

A Zaydi Revival ?

Last October I visited Yemen and heard that a Zaydi revival movement was making itself felt in the country, especially in the areas in and around Sa'da. I had suspected this fact for quite a while now because I had seen as early as 1991 in some of Sa'n'a's bookshops many Zaydi pamphlets and booklets, some consisting of treatises on *uṣūl al-fiqh* and others, of a more polemical nature, presenting the Zaydi case against such opponents as the Wahhabis and the Salafis on issues of ritual practice, theology and politics. So I decided to head north and see for myself what this movement was all about. Before leaving, however, I read many of these pamphlets so that the names and issues which cropped up would become familiar to me.

It seemed from my reading that the leading ulema of this movement have been Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥūthī, who wrote as early as 1979 a rebuttal of Ibn Bāz's fatwa prohibiting prayer behind a Zaydi imam. Other names that cropped up were those of Majd al-Dīn al-Mu'ayyidi, the famous Zaydi scholar living close to Sa'da and a new name on the Zaydi scene, that of Muḥammad Yahyā Sālim 'Izzān. The main issue of concern in all of these works was the preservation of the Zaydi-Yemeni heritage from extinction because of the onslaught of a proselytizing Wahhabi movement in such traditional Zaydi provinces as Sa'da and the Jawf combined with neglect and opposition to Zaydi concerns and issues by the government in Sa'n'a.¹ Judging by the number of booklets and pamphlets he had written or edited, it seemed to me that by far the most active member among the Zaydi scholars was Muḥammad 'Izzān, so it was to meet him that I travelled to Sa'da to find out more about Zaydism in Yemen today.

'Izzān is a young man in his late twenties, and is not of sayyid descent. He was originally from Rāzih but now lives in Sa'da's suburbs. A student of the great Zaydi ulema of Sa'da, like Majd al-Dīn al-Mu'ayyidi, 'Izzān now teaches next to his home all the traditional Islamic sciences including *ilm al-halām* and, of course, Zaydi *fiqh*. He is also extremely active in editing and publishing Zaydi works, and has thus far edited at least nine pamphlets ranging from matters of invocation (*du'ā'*) to those relating to prayer postures in accordance with Zaydi authorities by way of works by Zaydi imams such as al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm al-Rassī and al-Qāsim b. Muḥammad (al-Kabīr, the founder of the Qāsimī dynasty). 'Izzān has also edited major Zaydi works like *al-Falak al-dawwār* by Ṣarīm al-Dīn Ibrāhīm b.

Muḥammad al-Wazīr in the *hadīth* sciences and, more importantly for the contemporary Zaydi scene, a work entitled *al-Ghuṭamṭam al-zakḥḥār* by Muḥammad b. Ṣāliḥ al-Samāwī (d. 1825) but known to all as Ibn Hariwa.

This last work lies squarely within the debates between the Zaydis and the Wahhabis and other Sunna-oriented scholars and activists hostile to Zaydism, and particularly its Yemeni followers, namely the Hadawis (the followers of the legal school of al-Ḥādī ilā al-Ḥaqq Yahyā b. al-Ḥusayn, the founder of the Zaydi Imamate in Yemen). Ibn Hariwa was a Zaydi-Hadawi scholar who had attacked Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-Shawkānī (d. 1834), probably the most famous of all the Sunna-oriented Yemeni scholars and who is upheld by all Wahhabis and Salafis as one of the great revivalist of Sunni Islam of his time. As a result of his attack on Shawkānī and al-Mahdī 'Abd Allāh, the imam of his day, Ibn Hariwa was executed and has thus become a martyr for the Zaydi cause. For this reason, Zaydis like 'Izzān are keen to publish his works in their attempt to rebut what they see as continuing attacks against Zaydi thought and history. Ibn Hariwa's name also adorns a teachers' institute in Sa'da where 'Izzān and like-minded scholars are active in spreading Zaydi thought.

Like the so called Scientific Institutes (*al-ma'ahid al-'ilmiyya*) which are dominated by the Islamists of the Islāh party, and where a Sunni brand of Islam is taught, the Zaydis have set up their own institutions called the Scientific Schools (*al-madāris al-'ilmiyya*). For the curriculum of these madaris, new textbooks have been penned reflecting the Zaydi bent of the education they provide. The books were being distributed during my stay, and one of these was an abridgement by Sayyid Ahmad al-Shāmī of *Kitāb al-Azhār*, the standard Zaydi legal text; he is the president of Hizb al-Ḥaqq and a notable Zaydi scholar in his own right.

The curriculum of the Zaydi *madāris*, I was told, is divided into three stages and covers all the Islamic sciences: *grammar*, *fiqh*, *ilm al-halām*, et al. It would seem that this is the first attempt in Zaydi history to formalize the educational process into a set curriculum with standard text books. These schools are apparently spread throughout the highlands: Sa'da, Jawf, Dhamār, Sa'n'a and Maḥabisha. In addition to these pedagogical reforms, 'Izzān told me that a Club of Young Believers (*Muntada al-Shabab al-Mu'min*) was founded and ran summer educational activities where young boys and men would study the Islamic sciences in accordance with Zaydi precepts. It would seem that 12,000 students had participated in the summer of 1994 throughout the highlands in these summer activities.

The general tone of the Zaydis I met in Sa'da was

defensive, and all felt they had to support the educational activities outlined above in order to preserve Zaydism from the Wahhabi-Salafi onslaught and a continuing government policy of neglect and, at times, active persecution. On no issue was the Wahhabi onslaught more heartfelt among the Zaydis than over the matter of Zaydi tombs. Muqbil al-Wādi'i, who is generally regarded as the Salafi ideologue par excellence in Yemen, lives in Dammaj among the Wādi'a tribe of Hamdān just outside Ṣa'da — a bit too close for comfort for the Zaydis. While Wādi'i openly declares his intention of destroying the tombs of the Zaydi Imams and their domes in Ṣa'da, I was told that, in the meantime, his acolytes were destroying many of the grave stones in the cemeteries just beyond Ṣa'da's city wall. I went to see for myself, and effectively most had been broken into pieces which were strewn all over the place. I was told the Salafis came in the middle of the night to do this but none had been caught and punished.

Despite their feelings of marginalization and of somehow being left behind by the train of history, the Zaydis are trying to put up a spirited fight lest they be forgotten. It is, however, the younger and more energetic members, like 'Izzān, who are most active since many of the older generations are not willing to engage fully with them. The reason for this is that the community is not immune from factionalism, with some of the older members apparently maintaining a strict understanding of Zaydism and refusing to participate fully in a less than ideal environment.

Refusing any accommodation with the present status quo in Yemen which they regard as corrupt, some of the diehard Zaydis have opted to migrate from cities like Ṣa'da in order to create their own *hijra*, in this case hamlets consisting of little more than a couple of homes in the tribal areas of Ṣa'da province. One such Zaydi is Sayyid 'Abd Allāh b. Yahyā al-Ḥūthī who has set up a *hijra* just outside Ṣa'da in a place called Takhya. He told me he did this because towns like Ṣa'da are polluting and full of corruption. It was with the help of local tribesmen, who gave him the land and helped out with the orchards and the digging of the well, that he has managed to accomplish his *hijra*: a small haven of the Zaydi ideal in a world that has become hostile.

♣ Bernard Haykel, Oxford University

¹ The most lucid account of this Zaydi concern can be found in a little booklet by Muḥammad al-Sa'īdī, *Ṣa'da li-mādha?*, Beirut: Dār al-Baṣā'ir, n.d.)

continued from p. 13

problems that artists often meet. I can mention, to start with, the absence of the highly backward nature of the organizations responsible for interacting with singers. The radio and TV stations, the Ministry of Information, etc., do not have sufficient appreciation for artists. In the West or even East, for example, singers and artists are idolized. Here in Yemen, to record one song, you are made to wait around for hours. This happens all the time. Another thing to mention is the market. We do not have a large enough market, to start with. But even this small market is subject to illegal recording and piracy of rights. Thus, the revenue one gets is a small fraction of the income.

Q: *Speaking about piracy, many Yemeni singers complain that many of their songs are being stolen by the Arab Gulf singers. Could you elaborate on that?*

A: This is true. There are many Yemeni songs that are taken over by Gulf singers. And since they have better access to a more powerful media, the Yemeni songs are identified with the Gulf singers. I personally have lost songs this way, and I can easily prove that. Other colleagues have also lost their songs to Gulf singers. We do not have the mechanism to rectify this problem. The government is not interested, and there is no syndicate or other body to stop this piracy. If there is somebody that is interested, I can right away give a long list of stolen songs.

Q: *What was your feeling during the last war in Yemen?*

A: I was saddened, of course. It is sad that our nation should fight with itself. I dream of a strong, unified, and prosperous Yemen. I do not understand why we should fight among ourselves. I am happy that the agony was short-lived, and that the unity of the country has been preserved. I pray that we will deal with the aftermath of the war in a civilized way that reflects the wisdom and good nature with which our forebears have been famous.

I think the unification of Yemen is not only a local achievement, it is also an Arab and Islamic pride. That is why safeguarding it is of paramount importance to us, the Arabs and Muslims.

Q: *I heard you were sick. What are your medical treatment plans?*

A: Yes, I suffer from a health problem. I have been advised to travel abroad for medical treatment. I have approached President 'Alī 'Abd Allāh Ṣāliḥ (through Mr. 'Abd al-Azīz 'Abd al-Ghanī) on this matter. He has graciously helped with a cash donation of YR 150,000 as well as tickets for my travel. I would like to use this occasion to thank the president for his positive response to my appeal.