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# Transfer of power in the Sharaf al-Dīn imamate (912–980/1506–1573): theory and practice

Ekaterina Pukhovaia

**Summary**
The tension between the meritocratic principle underlying Zaydi political theory that prevented the formation of dynasties, and the practical need to stabilize the transfer of power between rulers was constant throughout the pre-modern history of the Zaydi imamate. The demand for a stabilized transfer of power became particularly strong when the imamate expanded its territory and developed a broader support base. This article analyses the development of dynasticism in Zaydi Yemen by focusing on a unique document from the period of rule of Imām al-Mutawakkil ʿalā-llāh Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn (d. 965/1557), the first Zaydi imam to rule over both Upper and Lower Yemen. The document contains a will (*waṣīyah)* composed during the plague of 933/1527. It demonstrates how the Zaydi political elite sought to ensure hereditary transfer of power. The paper contextualizes this unique document, preserved in a single manuscript of a biography (*sīrah*) of imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn, in the broader context of sixteenth-century political transformation in Yemen.

**Keywords:** Yemen, Zaydism, political theory, dynasty, elites

## Introduction

The Zaydi imamate was founded in northern Yemen by Imām al-Hādī ilā-l-ḥaqq Yaḥyā (d. 298/911). Throughout its millennium-long history it underwent significant political transformations, ranging from territorial expansion and contraction to the restructuring of the institution of the imamate itself under the Qasimid dynasty (Haykel 2003). One transformation that appears of particular importance to the changing architecture of the Zaydi imamate is the practice of succession. Classical Zaydi theory made no provisions for a hereditary transfer of power and prohibited it, insisting instead on a meritocratic method of leader selection, in which a candidate-imam issued a call to the imamate (*daʿwah*). At the same time, the socio-political development of the Zaydi state necessitated stability in moments of transition. To approach this topic the paper analyses how the question of transfer of power and succession was addressed in the Sharaf al-Dīn imamate (912–980/1506–1573), the last pre-Ottoman Zaydi state in Yemen. This Zaydi polity integrated territories that were traditionally in Sunni (Shāfiʿī) hands, thus disposing of larger economic revenue and a more diverse population than its predecessors. In such a setting, questions of power transfer became more urgent to resolve than ever before.

## Previous attempts to form a dynasty

A table of contents from *Tatimmat Kitāb al-ifādah fī tārīkh al-aʾimmah al-sādah*, a collection of biographies of Yemeni Zaydi imams, provides a clear overview of succession in the imamate from the eleventh to the sixteenth century (al-Ḥibshī: f. 48a). An attentive reader will notice that, with a few exceptions, sons rarely followed fathers as imams (Pukhovaia 2017: 181–182). This information is confirmed in other Yemeni Zaydi sources (al-Zuḥayf 2002). Despite this historical record, there were multiple attempts to form Zaydi dynasties throughout the history of the imamate in Yemen. Families of descendants of the Prophet, *sādāh* (sing. *sayyid*), who were the only group eligible to lead the Zaydi imamate, repeatedly sought to concentrate power in their hands. In fact, descendants of Imam al-Hādī ilā-l-ḥaqq consistently held power in the Yemeni Zaydi imamate in the first century of its existence (al-Zuḥayf 2002: 632–664). As the Yemeni Zaydi imamate strengthened and survived against all odds, competition for the imamate increased and dynastic transmission of power became more difficult to sustain.

This trend seems to have intensified from the thirteenth century onwards, a period that ushered increased bureaucratization of the Zaydi imamate in response to competition from the Sunni powers in South Yemen, including the Rasulids and the Tahirids. The greater involvement of tribal and *sayyid* elites in the developing Zaydi state led to increased competition for the position of imam and resulted in a decrease of successful dynastic power transfers in the Zaydi imamate between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries. It is in this period that we witness the rise of powerful *sayyid* clans: the Banū Ḥamza, who were descendants of Imam al-Manṣūr ʿAbdallāh b. Ḥamza (d. 614/1217), the Banū al-Wazīr, and the al-Muʾayyadī family based in Ṣaʿdah.

## Sharaf al-Dīn history and historiography

Imam al-Mutawakkil Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn came to power in 912/1506. He spent the next three decades expanding the Zaydi imamate beyond its geographical constraints of the northern highlands. This expansion became possible after the Egyptian Mamluk invasion of Yemen in 1517 that removed the Tahirid dynasty from power (Serjeant 1983: 68–69). With their gunpowder weapons, previously unseen in Yemen, the Mamluks changed the balance of power in the region. However, 1517 was also the year in which the Egyptian Mamluk sultanate was conquered by the Ottomans. As a result, shortly after their conquest, the Mamluks found themselves stranded in Yemen (Serjeant 1983: 68–69). Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn, who located in the vicinity of Sana'a, in the region of Ḥajjah, stepped into this vacuum of power. With the Tahirids removed and some of the defeated Mamluks joining his army, he held the biggest political and military force in Yemen at the time. Not only the territorial expansion, but also the institutional development of this period made a break with the patterns of preceding Zaydi imams. This is especially visible in the way this imam approached the question of power transfer.

Until recently our knowledge of this early modern imamate's history has been based on sources compiled more than a century after these events, including the biography (*sīrah*) of the imam written by Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn's descendant Ibn al-Mufaḍḍal (d. 1085/1674) (Ibn al-Mufaḍḍal 2012). This biography is in fact an abridgement of at least four previously unstudied sources contemporaneous with Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn, compiled by court historians in the circle of the imam. With these new sources we can revise the events of Sharaf al-Dīn's history, particularly the question of succession.

## The will of Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn

Al-Murhibī's incomplete biography of the imam is one of the recently discovered biographical sources on the early Sharaf al-Dīn imamate. It contains a unique document that does not survive in any other sources –– a will (*waṣīyah*) of Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn, written in 933/1527 (al-Murhibī: 250a–268b). That year Yemen was hit by an epidemic (*ṭāʿūn*) (Ibn Luṭfallāh 2003: 75). The will appears to have emerged as a political and legal solution to this situation of crisis. Uniquely to Zaydi historiography, it contains provisions to appoint an heir to the imam. Wills composed by other imams survive, but examples from the medieval period tend to deal with questions of piety, rather than political appointments (al-Ḥusaynī 1992, iii: 151–153).

The text introducing the will of Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn and the will itself cite the epidemic as the cause of its composition (al-Murhibī: 248b–249b, 264a). One can accept this reasoning, especially considering memories of the devastating epidemic (*ṭāʿūn*) of 840/1436, during which Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn's paternal grandfather, Imam al-Mahdī Aḥmad Ibn al-Murtaḍā, died (al-Zuḥayf 2002: 1091). It is not impossible that Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn saw this as the right moment to put in place reassurances for his family and his elites that the state and its institutions would remain intact. There is, however, at least one other possible explanation for the motivation behind this document. In 929/1523 the opponent of Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn, Imam al-Nāṣir Ḥasan b. ʿIzz al-Dīn al-Muʾayyadī of Ṣaʿdah, died (al-Zuḥayf 2002: 1376, 1379). Immediately after his death, even though his son Majd al-Dīn issued his call to the imamate (*daʿwah*) and received support from the Ṣaʿdah elites, the validity of the Muʾayyadī family's claim to rule was open to question. Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn could have seen in this situation an opening to affirm the validity of his own family's claim to power. Simultaneously, he also needed to define what made his arrangements for dynastic transfer of power different from those of the Muʾayyadī family. These complex motivations probably informed the composition of the will.

Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn anticipated resistance to this document and approached the framing of his innovative ideas in a cautious way. Half of the will deals with topics of property, the foundation of family *waqf* (charitable endowment), and the separation of the property of the imam as a person from state property (al-Murhibī: 252a–260b). This section is followed by the 'political' section (al-Murhibī: 260b–263a). It opens with a description of the functions and responsibilities of the will's executioner (*wāṣī*). The document then deals with the question of eligibility for the imamate. Here, Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn appears as an innovator of Zaydi political theory as he introduces, in addition to the classical categories of the fully eligible imam (*sābiq*) and a 'placeholder imam' (*muḥtasib*), a new category of ruler, the 'competent person' (*ṣāḥib al-ṣalāḥīyah*). This type of ruler, according to the will, is a person apt in affairs of the state, including civil administration and war. The term itself is an innovation, even though it appears linked to the notion of public interest (*maṣlaḥah*). Following this theoretical intervention that is supported by opinions from Zaydi scholars and a broad reference to the Shāfiʿī school, Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn argues that his age is characterized by the absence of the *sābiq* and *muḥtasib* categories, and therefore only the 'competent person' chosen by the imam can become the next ruler. He then names his eldest son al-Muṭahhar as his heir and *ṣāḥib al-ṣalāḥīyah* (al-Murhibī: f. 263a).

The will proceeds to explain the mechanism of power transfer and the contours of the state led by a *ṣāḥib al-ṣalāḥīyah* (al-Murhibī: ff. 263a–265b). It seeks to lay the foundation for a stable political regime. To this end, Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn stressed two themes. One focused on the consultative relationship (*iʿtimād*, reliance and approval) between the ruler and the elite. As such, the document acts as a guarantee that al-Muṭahhar and the Sharaf al-Dīn elite will support each other. It mentions that al-Muṭahhar respects his father's advisors — the imam states 'I am convinced he will easily accept what the nobles will order' (*atayaqqanu minhu suhūlata qubūli mā yaʾmuru bihi ʾl-fuḍalāʾ*). The second theme Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn sought to address was that of potential sources of instability. Central among those were competition between siblings and the possibility that the imam's chosen heir would die in the epidemic. Therefore, the will guarantees that the brothers of al-Muṭahhar will support him and, should he die, will take his place. It is this concluding provision that indicates the family-centred character of power transfer that the imam envisioned.

At the same time, the will avoided open discussion of the fact that it was in essence laying a legal foundation for a dynasty. The text presents the new type of heir as a category of ruler who is not an imam. It also records criticisms of the decision in the form of questions (*masāʾil*) that the imam responded to (al-Murhibī: 266a). Finally, Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn appears not to be envisioning the continuation of his state beyond the generation of his sons (al-Murhibī: 265b).

Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn's will illustrates how the institutional development of the newly expanded Zaydi state necessitated a revision of foundational political principles. The new Zaydi state, with a vast Sunni population and access to trade routes, had become richer than its predecessors. This meant that the question of what defined this polity as a Zaydi state became more acute, not least with the existence of an alternative -- the Ṣaʿdah imams of the Muʾayyadī family. The will can be seen as part of this response, an explanation of the envisioned developmental path of the Zaydi imamate. The focal point of this development was the increased political role of the elites, who were recognized as the guarantors of power transfer from the imam to his sons and as the only group invested with the power to decide on the next imam.

## Consequences of the 933/1527 will

Although the 933/1527 will has survived only as a single copy, which one could take as a sign of irrelevance, the attempt at restructuring the Zaydi state and formulating dynastic principles that it recorded had far-reaching consequences.

Al-Muṭahhar continued his rise to the pinnacle of power in the years following the composition of the document. He led most of his father's military campaigns, ranging from southward expeditions to Zabīd and Aden to clashes with the Ismāʿīlis of Ḥarāz and the conquest of the northern regions around Ṣaʿdah. His importance in the Sharaf al-Dīn imamate is reflected in his titles -- Fighter in the Path of God (*mujāhid fī sabīl allāh*), Pride of the World and of the Faith (*fakhr al-dunyā wa-ʾl-dīn*), Conqueror for Truth (*al-nāṣir li-l-ḥaqq*) (al-Zurayqī: 3a). Eventually, his rise to power led to conflicts with his father. The tension seems to have intensified after the

conquest of Ṣaʿdah and was probably related to the integration of more conservative Zaydi circles into the Sharaf al-Dīn imamate.

In 948/1541 Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn revised his will. He chose a different son to become heir, claiming that he was more eligible. In response, al-Muṭahhar rose against his father in revolt. This led to a protracted succession crisis in the Sharaf al-Dīn imamate. During this crisis al-Muṭahhar succeeded in keeping his political status. In 953/1546 the imam revised his decision that led to the conflict and offered a compromise. As a result, the imamate was divided into dominions between his sons (al-Sharafī: 33a). After this succession crisis, the imam and his son reached a reconciliation and al-Muṭahhar received the approval (*riḍā*) of his father to rule (al-Sharafī: 31a). The dominions of descendants of the imam survived the Ottoman conquest of Yemen in the sixteenth century; his descendants continued to play a role in Yemeni politics well into the nineteenth century (Pukhovaia 2023). The succession crisis of 948–953/1541–1546 showed that the power of the 933/1527 will continued to shape politics and expectations of leadership in the Sharaf al-Dīn imamate two decades after its composition.

## Epilogue

It appears that the echoes of Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn's political innovations continued to affect Zaydi politics in the next century. This is particularly apparent in relation to the history of the Sharaf al-Dīn imamate in the early Qasimid period (1006–1054/1597–1644) following the expulsion of the Ottomans from Yemen. Aḥmad al-Sharafī, a scholar and contemporary of the first Qasimid Zaydī imams, recorded many details on the Sharaf al-Dīn state and the question of succession. Several copies of Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn's 953/1546 will were produced for members of the Qāsimid family, showing a lasting interest in this innovative attempt to form a dynasty. It is not unlikely that the Sharaf al-Dīn precedent informed the way the early Qasimid imamate was shaped.

While the Qasimid circles were busy uncovering details of the Sharaf al-Dīn imamate, their contemporaries from the descendants of Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn were on a mission to suppress this information. Ibn al-Mufaḍḍal, in his biography of his illustrious ancestor did not mention either the 933/1527 or the 953/1546 will. Another historian, ʿĪsā b. Luṭfallāh, who was a grandson of al-Muṭahhar, also ignored this information in his chronicle. He does not mention the writing of the 933/1527 will in his discussion of the events of that year and ignores the start of the succession crisis in 948/1541 about which we know from other sources (Ibn Luṭfallāh 203: 75, 111). Both historians no doubt had access to al-Murhibī's unique manuscript but chose to ignore it. The decision to rewrite the history of their ancestors indicates that the solutions Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn devised for the Zaydi polity remained controversial, even a century after his lifetime. Despite this controversy, however, they need to be acknowledged as an important innovation of Zaydi political thinking. Further study of their long-term impact on the development of the Qasimid imamate is a desideratum.

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