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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF AHMAD IBN HANBAL AND IMAM AL-SHAWKANI ON HADITHS OF OBEDIENCE TO UNJUST RULERS: Between Political Stability and Moral Accountability

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Abstract

Obedience to rulers constitutes an important theme in hadith studies because of its close relationship with the political stability and social order of the Muslim community. This article compares the perspectives of Ahmad Ibn Hanbal and Imam al-Shawkani regarding hadiths on obedience to unjust (*zhalim*) leaders. It analyzes how both scholars evaluate the authenticity of these traditions through *sanad* and *matan* criticism and examines the interpretive implications of their understanding and application. Employing a qualitative method based on library research with a comparative approach, the study uses *Usul al-Sunnah* by Ahmad Ibn Hanbal and *Nayl al-Awtar* by Imam al-Shawkani as primary sources. The data are analyzed descriptively and comparatively to highlight differences in their approaches to both *riwayah* (assessment of chains of transmission and textual quality) and *dirayah* (interpretation and practical implications). The findings reveal that Ahmad Ibn Hanbal emphasized near-absolute obedience to rulers in order to preserve political stability and prevent fitnah, permitting disobedience only when rulers explicitly command disbelief. In contrast, Imam al-Shawkani advocated conditional obedience and recognized the legitimacy of criticizing and rejecting policies that contradict Islamic law. By comparing two prominent scholars from different historical periods, this study demonstrates that the understanding of hadiths on leadership is not fixed or absolute but rather dynamic and shaped by varying social and political contexts.

Keywords: Hadith, Political Authority, Justice, Obedience to Rulers, Ahmad Ibn Hanbal and Imam al-Shawkani.

Abstrak

Ketaatan kepada pemimpin merupakan salah satu tema penting dalam kajian hadis karena memiliki hubungan yang erat dengan stabilitas politik dan tatanan kehidupan umat Islam. Artikel ini membandingkan pandangan Ahmad Ibn Hanbal dan Imam al-Syaukani mengenai hadis-hadis tentang ketaatan kepada pemimpin yang *zhalim*. Kajian ini menganalisis bagaimana kedua tokoh tersebut menilai autentisitas hadis melalui kritik *sanad* dan *matan*, serta menelaah implikasi interpretatif dari

pemahaman dan penerapannya. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif berbasis studi kepustakaan dengan pendekatan komparatif. Sumber data utama berasal dari *Usul al-Sunnah* karya Ahmad Ibn Hanbal dan *Nayl al-Awtar* karya Imam al-Syaukani, yang dianalisis secara deskriptif dan komparatif untuk mengungkap perbedaan pendekatan keduanya dalam aspek *riwayah* (penilaian terhadap rantai periwayatan dan kualitas teks) serta *dirayah* (penafsiran dan implikasi praktis). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Ahmad Ibn Hanbal menekankan ketaatan yang hampir bersifat mutlak kepada penguasa demi menjaga stabilitas politik dan mencegah fitnah, dengan pengecualian ketika penguasa secara jelas memerintahkan kekufuran. Sebaliknya, Imam al-Syaukani menegaskan bahwa ketaatan bersifat kondisional dan mengakui legitimasi untuk mengkritik bahkan menolak kebijakan penguasa yang bertentangan dengan syariat Islam. Dengan membandingkan dua ulama terkemuka dari periode sejarah yang berbeda, penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa pemahaman terhadap hadis-hadis tentang kepemimpinan tidak bersifat tetap dan absolut, melainkan dinamis serta dipengaruhi oleh konteks sosial dan politik yang melingkupinya.

Kata kunci: Hadis, Otoritas Politik, Keadilan, Ketaatan kepada Pemimpin, Ahmad Ibn Hanbal dan Imam al-Shawkani.

Introduction

The topic of obedience to leaders, including those regarded as *zhalim*, represents a salient subject within Islamic hadith scholarship and political jurisprudence. Hadiths concerning leadership frequently generate academic debate, particularly when associated with the legitimacy of unjust authority (Asep Saepudin, 2024, p.50). According to the Great Indonesian Dictionary, the meaning of *zhalim* is cruel, unjust, and without compassion, referring to an individual or group that hurts the feelings of others, both physically and mentally (*Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia*, 2008, p.1822). In *Lisaanul Arab*, the meaning of *zhalim* is to put something out of place. In terms, *zhalim* means doing something that goes beyond the bounds of truth, either because it is lacking or exceeding the limit (Mandzur, 2009, p. 98).

While some scholars emphasize the importance of preserving communal unity by advocating for obedience to leadership under all circumstances, others stress the

importance of justice as a prerequisite for legitimate leadership and regard obedience as conditional. This discourse is increasingly pertinent in light of contemporary socio-political contexts, where religious authority is instrumentalized as a basis for evaluating or critiquing governance (Pancaningrum, 2019, p. 221).

The problem studied in this research is how the methods of Ahmad Ibn Hanbal and Imam Al-Shawkani in interpreting the hadiths about obedience to the leader of the *zhalim* differ, focusing explicitly on their comparative approaches toward both the *sanad* (authenticity) and *matan* (content), and the implications of their differing interpretations for followers. This study is important because the two figures represent different generations and traditions: Ibn Hanbal, as the founder of the *madzhab*, who strongly emphasized adherence to the text, while Imam Al-Shawkani was a critical and contextual scholar who emphasized the *maqasid of sharia* as the basis of his thought.

In general, this study aims to compare the thoughts of Ahmad Ibn Hanbal and Imam al-Shawkani regarding hadiths on obedience to unjust (*zhalim*) rulers. The comparison focuses on how both scholars understood, interpreted, and applied these leadership traditions within different social and political contexts, as well as how they evaluated the *sanad* and *matan* of the hadiths that formed the basis of their respective views. Furthermore, this study seeks to highlight the contributions of these two scholars to the development of political hadith discourse within the Islamic intellectual tradition, particularly concerning the relationship between political authority, social stability, and the principles of the *Shari'ah*. By examining the similarities and differences in their approaches, this research is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of interpreting leadership-related hadiths and their relevance to contemporary Islamic studies in addressing issues of politics, governance, and the relationship between the Muslim community and political authorities in the modern era.

Several previous studies have explored similar topics. For example, research by Yusuf As-Sajid (2024) discusses hadiths regarding the obligation to listen to and obey leaders, emphasising their influence on the country's political stability (As-Sajid, 2024). Research by Diva Kurnia (2025) emphasises the principle of justice in Islamic sharia as one of the absolute leadership requirements and the prohibition of *zhalim* to realise the unity of the ummah (Diva Kurnia Dwi, 2025). However, these studies have not specifically

brought together Ahmad Ibn Hanbal and Imam Al-Shawkani in a comparative analysis, especially within the framework of *riwayah* and *dirayah*.

Thus, this article aims to provide a comparative analysis that places two figures across the ages and from different traditions in academic dialogue. The focus is placed on clarifying how their distinct methodologies, both in scrutinizing transmission and content (*riwayah*) and in interpreting impact and practical application (*dirayah*), highlight different approaches to the issue of obedience to *zhalim* leaders. This comparative approach contributes to leadership hadith studies by expanding both the historical and critical understanding relevant to contemporary situations.

This study employs a qualitative approach using descriptive-analytical and comparative library research methods. It focuses on examining the views of Ahmad Ibn Hanbal and Imam al-Shawkani regarding hadiths on obedience to unjust rulers through historical and textual approaches. Primary data are drawn from *Ushul al-Sunnah* and *Nayl al-Awtar*, supported by relevant hadith and *fiqh* literature, while secondary sources consist of journal articles and contemporary studies on hadith criticism and Islamic political thought. Data were collected through documentary analysis of hadith texts and scholarly interpretations. The analysis was conducted comparatively and critically by classifying the relevant hadiths, examining their *sanad* and *matan*, and comparing the methodologies employed by both scholars.

Discussion

The Socio-Political Contexts and Epistemological Foundations of Ahmad Ibn Hanbal and Imam al-Shawkani

1) Ahmad Ibn Hanbal

Abu Abdillah Ahmad Ibn Muhammad Ibn Hanbal Al-Ash'ari Al-Shaibani, known as Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (780-855 AD.164-241 AH), was born in Baghdad. Baghdad was the intellectual heart of the Abbasid Dynasty. He was the fourth imam of the madhhab in Islam, a renowned hadith scholar, and a defender of *Ahl al-Sunnah*. His father died when he was three. As a result, he was raised solely by his mother (Agustiansyah et al., 2023, p.248). From a young age, he showed a keen interest in hadith. His intellectual

journey took him to Kufa, Basrah, Mecca, Medina, and Yemen, where he learned from hadith experts. This strict approach to preserving the authenticity of hadith shaped his reputation. His monumental work, *al-Musnad al-Imam Ahmad*, contains over 30,000 hadiths and serves as a primary source for classical hadith studies (Ahmed & Balisani, 2024, p.236).

Ibn Hanbal's background was shaped by Baghdad's vibrant theological debates, which involved Ahl al-Hadith, Mu'tazilah, and other sects. He sided with Ahlu al-Hadith, who advocated full obedience to texts and avoided rational speculation (Zainuddin, 2023, p.94). This made him a textualist conservative, especially in interpreting leadership hadiths. During Ibn Hanbal's time, the Abbasid Empire faced political authoritarianism. The *mihnah* event (833-838 AD) was an ideological test during Caliph al-Ma'mun's era that enforced the Mu'tazilah doctrine of Qur'an creation (Agustiansyah et al., 2023, pp.250-251). Ahmad Ibn Hanbal rejected this idea, which led to his torture and imprisonment.

He responded to the doctrinal trials regarding the createdness of the Qur'an with unwavering resolve, refraining from engaging in overt rebellion against the ruling authorities (Muhammad Fahmi, 2023, p.31). Such experiences profoundly shaped his intellectual stance, leading him to believe that political stability outweighed the risks associated with insurrection. Consequently, his views on obedience to a *zhalim* leader were predominantly aimed at safeguarding social cohesion and mitigating greater discord within the community.

Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal's epistemology is rooted in the absolute authority of revelation, where truth is achieved through authentic transmission (*riwayah*) rather than speculative reasoning (*ra'yu*). The methodology places great emphasis on textuality, where even weak hadith (*dha'if*), as long as it is not fake, takes precedence over analogy (*qiyas*) (Azzahra and Arifin, 2024, p.307). For Ibn Hanbal, the source of Islamic law must come purely from the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and the hadith of the Companions. This creates a rigid yet consistent frame of mind, in which the human mind is positioned as a tool for understanding the text, rather than for criticizing or transcending its outward meaning.

Across the socio-political spectrum, Hanbali's methodology gives birth to a dutiful traditionalism, a position that prioritizes the stability of the ummah above all

forms of radical change. This concept is based on the principle of avoiding slander or civil chaos. For traditionalists, obedience to the leader, as long as it does not command manifest disobedience, is a religious obligation to maintain the integrity of the Muslim community (Yuniati, 2025, p.40). Thus, for Ibn Hanbal, maintaining stability is not just a political strategy but a manifestation of maintaining the purity of religion itself from the threat of disintegration.

2) Imam Al-Shawkani

Imam Muhammad bin Ali Al-Shawkani (1760-1834 CE/1173-1250 AH) was born in Syaukan, Yemen, a region renowned for its robust Zaidiyyah intellectual traditions. However, from his early years, Al-Shawkani was recognized as an independent scholar, rejecting rigid adherence to the madhhab. He prioritized direct *ijtihad* based on the Qur'an and hadith, positioning his thought as both reformist and critical of inherited *taqlid* (Taufiki and Putra, 2022, p.38). He rejected uncritical adherence (*taqlid*) to specific legal schools and advocated for direct *ijtihad* predicated on authentic textual evidence. His scholarship in hadith science is exemplified in his work *Nailul Authar*, a commentary on *Muntaqal Akhbar* by Al-Majd Ibn Taymiyyah, which systematically addresses *fiqh* rulings derived from selected hadiths (Dhonni, 2023, p.61). In this oeuvre, Al-Shawkani demonstrates both rigorous *sanad* and *matan* analysis, as well as a capacity to critically engage with the opinions of scholars across various legal traditions.

The socio-political conditions in Yemen during the 18th century were extremely complex. On the one hand, the influence of the Qasimid Dynasty (Zaidiyyah) was still very strong; on the other hand, there were conflicts for power, division among madhhabs, and social chaos (Atabik and Mustaqim, 2020, p.91). The fanaticism of madhhab became one of the biggest obstacles to the development of hadith studies in Yemen at that time. The dominance of the Zaidiyyah school, strengthened by political support, created exclusivity in the scientific tradition. Clerics who support reform are often considered subversive and limited in their scope. This results in the generation of scholars being less critical of *sanad* and *matan* (Saputra, 2025, p.163).

It is in this context that Imam Al-Shawkani appears as an active scholar, calling for the purification of Islamic teachings by inviting a return to the primary sources, namely the Qur'an and hadith, and rejecting political authority that is considered unjust.

In his efforts, Imam Al-Shawkani emphasized that the Qur'an and Hadith are complete and can be used as sources and legal postulates (Taufiki and Putra, 2022, p.38). Efforts to explore the law outside of the two sources of law must be carried out with broad and deep thinking. It is also necessary to pay attention to *the maqasid of shari'ah* and its context in relation to the events at hand. Imam Al-Shawkani's method tends to be more open and critical, refusing to side with one madhhab or be bound by the thoughts of previous scholars. This perspective reflects the significant influence of the socio-political reality of 18th-century Yemen, characterized by power conflicts and legitimacy crises (Saputra, 2025, p.166).

Husain bin Abdullah al-Amri, one of the researchers on biography and political sociology in the time of Al-Shawkani, emphasized in his work, *Al-Imam Al-Syaukani: Ra'id al-Fikr al-Hurr*, that Al-Shawkani was a figure who dared to break the chain of intellectual confusion of his time. Al-Amri considered that Al-Shawkani was not only a faqih, but also a symbol of resistance to the stagnant authority of the sect. Ijtihad is not a privilege of the past, but an obligation of every age to keep the sharia alive and relevant (Abdullah al-Amri, 1990, p.144).

Imam Al-Shawkani's epistemology is based on the spirit of intellectual independence that prioritizes the power of critical interpretation (*dirayah*). His methodology focuses on ijtihad, where he does not limit himself to one particular sect, but rather tests each postulate directly through sharp linguistic and rational analysis. Interestingly, Al-Shawkani did not view the law as a static text only, but integrated it with the concept of *maqasid shari'ah* broadly. In his view, Islamic sharia is built on the principle of eliminating difficulties (*rafu al-haraj*) and providing convenience for humans. Therefore, obedience to postulates should not be understood as an excruciating burden, but rather as a path to the protection of the five main principles, namely religion, soul, intellect, heredity, and property (Setiawan, 2025, p.1886).

In contrast to the traditionalist orientation that focuses on the meaning of obedience on political stability, Imam Al-Shawkani reconstructs the concept of obedience into a broader and dynamic responsibility. With its methodology, true obedience is not absolute obedience to the ruler or authority of the sect to maintain *the status quo*, but absolute obedience to the strongest postulate (Olğaç, 2021, p.7). Al-Shawkani extends the

scope of this obedience into the intellectual and moral-social realms, where a Muslim is obliged to adhere to the principles of justice and public benefit outlined by the Shari'a.

Therefore, if traditional political obedience focuses on conflict prevention, obedience in Al-Shawkani's perspective is oriented towards adherence to the objective truth. This includes obedience to make corrections to social deviations, purification of faith, and fair law enforcement. Thus, the concept of Al-Shawkani obedience is transformative. He did not allow the community to be trapped in passive obedience, but encouraged active obedience that demanded continuous improvement to achieve the great goals of *maqasid shari'ah* that went beyond just the administrative order of the government (Dhonni, 2023, p.69).

Obedience to Unjust Rulers: A Comparative Analysis of Hadith Interpretative of Ahmad Ibn Hanbal and Imam al-Shawkani

- 1) Hadith Listening and Obeying the Leader Even When the Back is Beaten and the Property is Confiscated

The issue of obedience to political leaders, particularly those who act unjustly, has long been one of the most debated themes in Islamic political thought and hadith studies. A central text in this discussion is the hadith narrated by Hudhayfah ibn al-Yaman in which the Prophet Muhammad instructed Muslims to listen to and obey their leaders even when subjected to personal injustice, such as physical abuse or the confiscation of property. Although the hadith is authentically transmitted in *Sahih Muslim* and widely accepted by classical scholars, its interpretation has generated diverse perspectives regarding the limits of political obedience, the preservation of social order, and the obligation to resist injustice. Among the most influential interpretations are those of Ahmad Ibn Hanbal and Imam al-Shawkani. While both scholars accepted the authenticity of the hadith, they differed in their methodological approaches and practical implications. Ahmad Ibn Hanbal emphasized patience and obedience as a means of preventing *fitnah* and maintaining communal stability, a position shaped by his experience during the Mihnah under the Abbasid caliphs. In contrast, Imam al-Shawkani interpreted the hadith within a broader legal and ethical framework, arguing that obedience is conditional and must be understood alongside other textual evidences that

uphold justice and condemn wrongdoing. These differing perspectives demonstrate the dynamic nature of hadith interpretation and highlight the importance of examining how historical context, epistemological foundations, and methodological principles influence scholarly understandings of political authority in Islam.

From Hudzaifah ibn Yemen (*may Allah be pleased with him*), the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said:

يَكُونُ بَعْدِي أئِمَّةٌ لَا يَهْتَدُونَ بِهَدَايِي، وَلَا يَسْتَنُّونَ بِسُنَّتِي، وَسَيَقُومُ فِيهِمْ رِجَالٌ قُلُوبُهُمْ قُلُوبُ الشَّيَاطِينِ فِي جُثْمَانِ إِنْسٍ، قَالَ: قُلْتُ: كَيْفَ أَصْنَعُ يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ، إِنْ أَدْرَكْتُ ذَلِكَ؟، قَالَ: تَسْمَعُ وَتُطِيعُ لِلْأَمِيرِ، وَإِنْ ضَرَبَ ظَهْرَكَ، وَأَخَذَ مَالَكَ فَاسْمَعْ وَأَطِعْ (رواه مسلم)

"There will be leaders after me who do not take my instructions and sunnah. There will also arise one whose heart is the heart of the devil in the form of man." I (Hudzaifah) asked, "What should I do?" He replied, "(You should) listen and obey the amir, even if he strikes you on the back and takes away your property, still listen and obey." (HR. Muslim).

The hadith under discussion is narrated by Imam Muslim in *Sahih Muslim, Kitab al-Imarah*, under the chapter *Wajib al-Ta'ah wa Hurmat al-Khuru'j 'ala al-Umara'* (The Obligation of Obedience and the Prohibition of Rebellion Against Rulers), with Hudhayfah ibn al-Yaman serving as its principal narrator. Owing to its inclusion in *Sahih Muslim* and its transmission through other reliable collections such as those of Imam Ahmad and Abu Dawud, the hadith is generally classified as *sahih li-dhatihi* (Muslim, 2000, p.830).

Ahmad Ibn Hanbal regarded this hadith as a foundational text concerning political obedience and social stability. In *Mihnah al-Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, al-Maqdisi records a statement transmitted by Abdullah ibn Ahmad, who reported hearing his father say, "Even if the rulers beat and imprison me, I will remain patient." Imam Ahmad then recited Qur'an 46:35, which commands steadfast patience in the manner of the *ulul 'azm* among the prophets (al-Maqdisi, 1987, p.68). This statement reflects Ahmad's deep commitment to patience in the face of political oppression, a conviction shaped by his personal experience during the Mihnah under the Abbasid caliphs al-Ma'mun and al-Mu'tasim. Despite enduring imprisonment and physical punishment, he

consistently rejected calls for rebellion and emphasized the preservation of communal unity. Similar views are found in his *Musnad*, which contains traditions prohibiting rebellion against rulers, and in *Ushul al-Sunnah*, where obedience to political authorities is affirmed so long as they do not command acts of disobedience to God (Hanbal, 1999, p.6).

Imam al-Shawkani likewise accepted the authenticity of this hadith in *Nayl al-Awtar* due to its sound chain of transmission. However, his interpretation differs from that of Ibn Hanbal. Al-Shawkani argues that the phrase “even if he strikes your back and takes your property” should not be understood as an unrestricted endorsement of political oppression. Rather, it functions as a *mukhassis* (specifier) that addresses particular circumstances in which obedience remains obligatory despite personal injustice, provided that the ruler does not command disbelief or sinful conduct. According to al-Shawkani, the hadith aims to preserve public order and prevent greater social harm, rather than to legitimize tyranny or abuse of authority (Asy Syaukani, 1990, p.360).

At first glance, this hadith appears to conflict with other prophetic traditions that emphasize *al-amr bi al-ma'ruf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar* (enjoining good and forbidding evil) and condemn injustice. Classical scholars therefore sought to reconcile these texts by maintaining that obedience to rulers is obligatory only within the bounds of obedience to God. Personal injustices committed by rulers are viewed as trials that require patience, whereas commands involving disbelief or sinful acts must not be obeyed. Consequently, this hadith cannot be interpreted in isolation; rather, it must be understood alongside other relevant traditions that qualify and restrict the scope of political obedience (Astuti et al., 2024, p.2223).

2) Hadith Listening and Obeying the Leader in All Circumstances

Among the most influential hadiths concerning political authority and the limits of obedience in Islam is the narration of ‘Ubadah ibn al-Şāmit, in which the Prophet Muhammad required his Companions to pledge allegiance based on listening and obeying their leaders in both favorable and unfavorable circumstances, during times of ease and hardship, and even when rulers prioritized their own interests over those of the people. The hadith further emphasizes that political authority should not be challenged

unless a ruler manifests clear and undeniable disbelief supported by explicit evidence from divine revelation. As an authentic narration recorded in Sahih Muslim, this tradition has played a central role in shaping classical Sunni political thought, particularly regarding the balance between maintaining social order and confronting injustice. While Muslim scholars generally accepted the hadith's authenticity, they differed in their interpretation of its practical implications. Ahmad Ibn Hanbal viewed it as a foundational principle for preserving communal stability and preventing civil strife, drawing upon his own experience of persecution during the Mihnah to advocate patience and non-rebellion even under oppressive rulers. In contrast, Imam al-Shawkani accepted the obligation of obedience but interpreted it within a broader framework of justice, public welfare, and adherence to the objectives of the Shariah, allowing room for criticism of rulers whose actions contradicted Islamic principles. The differing approaches of these two scholars illustrate the dynamic nature of hadith interpretation and provide an important lens through which to examine the relationship between political authority, religious obligation, and social responsibility in Islamic thought.

عَنْ عُبَادَةَ بْنِ الصَّامِتِ قَالَ: دَعَانَا رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ فَبَايَعَنَا، فَقَالَ: فِيمَا أَخَذَ عَلَيْنَا أَنْ بَايَعْنَا عَلَى السَّمْعِ وَالطَّاعَةِ فِي مَنْشَطِنَا وَمَكْرَهِنَا، وَعُسْرِنَا وَيُسْرِنَا، وَأَثَرَةِ عَلَيْنَا، وَأَنْ لَا نُنَازِعَ الْأَمْرَ أَهْلَهُ، إِلَّا أَنْ تَرَوْا كُفْرًا بَوَاحًا، عِنْدَكُمْ مِنَ اللَّهِ فِيهِ بُرْهَانٌ (رواه مسلم)

From 'Ubadah ibn Ash-Shamit (may Allah be pleased with him), he said: "The Messenger of Allah ﷺ called us and we danced him. He said: "Among the things he takes from us in the bai'at is that we may hear and obey in circumstances we like or dislike, in difficult or easy circumstances, and even though our rights are deprived, and that we do not take power from its owner, unless you see real disbelief, of which you have evidence from Allah." (HR. Muslim).

The primary source of this hadith is *Sahih Muslim, Kitab al-Imarah*, under the chapter *Wajib al-Ta'ah li al-Umara fi Ghayr Ma'shiyah* (The Obligation of Obedience to Rulers in Matters That Do Not Involve Sin), where it is recorded as hadith no. 1709. The hadith possesses a continuous (*muttasil*) chain of transmission and is narrated by trustworthy (*thiqah*) transmitters tracing back to the Companion 'Ubadah ibn al-Samit. Owing to the reliability of its narrators and its inclusion in *Sahih Muslim*, the hadith is

classified as *sahih*. Similar narrations are also found in the collections of Imam Ahmad, Abu Dawud, and al-Nasa'i, further reinforcing its authenticity (Muslim, 2000, p.827).

The hadith establishes a fundamental principle of political obedience in Islam, requiring Muslims to listen to and obey their leaders in both favorable and unfavorable circumstances, during times of ease and hardship, and even when rulers appear to prioritize their own interests over those of their subjects. The obligation of obedience remains binding regardless of personal agreement or disagreement with a ruler's policies, provided that such commands do not involve disobedience to Allah. The only explicit exception mentioned in the hadith is when a ruler manifests clear and undeniable disbelief (*kufir bawwah*) supported by definitive evidence from revelation, in which case the obligation of obedience is no longer applicable (Asep Saepudin, 2024, p.53).

Ahmad Ibn Hanbal regarded this hadith as one of the principal foundations of Sunni political doctrine. A notable illustration of his position is recorded in *Musnad Imam Ahmad* with the commentary of Shaykh Ahmad Muhammad Shakir. During the reign of Caliph al-Mutawakkil, a royal messenger approached Imam Ahmad after hearing allegations that he had pledged allegiance to another claimant. Imam Ahmad firmly denied the accusation and declared his unwavering loyalty to the Caliph, stating that he remained committed to listening and obeying the *Amir al-Mu'minin* in both ease and hardship and continuously prayed for his guidance and success (Syakir, 2013, p.138). This statement reflects Ahmad's broader commitment to political obedience and social stability. Influenced by his experience during the Mihnah under the Abbasid caliphs, he consistently emphasized patience in the face of injustice, rejection of doctrinal deviation, and avoidance of armed rebellion, which he believed would lead to greater fitnah and bloodshed within the Muslim community.

Imam al-Shawkani likewise accepted the authenticity of this hadith and discussed it extensively in *Nayl al-Awtar*. According to his interpretation, the hadith commands Muslims not to withdraw their obedience from rulers as long as they remain within the fold of Islam and do not openly manifest disbelief. Al-Shawkani argues that maintaining obedience to an imperfect or even oppressive ruler is preferable to rebellion, since political upheaval often results in greater harm, social disorder, and loss of life. Nevertheless, he maintains that when a ruler clearly demonstrates disbelief supported by unequivocal

evidence, obedience is no longer obligatory and opposition becomes permissible (Asy Syaukani, 1990, p.361).

Despite his emphasis on political stability, al-Shawkani does not advocate unconditional obedience. Rather, he interprets obedience within the broader framework of justice, public welfare, and adherence to the principles of the Shariah. His analysis leaves room for constructive criticism of rulers who commit injustice or violate Islamic norms, provided that such criticism is conducted wisely and does not lead to greater societal harm. Consequently, while al-Shawkani prioritizes the preservation of public order, he does not regard obedience as a means of legitimizing tyranny; instead, it remains conditional upon the ruler's continued adherence to the essential principles of Islam and the welfare of the Muslim community.

3) Hadith Obedience to Leaders is Obedience to Allah swt. and His Messenger

Among the foundational hadiths concerning political authority in Islam is the narration of Abu Hurairah in which the Prophet Muhammad linked obedience to legitimate leaders with obedience to himself and, ultimately, to Allah. This authentic hadith, recorded by both al-Bukhari and Muslim, establishes the religious significance of political obedience as a means of preserving social order and communal unity. At the same time, classical scholars emphasized that such obedience is not absolute, but remains conditional upon conformity with the teachings of Islam. Both Ahmad Ibn Hanbal and Imam al-Shawkani accepted the authority of this hadith and regarded obedience to rulers as a religious obligation; however, they maintained that no obedience is due in matters that involve disobedience to Allah. Their interpretations demonstrate the balance between loyalty to legitimate authority and adherence to the higher principles of the Shariah.

عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ، عَنِ النَّبِيِّ ﷺ قَالَ: مَنْ أَطَاعَنِي فَقَدْ أَطَاعَ اللَّهَ، وَمَنْ يَعُصِنِي فَقَدْ عَصَى اللَّهَ، وَمَنْ يُطِيعَ الْأَمِيرَ فَقَدْ أَطَاعَنِي، وَمَنْ يَعُصِ الْأَمِيرَ فَقَدْ عَصَانِي (مُتَّفَقٌ عَلَيْهِ)

From Abu Hurairah (may Allah be pleased with him) from the Prophet ﷺ, He said: "Whoever obeys me, he has indeed obeyed Allah. Whoever disobeys me, he has indeed disobeyed Allah. Whoever obeys the leader, he has indeed obeyed me. And whoever disobeys the leader, he has indeed disobeyed me." (Muttafaq 'alaih).

This hadith is classified as *sahih* and is agreed upon by both Imam al-Bukhari and Imam Muslim (*muttafaq 'alayh*). It is recorded in *Sahih Muslim, Kitab al-Imarah*, under the chapter *Wujub al-Ta'ah li al-Umara fi Ghayr Ma'shiyah* (The Obligation of Obedience to Rulers in Matters That Do Not Involve Sin), as hadith no. 1835. The narration is transmitted from Abu Hurairah and is also reported with similar wording by Imam Ahmad and al-Nasa'i, further strengthening its authenticity (Muslim, 2000, p.824).

The hadith establishes a hierarchical relationship between obedience to Allah, obedience to the Messenger, and obedience to legitimate political authority. It indicates that obedience to a ruler constitutes an extension of obedience to the Prophet ﷺ and, ultimately, to Allah, provided that such obedience does not involve acts of disobedience or violations of the Shariah. Therefore, obedience to leaders is regarded as an act of worship when it is motivated by obedience to Allah and His Messenger. Nevertheless, the hadith should not be understood as granting unconditional legitimacy to all actions of rulers, especially when their commands contradict Islamic principles and legal norms (Hardi, 2024, p.145).

Ahmad Ibn Hanbal regarded this hadith as a fundamental basis for maintaining political order and communal unity. In *Ushul al-Sunnah*, he asserts that anyone who refuses to obey a Muslim ruler who has been recognized and accepted by the community risks undermining the unity of the Muslims and violating the teachings of the Prophet ﷺ. He further maintains that rebellion against a ruler and attempts to remove him by force are prohibited, considering such actions to be innovations that depart from the Prophetic Sunnah (Hanbal, 1999, p.7). This position reflects Ahmad's broader commitment to preserving social stability and preventing civil strife. Consequently, he understood obedience to legitimate authority as a religious obligation closely connected to obedience to Allah and His Messenger.

Imam al-Shawkani similarly affirmed that obedience to rulers is an extension of obedience to Allah and His Messenger. However, in *al-Darari al-Mudhiyyah Sharh al-Durar al-Bahiyyah*, he emphasizes that such obedience is conditional rather than absolute. According to al-Shawkani, the obligation to obey political authority is restricted to matters that conform to righteousness and the teachings of Islam. When a ruler commands acts of disobedience, injustice, or disbelief, obedience is no longer required.

Citing this hadith, al-Shawkani argues that there is no obedience to any created being in matters that constitute disobedience to the Creator; therefore, obedience to rulers remains valid only within the framework of goodness and compliance with the Shariah (Asy Syaukani, 1987, p.443). His interpretation demonstrates an effort to balance political stability with the higher ethical and legal principles of Islam.

Historical Context and Socio-Political Dynamics in the Thought of Ahmad Ibn Hanbal and Imam al-Shawkani

1) Socio-Political Dialectics: Historical Background and Challenges of the Times

Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal's understanding of the hadiths regarding obedience to the leader was greatly influenced by the socio-political context of the Abbasid Dynasty during his lifetime, particularly during the *mihnah* event, an ideological test conducted by the ruler against the scholars. Experience saw how state institutions could become very repressive, but on the other hand remained the only barrier so that the ummah did not fall into anarchy, shaping its very cautious landscape of political thought. In this politically fraught period, Ibn Hanbal emphasized the importance of maintaining social stability and preventing slander within the Muslim community (Agustiansyah et al., 2023, p.251).

He was of the view that rebellion against the ruler, even if it was *zhalim*, would actually cause greater evil and chaos than the evil caused by the *zhalim* of the ruler himself. For Ibn Hanbal, maintaining the integrity of the social structure is the main prerequisite for the sharia to continue to be implemented, even if its leaders make deviations personally and in policy. His attitude is very much in line with *Ahlu al-Hadith's approach*, which tends to be textual and careful in dealing with political authority. In Ibn Hanbal's view, the hadiths about the command to obey the leader of the *zhalim* should be understood as an injunction to keep the ummah from division and avoid greater fitnah (Zainuddin, 2023, p.101).

In the *Musnad of Imam Ahmad Syarh Shaykh Ahmad Muhammad Syakir*, during the reign of al-Watsiq, Ibn Hanbal continued to participate in Friday prayers in congregation, but when he arrived home, he repeated his prayer. Imam Ahmad said that Friday prayers in congregation are still carried out because of their virtue, while prayers

must be repeated if they are done behind the backs of people who disagree with the shari'a (Syakir, 2013, p.134).

As long as the ruler still upholds the prayer and does not openly command immorality, then obedience to it is obligatory. This view affirms a political stance that focuses on social order and the sustainability of people's religious life. In this context, obedience that is interpreted as absolute adherence to the leader is seen as a moral responsibility to maintain the unity of the ummah and avoid spreading slander (Al Halib, 2025, p.13).

A few centuries later, in Yemen, Imam Al-Shawkani faced a different reality, where intellectual stagnation due to madzhab fanaticism had reduced the critical role of the ulama to the rulers. He lived in a religiously rigid environment, where political authority often took refuge behind traditional legitimacy that was no longer critically tested. As a persistent advocate of ijtihad, Al-Shawkani saw that blind obedience without criticism would only perpetuate deviations that were detrimental to the public. The spirit of his time was the spirit of liberation from the shackles of *taqlid*, which then underpinned his view of the relationship between the people and the rulers (Al-Shafi'i et al., 2025, 807).

In his book *Revival and Reform in Islam: The Legacy of Muhammad al-Shawkani*, Bernard Haykel provides a very sharp sociopolitical analysis of how Al-Shawkani's thinking shaped the state and the modern Islamic movement. Haykel explained that Al-Shawkani revolutionized the concept of law by stating that there is only one legal truth, which is the source of the strongest evidence. This effectively undermines the legitimacy of the plurality of madhabs, which is often used as a political tool to maintain *the status quo* (Haykel, 2003, p.10).

Through a more independent criticism of hadith, he argues that obedience is only in matters of ma'ruf. Meanwhile, in disobedience, there is no obligation for the people to obey. For Al-Shawkani, maintaining the purity of the law of Allah swt. and demanding accountability of leaders is the main way to improve the ummah, rather than just maintaining pseudo-stability that actually allows injustice to take root (Wali and Hifazatullah, 2024, p.24).

2) Methodological Foundations: Contextual Implications for Hadith Criticism

The difference in the political situation between the Abbasid era and the *Tajdid* era in Yemen directly affected the methodology of the two figures in selecting and interpreting the hadith of obedience. Ahmad Ibn Hanbal adopted an approach that tended to be protective of history. For him, the hadiths that command patience with the ruler are not just legal texts, but the last bulwark of defense to maintain the cohesion and unity of the ummah (Ali Musri and Grafika Penataran, 2023, p.30).

In his criticism, he strongly emphasized the aspect of sanad and the sustainability of tradition (*atsar*). This attitude was born out of the concern that if the door of criticism of the hadith of obedience was opened too wide in the midst of political turmoil, then separatist groups would gain complete theological legitimacy to destroy the unity of Muslims (Ali Musri and Grafika Penataran, 2023, p.31). Thus, Ibn Hanbal's methodology is defensive by maintaining the historical status quo for the sake of collective safety.

In contrast to Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, Imam Al-Shawkani, who is known to be more critical in understanding a postulate, presents a different interpretation of hadith texts and verses regarding obedience to rulers. In his work *Tafsir Fath al-Qadir*, Imam Al-Shawkani emphasized that the command to obey *ulil amri* is not absolute, but conditional. This obedience only applies if the commandment is in line with the principles of tauhid and does not contradict the law of Allah swt. (Asy Syaukani, 2010, p.481).

Qasim Ghalib, a Yemeni academic and researcher known for his studies of major figures in Yemeni intellectual history, criticized the Al-Shawkani language style, which was considered quite aggressive. In methodology, he also detected inconsistencies from Al-Shawkani, who were sometimes still trapped in the remnants of Mu'tazilah's rationalism. However, on the other hand, Qasim Ghalib presents a portrait of Imam Al-Shawkani as a reformer. He praised Al-Shawkani's courage in breaking the frozen taklid and his efforts to revive the ijihad methodology based on the Qur'an and Sunnah. Qasim Ghalib, in his work, *al-Imam Al-Shawkani: Hayatuhu wa Fikruhu*, also acknowledged the integrity and independence of Al-Shawkani, who remained firm in ijihad despite being in a political system with the influence of certain madzhabs (Qasim Ghalib, 1988).

A study in the *Tambusai Education Journal* that examines the method of interpretation by Imam Al-Shawkani confirms that he developed an integrated *approach to riwayat* and *dirayah*, which involves keeping the hadith text as the basis while always

analyzing it through rational and contextual considerations (Sormin et al., 2025). This approach demonstrates the courage of Imam Al-Shawkani in performing *ijtihad* and correcting overly dogmatic political interpretations.

If Ibn Hanbal prioritizes the validation of transmission to dampen the slander, Al-Shawkani prioritizes contextual accuracy to ensure that the hadith is not misused by the ruler for the purpose of committing injustice. Because for Imam Al-Shawkani, the methodology of hadith criticism is a tool to carry out checks and balances on power, not just an instrument of civil order.

3) Compliance Comparison: Between Textual Stability and Contextual Accountability

The above methodological differences lead to contrasting legal conclusions in responding to deviant leaders. Ahmad Ibn Hanbal formulated obedience as textual stability. In his view, the hadiths that command to *"hear and obey even if the back is struck"* should be understood as a doctrine of public protection. For him, the text is preventive. If the people are given space to judge and reject the legality of the ruler subjectively, then the door to anarchy will be wide open. Therefore, Ibn Hanbal put patience above resistance. Obedience in the Hanbali perspective is the sacrifice of individual rights (justice) for the sake of upholding communal benefits (security).

On the other hand, Al-Shawkani offers a more dynamic contextual accountability paradigm. He dissected the hadiths of obedience not as an absolute mandate for the ruler, but as a reciprocal contract between the leader and the people, limited by the law of the Creator. Al-Shawkani sharply distinguishes between obedience in benefit and obedience in disobedience. If Ibn Hanbal tends to swallow the text intact for the sake of stability, Al-Shawkani harmonizes the text, emphasizing that the hadith of obedience should not invalidate the hadith that states *that "there is no obedience for creatures in committing immorality towards al-Khaliq"*. For him, allowing injustice without intellectual criticism, and to a certain extent, is a form of betrayal of the sharia itself (Siddiq Hasan Khan, 1993, p.16).

Fundamentally, the clash of these two thoughts lies in the priority of risk. Ibn Hanbal was more afraid of the slander and chaos born of the rebellion, so he preferred

the path of political conservatism. Meanwhile, Al-Shawkani was more afraid of the despotism born of the silence of the scholars, so he chose the path of critical reformism. This comparison shows that obedience in Islam is not a monolithic concept, but rather a spectrum that moves between the need for social order and the demand for legal justice, depending on the challenges of the times faced by each thinker.

The fundamental difference between the views of Ahmad Ibn Hanbal and Imam Al-Shawkani lies in the epistemological framework and reasoning methods they use in understanding the hadiths of leadership. Ahmad Ibn Hanbal operates in a textual-normative paradigm, which prioritizes the purity of the text and the continuity of the Salaf tradition. For Ibn Hanbal, the authority of hadith is the highest source of law after the Qur'an; therefore, it should not be interpreted freely (Wahab Syakhrani & Hidayah, 2022, p.25). The literal meaning must be maintained as far as possible to preserve religious authenticity and social stability. Thus, Ibn Hanbal's *method of istidlal*, or revocation of the law, tends to be preventive, assuming that rejection or rebellion against the ruler can risk opening the door to wider slander, thereby causing greater damage.

On the contrary, Imam Al-Shawkani is represented by a contextual-critical pattern, namely a method that remains rooted in *riwayah* but is open to *dirayah* and rational analysis. He considered that hadith texts should not be understood rigidly without considering *the maqasid of shari'ah* and the socio-political reality of the ummah (Abd. Azid & Ahmad, 2019, p.20). With this method, Imam Al-Shawkani carried out a more elastic and solutive reading of the hadith of obedience, especially in the context of *zhalim* leadership. This approach shows the integration between the hadith tradition and the rationalism of 18th-century Yemeni fiqh, where critical *ijtihad* became a means of balancing stability and justice (Atabik & Mustaqim, 2020, p.95).

Ahmad Ibn Hanbal maintains the legitimacy of authority to avoid slander, while Imam Al-Shawkani prioritizes the value of justice to prevent power from turning into *zhalim*. Both depart from the spirit of safeguarding the people's benefit, but take different epistemic paths. Thus, the dialogue between these two patterns reveals the methodological dynamics within the rich Islamic tradition, where texts that demand obedience coexist with contexts that demand justice.

Relevance to the Contemporary Socio-Political Context

The perspectives of Ahmad Ibn Hanbal and Imam al-Shawkani on obedience to political leaders remain highly relevant to contemporary socio-political realities, particularly amid the challenges posed by moral crises, abuses of power, corruption, and the emergence of extremist movements in the Muslim world. In the context of the modern nation-state, where political legitimacy is no longer based upon the classical caliphate system, Ibn Hanbal's emphasis on social stability and the prohibition of rebellion retains significant normative value for preserving public order and communal security (Zainuddin, 2023, p.101). The principles he championed -patience, unity of the Muslim community, and the avoidance of fitnah- may be translated into adherence to constitutional frameworks and legal institutions, provided that they do not contradict the fundamental teachings of Islam. Consequently, Ibn Hanbal's political thought should not be understood merely as a justification for authority, but rather as a form of social ethics aimed at preventing violence and preserving societal cohesion.

At the same time, the contemporary prevalence of authoritarian tendencies, corruption, and violations of human rights renders Imam al-Shawkani's thought increasingly relevant as a theological and ethical foundation for accountability and constructive criticism of political power. Al-Shawkani's insistence that obedience is conditional and limited by justice and conformity with the Shariah resonates with modern principles of good governance and responsible leadership (Rusyidi, 2023, p.1003). In this framework, political leaders are not merely holders of formal authority, but trustees who are obligated to uphold universal values such as honesty, responsibility, and social justice (Siddeh, 2021, p.181). His rational and contextual approach to *ijtihad* provides space for public participation in implementing *al-amr bi al-ma'ruf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar* in a manner that strengthens, rather than undermines, social stability.

Moreover, al-Shawkani's criticism of rulers whose actions contradict the principles of the Shariah offers a normative basis for strengthening the role of civil society and religious institutions in promoting justice and public welfare. Conversely, Ibn Hanbal's emphasis on tolerance and rejection of violence serves as an important safeguard against extremist tendencies that seek to legitimize rebellion and political violence in the name of religion. Together, the ideas of these two scholars provide an epistemological

framework for developing an Islamic political ethic that rejects both anarchism disguised as religious zeal and authoritarianism justified in the name of stability.

The continuing relevance of their thought is also evident in contemporary debates concerning the relationship between religion and the state. On the one hand, Ibn Hanbal's principles encourage respect for legal authority and institutional order within the framework of the modern state. On the other hand, al-Shawkani's ideas inspire the pursuit of a political order grounded in justice and moral accountability. Their differing approaches demonstrate the adaptability and dynamism of the Islamic intellectual tradition, showing that classical scholarship is capable of responding to changing historical circumstances.

From a contemporary perspective, the contrast between these two paradigms reflects ongoing tensions between the demands of political stability and the necessity of public accountability. The Hanbali approach often finds expression in narratives that prioritize social cohesion and economic security, emphasizing the dangers of disorder and national fragmentation. In contrast, the spirit of al-Shawkani's reformism can be observed in the rise of civic activism and demands for transparency and accountability, facilitated by modern media and democratic participation. These developments illustrate that obedience is not an unconditional principle, but one that must operate within the boundaries of justice and ethical responsibility.

Ultimately, the dialogue between Ahmad Ibn Hanbal and Imam al-Shawkani demonstrates that Islamic political thought is neither monolithic nor static. Rather, it represents a dynamic spectrum that seeks to reconcile the preservation of social order with the pursuit of justice. Their intellectual legacies suggest that contemporary Muslim societies need not choose between stability without criticism, which risks authoritarianism, and criticism without regard for order, which risks anarchy. Instead, they point toward a balanced political paradigm in which legitimate authority is respected while remaining subject to moral accountability and the higher objectives of the Shariah.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the differing interpretations of Ahmad Ibn Hanbal and Imam al-Shawkani regarding the hadiths on obedience to unjust rulers are fundamentally

rooted in their distinct socio-political contexts and methodological orientations. Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, who experienced the Abbasid *mihnah* and its accompanying political repression, emphasized patience and obedience to rulers as essential means of preserving communal stability and preventing fitnah, provided that rulers did not command acts of disobedience to God. In contrast, Imam al-Shawkani, writing amid the political fragmentation and intellectual stagnation of eighteenth-century Yemen, maintained that obedience is conditional rather than absolute and allowed room for constructive criticism of rulers whose actions contradicted the principles of the Shariah, so long as such criticism did not produce greater harm or social disorder. Although both scholars shared the common objective of safeguarding the welfare (*maslahah*) of the Muslim community, Ibn Hanbal adopted a more conservative and stability-oriented approach, whereas al-Shawkani advanced a reformist and critically engaged paradigm. This study contributes to the field of hadith and Islamic political thought by demonstrating that interpretations of leadership hadiths are neither monolithic nor ahistorical, but are shaped by the interaction between textual evidence, epistemological frameworks, and socio-political realities. By comparatively examining two prominent scholars from different historical periods, this research highlights the dynamic character of the Islamic intellectual tradition and offers a balanced framework for understanding political obedience that reconciles the demands of social stability with the imperatives of justice and accountability in contemporary Muslim societies.

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