Introduction

Games of Succession: Patriarchy, Power, Gender

The Unforgettable Queens of Islam is a book about Muslim women rulers, women who have contested rules of dynastic succession in medieval Yemen and India and stood for election in modern Pakistan and Indonesia. How did they achieve such feats? How could young Muslim women come to occupy the exalted office of the sultan in Delhi in medieval India, or be democratically elected prime minister in modern Pakistan? Did they contravene religious laws and moral orders to become rulers in their societies? What sociopolitical structures, cultural mechanisms, and personal qualities enabled them to realize their objectives? History provides us with many cases of powerful women – Muslim and non-Muslim – who influenced men of power (or men in general) to change the course of their relations, dynastic successions, and sociopolitical events.[1] My interest in this book is with women at the forefront of the political scene – women who have engaged with the existing structures of power and authority, overcoming institutional obstacles and individual objections to become ruling queens. Following the trajectory of the political ascent of Muslim women rulers, I explore four women's paths to political power and authority. But first, I lay out the broader historical contexts and theoretical frameworks of the book by discussing the diverging interpretations of revelation and tradition, the Qurʾan and the hadith, regarding women and political authority. For that I tell the Quranic story of the Queen of Sheba and her Mighty Throne (Qurʾan 27:20–45) and discuss the political leadership of Mother of the Faithful, *hazrat* ʿAʾisha[2] in the Battle of the Camel that occasioned the pronouncement of a Prophetic hadith.

As I contemplate the life stories of Muslim women political rulers from medieval to modern times, I recall an oft-repeated hadith on the subject allegedly attributed to the Prophet of Islam: "Never will succeed

[1] Shahrzad, the protagonist of *The Thousand and One Nights*, is a perfect example. For a study of variations of power, see Eric Wolfe (2001, 384–385).
[2] Muslims use the honorific prefix *hazrat* (Excellency) for exalted personalities such as ʿAʾisha. To prevent repetition, I refrain from doing so after the first mention.

such a nation as makes a woman their ruler."[3] Where this hadith came from, and why? Contestation over leadership and the caliphate erupted almost immediately after the Prophet Muhammad's death. His silence regarding an heir – or not specifically nominating one – confronted the nascent Muslim community with the dilemma of succession: was it to be based on descent and blood kinship or on the consensus of the political elite? By the time the Umayyad caliphs (661–750) consolidated power, patrilineal dynastic succession had become hereditary.[4] The military involvement of ʿAʾisha, the "beloved of Muhammad," in the battle of succession played a crucial role in polarizing the community's sentiments during the reigns of the third and the fourth caliphs.[5] Her dramatic loss in the Battle of the Camel (see Chapter 2), in which she led the opposition to the fourth caliph, ʿAli, allegedly occasioned the pronouncement of the above-mentioned hadith. It was not, however, until almost two hundred years later that this hadith was "authenticated" by the famed scholar and hadith collector Imam Bukhari (d. 870), who subsequently included it in his compendium of "correct" (*sahih*) hadith – despite the fact that it was a "singleton" and "weak" (i.e. not corroborated by other companions and associates of the Prophet).[6] Whether this is a "forged hadith" (Brown 2018) or the Prophet of Islam actually said it has been debated in modern times by scholars, including Mernissi (1991), Abou El Fadl (2001), Fadel (2011), and Ibrahim (2016), and the debate continues on the web. Twelve centuries later and in the waning years of the twentieth century, the same hadith was retrieved from the recesses of history to challenge the democratic victories of Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan (see Chapter 5) and Megawati Sukarnoputri in Indonesia (see Chapter 6).

Yet I also recall that the Prophet of Islam had received divine revelations regarding the Queen of Sheba and her astute political leadership. The Quranic Queen of Sheba is, as I describe in Chapter 1, the sovereign of an idyllic and peaceful community to which God has denied neither bounty nor riches. Above all, the queen is given a Mighty Throne (*ʿarsh-i ʿazim*), representing the seat of her power and authority (Qurʾan 27:23). Note that the Qurʾan uses the same term to describe God's celestial throne, "God: there is no God but He, the Lord of the Mighty Throne

[3] https://sunnah.com/bukhari/92.
[4] Rather than giving both the Islamic and Christian dates simultaneously, I have opted to cite only the latter. Suffice it to say that the Islamic calendar, the Hijri, begins with the migration (*hijra*) of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE.
[5] Brown defines caliph as meaning "succession" or "appointed representative," though it generally refers to those delegated with supreme political authority (2018, 211).
[6] For a critique of al-Bukhari's recording of hadiths such as the above, see Mernissi (1991).

[ʿ*arsh-i ʿazim*]" (27:26). Might we infer such meaningful parallelism as support for the legitimacy of the queen's sovereignty?[7]

For Muslims the Qurʾan is divine and Quranic revelations constitute the supreme source of authority. Hadith, the recorded words of the Prophet Muhammad – collected and recorded almost two centuries after his death in the ninth and tenth centuries – form the second highest source of authority. Muslims believe that the Prophetic hadiths are divinely inspired.[8] In the course of time, the staggering number of unverified and unauthenticated hadiths collected and attributed to the Prophet Muhammad led medieval Muslim scholars to set in place mechanisms for the verification of the Prophetic hadith. Nonetheless, Muslims are far from unanimous on many hadiths, and Sunnis and Shiʿites each have their own corpus of "authenticated" hadiths, though much of them may overlap.[9] The hadith literature, the Tradition, has been a major source of Islamic law or *shariʿa* in many contemporary Muslim societies, often incorporating some of the local customs, *ʿurf* and *ʿadat*, into the legal structure.

How are we to interpret the differences between these two supreme sources of authority regarding women and political authority in Islam, one supportive and the other opposed? Juxtaposing the Quranic support for women's sovereignty – or absence of opposition to it – with that of its purported prohibition in the Prophetic hadith, I revisit the story of the Queen of Sheba, and examine the sociopolitical circumstances that occasioned the recollection of the Prophetic hadith in order to contextualize women's chances of – or impediments to – political leadership. It is in the intersections of these two supreme sources of authority *and* the sociopolitical dynamics on the ground that I locate the prospects for and challenges to women's paths to political leadership, and Muslim exegetes' opposition to or ambivalence regarding women and political authority. I ask whether the objections to women's political leadership are to be sought in the divine revelations, the prophetic hadiths, or in the pragmatics of patriarchal sociopolitical structures.

The two overlapping themes that run through women's narratives of paths to power are succession and dynastic ties – be it to the throne in medieval times or to the office of president or prime minister in modern

[7] Tabari, in his interpretation of the meanings of the Qurʾan, argues that the scripture explains the meanings of revelations itself. See also Lawrence (2006, 87, 91) and Barlas (2006, 261–262).
[8] Al-Shafiʿi, the ninth-century legal theorist, declared that Muhammad's actions were divinely inspired based on the Quranic command to obey God and his Prophet (24:52). See Stowasser (1994, chapter 9).
[9] For an informative discussion on hadith, see Brown (2018).

times. Specifically, the thread that ties the chapters together is the dynamics of the father-daughter relationship (and sometimes that of husband and wife), what I have elsewhere called the "paradox of patriarchy" (2002). Succession to high office, as argued by Ortner, is a "serious game" (2006, 129; Goody 1966). It is also a deadly game and has primarily been played among men, usually devolving from father to son – but not necessarily to the first-born son. Islamic history, however, has recorded instances in which some women have also tried their hand at the games of succession. More often than not, they were supported by their father, who was in a position to promote his daughter – for a variety of personal, political, and emotional reasons – in the absence or at the expense of his sons. I situate women rulers' rise to power within three interrelated domains: kinship and marriage, patriarchal rules of succession, and individual women's personal charisma and popular appeal. Family is the heart of human society. It is the source of support and sustenance, but also a wellspring of resentment and competition. Across cultures, kinship and family relations are riddled with irresolvable paradoxes of love and hate, competition and cooperation, devotion and betrayal. Both men and women of the elite draw their power and authority from – or meet their ruin and demise within – their families. But particularly fraught is the relationship between royal fathers and sons, who are each in a structural position to deprive or dislodge the other from power.

I hope to demonstrate that women's restricted political role in the public arenas of Muslim-majority societies is ultimately the product of a multiplicity of local and historical factors, only one of which is religion, albeit an important one. However, with the radicalization of religion in the Muslim world – indeed, in much of the modern world[10] – the backlash to women's political activism has increased in tandem with women's demands for gender justice, legal equality, and fair political representation. As modern phenomena and movements, both the "feminists" and the "fundamentalists" are vying for political authority: one for inclusion and equal gender representation, and the other for exclusion and maintaining – even sanctifying – the male-dominated status quo.[11] The precariousness of such complex, multifaceted, and ongoing contests of

[10] See the six volumes of the Fundamentalism Project, edited by Martin Marty and Scott Appleby (1991–2004).

[11] "Fundamentalist" backlash against women's increasing political agency is not peculiar to the Muslim world. As a record number of women from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds gained representation in the United States' Congress in 2018 and increased their political clout, more and more state legislatures enacted laws to restrict access to contraception and criminalize abortion. The most draconian step was taken by the all-male state government of Alabama that passed a law in May of 2019 banning all abortions and threatening abortion providers with ninety-nine years' imprisonment.

gender inequality as they unfold from Algeria to Indonesia are simultaneously inspiring and foreboding, as vividly visualized in the video documentary *Feminism Inshallah: A History of Arab Feminism* (2014).[12] Riveted by the unexpected twists and turns that gender dynamics are taking in the public domain in Egypt and Tunisia, Iran and Indonesia, we are alternately exhilarated by the expressions of gender unity and harmonious chants for equality and dignity, and demoralized by the painful demonstration of patriarchal brutality bent on denying education to young girls in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Now the gentle breath of the "Arab Spring" lifts our spirits and fills us with hopes of flourishing democracies from North Africa to South Asia; now the shameful cruelty of a woman's exposed body clad in a blue bra chokes us with anger (Amaria 2011). Now the indomitable spirit of the young Malala Yousafzai's determination to highlight the need for girls' education gives us hope for future generations of young girls – and boys – in Pakistan and Afghanistan;[13] now the fierce political competition and assassination of women political leaders in the same neighborhood expose state terror and structural violence in all their poignant ugliness. While patriarchs and patriarchal regimes are changing and adapting to the demands of modern times, "patriarchy" has never been an unchanging monolith and has not worked in cultural vacuums, locally or globally. Amina Wadud defines patriarchy, based on a discussion by Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, as "a hegemonic presumption of dominance and superiority" that "extend[s] humanity to women only in functional juxtaposition" to male norms. It does not mean that all men dominate all women equally (Wadud 2006, 96).

A look at the recorded history of women rulers across the Muslim world reveals that a number of women have actually governed as queens in different societies and at various junctures in history, hailing primarily from South and Southeast Asia. Their authority and leadership indicate that however compelling dominant religious ideologies might be, specific local cultures and political traditions have led to outcomes that challenge and undermine such ideologies. This should, perhaps, not come as a surprise since the farther away societies are from the center of the Arab/Islamic world, the stronger is the influence of cultural traditions

[12] Created by Feriel Ben Mahmoud; distributed by Women Make Movies. Color (52 minutes).

[13] Born in Pakistan in 1997, Malala Yousafzai was seriously wounded in 2012 in an attack on her school bus by a member of the Taliban. She has since recovered and lives in England. She champions the cause of girls' education and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014, becoming the youngest person to ever receive that honor (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malala_Yousafzai). See also *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban* (2013).

and local customs (*ʿurf* and *ʿadat*) that pattern people's behavior and shape their sensibilities. In other words, a society's geographic location, ethnic identity, and political economy contribute significantly to patterning of gender hierarchy, roles, and relationships.

Culture, Ethnicity, Sensibility

A detailed discussion of the diversity of the changing social attitudes and sensibilities around expressions of women's political agency and gender relations, as Islam expanded on the world horizon, is beyond the scope of this introduction. Suffice it to say that as the political structure and administrative bureaucracies became more centralized in the Islamic caliphate in Baghdad, increasingly restrictive and negative attitudes were expressed toward women's autonomy, mobility, and political leadership. Comparing the representations of female companions of the Prophet in the biographies of chroniclers from the ninth to the fourteenth century, Asma Afsaruddin clearly demonstrates the rise in patriarchal gender negativities (2010a). Barbara Stowasser (1994, 104–118) similarly highlights the increasingly unfavorable – or conflicting – depiction of the lives and legacies of the wives of the Prophet Muhammad in the works of hadith collectors and biographers. In the farther East and Southeast Asia and in Central Asia, attitudes toward women, the extent of their autonomy, independence, and relationships were markedly different. As those communities came under the control of Turco-Mongolian domination, gender boundaries tended to become more fluid, particularly among the elite, whose womenfolk exerted authority and were accorded greater autonomy. Women often shared political leadership with their husbands or were supported in leadership positions by their fathers – sometimes even by their fathers-in-law. Despite the increasing influence of "Islam, Christianity and Buddhism over the last four centuries" in Southeast Asia, women's autonomy and authority remained undiminished (Khan 2009, 168). Sher Banu A. L. Khan describes the rulership of four successive generations of mothers, daughters, and sisters in the seventeenth-century Sultanate of Aceh, whose leadership was supported by both custom, *ʿadat*, and Islam (2009, 168). All four queens ruled "peacefully," and it was not until the leadership of the fourth and last queen, Kamalat Syah, that pressures were brought to bear upon the state by "a fatwa purportedly produced from the Shariff of Mekah [*sic*] stating that a woman cannot rule in Islam" (Khan 2009, 167). Shaharyar Khan (2000) likewise examines the political leadership of four consecutive generations of mothers and daughters in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Bhopal,

India. Qudsiyya Begum, the first of the four, seized the opportunity to succeed her assassinated husband to become the regent of her infant daughter at the age of nineteen (r. 1819–1837). Qudsiyya's daughter, Sikandar Begum (1816–1868), grew up to become the second female ruler of Bhopal, whose reign partly overlapped with that of Queen Victoria of England (d. 1876).[14] Although pious, Qudsiyya abandoned veiling, arguing that it was not a sign of piety and virtue. When faced with opposition to her leadership from her male relatives based on the alleged Prophetic hadith, she countered that the Prophet Muhammad's wife "was a great role model for women and even took part in battles" (Preckel 2011; Khan 2000, 77). Her great-granddaughter, Sultanjahan Begum, on the other hand, took to veiling again and attended the coronation of King George of England in 1911 clad in her bejeweled white *burqa*. She abdicated her throne in 1926 on behalf of her son (Khan 2000).

Sporadic and scattered though it was, the thirteenth century is recorded as the most momentous period for women's political leadership in the annals of the medieval Islamic world. Three women in three different corners of the Muslim world took the reins of power (Lane-Poole 1903, 74). Most notable among them was Razia Sultan, the only female ruler of the Delhi Mamluk Sultanate, who ruled from 1236 to 1240. She is the subject of Chapter 4. Her near-contemporary Shajarat al-Durr (The Tree of Pearl) was another high-spirited Mamluk queen, who ruled Egypt in her own right for several months in 1250 before being ordered by the "short-sighted" caliph in Baghdad to forfeit the crown and marry (discussed in Chapter 4). Last is Abish Khatun (b. 1263), the ninth sovereign of the Persian dynasty of the Atabeks, also known as the Sulghurid dynasty (Lane-Poole 1903, 74). Her formidable mother, Terken Khatun,[15] ruled as the regent of her son, Abish's brother, in the southern province of Fars in Iran, which was under the hegemony of the Ilkhanid dynasty (1256–1353; Dalkesen 2007, 174). As a child Abish was sent to Shiraz, her native city, during the troubled period of Mongol supremacy in the region. She was still very young when her mother arranged her marriage (c. 1272) to an *ilkhan*, a Mongol prince, who ruled Fars in Abish's name until his death in 1282. Abish Khatun was caught in a revolt against the *ilkhan*s and sent to jail in Tabriz (northwest Iran) in 1286–1287, and executed subsequently in 1289. Abish was only twenty-six years old (Spuler 2011, 210).

[14] For an interesting and informative account of Sikandar Begum's memoir on her *hajj* pilgrimage to Mecca, see Lambert-Hurley (2008).

[15] Terken/Tarkan/Turkan Khatun means "the Queen of the Turks." Khatun is a general honorific used for Turco-Mongolian queen consorts.

All three sovereign queens hailed from Turco-Mongolian backgrounds, with Shajarat al-Durr and Razia owing "their position in part to Turkish slave officers, first-generation converts from the steppe, who originated in a society where women enjoyed wider latitude" (Jackson 1999, 189). All three queens had coins minted in their names and a *khutba* (official sermon) read in their honor, two criteria indicative of their supreme position as sovereigns (Mernissi 1994; Lambton 1987, 106–107; Dalkesen 2007, 173 ff.). All three came to power, nominal though it was in the case of Abish, through dynastic ties and marriage connections.

Succession, Primogeniture, Polygyny: "Law of Fratricide"

> Whatever the system of succession, force is the final arbiter.
>
> Goody (1966, 18)

Succession is always coveted and contested, be it in medieval India or in modern Pakistan, though the means through which it is expressed and achieved vary. Much is written about dynastic and electoral forms of succession and it is not possible to cover the issues and debates in one chapter. The following is a brief discussion of general patterns of succession in Islamic medieval royal courts and contemporary Muslim societies, incorporating arguments made by Goody (1966), Fletcher (1979–1980), Peirce (1993, 2017), McIntyre (2005), Barfield (2012), and Duindam (2018).

Dynastic Succession

"No system of succession," argues Jack Goody, "is completely automatic, even setting on one side the recurrent possibility of dethronement, abdication or usurpation" (1966, 13). Sometimes succession takes place through primogeniture and the orderly transition of power from father to son, other times violently through fratricide and regicide. Sometimes royal fathers name their successor, but a cast-off son could always rebel against the chosen one – and history has recorded ample evidence of such political resentments. In Iran, for instance, it was not usually primogeniture that determined the basis for legitimacy, but "Divine Grace," which in practice "could be claimed by anyone who managed, often by force, to succeed" (Katuzian 2013, xv). Conflict and violence over succession is not haphazard, however. There is logic to the "Law of Fratricide!" A remnant of the Turco-Mongolian monarchic tradition of the grand

khan (winner takes the crown), argues Joseph Fletcher, fierce political competition survived the transition of nomadic political economic culture to the settled agricultural communities in Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East (1979–1980, 236). Concomitantly, as the governments became centralized in these agricultural and feudal societies, the absolute domination of the grand khan was replaced by dynastic rule (Fletcher 1979–1980, 236). Under such political system, the most talented male member of a royal dynasty would usually be chosen as the principle successor, and other contenders would be disposed of by either murder or war. This principle worked so well that no other replaced it (Fletcher 1979–1980, 239):

> Far from there being any theory of primogeniture . . . the law of succession may well be described as a "free-for-all", in which the strongest of the sons inherited the throne, while the others – according to the Law of Fratricide – suffered death. The stakes were indeed very high and the resulting struggles correspondingly fierce, each prince being supported by those leaders and officials who thought that he would best serve their purpose. It clearly rested with the officials in power to decide which of the dead sultan's sons was to be sent the message which would bring him to the throne. (Alderson in Goody [1966, 19])

The absence of a clear principle of primogeniture in medieval Muslim societies and the presence of legalized polygyny and concubinage among the male elite exacerbated games of succession. As mechanisms for the transfer of power and succession in medieval royal courts were loosely routinized and generally based on the "Law of Fratricide," domination and authority were often preserved through the extermination of one or all other contenders to the throne. Additionally, the prevalence of concubinage and slave ownership effectively rendered legal marriage (*nikah*) redundant; apparently the limitation of legal marriage to four official wives was perceived as too restrictive for some men of power. Besides, not only would the amount of bride prices and gifts given to legal wives "drain" the sultan's treasury (Peirce 1993, 38), the legal wives' powerful relatives at the royal court or in other states could make demands on the monarch and potentially cause trouble.[16] The changing patterns of marriage practice in these royal courts also led to congregations of a growing number of "slave" women from different social, ethnic, and religious backgrounds in the royal courts that heightened competition among the mothers of potential caliphs and sultans-to-be (Peirce 2017; Cortese and Calderini 2007, 109). It also boosted the pool of viable male heirs – hence, the potential for more palace intrigue and fraternal violence.

[16] Thomas Barfield, personal communication, May 2018.

Such polygynous royal palaces with their legendary harems – often functioning as "shadow governments" (Gholsorkhi 1995, 144) – would also become arenas for strategic alliances and deadly rivalries among royal mothers, daughters, sisters, wives, and concubines, not to mention other palace stakeholders such as *wazir*s, eunuchs, advisors, pages, nannies, and others – all vying to have their favorite son recognized as the legitimate heir; their survival depended on his success. Mernissi has argued that polygyny is an enabler for powerful sultans and fosters despotism (1994, 98). I would add that polygyny and concubinage also tend to foster self-indulgent, pleasure-seeking, and administratively challenged princes, ultimately leaving the throne bereft of a competent and viable male heir. A case in point is Rukn al-Din Firuz Shah (d. 1236), the half-brother of Razia Sultan of India and her predecessor, as I discuss in Chapter 4. It was within such overlapping networks of dynastic ties, kinship relations, and marriage alliances that a politically savvy and charismatic princess could find a real chance to walk out of the shadows, become visible, and take charge, particularly if she had her father's support or had been married to the ruling patriarch.

As the palace was the center of administration, political intrigues were primarily concentrated in the royal court, and power and authority were dominated by the person of the sultan. Princes and princesses enjoyed privileges and possibilities that were denied other classes of people. In the feudal societies of South and Southeast Asia, for example, by inheriting land, some women of the feudal families were – and still are – potentially in a position to exercise feats of national greatness and authority. The enabling mechanism, however, is not the ownership of land per se; it is the strong and special relationship between a lineage patriarch and his daughter, as I discuss later. Local knowledge was primarily based on oral communication and gossip, rather than on written texts and scriptures. For that matter, differences of opinion and a variety of views coexisted and were tolerated. Religious institutions and individuals functioned at the pleasure of the sovereign, though the caliph or sultan paid only lip service to the former. The political elite ruled and fought over succession amongst themselves, irrespective of the wishes of the people who would be tolerating the powers-that-be so long as their livelihood, security, and welfare were safeguarded (Barfield 2012).

Electoral Succession

With the post-Enlightenment institutionalization of authority in constitutions, political competition became routinized and "democratized" –