His Highness the Aga Khan explains the difference in his approach on matters of faith and matters of administration

Nicholas Tomalin: You have been compared to the Pope. Is your word, like his infallible?

Aga Khan: The Imam's word on the Faith is taken as an absolute rule. Every Ismaili is expected to accept it. The Community always follows very closely the personal way of thinking of the Imam. It's one of the particularities of Ismailis. An Ismaili who did not obey my word in matters of Faith, would not be excommunicated, he would still be a Muslim. He simply would no longer be a member of the Jamat -- the Community of Ismaili Muslims.

One has to make a very careful distinction here between worldly and religious matters. An Ismaili may ask my advice on a worldly problem, then not accept it. But if he were to ignore the Imam's decision on matters of Faith, the Community pressures on him would be very strong.

Roger Priouret: What is your role as head of the community?

Aga Khan: It is two-fold. The Imam must direct Ismailis on the practice of their religion and constantly interpret the Qur'an for them according to our theology. On the spiritual plane, the Imam's authority is
absolute. Ismailis believe therefore that what the Imam says is the only true interpretation possible....

One cannot change religion overnight. This evolution is a slow thing, and it is, therefore, an everlasting job with its own rhythm, usually a lot slower than the political and economic upheavals of the present time. What takes me the most time is no longer the management of business as the Imam for, as I have told you, it is very decentralized. Above all I give advice.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1975 L’Expansion Interview with Roger Priouret (Paris, France) [Translation] (Emphasis added)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/1732/

~~~~~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~~

ITV: And that your influence in the world is?

Aga Khan: I am responsible for guiding the interpretation of the faith for the Ismaili Muslims and advising them on issues of everyday life that they bring to me or that the Imamat as an institution has to decide upon....

ITV: Are you a democrat?

Aga Khan: Insofar as a [sic] institution can be democratic, yes. There are areas where in the interpretation of faith, democracy cannot, cannot play. But in the choice of leadership, in consultation on decisions, I do seek to consult as widely as possible.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1985 Independent Television (ITV) Interview (London, United Kingdom) (Emphasis added)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/3134/

~~~~~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~~

"I mean clearly everyone who works with me, whether it be colleagues at the top level, or my children, start from a different set of considerations
and knowledge. But in the end, we have to try and work as an institution that achieves results. You can’t really do that if there is no consensus on where you’re going. And this isn’t a corporate environment. It is an institution that seeks to function through consensus. And the only way to do that is to give everybody the opportunity to express a view. It may be right or wrong and the decision-maker -- for the moment -- is me.”

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1999 Pranay Gupte Interview (United States, United Kingdom) (Emphasis added)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/5676/

Interviewer: Supposing, for instance, one of your followers in a political trouble spot, let us say Kenya which is not after all impossible, were to write and ask you for political advice about how the community should behave there, would you feel in a position to give it?

Aga Khan: I would not feel in a position to give it, no. It would be the political committee which is organised to give advice on those particular problems that would give the answer. If it is a particularly sticky problem, then they would probably refer it to me.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1958 interview by four members of the UK Press (London, United Kingdom) (Emphasis added)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/1095/

Anthony Mann: Do you advise Ismaili communities when they should move on?

Aga Khan: In Uganda there was no choice. Ismailis are advised always to be loyal to their countries of birth or adoption....

Anthony Mann: If there is trouble anywhere, who takes the decision for Ismailis to leave?
Aga Khan: The local leaders. They might consult the Imam, and say, 'This is how we see the situation: what is your view in the light of your information?' But you can’t be loyal to your country of birth or adoption if you are constantly thinking 'The grass next door looks greener.'

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1979 Sunday Telegraph Magazine Interview with Anthony Mann (London, United Kingdom) (Emphasis added)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/1916/

Caroline Pigozzi: Are you very authoritarian?

Aga Khan: No, but I am insofar as it is the Imam's role to take decisions. It is up to him to assert himself and define the future of the institution and how it will proceed. But there is a constitutional structure in all 'our' countries, a system of consultation still in force that was introduced by my grandfather, Aga Khan III...

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2005 Paris Match Interview (4th) with Caroline Pigozzi (Paris, France) [Translation] (Emphasis added)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7190/

"In nearly all those countries the greater part of the tribute to the Imam is spent on schools, or prayer houses, and on the administration of various religious and social institutions. A considerable measure of local responsibility prevails; questions of marriage and divorce, for example, are entirely the concern of the local representative of the Imam. At times prosperous communities among the Ismailis help less prosperous ones in respect to similar institutions. I issue general instructions and orders; but the actual day-to-day administrative work of each local community is done by the Imam's representative and local chief.

"In some countries -- India and Africa for example -- the Ismailis have a council system, under which their local councillors are charged with
all internal administrative responsibility, and report to me what they have done....

"From all parts of the Ismaili world with which regular contact is politically possible a constant flow of communications and reports comes to me. Attending to these, answering them, giving my solutions of specific problems presented to me ..."

http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/1225/

Caroline Pigozzi/Jean-Claude Deutsch: Your Highness, what pride do you get from your work?

Aga Khan: I am proud of two things. The first is the creation, in a variety of countries, of institutions of the community which possess real autonomy, which do not depend on the intervention, nor the thinking, nor the support of the Imam.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1994 Paris Match Interview (1st) with Caroline Pigozzi and Jean-Claude Deutsch (Paris, France) [Translation] (Emphasis added)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/850/

Aga Khan: ... But you asked how the community is structured, in fact it's a very decentralised structure.

Michael Charlton: Well, in what matters then do you specifically intervene? What is your influence and authority?

Aga Khan: Long term, long term social programming, long term economic programming, educational development, health, housing, the direction for institutions to go in, that also.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1979 BBC Radio 4 Interview with Michael Charlton
Caroline Pigozzi/Jean-Claude Deutsch: Are you authoritarian?

Aga Khan: The exact term would be more like a director in the sense that I have a very precise vision of what I want. Although I try to be a man of consensus, it bothers me terribly when one of the people working for me makes the same mistake two or three times.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1994 Paris Match Interview (1st) with Caroline Pigozzi and Jean-Claude Deutsch (Paris, France) [Translation] (Emphasis added)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/850/

---

"Because our institutions are growing very quickly, it is my hope and prayer that, 10 or 15 years from now, the Jamat’s capacity in most of the countries where it is living, will be very significant indeed, and that is what the Shia Ismaili Tariqah of Islam should achieve in the world. I am ambitious for you in the right way, just as a father and mother are ambitious for their children. Both a father and a mother want their children to work well, properly and ethically, and to carry these values throughout their lives."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2008 Golden Jubilee Closing Message (Aiglemont)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10309/

---

Geoffrey Barker: How do you exercise your religious authority?

Aga Khan: If I have a decision to give it will be a decision which I have discussed extensively with people in my own community. We will look at other people's attitudes to the same problem and the decision will be given by the Imam as a decision for the future.
His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1979 The Age Interview with Geoffry Barker
(Melbourne, Australia) (Emphasis added)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10329/

"The Imamat is a hereditary office, and the Imam is responsible for guiding the practice of the faith of the Ismaili community. In matters of faith he makes the decisions. In the matters of everyday activity, he has a large network of everyday institutions and structures that answer to him."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1983 Life Magazine Interview with Margot Dougherty and Richard B. Stolley (New York, USA)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/2997/

Michael Charlton: Is there a central principle which has guided and informed your decisions would you say?

Aga Khan: First of all, we are Shia Muslims. Secondly, we believe in contributing, in participating in the development of the country we live in. We can’t, don’t seek to live in a little tiny nucleus of internally thinking people. Law and order, freedom of practice of the faith, these are all fundamental principles for us like for everybody else.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1979 BBC Radio 4 Interview with Michael Charlton (London, United Kingdom)

Anthony Mann: When I asked how he obtained his knowledge of local questions, he touched -- very lightly -- on the Imamat’s intelligence network.

Aga Khan: When you meet people personally on these trips they express themselves differently from the way they would write a letter. And when I
am here I receive a continuous flow of information through my reporting system. **There are very few activities that are not regularly reviewed here.**

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1979 Sunday Telegraph Magazine Interview with Anthony Mann (London, United Kingdom) (Emphasis added)  
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/1916/

~~~~~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~~

**Michael Charlton:** How do you know what is going on?

**Aga Khan:** (Laughs) Oh well, there are all sorts of -- all sorts of sources of information, as you can imagine....

**Aga Khan:** I think any religious institution is well informed because people talk within the privilege of the faith....

**Michael Charlton:** To that question of how isolated and lonely in the Islamic world a leader with the authority of the Shah invested himself with, and was invested with, is, it was said, I think that no one dared to tell a lie to the Shah's father, the old Shah, and no one dared to tell the truth to his son. I mean, you feel that there are lessons for you perhaps in that? I don't mean to suggest that analogy is a very close one, but ...

**Aga Khan:** The role of the Imam is to listen -- not to talk. There is a big difference in the sense that members of the community must inform me, must tell me what is of concern to them. **I do not run a government.**

**Michael Charlton:** But are you a good listener, and what are you hearing?

**Aga Khan:** Well I encourage people to speak as much as I can get them to speak. And I like them to speak very frankly, and I have often told them now look, within the context of the faith, you've got to speak the truth....

**Aga Khan:** ... There is a very privileged relationship within the context of the faith. Very privileged. If a man is going to talk about his family, if he is going to talk about his personal problems, that relationship is very
intimate. And this is what occurs.

_Aga Khan:_ ...I think the Ismailis have, at least insofar as my grandfather was concerned, and insofar as I am concerned, have always had this possibility and have been encouraged to speak absolutely openly and frankly on any issue which they choose.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1979 BBC Radio 4 Interview with Michael Charlton (London, United Kingdom) (Emphasis added)

"Some busybodies have ferreted out the fact that in the 1930’s I approached the Government of India and suggested that I might be given a territorial state and join the company of Ruling Princes....

"This is what really happened: it had long been felt among the Ismaili community that it would be desirable to possess a national home -- not a big, powerful state, but something on the lines of Tangier or the Vatican -- a scrap of earth of their own which all Ismailis, all over the world, could call theirs in perpetuity where they could practise all their customs, establish their own laws, and (on the material side) build up their own financial centre, with its own banks, investment trusts, insurance schemes and welfare and provident arrangements.

"The idea of a territorial state made no particular appeal to me, but in view of the strength of Ismaili sentiment on the matter I made my approach to the Government of India...."

http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9933/

"By Allah, I had no liking for the caliphate nor any interest in government, but you yourselves invited me to it and prepared me
for it."

Hazrat Ali
Nahj ul Balagha, Sermon 204 (Emphasis added)

"I had advised you against this arbitration [of Siffin] but you rejected my advice like adversaries and opponents till I turned my ideas in the direction of your wishes. You are a group whose heads are devoid of wit and intelligence."

Hazrat Ali
Nahj ul Balagha, Sermon 36 (Emphasis added)

"With his troops standing fast by their refusal to fight any further, Ali was left no option but to consent to arbitration [of Siffin]. 'Do not forget that I forbade you this,' he told his men."

Hazrat Ali
Quoted in 'After the Prophet', Chapter 10, Lesley Hazleton, 2010 (Emphasis added)

"Let me finally emphasise my strong conviction that public integrity cannot grow out of authoritarian pronouncements. It must be rooted in the human heart and conscience. As the Holy Qur'an says: 'There is no compulsion in religion.'"

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2006 School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University, Commencement Address (New York, USA) (Emphasis added)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7699/

Aftab Ahmad Khan: How would you assess the progress of Ismaili Community under your leadership and what would you consider as your
major contribution?

Aga Khan: ... A third area has been to build upon the institutional structure which my grandfather had created so that the members of the community and others would use these institutions which were not only responding to the existing problems but were sufficiently well managed to anticipate future requirements and to grow in such a way that they became strong pillars of support for the community in fields of education, health, housing and economic development.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1983 Pakistan and Gulf Economist Interview with Aftab Ahmad Khan (Karachi, Pakistan)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/2799/

"I have attempted in the past 50 years to build institutional capacity, within the Jamats in various parts of the world, and in such a way that the Imamat itself has the ability to achieve goals which seem to me important. That I think has made good progress. We have got capacity today. Capacity to act nationally. Capacity to act regionally. Capacity even to act globally if and when it is necessary. But that capacity needs to be handled with very great care, very great tact, very great discretion."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2008 Jamati Institutional Leaders Dinner remarks (Mumbai, India)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10296/

See also: His Highness the Aga Khan on the Imam’s authority and discretion in interpreting the Qur’an

Click here for this post in PDF format.