

RECONSTRUCTING PUBLIC OFFICIALS' CRITERIA IN INDONESIA FROM AL- FĀRĀBĪ'S PERSPECTIVE: COMPETENCE, VIRTUE, AND WELFARE

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Abstract: *Who is appointed to public office shapes how well institutions perform and how far citizens trust them. In Indonesia, published monitoring reports and Ombudsman figures show that merit-based appointment is still uneven, and that promotion and transfer are among its weakest areas. This article asks which criteria for public officials can be reconstructed from al-Fārābī's concept of al-Madinah al-Fāḍilah (the virtuous city). It uses library research and conceptual analysis, and reads Arā' Ahl al-Madinah al-Fāḍilah, al-Siyāsah al-Madaniyyah, and Tahṣīl al-Sa'ādah through Gadamerian hermeneutics, with Ricoeur's notion of distanciation as a check against anachronism. Al-Fārābī treats rule as an intellectual and moral task directed at collective happiness (sa'ādah). His account of the ruler's natural and acquired qualities yields three linked criteria. Competence covers intellectual capacity, knowledge, and judgment. Virtue covers truthfulness, temperance, justice, courage, and indifference to wealth. Welfare orientation means using authority for common well-being instead of personal, family, or party interests. The article sets these criteria beside merit-system theory, virtue ethics, and research on public leadership, and notes where al-Fārābī follows or departs from Plato's Republic. It argues that the three criteria extend the merit principle in Indonesian civil-service law, which rests on qualifications, competence, and performance, by making character and purpose explicit grounds for appointment.*

Keywords: *al-Fārābī; al-Madīnah al-Faḍīlah; public officials; political leadership; competence; virtue; public welfare; merit system; Indonesia.*

INTRODUCTION

The quality of public leadership shapes how effective, legitimate, and ethically directed a government is. Public office is a form of political responsibility. It calls for competence, integrity, sound judgment, and commitment to the common good. Comparative research points the same way: state capacity and the quality of government depend heavily on how officials are recruited and promoted (Evans & Rauch, 1999; Rothstein & Teorell, 2008). Merit-based recruitment is associated with lower corruption (Dahlström et al., 2012), and patronage appointments tend to trade capability for loyalty (Grindle, 2012).

Indonesia illustrates the problem. Law No. 20 of 2023 on the State Civil Apparatus (ASN) requires ASN management to follow the merit system, that is, decisions based on qualifications, competence, and performance without discrimination (UU No. 20 Tahun 2023). Practice lags behind the rule. By November 2022 the State Civil Apparatus Commission (KASN) counted 217 agencies as having reached the "good" category or higher, fewer than half of those it assessed, and in its 2021 assessment promotion and transfer scored below 50 percent, the lowest of the merit aspects it measures (Antara News, 2022). In January 2023 KASN's chair named strong political intervention in the bureaucracy as one of three main obstacles to applying the merit system (Antara News, 2023). The Ombudsman of the Republic of Indonesia reported that staffing matters made up 22 percent of the complaints it handled at the resolution and monitoring stage in 2023, second only to land, with transfers among the most frequent issues (Investortrust, 2024). The Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) has also recorded seven regional heads caught in the sale of official positions between 2016 and 2021 (Kompas TV, 2021).

These figures do not say how many officials are unqualified. They come from monitoring and complaint systems, each with its own coverage and limits, and this article uses them only as context. They do show that appointment is a recurring weak point. When it fails, the costs are familiar: inefficient administration, weaker institutional performance, lower public trust, and a widening gap between those who hold authority and the needs of the people they serve (Van Wart, 2003). Who is fit to hold public office is therefore a question of political ethics as well as personnel administration (Cooper, 2012).

Recent scholarship has stressed the role of ethical principles in Indonesian governance. Wilujeng (2025) argues that *'adl* (justice), *mas'ulīyyah* (accountability), *shūrā* (consultation), and *maṣlahah* (public welfare) give an ethical framework for dealing with corruption, inefficiency, and falling public trust. Munadzir et al. (2025) compare Indonesian and Saudi Arabian leadership through *siyāsah shar'īyyah* and conclude that leadership cannot be separated from the norms that govern political authority. These studies give a solid base for thinking about good governance from an Islamic political perspective. Their main concern, however, is the principles and institutions of governance, not the **substantive criteria for deciding whether a particular person is qualified to hold public office.**

Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (c. 870–950) offers a useful starting point. In *Ārā' Ahl al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*, the quality of political order cannot be separated from the intellectual and moral quality of those who rule (al-Fārābī, 1985, ch. 15). His virtuous city (*al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*) is aimed at *sa'ādah* (happiness), and its ruler needs intellectual excellence, moral virtue, sound judgment, and the ability to lead the community toward that end. Recent studies confirm that these ideas still speak to present-day questions (Germann, 2021; Muttaqin, 2022; Poyraz, 2025). Antika and Dewantara (2021) relate al-Fārābī's ideal state to Indonesian civic life through the themes of virtue, right action, and collective happiness. Putri (2020) reads his political philosophy as a politics directed to happiness and links the quality of leadership to the harmony of society.

More specifically, Pangesti et al. (2024) examine the ideal leader in the thought of al-Fārābī and al-Māwardī. They identify several qualities of an ideal leader: intellectual capacity, knowledge, moral character, courage, honesty, and fitting conduct. They also show that al-Fārābī joins a vertical dimension of leadership (the moral and spiritual) to a horizontal one (responsibility toward society). Fata et al. (2025) trace the convergence of al-Fārābī's political philosophy with Pancasila as an ontological and moral foundation of the Indonesian state, and stress moral consciousness, virtue, wisdom, justice, and orientation toward the common good as elements of political leadership. These studies matter because they show that al-Fārābī can be brought into dialogue with Indonesian politics and need not be treated only as a historical doctrine.

A research gap remains. Existing studies have mostly dealt with al-Fārābī's ideal state, the meaning of happiness, the general traits of an ideal leader, or the fit between his thought and Indonesian state ideology (Antika & Dewantara, 2021). Studies of Indonesian governance have stressed *good governance*, *siyāsah shar'īyyah*, accountability, justice, and institutional arrangements (Wilujeng, 2025). What has not been explored enough is how the virtuous city can serve as a normative framework for reconstructing the criteria used to select and appoint public officials in Indonesia today, above all where a formal political position is not matched by competence, virtue, and orientation toward public welfare. This gap is where the present study works.

The article therefore goes beyond asking whether al-Fārābī is relevant to Indonesia. Its question is narrower: What criteria for public officials can be reconstructed from al-Fārābī's concept of *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*, and how can they respond to the problem of public leadership in Indonesia? The study proposes that an official's suitability should not be judged only by political loyalty, formal qualifications, or administrative experience. Following al-Fārābī's normative logic, public leadership should combine three linked dimensions: competence, virtue, and welfare orientation. Competence concerns intellectual capacity, knowledge, judgment,

and the ability to carry out public responsibilities. Virtue concerns moral integrity, justice, self-discipline, and ethical character. Welfare orientation concerns the commitment to direct political authority toward collective well-being.

The study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it moves the analysis of al-Fārābī from the general idea of the ideal state to the criteria for selecting and appointing public officials. Second, it places classical Islamic political philosophy within a present Indonesian governance problem by building a normative model in which competence, virtue, and public welfare reinforce one another as criteria for legitimate public leadership. Third, it sets al-Fārābī's criteria beside modern merit-system theory, virtue ethics, and research on public leadership, and traces what he takes from Plato's *Republic* and what he changes. The study does not present *al-Madīnah al-Faḍīlah* as an idealistic or utopian model. It treats it as a critical standard against which the quality of political leadership can be judged and rebuilt. In this sense, al-Fārābī's philosophy is more than a historical account of the virtuous city. It is a conceptual resource for thinking about how public authority should be entrusted to people able to exercise power wisely, ethically, and for the benefit of society.

METHOD

a. Philosophical and Methodological Foundations

1. Philosophical Orientation

This study uses a qualitative philosophical design based on library research and conceptual analysis (Zed, 2004; Adlini et al., 2022). It treats political leadership as a normative question (who may hold public authority, on what grounds, and for what purpose) as well as an empirical phenomenon. That orientation suits the problem. Whether the people appointed to office are qualified is partly a matter of fact, which Indonesian monitoring data can speak to, and partly a question of what qualification should mean, which data alone cannot settle. The study therefore does not measure how many appointments fail; the Introduction draws on published monitoring data only to show that the problem is real. Its aim is to reconstruct the normative criteria that should govern appointment to public office (Jabareen, 2009).

The primary framework is the political philosophy of Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, especially his account of *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* (the virtuous city), *sa'ādah* (happiness), virtue, intellectual excellence, and the purpose of political association. His political writings are treated as philosophical sources for the link between the qualities of rulers and the ends of political community (al-Fārābī, 1985, 2001, 2015). Contemporary scholarship is used to interpret these texts and to bring them into conversation with Indonesian governance (Galston, 1990; Mahdi, 2001; Germann, 2021).

The method has two parts. Philosophical interpretation identifies what competence, virtue, leadership, happiness, and public welfare mean in al-Fārābī's texts and how they relate to one another. Conceptual reconstruction then carries those meanings into a framework for judging the qualifications of public officials in Indonesia. It follows Jabareen's (2009) procedure of mapping sources, reading and categorizing concepts, integrating them into a framework, and testing the result for coherence. The study does not try to copy al-Fārābī's political model. It reconstructs the normative principles behind it for present-day public governance.

2. Data Generation Techniques

As a library study, the research generated data from documents, not from interviews, observation, surveys, or focus groups (Zed, 2004). The data are primary philosophical texts and secondary literature on al-Fārābī, leadership, public governance, and the Indonesian political context. The primary texts were chosen on purpose because they state his views on political organization, virtuous leadership, happiness, and the aims of human association.

The main primary sources are *Ārā' Ahl al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* (*The Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City*, known in Walzer's translation as *On the Perfect State*), read in Walzer's (al-Fārābī, 1985) Arabic–English edition and Nādir's (al-Fārābī, 1986) Arabic edition; *al-Siyāsah al-Madaniyyah* (*The Political Regime*), read in Butterworth's translation (al-Fārābī, 2015) alongside the Hyderabad text (al-Fārābī, 1926a); *Kitāb al-Tanbīh 'alā Sabīl al-Sa'ādah* (*The Book of Admonition on the Way to Happiness*; al-Fārābī, 1926b); and *Kitāb Tahṣīl al-Sa'ādah*

(*The Attainment of Happiness*), read in Mahdi's translation (al-Fārābī, 2001) alongside the 1995 Arabic edition (al-Fārābī, 1995). Page and chapter numbers in this article refer to the English translations unless stated otherwise. The texts were read for explicit and implicit statements about the qualities of rulers, intellectual and moral excellence, political purpose, and the relation between leadership and collective happiness.

Secondary data came from peer-reviewed articles and scholarly books on al-Fārābī, Islamic political philosophy, political ethics, public leadership, merit-based administration, and Indonesian public administration. Context on appointment practice in Indonesia comes from Law No. 20 of 2023 and from KASN, Ombudsman, and KPK statements as reported in national news media. These serve as context, not as data for testing the framework. Particular attention went to recent studies of al-Fārābī in the Indonesian setting, including work on the ideal state, ideal leadership, Pancasila, and political ethics. Pattison's (2024) study of revelation in al-Fārābī's virtuous city informed the reading of how political leadership relates to intellectual knowledge and to the purposes of the city.

Data collection followed four steps: (1) identifying the relevant primary and secondary literature; (2) selecting it on purpose, for relevance, scholarly credibility, and direct contribution to the concepts studied; (3) close reading and extraction of passages on leadership, competence, virtue, happiness, and welfare; and (4) sorting the extracted concepts into analytical categories. The unit of analysis is the text, not human participants, so no informant sample, interview time, or fieldwork period applies (Zed, 2004). The corpus was read through sustained engagement with the texts and by cross-checking the primary works against contemporary scholarship.

3. Data Analysis

The texts were analyzed through philosophical hermeneutics combined with thematic-conceptual analysis. The hermeneutic approach follows Gadamer (2004) and Ricoeur (1981). From Gadamer the study takes three ideas. Interpretation starts from the interpreter's own situation, so the Indonesian problem of

appointment is stated openly at the outset as the horizon from which al-Fārābī is read. Understanding happens as a fusion of horizons, in which the question put to the text and the text's own answer correct each other. And understanding includes application: a text is understood only when it is brought to bear on a present question. From Ricoeur the study takes distancing and appropriation. A text detaches from its author and original setting, and that distance allows a critical reading before the text is appropriated. Claims about a first ruler in a tenth-century virtuous city are therefore not carried over directly to Indonesian civil servants. Skinner's (1969) warning against reading past authors as if they answered our questions supports the same caution.

The analysis had five steps. First, passages on rulership, intellectual capacity, virtue, political purpose, *sa'ādah*, and collective welfare were identified in the primary works and read in context. Second, the passages were coded by recurring concept. Third, the relations among the concepts were examined to reconstruct al-Fārābī's account of the qualified ruler, moving between single passages and the work as a whole, as the hermeneutic circle requires. Fourth, the reconstructed concepts were put in dialogue with Indonesian governance problems and with modern theory of merit systems, virtue ethics, and public leadership. Fifth, the resulting categories were integrated into a framework of competence, virtue, and public welfare (Jabareen, 2009).

The analysis followed an interpretive, not a statistical, logic. Attention went to the meaning of concepts within their textual context, so that al-Fārābī's ideas were not reduced to isolated quotations. Internal consistency was checked by comparing formulations across his major political and ethical works. Interpretive rigor was supported by source triangulation: comparison among several primary texts, and between primary texts and contemporary interpretations. Secondary literature was not a substitute for the primary texts. It served to contextualize, challenge, and refine the interpretation (Gadamer, 2004; Skinner, 1969).

The study also used conceptual triangulation, checking whether competence, virtue, and welfare orientation can be derived consistently from al-Fārābī's wider philosophical system. Because the research involved no human participants, personal data, interviews, or experiments, informed consent and participant confidentiality do not apply. The main ethical duty was scholarly integrity: faithful representation of sources, avoidance of plagiarism, and a clear line between al-Fārābī's own concepts and the researcher's contemporary reconstruction.

b. Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Model

The theoretical framework is built mainly from al-Fārābī's political and ethical philosophy, especially the linked concepts of *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*, *sa'ādah*, intellectual excellence, virtue, and political leadership. For al-Fārābī, political association does not exist only to secure material survival or administrative order. The virtuous city is directed toward true happiness, which requires cultivating intellectual and moral excellence among its members and, above all, among those who lead (al-Fārābī, 1985, 2001). Political authority therefore has a teleological character: the quality of government is judged by the end toward which power is directed.

The first dimension is competence. In al-Fārābī's account of the ruler, intellectual capacity holds a central place: quick comprehension, retention, keen intelligence, clear expression, and love of learning among the ruler's natural qualities, with wisdom and mastery of the sciences as acquired ones (al-Fārābī, 1985, ch. 15; 2015). Competence here goes beyond technical administrative skill. It includes intellectual judgment and the ability to decide well on collective affairs.

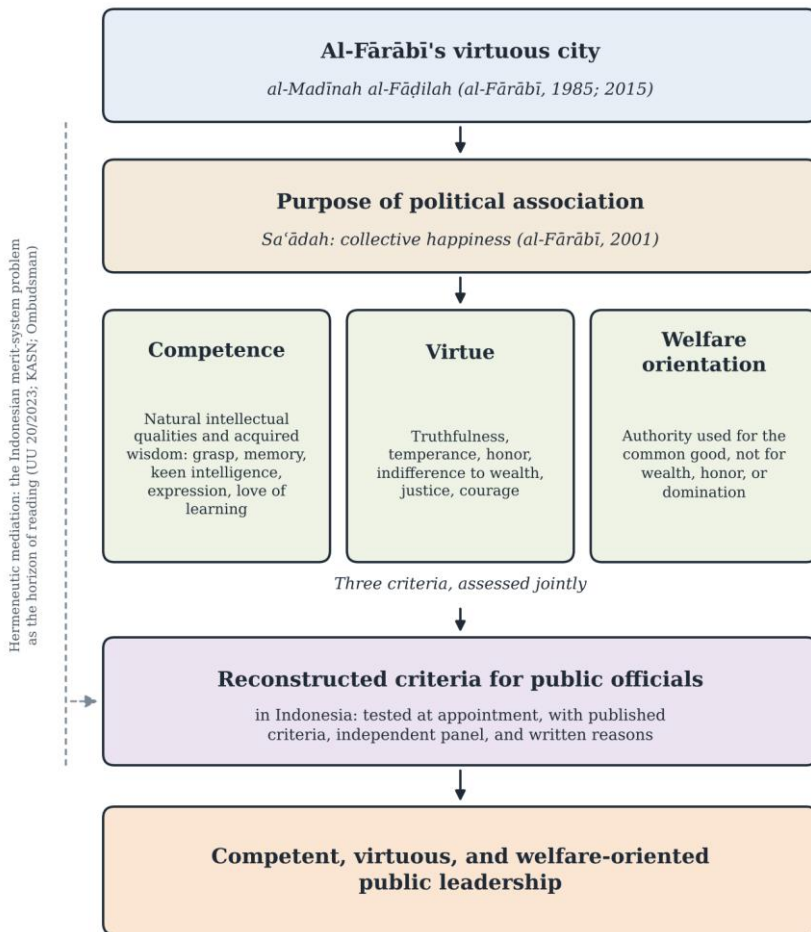
The second dimension is virtue. A virtuous political order needs leadership grounded in moral excellence, not in domination, personal interest, or the pursuit of power for its own sake. Al-Fārābī's list of the ruler's natural qualities includes love of truth, moderation in appetites, a sense of honor, indifference to money, love of justice, and courage (al-Fārābī, 1985, ch. 15). Virtue gives intellectual capacity its ethical direction. Without it, an official may

be administratively capable and still open to self-interest and abuse of authority.

The third dimension is public welfare. Al-Fārābī ties the right organization of political society to *sa'ādah*, the ultimate human good and the end toward which a virtuous community should be directed (al-Fārābī, 2001). This study reconstructs the political pursuit of *sa'ādah* as an orientation toward collective welfare: public officials should use authority for the benefit of society, not for personal, family, factional, or purely political interests. Pattison (2024) shows how knowledge, revelation, and the political organization of the virtuous city are connected, which reinforces the intellectual and normative foundations of al-Fārābī's view of leadership.

On this basis, qualified public leadership is conceptualized as the combination of competence, virtue, and public welfare. Competence makes governance effective, virtue guides the ethical use of authority, and public welfare gives it its purpose. The three dimensions complement one another and should be treated together as criteria for judging public officials (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Conceptual model of public-official criteria reconstructed from al-Fārābī's al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*



Source: Author's elaboration, based on al-Fārābī (1985, 2001, 2015).

RESULTS AND EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Because this is a philosophical library study, "empirical findings" is understood in a **textual-interpretive sense**, not as findings from interviews, surveys, or field observation. The results come from a systematic reading of al-Fārābī's primary political and ethical works and

are then set against the problem of public leadership in Indonesia. The analysis shows that al-Fārābī's idea of political leadership cannot be reduced to formal authority or administrative power. Legitimate and effective leadership requires **intellectual competence, moral virtue, and orientation toward the ultimate good of society** together. In this framework, the quality of public officials cannot be separated from the quality and purpose of the political community itself.

The findings also show that *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* supplies a normative framework for judging public leadership through a teleological view of politics. Political organization exists to make human perfection and *sa'ādah* possible, and leadership is the main instrument for directing society toward that end (al-Fārābī, 1985, 2001). The appointment of public officials therefore cannot be justified by political representation, loyalty, institutional position, or formal qualifications alone. The findings point to three linked criteria for reconstructing the qualifications of public officials: **(1) intellectual and practical competence, (2) moral and political virtue, and (3) orientation toward public welfare**. These are the central findings of the study.

1. Competence as the Intellectual Foundation of Public Leadership

The first finding is that **competence is a basic condition of legitimate political leadership** in al-Fārābī. In *Ārā' Ahl al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*, the first ruler is described through twelve qualities he must have by nature (al-Fārābī, 1985, ch. 15, p. 247). Five of them concern the intellect: he grasps quickly what is said and what the speaker means; he retains what he learns and forgets little; he has keen intelligence and picks up subtle hints; he can express his thoughts fully in speech; and he loves learning and finds it easy. The ruler must also acquire wisdom and command of the theoretical sciences, which is why al-Fārābī can call him a philosopher (Germann, 2021, sec. 4.2; Poyraz, 2025). In *al-Siyāsah al-Madaniyyah*, political leadership is tied to the ability to understand the proper ends of human association and to tell apart actions that lead a society toward its good from those that only satisfy immediate or private

interests (al-Fārābī, 2015). Political authority therefore takes more than the possession of power. It takes intellectual capacity, knowledge, sound judgment, and the ability to turn knowledge into fitting political action.

This matters for the contemporary problem of officials who hold strategic positions without sufficient competence. From al-Fārābī's perspective the problem is more than administrative incompetence. It is a mismatch between **political authority and the intellectual capacity needed to use that authority responsibly**. An official who lacks knowledge and judgment can have formal legitimacy and still be unable to direct public affairs toward their proper ends.

Read against the list above, competence in al-Fārābī has at least four parts: comprehension (grasping a problem and what others mean), memory and learning (retaining knowledge and continuing to acquire it), expression (explaining decisions and reasons), and practical wisdom (choosing suitable means for legitimate ends). This challenges a narrow idea of merit based only on educational credentials or technical experience. What is needed is a competence that lets officials understand complex public problems, weigh alternatives rationally, foresee consequences, and decide in line with the common good.

Pattison (2024) strengthens the epistemic side of this reading. His analysis of revelation in *al-Madīnah al-Faḍīlah* shows political leadership embedded in a wider epistemological and normative structure. Knowledge is not detached from political responsibility; it adds to the capacity of leadership to guide the community toward its proper end. The first finding therefore establishes **competence as the intellectual basis of responsible public authority**.

2. Virtue as the Moral Foundation of Political Authority

The second finding concerns **virtue as the moral foundation of leadership**. Al-Fārābī does not picture the ideal ruler as merely intelligent or technically able. Intellectual excellence must come with moral excellence so that power is directed toward fitting ends. In his typology, the virtuous city differs from defective cities by the purposes that its inhabitants and leaders pursue. A

community is virtuous when its organization and leadership aim at genuine happiness, not at wealth, domination, honor, pleasure, or other limited goals (al-Fārābī, 1985).

This has direct consequences for judging public officials. **Competence without virtue allows efficient but ethically destructive governance.** An official may have wide knowledge and administrative skill and use both for personal, family, factional, or political interests. In al-Fārābī's terms, whether an official is capable cannot be separated from whether that capability is governed by good character.

The analysis identifies six elements of political virtue. Each can be tied to the natural qualities that al-Fārābī lists for the first ruler (al-Fārābī, 1985, ch. 15, p. 247). Truthfulness: the ruler loves truth and truthful people and rejects falsehood. Temperance: he is moderate in his appetites and averse to gambling and indulgence. Honor: he is proud and rejects what is base. Indifference to wealth: he places little value on money. Justice: he loves justice and just people, opposes oppression, and resists committing injustice. Courage: he is resolute and brave in carrying out what is right. In the criteria proposed here, integrity is built from truthfulness and indifference to wealth, self-discipline from temperance and honor, and justice and courage keep their own names. Wisdom, which an earlier version of this article listed under virtue, is treated under competence because al-Fārābī places it among the intellectual qualities. These qualities work as internal controls on the use of authority. Virtue stops competence from becoming an instrument of domination and turns political capacity into service to society.

The finding also shows that leadership qualification in al-Fārābī is **ethical, not merely procedural**. Formal appointment, institutional authority, and legal recognition are poor indicators of leadership quality when they are cut off from moral excellence. Reconstructing the criteria for public officials in Indonesia therefore means moving from a purely positional view of leadership toward a character-based view of public authority.

3. Public Welfare as the Teleological Orientation of Leadership

The third finding identifies **public welfare as the ultimate orientation of political leadership**. In al-Fārābī's system, political association has a purpose beyond keeping order. The final objective is *sa'ādah*, true happiness, the perfection that human beings seek through virtuous association and right action (al-Fārābī, 2001, sec. 1, p. 13). Political institutions and leaders get their normative justification from their capacity to make this higher human end possible.

Kitāb Taḥṣīl al-Sa'ādah ties together human perfection, knowledge, virtue, and the achievement of happiness (al-Fārābī, 2001, pp. 13–50). On this view, political authority is meaningful only when it helps create conditions in which society can pursue genuine human flourishing. Leadership that puts private interest, material accumulation, factional advantage, or personal prestige first contradicts the orientation of the virtuous city.

For Indonesia, this finding gives a criterion for telling **public office from political possession**. A public position should not be treated as a means of distributing power among political networks. It is a trust, and its legitimacy depends on what it contributes to collective welfare. Public welfare here is not limited to economic development or administrative efficiency. It includes justice, social harmony, human flourishing, and the wider conditions citizens need to live with dignity.

Public welfare is thus **the final criterion against which competence and virtue are judged**. Competence answers whether an official is able to govern. Virtue answers whether the official is morally prepared to govern. Public welfare determines what that ability and that morality are for.

4. The Integration of Competence, Virtue, and Public Welfare

The most important finding is that the three dimensions cannot work alone. Al-Fārābī's political philosophy sets up a structural relation among knowledge, virtue, leadership, and happiness. Political competence gives the capacity to act, virtue gives action its ethical direction, and *sa'ādah*, or public welfare, gives it its purpose (al-Fārābī, 1985, 2001, 2015).

Table 1 summarizes the findings as a model.

Table 1. *Competence, virtue, and public welfare as criteria for public officials*

Dimension	Core Finding	Leadership Requirement	Risk Absent	When
Competence	Intellectual and practical capacity is necessary for responsible governance	Knowledge, judgment, wisdom, problem-solving ability	Incompetent and ineffective governance	
Virtue	Political capacity must be governed by moral excellence	Integrity, justice, self-discipline, courage	Abuse of authority and self-interest	of
Public Welfare	Political authority must serve the higher good of society	Commitment to common good and human flourishing	Politicization of office and particularistic interests	and

Source: Author's elaboration, based on al-Fārābī (1985, 2001, 2015).

Integrating the three dimensions gives a fuller picture of a qualified public official. Competence without virtue may produce efficient but morally troubling leadership. Virtue without competence may produce good intentions without effective governance. Competence and virtue without a welfare orientation may let authority serve narrow interests instead of society as a whole. The ideal public official is one whose intellect, character, and political purpose reinforce each other.

5. Reconstruction of Public-Official Criteria for Indonesia

The last finding turns al-Fārābī's framework into a normative proposal for Indonesia. The problem of insufficiently competent officials should not be addressed only through stricter administrative requirements. The meaning of qualification itself needs to be rebuilt. Qualification should cover formal credentials, but also intellectual capability, ethical character, and demonstrated commitment to public welfare.

The resulting framework can be formulated as:

Qualified Public Official = Competence + Virtue + Public-Welfare Orientation

This formula is the main conceptual contribution of the findings. It turns *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* from a general picture of the ideal political community into a normative standard for judging

public leadership. The quality of governance depends heavily on the quality of the people given political authority. Reform of public governance should therefore begin with the criteria for identifying, appointing, and evaluating public officials as well as with institutional mechanisms.

Al-Fārābī thus offers Indonesian governance a critical point of view: public office should go to people who know how to govern, have the virtue to govern ethically, and understand that the purpose of governing is the welfare and flourishing of society. The Discussion examines how this view relates to modern theory and how it can be applied to appointment practice.

Discussion: Implications and Recommendations

The findings give a substantial normative framework for rethinking the criteria for public leadership in Indonesia: public officials should be judged on competence, virtue, and orientation toward public welfare together. Earlier work has used al-Fārābī to discuss the ideal state, happiness, leadership ethics, and the philosophical basis of Indonesian political life. Antika and Dewantara (2021) show how his ideal state bears on Indonesian civic life, and Putri (2020) reads politics as a road to happiness. This study moves the question from the ideal political community to the criteria by which individuals holding public authority should be judged. The next four paragraphs set those criteria against Plato and against modern theory. The implications for each dimension and for practice follow.

Al-Fārābī's criteria are easiest to understand beside Plato's *Republic*. Plato makes philosophical wisdom the qualification for rule and holds that cities will not be well governed until philosophical knowledge and political power meet in the same people (Plato, 1992, bk. 5). Al-Fārābī writes in this tradition: his first ruler is a philosopher, and the virtue of the city depends on him (Galston, 1990; Mahdi, 2001; Germann, 2021). He also changes the Platonic model in three ways that matter here. First, he sets out an explicit list of natural and acquired qualities for the ruler (al-Fārābī, 1985, ch. 15). A list can be used as a criterion in a way that a sketch of the philosopher-king cannot. Second, he joins the philosopher's rule to prophecy and lawgiving, so that the

first ruler is also the founder of the community's laws (Germann, 2021). Third, he allows for the case where no single person has all the required qualities: rule then passes to a person or a group who together hold them (Germann, 2021, sec. 4.2). This third provision is the most useful for appointment practice, because it treats qualification as something that can be spread across people and checked by institutions, instead of resting in one exceptional figure. It also limits the claim made here. Al-Fārābī's list was written for a sovereign, and applying it to civil servants is an analogy, one that needs the caution Skinner (1969) recommends.

Merit-system theory gives the first modern comparison. Kaufman (1956) described public administration as a long argument among three values, neutral competence, representativeness, and executive leadership, and civil-service reform rested mainly on the first. Ingraham (1995) shows that merit has been a changing and contested idea rather than a fixed technique, since it carries a claim about what kind of public service a democracy should have. Evidence links merit-based recruitment to lower corruption and stronger state capacity (Evans & Rauch, 1999; Dahlström et al., 2012). Indonesian law follows this tradition by defining merit through qualifications, competence, and performance (UU No. 20 Tahun 2023). Al-Fārābī's criteria agree with the competence element and sharpen it: competence includes judgment, comprehension, and the capacity to learn, beyond technical qualification. They add two things that a definition built on qualifications and performance does not state directly. One is character as a ground for appointment, where it is usually treated as a code of conduct applied afterward. The other is purpose: whether a person will use office for the public good. This is also where the proposal is most open to objection. Character and purpose are harder to measure than credentials, and a test of virtue can become a tool for the favoritism that merit systems exist to prevent. The proposal is best read as an argument about what the merit principle is for. It should be turned into measurable indicators only with safeguards, discussed below.

Virtue ethics gives the second comparison. For Aristotle, virtue is a settled disposition to choose well, formed by habit, and practical

wisdom is needed to apply it in particular cases (Aristotle, 1999). Contemporary virtue ethics keeps the idea that character matters for right action alongside rules and outcomes (MacIntyre, 1981; Hursthouse, 1999). In public administration, Cooper (2012) argues that administrators act well when they hold the dispositions of a responsible professional, since rules cannot cover every case that discretion has to settle. Al-Fārābī agrees that virtue governs how knowledge is used. He differs from Aristotle's emphasis on habituation by treating several of the ruler's virtues as natural endowments that education can refine but not create (al-Fārābī, 1985, ch. 15). For appointment this has a practical meaning: if character is partly given and partly formed, selection and development both matter.

Research on public leadership gives the third comparison. Van Wart (2003) reviews the field and treats leadership as a combination of personal traits and skills applied in an organizational context. Moore (1995) argues that public managers create value by judging what the public would value and by building the authorization to deliver it. This is competence as strategic judgment, close to the practical judgment al-Fārābī expects of the ruler. Taken together, these works suggest that al-Fārābī's three criteria match what the modern literature treats as the core of public leadership: skill, character, and a public purpose.

The first implication concerns competence. Studies of al-Fārābī's ideal leader stress intellectual and moral qualities; this study turns them into a specific criterion for appointment. For al-Fārābī, leadership requires knowledge, intellectual excellence, judgment, and the ability to direct affairs toward fitting ends (al-Fārābī, 1985, ch. 15; 2015). In Indonesian discussion, competence usually appears as an administrative requirement, not as a condition of legitimate authority. The study therefore widens competence from formal qualifications to substantive capacity. An official should hold more than a position or an academic credential. He or she should be able to understand complex public problems, reach reasoned decisions, and foresee the consequences of political action (Van Wart, 2003; Moore, 1995).

The second implication concerns virtue as a necessary complement to competence. Pangesti et al. (2024) show that the ideal leader in al-Fārābī and al-Māwardī has intellectual, moral, and personal

qualities. The present findings support this and add that competence alone cannot guarantee good governance. A capable official may still use authority to favor personal or political interests. Al-Fārābī's distinction between virtuous and defective political associations indicates that the quality of leadership depends on the ends that rulers pursue. Ethical integrity, justice, self-discipline, and commitment to the common good should therefore count as substantive parts of an official's qualification, not as desirable extras.

The third implication concerns public welfare as the purpose of political authority. Putri (2020) connects al-Fārābī's political philosophy with the pursuit of happiness, and Fata et al. (2025) show its convergence with Pancasila on the moral and philosophical foundations of political order. This study carries the discussion further by translating *sa'ādah* into an orientation toward public welfare. The translation is not an equation: *sa'ādah* cannot be reduced to administrative welfare. It gives a normative basis for seeing governance as an instrument of human flourishing. Public officials should therefore be judged by whether their decisions advance justice, social well-being, institutional integrity, and the common good, not merely whether they satisfy short-term political interests. This echoes the idea of quality of government as impartial exercise of public authority (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008) and the idea of public value (Moore, 1995).

The study also has practical implications for the bodies that appoint officials. First, selection should test the three dimensions separately and record the reasons for each judgment. Competence can be assessed through competency tests, structured interviews, and leadership assessments. Virtue can be examined through integrity checks and the candidate's record, including asset declarations and conduct history. Welfare orientation can be examined through evidence of past public service and through conflict-of-interest declarations that show whether family or political ties could shape decisions. Second, because character and purpose are harder to measure than credentials, these judgments need safeguards: published criteria, an independent selection panel, written reasons, and a route for appeal. Without them, a test of virtue could become a new channel for

the political discretion that merit rules are meant to restrain, a risk that reports of political intervention in Indonesian appointments make concrete (Antara News, 2023). Third, because al-Fārābī treats some qualities as acquired, training and mentoring in public ethics are justified alongside selection (Cooper, 2012).

For political parties and political actors, the findings suggest rethinking the criteria used to identify and promote candidates for strategic public positions. Loyalty should not substitute for competence and virtue. Candidate development programs should include intellectual capacity, ethical leadership, policy knowledge, and commitment to public service. Universities can use al-Fārābī's framework in political and civic education that links leadership competence with moral responsibility. For civil society and citizens, the framework gives a normative basis for judging public officials beyond popularity, party affiliation, or electoral success.

The study also has implications for Islamic political thought. It shows that classical Islamic political philosophy can contribute to present debates on governance without being reproduced mechanically as a historical model. Pattison (2024) shows the continuing philosophical interest of knowledge and normative order in al-Fārābī's virtuous city. Building on this, the study treats al-Fārābī's philosophy as a critical framework for assessing modern public leadership, and so adds to a developing dialogue between Islamic political philosophy and contemporary theories of ethical and merit-based governance.

Several limitations should be stated. First, the study is conceptual and library-based. It does not test whether the three-dimensional framework predicts how Indonesian public officials actually perform, and the empirical material in the Introduction is limited to published reports of KASN, the Ombudsman, and KPK as carried by news media, not a systematic dataset. Second, the analysis centers on al-Fārābī and does not compare him systematically with other Islamic political thinkers such as al-Māwardī, Ibn Khaldūn, or contemporary Islamic political theorists. Third, translating *sa'ādah* into public welfare is interpretive, and the two are not fully equivalent. Fourth, al-Fārābī wrote about a sovereign, and extending his criteria to civil servants is an analogy. Future research should operationalize the three dimensions

empirically and examine them through case studies, interviews, comparative research, or policy analysis, and should place al-Fārābī beside other traditions of political thought to test the framework's robustness.

In sum, the reform of Indonesian political leadership should not rest only on institutional mechanisms. It should also ask who is entrusted with authority and what qualities those people have. The central recommendation is a shift from position-centered politics to qualification-centered leadership, in which competence makes governance effective, virtue ensures that authority is used ethically, and public welfare gives political power its purpose. In this respect *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* remains relevant, not as a blueprint for reproducing a medieval political system, but as a philosophical resource for reconstructing the normative foundations of public leadership in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that al-Fārābī's concept of *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* offers a relevant normative framework for reconstructing the criteria for public officials in Indonesia. Qualified political leadership cannot be reduced to formal authority, political loyalty, or administrative qualifications. It requires three things together: competence, virtue, and public-welfare orientation. Competence gives the intellectual and practical capacity to govern, virtue ensures that authority is exercised ethically and justly, and public welfare directs political power toward collective flourishing. The main contribution is to turn al-Fārābī's classical theory of the virtuous city into a framework for evaluating the qualifications of present-day officials, one that extends the merit principle with character and purpose. The framework gives a philosophical basis for strengthening merit-based, ethical, and welfare-oriented leadership in Indonesia.

The next step is to turn the three dimensions into measurable indicators and test them on actual appointment processes in Indonesia.

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