

Authority without Territory

Dr Daryoush Mohammad Poor discusses the concepts of authority and modernity within the Ismaili Imam

Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims recognise the authority of the Imams descended from the ahl al-bayt, household of Prophet Muhammad (may peace be upon him and his family), through his daughter Hazrat Bibi Fatimah (pbuh) and his son-in-law and spiritual successor, Imam Ali (pbuh). While Ismailis share common doctrines with the broader Muslim community in accepting the unity of God, belief in the finality of Prophet Muhammad and in the hereafter, the distinguishing feature of the community, as for all Shi'a Muslims, is the centrality of the doctrine of Imam. In Shi'i traditions, the Imam is believed to inherit the spiritual authority and the esoteric knowledge of the Prophet. As such, each Imam in every age is deemed to be responsible for providing the interpretation of Allah's final message in any given era and doing all he can to safeguard and secure the material well-being of his community.

It is important to note here that Imam is a pan-Islamic issue as it is related to the question of the relationship between authority and power, which is of universal importance. All societies have rulers or some form of governance. There are times when the power invested in the ruler or government becomes devoid of legitimacy and becomes sheer power which, in its extreme form, is called a dictatorship. In Muslim history, following the demise of the Prophet, there was a question about who had the authority to interpret the faith and lead the community, and what was to be the basis of that authority. Those who governed Muslim societies were often at pains to legitimise their power through their relationship to the Prophet's household, or the support of the ulema, or the consent of the populace. The Shi'a concept of religious authority was based on divine designation through the Prophet and direct descent from the Prophet, through Hazrat 'Ali and Bibi Fatimah.

Authority in any form, political or religious, is closely connected with obedience and a willingness to follow someone who is believed to be exercising power legitimately. In religious terminology, particularly in Shi'a doctrines, this is linked with walaya whose meaning covers concepts such as love for and obedience to the people of the Prophet's household. It is rooted in the Shi'a interpretation of several verses of the Qur'an, traditions of the Prophet and the legacy of Shi'a leadership through its various historical manifestations.

The Ismaili Imam's institutional endeavours reflect its encounter with modernity in its European sense, particularly after the migration of the 46th Imam from Iran to India in the 19th century. Modernity carries a baggage of rationality, science and effective social and political institutions. A distinction ought to be made here between modernisation and modernity. Historically, modernity is about conceptual and philosophical shifts in the outlook of post-medieval European societies, while modernisation is a technological shift in the methods of running the affairs of society in a more effective way. This is reflected in the Ismaili community in the early 20th century in Imam Sultan Mahomed Shah's endeavours to develop health, education and financial institutions for the community. These institutions became the foundations of the current network of institutions of the community and the Imam.

As regards to modernity, the Imam represents a conscious effort to preserve the fundamental value system of the community both in terms of its broader Islamic underpinnings and the Shi'i legacy of the role of intellect in faith. As such, the Ismaili Imam has not embraced European modernity with all its historical, political and cultural specificities. For the Ismaili Imam, modernity is not exclusively articulated, understood or practiced in western or European terminology, but in

a manner which is compatible with the Ismaili Muslim value system. This system is informed by the teachings (ta'lim) of the Imam-of-the-Time.

In order to actualise the vision of the Imam, the vehicle of institutions was necessary. The institutional framework of the Ismaili community today is formulated in the The Ismaili Constitution which has gone through several phases of development since the first drafts were drawn up in the early 20th century during the Imam, Imam Sultan Mahomed Shah. The Constitution consists of a Preamble which broadly describes the core doctrinal beliefs of the community and the centrality of the Imam's authority in guiding the community as well as a series of rules and regulations for the functioning of the various institutions within and beyond the community, including the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN).

The Constitution is a manifestation of a pluralist and diverse community of Ismailis who now live in over twenty five countries around the world. It bears many elements which resemble a social contract but it is indeed more anchored in values and traditions which portray it as a covenant, reflecting the nature of the Imam's authority. The rational and bureaucratic nature of the institutions, be they community or AKDN institutions, are similar in form to modern institutions, but with the added element of an Ismaili value system which is rooted in the vision of the present and living Imam.

The vision of the Imam is not only reflected in the structure of the institutions but also in a constellation of terms, vocabularies and concepts. These include

pluralism, cosmopolitan ethics, sustainable development and a set of other interrelated concepts that inform his commitment to 'improving the quality of life' of the community and of those amongst whom it lives. This commitment is non-denominational and examples of this can be found in the work of a number of institutions, such as the Aga Khan University, which offers opportunities for educational excellence without any discrimination based on faith, race or gender. This spirit can also be seen in the restoration of historic cities and various projects of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture in which the primary beneficiaries are not Ismailis.

This attention to improving the quality of life is associated with and predicated by a bifocal leadership which gives equal attention to both the material aspects of the life of an Ismaili and its spiritual dimension; not forsaking one for the other. In the language of the Imam, this is described as keeping a balance between *din* and *dunya*. As such, the Imam's role is not limited to just religious and other-worldly functions.

The presence of a living Imam provides the community with the dynamism to strive for solutions to problems which cannot be solved by conventional or traditional methods. There is no one unchanging set of rules and regulations; the presence of a living Imam is meant to keep the community from falling into such rigidity. The centrality of the Imam's guidance is the living tradition of this community which enables it to address the dynamic challenges of the modern world.

“Historically, Ismailis are united by a common allegiance to the living hereditary Imam of the time in the progeny of Islam's last and final Prophet Muhammad (may peace be upon him) through his daughter Fatima and her husband, Hazrat Ali, the Prophet's cousin and the first Shia Imam. In the Muslim ethical tradition, which links spirit and matter, the Imam not only leads in the interpretation of the faith, but also in the effort to improve the quality of life of his community, and of the wider societies within which it lives; for a guiding principle of the Imam's institutions is to replace walls which divide with bridges that unite.”

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