



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

## **The Ismaili Imam and its Institutional Capacity**

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*“One of the central elements of the Islamic faith is the inseparable nature of faith and world. The two are so deeply intertwined that one cannot imagine their separation. They constitute a ‘Way of Life’. The role and responsibility of an Imam, therefore, is both to interpret the faith to the community and, also, to do all within his means to improve the quality and security of their daily lives.” His Highness the Aga Khan.<sup>1</sup>*

In a single sentence, His Highness the Aga Khan IV captures both the role and mandate of the institution of Imam, historically validated and particularly evidenced in the last 50 years. The exemplary life of Prophet Muhammad has enabled Muslims in every age to understand the links between matters worldly and spiritual. In Shi‘a Islam, it is the mandate of the Imam to ensure a social context that maintains a harmonious balance between *din* and *dunya*. During the last half century, His Highness has responded, with foresight and determination, to a world where his followers have lived in extremely varying conditions and in which there has been accelerating change. Central to his leadership, work and long-term vision is the untiring pursuit of a better quality of life for current and future generations.

Since acceding to the Imam in 1957, he has developed a global network of institutions. Ismaili community (*Jamati*) organisations at local, national and international levels serve the Imam’s *murids*, while other Imam institutions, most of them operating under the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), work to improve living conditions and opportunities for people, regardless of their faith. Under the Imam’s guidance, professional staff and selfless volunteers in large numbers, work to transform lives through these institutions.

Putting a modern complexion on the historic guiding and leading role of *Imamat*, ordained well over a millennium ago, the Imam has, in recent history, established religious, social, economic and cultural institutions to respond to the changing circumstances of the *Jamat*. Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah founded organisations that addressed the conditions of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when many of the Ismailis lived under colonialism. This institutional structure has evolved and expanded remarkably under the present Imam. He has formalised, consolidated and reoriented existing organisations and has established many new ones. The last half of the century has witnessed significant global changes including decolonisation, Ismaili migration to the West, strengthening of contacts with Ismaili communities in Central Asian, economic and social upheavals, wars, rapid technological advancements, and globalisation. Against this backdrop, the institutions of the Ismaili Imam have spread over a space more extensive than at any other time in history.

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On 13<sup>th</sup> December 1986, His Highness the Aga Khan promulgated *The Constitution of the Shi‘a Imami Ismaili Muslims*, bringing the transnational community’s governance under one institutional structure. Ordaining the Constitution, His Highness said, “It is my belief that the Ismaili Constitution will provide a strong institutional and organisational framework through which my *Jamat* (community) will be able to contribute to the harmonious development of the Ummah and of the societies in which the *Jamat* lives.” This framework, organising the community’s *dini* (spiritual) and *dunyavi* (material) matters, has proved to be an effective and sustainable civil society model.

Ismaili Councils are responsible for social governance at the local, regional and national levels. The Ismaili community institutions also include Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Boards, Grants and Review Boards, and Conciliation and Arbitration Boards. Other boards operate in the areas of economic wellbeing, education, health, housing, social welfare, and youth and sports. His Highness determines the roles, responsibilities, composition, powers and jurisdiction of these bodies. He has also established the Leaders’ International Forum (LIF) to whom he refers specific matters affecting the Ismaili community. The Institute of Ismaili Studies is a key academic and educational resource for the community. It addresses, amongst other aspects of its mandate, the Ismaili community’s religious education needs by conducting research on its intellectual, spiritual and literary heritage and provides materials for religious formation.

AKDN agencies deal with the development needs of people regardless of their faiths. The Network is an endeavour of the Ismaili Imamate to realise the social conscience of Islam. It brings together organisations and programmes that seek to relieve society of ignorance, disease and deprivation. In societies where there is a significant presence of Muslims, it also seeks to revitalise and broaden the understanding of Islam’s pluralist cultural heritage. AKDN’s mandate derives from the ethics of Islam which aim for a balance between the material and the spiritual. Islam’s ethical ideal is to enable each person to live up to the exalted status of the being in whom Allah has breathed His spirit. Allah made all that is in the heavens and the earth an object of trust for human beings. Therefore, worship is incomplete without an active social conscience. By grounding societal values in the principles of moral responsibility, Islam lifts the social order to a spiritual level. In the words of His Highness the Aga Khan:

*“To the Imamate the meaning of ‘quality of life’ extends to the entire ethical and social context in which people live, and not only to their material well-being measured over generation after generation. Consequently, the Imamate’s is a holistic vision of development, as is prescribed by the faith of Islam. It is about investing in people, in their pluralism, in their intellectual pursuit, and search for new and useful knowledge, just as much as in material resources. But it is also about investing with a social conscience inspired by the ethics of Islam. It is work that benefits all, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, nationality or background. Does the Holy Qur’an not say in one of the most inspiring references to mankind, that Allah has created all from one soul?”<sup>2</sup>*

The Imamate’s vast institutional network addresses the needs of the poor, particularly in Asia and Africa. AKDN organisations are structured broadly under three categories: Economic Development, Social Development and Culture. The Network’s long experience in engaging



with social and economic development has drawn governments to it for policy advice and partnership. The Ismaili Imam and AKDN have formalised frameworks for their development initiatives by entering into internationally recognised Protocols, Agreements of Cooperation, Memoranda of Understanding or Letters of Intent with many national governments and international organisations. These serve to strengthen and formalise the Imamat's and AKDN's international partnerships, relationships and long-term commitments in the countries and regions within which they work.

AKDN adopts a comprehensive strategy to help people move out of poverty and enable them to participate in the social and economic mainstream. It is guided by a philosophy of human dignity and self-reliance. For development to be sustainable over the long term, local people are engaged in planning and development. This requires projects to be inclusive and respectful of the pluralism of societies. Additionally, encouraging the recognition of merit promotes excellence and continual improvement in standards.

The provision of quality education is the cornerstone of AKDN's approach to uplifting the human condition. This view emerges from the teachings of Prophet Muhammad and Hazrat 'Ali that inspired Imam al-Muiz's establishment of Al-Azhar University, one of the oldest in the world.

The global network of AKDN's educational institutions, including pre-schools, Aga Khan Academies, Aga Khan University and University of Central Asia, is a testament to His Highness's conviction that knowledge is vital to the fulfilment of individuals and betterment of society.

Addressing AKDN's social development mandate, Aga Khan Foundation's programmes incorporate education, healthcare and environmental safeguards, revitalisation of cultural assets, and the development of appropriate infrastructure, rural support and income generation opportunities. Aga Khan Agency for Microfinance's not-for-profit programmes, which provide small loans to the less fortunate, constitute a critical building block for an equitable civil society.

The Aga Khan Fund for Economic Development is the only for-profit agency of the Network. Its innovative agenda, based on the AKDN's strong ethical framework, promotes public and private sector partnership in which investment decisions are primarily based on prospects for improving lives. Taking bold but considered steps to invest in fragile and complex economies, it has assisted in rehabilitation efforts after war or internal turmoil in places as varied as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Mozambique, Tajikistan and Uganda.

To complete the picture, architecture, urban revitalisation and traditional music are the responsibility of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture. It focuses on culture as a means of enhancing the physical, social and economic regeneration of Muslim communities. It runs the Aga Khan Music Initiative in Central Asia, the Historic Cities Programme, and various education and culture programmes including the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.



The Imam's plans for the coming years include new poverty alleviation initiatives as well as the establishment of additional Aga Khan Academies, AKU's Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Global Centre for Pluralism, Aga Khan Museum, Delegations of the Ismaili Imam, and Ismaili Centres and Jamatkhana in Dubai, Dushanbe, Houston, Khorog and Toronto. The Golden Jubilee will witness various new initiatives, which will undoubtedly come to be seen by future generations as part of His Highness the Aga Khan's unique legacy.

<sup>1</sup> Excerpt of an address by His Highness the Aga Khan to the Tutzing Evangelical Academy, Tutzing, Germany, 20<sup>th</sup> May 2006

<sup>2</sup> Excerpt of a speech made by His Highness the Aga Khan at the opening of the Alltex EPZ Limited plant, Athi River, Kenya, 19<sup>th</sup> December 2003

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