

"Babeş-Bolyai" University, Cluj-Napoca

PhD THESIS

THE ROLE OF ISLAMIC LEADERS OF FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS IN
PROMOTING COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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Summary

This thesis explores the involvement of leaders of Islamic religious groups from various nations in the Islamic world, focusing on their engagement with both ancient and contemporary teachings to comprehend, implement, and promote the principles of modern human development.

Using a case study methodology, the study examines two prominent religious leaders representing the Sunni and Shiite sects: Fethullah Gulen, an influential Sunni Islamic thinker, and Prince Aga Khan IV, also known as Karim Shah Al-Husseini, an Ismaili Shiite Imam residing in the Western world.

The first model examines Aga Khan IV, who leads the Shiite Ismaili sect. He embodies an enlightened, secular, and non-political form of Shiite Islam, though his position is based on an undemocratic system of hereditary spiritual leadership. The second model focuses on Fethullah Gulen, a Turkish cleric representing the Sunni Muslim majority. He serves as an enlightened, secular, non-political, and non-hereditary Islamic religious leader, unaffiliated with either the Sufi order or the tradition of hereditary religious leadership.

In this study, I focus on the role played by a religious and spiritual Islamic authority that does not possess any legitimate political power. This authority differs in its approach and techniques in understanding the principles of Islam and its manifestations in conceiving the appropriate political role, including its teachings, traditions, and laws, compared to other popular religious authorities in mainstream Islamic realms.

I will address one of the important political roles: the process of establishing and managing sustainable development in a religious community. Here, the leader who oversees the developmental process is a highly respected religious symbol, and the targeted communities are composed of spiritually dispersed followers affiliated with their spiritual leadership through a divine bond. This bond transcends national, racial, linguistic, and cultural differences, as well as political and social backgrounds.

Hence, this research aims to answer the main question:

“In what ways do Islamic religious leaders exert their influence on comprehensive societal development, going beyond religious, sectarian, and political affiliations, to improve the standard of living for their followers and other members of society?”

The thesis addresses the following sub-questions:

1. What religious principles, legislations, and practices within Islam are proposed to address the developmental needs of society, and what mechanisms and practices are advocated to fulfill these needs?
2. What roles do contemporary religious leaders play in supporting development, and which developmental institutions are utilized to execute this role?
3. How have religious leaders navigated political sovereignty concerns to address the dispersed geopolitical contexts within the religious community?
4. What religious, political, and social obstacles hinder the efforts of religious leadership, and to what extent have these obstacles been overcome by the religious leadership?
5. What can religious political parties, religious groups, and religious organizations learn from the experiences of the Ismaili Imamate and Fethullah Gulen’s service movement to achieve sustained growth for the communities they serve?

The significance of the research

This study falls under the category of religion and development studies, a field that investigates how religious factors impact economic, social, and cultural development processes. It focuses on understanding how religion shapes values and beliefs that influence economic growth and social progress, as well as examining the interactions between religion and governmental policies. Despite a wealth of Islamic studies in other fields, the Arab library generally lacks research of this type.

The research analyzes the impact of Islamic values and principles contained in the Qur’an on comprehensive development in Islamic countries. It examines the application of principles such as social justice, equality, basic rights, women's roles, poverty alleviation, and wealth distribution in the Islamic economy. Additionally, it explores how these values influence development practices in Islamic societies and the role of religious institutions in promoting sustainable development.

This study is notable for addressing the contemporary economic and political reality of the Ismaili sect and its leader, the Aga Khan, highlighting his developmental achievements, which could serve as a role model for many local Islamic movements, sects, and parties.

The study also makes a significant contribution to the Arab scholarship by examining the Nation of Islam, an emerging Islamic sect that lacks followers in the Middle East, Asia, or Africa. This sect operates exclusively in the United States, with Black Americans as its representatives. Furthermore, the study sheds light on the Fethullah Gulen movement in Turkey, which is not widely known in the Arab world. The movement is often negatively portrayed in media influenced by the official Turkish propaganda of the Justice and Development Party, led by President Recep Erdogan, which labels it as a coup organization and terrorist group.

The study is unique because it uses a variety of realistic models in terms of religion, location, ethnicity, and political, social, and historical context. This diversity enhances the research, expands its sources, and provides the reader with a broad range of scientific experiences reflected in these models. By linking religion and development, the study offers political recommendations that can enhance the development efforts of governments and civil society institutions in countries with an Islamic majority.

The study is organized into six chapters.

The first chapter presents the context and importance of the study. The second chapter explores the notion of religion as defined by sociologists specializing in religious studies, along with various forms of religious beliefs and behaviors. It includes a comprehensive investigation into the origins of religion and its influence on society and politics, focusing on functional theories. Additionally, the chapter examines the impact of religion on society, delving into the Islamic faith and its essential ideas related to development, and considering the future trajectory of religion. It also discusses the two primary factions of Islam, Sunnis and Shiites, and their contrasting political ideologies, specifically the concepts of caliphate and guardianship. The role of Sufism in Islamic cultural development is also covered.

Chapter 3 discusses Islamic economics, financial transactions, and religious activities related to finance, such as zakat and khums. It concludes with an analysis of the concept of religious reform in Islam, discussing its necessity, various methodologies, and contributions to progress.

Chapter 4 examines the Islamic concept of development, exploring modernization and current development concepts. It provides a summary of the historical roots of these ideas and the main ideologies associated with present-day growth. The chapter continues with an analysis of a current conceptual framework and presents a succinct assessment of contemporary perspectives on Islamic doctrine aligned with comprehensive progress. It also includes an analysis of the development concepts of Aga Khan, the representative of Ismaili Shiite Islam, detailing the sect's principles of growth, the concept of Imamate, and the unique traits of the Ismaili Shiite community. Furthermore, it evaluates the specialized knowledge and role of the development agencies established by Aga Khan.

Chapter 5 focuses on the experiences of Fethullah Gulen, a Turkish Muslim cleric representing the Sunni community, and his expanding organization. This chapter examines the historical context leading to the movement's emergence, particularly the political transformations in Turkey after the collapse of the Ottoman Caliphate and the founding of the secular Turkish Republic. It analyzes Gulen's background and the evolutionary process of the religious organization he established. Additionally, it examines the roles of the institutions founded by the movement, their contributions to promoting development, and the obstacles they faced.

Research methodology

In this study on development and the influence of religion on development, I employed structural-functional theory to examine various aspects of religion, including religiosity, terrorism, Sufism, and the politicization of religion. Additionally, I explored patterns of relationships in social reality, such as sectarian affiliation, the relationship between followers of the Ismaili sect and their Imam, lifestyle, and Shiite religiosity. Furthermore, I investigated the followers of the preacher Gulen and their relationship with religion, as well as the role of religion and social structure within religious groups and its impact on comprehensive development.

I utilized a case study methodology to examine the main topic of the study, focusing on two prominent religious leaders who serve as representatives of the Sunnis and Shiites, two significant sects in modern times. These individuals include Fethullah Gulen, an influential Sunni Islamic thinker, and Prince Aga Khan IV, also known as Karim Shah Al-Husseini, an Ismaili Shiite Imam residing in the Western world.

I employed a comparative strategy to assess and contrast the research models, aiming to uncover any parallels, symmetries, or differences between them. This approach also helped clarify the relationship between the variables under study.

To investigate the study questions, I analyzed historical documents that offer insights into the intellectual and theological basis of the religious groups. The study seeks to comprehend the perspectives, cognitive structures, political heritage, and historical occurrences that have shaped the groups' growth. The aim is to examine the impact of historical, political, and ethnic conditions on the cognitive advancement of the groups, as well as the elements that have molded their disposition, culture, and spiritual maturation. Furthermore, the study investigates the historical, political, and social factors that have shaped the groups' intellectual makeup. It was imperative to develop beliefs grounded in historical evidence, which involved critically examining history and conducting a thorough analysis of the groups' historical contexts. This assessment rejects prejudiced and rigid perspectives.

To conduct a rigorous and focused examination of the intellectual underpinnings, a wide range of sources were utilized, and a thorough investigation of historical facts was undertaken to ensure the scholarly integrity of the content. The research examined the historical development of particular religious communities and then analyzed contemporary studies written by both insiders and outsiders of the communities. These studies described the current context of events and recent developments within the groups. The research also examined the communities' websites and analyzed the visual, written, and spoken content produced by the religious groups' leadership. Additionally, it observed the interactions among group members on social networking platforms and engaged with individuals from various ethnic backgrounds to investigate their perceptions of religious leadership development programs.

World press and media sites were examined to present an impartial portrayal of the actions of the religious leadership, its cultural and civilizational characteristics as perceived by host communities, and unbiased evaluations of the development initiatives and their potential impact, both positive and negative, on the targeted communities. I conducted an analysis of religious factions within Sunni and Shiite communities that oppose the leadership style of other religious sects. This analysis compares these groups based on their effectiveness, vitality, unity, adaptability to current circumstances, and ability to meet their developmental needs. I also considered their political and ideological perspectives.

I employed the political leadership methodology, which has become increasingly popular in public policy analysis over the last decade. This choice was made due to the active involvement of religious leaders in leading their development organizations, managing the affairs of their spiritual and sectarian communities, formulating policies for these organizations, and guiding their followers based on values and principles that impact politics and development. Burns (1978) and Blundell (1987) sought to enhance our understanding of political leadership by examining its background and analyzing this complex phenomenon. The aim was to scrutinize the actions of politicians in tackling societal issues, explore the power dynamics and influence of political leaders (particularly religious leaders who engage in political roles) on their followers, and assess the impact of personal leadership traits on the general public by individually analyzing leaders using personality theories. Traditionally, political science has seldom employed this methodology, and experts attribute this limited use to the complex character of political leadership, which frequently contradicts the precepts of liberal democratic ethics. Religious leaders, especially within the framework of Islam, do not attain power through democratic elections. Instead, they obtain their religious and political viewpoints through heredity or self-imposition, relying on personal traits.

I interviewed academics, researchers specializing in development and Islamic studies, political and social sciences, and representatives of organizations affiliated with certain Islamic groups. These interviews were conducted in person or online via platforms such as Google Meet and Facebook Messenger. The interviews aimed to determine the study's findings by comparing them with the responses of the interviewed experts, considering their academic expertise and research output in areas that overlap with the academic thesis. The interviewees were given the freedom to choose the questions they wanted to answer, and it was agreed not to reveal the respondents' identities.

Main results and recommendations

The research concludes that Islam inherently promotes development principles that align, to some degree, with contemporary development theories. These principles include the promotion of freedom, justice, equality, respect for human rights, support for marginalized groups, women, and children, as well as the fight against poverty, destitution, and illiteracy. Furthermore, Islam advocates for environmental protection, security, peace between societies, and the enhancement of social cohesion, mutual reliance, and integration within and among

human societies. These concepts and methodologies can be refined and modernized to meet the demands of contemporary society and inspire effective civil society groups and institutions to achieve global development objectives.

The research also identifies a pressing need for religious reform, which involves revising traditional beliefs that contradict development goals and human rights principles. These contradictions include religious conflicts, the use of violence and terrorism to impose religious policies, and the manipulation of emotions to achieve destructive political goals. Such actions undermine security, social peace, and peaceful coexistence, and promote discrimination based on religion, sect, sexuality, or race, contrary to the essence of religion and its universally shared values.

In conclusion, the research presents several ideas and recommendations. Offering international political backing to institutional and individual religious reform endeavors would effectively purify religions and sects from corruption and address behaviors that contradict principles of human dignity, peace values, and respect for human rights and freedoms. This support would specifically target intellectual, financial, and administrative corruption while fostering overall growth.

The text proposes enhancing the influence of religious leaders who possess qualities such as enlightenment, openness, tolerance, and opposition to violence, intolerance, and racism. It suggests establishing partnerships with these leaders to seek their advice in defining development values and collaborating to achieve development objectives endorsed and implemented by international institutions.

Key words:

development and religion, religious conflicts, terrorism, Islam, leadership, human rights

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