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The prince on Pakistan's invisible throne

LEE HAN SHIH

Prince Karim Aga Khan invests up to US\$150 million each year in projects helping developing nations.

He was an honorary pallbearer at the funeral of former Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. On October 2nd, 2000, he stood with other dignitaries including Cuban strongman Fidel Castro and former US President Jimmy Carter in Montreal's magnificent Notre-Dame Basilica, the only Muslim in a sea of Christians. But no one could tell he was an outsider. For all appearances, the Aga Khan looked and acted like a rich white man, down to his thousand-dollar suit and his mannerisms and his Prince Charles-like English accent.

But Prince Karim Aga Khan, 70, a direct descendent of the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatima who was born in Switzerland, is a self-admitted Asian and one with a most unusual status.

Among the developing nations, from Pakistan to Tanzania, he is accorded the status of a head of state. And indeed he rules more people than many small countries. The Aga Khan – a hereditary title first bestowed on his great great-grandfather by the Shah of Persia in 1818 – is the 49th Imam (spiritual and general leader) of the Ismaili Nizārīs, a sect of the Shi'a Ismaili formed in 765 AD, which now has up to 20 million followers scattered all over the world.

The Ismailis are well educated, self-contained, model citizens in their host countries and totally dedicated to the Aga Khan. The tributes they regularly give to their leader – in one famous incident, they put his grandfather Mohammad Aga Khan, on one end of a large scale and balanced the other with his weight in gold and diamonds as a birthday present – enables the current Aga Khan to invest up to US\$150 million each year in projects helping developing nations.

Before Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, the Aga Khan had been working hard to reduce poverty and to raise education levels, especially that of women, in the Third World.

In 1957, at age 20, he unexpectedly inherited the title and all its responsibilities because his grandfather decided to bypass his father (a playboy who was once married to Hollywood star Rita Hayward) and pass the mantle to his Harvard-graduate grandson.

Prince Karim founded the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), today one of the largest private development networks in the world. His connections opened doors to AKDN in the Third World that are close to other agencies.

In war-torn Afghanistan, the AKDN has raised US\$400 million for various development projects, with a large chunk of money coming from its own resources. In Pakistan he founded the first private university. Two months ago he visited Tanzania and promised to spend US\$450 million to build a university there.

As religious leader, the Aga Khan is a moderate voice in a world increasingly divided by Bush-like anti-terrorist countries and the Islamic world. The Aga Khan has openly chided the West for not trying to understand Islam and gone on record to state that many of today's so-called fundamental Islamic movements are more political than religious in nature.

Unlike other Islamic leaders, his voice is heard in the West, since he hobnobs with western leaders in public and private occasions. Pierre Trudeau, for example, was a personal friend who opened the door to Canada for Asians, among them many Ismailis, when Idi Amin chased them out of Uganda in the 1970s. Today there are 45,000 Ismailis in Canada, some occupying high government positions. So far the Aga Khan has kept a low profile. But in time to come, this King Without A Throne may find himself in much demand as a moderator.

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