
The Concept of Human Dignity in the Qur'an and Its Application in Modern Social Systems: A Contextual Analysis for Pakistan

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Abstract

Human dignity (karāmah) is a foundational ethical and theological principle in the Qur'an, underpinning the Islamic worldview of justice, equality, and human rights. This article explores the Qur'anic conception of human dignity, tracing its theological roots, scriptural articulations, and ethical implications. It then examines how this concept can be meaningfully applied to contemporary social systems in Pakistan—particularly in legal, educational, economic, and political domains. By engaging with both classical Islamic scholarship and modern socio-legal frameworks, the study argues that a Qur'an-centered understanding of human dignity offers a robust normative basis for reforming state institutions and social practices in alignment with both Islamic ethics and universal human rights standards. The article concludes with policy-oriented recommendations for integrating the Qur'anic vision of dignity into Pakistan's national development agenda.

Keywords: Human Dignity, Qur'an, Karāmah, Pakistan, Islamic Ethics, Social Justice, Human Rights

Introduction

In an era marked by global discourses on human rights, social justice, and inclusive development, the concept of human dignity has emerged as a unifying moral principle across diverse philosophical and religious traditions. Within the Islamic tradition, human dignity is not a modern invention but a divinely ordained reality rooted in the Qur'an. The Qur'an affirms the inherent worth of every human being irrespective of faith, gender, ethnicity, or social status. This affirmation forms the bedrock of an Islamic ethics of justice and compassion that remains profoundly relevant to contemporary societies, particularly in Muslim-majority nations like Pakistan.

Pakistan, as an Islamic Republic, has enshrined Islamic principles in its Constitution while simultaneously committing to international human rights norms. Article 2A of the Constitution incorporates the Objectives Resolution, which declares that “the principles of democracy, freedom, equality, tolerance and social justice, as enunciated by Islam, shall be fully observed.”¹

Yet, in practice, systemic inequalities, gender-based discrimination, economic marginalization, and institutional weaknesses often undermine the dignity of large segments of the population. Bridging this gap between constitutional ideals and lived realities requires a renewed engagement with the Qur'anic concept of human dignity—not as a static theological doctrine but as a dynamic ethical compass for social transformation.

This article undertakes a systematic analysis of human dignity in the Qur'an, drawing on key verses and classical exegetical traditions, and then explores its practical implications for modern social systems in Pakistan. The study is structured in four parts: **(1)** theological foundations of human dignity in the Qur'an; **(2)** ethical and legal dimensions derived from the Qur'anic worldview; **(3)** contemporary

challenges to human dignity in Pakistan; and (4) pathways for integrating Qur'anic dignity into national policy and social practice.

I. Theological Foundations of Human Dignity in the Qur'an

The Qur'an presents human dignity as an ontological reality grounded in divine creation. Unlike secular conceptions that often derive dignity from rational autonomy or social contract theory, the Islamic understanding locates dignity in the very act of God's creation and the unique status He conferred upon humanity. The pivotal verse in this regard is Surah al-Isrā' : "Indeed, We have conferred dignity upon the Children of Adam, and carried them on land and sea, and provided for them the best of sustenance, and exalted them above many of those We created with definite preference."²

This verse establishes a universal and unconditional dignity (karāmah) bestowed by God upon all human beings—Muslim and non-Muslim alike—by virtue of their shared humanity.

Classical commentators such as al-Ṭabarī and al-Qurṭubī emphasize that this dignity is not earned through piety or merit but is an intrinsic gift from God.³

Al-Rāzī further notes that the phrase "exalted them above many of those We created" does not imply superiority over all creation (e.g., angels) but signifies a privileged position among earthly beings, endowed with intellect, moral agency, and the capacity for spiritual ascent.⁴

This theological premise negates any basis for caste, racial, or gender-based hierarchies, affirming instead a radical ontological equality.

The dignity conferred in 17:70 is further reinforced by the narrative of human creation. In Surah al-Ḥijr and Surah Ṣād, God commands the angels to prostrate before Adam after breathing into him "My spirit" (rūḥī).⁵

While theological interpretations vary on the nature of this "spirit," the symbolic act underscores humanity's unique proximity to the Divine. This proximity is not a

license for arrogance but a responsibility (amānah) to uphold justice and care for creation. As Surah al-Aḥzāb (33:72) states, humanity accepted the trust that even the heavens and earth refused.⁶

This trust includes the stewardship of one's own dignity and that of others.

Importantly, the Qur'an balances the exalted status of humanity with a sobering reminder of human vulnerability and fallibility. Adam's lapse in Paradise (Surah al-Baqarah 2:36) illustrates that dignity does not equate to infallibility.⁷

Rather, it coexists with the potential for error and the need for repentance. This dialectic between honor and humility is central to the Qur'anic anthropology: humans are dignified yet accountable, noble yet capable of degradation through injustice and oppression.

The universality of this dignity is evident in the Qur'an's consistent use of the term "Children of Adam" (banī Ādam), a phrase that transcends religious, ethnic, and national boundaries. In Surah al-A'raf (7:26), God addresses all humanity: "O Children of Adam! We have certainly sent down to you clothing to cover your nakedness and as adornment. But the garment of righteousness—that is best."⁸

Here, physical and moral covering are linked, suggesting that true dignity lies not merely in bodily integrity but in ethical conduct. Yet even those who lack righteousness retain their basic human worth, as the Qur'an never revokes the karāmah granted in 17:70.

This theological framework has profound implications for social ethics. If every human being is inherently dignified by divine decree, then any system or practice that degrades, humiliates, or excludes individuals violates a sacred trust. In the Pakistani context, where social stratification, honor-based violence, and institutional neglect often erode human worth, the Qur'anic vision offers a powerful corrective.

II. Ethical and Legal Dimensions of Qur'anic Dignity

The Qur'anic affirmation of human dignity is not confined to theological abstraction but translates into concrete ethical injunctions and legal principles. These can be grouped into four interrelated domains: the sanctity of life, justice and equity, freedom of conscience, and social welfare.

A. Sanctity of Life

The Qur'an declares the unjust taking of a single life equivalent to the killing of all humanity: "Whoever kills a soul unless for a soul or for corruption [done] in the land—it is as though he had slain mankind entirely. And whoever saves one—it is as though he had saved mankind entirely".⁹

This verse, revealed in a context of tribal vendettas, universalizes the value of human life and prohibits extrajudicial violence. Classical jurists interpreted "corruption in the land" (*fasād fī al-ard*) narrowly, requiring due process and evidentiary standards before capital punishment could be applied.¹⁰

In Pakistan, where extrajudicial killings, honor crimes, and mob violence persist, this Qur'anic principle demands robust legal safeguards and cultural transformation. The state's duty to protect life is not merely a secular obligation but a divine mandate rooted in the dignity of the human person.

B. Justice and Equity

Justice (ʿadl) is a recurring Qur'anic imperative, often paired with compassion (*rahmah*). Surah al-Nisā' command believers: "O you who believe! Stand firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even if it be against yourselves, your parents, or your kin."¹¹

This verse prioritizes truth over tribal or familial loyalty—a radical ethic in pre-Islamic Arabia and equally challenging in contemporary Pakistan, where kinship and patronage often override impartial justice.

The Qur'an also mandates equitable treatment of non-Muslims. Surah al-Mumtahanah states: "Allah does not forbid you from those who do not fight you because of religion and do not expel you from your homes—from being righteous toward them and acting justly toward them. Indeed, Allah loves those who act justly."¹²

This verse dismantles religious exclusivism and affirms that justice is owed to all peaceful citizens, regardless of faith—a principle vital for Pakistan's religious minorities.

C. Freedom of Conscience

The Qur'an explicitly rejects coercion in matters of faith: "There is no compulsion in religion. The right course has become clear from the wrong"¹³.

This verse, foundational to Islamic thought, affirms the dignity of individual conscience. Classical scholars like Ibn Taymiyyah argued that faith must be voluntary to be meaningful, and coercion produces hypocrisy, not conviction.¹⁴

In Pakistan, where blasphemy laws are sometimes weaponized against minorities and dissenters, this principle calls for legal reforms that protect freedom of belief while maintaining public order. The dignity of conscience requires both state restraint and societal tolerance.

D. Social Welfare and Economic Justice

Human dignity in the Qur'an is inseparable from material well-being. The institution of zakāt (obligatory almsgiving) is designed to "purify" wealth and redistribute resources to the poor.¹⁵

The Qur'an condemns hoarding wealth (Surah al-Ḥadīd 57:18) and praises those who "give food in spite of love for it to the needy, the orphan, and the captive"¹⁶.

Economic dignity also entails fair labor practices. Although the Qur'an does not detail labor laws, its emphasis on fulfilling contracts and prohibiting exploitation implies that workers must be treated with respect and paid justly. In Pakistan, where

informal labor constitutes over 70% of employment and child labor remains prevalent, these principles demand stronger regulatory frameworks grounded in Islamic ethics.

III. Contemporary Challenges to Human Dignity in Pakistan

Despite its constitutional and religious commitments, Pakistan faces systemic challenges that undermine human dignity across multiple domains.

A. Legal and Judicial Inequities

Pakistan's legal system, a hybrid of British common law and Islamic jurisprudence, often fails to deliver timely or impartial justice. Backlogs, corruption, and weak enforcement mechanisms leave the poor and marginalized vulnerable. Women, in particular, face barriers in accessing justice due to patriarchal interpretations of Islamic law and societal stigma. While the Qur'an mandates equal testimony in financial matters (Surah al-Baqarah 2:282),¹⁷

Customary practices often discount women's voices in courts.

Blasphemy laws, though intended to protect religious sensibilities, have been misused to settle personal vendettas, especially against religious minorities. The presumption of guilt and threats of mob violence create a climate of fear that violates the Qur'anic injunction against false accusation.¹⁸

Reforming these laws to align with both Islamic principles of justice and international human rights standards is essential for restoring dignity to all citizens.

B. Gender Inequality

Despite constitutional guarantees of gender equality, women in Pakistan face discrimination in inheritance, divorce, and political participation. Cultural practices such as swara (compensatory marriage) and honor killings directly contradict the Qur'anic view of women as dignified persons with rights to life, property, and autonomy. Surah al-Nisā' explicitly prohibits inheriting women against their will and commands kind treatment.¹⁹

Efforts like the Protection of Women Act (2006) and the establishment of women's police stations are steps forward, but deep-seated patriarchal norms require sustained educational and religious engagement. Islamic scholars in Pakistan have increasingly emphasized that gender justice is not a Western import but a Qur'anic imperative.

C. Economic Marginalization

With over 40% of the population living in multidimensional poverty, economic insecurity is a major affront to human dignity.²⁰

Informal workers, landless peasants, and urban slum dwellers lack access to healthcare, education, and social protection. The Qur'anic vision of an economy that circulates wealth (Surah al-Hashr 59:7)²¹

Stands in stark contrast to Pakistan's high levels of inequality, where the top 1% holds nearly 9% of national income.²²

The state's failure to collect adequate taxes—especially from the wealthy—and its reliance on regressive indirect taxation further exacerbate inequities. Revitalizing zakāt and waqf (endowment) institutions, as envisioned in the Qur'an, could provide alternative mechanisms for poverty alleviation and social investment.

D. Education and Ethical Formation

Pakistan's education system, fragmented between public, private, and madrasah sectors, often fails to cultivate a holistic understanding of human dignity. Curricula in many institutions emphasize rote memorization over critical thinking and ethical reasoning. Moreover, religious education sometimes presents a narrow, legalistic interpretation of Islam that neglects the Qur'an's emphasis on compassion and human worth.

Integrating the Qur'anic concept of karāmah into national education standards could foster a generation that values justice, pluralism, and service. Pilot programs in

Punjab and Sindh that incorporate ethics and civic education show promise but require scaling up with adequate resources.

IV. Integrating Qur’anic Dignity into Pakistan’s Social Systems

Realizing the Qur’anic vision of human dignity in Pakistan requires coordinated action across legal, educational, economic, and political spheres. The following recommendations are grounded in both Islamic principles and practical policy considerations.

A. Legal and Judicial Reforms

- 1. Reform Blasphemy Laws:** Amend the blasphemy statutes to include safeguards against false accusations, such as requiring higher evidentiary standards and penalizing malicious complaints. This aligns with the Qur’anic emphasis on justice and the protection of the innocent.
- 2. Strengthen Access to Justice:** Expand legal aid services, digitize court records to reduce delays, and train judges in gender-sensitive jurisprudence. Special courts for violence against women and minorities should be established nationwide.
- 3. Harmonize Islamic and Constitutional Law:** Create a national commission of Islamic scholars, jurists, and human rights experts to review laws for consistency with both the Qur’an and the Constitution. This would prevent the instrumentalization of religion for discriminatory ends.

B. Gender Justice Initiatives

- 1. Promote Qur’anic Gender Ethics:** Launch nationwide campaigns, in collaboration with mosques and media, to disseminate authentic Qur’anic teachings on women’s rights. Highlight verses that affirm women’s dignity, such as Surah Āl ‘Imrān: “Indeed, I do not allow the work of any worker among you to be lost, whether male or female; you are of one another.”²³

2. **Enforce Existing Laws:** Ensure rigorous implementation of laws against honor killings, child marriage, and workplace harassment. Community-based monitoring mechanisms can enhance accountability.
3. **Increase Women's Political Participation:** Implement quotas for women in local government and provide leadership training. Women's voices are essential in shaping policies that affect their dignity.

C. Economic and Social Policies

1. **Revitalize Zakāt and Waqf:** Modernize zakāt collection through digital platforms and ensure transparent distribution to the eight categories specified in Surah al-Tawbah. Encourage waqf investments in education, healthcare, and affordable housing.
2. **Universal Social Protection:** Introduce a national social safety net that guarantees basic income, healthcare, and education for all citizens, particularly the most vulnerable. This fulfills the Qur'anic mandate to care for the poor and orphaned.
3. **Promote Ethical Business Practices:** Incentivize corporate social responsibility through tax benefits and public recognition. Businesses should be encouraged to adopt Islamic ethical standards that prioritize human dignity over profit maximization.

D. Educational Transformation

1. **Curriculum Reform:** Integrate the concept of human dignity into national curricula at all levels, drawing from both Qur'anic sources and universal human rights instruments. Textbooks should present Islam as a religion of justice and compassion.
2. **Teacher Training:** Equip educators with pedagogical tools to teach ethics, critical thinking, and interfaith understanding. Religious teachers in madrasahs should receive training in contemporary social issues.

3. Interfaith and Civic Education: Promote dialogue between different religious and ethnic communities through school programs and youth exchanges. This builds social cohesion and mutual respect, reflecting the Qur’anic ideal of human brotherhood.

E. Role of Religious Leadership

Ulama and religious scholars have a pivotal role in shaping public discourse on human dignity. Fatwas (religious rulings) should consistently emphasize the Qur’anic prohibition of oppression (ẓulm) and the duty to uphold justice. National platforms like the Council of Islamic Ideology can issue guidelines on applying Qur’anic ethics to modern challenges, from climate change to digital rights.

Conclusion

The Qur’anic concept of human dignity is not a relic of the past but a living, dynamic principle with immense relevance for Pakistan’s present and future. Rooted in divine revelation yet responsive to human needs, it offers a holistic framework for building a just, inclusive, and compassionate society. By grounding social reform in this sacred vision, Pakistan can reconcile its Islamic identity with its democratic aspirations and fulfill the promise of dignity for all its citizens.

The path forward requires courage, wisdom, and collaboration among state institutions, civil society, religious leaders, and ordinary citizens. As the Qur’an reminds us: “Indeed, Allah does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves” .²⁴

Transforming Pakistan into a society that truly honors the karāmah of every human being begins with this internal and collective renewal.

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