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 Imamat, an opportunity to reflect on the nature of the Ismaili community and the role of the Ismaili Imam's broader effort to improve the quality of life of people. 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. Your Excellency, can you tell us something about the Aga Khan's role as a religious leader?
A. 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 spiritual 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. What has the Akhbar Khan done to develop 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 Imamat, as an institution, does not in current times govern any lands but remains a supranational entity, representing the succession of Imams since the time of the Prophet.

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 Imamat's broader effort to improve the quality of life of people. This follows from the responsibility, implicit in the institution of the Imamat, 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: 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.