

## The Unforgettable Queens of Islam

In this landmark study, Shahla Haeri offers the extraordinary biographies of several Muslim women rulers and leaders who reached the apex of the political system of their times. Their stories illuminate the complex and challenging imperatives of dynastic succession, electoral competition, and the stunning success they achieved in medieval Yemen and India, and modern Pakistan and Indonesia. The written history of Islam and the Muslim world is overwhelmingly masculine, having largely ignored women and their contributions until well into the twentieth century. Religious and legal justifications have been systematically invoked to justify Muslim women's banishment from politics and public domains. Yet this patriarchal domination has not gone without serious challenges by women – sporadic and exceptional though their participation in the battle of succession has been. *The Unforgettable Queens of Islam* highlights the lives and legacies of a number of charismatic women engaged in fierce battles of succession, and their stories offer striking insights into the workings of political power in the Muslim world.

Shahla Haeri is Associate Professor of Anthropology and a former director of the Women's Studies Program at Boston University. She is the author of the pioneering ethnographic book *Law of Desire: Temporary Marriage in Shi'i Iran* (1989, 2014) on the unique Shi'a practice of temporary marriage in Iran and *No Shame for the Sun: Lives of Professional Pakistani Women* (2002). She is the producer and director of a video documentary on Iranian women presidential contenders entitled *Mrs. President: Women and Political Leadership in Iran* (2002). Haeri is the recipient of many grants and postdoctoral fellowships.

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# The Unforgettable Queens of Islam

*Succession, Authority, Gender*

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Shahla Haeri

*Boston University*



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به هیچ مبحث و دیباچه ای قضا ننوشت

برای مرد کمال و برای زن نقصان

Nowhere in the Preface has judgment been written

That man is perfect and woman deficient

Parvin Etesami, 1907–1941

For

*Pouné & Parya*

*Yashar & Laili*

*Q-mars & Daniel*

&

*Reza*

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## Preface

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From your world, I like three things: perfume, women, and prayer.

Prophet Muhammad

The news was brief: Iranian women contesting the presidential election of 2001. The news was as shocking as it was novel. Who would have thought that of all the places in the world, the twenty-first century would be ushered in by women standing for election in the Islamic Republic of Iran! This was news like no other coming out of Iran at the time. Here in Boston I expected to read the headlines in the *New York Times*, watch it on CNN, and hear it on National Public Radio. Alas, the American media and press hardly took notice. If it had been a case of “[dis]honor killing,” I thought, media coverage would have been probably extensive. But not professional, middle-class, veiled Muslim women challenging the presidential election in Iran, and eager to assume political authority. The *New York Times* included but a passing reference in the last paragraph of a short article to “two women” among the forty or so male contenders, noting that all of them were rejected by the Guardian Council (MacFarquhar 2001).<sup>1</sup> Little was said about Iranian women presidential contenders, and few people heard about them. The news of who these women were was apparently not deemed “fit to print,” nor did it fit the dominant Orientalist and colonial narrative of “Muslim women”: veiled, victimized, oppressed, and passive, languishing in walled-in “harems.” Ironically, nothing was said about them in other Muslim countries either, nor did they get much news coverage in Iran! By the time I went to Iran for my annual summer visit, much to my astonishment, I discovered that not two but forty-seven educated, middle-class, professional women from all over the country had actually filed their application with the Interior Ministry, determined to stand for the presidential election.

For well over a decade, I have been fascinated by the unprecedented and paradoxical emergence of large numbers of Muslim women as

<sup>1</sup> [www.nytimes.com/2001/05/05/world/iran-s-president-seeks-new-term-vowing-more-political-change.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2001/05/05/world/iran-s-president-seeks-new-term-vowing-more-political-change.html).

political agents. From their impressive mobilization and participation in the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the presidential election of 2009 to their vocal presence in North Africa and the “Arab Spring,”<sup>2</sup> to the Voice of Concerned Mothers in Indonesia, women are joining their voices and energetically mobilizing their resources to participate in the public domain in ever-increasing numbers. Brief though the Arab Spring seems to have been, it has already engendered a more vocal gender reflexivity and rekindled political awakening in the region. Increasingly educated and well informed, women have shed the age-old cloak of cultural inhibitions and have challenged the rigid patriarchal constructions of gender (in)justice, political/legal inequalities, and gender hierarchy. They come from all walks of life, backgrounds, beliefs, classes, and strata, religious or secular, and are determined to have a seat at the political table, one that has long been so jealously monopolized by men. Caught between a rock and a hard place, between the enduring Western Orientalist narratives and the lasting indigenous misogynist policies, “Muslim women” have a delicate balancing act to perform. Not wishing to feed the tired universalized colonial narrative of victimized and passive “Muslim women,” nor willing to suffer the intolerant “fundamentalist” and “essentialist” discourse of “Islamists” in their own home countries, women activists and scholars of all backgrounds have shown considerable awareness of and reflexivity to local and global political dynamics. They have questioned the male domination of political authority and monopoly of sacred knowledge and have challenged men on both fronts, though more successfully in the latter. Unwilling to subordinate their piety and devotion to misogynist “orthodoxies,” women scholars of Islam have pursued a two-pronged strategy. First, to retrieve from the recesses of historical neglect the names and biographies of women who contributed to religious knowledge and gained religious authority; and second, to pursue and develop a “feminist theology,” based on a modern rereading of the Quranic revelations: one that is egalitarian, tolerant, and inclusive.<sup>3</sup> They have been equally critical of the essentialist Orientalist stereotyping of “Muslim women” as victimized, needing “saving” by colonial and Western powers (Abu-Lughod 2013). Women’s political authority, however, has received less

<sup>2</sup> Attributing the adjective “spring” to the Arab uprising of 2011 has become contested. See a series of commentaries and exchanges in the Sociology of Islam list electronic posting (September 14, 2018). Retrieved from Sociology of Islam, [sociology\\_of\\_islam-g@vt.edu](mailto:sociology_of_islam-g@vt.edu). I continue to use “Arab Spring” because of its identification with these particular uprisings.

<sup>3</sup> See, for a few examples, the work of Asma Afsaruddin, Leila Ahmed, Kecia Ali, Laleh Bakhtiar, Asma Barlas, Riffat Hassan, Mervat Hatem, Aziza Al-Hibri, Ayesha Hidayatullah, Amira Sonbol, D. Spellberg, Barbara Stowasser, and Amina Wadud.

systematic attention<sup>4</sup>; it is highly contested and fraught with tensions and contradictions, and has faced a much tougher patriarchal challenge from within the Muslim world. Meaningful political authority and representation at the highest echelons of the state is still far out of women's reach, and not just in the Muslim world. But the rough political terrains have not stopped women from mobilizing and organizing in the Muslim world, and beyond.

My interest was initially sparked by the election of Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan in 1988, the first democratically elected woman prime minister in the Muslim world, and was further piqued by Mrs. Shahid Salis, the tightly veiled, highly educated, and articulate woman who told me that she saw no incompatibility between being a woman and becoming the president of a country such as the Islamic Republic of Iran. She was one of the six presidential contenders whom I interviewed for my video documentary, *Mrs. President: Women and Political Leadership in Iran* (2002).<sup>5</sup> She underscored the legitimacy – indeed, the necessity – of her run for the presidency in Iran, first and foremost on the basis of the Quranic revelations regarding the sovereignty of the Queen of Sheba (27:20–44). “We have [in the Qur’an],” she said, “a country where a woman called Queen of Sheba was ruling. This is very important for us.” She continued, “Historically, women have played fundamental roles, *naqsh-i asli*,” in the lives of male religious and political leaders (19:14–54). She stressed the role mothers and wives played in the lives of Abrahamic prophets, including Muhammad, Jesus, and Moses. Mrs. Shahid Salis emphasized the indispensable financial assistance and emotional support Khadija, the Prophet’s first wife, provided him, and underscored the special attention the Prophet lavished on his daughter Fatima by taking her to public places. Her remarks sounded well thought out and strategic to me. She was determined to engage in the “serious games” (Ortner 2006) of political competition in Iran. Knowledgeable about the tenor of religious discourse of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Shahid Salis supported her run for the presidency by systematically quoting Quranic verses or Prophetic hadiths – much as the current male political and religious elite do in Iran. She used similar religious/political logic to counter the patriarchal elite’s justification of restricting women’s access to the political domain.

Ten years later, in another Muslim society, the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize winner Tawakkol Abdel-Salam Karman<sup>6</sup> also legitimated her political activism by reaching back in history to trace her noble genealogy to the

<sup>4</sup> See Jalalzai (2008, 207). <sup>5</sup> <http://ffh.films.com/search.aspx?q=shahla+haeri>.

<sup>6</sup> <http://nobelwomensinitiative.org/meet-the-laureates/tawakkol-karman/#sthash.cNv2DnOV.dpuf>.

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Queen of Sheba *and* to Queen Arwa, locally known as the “Little Queen of Sheba” (the subjects of Chapters 1 and 3, respectively). Wrapped in her colorful headscarf, Karman addressed the Nobel Committee in Sweden with eloquence:

And here I am now . . . coming from the land of Yemen, the Yemen of wisdom and ancient civilizations, the Yemen of more than five thousand years of long history, the great Kingdom of Sheba, the Yemen of the two queens, Bilqis<sup>7</sup> and Arwa, the Yemen which is currently experiencing the greatest and the most powerful and the largest eruption of Arab spring revolution.

She defended the values of the “Arab spring” and voiced her dream of having a peaceful, democratic country, one that would function under the rule of law.<sup>8</sup> Karman’s call for democracy, rule of law, and orderly transfer of power in Yemen echoed that of her countrywoman Dr. Faufa Hassan al-Sharqi, a candidate for a seat in the parliament. Some twenty years earlier and in one of her campaign speeches in the capital city of San’a al-Sharqi also connected women’s political activism in Yemen to the legendary Queen of Sheba and the eleventh-century Queen Arwa (Warburton 1993, 12).

Informed on their history and confident of their objectives, these women exhibited political acumen and determination in their quest to reappropriate the unforgettable queens of Islam. I intend to accompany them on this quest. I want to bring to life stories of legendary and historical women rulers from medieval to modern times, those formidable women leaders who have reached the apex of authority and power in patriarchal Muslim societies. As I embarked on this project, however, I have at times wondered why the Quranic revelations regarding the sovereignty of the Queen of Sheba, whose transcultural story has historically enjoyed transnational popularity, have not been systematically appropriated by her Muslim daughters to claim political authority and leadership – just as Mrs. Shahid Salis was doing in Iran. Why and how was the queen’s bond with her worldly daughters severed, metaphorically speaking? What kind of sacred justification or secular logic has been employed to justify Muslim women’s banishment from political domains? Yet this patriarchal history has not proceeded without challenges by women, sporadic and exceptional though their participation in the political “games of thrones” has been. Succession, be it to the throne in the legendary land of Saba, medieval Yemen and India, or modern Pakistan

<sup>7</sup> Bilqis is the popular name for the Queen of Sheba (see Chapter 1).

<sup>8</sup> [www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2011/karman/26163-tawakkol-karman-nobel-lecture-2011/](http://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2011/karman/26163-tawakkol-karman-nobel-lecture-2011/). Sadly, foreign intervention and frequent bombing is rapidly destroying the Yemini people and their ancient civilization.

and Indonesia, has almost always been contested, whether through dynastic ties or electoral procedures.

This book is about gendering the history of sovereignty and political authority in the Muslim world by highlighting the lives of Muslim women leaders who have contested rules of dynastic and political power to become sovereigns in their highly patriarchal societies.<sup>9</sup> How did women rulers achieve such feats? What sociopolitical structures, cultural mechanisms, and personal qualities enabled them to realize their objectives? In talking about women and political authority, however, I am mindful that women have always wielded power – in the sense of influencing others' behavior – but often from behind the throne. Women have, throughout history, lived with men of power and have influenced them and exerted power over them. Indeed, there are more examples of women swaying the course of a society's events through their sons, husbands, and fathers than women who have actually worn the crown.<sup>10</sup> My interest in this book is with women at the forefront of the political scene, women who have engaged the existing structures of power and authority and have overcome objections and obstacles to become political leaders in medieval Egypt, Yemen, and India, or in modern Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Indonesia.

The written history of Islam and the Muslim world, in all its geographical breadth and layers of cultural diversity and complexity, represent an overwhelmingly masculine history, one that has by and large ignored women and their sociocultural and political contributions – at least until well into the twentieth century. Yet while the written history has assiduously ignored women, if not actively forgotten them, the oral history of the region and its folklore have given a prominent place to its womenfolk and their ingenuity. I am referring to the enchanting stories of *The Thousand and One Nights* that bring women's intelligence and agency to life, in their kaleidoscopic complexities, colorfulness, and intrigues.

I take a long-term ethnohistorical view of Muslim women's paths to power, contextualized within a cross-cultural anthropological perspective. Presently, with Muslim women's mobilization in the public domain and their demand for political representation and leadership, a book on medieval and modern Muslim women who have actually occupied the position of queens, sultans, and prime ministers is timely – if not overdue. A major goal of this book is thus to make visible aspects of Islamic history and Muslim women's political lives and leadership unknown to a vast

<sup>9</sup> For a description of the specificities of patriarchy in the Middle East, see Joseph and Slyomovics (2001).

<sup>10</sup> For two excellent monographs on such women, see Peirce (2017) and Lal (2018).

number of people, including many Muslims themselves. Muslim women's paths to power depend on a multiplicity of factors, including dynastic ties and descent, marriage and political alliances, the presence or absence of competent and viable male heirs, ethnicity and race, and the dynamics of the relation between the ruling patriarch and the religious establishment. They also depend on women's own personal resourcefulness, ambition, and charisma, and on their political acumen to patronize networks of the palace and popular support. In modern times, succession and transfer of power depend principally on the constitution, public support, and the ballot box – though dynastic ties always help. Political rivalry and battles of succession, however, may be no less intense – they may even be deadly – as I discuss in Chapters 5 and 6.

Daniel Varisco finds anthropologists “guilty of writing almost exclusively for, and often against, themselves” (2018, 2), thus remaining unknown among a wider readership. I wish to avoid falling into that category. I have tried to write this book on Muslim women rulers and political leaders in such a manner that would appeal to a wider audience and find a larger readership, particularly among students and young people. Last year, I had a chance to discuss parts of this book with my advanced undergraduate and graduate students at Boston University, some of whom were from the Muslim world. They were mesmerized to learn about women leaders and rulers, and almost without exception expressed surprise that they had not heard about them before.<sup>11</sup> Why was it, they repeatedly commented, that the images of Muslim women they see around them – whether in their own home countries or abroad – are often so woefully misguided. I hope this book addresses some of their concerns, satisfies their inquisitive minds, and quenches their thirst for knowledge about some remarkable Muslim women who have achieved political authority and left indelible marks on the history of the Muslim world.

<sup>11</sup> The class' final project was called “Adopt a Queen.” Students were required to write a research paper about a Muslim queen from any historical period and continent. A majority of them told me how much they learned doing the research and gained new understanding of challenges of authority faced by women in their societies and cultures.

## Acknowledgments

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I have benefited enormously from the existing – and rapidly growing – work done by scholars of Islam, Muslim, and non-Muslim. My intellectual debt to this scholarship is huge. Knowledge is not only accumulative, it is also shared. As scholars, we stand to benefit from the knowledge produced by our predecessors as well as by our contemporaries, even as we wish to differentiate our work from that of others and to underline its originality. I wish to join the many indigenous and international scholars of Islam and activists who have made it their objective to listen to the echoes of Muslim women's voices from the past and the present – to retrieve their political history, render them visible, and make stories of their lives accessible to a larger readership. A heartfelt collective thanks to all.

Several grants and fellowships helped me launch this book project and to continue working on it. A postdoctoral fellowship at the Women's Studies in Religion Program at Harvard Divinity School (2005–2006) provided me with the perfect intellectual opportunity to think through my project on Muslim women's political authority. I am grateful to Ann Braude, the director of the WSRP, and to my cohorts Gannit Ankori, Constance Furey, Rosemary Carbine, and Jia Jinhua for their stimulating comments and contributions.

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xvi Acknowledgments

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In Pakistan, where I have gone many times since 1987, I felt right back at “home,” thanks to Nadeem Akhtar’s impeccable arrangements for my lodging and transportation. I sought out old friends, and had long conversations with Durre Ahmad, Senator Aitzaz Ahsan, Asma Jahangir (whose untimely death in February of 2018 I mourn deeply), Ambassador Seyyda Abida Hussein, Naheed Khan and her husband Senator Safdar Abbasi. Their willingness to share their firsthand knowledge of the times they had spent with Benazir Bhutto was invaluable and I thank them all with much gratitude. I spent much time discussing the topic of my book with Kishwar Naheed and Ayesha Siddiqa, two of the remarkable women whom I had interviewed for my book on professional Pakistani women (2002) and whose friendship I have since continued to enjoy.

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xviii Acknowledgments

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As always, the love of my husband, Walter (Rusty) Crump, my siblings Shirin, Shokoofeh, Mohammad Reza, and Niloofar, and my nieces and nephews to whom I have dedicated this book, sustained me emotionally and gave me the energy and strength to persist and to continue.

## Abbreviations

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AZO	Al-Zulfikar Organization
CIMC	Congress of the Indonesian Muslim Community
Golkar	The New Order Party
JI	Jamaat-e-Islami
ISI	Inter-Service Intelligence
JUP	Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam
MPR	People's Consultative Assembly
NU	Nahdlatul Ulama
PDI-P	Indonesian Democratic Party - Struggle
PKB	National Awakening Party
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
PPP	United Development Party
PPP	Pakistan People Party

## Glossary

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<i>‘adat</i>	custom, tradition
<i>‘afarit</i> (sing. <i>‘ifrit</i> )	demons, supernatural creatures
<i>abangan</i>	a nominal or syncretic Javanese Muslim
<i>‘adil</i>	just
<i>amir</i>	king, leader
<i>amir ahkur</i>	lord of the stable
<i>amir hajib</i>	military chamberlain
<i>‘arsh-i ‘azim</i>	mighty throne
<i>aya/ayah</i>	a verse in the Qur’an
Basra	a city in southern Iraq
Bay’a	pledge of loyalty
Begum	lady, honorific term of address in South Asia
<i>benazir</i>	without parallel, incomparable
<i>chamcha</i>	henchman, crony
<i>Chihilgani</i>	the forty slave devotees of Sultan Iltutmish
<i>da ‘wa</i>	mission
<i>da ‘i</i>	missionary
<i>da ‘i mutlaq</i>	supreme missionary with absolute authority
<i>dam</i>	breath
<i>danishmand-guneh</i>	quasi-intellectual, learned
<i>dalang</i>	puppeteer, storyteller
<i>dupatta</i>	a long rectangular scarf, an indispensable part of Pakistani dress
<i>durbar</i>	royal court
<i>fitna</i>	civil war, chaos
<i>fuqaha</i>	jurists
<i>ghaba/qaba</i>	long traditional male garment
<i>ghairat</i>	jealousy (primarily male), honor
<i>ghulam</i>	slave
Golkar	Suharto’s New Order party
hadith	sayings and deeds attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, recorded over a century and half

	after his death. Hadiths constitute the second most important source of authority in Islam
<i>hajib</i>	cover, veil
<i>halus</i>	smooth, calm, harmony
<i>hammam</i>	bathroom
<i>harem</i>	women's quarter
<i>hazrat</i>	majesty (honorific)
<i>hikmat</i>	wisdom
<i>howdah</i>	a seat or covered pavilion on the back of an elephant or camel
<i>hudhud</i>	hoopoe
<i>hujja</i>	the highest rank after the imam-caliph in the Isma'ili-Shi'i religious and political hierarchy
<i>ibu</i>	mother in Bahasa
<i>idda</i>	the four-month period of sexual abstinence obligatory for Muslim widows
<i>ifk</i>	"story of the lie"
<i>'ifrit</i>	demon
<i>iqta'</i>	the assignment of lands for a fixed value
<i>'ishrat</i>	pleasure
<i>jahiliyya</i>	ignorance, i.e., of Islam
<i>jinn</i>	supernatural creature
<i>kadhatona</i>	the inner quarter in a royal palace where women lived in Indonesia
<i>kaghzi pirhan</i>	dyed garment
<i>khalq</i>	people, masses
<i>kham</i>	raw, inexperienced
<i>khatib</i>	public speaker
<i>khatun</i>	lady, princes, queen consort
<i>khudavand-i jahan</i>	Lord of the World
<i>khunriz</i>	blood thirsty
<i>khul'</i>	Islamic divorce initiated by wife
<i>khutba</i>	religious sermon
<i>kulah</i>	hat
<i>labuhan</i>	a purifying ritual
<i>lahv va la 'b</i>	indulging in one's desires
<i>lashkar kish</i>	military leader
<i>Limbuk</i>	a female figure of Indonesian mythology
<i>mamluk</i>	slave
<i>mastureh</i>	chaste, covered, veiled

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<i>mbak</i>	respectful term for older sister
<i>mimbar bebas</i>	free speech forum
<i>mukhannisan</i> (pl.)	castrated, effeminate men
<i>mulahideh</i>	apostate
<i>muqti</i>	holder of <i>iqta'</i>
<i>mut'a</i>	temporary marriage
<i>naqsh-i asli</i>	fundamental roles
<i>namdar</i>	famous, world renown
<i>naskh</i>	cancelled
Nijahid	a Yemenite tribe
<i>parwarish</i>	foster
Pathan	synonymous with Pashtun, an ethnic group in Afghanistan and Pakistan
<i>punakawan</i>	clown/servant
<i>qaba</i>	long traditional male garment
<i>qaramatih</i>	an Isma'ili offshoot
<i>qadi</i>	judge
<i>qibla</i>	direction of Muslim prayer toward Mecca
<i>qaum</i>	tribe, nation
qumus	envelope
Qur'an	Muslim holy book, the scripture; the highest source of authority
<i>qurbat</i>	proximity, favor
Qureish	the Prophet Muhammad's tribe in Mecca
<i>ra'iyat parvar</i>	guardian of people
<i>reformasi</i>	reformist
<i>sahar</i>	dawn
sahih	correct, authentic
Semar	a beloved mythical male character in Indonesia
<i>shadgan</i>	a safe space in the royal court
Shafi'ism	one of the four schools of Sunni law
<i>shaheed</i>	martyr
<i>shihna</i>	police magistrate
<i>sijill</i>	official letter
<i>sunna</i>	tradition, a way of life, tradition of the Prophet Muhammad
<i>sura</i>	a chapter in the Qur'an
<i>talaq</i>	Islamic divorce
<i>tankah</i>	coin
<i>tavakkol</i>	trust in God, surrender
Tayyibi Isma'ilism	a branch of Isma'ilism
<i>'urf</i>	custom, tradition

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valide sultan  
*wahju*  
*wali*  
*Wayang*  
*wazir*

mother of the sultan  
divine inspiration  
representative, guardian  
shadow puppet play  
prime minister

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