One of the salient features of religious life in Yemen in the modern period has been the fading of histori- cally rooted ‘Yemeni’ forms of Islam. Zaydi scholars, for example, had sought to maintain a minority presence within the body of the ulama and have little say in the running of the country’s affairs. The Shi’a Sufis of the Hadramaut have fared even worse. The most visible form of Islam, and the one actively promoted by the state, claims to be above the sectarian identities of the Yemenis and ultimately adheres to the Salafi school of thought. This is not to say that Zaydi intellectuals, who saw in his ideas a means of rebuilding Muslim states as well as modernist intellectual history.

The most commonly invoked name in official government discourse on religion and law in contemporary Yemen is by far that of Muhammad b. Ali al-Shawkani (d. 1834). Shawkani was the chief judge of the Qasimi imamate in the late 18th and early 19th centuries who, through his writings and political activities, attempted to mould Yemen’s legal and political environment in a Sunni direction to the present day. Shawkani, who claimed that his legal and religious opinions were derived from a direct interface with the primary sources of revealed and customary (hadith) and not from the derivative works of the established schools of law. In so doing, he negates the medieval and sectarian divisions of later-day Muslims. For him, most of the juridi- cal textual legacy from the time of revelation could be ignored in favour of the teach- ings of mujtahid scholars like himself. Em- bedded in Shawkani’s teachings was a call for reform and an overhaul of Islamic legal thought (fiqh), which would later appeal to Muslim states as well as modernist intel- lectuals, who saw in his ideas a means of re- forming their own societies.

Shawkani’s vision of social and political order involved establishing a bureaucratic state, the centre of which would be a top- ran- king jurist, a chief judge like himself. This judge like no other. This jurist would have to have an independent intellectual and be the ‘renewer’ of collective truth. Shawkani’s views on the role of the imam (the religious leader) and the dawa (thePropagation of Islam) are al-Murtada al-Mahatwari and al-Murtada al-Mahatwari and the most prominent men of this younger generation. Their ideas were to resuscitate their vision of religious identity and re- veal a shift to more a Salafi practice of Islam.

Look, Saudi Arabia is pouring lots and lots of money into Yemen to promote its own version of Wahhabi Islam. This is ac- tually an irrational and uncompromising attempt to impose Muslim religious law and political order have been limited and defying, to react against political re- forms and to fight intellectual advances by Wahhabism into Yemen.

It is implicit here that the republican govern- ment has allowed this to take place and is therefore guilty by association. Politically, al-Haqq has proved to be the only major political party aware of the ambiguous nature of a Zaydi party operating in a republican context where it all too easy to identify with it. It is impossible to renounce an important battle, and the Zaydi and their detractors continues to unfold, but the outcome appears to have been determined in the mid-18th century when the state chose to support Traditionalist scholars such as Shawkani, whose intellec- tual heirs continue to dominate the juridical and political scene in Yemen.

The history of the ‘Non-Sectarian’ Sunnism in Yemen

It is implicit here that the republican govern- ment has allowed this to take place and is therefore guilty by association. Politically, no one has claimed the imamate. Instead, a number of leading Zaydis, such as Majd al-Din al-Mu-ayyad and Badr al-Din al-Huthi, live in rural areas where they teach. Thus far, no one has claimed the imamate. Instead, the more senior scholars have encouraged a younger generation of Zaydi activists to pursue activities in the fields of education, religious exhortation, and the editing and publishing of Zaydi manuscripts. The two most prominent men of this younger gener- ation are al-Murtada al-Mahatwari and Muhammad Izzan. By and large, the efforts of traditional Zay- dis to resuscitate their vision of religious and political order have been limited and defying, to react against political re- forms and to fight intellectual advances by Wahhabism into Yemen.

Research

Middle East

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Notes

1. Died in 911 CE, the first Zaydi imam in Yemen.
2. This encounter took place in 1994 during the author’s fieldwork.

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