

History of the Political Leadership of the Ulema in al-Hind

The role of the Ulema (scholars) has been well defined and understood within Muslims. It has been narrated in Sunan Abu Dawud where Kathir ibn Qays said: I was sitting with Abu Darda' in the masjid of Damascus. A man came to him and said: Abu Darda, I have come to you from the town of the Messenger of Allah (saw) for a tradition that I have heard you relate from the Messenger of Allah (saw). I have come for no other purpose. He said: I heard the Messenger of Allah (saw) say, «مَنْ سَلَكَ طَرِيقًا يَطْلُبُ فِيهِ عِلْمًا سَلَكَ اللَّهُ بِهِ طَرِيقًا مِنْ طُرُقِ الْجَنَّةِ وَإِنَّ الْمَلَائِكَةَ لَتَضَعُ أَجْنِحَتَهَا رِضًا لِطَالِبِ الْعِلْمِ وَإِنَّ الْعَالَمَ لَيَسْتَغْفِرُ لَهُ مَنْ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَمَنْ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَالْحَيَّاتُ فِي جَوْفِ الْمَاءِ وَإِنَّ فَضْلَ الْعَالِمِ عَلَى الْعَابِدِ كَفَضْلِ الْقَمَرِ لَيْلَةَ الْبَدْرِ عَلَى سَائِرِ الْكَوَاكِبِ وَإِنَّ الْعُلَمَاءَ وَرَثَةُ الْأَنْبِيَاءِ وَإِنَّ الْأَنْبِيَاءَ لَمْ يُوْرَثُوا دِينَارًا وَلَا دِرْهَمًا وَرَثُوا الْعِلْمَ» **«If anyone travels on a road in search of knowledge, Allah will cause him to travel on one of the roads of Paradise. The angels will lower their wings in their great pleasure with one who seeks knowledge, the inhabitants of the heavens and the Earth and the fish in the deep waters will ask forgiveness for the learned man. The superiority of the learned man over the devout is like that of the moon, on the night when it is full, over the rest of the stars. The learned are the heirs of the Prophets, and the Prophets leave neither dinar nor dirham, leaving only knowledge, and he who takes it takes an abundant portion.»** [Sunan Abu Daud]

We see many examples in the history of the Khilafah (Caliphate) State where Ulema exhibited the role mentioned in the hadith above. This role encompasses the spread of the Deen as well as leading the Ummah against the forces of Kufr. Ibn Taymiyyah (rh) exemplifies this role when he encouraged the Mamluk rulers and the local population to resist the Mongols. He emphasized the religious duty of jihad against the invading forces and actively called upon the rulers of Egypt and Syria to defend Damascus. He issued fatwas declaring the religious duty of Muslims to fight the Mongol armies, preaching jihad against the Mongols at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus and personally participated in military action, leading in battle with a sword. He negotiated directly with the Mongol leader Ghazan Khan and his vizier Rashid al-Din and successfully secured the release of many Muslim and dhimmi prisoners taken by the Mongols. Hence we see that Ibn Taymiyyah played an active political role in rallying not just the Muslims, but the leadership of the Muslims.

Similarly, the Ulema of Hind played an instrumental role in the resistance to British colonialisation. The Ulema of Hind were an important part of the political leadership in Hind. Ahmad Sirhindi (1564-1624) and Shah Waliullah (1703-1762) were two influential Ulema who played a prominent role in shaping the religious and political landscape of Mughal India. Ahmad Sirhindi engaged with the Mughal court primarily through correspondence and personal interactions. He wrote numerous letters to Mughal nobles to influence religious policies, regularly attended court debates to counter unorthodox religious beliefs and doctrines prevalent in the court. He was imprisoned twice by Jahangir, once in 1618 and again in 1622.

Shah Waliullah was a phenomenal thinker as well as an alim. His political leadership is indicated by the fact that he invited Ahmad Shah Abdali, the Afghan ruler, to invade India to counter the growing power of the Marathas. This led to the Third Battle of Panipat in 1761, where Abdali defeated the Marathas.

The period when the British entered Hind, became the ruling class in Hind, became the colonial power in Hind and then led Hind to partition generated political challenges for the Ulema, which impacted the role of the Ulema. You can see that impact in the changing role the Ulema played essentially over this time period.

The year 1802 was when Shah Abdulaziz (1746–1824), the son of Shah Waliullah (1703–1762) declared a fatwa declaring Hind to be Dar ul Harb. The fatwa stated:

“In this city (Delhi) the Imam-ul-Muslimin wields no authority. The real power rests with the Christian officers. There is no check on them; and the promulgation of the commands of Kuffar means that in administration and justice, in matter of law and orders, in the domain of trades, finance and collection of revenue- everywhere the *Kuffaar* (infidels) are in power. Yes, there are certain Islamic rituals, e.g. Friday and *Eid* prayers, *Aazan* (call for pray) and cow slaughtering with which they brook no interference; but the very root of these rituals is of no value to them. They demolish mosques without the least hesitation and no Muslims or any dhimmi can enter into the city or suburbs but with their permission. It is in their own interest if they do not object to the travelers and traders to visit the city. On the other hand, distinguished persons like Shuja-ul-Mulk and Wilayati Bagam cannot dare visit the city without the permission. From here to Calcutta, the Christians are in complete control. There is no doubt that in principalities like Hyderabad, Rampur, Lucknow etc. they have left the administration in the hands of local authorities, but it is because they have accepted their lordship and have submitted to their authority.”

The fatwa and its language indicates the mindset. They were Ulema in a ruling structure built on Islam, and they were empowered to give fatwas and account the Moghul rulers. They carried the political leadership for all, indicated by the use of the term dhimmi for Hindus and Kafir for the British. The fatwa pronounced that it was obligatory upon Muslims to either wage war for freedom or migrate from the country and it applied to the entire territory held by the British, not just Delhi. The political nature of the fatwa was such that it provided religious justification for resistance against British rule, was used as a tool to mobilize public opinion against British rule well into the 19th century and became the precursor to the Indian independence movement.

While the British were concerned about the 1802 fatwa, their response was measured and multifaceted, focusing on countering its ideological impact rather than resorting to immediate repression. They sought to manage the situation through a combination of propaganda, diplomacy, and selective engagement with Muslim leaders and scholars who were amenable to British rule.

So, from being Ulema connected to the ruling Islamic class, they became Ulema who were the political and military leaders of an uprising against an occupation.

This political leadership was practically demonstrated when the rebellion took place in 1857. The 1857 uprising was a shock for the British. The Ulema rallied the Ummah and the Hindus into a violent resistance, with little or no dissent from the Hindus. During the 1857 Jihad against British rule, the ulema played influential roles in mobilizing resistance and issuing religious decrees to legitimize the revolt. Some of the most prominent figures were:

Maulana Fazl-e-Haq Khairabadi - Khairabadi issued the famous fatwa declaring jihad against the British as an obligation, actively participating in the rebellion and, imprisoned by the British.

Mufti Sadruddin Azurda - Grand Mufti of Delhi - Azurda signed the fatwa calling for jihad against the British, worked with Bahadur Shah Zafar (Moghul emperor at the time) critically organizing resistance during the uprising. His property and library were destroyed by the British.

Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah Madrasi - Known as “Sufi soldier” and a key strategist, he travelled across India, mobilizing support for the rebellion and instrumental in organizing resistance in Awadh. Praised for his military skills including his innovative “Chapati Scheme” to spread messages of rebellion.

Haji Imdadullah Muhajir Makki - A Chishti Sufi leader, declared Amir to lead resistance efforts near Delhi, in Shamli, alongside figures like Maulana Muhammad Qasim Nanotwi and Maulana Rashid Ahmad Gangohi.

Maulvi Sarfaraz Ali - Known as the "Imam of the Mujahedin," he was deeply connected to Delhi's intellectual circles playing a significant role in uniting jihadis with Delhi's elite.

Maulana Rahmatullah Kairanvi - he actively participated in anti-British activities during 1857. He is also remembered for his earlier debates with Christian missionaries.

Bahadur Shah Zafar - Although a symbolic figure as the last Mughal emperor, he worked closely with ulema like Azurda to legitimize and lead the rebellion. His court became a hub for revolutionary planning during the revolt. The Ulema used him as the alternative the leadership to the British.

The British response to the Ulema's leadership in the 1857 Rebellion was severe and brutal, targeting these Ulema who played a significant role in leading the uprising against colonial rule. The British resorted to mass executions of Ulema, employing various methods to instil fear and suppress further resistance. Ulema were publicly hanged, with their bodies put on display to serve as a deterrent. Some were strapped to cannons and fired, dismembering their bodies to such an extent that proper burials became impossible. In extreme cases, Ulema were reportedly roasted alive on hot coals. The road from Delhi to Moradabad became a grim spectacle, with numerous Ulema executed by hanging from trees along this route. The British went further to destroy the infrastructure of the Ulema. The Jama Masjid in Delhi was confiscated. A large part of the Fatehpuri Masjid was sold. The Akbarbadi Masjid was destroyed. The British took control of all religious institutions in Delhi, built on the Ulema's involvement in the uprising.

The population of Delhi at that time was around 220,000, (Al Hind population was around 180 million) whilst it is reported that around 500-1000 Ulema were killed in Delhi in the initial period. This gives a ratio of around one Alim per 220 Muslims indicating the dominant leadership of the Ulema. These restrictions collectively aimed to neutralize the ulema as a source of resistance to British rule. The policies forced many ulema to relocate to rural areas leading to the establishment of new centres of Islamic learning such as Deoband in 1866 (by Muhammad Qasim Nanautawi), significantly curtailing the ulema's overt political activities. There were reports that Makkah and Madinah were full of Ulema from Al Hind who had emigrated to escape the brutality of the British. These policies of the British post 1857 targeting Ulema, Muslims and Islam further shaped the Ulema activities. There are many articles published that describe the barbaric methods used by the British to murder the Ulema and those who supported – all with the spirit to break the will of the Ulema.

So, from being Ulema connected to the ruling Islamic class in the period before 1802, they became Ulema who were the political and military leaders of the 1857 uprising. Post 1857, on the one hand they became Ulema who were political leaders of a population that was being marginalised by the British, and on the other hand protectors of Islam via establishment of madressas to counter the secular education imposed by the British.

Shah Abdul Aziz issued the fatwa against the British, and his contemporaries like of Shah Abdul Ghani as well as Mamluk Ali Nanutawi (1789-1851) disseminated the fatwa. The latter's notable students included Muhammad Qasim Nanautawi (founder of Darul Uloom Deoband 1866) Rashid Ahmad Gangohi (co-founder of Darul Uloom Deoband) and Muhammad Yaqub Nanautawi. The students of Muhammad Qasim Nanautawi and Rashid Ahmad Gangohi were Mahmud ul Hasan Deobandi (1851-1920) Known as "Shaykh al-Hind," Anwar Shah Kashmiri (1875-1933) and Husain Ahmad Madani (1879-1957). Having been defeated in a military battle, these Ulema were in no mood to give up and now engaged in a wider political battle against the British.

Mahmud ul-Hasan and Husain Ahmad Madani travelled to Makkah in September 1915, accompanied by several scholars. This trip was part of a broader strategy known as the Silk Letter Movement (Tehrik-e-Reshmi Rimal), which aimed to overthrow British rule in India and liberate other Islamic countries under foreign control. Mahmud ul-Hasan dispatched Obaidullah Sindhi to Afghanistan in July 1915. The plan was for Obaidullah Sindhi to go to Afghanistan to persuade the Afghan Amir Habibullah Khan to declare war against Britain.

In the meantime, Mahmud ul Hasan and Husain Ahmed Madani travelled to Makkah with the objective of orchestrating a comprehensive anti-British movement. On 18 October 1915, he went to Makkah where he had meetings with Ghalib Pasha, the Turkish governor, and Anwar Pasha, who was the defense minister of Turkey. Ghalib Pasha assured him of assistance. Hasan also had a meeting with the Djemal Pasha the governor of Syria. But the plan of the Silk Letter Movement was leaked and its members were arrested. Mahmud ul Hasan and his companions were imprisoned for four years in Malta by the British.

The visionary political thought is striking here. They were evaluating the political and military strengths of the Muslims internationally, and how to use it against the British colonialist power. The thought of seeking support from the Muslims in the surrounding areas is consistent with the Hukm of Jihad. If an area is under attack and it cannot defend itself, the obligation extends to the surrounding areas (al ard al aqrab) and so on. So as a true leadership, they not only gave the fatwa, but acted upon it by pursuing political relations with the leadership in the surrounding areas. The strategy of using Muslim dominated areas to push for rebellions against the British to stretch their military resources, the contacting of political figures in the Muslim world who would have access to the resources to achieve the desired results - this is all political thinking that Mahmud ul Hasan and Husain Ahmed Madani carried. And clearly this was not particular to them, but part of the political medium that they were groomed in. However, with the defeat of the Othmani Khilafah (Ottoman Caliphate) after the Second World War, these plans were rendered redundant.

So, post 1914 – the Ulema became drivers of a transnational movement attempting to weaken the British colonial power. The Khilafah Movement was a significant pan-Islamic campaign launched by Ulema following World War I. Led by prominent figures such as Muhammad Ali and Shaukat Ali (the Ali brothers), Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, and Hakim Ajmal Khan, its primary objectives were to protect the Othmani Khilafah from dismemberment by the Allied powers and to preserve the Khalifah's control over Muslim holy places. The Ulema of Hind even sent a delegation to Mustafa Kemal asking him not to abolish the Khilafah, but to no avail. The Khilafah Movement was short lived once Mustafa Kemal abolished the Khilafah in 1924.

In order to understand the political power of the Ulema even during this period, we find that Gandhi, an established British agent, who had returned from South Africa to lead the Indian National Congress, was forced to join it and support it for his own legitimacy purposes – he had to be seen to be supporting the resistance movement led by the Ulema. This indicates that Gandhi joining it was ultimately a British plan to derail the movement because they were not able to easily counter the leadership of the Khilafah Movement and the Ulema. The British worked hard to dissolve this Khilafah Movement making sure that the Movement's ambitions were aborted, and its tendency was transformed into a nationalist and sectarian one.

Mahmud ul Hasan, who had been released from incarceration in Malta by the British in early 1920, was co-opted to the Khilafah Movement as soon as he returned to Hind, but he passed away later in November 1920. Husain Ahmed Madani continued the struggle against the British, but now the political medium had now changed. Since 1857, the British had realized the need to cultivate an alternative leadership to the Ulema. They made immense efforts to build a secular Muslim leadership of the elite groomed by the British, providing

them with a parallel Pakistan movement to replace the Khilafah Movement, which only succeeded post destruction of Khilafah. These were extreme multi-generation British efforts. From post 1857 to the late 1920's indicates that it took almost around 60-70 years to break the enduring political leadership and threat of the ulema.

Husain Ahmed Madani now had to deal with leaders in the Ummah that were not necessarily from the Ulema, or who were from the Ulema but had adopted the need to reconcile Islam with concepts from the West. Secular leaders used Western concepts to interpret Islam consistent with British political plans. Husain Ahmed Madani and other Ulema saw this as secular people arrogating to themselves the role of interpreting Islam, something that was the right of Ulema only. On the other hand, secular leaders dismissed the Ulema because of their alleged lack of worldly experience and modernity. With the destruction of the Khilafah, the Ummah and the Ulema faced the rise of nation states and the subsequent material progress of the Western world.

The Ulema reconciled themselves to protecting Islam under a secular leadership. They maintained the continuity of the Ulema tradition of madressas. Some of the key students of Anwar Shah Kashmiri, Mahmud ul Hasan and Husain Ahmed Madani including Allama Shabbir Ahmad Usmani - known for his deep understanding of Islamic sciences, Mufti Muhammad Shafi Usmani - founder of Darul Uloom Karachi and Mawlana Muhammad Yusuf Banuri founder of Darul Uloom Banuri Town, Karachi, Mufti Muhammad Hassan founder of Jamia Ashrafiya in Lahore, and Mawlana Abdul Haq who founded Jamia Haqqania. We are all witness to the legacy of these Ulema.

If we were to distil the essential conflict between the British and the Ulema, it would center on the leadership of the Ulema itself. While the British could not directly control the vast population of Hind, they were able to manage and manipulate a handful of its political leaders. However, from 1802 to 1924, the British consistently failed to find a compliant or pliant Ulema leadership willing to serve their interests. As a result, the British resorted to a dual strategy: on one hand, they terrorized and suppressed the Ulema, and on the other, they worked to cultivate an alternative, secular leadership to replace them.

This they achieved once the Ottoman Khilafah was destroyed in March 1924, and by post 1945, the Ulema in Hind found themselves displaced. The Ummah had moved away from their leadership and much like the rest of the Islamic world, a new order consisting of puppet (agent) secular regimes imposed by the colonial powers came to rule over the Muslim world. The destruction of the Khilafah brought calamity after calamity upon the Ummah, leaving it to suffer immense political and economic hardship over the past century. Despite the widespread imposition of secular systems across the Muslim world, the Ummah has shown signs of revival. The post-9/11 persecution of Muslims, the brutal wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the subversion of the Arab Spring, and the ongoing genocide in Gaza have all revealed the profound Islamic sentiment that still courses through the Ummah.

The Ulema become a displaced and side-lined political leadership not because they lacked the capacity to lead, but because they have been absent from the dominant political arena for so long. Today, the revival of the Ummah is predicated on leaderships that challenge the global order based on Islam. We see this dynamic unfolding, where the contemporary colonial power — the United States — finds itself challenged by an Ummah that is increasingly demanding Islam. Despite occupying and waging a 20-year war in Afghanistan, the US was ultimately forced to capitulate to the Taliban. Similarly, in Syria, the US had to confront a strong pro-Khilafah movement that demanded the removal of the Kaafir Alawite regime — a regime that had loyally served US interests for decades. In both of these regions, despite the US playing a hands on role to maintain their agents, they were forced to accept overtly pro-Islamic leaderships because the Ummah demanded it.

The parallel between current events and those of a century ago is indeed striking, revealing a significant shift in the political landscape of the Muslim world. Britain could not

secularise the Ulema and had to build an alternate secular leadership – and only succeeded because of the decline of the Ummah. With the revival of the Ummah, the US, unlike Britain a century ago, has had to accept and adapt to this Islamic resurgence. It is crucial to understand that this revival presents entirely new opportunities for the Ummah. The examples of Afghanistan and Syria quoted above indicate that the US cannot counter the adoption of Islam by sincere leaderships.

The current secular political leaderships in the Ummah exist because the Ulema are politically absent. The Ulema need to return to the political domain and follow not only the legacy of their predecessors as described above, but the role prescribed for them in the hadith as inheritors of the Prophets (as). The manhaj (methodology) of the Prophets (as) indicates that the opposition to their call was never from the general masses, rather from the leadership of the people to whom the Prophets (as) were sent. In many descriptions of the engagements of the Prophets (as), Allah (swt) mentioned, ﴿فَقَالَ الْمَلَأُوا الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا﴾ **“The disbelieving chiefs of his people responded...”** [TMQ Surah Al-Muminoon 24] to describe the opposition from the existing leaderships to the call to the Deen. Today the secular leaderships represent the chiefs, not just as obstacles to Islamic revival, but tools of colonialist powers, especially the US, to maintain hegemony. It’s not only necessary, but natural for the Ulema to challenge this status quo. As inheritors of the Prophets’ legacy, they must lead this challenge, re-engaging with the political medium to offer Islamic governance. The success is assured by the Prophet Muhammad’s (saw) hadith predicting the return of **﴿ثُمَّ﴾** **«a Khilafah according to the method of Prophethood.»** This prophecy provides both motivation and inevitability to the Ulema’s mission. By confronting existing power leaderships and presenting a genuine Islamic alternative, the Ulema will be fulfilling their divine role and paving the way for the promised return of Islamic governance.

Imam Ahmad in his Musnad narrated from al-Nu’man Ibn Bashir (ra) as saying that the Messenger of Allah (saw) said, **﴿تَكُونُ النَّبُوءَةُ فِيكُمْ مَا شَاءَ اللَّهُ أَنْ تَكُونَ ثُمَّ يَرْفَعَهَا إِذَا شَاءَ أَنْ يَرْفَعَهَا ثُمَّ تَكُونُ خِلَافَةً عَلَىٰ مِنْهَاجِ النَّبِيِّ فَتَكُونُ مَا شَاءَ اللَّهُ أَنْ تَكُونَ ثُمَّ يَرْفَعَهَا إِذَا شَاءَ اللَّهُ أَنْ يَرْفَعَهَا ثُمَّ تَكُونُ خِلَافَةً عَلَىٰ يَرْفَعَهَا إِذَا شَاءَ أَنْ يَرْفَعَهَا ثُمَّ تَكُونُ مُلْكًا جَبْرِيَّةً فَتَكُونُ مَا شَاءَ اللَّهُ أَنْ تَكُونَ ثُمَّ يَرْفَعَهَا إِذَا شَاءَ أَنْ يَرْفَعَهَا ثُمَّ تَكُونُ خِلَافَةً عَلَىٰ مِنْهَاجِ النَّبِيِّ ثُمَّ سَكَتَ﴾** **“Prophethood will last with you for as long as Allah wants it to last. Then there will be Khilafah according to the Method of Prophethood, and things will be as Allah wishes them to be. Then Allah will end it when He wishes. Then there will be hereditary rule, and things will be as Allah wishes them to be. Then Allah will end it when He wishes. Then there will be an oppressive rule, and things will be as Allah wishes them to be. Then Allah will end it when He wishes. Then there will be a Khilafah according to the method of Prophethood.”** Then he fell silent.” [Ahmed]

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