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Islamic political thought

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Abstract

The Research paper is generally talk about the political thinking and Islamic policy in the ancient and medieval era. It is talk all about the beginning of Islamic state in the world and the influence of Islam throughout the world. Islamic political thought has found numerous expressions from its very beginnings through modern times. As such, presenting an overview of its development and essence is not an easy task as one must include not only the contributions of key Islamic political philosophers (e.g., al-Farabi, Ibn-Khaldoun, and Avicenna), but also the religio-political credos of main Islamic schools of thought (i.e., the Sunni, the Shi'a, and the Kharijites), as well as an overview of main Islamic political concepts (i.e., the question of succession and leadership, or the khalifah versus the imamah precepts). Although some have argued that Islamic political thought has been neglected by all but a few specialists, several scholars have undertaken the arduous task of exploring, discussing, and summarizing the milieu, meaning, and significance of Islamic political thinkers, ideas, and developments. This research paper has outlined the many expressions that Islamic political thought has found from its very origins to modern day fundamentalist and (more) liberal Islamic movements. In order to present a more complete picture, key historical developments (such as the religio-political schism within Islam), the contribution of several classical Islamic philosophers, as well as modern works on Islamic political thought have been mentioned. The richness of background material makes it difficult to present a unified and brief summary of the entire evolution of Islamic political thought through the centuries. It suffices to say, therefore, that Islamic political thought has come a long way, and one can only wonder what the next stages of its development may be.

Keywords: Muslim law, Islamic, Shi'a, Sunni, khalifah

1. Introduction

Islamic political thought has found numerous expressions from its very beginnings through modern times. As such, presenting an overview of its development and essence is not an easy task as one must include not only the contributions of key Islamic political philosophers (e.g. al-Farabi, Ibn-Khaldun, and Avicenna), but also the religio-political credos of main Islamic schools of thought (i.e. the Sunni, the Shi'a, and the Kharijites), as well as an overview of main Islamic political concepts (i.e. the question of succession and leadership, or the khalifah versus the imamah precepts). Although some have argued that Islamic political thought has been neglected by all but a few specialists, several scholars have undertaken the arduous task of exploring, discussing, and summarizing the milieu, meaning, and significance of Islamic political thinkers, ideas, and developments (Ayoob, 2007; Black, 2001; Crone, 2005; Enayat, 1982; Lewis, 1991).

Through philosophers, concepts, and religious movements, Islamic political thought has impacted religious, secular, and academic communities. Thus, given its intellectual and practical significance, the need to more fully comprehend the dynamics and development of Islamic political thought warrants and justifies the inclusion of this research paper in our collection. First, this research paper defines the concept of Islamic political thought in terms of its etymology. Second, it surveys the classical period of Islamic political thought, including its origins, the religious-political schism within Islam, and the contributions of key classical Islamic political philosophers. Third, the research paper summarizes modern expressions of Islamic political thought and current academic research on the topic. The conclusion recaps the main points in the historical and academic development of Islamic political thought.

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2. Etymology of Islamic Political Thought

As this research paper views philosophy and thought as interchangeable concepts, it defines the latter in terms of the former. Generally, political philosophy refers to the study of state affairs and processes as well as to the in-depth search for rationales in politics and ethics in public behavior (Walzer, 1963). To this, Islamic political thought adds a specific framework—that of Islam—to study, explain, and rationalize all things political. This framework is derived from the very sources of Islam: the Qur'an (comprising revelations to Muhammad), supplemented by the hadiths (stories about Muhammad's life, words, and deeds). Thus, Islamic political thought began from the very inception of Islam (circa 622), and its development is generally divided in two main periods: classical or premodern (645-1500), from the historical origin of Islam to the end of the classical period, and early modern and modern Islamic political thought (1500-present), which includes the dynastic period from the Safavid empire to contemporary Islamic political movements.

3. Premodern Islamic Political Thought

It would be impossible to include all thinkers, concepts, and movements that are part of this period of Islamic political thought. Such an endeavor should begin with Muhammad's life and his political contributions to the first Islamic state, the religious and political schism within Islam, a discussion of the Sunni tradition (sunna), and the Shi'ite theories of leadership (imamah; 622-1000), an overview of the theory of the caliphate in *din wa dawla* (religion and the state; 1000-1220); and an explanation of Shari'a ideology and the spread of Islam (1220-1500). In addition, a summary of the works of major Islamic political philosophers and thinkers during this period should be included. All this is summarized briefly next beginning with Muhammad's life as both a religious and political leader.

A. Muhammad as a Political and Religious Leader

Muhammad's position in the early Muslim community was of God's appointed religious, political, and military leader, which was a central factor in keeping the Muslim community united both religiously and politically. Thus, Muhammad's death in 632 CE suddenly posed several questions to his followers: Who should succeed Muhammad? What is the Islamic way of choosing his successor? What type of government should the Muslim community have? The answers to these questions were further complicated as Muhammad died without giving clear instructions as to how to choose a successor or the type of government that the community needed to establish.

As a result, the death of Muhammad in 632 CE started a disagreement over who should succeed him as a political and religious leader of the umma—the Muslim community. While Muhammad's body was being prepared for burial by his close family (including Ali Ibn Abi Taleb, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law), a small group of the Ansar (Muhammad's helpers) met in Saqifat Bani Sa'eda and selected Abu Bakr, a close companion of Muhammad, as his successor (and first caliph). However, some did not accept this decision, arguing that Ali (Ibn Abi Taleb) was appointed as Muhammad's successor by Muhammad himself (Lapidus, 2002).

Since that time, succession (khalifah or imamah, caliphate system or imamate system), and how it should be done, has

remained a matter of dispute. The Umayyads—the second Islamic caliphate (after the Rashidun caliphate of the first four caliphs) established after the death of Mohammed—tried to resolve the issue by decreeing that the caliph should appoint his own successor. Thus, before Abu Bakr died, he chose Umar as his successor. Umar, on the other hand, delegated the election of his successor to the Majlis al-Shoura, a consultative council (Subhi, 1969). This council chose Uthman as the third caliph, but a rebellion against him instituted Ali as the fourth caliph and led to the first civil war among the Muslims in the Battle of Al Jamal (the camel). Following Ali's succession, a second major civil war, the Battle of Siffin, ensued between Ali's supporters and the supporters of Mu'awiyah Ibn Abi Sufian, who founded the Umayyad dynasty (Ismael & Ismael, 1980; Subhi, 1969).

In summary, early Islamic religious and political history reflects the following: First, Muhammad did not indicate how to choose a successor, nor did he indicate a preference for one form of state over another (nor did the Qur'an). Second, in the few years following the death of Muhammad, four distinct patterns of succession emerged: (1) limited choice (Abu Bakr), (2) nomination by the caliph (Umar), (3) shoura, or consultation (Uthman), and (4) a coup (Ali). Third, the question of succession led to a greater political conflict that, after the assassination of Uthman, caused a religious schism in Islam, dividing the umma into Sunni and Shi'a. In addition, the establishment of the Umayyad dynasty and the violent death of Ali's son Hussein further affirmed and deepened the gap between the Sunnis and the Shi'as, consolidating their differences in religious and political matters (Ismael & Ismael, 1980; Subhi, 1969). Furthermore, the dispute over the question of succession resulted in a distinction between the caliph and the imam. Originally, khalifah was used to denote a caliph's religious and political leadership (the caliph is also known as Amir al-Mu'minin, or Commander of the Believers). The word imam, on the other hand, referred to the leader of the Muslims in prayers. However, with the establishment of the Umayyad dynasty, supporters of Ali, the Shi'a, developed the doctrine of the imamah, which gave both religious and political dimensions to the ruler. The Shi'a, therefore, upheld the view that the Imamate belongs to Mohammad and his descendants, of which Ali was the first Imam. In addition, Shi'a doctrine affirmed that the Imam is incapable of sin (Hairi, 1977). The Sunnis, on the other hand, accepted the caliph as a temporal ruler who is "pre-eminently a political functionary and though he may perform religious functions, these functions do not imply the possession of any spiritual powers setting him thereby apart from the rest of the faithful" (Arnold, 1965, p. 17). Thus, in Sunni tradition, the caliph did not enjoy any particular religious role although Sunnis continue to see the Imamate, as reflected in the rules of the first four successors, to be the true Islamic form of government.

The conflict over succession led to the creation of three main schools of Islamic political thought: Sunni, Shi'a, and Kharijites. These are briefly discussed next.

B. Three Schools of Islamic Political Thought

For both Sunnis and Shi'a, the imam became "the de jure ruler and the de facto caliph" (Subhi, 1969, p. 24). However, early Muslims were confronted with myriad questions as to the nature and extent of the imam's power. How are imams

chosen? What is their role? What is their relationship with the rest of the Muslim community? These questions bridging political reality and religious roles were never truly answered, at least not in a unanimous way.

1. The Sunni School

The Sunnis saw the role of the imam as essential for the well-being of the community, but they did not bestow on him any mystical powers (Hairi, 1977). To choose the imam, the Sunnis emphasized the role of *Ahl al-Hal wa al-'Aqd* (those who loose and tie, meaning those who know; a select few) to legitimize the first four caliphs. Under this doctrine, the Muslim community was not given an active say in choosing its ruler, which eventually led to dissension, factionalism, and rebellions. However, instead of discussing the issues caused by the *Ahl al-Hal wa al-'Aqd* doctrine, Sunni theorists focused on other problems, such as how many people should belong to *Ahl al-Hal wa al-'Aqd* and how many are needed to have a legal *bay'ah* (pledge of allegiance). Muhammad al-Baqelani (died 1013), for instance, established several rules in that regard: The nomination of the imam (*'aqd al imama*) can be done by one person, and six people are needed to achieve *bay'ah*. In addition, the community cannot depose an imam unless he denounces Islam or stops praying and teaches others to do the same, the imam is not infallible, he has to come from the tribe of Quraysh, and he needs to be knowledgeable about war and how to protect the community (Ibish, 1966; Ismael & Ismael, 1980).

Some Sunni religious thinkers were challenged in their views by Muslim philosophers who were reading and commenting on Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. One of these philosophers was al-Farabi (870-950) who, in his book *Ahl al Madinah al Fadelah*, introduced his theory of the state. Al-Farabi affirmed that the state should be based on a "mutual renunciation of rights," for in a society or a state, each individual must give up "in favor of the other a part of that by which he would have overpowered him, each making it a condition that they would keep perfect peace with each other and not take away from the other anything except on certain conditions" (quoted in Sherwani, 1977, p. 71). Also, al-Farabi defended Plato's philosopher king, describing his *ra'is awwal* (ideal ruler) as one "who by his very nature and upbringing, does not want to be instructed by others and who has the inherent capacity for observation and of conveying his sense to others" (quoted in Sherwani, 1977, p. 73). For the perfect *ra'is awwal*, al-Farabi enumerated 12 traits but was satisfied with one who had only 5 or 6. In addition, if no man was found possessing even that minimum number of attributes, then a council with two to five members having an aggregate of 10 attributes among them should be chosen. One of these two to five council members, al-Farabi asserts, must be a *hakim*-a wise man who knows the needs of the state and its people.

Another prominent Sunni theorist, Abu al-Hassan al-Mawardi (975-1058), also wrote on the role of the imam. In his works *Ahkam Sultaniyah*, *Nasihah al Muluk*, and *Qawanin al Wizarah*, al Mawardi argues that the imam is a "caliphate of prophethood in safeguarding religious and temporal affairs" (quoted in Sherwani, 1977, p. 148) and, as such should follow the "right path," guided by both the *Shari'a* and reason. The imam, on the other hand, should be just, knowledgeable of the purposes of *ijtihad* (i.e., making a

legal decision based on an independent interpretation of the Qur'an and the sunna), without physical or sensual handicaps, wise in ruling the community and its affairs, courageous in protecting Islam, and a descendant of the Quraysh tribe (Ismael & Ismael, 1980). His role is to protect the faith, judge among people, punish transgressors, appoint just men, and lead a life between piety and luxury. As to how the imam should be chosen, al-Mawardi prescribes either by *Ahl al-Hal wa al-'Aqd* or election or by the previous imam. The imam, argues al-Mawardi, can be removed for only two reasons: *hajr* (acting against Islam) and *qahr* (falling prisoner and having no hope of being saved or freed; Ibish, 1966; Sherwani, 1977).

Alater Sunni religious thinker, Ibn Taimiyah (1263-1328), who wrote *Minhaj al Sunnah*, also did not consider it necessary for the community to elect its imam, but he affirmed that the *bay'ah* (the pledge of allegiance) served as a bilateral contract between the Imam and his community. Although, to Ibn Taimiyah, the imam could reach a certain point of perfection, he could never be a prophet. In contrast to other Sunni thinkers, however, Ibn Taimiyah did not affirm that the Imam should be from the Quraysh tribe as he saw this condition contradictory to Islamic teachings of equality among Muslims. Yet he also argued that although the rule of the imam is vested in divine law, the imam should consult *Majlis al-Shoura*, or the consultative council, and be guided by its decisions more than by historic precedents (Sherwani, 1977).

In summary, Sunni political thought generally did not perceive the nature or origin of political power as problematic and focused instead on its implementation and administration. As such, the main issues addressed by Sunni theory were the personal qualities of the ruler and the organization of the state "since neither the attainment of power nor its fundamental legitimacy were at issue for the Sunni sect" (Ismael & Ismael, 1980, p. 605).

2. The Shi'a a School

The religious doctrine of Shi'a a evolved as a political protest regarding the disputed question of succession following Muhammad's death (Subhi, 1969). However, although the conflict began immediately after Muhammad's demise, it did not clearly delineate specific religious ideologies until after the death of the fourth caliph, Uthman and the ensuing controversy between the supporters of Ali and the Umayyad dynasty (Ismael & Ismael, 1980). A central tenet of the Shi'a doctrine was and is that the imam belonged only to Muhammad and his descendants. Thus, the imam, like Muhammad, is believed by the Shi'a to be an infallible interpreter and protector of the law (Sherwani, 1977; see also Ismael & Ismael, 1980). A good description of the Imam's powers is provided by al-Imam al-Rida in Subhi (1969).

The largest branch of the Shi'a are the Twelvers. They believe that there were 12 divinely ordained imams who are the spiritual and political successors of Muhammad, with the first rightful imam being Ali (the Islamili and the Zaydi, while also Shi'a, believe in a different number of imams). Each succeeding imam was the son of the previous imam (with the exception of Husayn ibn Ali, who was the brother of Hasan ibn Ali). The 12th and final imam was Muhammad al-Mahdi, who is believed by the Twelvers to be currently alive and in hiding.

Thus, generally, Shi'a religious and political thought was governed by the doctrine of the occultation of the last imam, his reappearance, and the hope for his rule in a just and egalitarian manner in accordance with Islamic laws and precepts. In the expectation of the Imam's return, Shi'a thinkers developed the doctrine of taqiyah-religious and political beliefs that have been used to justify an acceptance of existing governments. In addition, this doctrine has stimulated research on the nature of political authority during the period of the greater occultation of the last imam. In general, the contradiction between the ideal state led by the last imam and the necessity of government in the meantime has led Shi'a intellectuals to elaborate and discuss the structure and functions of political power in the less-than-ideal state. As such, concepts of constitutionalism and democracy have been integrated into Shi'a concepts of government during this period of absence. Thus, Shi'a political thought has focused mainly on the nature and origins of power during the imam's absence, the limitations of the usurpation of power, and the accountability of the leaders. It is argued that Ayatollah Khomeini's political thought is a direct continuation of this trend of Shi'a religious and political theory (Ismael & Ismael, 1980).

In addition, following the great occultation of the last imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, the doctrines of marja i taqlid (a source to follow or a religious reference) and ijtihad became important and were used by religious scholars or the ulama to provide leadership for people in religious, social, and political matters (Hairi, 1977). As such, after the Qur'an and the imams, marjas have the highest religious power in Twelver Shi'a Islam. As a result, a Grand Ayatollah (title granted to a top Shi'a mujtahid, or a male Shi'a scholar competent to interpret Shari'a using ijtihad, or independent thought, has the authority to make political and religious decisions for the umma).

One of the influential religious leaders in Iran at the beginning of past century was Mirza Muhammad Husayn Na'ini, who tried to reconcile the ideas of constitutionalism (mashruta) with the principles of Islamic government. To do this, he established two general purposes of a government, namely, (1) to maintain internal order, protect individual rights, and support education and (2) to prevent any foreign intervention by "preparing a defensive force and war ammunitions, and the like" (Hairi, 1977, p. 166). Na'ini asserted that there are two kinds of governments: tamallukiyyah (tyranny) and vilayatiyyah (constitutional government). He argued that Muslims need to fight tamallukiyyah, for it turns human beings into slaves. On the other hand, while Na'ini held to the Shi'a doctrine that the ideal government is the government of the imam who is infallible, sinless, and possesses God-given knowledge, in the absence of such an imam, "the only possibility left... is to choose a constitutional form of government, even though the latter would still be a usurpation of the Imam's authority" (Hairi, 1977, p. 191). However, the ruler in such government must still gain the approval of the ulama. Hence, Article 2 of the Iranian Constitution includes the following provision:

At no time must any legal enactment of the National Consultative Assembly... be at variance with the sacred principles of Islam... It is hereby declared that it is for the... Ulama... to determine whether such laws as may be proposed are or are not conformable to the principles of Islam; and it is therefore officially enacted that there shall at

all times exist a committee of not less than five muj tahids... so that they may... reject and repudiate, wholly or in part, any such proposal which is at variance with the Sacred Law of Islam, so that it shall not obtain the title of legality. (Hairi, 1977, p. 213)

This article clearly gave the religious authorities an official role in determining the compatibility of political laws with Islamic principles. However, some argue that this article, like the constitution itself, remained abstract as political leaders effectively counteracted these limitations of their powers (Ismael & Ismael, 1980).

3. The Kharijites School

The Kharijites (renegades) school of thought maintained that the leadership of the Muslim community should be open to all Muslims and that an elected caliph should not relinquish his right under any circumstances. However, if he is unjust, he should be deposed by any means (Hassan, 1967). In fact, the Kharijites argued that the caliphate and imamah were not necessary. One of the Kharijites' main thinkers, Shahrastani, affirmed that the "Imamah is not necessary according to Shari'a (Islamic law). It is based on people's interactions with each other. If everyone justly deals and cooperates with the others, as well as fulfills his duties and responsibilities, they do not need an Imam" (quoted in Subhi, 1969, p. 69; see also Hassan, 1967, p. 161).

Thus, this school of thought introduced a rather radical view of Islamic political structure. Many of its theories became popular in the 19th century with the advent of nationalism. As such, some Islamic reformers, including Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1839-1897) and Mohammad Abdo (1848-1905), tried to reconcile Western democratic precepts with the Islamic idea of the state. The combination of the Kharijites' theories and the teachings of such thinkers led to a new generation of secular thinkers who wanted to completely separate religion from the state. Ali Abd al-Razeq (1972) is one of the best representatives of these new ideas. Writing in 1925, he maintained that Islam never promoted or decided on a particular form of government, nor were Muslims ever required to build a particular system. Abd al-Razeq did not perceive the caliphate to be a religious system and argued that the Qur'an did not order it. Al-Razeq (1972) disentangled Islam from the caliphate and argued that "Islam is innocent from the caliphate because it paralyzed any development in the form of government among the Moslems" (pp. 92-93). More basically, al-Razeq asserted that Muhammad did not form a government or establish a state, and thus the caliphate in Islam was "based on nothing but brutal force," a catastrophe that "hit Islam and Moslems and is a course of evil and corruption" (pp. 129, 136). Al-Razeq, therefore, maintained that Muslims are free to choose their form of government (Ismael & Ismael, 1980).

In addition to this religio-political schism in early Islam, several Islamic philosophers also contributed to shaping early Islamic political thought and are discussed next.

The Mughal Empire

The Mughal (or Mogul) Empire ruled most of India and Pakistan in the 16th and 17th centuries. It consolidated Islam in South Asia, and spread Muslim (and particularly Persian) arts and culture as well as the faith. The Mughals were Muslims who ruled a country with a large Hindu majority.

However for much of their empire they allowed Hindus to reach senior government or military positions.

The Mughals brought many changes to India:

1. Centralised government that brought together many smaller kingdoms
2. Delegated government with respect for human rights
3. Persian art and culture
4. Persian language mixed with Arabic and Hindi to create Urdu
5. Periods of great religious tolerance
6. A style of architecture (e.g. the Taj Mahal)
7. A system of education that took account of pupils' needs and culture

Muslims in India

There had been Muslims in India long before the Mughals. The first Muslims arrived in the 8th century.

In the first half of the 10th century a Muslim ruler of Afghanistan invaded the Punjab 11 times, without much political success, but taking away a great deal of loot.

A more successful invasion came at the end of the 12th century. This eventually led to the formation of the Delhi Sultanate.

A later Muslim invasion in 1398 devastated the city of Delhi.

The Mughal Empire grew out of descendants of the Mongol Empire who were living in Turkestan in the 15th century. They had become Muslims and assimilated the culture of the Middle East, while keeping elements of their Far Eastern roots.

They also retained the great military skill and cunning of their Mongol ancestors, and were among the first Western military leaders to use guns.

Babur

Babur the first Mughal Emperor, was a descendent of Genghis Khan and Tamerlane. Babur succeeded his father as ruler of the state of Farghana in Turkestan when he was only 12, although he was swiftly deposed by older relatives. Babur moved into Afghanistan in 1504, and then moved on to India, apparently at the invitation of some Indian princes who wanted to dispose of their ruler. Babur disposed of the ruler, and decided to take over himself.

He captured the Turkic Ghur'at Sultanate of Delhi in 1526, imposing his rule on most of Northern India. The Empire he founded was a sophisticated civilisation based on religious toleration. It was a mixture of Persian, Mongol and Indian culture.

Under Babur Hinduism was tolerated and new Hindu temples were built with his permission. Trade with the rest of the Islamic world, especially Persia and through Persia to Europe, was encouraged.

The importance of slavery in the Empire diminished and peace was made with the Hindu kingdoms of Southern India. Babur brought a broad-minded, confident Islam from central Asia. His first act after conquering Delhi was to forbid the killing of cows because that was offensive to Hindus.

Babur may have been descended from brutal conquerors, but he was not a barbarian bent on loot and plunder. Instead he had great ideas about civilisation, architecture and administration. He even wrote an autobiography, *The Babur - Namah*. The autobiography is candid, honest and at times even poetic.

Babur was followed by his son Humayun who was a bad emperor, a better poet, and a drug addict. He rapidly lost the empire. He did eventually recover the throne but died soon afterwards after breaking his neck falling downstairs.

While Humayan was certainly disastrous as a ruler, his love of poetry and culture heavily influenced his son Akbar, and helped to make the Mughal Empire an artistic power as well as a military one.

Abu Akbar

The third Emperor, Abu Akbar, is regarded as one of the great rulers of all time, regardless of country. Akbar succeeded to the throne at 13, and started to recapture the remaining territory lost from Babur's empire. By the time of his death in 1605 he ruled over most of north, central, and western India.

Akbar worked hard to win over the hearts and minds of the Hindu leaders. While this may well have been for political reasons-he married a Hindu princess (and is said to have married several thousand wives for political and diplomatic purposes)-it was also a part of his philosophy.

Akbar believed that all religions should be tolerated, and that a ruler's duty was to treat all believers equally, whatever their belief. He established a form of delegated government in which the provincial governors were personally responsible to him for the quality of government in their territory.

Akbar's government machine included many Hindus in positions of responsibility-the governed were allowed to take a major part in the governing. Akbar also ended a tax (*jizya*) that had been imposed on non-Muslims. This discriminatory tax had been much resented, and ending it was a popular move.

An innovation was the amount of autonomy he allowed to the provinces. For example, non-Muslims were not forced to obey Islamic law (as was the case in many Islamic lands), and Hindus were allowed to regulate themselves through their own law and institutions.

Akbar and Godism

Akbar took the policy of religious toleration even further by breaking with conventional Islam. The Emperor proclaimed an entirely new state religion of 'God-ism' (*Din-i-ilahi*) - a jumble of Islamic, Hindu, Christian and Buddhist teaching with himself as deity. It never spread beyond his court and died when he did.

Fatehpur Sikri was the new capital built by Akbar, as a part of his attempt to absorb other religions into Islam. Fatehpur Sikri is a synthesis of Hindu and Islamic architecture.

Jahangir and Jahan

Jahangir

Akbar's son, Emperor Jahangir, readopted Islam as the state religion and continued the policy of religious toleration. His court included large numbers of Indian Hindus, Persian Shi'a and Sufis and members of local heterodox Islamic sects.

Jahangir also began building the magnificent monuments and gardens by which the Mughals are chiefly remembered today, importing hundreds of Persian architects to build palaces and create magnificent gardens.

Jahangir's approach was typified by the development of Urdu as the official language of Empire. Urdu uses an

Arabic script, but Persian vocabulary and Hindi grammatical structure.

Jahan

The architectural achievements of the Mughals peaked between 1592 and 1666, during the reign of Jahangir's successor Jahan. Jahan commissioned the Taj Mahal. The Taj Mahal marks the apex of the Mughal Empire; it symbolises stability, power and confidence. The building is a mausoleum built by Jahan for his wife Mumtaz and it has come to symbolise the love between two people.

Jahan's selection of white marble and the overall concept and design of the mausoleum give the building great power and majesty. Jahan brought together fresh ideas in the creation of the Taj. Many of the skilled craftsmen involved in the construction were drawn from the empire. Many also came from other parts of the Islamic world - calligraphers from Shiraz, finial makers from Samarkand, and stone and flower cutters from Bukhara.

By Jahan's period the capital had moved to the Red Fort in Delhi, putting the Fort at the heart of Mughal power. As if to confirm it, Jahan had these lines inscribed there: "If there is Paradise on earth, it is here, it is here."

Paradise it may have been, but it was a pricey paradise. The money Jahan spent on buildings and on various military projects emptied his treasury and he was forced to raise taxes, which aggravated the people of the empire.

Aurangzeb

Jahan's son Aurangzeb was the last great Mughal Emperor. History's verdict on Aurangzeb largely depends on who's writing it; Muslim or Hindu. Aurangzeb ruled for nearly 50 years. He came to the throne after imprisoning his father and having his older brother killed.

He was a strong leader, whose conquests expanded the Mughal Empire to its greatest size. Aurangzeb was a very observant and religious Muslim who ended the policy of religious tolerance followed by earlier emperors.

He no longer allowed the Hindu community to live under their own laws and customs, but imposed Sharia law (Islamic law) over the whole empire. Thousands of Hindu temples and shrines were torn down and a punitive tax on Hindu subjects was re-imposed. In the last decades of the seventeenth century Aurangzeb invaded the Hindu kingdoms in central and southern India, conquering much territory and taking many slaves.

Under Aurangzeb, the Mughal Empire reached the peak of its military power, but the rule was unstable. This was partly because of the hostility that Aurangzeb's intolerance and taxation inspired in the population, but also because the empire had simply become too big to be successfully governed.

The Muslim Governor of Hyderabad in southern India rebelled and established a separate Shi'a state; he also reintroduced religious toleration. The Hindu kingdoms also fought back, often supported by the French and the British, who used them to tighten their grip on the sub-continent.

The establishment of a Hindu Marathi Empire in southern India cut off the Mughal state to the south. The great Mughal city of Calcutta came under the control of the East India Company in 1696 and in the decades that followed Europeans and European-backed Hindu princes conquered most of the Mughal territory.

Aurangzeb's extremism caused Mughal territory and creativity to dry up and the Empire went into decline. The Mughal Emperors that followed Aurangzeb effectively became British or French puppets. The last Mughal Emperor was deposed by the British in 1858.

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