a collegial successor is to be selected: Does this intrinsically take place or do the inhabitants of the excellent city choose him as their leader? It appears that al-Fārābī assumes that the collegial leadership will emerge naturally within the excellent society.

In addition, in the city whose parts are by their nature endowed with unequal capacities enabling them to perform some tasks but not others (Al-Farabi, 1985, pp. 231-235), al-Fārābī identifies five social classes: the virtuous ones (philosophers, experts, etc.), the linguists (scribes, poets etc.), the assessors (physicians, engineers, astronomers etc.), fighters (combatants, guardians etc.) and the money-makers (farmers, traders, herders etc.) (Alfarabi, 10th century/2001, p. 37; Cihan, 2017, p. 245). Each class operates in harmony with the others and fulfils its role, first, in accordance with the aim of the ruler and, then, with the aim of the other class which is above it in the rank (Al-Farabi, 1985, p. 237). Al-Fārābī links this dimension with the First Cause, stating that:

all these existents act in conformity with the First Cause, follow it, take it as their guidance and imitate it; but each existent does that according to its capacity, choosing its aim precisely on the strength of its established rank in the universe: that is to say the last follows the aim of that which is slightly above it in rank, equally the second existent, in turn, follows what is above itself in the rank, and in the same way the third existent has an aim which is above it. (Al-Farabi, 1985, pp. 237-239).

To make this dimension more salient, al-Fārābī draws a simple but profound analogy between “the excellent city” and “the perfect and healthy body”. In this analogy, he talks about one ruling organ that first comes to be, namely *the heart*, which he likens to the ruler of the excellent city (Al-Farabi, 1985, pp. 231-241; Farabî, 10th century/2016, pp. 69-77). In addition to this, he draws another analogy between a ‘physician’ and ‘a ruler’, stating that when the virtuous city deviates from the so-called equilibrium with regard to moral habits possessed by the people of the city, the king curing the souls of the excellent city is the one responsible for bringing it back to uprightness and maintaining it, just as a physician does. Interestingly enough, in *al-madīna*, his kingly art and political art are considered the most superior of all arts. This is because the rest of the arts in the city have to serve the purpose of the ruler, who must employ them so as to accomplish his intention (Alfarabî, 10th century/2001, pp. 21-27; Fârâbî, 10th century/2017, pp. 60-63).

In this connection, the virtuous city is governed by the first ruler or successor ruler(s) based on two conditions: (a) rulership and (b) service (El-Farabî, 10th century/2012, p. 97; Alfarabi, 10th century/2015, p. 87). It is done by considering the innate character of the inhabitants of the city as well as the way they are educated. The first ruler is responsible for ranking the citizens and organizing their education accordingly, putting them in a ranking of either rulership or service based on their specialized duties. Within this system, the citizens are arranged into higher, intermediate and lower ranks depending on their proximity to the ruler of the city. These ranks are not isolated; rather, each group is harmoniously connected to the others in a way that promotes mutual cooperation, overcomes moral deficiencies, and enables them to work collectively toward the attainment of felicity. In addition, al-Fārābī writes:

Each of the inhabitants of the virtuous city needs to be cognizant of the ultimate principles of the existents, their rankings, happiness the first rulership that belongs to the virtuous city, and the rankings of its rulership. Then, after that, [85] [each needs to be cognizant of] the defined actions by which happiness is gained when they are performed. These actions are not to be restricted to being known without being done and the inhabitants of the city being brought to do them. (Alfarabi, 10th century/2015, p. 88).

Via persuasion or compulsion, the ruler of the excellent city must cultivate the virtues appropriate to each citizen and govern the city hierarchically so that the classes of *al-madīna* can reach the level of perfection for which they are naturally suited. In attaining felicity, this mutual service among the classes displays a cosmic order in which every part contributes to the functioning of the whole (Mahdi, 2010, p. 130). Since the ultimate goal of the excellent city is to attain felicity, and each citizen must know the defined actions that lead toward this goal, the ruler must be cognizant of the ways and actions to achieve this end. As al-Fārābī states, the ruler's ultimate purpose is to "provide himself and the rest of the inhabitants of the city true happiness" (Alfarabi, 10th century/2001, p. 27). Therefore, the ruler organizes the city through, for instance, actions and laws set down by him so that all inhabitants can collectively progress toward the realization of the above end (Fārābī, 10th century/2017, p. 66).

CONCLUSION

This article has sought to succinctly explore Abū Nasr al-Fārābī's conception of political leadership by focusing on his three works that directly engage with the subject. In this sense, the study mainly contributes to the literature by providing a close reading of al-Fārābī's key political works and thereby offering a nuanced account of political leadership, while acknowledging its limitations of focusing primarily on the textual analysis of selected works. It also situates his conception of political leadership within both traditional and contemporary debates on political leadership, thus highlighting its relevance for these discussions, a point that is elaborated further below.

Al-Fārābī's conception of political leadership is substantially shaped by the concept of felicity, which, arguably, largely sets him apart from other thinkers in the traditional study of political leadership. For him, political leadership serves as a vehicle for achieving the ultimate goal of human life: the attainment of felicity by each inhabitant of the excellent city. To put it differently, it is exercised as a means to realize the highest perfection of human society.

This highest end—felicity— constitutes the fundamental reason why excellent cities must be established and governed by a perfect leader. Such an end seems to be absent in today’s political systems. These systems pursue a plurality of ends—such as economic growth, security, and stability—which may be conceived as the highest ends of contemporary societies. Yet, unlike al-Fārābī’s singular and transcendent goal, these ends are diverse and interwoven.

Moreover, al-Fārābī—like many traditional thinkers in the field (see, for instance, Açıkalın, 2020)—elaborates on the necessary conditions for one to be a leader or, in his words, a perfect leader or collegial leader(s) of the excellent city, despite certain shortcomings in the clarity and practicality of his account. This aspect points to al-Fārābī’s congruence with the traditional accounts of political leadership, which habitually foreground the personal qualities of leaders. Al-Fārābī’s ideal ruler, defined by the above-mentioned virtues, fits squarely within this tradition. However, as Elgie (2015) argues, contemporary accounts of political leadership place far less weight on the qualities of leaders. Instead, they emphasize markedly different dimensions of the exercise of political leadership, such as the relationship between leaders and the broader context in which they operate, the institutional constraints that shape leadership, and the dynamics of leader–follower interactions. Indeed, in today’s context, particularly in democratic settings, political leadership is conceived less as the embodiment of extraordinary personal qualities in a single figure and more as a process mediated by accountability, collective decision-making, and institutional checks on authority.

Finally, it should be noted that al-Fārābī’s views on political leadership reflect an ideal vision whose feasibility in the contemporary world is highly constrained. Establishing an excellent city ruled by a first ruler or collegial rulers seems nearly impossible to realize today. In democratic systems, political leadership is embedded within structures such as competitive elections, the rule of law, institutional checks and balances, accountability mechanisms, and a pluralistic decision-making process—all of which finds no place in al-Fārābī’s conception. Authoritarian regimes, by contrast, may appear closer to al-Fārābī’s conception of political leadership in terms of the concentration of power in a single figure who typically possesses strong executive authority and faces little to no opposition from rival figures or political parties. Nonetheless, unlike the orthodox understanding that places much emphasis on nation and national identity as the basis of state entities, al-Fārābī speaks of an excellent city founded on a unity of purpose and maintains that such political entities can, if necessary, be governed collectively by more than one individual. Future research could extend this article by taking into account a wider range of al-Fārābī’s writings, although these works address numerous subjects.

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