

The Shia Ismaili Muslims

The Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims, generally known as the Ismailis, belong to the Shia branch of Islam. The Shia form one of the two major branches of Islam, the Sunni being the other. The Ismailis live in over 25 different countries, mainly in Central and South Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Europe, North America and Australia, and number approximately 20 million. The Ismailis are thus a transnational community who are responsible citizens of the countries where they live.

Throughout their 1,400 year history, the Ismailis have been led by a living, hereditary Imam. They trace the line of Imamate in hereditary succession from Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad (may peace be upon him). The followers of Ali, or Shia, already in existence during the lifetime of the Prophet, maintained that while the revelation ceased at the Prophet's death, the need for spiritual and moral guidance of the community continued.

They firmly believed that the legacy of Prophet Muhammad could only be entrusted to a member of his own family, in whom the Prophet had invested his authority through designation before his death. That person was Ali, Prophet Muhammad's cousin, the husband of his daughter and only surviving child, Fatima. The institution of Imamate was to continue thereafter on a hereditary basis, succession being based on designation by the Imam of the Time.

In time, the Shia were sub-divided. The Ismailis gave their allegiance to Imam Jafar as-Sadiq's eldest son Ismail, from whom they derive their name. The Ismailis continue to believe in the line of Imamate in hereditary succession continuing from Ismail to His Highness the Aga Khan, who is their present, 49th Imam in direct lineal descent from Prophet Muhammad.

The Ismaili interpretation is a major, historical part of the faith of Islam, the Ismaili community being the second largest within the Shia branch of Islam. It has a credal tradition, which stretches back to the early half of the seventh century, and a school of jurisprudence first promulgated more than a millennium ago, during the Ismaili Fatimid caliphate. Its institutional guide and leadership is the Ismaili Imamate, and its multiple agencies are having an increasingly significant world impact.

The Ismailis are the only Shia Muslims to have a living, hereditary Imam; it is the presence of the living Imam that makes the community unique. Spiritual allegiance to the Imam and adherence to the Shia Imami Ismaili interpretation of Islam according to the guidance of the Imam of the Time, have engendered in the Ismaili community an ethos of self-reliance, unity, and a common identity. In a number of the countries where they live, the Ismailis have evolved a well-defined institutional framework through which they have, under the leadership and guidance of the Imam, established schools, hospitals, health centres, housing societies and a variety of social and economic development institutions for the common good of all citizens regardless of their race or religion.

Since assuming office in 1957, the present Aga Khan has adapted the complex system of administering the various Ismaili communities, pioneered by his grandfather, Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan III, during the colonial era, to a world of nation states. In the course of that process, Aga Khan III, who was twice President of the League of Nations, had already

provided a contemporary articulation of the public international role of the Imam. The Imam today, under the present Aga Khan, continues this tradition of strict political neutrality.

In view of the importance that Islam places on maintaining a balance between the spiritual wellbeing of the individual and the quality of his or her life, the Imam's guidance deals with both aspects of the life of his followers.

In keeping with this mandate, and in accordance with Ismaili history, tradition and the needs of the time, the Imams have given rules of conduct and constitutions in conformity with the Islamic concepts of unity, brotherhood, justice, tolerance and goodwill. In the modern period, the first Ismaili Constitution was ordained by the 48th Imam, Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan III, in 1905 for the Ismailis of East Africa. This gave the community a form of administration comprising a hierarchy of governance structures at local, national and regional levels, setting out rules of personal law to govern such matters as marriage, divorce and inheritance, as well as guidelines for mutual cooperation and support within the community and its interface with other communities. Similar constitutions were promulgated in South Asia under instructions from the Imam. All of them were periodically revised to address emerging needs.

In continuation of this tradition, the 49th Imam, His Highness the Aga Khan, has extended this constitutional governance to other regions around the world. In 1986, he ordained an Ismaili Constitution which, for the first time, brought under a common aegis, the social governance of the global Ismaili community in order better to secure their peace and unity, spiritual and social welfare, as well as to foster fruitful collaboration among different peoples, to optimize the use of resources, and to enable the Ismaili Muslims, wherever they live, to make a valid and meaningful contribution to the improvement of the quality of life of the societies in which they live and to be responsible citizens of the countries where they reside.

To achieve these ends, the Imam has established, within the framework of the Constitution, National, Regional and Local Councils responsible for overall social governance; and Central Institutions for the provision of services to the community in education, health, social welfare, housing, economic welfare, cultural and women's activities, youth and sports development. The Constitution also incorporates Religious Education Boards for the provision of religious education at all levels of the community, for the requisite human resource development and for research and publication. National and International Conciliation and Arbitration Boards have been established to encourage amicable resolution of conflicts through impartial conciliation and arbitration, a service which is being increasingly used, in some countries, even by non-Ismailis.