Shia Ismaili Leadership: Past and Present

Books Reviewed: Diana Steigerwald, *Imamology in Ismaili Gnosis* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2015); Otambek Mastibekov, *Leadership and Authority in Central Asia: An Ismaili Community in Tajikistan* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2014); Daryoush Mohammad Poor, *Authority without Territory: The Aga Khan Development Network and the Ismaili Imamate* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

The self-declaration of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as *khalīfah* in 2014 has once again brought to the fore the topic of Muslim leadership. There are numerous forms of leadership in Muslim societies today. Apart from presidents, prime ministers, kings, emirs, and shaykhs, religious heads like the Shaykh al-Azhar as well as certain Sufi shaykhs and pirs have varying levels of prominence. The Supreme Leader of Iran is the head of state and the county's highest-ranking political and religious authority. Aga Khan IV, the current Shia Nizari Ismaili Imam, leads a transnational community and has established the Aga Khan Development Network. Fethullah Gulen is founder of the transnational Hizmet (service) movement that has roots in Turkey.

The issue of Muslim leadership initially came into focus following the Prophet's death in 632, when Abu Bakr al-Siddiq was nominated as the first *khalīfah*. Ali ibn Abi Talib, married to the Prophet's daughter Fatima, asserted his claim but eventually agreed to accept Abu Bakr's selection. Ali became the fourth *khalīfah* after Abu Bakr, Umar al-Khattab, and Uthman ibn Affan. His closest followers, who came to be known as the *Shī'at 'Alī* and later just Shia, upheld the belief that the Prophet's family possessed the right of leadership. This group has adhered to Ali and Fatima's descendants as Imams.

The Shia Imama is a religious institution that embodies authority in the domains of faith (*dīn*) and world (*dunyā*). It is generally characterized by a hereditary succession of leaders from father to son, except among the Zaydis (living mostly in northern Yemen), who select their Imams from any male descendant of Ali and Fatima. The largest Shia group, the Ithna Asharis (Twelvers), are concentrated mainly in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, and the Gulf region. Their name refers to the belief that their Twelfth Imam went into occultation in 873 and is expected to re-emerge as the messianic Mahdi. In his absence, the community is guided by ulama led by the ayatullahs.

Ismailis comprise several sub-groups, with the largest two being the Nizaris and the Musta‘lis. The latter’s lineage of leaders extended to their Twenty-First Imam, who is said to have gone into occultation in 1130. The Da‘i al-Mutlaq presides over the Tayyibi Musta‘li community in his absence. Nizaris hold that the lineage of their Imams continues to the present day in the person of Shah Karim al-Husseini, the Forty-Ninth Imam since Ali ibn Ali Talib. He is better known as the Aga Khan, a title accorded in the nineteenth century by the Qajar Shah of Iran to the Forty-Sixth Nizari Ismaili Imam.

Fourteen centuries of history have seen Imams in various situations: the leadership of all Muslims as one of the Khulafa’ al-Rashidun, the martyrdom of Husayn, scholarly quietude under the Umayyads and concealment under the Abbasids, triumphant re-emergence and rulership of Fatimid Imam-Khalifahs over an empire for two centuries, leadership over the Alamut state in Iran and Syria, concealment of the Nizari Imams for six centuries, governorship of an Iranian province by Aga Khan I who then moved to India, and the migration of Aga Khan III to Europe. In the Ismaili Imama’s long history, there has been an alternating pattern of periods of concealment (*satr*), due to danger posed by external forces seeking to destroy the Imama, and of manifestation (*kashf*), characterized by open engagement with society.

Many Ismaili philosophical writings have dwelt on the Imama, mostly expounding ideas about its spiritual nature and occasionally about its worldly engagement. The three books under review in this article examine Nizari Ismaili leadership. *In Imamology in Ismaili Gnosis*, Diana Steigerwald conducts a philosophical survey of Imama from Ali to Aga Khan IV, the current Ismaili leader. Comparisons to Farhad Daftary’s *The Ismailis: Their History and Doctrines*, which has become a standard historical reference on the topic, may be inevitable. Although a substantial 347 pages, Steigerwald’s book is far shorter than Daftary’s 800-page tome, which is a fairly comprehensive history of the Ismailis and presents detailed descriptions of the various periods in the group’s long history. Steigerwald attempts to provide a thematic unity to a 1,400-year period of history through discussions of persons, events, and ideas in a series of passages of varying lengths. This organization has resulted in a fairly accessible handbook that needs to be complemented by other sources for a more extensive coverage of specific topics.

As a scholar of Islamic thought, Steigerwald’s publication, while following largely the same historical trajectory as Daftary’s, places relatively more emphasis on philosophy. She discusses various cosmological models and concepts about the Shia Imama that appeared in different times. The author explains the unfolding of these beliefs through the emphasis that Ismailis place

upon the esoteric (*bāṭin*) aspects of spirituality over the exoteric (*zāhir*). It seems that the author struggled to present the theme of Ismaili gnosis within the book's chronological arrangement. The group's concepts about Islamic spirituality are discussed, usually in the latter parts of chapters, among the long series of historical personalities.

Neo-platonist ideas were a major preoccupation of some of the major exponents of early Muslim philosophy, including al-Kindi (d. 873), al-Farabi (d. 950), and Ibn Sina (d. 1037). It is not surprising, then, that Ismaili thinkers of this period drew on those ideas to expound upon the Imam's cosmological significance. Steigerwald compares the various versions of the cosmological hierarchies erected by al-Nasafi (d. 1197), al-Sijistani (fl. 971), al-Kirmani (d. 1021), and Nasir-i Khusraw (d. 1088). Some of these conceptual structures sought to order the relative status of the Prophet, the Imam, and ranks within the Ismaili da'wah. In this we see rationalizations of the religio-political structures that were in place in the pre-Fatimid, Fatimid (909-1171), and Alamut (eleventh-twelfth centuries) periods.

A key difference between Daftary's and Steigerwald's books is that while the former only offers a cursory section on the development of India's Nizari Ismaili communities, the latter devotes a chapter to this topic. This highly significant period began in the fourteenth century and is generally understudied by scholars of Ismaili history, even though Ismailis of Indian origin currently hold dominant positions in the transnational community's structures (Mohammad Poor's book refers to them as the "mainstream."). Sponsored by the Association for the Study of Ginans, Steigerwald's publication discusses some of the concepts presented in the *ginan*s, a large body of lyric writings that expounds upon Ismaili Muslim beliefs to Indian members of the community. The emergence of this Satpanth tradition was integral to the historical developments in the Subcontinent, where Sunni and Shia preachers used Indian languages and embedded Islamic ideas within Indic conceptual frameworks. This is an underexplored area in contemporary scholarship: The field of Islamic studies, shaped by Orientalists working within positivist rationalism, does not appear to appreciate the fluidity of religious thought and culture relating to the engagement between peoples. Steigerwald explains how Indic Vedic cosmology was adapted to Ismaili messianism to explain the status of the Ismaili Imam.

Whereas several ideas about the Imam's cosmological placement appear in the book, there is no attempt to reconcile them. Steigerwald suggests that such an effort would be futile due to the cultural and intellectual diversity of Ismaili writers who lived in different places and times. She maintains that

there is a unity of thought on the concept of the Imam at the esoteric, rather than at the exoteric, level. We ultimately find that there remain overlapping but distinct intellectual heritages of various Ismaili communities in Syria, Iran, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, and China. This poses particular challenges to the Nizari Ismaili Imama, which is currently seeking to bring a level of transnational coherence to its dispersed and diverse followers who are coming together, especially in western sites of diasporic relocation.

The book's penultimate chapter addresses developments from the nineteenth century to the present. It discusses the Aga Khans and briefly examines the various court cases launched against them by dissidents from the community in India during British rule. The Aga Khans were largely able to overcome these significant challenges, although not without substantial numbers declaring themselves to be Twelvers or Sunnis. The chapter also describes the Aga Khan III's development activities, which his current successor vastly intensified. Steigerwald presents brief passages on Aga Khan IV's establishment of some of the major organizations that were eventually brought together under the Aga Khan Development Network.

She does not substantially discuss the diasporic dispersal of Ismaili communities, especially those of Indian origin, which is integral to the transnationalization of the group's institutional development. Nor does she dwell upon the conceptual implications of such international engagements on the Ismaili Imama. The latter topic is explored, in varying manners, by Otambek Mastibekov in *Leadership and Authority in Central Asia: An Ismaili Community in Tajikistan* and Daryoush Mohammad Poor in *Authority without Territory: The Aga Khan Development Network and the Ismaili Imamate*.

Mastibekov, working primarily through political and anthropological lenses, provides a fascinating account of Ismaili leadership in Tajikistan during the pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods. As in the other Muslim-majority lands of Central Asia, this country was under Soviet dominance for most of the twentieth century. Tajik Ismailis are concentrated in the Gorno-Badakhshan (Pamir) province, where they form the vast majority of the population. This province is contiguous with other areas of long-standing Ismaili residence, namely, Afghan Badakhshan, Hunza and Gilgit in northern Pakistan, and Xinjiang in western China. Its mountainous topography enabled the persecuted communities to continue practising their Shia Ismaili faith over many centuries. A key person in the history of this region was the renowned eleventh-century Persian poet, philosopher, and Ismaili *dā'ī* Nasir-i Khusraw. Returning to the East after stays in the Fatimid capital of Cairo, he became a renowned exponent of Ismaili teachings in Badakhshan and neighboring lands.

Ismaili leadership in the region after Nasir-i Khusraw was characterized by the dominance of individuals with the title of *pir*. As an equivalent of *shaykh*, this term is similar to that accorded to the heads of Sufi orders. Like many Sufi leaders, Ismaili *pir*s maintained records of their genealogies going back to the Prophet. (*Mir*s were a separate group of leaders who were responsible for managing the material wellbeing of the population.) *Pir*s were appointed by the Imam. This post was, at least in theory, not hereditary; however, in practice it was passed down in certain families. Ismailis in the region selected the individual *pir* to whom they gave their allegiance. These figures' authority over their respective followers was significant, given the relative inaccessibility of regular guidance from the distant Imam. According to Mastibekov, they competed with each other on internal matters but were united in negotiations with the rulers of Afghanistan, Bukhara, and Russia, all of whom were jostling for control over the Pamir region.

The nineteenth century was that of the "Great Game," during which the Russians, the British, and other powers competed for Central Asian dominance. Both the *mir*s and *pir*s, who were marginalized during the Afghan "oppression" (p. 52) of the 1880s, supported Russia's takeover of the Pamir area. The Tsar's government reduced tax payments and allowed a degree of autonomy to local leaders. "The Ismaili religious leaders were able not only to protect their authority but were a cornerstone of the political and social institutions for implementing and constructing their state under the protectorate of their choice" (p. 59). The Ismaili *pir*s sided with the Tsar but obeyed the Ismaili Imam, who was allied to the British. Mastibekov states that "as the notion of borders became more and more important between countries from the nineteenth century, Aga Khan III firmly commanded his followers to be sincere and loyal to the country in which they live" (p. 73).

Following the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Soviet communists took over in Tajikistan and other Central Asian countries. They were extremely suspicious of the pirs' relationship with the previous Tsarist government and their ongoing allegiance to Aga Khan III, who was residing in British-occupied India and later in western Europe. Mastibekov states that there is no clear evidence that the Ismaili leader counseled political or military opposition to the Soviets. Nevertheless, the communists gradually weakened the power of the *pir*s and *mir*s. In any case, the former institution was terminated during the 1930s by the Imam himself, who replaced it with the office of the *mukhi*. This move may have been prompted by the politics of Tajikistan, but it may also have been determined by Aga Khan III's desire to bring uniformity to the various regions of Ismaili concentration. The Indian term *mukhi* is used among

the Subcontinent's Ismailis as a title for the person who presides over religious ceremonies.

Soviet rule was antagonistic to religion, and Mastibekov employs the term *Muslim-atheist* for the new kind of local leadership that arose in Badakhshan. He suggests that such leaders had "religious belief internally, but [were] not able to express it publicly" (p. 88). Some of these members of the Soviet leadership included *sayyid*s (tracing their genealogy to the Prophet) who were able to prevent the execution of some *pir*s accused of being spies. Nevertheless, during Stalin's period of the Great Terror "it is hard to find a single family with a religious background that escaped the punishment of that regime" (p. 92). Those *pir*s who were not killed fled to Afghanistan, India, and China. Henceforth, the Soviets permitted only a class of religious functionaries, known as *caliphs*, to conduct religious ceremonies such as funerals and marriages.

The Imam appears to have maintained intermittent contact with his followers in Badakhshan, despite Moscow's restrictions. Travellers visited him in Bombay, where they would render his Badakshani followers' religious dues and return with guidance from him in the form of *farman*s. A pivotal event was the 1923 visit of Sabz Ali Ramzan Ali, Aga Khan III's emissary. He was a leading Ismaili figure of the era who travelled from India to Tajik and Afghan Badakhshan, Hunza and Gilgit, and Xinjiang. Although Sabz Ali was critical of the *pir*s, Mastibekov indicates that there is no evidence to suggest that this was when the *pir* institution ended. It is noteworthy that, whereas Mastibekov refers to him as *mashnari* (missionary) in the Badakhshani context, the man himself is referred to as "Pir Sabzali" in Indian Ismaili tradition. This points to the diversity of leadership structures existing in various Ismaili regions.

While Soviet hegemony produced significant turbulence in Badakhshan's traditional leadership, it raised the population's level of literacy and material wellbeing. There was also strong Badakhshani representation in the parliament, the cabinet, and the leadership of academic institutions. Religious identities and practices were not openly displayed, but they did survive. The immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union proved to be an even more turbulent time in Tajikistan. Armed conflict broke out between the government in the capital Dushanbe and members of opposition groups, including those from the Pamirs. Mastibekov states: "With the outbreak of the civil war … Badakshanis became the main targets of attack in Dushanbe and other regions" (p. 112). He refers to the systematic killing of people from the province from December 1992 to around May 1993 as "ethnic cleansing" (p. 113). The author asserts that they

"were killed for being Badakhshanis and not for being Ismaili" (p. 118). Sunni Karateginis were also massacred alongside Ismaili Pamiris.

During the conflict, Badakhshan's political leaders split along several lines and opposed each other. However, Mastibekov states that the province's religious leaders did not become involved in the civil war and played a role in ending it. The current Ismaili Imam, Aga Khan IV, visited Badakhshan in 1995 and counseled his followers to work toward re-establishing peaceful relations in the country. He became directly involved in setting up meetings between the government and the opposition groups. During the civil war his organizations' aid to Tajik Badakhshan was vital in preventing a humanitarian disaster. This was the first time ever that the Ismaili Imama's central institutions had been physically present in such a major and crucial manner among his Pamiri followers. Not surprisingly, it had a significant impact upon them.

The book's penultimate chapter is on the current Imam and the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), which has become a significant transnational civil society actor in Tajikistan. It employs some 80,000 people in Muslim-majority and other countries on several continents. Its agencies operate in social, economic, and cultural sectors. This presence has enabled the Ismaili Imam to emerge as an international Muslim actor and to gain a degree of influence in several eastern and western states.

While Mastibekov's publication is a regionally focused study of Ismaili leadership, Mohammad Poor's monograph is an analysis of the Ismaili Imama and AKDN on a broader scale. The latter engages with sociological concepts, particularly those of Max Weber, to develop what he calls "the first comprehensive study of the modern institutions of the Ismaili imamate and its functions in the globalized and cosmopolitan world today" (p. 229). This ambitious, bold, and contentious book tends to invite debate. Whereas there have been several journal articles, book chapters, and theses written about this topic in the last decade, Poor's monograph provides an extended conceptual discussion of the Ismaili Imama in relation to its institutions.

The work is replete with paradoxes. One of them is that whereas it uses Weber's theory of the ideal types of authority (viz., traditional, charismatic, and legal-bureaucratic) as a matrix on which to build its arguments, it also rejects how this founding father of contemporary sociology applied his own theory. Seeing the German intellectual as Eurocentric and susceptible to the faults of Orientalism, Poor writes that "Weber's typology is rich but his remarks about Islam are poor" (p. 43). Like many other European scholars of his day, Weber was given to seeing only westerners as capable of rationality and eastern societies as mired in the world of magic and incapable of modernity. There

are also points of agreement and disagreement between Poor and Mastibekov. For example, both view power and authority as distinct from each other and contend that the Imam's legitimacy comes not from control of a territory, but from the authority based on his claim to the Shia Imama. However, whereas Mastibekov holds that the Ismaili Imama is characterized only by charismatic authority, Poor asserts that it is a unique "hybrid" that draws on all three of Weber's categories (pp. 205-23).

The German sociologist was concerned that charismatic authority wears out in time and saw the possibility of sustaining it by establishing legal-bureaucratic institutions based on traditional authority and imbued with rationality. To him, the Protestant ethic provided the impetus to develop such bodies that would function as the basis of a democratic, modern society. This was supposed to have produced a modern capitalism sustained by a rationalist bureaucracy that was only possible in western societies. An important feature of this model was the contemporary nation-state, in whose constitution and legal apparatus the system was embedded. The secularization of society was also important for such a model to succeed.

Poor describes the Ismaili Imama and the AKDN as a "Weberian paradox" (p. 51), for on the one hand it bears the features of tradition, charisma, and legal-bureaucratic organization, whereas on the other it goes against Weber's theory, which incorporates these three features of the contemporary polity. A key characteristic of the Imama is its assertion that it straddles the worlds of both religion (*dīn*) and material existence (*dunyā*); this goes against the dominance of secularity (if not the complete absence of religion) in Weber's model. In speeches to western audiences, Aga Khan IV frequently refers to the Islamic consonance between *dīn* and *dunyā* to explain his intense engagement as a Muslim religious leader in establishing institutions with a mandate to improve the quality of life of his followers and of those people among whom they live.

The author appears to make a weak argument in stating that the Ismaili Imama's institutions resemble "the ideals of a semi-democratic system … partly because the community is made of highly educated and successful members and above all as a result of the non-state formation of the Community" (p. 53). He admits that the Imam is unelected, but finds "a clearly democratic quality" (ibid.) in the rotational appointments of the community's subsidiary leadership. These statements do not address how problems (e.g., nepotism) are avoided by the continual circulation of elite families and individuals in positions of power. Despite the Aga Khan's promotion of meritocracy, vocal members of the community who are increasingly active on the Internet frequently com-

plain about the amassing and misuse of power by those who hold multiple appointments in the bureaucratic structures.

Poor mentions the Imam's promulgation of a constitution "that works as a unifying legal framework – a semi-rational-legal framework in conformity with modernity – bringing under one umbrella all the scattered Ismaili communities around the globe" (p. 54). The document outlines, under the authority of the Imam, the institutional structure of the communal institutions, which operate as translocal self-governing structures, and the AKDN organizations, which are non-denominational and operate transnationally in the public sphere. This international infrastructure, which is neither nation-based nor governmental but is inspired by Islamic sensibilities, stands against Weber's conceptualization of how authority operates in the contemporary world. However, the author appears to overreach when he describes the Ismaili constitution as "a *covenant* that regulates the relations between the leader and the led" (p. 54; italics in the original). This seems to be contradicted by a later statement: "Ismaili doctrines and the very text of the Ismaili Constitution do give the imam (or the imamate) the unfettered choice to decide about the worldly and religious affairs of his followers" (p. 56). It is not clear how this "covenant" has changed anything if the Imam's authority has remained unchanged.

One of the more contentious aspect of Poor's theory about the current status of Ismaili leadership is that the "imamate has transformed itself from a personalized and individual authority to the 'office of the imamate'" (p. 55). The book makes a major issue of the fact that, instead of only the name of the current Imam, the term "Ismaili Imamat" has appeared on various official documents in recent years. Articulations of Ismaili concepts about the non-personal nature of the Imama are not new; they can be traced back at least 1,000 years to the Fatimids, a time when messianic expectations among the Shia were very high. Moreover, the Twelfth Imam, who had gone into concealment in 873, was expected to return as the Mahdi.

The emergence of the Fatimids from concealment was viewed in this context when their rule was initiated in 909 by an Imam-Khalif whose personal title (*laqab*) was Al-Mahdi. His successor bore a similarly messianic title: Al-Qa'im. During the time of his grandson Al-Mu'iz, the concept of the "dynasty of Mahdis" was expressed: each of the Imam-Khalifs continues the mission of his predecessors. Current references to the "Ismaili Imamat" in agreements with governments and other entities, therefore, are not introducing a completely new way of viewing this institution as consisting of a succession of Imams. On the other hand, they do not change, as Poor himself states, the individual Imam's "unfettered" autonomy (p. 56). This is indeed, as the author

writes, "different in many ways from other institutions of authority in the Muslim world" (p. 20), but in the context of Ismaili history we do not seem to have here "a new form of authority which is unprecedented" (p. xiii).

Many observers heap praises on the AKDN's considerable achievements while overlooking its occasional failures. The network is an imaginative response to a transnationalism and translocalism made possible by the growing degree of globalization over the last few decades. The title – *Authority without Territory* – seems appropriate, for it describes the creative development of institutions under the leadership of a small but transcontinental community that has no political control over any country. However, the author's contention that "the authority of the Imam is increasingly embodied in the institutions that he has created rather than being concentrated in his own person" (p. 55) is particularly problematic. This appears to be a misreading of core Ismaili theology, which distinguishes between, on the one hand, the Imama as a primary and essential institution that derives legitimacy from the criteria of descent from the Prophet and appointment by the previous Imam and, on the other, the (secondary) institutions that are established by the Imama itself. The author apparently tends to conflate the two.

The "bureaucratization of the imamate" (p. 228) is nothing new; it was present earlier, for example, in the massive apparatus of the Fatimid empire. When the Alamut state collapsed, the Nizari Imama's presence remained in the persons of Imams who had no political power or significant bureaucratic institutions. Despite the AKDN's relatively large presence of in the current Imam's activities, it is merely a temporal expression, as were the Fatimid and Alamut institutions in their respective times. Viewed from the perspective of Ismaili theology and history, the structures are not necessarily a permanent embodiment of the Imama itself. The book appears to presume that the particular sets of relationships that the Ismaili Imama has currently established with various states and other entities will persist forever. Poor suggests that "lessons have been learned from the past" and the "political neutrality of the Ismailis" (p. 222) will insulate them from adverse developments in the future. However, the long course of human history has demonstrated that even what seem to be the most viable socio-political arrangements eventually give way to the ultimately unpredictable flow of worldly events. Ismaili history itself has shown how the Imama has alternated between manifestation and concealment.

Notwithstanding its apparent shortcomings, this book marks an important milestone in the theorization of the contemporary Ismaili Imama. The scholarly expression of the institution has largely been in publications on the pre-Fatimid, Fatimid, and Alamut historical periods. It is noteworthy that none of

the three books under review were produced under the aegis of the Institute of Ismaili Studies. All three authors, in their respective ways, have made a contribution to the study of the past and current Shia Ismaili leadership. Mastibekov and Poor have presented varying levels of critical analysis that have been absent from most of the literature on Ismailis, especially about the current period. The former discusses some of the difficulties that the Pamiris have experienced with AKDN and communal institutions established after the Soviet period. He comments on the frictions with expatriate heads of institutions as well as the local leadership. Even as Poor writes about the success of bureaucratizing the current Imama, he also laments the existence of the Weberian "iron cage" (p. 228) and the discursive disconnect between the Imama and its technocrats.

All three authors have missed opportunities to address some of the sharper critiques of the AKDN, such as those posed in Faisal Devji's writings over the last few years. Nevertheless, these publications are welcome additions to the scholarship that examines the significant, but much neglected, contemporary developments in a community whose historical studies generate several books every year.

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