The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates

The Islamic Near East from the sixth to the eleventh century

Hugh Kennedy

Longman
London and New York

1986

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Structure of Politics in the Muslim Commonwealth

The fourth/tenth century saw a profound change in the political society of the Islamic world. The superficial characteristics of this are well documented and easy to recognize; the caliphate disintegrated into a bewildering variety of successor states. The Muslim sources present these states as being ruled by dynasties, the 'Uqaylids of Mosul, the Marwanids of Mayyāfāriqīn and so on, each of which tended to last for about a century and many of which seemed to go through a similar cycle of emergence, expansion under a strong ruler and decay under his weaker successors. Modern scholarship has tended to take over this traditional perspective and it often seems to the casual enquirer that these states were a sort of political mushroom, their appearance unexplained and their collapse the result of personal feebleness on the part of decadent rulers. In reality, however, the successor states varied greatly in their organization and outlook and reflected closely the economic and social structure of the society which produced them; it is only by concentrating on at least some of them in detail that we can see how the changes of this time affected the Muslim world.

The break-up of empires is usually seen as a period when social and cultural institutions are also under threat, a period of chaos and retreat, and the model of the decline and fall of the Roman empire as described by Gibbon is an easy one to adopt. It is also an irrelevant one. Certainly the dissolution of the 'Abbasid caliphate was accompanied by economic decline and social disruption in some areas, notably in Baghdad and central Iraq, but also in agricultural areas bordering the Syrian and Jaziran deserts where the increased pressure of pastoral peoples forced agricultural populations to abandon land which they had cultivated since Roman times. But in other areas the attainment of political independence led to economic and social development. At the most basic level it meant a new and vastly improved water supply for the citizens of

Mayyāfāriqīn in the south-east of the Anatolian plateau, on a larger scale it led to a sort of golden age in Fārs, a potentially rich area of Iran which had been exploited by outsiders since the Muslim conquests but which now became independent and prosperous under the Buyid dynasty; the picture of urban decline in Kūfa or Baṣra has to be balanced by the picture of growth in Shīrāz and Sīrāf.

On the cultural level as well, the period of the dissolution of the caliphate was one of great activity and achievement, what Adam Mez described in a famous book as the "Renaissance of Islam". Some of this cultural activity was concerned with the collection and codification of the treasures of the classical Arabic past; Ibn al-Nadīm's (d. 385/995) *Fihrist* was an index of all the works of Arabic literature then available, while Abū'l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (d. 356/967) sought to produce a comprehensive collection of the lives and works of the great Arabic poets in his *Kitāb al-Aghānī* or *Book of Songs*. In this respect these authors were perhaps analogous to those sixth-century figures in the West like Cassiodorus and Isidore of Seville who attempted to keep alive classical learning in a hostile environment. But the culture of the age went far beyond the preservation of the past. In all fields, the fourth/tenth and early fifth/eleventh centuries were periods of great achievement; al-Mutanabbī (d. 354/965) and Abū'l 'Alā' al-Ma'arrī (d. 449/1058) in poetry, Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) (d. 428/1037) in medicine and philosophy, al-Mas'ūdī (d. 345/956) in historiography and al-Muqaddasī (d. after 375/985) in travel writing are only a few of the great figures of the time. This cultural efflorescence was in some ways a product of the political fragmentation of the time, which provided new sources of patronage for authors. The doctrinal disputes of the age, especially the growing division between Sunnī and Shī'ī Islam, also gave rise to important theological writing and debate. While Baghdad remained important, it no longer played the dominant role as a cultural centre it had under the 'Abbasid caliphate, and the patronage of the caliphal court was replaced by support from many different sources which allowed a great variety of writing to emerge and writers like al-Mutanabbī and Avicenna, for example, to move around freely from one area to another if they thought it would be advantageous.

Two major changes underlay these developments: the conversion of the majority of the population to Islam and the economic decline of Iraq. The question of conversion to Islam is very problematic since, clearly, there were no census records or reliable statistics available. We know that there were no Muslims in the Near East before the time of the Prophet and we can be reasonably certain that by the sixth/twelfth century, the non-Muslims formed a fairly small minority of the popu-

lation: between these two poles there is much room for speculation. Recently the problem has been re-examined by R. Bulliet in his book *Conversion to Islam in the medieval period*, using Iranian genealogies to establish the dates when families became Muslim. His method was to look at the ancestors of men of learning as recorded in biographical dictionaries. He found that a significant proportion of these genealogies went back to a non-Muslim ancestor (in this he was helped by the fact that non-Muslim names in Iran were totally different from Muslim ones). By calculating back from the date of the subject of the biography, and reckoning each generation as twenty-five years, Bulliet could get some idea of the period at which the family had been converted. The method is obviously not foolproof and there are bound to be special circumstances in each family, but Bulliet worked from a sample of almost 500 genealogies, enough to give a representative picture. According to his research, Iran was only about 8 per cent Muslim at the time of the 'Abbasid revolution in 132/750 but this changed rapidly in the years which followed; by the early third/ninth century the proportion of Muslims was probably about 40 per cent and this increased to between 70 and 80 per cent in the fourth/tenth century. It is more difficult to extrapolate from the Iranian data to other areas of the Muslim world, but we should probably be correct in assuming that the rate of conversion was faster in Iraq than in Iran but slower in Egypt where the Muslims remained a small ruling group among a largely Coptic population until Fatimid times. Bulliet admits that his hypotheses are speculative and unprovable but they do seem realistic and provide a useful basis for discussion.

The Islamization of the Near East had profound effects on the political history. Under the Umayyads and early 'Abbasids, the Muslims had been a fairly small ruling élite, whose links were with their fellow Muslims rather than with the non-Muslim populations of the area in which they lived. There was a high degree of mobility among the ruling groups and, for example, a man of Syrian origin could govern Yaman for a period and then be transferred to Egypt or Armenia. Just as most of the British civil servants who administered India felt that their links were with their fellow Britons and with their British "home" rather than with the Indians who lived around them, so the early Muslims preserved a sense of common identity, usually coupled with the common language of Arabic. Conversion, however, weakened this *esprit de corps*, and the élite lost its cohesion. As they became converted, people in the various provinces demanded to be admitted to the political process as full members of the Muslim community. In this way the provinces came to be dominated by men whose roots and family were

entirely local. They were good Muslims, but their loyalty to a caliph and centralized Muslim government, hundreds, even thousands of miles away in a land they had never seen, was naturally limited. The progress of conversion meant that anti-Muslim revolts in the Near East almost completely died out even in areas like Egypt and Iran where there had been some in the Umayyad and early 'Abbasid times. The only attempt in the fourth/tenth century to set up a non-Muslim state in the area, the move by Mardāvīj b. Ziyār (d. 323/935) to restore Zoroastrianism, was a conspicuous failure. The break-up of the caliphate was in no way a reaction against Muslim conquest, it was rather a natural product of its success, and the evolution from a Muslim empire ruled by a small Muslim élite to a Muslim commonwealth where most of the population were Muslims was as natural, and in many cases as peaceful, as the emergence of the independent Commonwealth countries of Australia and Canada from the British empire.

The spread of Islam also led to the formalization of differences within the community. Of course, even in the days when the Muslims were a small minority of the population, there were vigorous debates and violent struggles to decide the nature of Muslim government. In the fourth/tenth century, however, these differences tended to become more rigid and the sects to develop separate memberships and structures of leadership. There were many reasons for this, but at least in part it was a product of the increasing numbers of Muslims from different geographical and social backgrounds. When Christianity became the dominant religion in the Roman empire in the fourth century, heresy became a major political and social issue; when Islam became the dominant religion in the Near East in the fourth/tenth century, sectarian division came to the fore.

The second major cause of change, the economic collapse of Iraq, is discussed in detail elsewhere (see pp. 189–90 above) but it must always be borne in mind as a fundamental, underlying factor in the collapse of the 'Abbasids and the difficulties of the Buyids of Baghdad. It also meant that the Muslim world developed something of a hollow centre. The old heartlands became impoverished and suffered a constant haemorrhage of their more able and dynamic citizens to more recently converted areas like Iran and Egypt. The old ruling élite based in Mesopotamia was replaced by outsiders, men from such marginal groups as the Kurds of the Zagros mountains, the Daylamites from the south Caspian area or Berbers of the hinterland of Ifrīqiya. The Muslim world no longer had a centre, a metropolis to look to, but rather a whole galaxy of regional centres, each developing its own political society and culture.

The successor states of the 'Abbasid caliphate were, in political terms, entirely independent, but they were bound together by many ties of language and culture. The most obvious of these was the use, throughout the Muslim Near East, of Arabic as the main administrative language. As Latin was used by bureaucrats in medieval Europe in areas where the vernacular was quite different, so Arabic was used in Islamic chanceries even in areas where the population spoke Kurdish, Persian, Armenian or Aramaic. As in the medieval West as well, the common language led to the creation of bonds between bureaucrats in different states and a common bureaucratic culture. Administrative expertise acquired in one area could be used to carve out a career in another. The *wazīr* al-Ḥusayn b. al-Maghribī (d. 418/1027), for example, could begin his career with the Hamdanids of Aleppo, pursue it in Fatimid Egypt and 'Uqaylid Mosul and end up a distinguished elder statesman in Marwanid Mayyāfāriqīn. This common Arabic language bureaucratic culture was a major source of unity.

This unity was expressed at a formal level by the recognition of the theory of the caliphate. The ideal of the caliphate lived on after the demise of its political authority. One dynasty in the area, the Fatimids, set up a rival caliphate but like the 'Abbasids, they claimed the leadership of the entire Muslim world and inherited the pan-Islamic ideas of their 'Abbasid rivals. Among the other dynasties, there were none who did not acknowledge the rights of a caliph in the *khuṭba*, the Friday sermon in which political allegiances were made public, although some rulers like Qirwāsh b. al-Muqallad the 'Uqaylid might change their allegiances to suit their political needs. For some years after the Buyid take-over in Baghdad, the Samanids of eastern Iran continued to pledge allegiance to a now dead 'Abbasid rather than the Buyid nominees. But whatever the practical reservations, no dynasty dispensed entirely with the idea of the caliphate or proclaimed an absolute independence. The grant of a title by the caliph remained a sign of political legitimacy and a sign that the recipient was now an accepted ruler. In the Fertile Crescent and much of Iran, the title of, for example, "Rukn al-Dawla" (Pillar of the ['Abbasid] State) was sought after by all who tried to establish their rule and it brought with it the assumption of caliphal authority, however powerless that might be in practice. Again the medieval West provides an illuminating comparison; in eleventh- and early-twelfth-century France, the actual power of the king in the more distant parts of his realm was non-existent, but the barons of those areas acknowledged the monarchy and its role, and they did not call themselves kings even if they were independent in every practical way.

There were other signs of the non-political unity of the common-

wealth. As far as we know, no Muslim state erected trade barriers against any other. Travellers in this period like Ibn Ḥawqal, al-Muqaddasī and Nāṣir-i Khusrau seem to have been able to move about without government interference. Robbers and thirst may have posed problems for the travellers; visas and frontier posts did not. Politically the Muslim world may have been divided, economically and socially it remained a unity.

This contrast between the division of government and the unity of culture and society was a product of the changing nature of government. The ʿAbbasids and their rivals the ʿAlids attempted to create a truly Islamic state. It was a very ambitious programme of moral reform and the rule of the Qur'ān and Sunna, a bold attempt to restructure society according to the vision of the Prophet, an ideal which has parallels in our own day. The dynasts of the Muslim commonwealth had no such aspirations. The functions of government were restricted to collecting taxes and providing a minimum of security to enable these dues to be gathered in peace. There were rulers who went further in developing their territories economically, ʿAḍud al-Dawla, Badr b. Ḥasanūya and the Marwanids of Mayyāfāriqīn stand out in this respect. Others, like the Hamdanids and the ʿUqaylids of Mosul seem to have made no such effort, but none of them attempted to restructure society according to Islamic principles. For many people, the functions of government were marginal to their daily lives. In most cities it was the urban élite of merchant and property-owning families who exercised everyday control over mosque and market; for the people of the villages it was increasingly the *iqṭaʿ* holder (see below, p. 209) who often claimed rights of *ḥimāya*, or protection, who represented government on a day-to-day basis. Even the Fatimid dynasty, with its Ismāʿīlī doctrine and its universal ambitions, made only intermittent attempts to spread its propaganda outside the governing class. It was as if Muslims had come to accept that government would not create a perfect Muslim society, at best it could only provide the framework in which men could strive to become good Muslims.

While the functions of government became restricted, so the profession of arms became confined to certain, mostly marginal, groups within the Muslim community. In early Islamic armies and, indeed, the armies of the ʿAbbasid revolution, the soldiers were simply the male Muslims prepared for battle, and the principle which lay behind the *muqātila* organization was that all Muslims should be able to do military service if called upon and it was this which entitled them to their *ʿaṭāʾ* or salary. Even the Khurāsāniyya of the early ʿAbbasid caliphate were in many ways part-time soldiers, owning property and conducting busi-

ness in Baghdad, marrying, having families and eventually losing their military identity entirely. These armies were often very large; 40,000 soldiers from Baghdad followed ʿAlī b. ʿĪsā when he set out to march against Khurāsān in 195/811 and numbers of around 100,000 are quoted for the Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd's armies against the Byzantines. Almost always, these armies contained a majority of foot soldiers, often outnumbering the cavalry two to one and on occasions even those who were mounted fought on foot. But ʿAlī b. ʿĪsā's great army was defeated by Ṭāhir's much smaller force and this may have been the death knell of the huge armies of the early Islamic era. From the third/ninth century, and particularly after the military reforms of al-Muʿtaṣim, armies became smaller and more strictly professional. This seems to have accompanied a change-over to cavalry warfare which required greater specialization and more equipment; the day of the part-time soldier was over. Increasingly these specialist troops were Turks imported as slaves or otherwise recruited in eastern Iran or the areas to the north of the Caucasus mountains. Not only were they distinguished from the Muslim civilians by their function, notably their abilities in the highly specialized skill of mounted archery, but also by their race and language. In the third/ninth century many of these Turks seem to have produced children who were fully Arabized Muslims like Mūsā b. Bughā and Aḥmad b. Ṭūlūn, ruler of Egypt (254–70/868–84) who began the integration of the families into Muslim society and the loss of their identity as a separate group.

This process of integration was brought to a halt in the early fourth/tenth century with the development of the *ghulām* system which was to be so important in the history of the Muslim commonwealth. The word *ghulām* (pl. *ghilmān*) simply means a youth or boy and such young men had been employed by kings and generals since Sassanian times. (In Seljuk and later times, the word *mamlūk* is normally employed to describe these soldiers: *ghulām* is the usual pre-Seljuk designation, although *mamlūk* is sometimes found.) It was not, however, until the break-up of the ʿAbbasid caliphate that whole armies were made up of them and the term came to acquire its specialized meaning of a soldier, usually Turkish by origin, and fighting as a cavalryman. The *ghulām* system as it existed in the Near East in the second half of the fourth/tenth century and first half of the fifth/eleventh seems to have been developed in Baghdad and Iraq with the arrival of new Turkish troops under Bajkam and Tūzūn and the destruction of the old ʿAbbasid army on the orders of the *amīr al-umarā'* Ibn Rā'iq in 325/936. There had been Turkish troops in the armies of the caliphs before (see above, pp. 159ff.) but what seems to have distinguished the *ghilmān* of this period was

their social organization. They fought in bands, often only a few hundred strong, recruited by a leader. The leader, usually himself a Turk, was responsible for securing their pay and employment. The young *ghilmān* looked to their leader as a sort of father-figure and often took his name as a sign of gratitude; the great Anūshtakīn (d. 432/1041) was always known as al-Dizbarī after an obscure Daylamite commander called Dizbar who had favoured him in his youth.

It was to their leader, rather than to the sovereign who employed them, that they owed their loyalty. Their leaders became like the *condottieri* of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy, powerful men, experienced professional soldiers, always seeking reliable paymasters to satisfy the needs of their followers. On the whole they were efficient, expecting and needing to be highly paid for their services; if they were not, they could not maintain their horses and equipment. If one paymaster failed, then they were obliged to take service with another in order to survive as a fighting unit and much of the apparent disloyalty and treachery can be explained in terms of financial necessity. Many of the lesser dynasts of the Near East could not afford to maintain *ghilmān* at all. Sayf al-Dawla, the Hamdanid ruler of Aleppo (d. 356/967), had recruited considerable numbers of *ghilmān* but his son Sa'd al-Dawla (d. 381/991), living in greatly reduced circumstances, could not afford to pay them, let alone recruit any more. Faced with this situation, they had two choices: some left to take service with the Fatimid rulers of Egypt while others stayed in Aleppo and took over the government of the city for themselves, while continuing to acknowledge the exiled Hamdanid as theoretical ruler. When, in 364/975 Alptakīn, the leader of the *ghilmān* in Baghdad, could no longer maintain himself against the Daylamite forces of 'Aḍud al-Dawla, he led his followers, about 300 of them, to pastures new in Damascus, which they took over for a while, and then to the Fatimid court in Cairo where some of them reached high positions. His first responsibility was to his followers rather than his paymasters.