

South African Muslim Clergy and its Political Response to Colonialism and Apartheid

Sultan Khan

School of Social Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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ABSTRACT The Muslim community in South Africa is heterogeneous in nature with diverse historical backgrounds and social composition although they subscribe to a common article of faith. Since their entry into the country, first as slaves and followed by indenture, they have experienced similar socio-political discrimination and exploitation no different to the majority of the indigenous population in the country. Given the heterogeneous composition of Muslims in the country, their response to the political atrocities perpetrated both by colonialism and apartheid took different forms in order to sustain its religious hegemony for more than three and a half centuries. This paper examines the response of the Muslim clergy within a community characterized by a set of complex socio-historical factors that has shaped its present day status within a liberated South Africa. The paper provides insight into how the diversity within the Muslim clergy impacted on a fragmented community response to both colonialism and apartheid. The Muslim clergy in South Africa and elsewhere in the world is known to exercise enormous hegemony amongst its followers although priesthood within the teaching and practice of Islam is not a norm. Nonetheless, the paper illustrates some of the social, religious and political dynamics within the Muslim cleric that resulted in a fragmented and diverse response to the colonial and apartheid regimes in order to win favor for its self-preservation as a religious grouping. A more progressive effort however becomes apparent in the latter days of apartheid through the formation of secular forms of social organizations within the community that identified with local and mass based struggle characterized by a diverse set of political actors in a quest for freedom. The Muslim community can claim to have nurtured distinguished political champions throughout its history. So did collaborationist political actors emerge within the community attracted by self-interest and narrow group motives. This tapestry of political responses may be attributed to the diverse sociological composition and history of the community resulting in low levels of social cohesion and polarization that is carried over into the post-apartheid era. Central to this has been the role of the diverse clergy which shaped and styled the communities political landscape that benefitted some and excluded others over centuries of political challenges and compromises.

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