

## **The Rise of Political Islam in Afghanistan: A Historical Perspective**

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**Abstract:** This paper delves into the historical development of political Islam in Afghanistan, tracing its origins to the Wahhabi movement of the eighteenth century and its subsequent evolution through various reformist and modernist currents. It elucidates the guiding principles, objectives, and influential personalities that have shaped the trajectory of political Islam, emphasising its intricate relationship with traditional Islamic scholarship and Western influences. Through a meticulous analysis of historical developments and ideological frameworks, this paper aims to offer nuanced insights into the challenges and opportunities posed by political Islam in Afghanistan's socio-political landscape.

**Keywords:** Political Islam, Afghanistan, Wahabi Movement, Islamic Reformism, Syed Qutb, Maulana Abu Ala Maududi, Khomeini, Sharia Law, Islamic Governance

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### **Introduction:**

The historical evolution of political Islam is a multifaceted and intricate phenomenon that has unfolded across centuries, encapsulating a nexus of religious, social, and political dynamics. This complex journey has been profoundly influenced by a plethora of historical events, including but not limited to colonialism, socio-economic transformations, and geopolitical intricacies. Political Islam finds its roots in the early years of Islam during the 7th century. The establishment of the Caliphate, an Islamic state governed by successors (Caliphs) to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) marked the genesis of political structures within the Islamic realm.

The Islamic world has witnessed the ascendancy and decline of various empires and caliphates, each leaving an indelible imprint on the political manifestation of Islam. Notably, the Abbasid and Ottoman Empires wielded significant influence in shaping the political landscape of the Muslim domain. The Ottoman Caliphate, which endured until the early 20th century, occupied a prominent position in both religious and political spheres. The 19th and 20th centuries ushered in significant challenges with the advent of European colonialism. The colonisation of Muslim-majority regions disrupted traditional political structures and introduced novel geopolitical paradigms. The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire following World War I constituted a pivotal juncture as Muslim societies grappled with the ramifications of colonial rule and the imposition of alien political frameworks.

The 20th century witnessed a resurgence of Islamic identity and activism in response to the challenges posed by colonialism and the subsequent nation-state paradigm. Islamic revivalist movements sought to reaffirm Islamic values in both personal and political domains. Notable figures such as Sayid Qutb in Egypt and Abul Ala Maududi in South Asia played instrumental roles in elucidating the political dimensions of Islam. The latter part of the 20th century and the early 21st century witnessed the emergence of political Islam as a response to socio-economic exigencies, authoritarian regimes, and foreign interventions. Movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East and the Taliban in Afghanistan aspired to establish Islamic governance as an alternative to prevailing political systems. Globalisation and interconnectedness have further influenced the trajectory of political Islam. Jihadist movements such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS materialised in response to perceived threats to Islam and endeavoured to institute Islamic governance through coercive means. These movements, while denounced by mainstream Islamic scholars, have engendered an added layer of complexity in the political milieu.

### **Islamic Revival and Political Islam (late 20th century):**

The latter half of the 20th century witnessed a significant resurgence of Islamic identity and political activism across numerous Muslim-majority nations. A pivotal event exemplifying this phenomenon was the Iranian Revolution of 1979, spearheaded by Ayatollah Khomeini. This revolution not only transformed Iran's political landscape but also served as a catalyst, inspiring Islamist movements on a global scale. The Iranian Revolution had a profound impact, contributing to the emergence of various Islamic movements seeking to integrate religious principles with political ideology. Collectively known as political Islam, this term gained prominence as analysts endeavoured to characterise the intricate interplay between Islam and diverse political ideologies within Muslim-majority societies.

Among the influential protagonists promoting political Islam was the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in Egypt in 1928. This organisation played a pivotal role in advocating for the infusion of Islamic principles into the political sphere while operating within the framework of parliamentary politics. The Muslim Brotherhood's influence extended beyond Egypt, establishing itself as a significant force shaping political discourse and activism in various other Muslim-majority countries. Political Islam, as a concept, encompasses a broad spectrum of movements, each with its own distinct goals and strategies. Some movements focused on establishing Islamic states based on a rigorous interpretation of Sharia law, while others sought to influence existing political structures to incorporate Islamic principles. The diverse nature of these movements reflects the complexity and multifaceted dynamics of the intersection between Islam and politics during this period.

In essence, the late 20th century witnessed a profound Islamic revival characterised by the resurgence of Islamic identity and heightened political activism. The Iranian Revolution and the role of the Muslim Brotherhood played pivotal roles in shaping the landscape of political Islam, contributing to a broader global discourse on the intricate relationship between religion and politics in Muslim-majority societies.

In the Afghan context, numerous Afghan leaders pursued their education at various esteemed universities, notably in Egypt, where they were exposed to a plethora of diverse Islamist movements and ideologies. One such exemplary figure is Burhanuddin Rabbani, who commenced his academic journey in Egypt in 1966. During his tenure at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Rabbani forged strong connections with prominent figures of the Muslim Brotherhood. Over the span of two years, he delved deeply into the study of Islamic philosophy and proficiently earned his master's degree. This educational odyssey profoundly influenced Rabbani's worldview and significantly contributed to the formation of his perspectives within the broader milieu of Islam.

### **The Roots of Political Islam in Afghanistan:**

The genesis of political Islam in Afghanistan can be discerned in the Wahhabi movement, which burgeoned in the eighteenth century within what is now Saudi Arabia. Established by Ibn Al Wahab, the Wahhabi movement championed a revival of the fundamental tenets of early Islam, eschewing perceived innovations and idolatries within the faith. This movement gained traction in Afghanistan through the dissemination of its ideology and engagements with indigenous scholars and rulers. The pivotal juncture occurred with the alliance forged between Ibn Saud and Ibn Al Wahab in 1744, precipitating the propagation of Wahhabi doctrine beyond the confines of the Arabian Peninsula.

### **Islamic Reformism and Modernism in Indian Subcontinent**

In the context of the Indian Subcontinent, the 18th-century luminary Shah Waliullah played an instrumental role in propagating Wahhabi teachings, significantly contributing to the genesis of Islamic reformist movements. A noteworthy consequence of this influence was the emergence of the Jihad movement, which accentuated the imperative to revert to the practices of the Salaf—the venerable early generations of Muslims. At the core of these reformist ideologies lies the repudiation of unreserved adherence to religious authority, underscored by a call for a judicious re-evaluation of Islamic practices and beliefs.

Concurrently, alongside the burgeoning reformist movements, modernist Islamic intellectuals in the Indian Subcontinent endeavoured to grapple with the challenges posed by Western ideas. These erudite minds aspired to harmonise Islamic teachings with Western principles, advocating for a rational approach to reform. The overarching objective was to bridge the perceived schism between Islamic tradition and the progress of the Western world. This intellectual strand not only espoused the assimilation of compatible Western ideas but also underscored the preservation of the essence of Islamic principles. Having close proximity to India, Afghanistan was directly influenced by this ideology, which had a deep impact on the Afghan religio-political landscape.

### **Key Figures in the Development of Political Islam:**

Prominent scholars such as Syed Qutb, Maulana Abu Ala Maududi, and Ayatollah Khomeini significantly influenced the trajectory of political Islam during the twentieth century. Syed Qutb advocated for the establishment of a parliamentary government rooted in Islamic principles, emphasising the compatibility of Islamic values with democratic governance. Meanwhile, Maulana Abu Ala Maududi envisioned an Islamic state characterised by the implementation of Sharia law, highlighting the importance of governance in accordance with Islamic teachings. Ayatollah Khomeini's role was particularly pivotal, as his Islamic Revolution in Iran served as a paradigm for numerous political Islamists. The revolution demonstrated the practicality of creating an Islamic state and underscored the potential for Islamic principles to guide the governance of a nation. Khomeini's influence extended beyond Iran, inspiring political Islamists globally and shaping their aspirations for Islamic governance. Together, these scholars made significant contributions to the intellectual foundations of

political Islam, each offering distinct perspectives on the relationship between Islam and governance and collectively influencing the development of political ideologies within the Islamic world.

Political Islamists assert that Islamic teachings provide comprehensive guidance for both personal morality and public governance. They emphasise the notion of a holistic Islamic way of life, wherein every aspect of society is imbued with Islamic principles. This encompasses not only individual behaviour but also the organisation of political institutions, economic systems, and social structures. By advocating for the primacy of Sharia in governance, political Islamists seek to create a society where laws and policies align with what they perceive as divine mandates. They believe that such a system would foster justice, morality, and social harmony, as it is based on principles derived from religious scripture and interpreted by religious scholars. Furthermore, political Islamists view the application of Sharia as a means of challenging existing power dynamics, particularly those influenced by colonial legacies or Western hegemony. They see the adoption of Islamic principles in governance as a form of resistance against what they perceive as oppressive or corrupt regimes, often characterised by authoritarianism, corruption, and injustice.

In their pursuit of societal transformation, political Islamists often engage in grassroots activism, political mobilisation, and participation in electoral politics. They seek to build popular support for their agenda by appealing to shared religious values and aspirations for a more just and equitable society. However, it is imperative to acknowledge the inherent diversity inherent within the political Islamist movement, wherein various groups and individuals advocate for disparate degrees of Islamic governance. While certain factions may ardently push for the establishment of an Islamic state marked by stringent adherence to Sharia, others may prioritize democratic principles, striving to harmonize Islamic values with contemporary governance structures.

In essence, political Islamists aspire to reconfigure societal dynamics in accordance with their nuanced interpretation of Islamic teachings. Their overarching objective involves the establishment of a governance system reflective of their religious convictions and responsive to perceived social injustices. This multifaceted approach encompasses not only the pursuit of political authority but also the systematic transformation of societal norms and institutions, aligning them intricately with the contours of their ideological framework.

### **Challenges and prospects**

The ascendancy of political Islam in Afghanistan represents a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, necessitating a nuanced examination. On one hand, it manifests as a vision of governance deeply entrenched in Islamic principles, resonating with the cultural and religious tapestry of Afghan society. This engenders a sense of familiarity and legitimacy among a substantial portion of the populace, potentially fostering social cohesion and stability.

However, this narrative of political Islam also raises concerns about the potential marginalisation of minority communities, particularly those adhering to diverse religious beliefs or cultural practices. The risk of exclusionary policies prioritising a narrow interpretation of Islam looms large, potentially exacerbating societal fault lines, thereby undermining the country's social fabric and impeding efforts towards national reconciliation.

Moreover, the resurgence of political Islam poses a conundrum for Afghanistan's democratic trajectory. While the embrace of Islamic governance may reflect popular sentiments and historical precedents, it concurrently evokes apprehensions about the erosion of democratic values and institutions. The consolidation of power within religious frameworks could undermine pluralism and civil liberties, curtailing the space for dissent and diversity of opinion. Thus, the challenge lies in reconciling the tenets of political Islam with the imperatives of democratic governance, ensuring that the rights and freedoms enshrined in the constitution are upheld without compromise.

In navigating these intricate complexities, Afghanistan's leaders face the daunting task of striking a delicate balance between accommodating the aspirations of political Islamists and safeguarding the principles of inclusive governance and human rights. This necessitates robust mechanisms for dialogue and negotiation, wherein diverse voices are not merely acknowledged but actively incorporated into the policymaking process. Embracing a pluralistic approach to governance that respects the rights of all citizens, irrespective of their religious or ethnic affiliations, is paramount for fostering social cohesion and sustainable development.

Furthermore, investing in education and civic engagement can empower citizens to actively participate in the democratic process, thereby fostering a culture of accountability and transparency. The prospects for Afghanistan's future hinge on its ability to navigate the complexities posed by the rise of political Islam. A holistic approach that carefully balances religious convictions with democratic principles can pave the way towards enduring stability and prosperity. This, however, requires unwavering commitment from all stakeholders to uphold the values of tolerance, pluralism, and respect for human rights, ensuring that Afghanistan emerges as a beacon of coexistence and progress in the region.

As we delve into the historical context, both the Islamic reformist movements and modernist thinkers in the Indian Subcontinent reflected responses to the changing socio-political landscape and encounters with

Western thought. While the former focused on returning to the roots of Islam and challenging perceived deviations, the latter sought a harmonious coexistence between Islamic values and the progressive aspects of Western philosophy. These concurrent streams of thought contributed to the diverse intellectual landscape within Islamic discourse in the region during this pivotal period.

### Conclusion

The history of political Islam in Afghanistan is intricately shaped by a nuanced interplay of historical legacies, ideological currents, and socio-political dynamics. Commencing with its origins in the Wahabi movement, political Islam has exerted a profound influence on both Afghan society and governance, metamorphosing into diverse contemporary manifestations. It presents itself as a proponent of Islamic revivalism and a bulwark against Western hegemony, yet concurrently introduces challenges to the ideals of pluralism, democracy, and human rights.

As Afghanistan grapples with its complex past and navigates the path towards the future, striking a judicious balance in addressing these inherent tensions becomes imperative. The dichotomy between the vision of Islamic revivalism and the imperative for inclusive governance demands meticulous consideration. Negotiating these intricacies will be pivotal not only for maintaining social cohesion but also for attaining sustainable development in Afghanistan. In this endeavour, it is indispensable to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of political Islam, recognising both its historical roots and its contemporary expressions, while concurrently striving to uphold the sacrosanct principles of democracy, human rights, and pluralism. Only through such a nuanced and sagacious approach can Afghanistan pave the way for a more inclusive, stable, and prosperous future.

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