



Muslim Women Rulers: A study of Islamic History

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ABSTRACT

The roots of Islamic Civilization are deeply set in the Qur'an, The Sunnah and Qur'ān e ūla, which have been regarded as the best time periods by the Messenger of Allah (pbuh). The Qur'an has mentioned many women who although were not direct political rulers, yet they changed the course of history, and set examples for those to come. The mention of the mother of Maryam (as) and of Maryam (as) herself, the mother and sister of Musa (as), the wife of Pharaoh, the indirect mention of Hajra (as) and her legacy, the role of the wives of the Messenger (pbuh); and a political ruler the Queen of Sheba, thus paying a tribute to them and not deeming them inferior to their male counterparts. Politics in Islamic history has always been a very pragmatic field and women have participated in it in various roles. Sometimes being the rulers like Raziya Sultana and sometimes being the powerful, influential de facto ruler like Queen Nūr Jahan. Some were excellent military commanders like Queen Amina of Zaria in the Sub Saharan Africa; others were great administrators such as Begum Shah Jehan of Bhopal.

The pivotal roles of Muslim women rulers in the history of Islam are highlighted in this article, covering the fourteen centuries period. The life and work of at least ten salient rulers is discussed in a manner, which shall set them as an example for times to come.

Keywords: *Islamic Civilization, Salient rulers, Life and work*

1.1 Introduction

Men and women are created from the same matter, and are allies of each other in this world. Allah SWT says in the Qur'an:

*“The believing men and believing women are allies of one another. They enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and establish prayer and give zakah and obey Allah and His Messenger. Those - Allah will have mercy upon them. Indeed, Allah is Exalted in Might and Wise”.*¹

Allah SWT has also said:

*“It is He who created you from one soul and created from it its mate that he might dwell in security with her”.*²

Allah SWT created Adam (AS) and Hawwa in order to develop a population of human race. From the very beginning of time men and women have been part of one another, going through every incident together, being addressed together when they made a mistake and were sent down to the earth together as a Caliph on the Planet Earth. Throughout the history of Prophethood there have been powerful women standing by the side of their husbands; making Hijra with them like Sara (AS),³ being the source of the turning point in history like Hajra (AS),⁴ being an epitome of love, faith and steadfastness like Aasiya (AS),⁵ giving birth to the great Prophet Isa(AS) all alone like Maryam (AS).⁶ These were the women who stood by the Prophets, raised the Prophets, and suffered with the Prophets, hence impacting and changing the history, leaving huge legacies behind. Was it not for a woman, there would be no Zam Zam, Musa (AS) would have been killed,⁷ Musa (AS) would not have married in Madian,⁸ Isa (AS) would never have been born.⁹ Last but not the least the wise Queen of Sheba, who saved her nation from war and recognized the Truth when it was presented to her.¹⁰

Coming down in timeline of history we see the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his robust relationship with Khadija bint Khuwaylid, he rushed to her from the cave of Hira rather than going to any of the men in Makkah, narrating to her what he saw and then Khadija (RA) took charge of the whole situation and dealt with it with extreme calm and intelligence.¹¹ The first person to accept Islam was a woman; the first martyr of Islam was a woman. When the Prophet (PBUH) was preparing to leave Makkah and make Hijra to Madinah, in the 11th and the 12th year of the Prophethood, delegations came from Madinah to give the pledge of allegiance to the Prophet PBUH of giving him a state protection. There were several women who came from Madinah to give this pledge, which was purely a decision of the Heads of the State of Madinah.¹²

In Madinah, when the first Muslim state was being formed, mankind saw one of the most unique commandments of the Qur'an: the financial empowerment of women through the laws of inheritance.¹³ It was unheard of among the pagan Arabs of those times who buried the females infants alive.¹⁴ Women stood up in wars, were agriculturists, entrepreneurs, surgeons, hence playing a pivotal role in the society.

It was in this backdrop that the distinctive civilization of Islam emerged, honoring and accepting the women in leadership positions. When Ayesha bint Abi Bakr (RA) led the Battle of Jamal, many great Companions participated as soldiers in her army. No one had any objection with a woman leading the army.¹⁵

It is amazing to know that there have been female Muslim rulers in almost all parts of the Muslim World. Selecting from a vast number, only a few prominent female Muslim rulers have been presented in this article to establish the fact that the female Muslim rulers played significant role in the course of history. The rationale behind this selection is the impact and the time period of history to which those rulers belong, to get a glimpse of the society and state pattern of Islamic civilization at its bloom, and the role of women in those societies. The methodology largely involves the historic research technique.

Nevertheless, we must not forget the Hadith the Prophet (PBUH), which has been interpreted in various manners by the scholars:

“When the Prophet (PBUH) heard the news that the people of the Persia had made the daughter of Khosrau their Queen (ruler), he said, "Never will succeed such a nation as makes a woman their ruler."”¹⁶

Some scholars say that this was only in the context of the Persians, whereas others consider it to be the general rule.

1.1 Queen Zubaidah (216 AH)

Zubaidah bint Ja’far ibn Mansur is the most famous of the Abbassid princesses. Her real name was Amatul Aziz and her grandfather Mansūr gave her the nickname Zubaidah as an endearment. She is predominantly remembered for the wells, reservoirs and artificial pools that provided water for Muslim pilgrims along the route from Baghdad to Makkah and Madinah, which came to be known as Darb Zubaidah in her honor. Rest houses, police stations and mosques were built on the pilgrim routes to facilitate and secure the life and wealth of the pilgrims. Her engineers moved in the direction of Qiblah and drew a map of over 1200 kilometers and the road was divided into forty stations of shelter for the caravans and their animals. High minarets lit with fire were erected for the purpose of navigation. All these structures served millions of pilgrims from all over the world for more than a thousand years. Darb Zubaidah began from Baghdad and passing through Kufa, Najaf and Qadsiya, reached Naqra, where it bifurcated for Madinah.

Darb Zubaidah not just provided water and security to the pilgrims; rather it became a cosmopolitan of cultural and commercial activities. People from different areas met, traded and exchanged cultural ideas and historical stories. The route remained active for six months for the pilgrims and the rest six months for the local merchants. It is

said that Zubaidah spent equivalent of 5950 kg of gold on this project and when she was handed the written expenses, she was sitting in her palace by her pond and she threw the paper in the pond without looking and said I seek its remuneration from Allah on the Day of Judgment.¹⁷ When she was first told about the heavy cost of this project, she said it should be completed even if every stroke of axe was to cost a *dinar*.¹⁸

Ibn Batutta states:

*“Every reservoir, pool or well on this road, which goes from Makkah to Baghdad is due to her munificent bounty. Had it not been for her concern on behalf of this road, it would not be usable by anyone”.*¹⁹

It is interesting to note that the activities and achievements of her and her husband, Harūn al Rasheed became basis for the famous serial of stories *Daastan e Alif Laila*.²⁰

Zubaidah's palace echoed of buzzing bee sound because one hundred of her maidservants were reciters and Hafizāt of the Qur'an and they kept reciting the Holy Book while doing their daily chores.²¹ She was very fond of learning and she sponsored a group of scholars to promote Islamic learning.

Though not involved directly in politics, she was a very wise woman and when her own son Ameen was killed in a battle with Mamoon (Haroon's son from another wife) and Mamoon became the Caliph, she wrote to him: I congratulate you as the new caliph. I have lost a son, but the son that I did not give birth to replaced him. Hence purifying the palace of intrigues and backstabbing. She died at the age of 67 in 216 A.H.²²

1.2 Razia Sultana (1205-1240)

The very first Muslim woman ruler of South Asia, Razia Sultana of Delhi remained in power in Delhi for four years (1236-1240 CE). She was the only woman ever to sit on the throne of Delhi. Razia's ancestors were Muslim slaves of Turkish origin who came to India during the 11th century. She was the daughter of Altamish, who was a beloved and cherished slave of Qutbuddin Aibak; Aibak married Altamish to his sister Qutub Begum, from whom Razia was born. Opposing the tradition, her father selected her over her brothers, to be his heir. His special cabinet of forty ministers was surprised and opposed the idea of a female on a Muslim throne specially in the presence of his sons, to which Altamish replied: “My sons are given to follies of youth, none of them is fit to rule this country, and you will find that there is no one better able to do so than my daughter.”²³

Razia Sultana proved her father's judgment to be true and lived up to what he would have expected of her. She established peace, law and order, encouraged trade, built

roads, planted trees, dug wells, supported poets and painters, constructed schools and libraries, appeared in public without the veil, wore tunic and headdress of a man. State meetings were often open to the people. However, she made enemies when she tried to eradicate some of the prejudices against her Hindu subjects.

Sultan Razia, as she preferred being called instead of sultana, was a just monarch, the only child who had her father's heart: wise, just, generous and a benefactor to her realm, a dispenser of equity, a protector of her people and leader of her armies, she had all kingly qualities except her gender, and this exception made all her virtues of no effect in the eyes of men, may God have mercy upon her.²⁴

Firishta, a 16th-century historian of Muslim rule in India, wrote about her:

“The Princess was adorned with every qualification required in the ablest kings and the strictest scrutinizers of her actions could find in her no fault, but that she was a woman. In the time of her father, she entered deeply into the affairs of government, which disposition he encouraged, finding she had a remarkable talent in politics. He once appointed her regent (the one in control) in his absence. When the emirs (military advisors) asked him why he appointed his daughter to such an office in preference to so many of his sons, he replied that he saw his sons giving themselves up to wine, women, gaming and the worship of the wind (flattery); that therefore he thought the government too weighty for their shoulders to bear and that Razia, though a woman, had a man's head and heart and was better than twenty such sons.”²⁵

Her reign lasted for only three years (1236-1240) due to the arrogant, power hungry, narrow-minded chahlgani (the forty ministers) whom Altamish had shown great respect and it seems that Altamish believed that they would be sincere to his daughter after the initial shock. To the contrary, they became her worst enemy. She was overthrown and killed along with her husband Altunia, while she was in a battle for restoration of her throne.²⁶

1.3 Shajarat al Durr (- 1257)

Another Queen bearing the title of Sultana was Shajarat al-Durr, who gained power in Cairo in 1250 CE at about the same time as Razia Sultana and brought the Muslims to victory during the Crusades and captured Louis IX, the King of France and afterwards spared his life.

Shajarat al-Durr (Arabic: ‘string of pearls’) had the royal name al-Malika Ismat ad-Din Umm-Khalil Shajarat al-Durr. She was the high-spirited slave wife of the Ayyubid

Sultan As-Salih Ayyub, the grand nephew of Sultan Salahuddin Ayyubi. She was of Turkic origin and remained the Sultana of Egypt from 1250 to 1257, marking the end of the Ayyubid dynasty and the starting of the Mamluk era.

Shajarat al-Durr, was a very powerful and influential monarch. She played the roles of a military leader, a mother, and a sultana and was successful in all until her fall from power in 1257. In the midst of the chaotic environment of the crusades, Shajarat al-Durr rose to pre-eminence, reestablished political stability and held on to political power for seven years in one form or another and in the end was murdered due to the intolerance of some of her male counterparts.²⁷

1.5 Queen Amina of Zaria (1533 to 1610)

Another iconic name in the history of women rulers in the Muslim World is that of the military Queen Amina of Zaria, the princess of Nigeria. Zaria was another name for Zazzau named after Amina's younger sister Zaria. Amina assumed throne of the state of Zazzau, after the death of her brother in 1576.²⁸ Zazzau was the largest of the seven Hausa States and the main source of slaves, which were sold to the Arab traders.²⁹ After her crowning she immediately began the war that was to last for 34 years, in order to expand Zazzau State. Her slogan for her fearsome and well trained soldiers was, "re sharpen your weapons". Her main emphasis was not on occupation of lands, but on compelling the local rulers to accept the status of tributaries of Zazzau and ensure safe passage to the traders of Hausa.³⁰ Zazzau expanded under Amina like never before. She built earthen walls around the city for protection. Some of which still exist known as *ganuwar* Amina (Amina's walls).

The historian, Sultan Bello of Sokoto writes:

"Strange things have happened in the history of the seven Hausa States, and most strange of these is the extent of the possessions, which God gave to Aminatu, daughter of the ruler of Zazzau. She waged war in the Hausa lands and took them all so that the men of Katsina and the men of Kano brought her tribute. She made war in Bauchi and against the other towns of the south and of the west, so that her possession stretched down to the shores of the sea of Niger".³¹

Amina brought unprecedented wealth to the land; one account mentions a tribute payment of 40 eunuchs and 10,000 kola nuts. She improved her kingdom's treasure and supremacy with gold, slaves and new crops. Since her people were brilliant metal

workers, Amina creatively initiated metal armor, including iron helmets and chain mail, to her army.

The modern state of Nigeria has commemorated Amina by building a statue of her, spear in hand, riding a horse in the center of Lagos.

1.4 The Begmaat of Bhopal (1819-1926)

Perhaps the most pragmatic and successful Muslim women rulers were the Begums of Bhopal. Set in the Indian chauvinistic male dominated society of the 19th century, these great women successfully governed the second largest Muslim state of the subcontinent, which was founded by a Pashtun soldier Dost Muhammad Khan in 1707. The Begums of Bhopal were a chain of ten women who played important roles in the matters of the state. The last four in the chain were absolute rulers.

1.4.1 Qudsia Begum (-1837)

The turning point of the fate of this grand state came when the young Nawab Nazar Muhammad Khan died leaving behind one fifteen months old daughter, and his courageous eighteen year old wife, Gauher Begum bearing the family title Qudsia who stood up for her daughter Sikandar Begum claiming her to be the rightful heir to the throne of Bhopal.³²

Shaharyar M. Khan says in his account of the Begums of Bhopal

“Qudsia’s address to the family is one of the most poignant moments in Bhopal’s history. A girl not yet 20, brought up traditionally in purdah, had dared to take the congregation of elders, rival family contenders and senior state officials by the scruff of their necks.”³³

Hence started the over hundred-year rule of four amazing women over the princely state of Bhopal marked by prosperity, stability and peace.

Qudsia Begum (1819-37) was the first woman in South Asia to effectively proclaim the right of Muslim women to lawfully be the ruler of a state. Being a devout Muslim herself, Qudsia showed that Islam does not exclude women from gaining political power. She commanded the army and would be at the forefront of battles.

1.4.2 Sikandar Begum(1817-1868)

Sikandar Begum’s reign began after the death of her husband, Nawab Jahangir Muhammad Khan Bahadur, who was able to rule for six years. When she came to power after her husband, she paid off the debt that was upon the state from the times

of Jahangir Muhammad Khan. She particularly improved the military and the agriculture sector of Bhopal. She also abolished the *Riba* based loans, made hospitals and *Madrasas*.

Sikandar was trained in martial arts and, like her mother, was a prudent and strong woman. Sikandar proved her worth and showed to the world that she was just as capable, or more, than her male counterparts. She played polo, went hunting and was a swordswoman, archer and lancer. She personally went to villages to look over the welfare of people and the state of her agricultural reforms.

She also commanded the army and would inspect district offices, the courts and the treasury herself to make sure that the state was running smoothly. Sikandar Begum also founded the *Victoria School* so that girls in Bhopal would receive technical training in trades such as handicrafts and acquire knowledge on basic academic subjects.

1.4.3 Shahjahan Begum (1838-1901)

Seventeen days after Sikandar Begum's death, her only daughter Shahjahan Begum became the next Begum of Bhopal and her then ten-year-old daughter, Sultan Jahan, became the heir.

Shahjahan was more ladylike and revived the development of the arts in Bhopal and under her rule the state became a cultural and literary center. She even patronized a number of female poets and appointed a male poet in her court to form a compendium containing the writings of female poets.

Shahjahan inherited the skills of being a strong administrator from her mother. She improved the tax system, built many palaces, mosques and monuments and made notable contributions to housing, education, health, technology and women's uplift. After the death of her first husband, she married Nawab Syed Siddiq Hassan, a great scholar of his time.

She aimed at eradicating small pox from the State and since people were afraid of getting the injections, she publically gave the injection to her own granddaughter. She built a hospital for leprosy and built many schools and madrassas, brought electricity to Bhopal, build bridges and many buildings as she is said to have a special love for building. Sultan Shahjahan is said to have built more number of Masajid during her rule than any of the other rulers. The largest Masjid was known as Taj al Masajid and it was built on the pattern of the Jamia Masjid Delhi. From 1878 to 1900, Bhopal faced three periods of drought, which Begum Shahjahan managed by her acumen and saved Bhopal from dire consequences.

Shahjahan Begum loved knowledge and honoured the people of knowledge. She funded rare books like Tafsir Ibn Kathir, Fath al Bari, Nail al Autar and made them

available for the people. She also funded Ali Garh Muslim University for which Sir Syed Ahmed Khan was extremely grateful to her.

Shahjahan Begum also wrote a reformist manual for women titled *Tahzib un-Niswan wa Tarbiyat ul-Insan*. It is considered the first compilation in India, which contained topics on women's work and their status in Islam. When she became terminally ill due to the cancer of mouth, she sent a message to her people to forgive her if she had ever hurt anyone.

1.4.4 Sultan Jahan Begum (1858-1930)

Inspired by her predecessors, Sultan Jahan Begum became a reformer and established many educational institutions, focusing on public instruction and female education. She is the founding and (till today) only female Chancellor of *Aligarh Muslim University*. Apart from education, she also improved taxation, the police, the army, the judiciary, agriculture, health and sanitation. In 1914, she became the president of the *All-India Muslim Ladies Association*.

The legacy of her 25-year rule involved a diverse court and a merit-based bureaucracy. She smartly negotiated with the British government in order to ensure her family's interests.

Apart from the multiple great steps that Sultan Jahan Begum took, one huge favour that she did to this Ummah was the funding of Maulana Shibli Nu'mani's *Seeratun Nabi*. When she heard that the Maulana is seeking to raise fifty thousand rupees, she called him and said she will fund the whole project immediately.³⁴

The reign of the *Begmaat* of Bhopal ended when Sultan Jahan's son took the crown after her death. Their dynasty is outstanding for their achievements as women, particularly Muslim women in colonial India, and inspiring for women today as they continue to struggle in a patriarchal world. All these *Begmaat* apart from being successive rulers were devout Muslims. Some of them never missed *Tahajjud*, others were ardent reciters of the Holy Qur'an.³⁵

1.8 Benazir Bhutto (1953-2007)

Benazir Bhutto served as the Prime Minister of Pakistan from 1988-1990 and then from 1993 to 1996 becoming the first woman to head a Muslim democratic government. She studied at Harvard University and the University of Oxford and was President of the Oxford Union. She is regarded as an icon of women's rights in male dominated society.

She had a very hard-core stance on Kashmir. In interviews she voiced support for the Kashmiri Muslims. She called on the United Nations to supervise the Kashmir Plebiscite, which was originally promised in 1948. In January 1990, Indian police opened fire on a pro-independence rally in Kashmir, killing fifty and sparking tensions in the region; Bhutto visited a training camp for pro-independence Kashmiri militants

on the Pakistani side of the border and guaranteed \$5 million for their cause; In one speech, she incited Kashmiri Muslims to rise up against their administration.³⁶

1.9 Khalida Zia (1945-)

Khalida Zia is a Bangladeshi politician who served as the Prime Minister from 1991 to 1996, and again from 2001 to 2006. She belongs to the Bangladeshi national Party. She was the first woman in the country's history and second in the Muslim Majority countries to head a democratic government as prime minister.³⁷

Zia worked on a 100-day program to fulfill most of her election promises to the nation. During her terms, Bangladesh attracted international investments for development of the country's organizational structure, energy resources and businesses from the United States, Great Britain, and Japan. Restoration of law and order was an achievement during her period.

She promoted neighbourly relations in her foreign policy. In her "look-east policy," she worked to strengthen local assistance in South Asia. Bangladesh began to participate in United Nations international peacekeeping efforts. In 2006, *Forbes* magazine published an article praising her administrative achievements. Her government worked to educate the female population, distribute food to the poor and promoted strong entrepreneurial culture. In its list of the 100 most Powerful Women in the World, *Forbes* magazine ranked Zia at number 14 in 2004, number 29 in 2005 and number 33 in 2006.

1.10 Halimah bint Yaqoub (1954-)

Halimah bint Yaqoub is the current president of Singapore. She was elected in an uncontested election in the 2017 Singaporean Presidential Elections and was sworn in as President in September 2017 becoming the first female president in the country's history.³⁸

An Indian Muslim from her father's side and of Malay origin from her maternal side, Halimah belongs to the Minority community. Her father was a watchman who died due to a heart attack when she was eight years old; her mother raised her and her four siblings. She helped her mother in earning livelihood by selling *nasi padang* (an Indonesian dish) on the roadside. However she went to school and eventually completed her Masters in Law in 1978 and was conferred an honorary Doctor of Law by the National University of Singapore in 2016.³⁹

Halimah entered politics in 2001 when she was elected as a Member of Parliament for the Jurong Group Representation Constituency. After the 2011 General Election, Halimah was appointed Minister of State for youth and sports and later serving as a State Minister for Social and Family Development. In 2013 Halimah was elected as the Speaker of the Parliament, becoming the first woman to hold this office in the

Singaporean history. In the 2015 General Election, Halimah was the sole minority candidate for the People's Action Party group. She has spoken out actively against Islamic Extremism in particular condemning and disassociating from the ISIS.⁴⁰

In recognition of her contributions, she was awarded the Berita Herian Achiever of the Year Award in 2001,⁴¹ the Her World Woman of the Year Award⁴² in 2003 the Aware Heroine Award⁴³ 2011, and was inducted into the Singapore Council of Women's Organization's Singapore women Hall of Fame⁴⁴ in 2014. Halimah bint Yacob has been included in the 500 most influential Muslims list for 2019 and again in 2020.⁴⁵ Another marvelous aspect of this pragmatic Muslim President is that she has a successful family life with a husband and five children.

1.12 Conclusion

The above account is just a drop from the ocean. There are many wonderful women in the books of history as well as in the contemporary world proving their worth. The valour of Hazrat Mahal of Oudh; the intelligence of Hürem Sultan; the strength of Sayyida al Hurra; the long reigning ruler of Yemen Arwa Al Sulaihi; the wise, powerful and influential Queen Khayzaran; the co ruler with her husband, of the Al Mowarid dynasty, Zainab Nafzawiyya who is described as *Al Qa'ima bimulkihi* literally meaning the one in charge of her husband's Mulk; the impeccable backbone of her great brother Fatima Jinnah; the progressive Sukarnoputri of Indonesia; hence the list is endless. They have stood firm in the face of gender discrimination, scheming, sometimes losing their lives but never giving in. In addition to being rulers they did what their male counterparts could not do: they bore children and raised them to be future kings and rulers. They were always found equally qualified and eligible for the role of a sovereign.

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³ Sahih Muslim: 2371

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