

Khilafah Movement

The **Khilafat movement** (1919-1924) was a political campaign launched mainly by Muslims in South Asia to influence the British government and to protect the Ottoman Empire during the aftermath of World War I. The position of Caliph after the Armistice of Mudros of October 1918 with the military occupation of Istanbul and Treaty of Versailles (1919) fell into a disambiguation along with the Ottoman Empire's existence. The movement gained force after the Treaty of Sèvres (August 1920) which solidified the partitioning of the Ottoman Empire.¹ In some regions the Khilafat movement cause was perceived as Islamic fundamentalism based on a pan-Islamic agenda.

In India, although mainly a religious movement, the movement became a part of the wider Indian independence movement. The movement was a topic in Conference of London (February 1920).

History

The Caliphate is an Islamic system of governance in which the state rules under Islamic law. Caliph literally means “successor” or “representative” and emphasizes religious authority for the head of state. It was adopted as a title by the Ummayyad Caliphs and then by the Abbasid Caliphs, as well as by the Fatimid Caliphs of North Africa, the Almohad Caliphs of North Africa and Spain and the Ottoman Dynasty. Most historical Muslim rulers were sultans or amirs, and gave token obedience to a caliph who often had very little real authority. Moreover, the Muslim clergy, the scholars and the various Sufi orders, exercised more religious influence than the Caliph.

Khilafat in South Asia

Although political activities and popular outcry on behalf of the caliphate emerged across the Muslim world, the most prominent activities took place in India. A prominent Muslim cleric and journalist, Maulana Mohammad Ali Jouhar had spent four years in prison for preaching

¹ Encyclopedia Britannica

resistance to the British and support for the caliphate. At the onset of the Turkish war of independence, Muslim religious leaders feared for the caliphate, which the European powers were reluctant to protect. Ali and his brother Maulana Shaukat Ali joined with other leaders such as Dr. Mukhtar Ahmed Ansari, Hasrat Mohani, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and Dr. Hakim Ajmal Khan to form the All India Khilafat Committee. They aimed to build political unity amongst Muslims and use their influence to protect the caliphate. In 1920, they published the Khilafat Manifesto, which called upon the British to protect the caliphate and for Indian Muslims to unite and hold the British accountable for this purpose.

In 1920 an alliance was made between Khilafat leaders and the Indian National Congress, the largest political party in India and of the nationalist movement. Congress leader Mohandas Gandhi and the Khilafat leaders promised to work and fight together for the causes of Khilafat and *Swaraj*. Seeking to increase pressure on the British, the Khilafatists became a major part of the Non-cooperation movement — a nationwide campaign of mass, peaceful civil disobedience. The support of the Khilafatists helped Gandhi and the Congress ensure Hindu-Muslim unity during the struggle. Khilafat leaders such as Dr. Ansari, Maulana Azad and Hakim Ajmal Khan also grew personally close to Gandhi. These leaders founded the Jamia Millia Islamia in 1920 to promote independent education and social rejuvenation for Muslims.

The non-cooperation campaign was at first successful. Massive protests, strikes and acts of civil disobedience spread across India. Hindus and Muslims collectively offered resistance, which was largely peaceful. Gandhi, the Ali brothers and others were imprisoned by the British. However, the Congress-Khilafat alliance began withering soon. The Khilafat campaign had been opposed by other political parties such as the Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha. While League politicians such as Muhammad Ali Jinnah dismissed the campaign as “religious frenzy,” many Hindu religious and political leaders identified the Khilafat cause as Islamic fundamentalism based on a pan-Islamic agenda.

In 1920, some 18,000 Muslims from Sindh and the Northwest Frontier Province emigrated to Afghanistan on the urging of Muslim religious leaders. They saw India as a *Dar al-Harb*, a non-Islamic land inhabited mainly by Hindus and controlled by the British; they sought to temporarily live in a *Dar al-Islam*, which signified a Muslim-majority and rule of Islam. However, the Afghan government forcibly deported the refugees back to British India, leaving them weak and vulnerable.

The Moplah rebellion in Malabar began as a dispute between mainly Hindu landlords and mainly Muslim peasants who farmed their land. This was because the Hindu landlords confiscated Muslim lands while they had attempted to flee to Afghanistan and refused to return their property. The situation eventually escalated into an inter-communal conflict in which armed Muslims attacked Hindus and British authorities. Thousands of people were killed and inter-communal harmony was severely weakened as a result, especially after Congress supported both the Hindu landlords and the British efforts to violently crush the rebellion.

Collapse

In wake of these disturbances, the Ali brothers began distancing themselves from Gandhi and the Congress. The Ali brothers criticised Gandhi's commitment to non-violence and severed their ties with them after he suspended all civil disobedience after the killing of 22 policemen at Chauri Chaura in 1922. Although holding talks with the British and continuing their activities, the Khilafat struggle weakened as Muslims were divided between working for the Congress, the Khilafat cause and the Muslim League. The final blow came with the victory of Mustafa Kemal's forces, who overthrew the Ottoman rule to establish a pro-Western, secular republic in independent Turkey. The Khilafat leadership fragmented on different political lines. Leaders such as Dr. Ansari, Maulana Azad and Hakim Ajmal Khan remained strong supporters of Gandhi and the Congress. The Ali brothers joined the Muslim League. They would play a major role in the growth of the League's popular appeal and the subsequent Pakistan movement. There was, however, a

Caliphate Conference in Jerusalem in 1931 following Turkey's abolition of the Khilafat, to determine what should be done about the caliphate.²

Legacy

The Khilafat struggle evokes controversy and strong opinions. It is regarded as a political agitation based on a pan-Islamic, fundamentalist platform and being largely indifferent to the cause of Indian independence. Critics of the Khilafat see its alliance with the Congress as a marriage of convenience. Proponents of the Khilafat see it as a major milestone in improving Hindu-Muslim relations, while advocates of Pakistan and Muslim separatism see it as a major step towards establishing the separate Muslim state. The Ali brothers are regarded as founding-fathers of Pakistan, while Azad, Dr. Ansari and Hakim Ajmal Khan are widely celebrated as national heroes in India.

The cause of establishing an Islamic State by reviving the caliphate system has been adopted by organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Jamaat-e-Islami umbrella groups in South Asia, founded in 1941 by Maulana Maududi and most of all Hizb ut Tahrir.

² Nasr, Vali, *The Shia Revival*, Norton, (2006), p.106