

Aga Khan approaches epochal milestone

Interview. His Highness the Aga Khan this year marks 60 years as the Imam (spiritual leader) of the Shia Ismaili Muslim community. The Diamond Jubilee of the Ismaili Imam, is an opportunity to reflect on the nature of the Ismaili community and the Aga Khan's leadership engagement and commitment to development during these 60 years. **Henry Lubega** talked to His Excellency Amin Mawji, the Ambassador of the Aga Khan Development Network. Below are excerpts.

Q. Your Excellency, can you tell us something about the Aga Khan's role as a religious leader?

A: His Highness the Aga Khan's role as a religious leader has a history going back 1400 years. He is the 49th Imam of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims.

I should explain that this is a hereditary role that traces its history back to the time of Prophet Muhammad, Peace Be Upon Him.

There was a view amongst a body of Muslims that the Prophet nominated no successor and that spiritual-moral authority belongs to those who are learned in matters of religious law.

According to this interpretation, there are many Imams who perform a leadership role within the Sunni interpretation of Islam.

The Shia interpretation was that the Prophet had designated his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, as his successor in spiritual leadership.

In time, the Shia Muslims have also been divided over the issue of rightful leadership. Today, the Ismailis are the only Shia community who throughout history, have been led by a living, hereditary Imam directly descended from the Prophet.

Q. How does the Aga Khan perform this leadership role?

A: Perhaps the best way to characterise the role of the Ismaili Imam is to describe it as both temporal and spiritual. In essence, he has religious authority to interpret the faith for those who refer to him but does not seek political leadership.

The Ismaili Imam, as an institution, does not in current times govern any lands but remains a supra-national entity, representing the succession of Imams since the time of the Prophet.

However, it is worth noting here that one of the fundamental tenets of Islam is that the spiritual and material worlds are inextricably connected.

In Islamic thought, faith does not remove Muslims or their Imams from daily, practical matters in family life, in business, in community affairs.

This notion, of the fusion of the spiritual and material worlds explains why His Highness the Aga Khan has been so committed to the work of development.

It explains his concern for our worldly habitat, for embracing its challenges, and for improving the quality of human life regardless of their faith, ethnicity or gender. The Ismaili Imam therefore can best be



Making a point. His Excellency Amin Mawji, the Ambassador of the Aga Khan Development Network during the interview. PHOTO BY COLLEB MUGUME

described as one of the institutions of spiritual and temporal leadership in Islam.

Q: So, how does the Aga Khan Development Network fit into this leadership role?

A: I would say that it is appropriate to think of the AKDN as an expression of the Ismaili Imam's interpretation of the application of Islam in practical life.

It is also a demonstration of the Ismaili Imam's broader effort to improve the quality of life of people. This follows from the responsibility, implicit in the institution of the Imam, to implement social action to realise the social vision of Islam for the benefit of all humanity.

I should add that the AKDN, as it

exists today, has its genesis in initiatives of Ismaili Imams going back over a century.

The present Imam, His Highness the Aga Khan, has consolidated and expanded these initiatives within a structured network of many different agencies involved in education, healthcare, tourism promotion, industrial development, financial services and so on, all operating under the umbrella of an international development organisation.

Q: Are the followers of the Ismaili Muslim faith closely involved with the AKDN?

A: I think the first point to emphasise here is that the AKDN does not restrict its work to any particular religion, community, tribe, country

or region.

The work of the AKDN is underpinned by the ethical principles of Islam particularly consultation, solidarity with those less fortunate, self-reliance and human dignity but the AKDN does not proselytize or seek to promote any particular faith. Its main focus is on the developing world.

The second point I would make is that pluralism is a central pillar of the AKDN's ethical framework: the beneficiaries of the AKDN's work and the staff employed by the AKDN agencies are of different faiths, origins and backgrounds.

The Shia Ismailis are encouraged, through their faith and the guidance of His Highness the Aga Khan as their spiritual leader, to foster self-realisation through the giving of one's self for the common good.

This is evident across all societies where Ismailis live. The community is comprised of diverse traditions, and Ismaili Muslims add value within their individual contexts. With this backdrop, it will not surprise you to learn that the Ismaili community provides significant support to the work of the network.

The community contributes invaluable volunteer time, professional services and substantial financial resources.

The AKDN relies on the Ismaili tradition of volunteer service to assist in the implementation and maintenance of projects, notably at health and education facilities. Indeed, I would say that this is one of the key strengths of the network which enables it to draw on professional expertise from across the world.

Q. How will the Diamond Jubilee be celebrated?

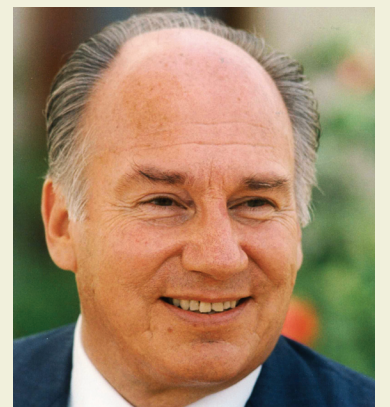
A: We expect the commemorative period for the Diamond Jubilee to span one year, from July 11, 2017 to July 11, 2018.

During this period, several events and celebrations are likely to take place around the world, giving communities the opportunity to not only acknowledge and appreciate the magnificent work done by His Highness the Aga Khan but also to contribute to his vision.

It is an exciting year to look forward to.

Background

His Highness the Aga Khan's role as a religious leader has a history going back 1400 years. He is the 49th Imam of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims. His hereditary role traces its history back to the time of Prophet Muhammad, Peace Be Upon Him. In Islamic thought, faith does not remove Muslims or their Imams from daily, practical matters in family life, in business, in community affairs. This notion, of the fusion of the spiritual and material worlds explains why His Highness the Aga Khan has been so committed to the work of development.



His Highness the Aga Khan spiritual leader of Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims