

Civic Education in Contemporary Educational Systems: A Critical Analysis in the Light of Islamic Thought

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Abstract

Modern educational discourse frequently emphasizes civic education as a means of producing law-abiding and socially responsible citizens. However, Islamic educational philosophy transcends this limited framework by prioritizing the formation of a morally upright human being (al-Insān al-Sāliḥ) before the development of a responsible citizen. This paper argues that while contemporary educational systems, particularly in developing countries, include civic education as part of formal curricula, it often remains ineffective due to fragmented instructional methods, lack of practical implementation, and absence of moral grounding. Studies from China (Xiao & Tong, 2010) and Western academic debates (Kunzman, 2005; Johnson, 2012) similarly highlight the global struggle to integrate values, emotional maturity, and civic responsibility into education. Islam, by contrast, offers a holistic concept of civic responsibility rooted in Tawḥīd, justice (al-ʿAdl), social cooperation (Taʾāwun), and accountability (Masʿūliyyah). Islamic teachings cultivate not only social order but also spiritual conscience and ethical discipline, creating a citizen who fulfills duties towards God, society, and humanity. This study concludes that the integration of Islamic moral foundations into civic education can offer a transformative model capable of addressing social decay, moral crises, and civic decline in modern societies.

Keywords: civic, education, Islamic thoughts, justice.

Introduction

The present era is described as the “Information Age”, a time in which no piece of news can remain hidden for long, nor can it be suppressed indefinitely. Every news item carries either a positive or negative impact. Generally, the news that becomes widespread in our society tends to propagate negativity, and it spreads rapidly.

In recent times, both in the near past and at present, the news circulating around us has been of a disturbing nature: “A teacher broke a student’s arm through physical violence,¹” “A

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pilgrim arrested on charges of murder,” “A doctor detained for illegal kidney transplants,” “A senior police official arrested on corruption charges,” and so on. This unending chain of sensational news not only affects the minds and emotions of people living within our society, but it is also subconsciously cultivating in our future generations a tendency toward guilt and a criminal mindset.

It is indeed a matter of grave concern that such a negative image has emerged about a nation that came into existence in the name of Islam, al-Islām, and whose overwhelming majority is Muslim. The negative portrayal of such a society, both in the outside world and even in the minds of its own citizens, certainly calls for serious reflection. For educationists and policymakers, it serves as a clear warning of the dangers that lie ahead.

The need for Ta‘līm al-Madaniyyah (Citizenship Education or Civic Education) is more urgent today than perhaps ever before. Our society is passing through a transitional phase in which our traditional system of moral upbringing has disintegrated. In this era of economic instability, parents are so deeply engaged in earning money that they have, in general, lost sight of their other responsibilities. Negligence in the upbringing (tarbiyah) of children has become widespread, and it appears as though our younger generation resembles a boat trapped in a violent storm, isolated, directionless, and unable to find a way out through either miracle or immediate strategy.

In the light of these realities, the only ray of hope that remains is our educational institutions and the education system. The burden of responsibility upon them has increased more than ever before, and it is from them that we may still tie our expectations for change.

What is civic education? There is no universally agreed definition of Civic Education (Ta‘līm al-Muwāṭānah). Some describe it as education in values; others define it as training to produce responsible citizens. In 2005, Kunzman argued that religion cannot be ignored in civic education, as religion plays a fundamental role in shaping responsible citizens³.

The need for Ta‘līm al-Madaniyyah (Civic Education) is more critical today than ever before. Our society is passing through a phase of rapid transformation wherein the traditional system of tarbiyah (moral upbringing) has collapsed. In this age of economic instability, parents have become so preoccupied with earning a livelihood that they generally fail to fulfil their other essential responsibilities (mas‘ūliyyāt). As a result, a severe negligence has emerged regarding the upbringing and moral guidance of children.

This situation has created an environment in which it seems as though our younger generation is like a boat trapped in a whirlpool, directionless, vulnerable, and waiting helplessly for either a miracle or an uncertain rescue plan. This moral vacuum in society has also weakened the values of akhlaq (moral character), ‘adālah (justice), amana (trustworthiness), and hurmah al-insān (sanctity of human dignity), principles that are central to the Islamic worldview.

Islamic Perspective

Islam goes beyond these conventional definitions. Rather than merely emphasizing the making of a “good citizen”, Islam focuses on nurturing a righteous human being (insān ṣāliḥ) grounded in taqwā (God-consciousness) and akhlaq (moral excellence). Once an individual becomes morally upright, he naturally becomes a responsible citizen, because such a person not only respects the law but fulfills all his responsibilities (farā’id) with sincerity and

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integrity⁴.

Civic Education and Our Current Education System

It cannot be denied that our contemporary education system does include elements of Civic Education (Ta'lim al-Muwāṭānah) in various subjects such as English, Urdu, Islāmiyyāt, and Social Studies. However, despite their inclusion, a crucial question arises: Why has civic awareness failed to develop effectively among our students? There are two evident reasons for this shortcoming.

First, these lessons are taught like ordinary textbook chapters. Both teachers and students feel their duty is done once a few end-of-chapter exercises are solved, and there is no effort to internalize or apply the concepts in real life⁵.

Second, these lessons are usually included at the primary school level, an age when students are too young to comprehend complex civic concepts. By the time they reach the age when these ideas could be applied in practical life, they have already forgotten them. As a result, despite the inclusion of civic lessons in the curriculum, they fail to produce the desired impact, they do not shape students' behavior, social awareness, emotional maturity, or civic responsibility in real life⁶.

Global Perspective on Civic Education

In China, Ziad and Tong (2010) in their study titled "Methods and Objectives of Civic Education in Contemporary Chinese Universities" concluded that Chinese universities must complete the unfinished mission of civic education to meet cultural and historical needs⁴. They argued that higher education institutions often neglect civic formation even though it is essential for preparing students to understand the role of authority (ḥukm) and to develop the ability to control their emotions in both personal and professional life⁷.

Similarly, Johnson (2012) in his work "The Lesson of Civic Citizenship" stated that the White House holds the view that the purpose of education should not be limited to employment alone. Rather, educated individuals must also possess civic manners, social responsibility, and problem-solving skills⁶. According to this report, there is a serious lack of fundamental civic education among students in the U.S., and barely 25% of university graduates are adequately informed about the nation's political system, democratic principles, global affairs, and their responsibilities as citizens⁸.

Research conducted across the world indicates a growing global realization, especially in Western and developed countries, that scientific advancement and military power alone do not define success. Rather, true progress lies in moral integrity, social harmony, and a responsible system of rights and duties⁹.

These dimensions reflect the essence of Civic Education (Ta'lim al-Madaniyyah) in an Islamic framework. They demonstrate that Islam presents a concept of civic education that is comprehensive (shāmil), universal (kullī), and deeply rooted in ethical responsibility (mas'ūliyyah).

The relationship between Islam and civic education is evident from numerous Qur'anic verses (āyāt) and Prophetic traditions (aḥādīth), some of which are mentioned below.

Allah Almighty says in the Qur'an:

وَبِالْوَالِدَيْنِ إِحْسَانًا

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“And treat your parents with kindness.¹⁰”

In today's materialistic age, the relationship of kindness (iḥsān) between children and parents is weakening. Parents often exhaust themselves, lawfully or unlawfully, to secure material comfort for their children. Yet the same children later become reluctant to care for their parents. Islam, however, commands children to pray for their parents with humility:

وَقُلْ رَبِّ ارْحَمْهُمَا كَمَا رَبَّيَانِي صَغِيرًا

“And say, ‘My Lord, have mercy upon them as they raised me when I was small¹¹.’

Likewise, Allah warns:

وَلَا تَقْتُلُوا أَوْلَادَكُمْ خَشْيَةَ إِمْلَاقٍ

“Do not kill your children for fear of poverty.¹²”

Today, bitter realities reflect the opposite: some parents commit suicide with their children due to poverty, while others even sell their children out of hopelessness. Yet Allah clearly forbids despair:

لَا تَقْنَطُوا مِنْ رَحْمَةِ اللَّهِ

“Do not despair of the mercy of Allah.¹³”

Islam also commands social morality and prohibits ethical corruption:

وَأَوْفُوا بِالْعَهْدِ

“And fulfill your promises.¹⁴”

لَا يَسْخَرُ قَوْمٌ مِنْ قَوْمٍ

“Let not one group mock another.¹⁵”

وَلَا يَتَحَسَّسُوا

“Do not spy on one another¹⁶.”

وَلَا يَغْتَابَ بَعْضُكُم بَعْضًا

“Do not backbite one another.¹⁷”

Allah also condemned racism (‘aşabiyyah) and tribal arrogance:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ

“O mankind! We created you from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another. Verily, the most honorable of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous.¹⁸”

Ignoring this divine teaching has led to racial conflicts and wars across the world. The Prophet ﷺ further emphasized social ethics and civic responsibility through his sayings:

"المسلم من سلم المسلمون من لسانه ويده"

“A true Muslim is the one from whose tongue and hand other Muslims are safe.¹⁹

"لا تحقرن من المعروف شيئا ولو أن تلقى أخاك بوجه طليق"

“Do not belittle any act of goodness, even if it is only greeting your brother with a cheerful face.²⁰

"الطهور شطر الإيمان"

“Purity is half of faith.”²¹

"كلكم راع وكلكم مسؤول عن رعيته"

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"Every one of you is a shepherd and every one of you will be held responsible for his flock"²². These teachings make it clear that Islam emphasizes rights (ḥuqūq) and responsibilities (farā'id) with remarkable depth and precision.

Despite material progress, humanity today is experiencing moral decline and ethical disintegration. True success, especially for Muslims, can never be achieved by ignoring the Islamic philosophy of education (Ta'lim Islāmī) and its foundations in akhlaq, 'adl, ukhuwwah, and mas'ūliyyah.

The only sustainable solution to these global crises is to design a holistic program of civic education (Manhaj al-Tarbiyah al-Madaniyyah) based on Islamic principles. For a Muslim, acting upon these dimensions of civic education is not optional, it is a religious obligation (farḍ).

Conclusion

The analysis shows that civic education, when rooted only in legal compliance and social discipline, remains incomplete and ineffective. Modern societies may succeed in producing skilled individuals, yet they often fail to cultivate morally responsible human beings capable of contributing to social harmony and collective well-being. Islamic educational philosophy provides a comprehensive framework in this regard by integrating moral purification (tazkiyah), ethical training (akhlāq), social responsibility (mas'ūliyyah) and justice ('adl) within the process of education.

Islam does not view civic responsibility as a state-imposed obligation alone, but as a faith-based duty grounded in accountability before Allah. The Qur'anic injunctions on honoring parents, protecting life, fulfilling promises, avoiding social evils, and promoting equality demonstrate a universal system of civic ethics. Similarly, the Prophetic teachings emphasize kindness, honesty, mutual respect, social cooperation, and responsibility. Together, they offer a powerful model of holistic civic education that develops responsible individuals, stable families, and morally sound societies.

Therefore, in the context of contemporary educational challenges, the Islamic model of civic education is not only relevant but urgently needed. By integrating Islamic moral foundations into modern curricula, societies can overcome ethical decline and develop balanced human beings who are spiritually conscious, socially just, and committed to the welfare of humanity.

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¹¹ Qur'an 17:24 (Surah Bani Isra'il).
¹² Qur'an 17:31 (Surah Bani Isra'il).
¹³ Qur'an 39:53 (Surah Az-Zumar).
¹⁴ Qur'an 17:34 (Surah Bani Isra'il).
¹⁵ Qur'an 49:11 (Surah Al-Hujurat).
¹⁶ Qur'an 49:12 (Surah Al-Hujurat).
¹⁷ Qur'an 49:13 (Surah Al-Hujurat).
¹⁸ Qur'an 49:13 (Surah Al-Hujurat)-ibid.
¹⁹ Sahih Muslim, Kitab al-Birr wa's-Silah, Hadith No. 2626.
²⁰ Sahih Muslim, Kitab al-Taharah, Hadith No. 223.
²¹ Sahih Muslim, Kitāb al-Jumu'ah, Hadith no. 793
²² Ibid, Hadith no. 793