

# History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

## Women Sovereigns in Islam

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History is not created with a big bang. It moves in subtle, almost imperceptible steps in which all men and women participate. It is an edifice on which the action of every human, no matter how humble, has left its imprint. Great events do occur, but they merely mark the milestones in the continuing unfolding of history.

In recreating the critical moments in Islamic history that have molded and shaped the present, a student of history cannot but be awestruck by the majesty of the human processes that have led up to those moments. Much like the buildup of stresses in an earthquake fault, the actions of ordinary men and women create tensions in the flow of history. When these tensions finally do culminate in historical moments, they are very much like the sudden shift of geological plates that mark the onset of an earthquake.

Very often, in focusing on the deeds of mighty men who made war and won battles, the mundane struggles of ordinary men and women are overlooked. Yet, it is from the ordinariness of these struggles that great events emerge. The lowly peasant is as much an actor in the drama of history as the mightiest king. It is in this context that one must examine the contributions of women in Islamic history.

There have been great women, those heroic ladies of the past, who made their way to the top of the historic edifice despite the obstructions placed in their way. Their achievements were even more remarkable when we measure them against a background of the gradual marginalization of women in Muslim societies. The exclusion of women from public space occurred gradually over centuries and must be understood in the broader context of the fragmentation of the unitary Caliphate and the separation of the masses from the rulers. When looked at in this context, the achievements of great women like Razia of India and Shajarat al Durr of Egypt who, despite heavy odds, became Sultanas and queens, stand out as even more remarkable.

Islam liberated women from the constrictions imposed by pre-Islamic Arab society. It opened up the spiritual, economic, social and political space to them. Women were bestowed an individuality. They were to live with men on a platform of equity and justice, partners in the creation of a universal community enjoining what is noble, forbidding what is evil and believing in God. The Prophet built such a community in Madina. The focus of life for this community was the Prophet's mosque, built adjacent to his house and it was from here that he elaborated on religious and social issues, adjudicated legal matters and discussed war and peace. There are three important issues to remember here. First, there was no distance between the head of the community and members of the community. The young

and the old, the poor and the rich, immigrants and locals, Madinites as well as foreigners had equal access to the leader. Second, the leader of the community was not just a political and military figure. He was also the religious and social authority who led the congregation in prayer and had responsibility before the *Shariah*. Third, the social, political and religious space in the mosque was open to women. Although congregational prayer was not obligatory for women, they were not prevented from praying in the mosque. Women prayed in the mosque in rows behind the men. They had equal access to the Prophet to seek counsel and advice on social, religious and political matters.

When the Prophet passed away, the Companions reaffirmed the continuity of Islam as an historical process by the establishment of the *Caliphate*. As defined by Ibn Khaldun, (*Muqaddamah*, p. 476, op. cit.), "the function of Caliphate was to enable the *ammah* (*common folks*) to live in accordance with the injunctions of the *Shariah*." In other words, it was to establish divine patterns in the matrix of human affairs. The Caliphate was rule by law. It differed from the despotism of kingship both in its structure and its functionality. In a kingdom, the word of the king was law; he could make or break it as he saw fit. In a Caliphate, it was the divine law that was the governing paradigm. The Caliph was accountable before the law just as much as the lowliest mendicant. Legitimacy of rule originated from a consensus of the community. The selection of the Caliph was through a process of consultation. The political, judicial, economic, religious and social space was shared between the ruler and the ruled. Even the most humble of citizens, man or woman, could question the Caliph on his decisions, or demand justice in accordance with the law. Thus the Caliphate was fundamentally different from kingship in its doctrinal underpinnings, its institutions and its operations.

The Caliph occupied the central stage in a four dimensional religious-judicial-military-economic space, which was shared with all members of the community, men and women alike. Through a process of consultation, Abu Bakr as Siddiq (r) became the first Caliph of Islam. In the tradition of the Prophet, the Caliph had four principal responsibilities. First, he was the religious head of the community. As such he led the congregation in prayer. Second, he was responsible for the implementation of divine law. He was expected to know the *Shariah* and to implement its injunctions in practice. Thus, he was the supreme judge. Third, he was responsible for the defense of the state. He led the army in times of war. Fourth, he was responsible for the economic well-being of the community. He ensured fair taxation, administered public works and arranged for correct and complete documentation of contracts and civil transactions.

These functions of the Caliph were compromised in time, one by one, some by historical necessity, others for the convenience of the Caliphs. The first to fall by the wayside was the religious function. The civil wars that erupted after the assassination of Caliph Uthman (r) (656) unleashed the forces of extremism. The deadly attacks of the Kharijites on Caliph Ali ibn Abu Talib (r), Emir Mu'awiya bin Abu Sufyan and Amr bin al As (661) demonstrated that the person of the Caliph was vulnerable to would-be assassins. The Kharijites were mortal enemies of anyone who disagreed with them. Extremism begets extreme reactions. Muawiya bin Abu Sufyan (d. 680), who fought his way to power and became the Caliph in 661, took the first step in this direction. He surrounded himself with a guard as a precaution against possible assassination. When he entered the mosque, the guard ensured that the common folk maintained a certain distance from the emir. The Omayyad Caliphs of Damascus, with the sole and notable exception of Omar bin Abdul Aziz, followed this practice of surrounding themselves with a guard. This was the first step in the bifurcation of political space between the ruler and the ruled.

In addition to security concerns, the administration of a vast empire, extending over three continents, required a person of exceptional caliber to organize, manage and provide oversight to the executive functions. This person was called the vizier. The word *vizier* derives from *mawazah*, meaning to facilitate. As such, the vizier was the principal facilitator of the wishes of the sovereign, chief among which were

defense, administration, finance and foreign affairs. During the Umayyad reign in Damascus (661-750), with the expansion of the empire in Asia, North Africa and Europe, the institution of the vizierate acquired enormous importance. The vizier became not only the functional arm of the empire, but also its principal think-tank and chief executive. He was privy to the Caliph's thinking as well as the inner workings of the court circles. The office of the vizier continued when the Abbasids seized power (750) and moved the capital to Baghdad.

With time, the functions of the vizierate were transformed. The Omayyad dynasty in Spain (760-1031), to put a distance between itself and some of the unpopular aspects of the defunct Omayyads of Damascus, de-emphasized the importance of the office of the vizierate. This they accomplished by splitting the vizierate into several departments. In place of a powerful single vizier formerly serving the emperor, there were now several viziers. This proliferation of the title had a secondary consequence. Coordination between the different viziers and communication between the sovereign and the vizierates required a new official. This official was called a *hajib*.

The word *hajib* derives from the root Arabic word *h-j-b*, meaning, to hide or conceal. The principal function of the *hajib* was to conceal the sovereign from the prying eye of the common folks, to protect the security of his person, to provide him with privacy and to act as a conduit for his wishes to the functioning viziers. Since the *hajib* had the ear of the sovereign, his position was considered higher than that of the viziers and he occupied the most spacious quarters, next to the sovereign, in the palace compounds. Sometimes, a *grand vizier* combined in himself the functions of a *hajib* and the supervision of the various viziers.

With the advent of the *hajibs*, the separation of the ruler from the ruled became institutionalized. Many of the Caliphs gave up the practice of leading the congregational prayers. Harun al Rashid (d. 809) was the first Caliph to employ professional *khatibs* to lead the prayers. Thereafter, with rare exceptions, it was the *khatib*, not the Caliph, who stood in front of the community of believers to give the Friday sermon. With time, the position of the *khatib* degraded to that of a professional *mullah* who came to regard the pulpit as his personal domain much as the ruler regarded the throne as his personal property. The *khatib*, who owed his job to the ruler, prayed for the health and well-being of the ruler in the *khutba*. Whenever there was a change in dynasties or when a new strongman took power, his name was promptly substituted for the old ruler. Similarly, the privilege of administering justice and giving *fatwas* (legal opinions) on matters of jurisprudence was also delegated to hired *kadis*.

The degree of separation between the Caliph and the common folks varied with the urbanization of a dynasty. The greater the urbanization, the greater was the separation. For instance, the Omayyads in urban Spain, employed *hajibs*, whereas the Murabitun and the Al Muhaddith who followed them, did not. The latter dynasties were held together more through tribal and racial cohesion than through attachment to dynastic rule and they delegated the functions of security, administration and management to their own kinsmen.

In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, when the Turks rose to power, they supplanted the institution of the Caliphate with the new institution of the Sultanate and the separation of temporal rule from religious authority was complete. The sultan became the political and military ruler. The caliph remained the nominal and titular head of the community, bereft even of dispensing religious *fatwas* because that responsibility was delegated to professional *kadis*. The separation of political and military authority from religious responsibility before Divine Law led to the rise of despots. The farther a ruler was from the ruled, the

more disdainful he was of the common man. Whereas the caliphs were only representatives selected to enforce Divine Law, the emerging despots were self-appointed political military authorities who forced their own law upon their subjects.

The Seljuk Turks continued the practice of employing viziers and *hajibs*. In the Ottoman courts, the *hajibs* were called *mabayeen*. In the medieval world, the concentration of such enormous power in the vizier was an invitation to ambitious men to usurp royal privileges for themselves. Over the centuries, many an incompetent sovereign found himself displaced by his own vizier.

Security of the sultans took on urgency with the rise of the Assassin Movement in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, which became the nemesis of Sunni sultans. As the Turkish Empire expanded, the *hajibs* were given further responsibilities to oversee the security of the palace grounds, greet royal visitors and supervise the royal kitchen. Thus the impact of the Assassin Movement in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries was similar to that of the Kharijites in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, namely, to further isolate the ruler from the *amah* (common folk).

The unitary concept of the Caliphate as the central focus of political, religious, judicial and administrative space was shattered and in its place sprang up separate spaces occupied by the sultan and his hired professionals. Certainly, there were exceptional rulers, such as Omar bin Abdul Aziz (d. 719) and Sulaiman the Magnificent (d. 1565) who sought to reverse this trend and made concerted attempts to live up to the ideals of a caliph. But such cases were few and far between. Through most of Islamic history, the Caliphate survived as a fossilized replica of its pristine self.

The threat of assassination, the fossilization of the caliphate and the rise of the sultanates, the emergence of the viziers, the hiring of professional *khatibs* and the appointment of *hajibs*, all contributed to the isolation of the ruler from the ruled. Within the isolated political and social space of the common folk, women found themselves even more isolated. The process was slow and subtle. It was a requirement that a caliph lead the congregational prayers. The qualifications for this function were addressed in all the major schools of *Fiqh*, which developed between 765-950. This was a period of global expansion of Muslim political power. Accompanying this expansion there was an influx of ideas from Greece, India, China and Africa. Islam was faced with the challenge of defining its interfaces with other civilizations while strengthening its own ideational structure in the face of alien ideas. *Fiqh* (jurisprudence) was the doctrinal response of the Islamic civilization to the challenge of these older civilizations.

The five major schools of *Fiqh* (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanbali and Ja'afariya) came up with different answers as to whether a woman was qualified to lead a congregational prayer. In the opinion of the Hanafi, Shafi'i and Ja'afariya Schools, a woman may lead a congregation of other women and children but not of men. The Maliki and Hanbali Schools were stricter. Since a woman could not lead *juma'a* prayers, this automatically barred her from aspiring to be a caliph or imam. However, the spiritual and religious space remained open to women during the early Caliphate. During the Caliphate of Omar ibn al Khattab (r), women prayed behind the men, took part in the discussions in the mosque and on many an occasion, questioned the caliph about affairs of state. In the great mosques built during the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, provision was made for a separate section for women.

In the 9<sup>th</sup> century, as the Turks entered the fold of Islam in large numbers and the sultanate became the mechanism of temporal power, it was the sultan, not the caliph, who defended the *ummah* from its enemies, appointed executive functionaries and implemented the tenets of the law. Following their own cultural traditions, the Turks were more open to the entry of women into the political, judicial and

military space. Turkish women rode into battle with men, took part in the affairs of state and sat next to sultans and jurists advising them in the dispensation of justice. This pattern of women's participation in public affairs continued in later centuries in the courts of the Turkomans, the Great Moghuls, the Africans of the western Sudan and the Indonesians.

Since a sultan was not necessarily required to lead the prayer, this function having been delegated to professional *khatibs*, a woman was not precluded from becoming a sultan. However, further historical developments impeded the access of women to political and social space. The 9<sup>th</sup> century saw an influx of Greek rational thought and Greek culture into the courts of Baghdad. The Mu'tazilites emerged as champions of rational thought and were embraced with open arms by the caliphs. But then the Mu'tazilites overstepped their bounds and applied their methods to Divine revelation. They claimed that the Qur'an was created in time. This position drew a determined and persistent reaction from the *ulema* and the Mu'tazilites were repudiated. What emerged triumphant from this caldron of ideas was a doctrinal Islam that was even more conservative in its approach to social and cultural matters. This was the period when Imam Ahmed ibn Hanbal codified the Hanbali School of *Fiqh*, which is the most conservative of the four major Sunni schools of jurisprudence.

The infusion of Greek culture had brought dancing girls into the palaces of Baghdad and Muslim jurists, fearing an assault on the order and stability of society, took a hard stance against the intermingling of men and women. This was done presumably for the protection of women. With time however, the position hardened and women were precluded from social and political life altogether. Legal opinions were offered that would even bar a woman from the mosque.

The universal brotherhood and sisterhood that was created by the Prophet was shattered and in its place emerged class distinctions between the ruler and the ruled and sex distinctions between men and women. The masses were secluded from political life and among the masses, women were even more secluded.

It is a tribute to the inexorable spirit of humankind that the masses never give up. Those who are excluded continue to challenge the status quo and it is through these tensions that human progress ensues. With the introduction of Turkish and African blood into Islam and the later infusion of Mongol, Indian and Indonesian elements, the rigid separation of women from politics and culture was challenged. And it was from among these "newcomers" that the great queens of Islam emerged, women such as Razia Sultana of Delhi, Shajarat al Durr of Cairo and Noor Jehan of the Great Moghuls, who distinguished themselves in the political space and left their indelible mark on Islamic history.

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