

Transition and Renewal: Prince Rahim Aga Khan Ascends to the Ismaili Imamate in Challenging Times

A Personal Reflection by Karim H. Karim

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Aga Khan IV worked closely for several decades with members of his family to run Ismaili Imamate's multiple global networks. These institutions include transnational and translocal communal bodies as well as the public-facing Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), which is one of the world's largest non-governmental organizations. The religious leader passed away on February 4, 2025 and his eldest son, Prince Rahim al-Hussaini, became Imam of the worldwide *Jamat* (community) of Nizari Ismaili Muslims.

The Imamate is a pre-eminent Shia Islamic authority that has historical roots in the Prophet Muhammad's designation of Ali ibn Abi Talib in 632 CE at Ghadir Khumm in Arabia. It is Ismaili belief that an unbroken chain of lineal descent from Imam to Imam has continued over 14 centuries. Rahim is the 50th personage to hold this unique position of religious and worldly leadership. He is also the fifth Aga Khan (Commanding Chief), the title that a 19th century Shah of the Qajar dynasty in Iran granted a previous Imam.

Fundamental to the Ismaili faith is the religious relationship between Imam and community. The Imam is the *murshid* (spiritual guide) of each individual *murid* (aspirant), reflecting a deep connection of affection and caring. Such was the bond between Ismaili *murids* and the 49th Imam over the course of 67 years. As news arrived of Aga Khan IV's demise on February 4th, community members gathered at *jamatkhanas* (Ismaili places of worship) around the world. They were bereft at having lost their spiritual father. But the mood changed palpably on the following day upon the announcement of the next Imam's ascension. Uplifted by the continuation of the long-standing hereditary Imamate, they welcomed Rahim Aga Khan as their leader.

A *Takht Nashini* ("enthronement") ceremony took place on February 11th at the *Diwan*, the Seat of the Ismaili Imamate in Lisbon, Portugal, where Ismaili leaders from around the world pledged allegiance (*bay'a*) to the new Imam. Murids solemnly gathered at locations in several continents to watch the historic proceedings either through live-streaming or same-day video as Imam Shah Rahim al-Hussaini addressed the *Jamat* for the first time. While affirming the Prophet Muhammad and previous Imams' teachings, he also outlined elements of his own vision and hopes for the future.

Imam Rahim announced that he will be visiting places of Ismaili presence around the world. The *murids*, who live in many countries, look to giving their personal *bay'a* in the presence of their *murshid* and to developing a close spiritual relationship with him. Several *Takht Nashini* events of his father took place in East African and South Asian cities in 1957 and 1958. (Media coverage of

such events also publicized the advent of the new leader beyond Ismaili communities to national audiences.)

Aga Khan V's Imamatus is expected to be one of continuity and renewal. Incoming leaders undergo multiple transitional stages as they come to the fore and awareness of the new Imam in communal and public consciousness will be layered and asynchronous. Ismaili adherents have recognized the Imamatus of Mawlana Shah Rahim al-Hussaini and they expect their ties to strengthen upon his regular interactions with the world-wide *Jamat*. In 1957, his father succeeded an Imam who had been a much-loved *murshid* for 72 years. Ismailis continued to refer to Aga Khan III well into the Imamatus of Aga Khan IV. Similarly, the preceding Imam will remain in the community's active memory as Shah Rahim brings his own distinct spiritual and material insight to the Ismaili *Jamat*.

Both Aga Khan III and Aga Khan IV moved with ease among monarchs, presidents, prime ministers, and leaders of international organizations, many of whom sought the respective Imams' counsel on important matters. Prince Rahim has been engaging with governments and major institutions for many years; such interactions will grow as his public profile as head of the Ismaili community and the AKDN solidifies. The Ismaili Imam is often called upon to be a statesman who navigates troubled waters in various parts of the world. His *jamats* living in Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East find themselves amidst the jostling of powers like China, Russia, Pakistan, India, Iran, Syria, Israel, and America. Ismailis have come under physical attack from militants and some AKDN institutions have been taken over by autocrats in recent times. Growing anti-Muslim attitudes in western societies present additional challenges. All this makes the supervision of a vast and expanding network of organizations very demanding and Aga Khan V will continue to work closely with his family to manage the challenges. He also counts on renewed commitment from his global *Jamat*.

Prince Rahim has personally led the AKDN's organization-wide initiative on addressing climate change in the last few years. Responding to this program requires substantial change on the part of institutions for whom the environment has previously been a lesser priority. A film that recorded the young Aga Khan IV's first meeting with communal leaders in 1957 shows him sternly telling them to alter their set ways of doing things. Aga Khan V will similarly require shifts in mindset from his communal and AKDN administrators, staff and volunteers as they deal with evolving circumstances in the *Jamat* and the world.

The institutions face multiple challenges that demand imaginative thinking and openness to innovative approaches. Despite decades of effort, much remains to be done on the core communal and AKDN mission of poverty alleviation. Additionally, young Ismailis, raised on the faith's teachings on caring for humanity, are increasingly asking members of older generations to help them understand their reticence on tackling certain social justice issues more directly. Answers from communal organizations on these and other matters appear to be slow in coming as the largely top-down flows of information permit limited opportunities for effective two-way communication.

Given the state of our fast-moving and turbulent world, the Imam will count on institutional leaders to demonstrate foresight, creativity and integrity in seeking fresh solutions to old and new problems. Propriety in administration has long been emphasized in the Imam's domain, which has previously included territorial authority. The noted 11th century Fatimid Ismaili administrator Da 'i Ahmed al-Naysaburi stated that those who lead the Imam's institutions should be knowledgeable and steadfast in ethical practice. They are expected to be thoroughly transparent in their dealings with the Imam – especially in the occasions of failure. The essence of loyalty is complete honesty. Qadi Abu Hanifa al-Nu'man, a close confidant of several Fatimid Imams, asserted: "Let us speak the truth and hide nothing from the Imams." This 1,000-year-old instruction remains just as pertinent today as Imam Shah Rahim leads his community into the mid-21st century.

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Suggestions for further reading

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