

Governing Diverse Communities: A Medieval Muslim Illustration

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What constitutes good governance and how is the quest for good order to be fulfilled? One way to respond to this question is to examine models of authority and leadership which Muslims themselves have crafted through the course of their millennial historical experience. This article focuses on illustrating one such model which the Fatimid dynasty (909-1171), the founders of Cairo, instituted upon their arrival in Egypt in 969 CE.

One of the distinctive characteristics of the Fatimid caliphate is the model of leadership and governance that they espoused and its durability over two and a half centuries in lands that were historically inhabited by diverse confessional communities. In governing North Africa for over half a century (909-969 CE), the Fatimids had to translate their utopian notions of righteous rule into a pragmatic model of governance over a populace that was religiously and ethnically varied, and among whom were groups who were ideologically antagonistic to their minority rule. The Fatimid conquest of Egypt in 969 CE added to the complexity, as Egypt's populace had a relatively greater indigenous ethnic and religious diversity. The longevity of the Fatimid reign, which lasted two and a half centuries, and its notable periods of stability and prosperity indicate that the dynasty was, by and large, able to foster a viable model of governance.

Restoration of social, economic, and political order was among the primary features of the proclamation of security which the Fatimid sovereign, Imam-caliph al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah, vouchsafed upon the Fatimid conquest of Egypt. The guarantee of safety which they issued (*aman* document) provided an instructive formulation of the Fatimid principles of governance.¹ Invoking their claim to the universal imamate, it articulated the notion of protection as one that encompassed all their subjects, irrespective of their race, ethnicity, or belief. It referenced this declaration to that of the Prophet Muhammad and his provision of the protection over all the people of Medina, including its resident Jewish tribes, as recorded in the so-called Constitution of Medina.

The Fatimid guarantee of safety stipulated the relationship between the new caliph and his subjects. In principle, it outlined the essential responsibilities of good governance. It promised economic reforms through a variety of means, including the maintenance of coinage and the elimination of

metal impurities from them, facilitation of trade through the upkeep of roads, curbing brigandage, ensuring that laws of inheritance adhered to scriptural and prophetic norms, and ensuring that the state would regulate financial legacies. Essentially, it provided a reiteration of the safety that a Muslim ruler was required to provide for his community.

While the provision of good governance provided the theoretical paradigm upon which the Fatimids legitimised their entry into Egypt, it is in the reign of Imam-caliph al-Aziz bi'llah (975-996), the first Fatimid sovereign to begin his reign in Egypt, that the precepts of governance stipulated in the *aman* document were translated into state policy and incorporated into its institutional infrastructure.

Under Fatimid rule, Egypt continued to possess sizeable and established indigenous Christian denominations, in particular, Copts, Melkites, and Nestorians, as well as a number of Jewish communities including the Rabbanites and Qaraites. Over the centuries, their social and economic roles had become woven into the fabric of Egyptian society, particularly as seasoned bureaucrats and traders, medical professionals, gold and silversmiths, and money-lenders. The *aman* declaration guaranteed that the customary regulations accorded to the People of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitab*) would be upheld. Like his predecessor, al-Muizz li Din Allah, the Imam-caliph al-'Aziz is known to have provided state support for the renovation as well as the upkeep of Christian houses of worship.² He is noted to have permitted the Copts, the largest indigenous Egyptian Christian community, to rebuild the Church of St. Mercurius near Fustat, despite its reconstruction being challenged by some Muslims.

Imam-caliph al-'Aziz also established familial relations with the Melkite Christian community, which had an established presence in Egypt and Syria. His life-long companion, the mother of the well-known Fatimid princess, Sitt al-Mulk, was a Melkite. Al-'Aziz appointed her two brothers, Arsenius and Orestes, as Melkite Patriarchs over Alexandria and Jerusalem respectively. Towards the later part of his reign in 994 CE, al-'Aziz promoted the Christian bureaucrat 'Isa b. Nestorius to assume responsibility for the overall administration of the state. 'Isa, in turn, appointed the Jewish administrator, Manashsha b. Ibrahim, as the financial controller over Syria. The appointment

of Christian and Jewish administrators to the senior most state positions demonstrated the Fatimid commitment to inclusive governance across their religious and ethnic populace.

The Fatimids faced challenges in instituting their governance over the religiously and socially stratified Egyptian society. This required them to develop a finely tuned balancing act in regulating their relationships with each of the significant communities. The sources reference specific incidents where different communities were held in check to ensure public order. The Fatimids also created legal and social frameworks that enabled people from various religious and ethnic communities to be involved in their administration. However, none of these communities were allowed to establish their total dominance. The appointment of a Jewish convert, Ya'qub b. Killis to the post of Chief Minister in 979 CE by Imam-caliph al-'Aziz is a case in point. The most famous of his chief ministers and arguably among the most competent administrators of his age, Ya'qub was nonetheless temporarily dismissed from his post at the pinnacle of his power in 985 CE. He was arrested and imprisoned for actions that were considered to be a travesty of justice. While Ya'qub was subsequently reinstated in his post and continued to occupy it until his death in 991 CE, his temporary banishment served as a salutary reminder to the Egyptian subjects of the imperative for the maintenance of just order.

The Fatimids faced their own dynastic challenges, yet, judged by the yardstick of history, their rule is remembered in subsequent Muslim Egyptian historiography as a period of relatively peaceful prosperity and inclusive governance. Moreover, it suggests a sustainable model of inclusive and equitable governance, as they were understood in that time and age.

References

1. For the detailed analysis and English translation of this significant document, see, S. Jiwa, 'Inclusive Governance: A Fatimid Illustration', in *A Companion to the Muslim World* (London, 2010), 157-176.
2. The 'Pact of 'Umar' forbade this, but as Shi'i Imam-caliphs, the Fatimids claimed to follow the precepts set by the Prophet and Ali b. Abi Talib, and did not feel obliged to follow the other caliphs' precedence.

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