

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **Islamic Perspective on Imamship Tussle and Rationale Behind its Prohibition**

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#### **Abstract**

The work examined the Imamship tussle under the shade of Islamic law (Shariah) and the rationale behind its prohibition. The gap identified by the researcher was the restricted rotational system of Imamship which must be addressed according to the Qur'an and Sunnah. The data was gathered through primary sources which required the researcher to interview some personalities both physical and virtual, while the secondary sources were also considered for hitch-free analysis of data. The findings showed some reasons behind the Imamship tussle in some mosques such as hereditary, personal interest and political influences. The work recommended the abolition of restricted rotational system of Imamship in most mosques and to be replaced with unrestricted system of Imamship by making it open to all qualified Muslims irrespective of their background, as well as the reason

why they should embrace the verdict of the constituted authority. Finally, the work created an awareness of the evils of the restricted rotational system of Imamship through which qualified candidates outside the rotating families are marginalized, and the essence of embracing peace both before and after the Imamship processes.

**Keywords:** Imamship, Imam, Tussle

## **Introduction**

Tussle is the physical contest or struggle that cuts across all human endeavours, be it spiritual, political, social or economic. It is a global phenomenon that is obtainable within the Islamic and non-Islamic gatherings or organizations. Also, the physical contest for the mantle of leadership has been in existence right from the creation of the world. That was the rationale behind the rejection of *Iblis* [Satan] to bow down for Adam when he was instructed by Allah. Imamship tussle means fighting, contesting, struggling and seeking for the position of Imam by all means as a result of one's personal interest, political affinity and heredity.

Imamship tussle could be traced back to the second generation of Islam immediately after the demise of the Prophet regarding the legitimate person to succeed him. Then, Muslims were of two categories: the *Muhajirun* [the emigrants], *Ansar* [the helpers] and later the Shiites. Though majority of Muslims upheld that the Imamate should be based on consultation and that made Abubakar as the first Caliph of Prophet Muhammad [peace and blessings of Allah be upon him] in Islam. Shiites, on other hand, upheld the fabricated Hadith which alleged the Prophet to have raised and endorsed the

Imamate of Ali after his death at a place called Ghadir khumm while returning from farewell pilgrimage in the year 632 CE. This belief is the reason why we have two perceptions in respect of Imamship: the Sunni and Shiites perspectives [Abbas, 2010].

Subsequently, the false prophets, particularly *Musailimah*, and Sajjah began attributing prophecies to themselves following the death of Prophet Muhammad [SAW]. Also, Muawiyah, the governor of Syria, refused to obey 'Alee [the fourth Caliph] after the death of Prophet Muhammad [peace and blessings of Allah be upon him] as Caliph, requesting from him to find out the murderers of Uthman [the third Caliph] or else he would be taken as an accomplice. So, the Caliphate of 'Alee faced troubles with Muawiyah. Thereafter, there was a tussle between Husayn, the son of Ali and Yazid, the son of Muawiyah which led to the murder of the former on the instruction of the latter when he refused to pledge allegiance to his Imamship at a place called Karbala in the year 680 CE [Kilani, 2019]. Therefore, the Imamship tussle in most mosques especially in Yorubaland is far away from the ideal ways of appointing Imam. Therefore, the paper examines the factors that are instrumental to tussle and the lens upon which Islam look at Imamship tussle and the rationale behind its prohibition.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Imamship is defined as the religious leadership which entails the management of the affairs of the Muslim community, improving and exalting the position of Muslims. Also, it is a branch of Islamic

jurisprudence that deals with the study of the Imam as the head of a mosque, religious leader as well as community head [Adeleke, 2018].

The word *Imam* is derived from the Arabic verb “*Amma*” which has three different meanings according to Cowan (1993:23). It means to go or to go somewhere, to lead the way, lead someone by one’s example and to lead someone in prayer (*Salat*). So, Imam, in this context, is someone who stands in the front in order to lead others in prayers.

Also, the term Imam, in the view of Shah (2019) is an Arabic word which literally means guide or leader. It is, however, being mistakenly translated by some as in front due to the fact that they assign diacritic *fathah* as first vowel instead of the required *kasrah*. Be that as it may, it connotes different thing in the view of Orthodox Muslims and Shiites. To the former, it is a title reserved for those who lead congregational prayers, and occasionally extended to jurist consult. Bur for the later, it is a rank of theological significance and inherent component of their creedal postulations of prophecy and revelation.

Therefore, the following are the various usages of the word “Imam” according to Abbas (2010):

- a. Imam as a political head: The head of the Muslim government can be referred to as *Imam* or *Khalifah*. That is why the word “Imam” is being used interchangeably with *Khalifah*. So, the four rightly guided Caliphs who succeeded the Prophet both in the spiritual and political administration of the Muslim state could be referred to as Imams or Caliphs.

- b. Imam as a leader of Theology or Islamic Jurisprudence: Both scholars and founders of the Islamic School of Jurisprudence and Sects are also referred to as Imams. Such as *Imam Abu Hanifah*, *Imam Maliki*, *Imam Shafii*, *Imam Hambali*, *Imam Abu Hamid Al-Ghazzali*, *Imam Al-Jurjaani*, etc.
- c. Imam as a leader of prayer in the mosque: This is someone selected or appointed based on some qualifications to lead the Muslim congregants in either daily prayer, Friday prayer, or Eid prayers. However, this category is the focus of this paper.

The origin of Imamship in Islam could be traced to the life story of Prophet Ibrahim [may Allah be pleased with him] when he was made an Imam by Allah after he passed a series of divine stages and tests. Having made the Imam, he prayed unto his Lord to make his descendants Imams. Hence, acceptance of his prayer made his son Ismail an Imam, and at the same time, the Prophet of Allah, as well as Prophet Dawud. It could be noted that Prophet Dawud was not only an illustrious Prophet but also a king and Imam who was commanded to administer justice among people. That is why justice is the fundamental feature of Imam in Islam. Allah says:

O Dawud, We have made you a vicegerent on earth, so judge between people with truth, and do not follow your desires, lest it should lead you astray from Allah's path. Surely, those who go astray from Allah's path will have a severe punishment, because they had forgotten the day of Reckoning". Q38:26.

Also,

And when Ibrahim was tested by his Lord with certain words and he fulfilled them, He (Allah) said, I am going to make you an Imam for the people. He (Ibrahim) said, and from among my progeny. He (Allah) replied, my promise does not extend to the unjust". Q2:124.

The institution of Imamship was also linked to the life history of Prophet Muhammad. This is because he combined not only spiritual leadership, but also political, economic and social affairs. After his demise, Abubakar was made the leader (*Khalifah*) of the Muslim community, and he reigned for two years (632-634). Upon his death, and due to the significant role of the Imam in the society, Umar Ibnul Khattab was appointed as the leader and ruled for ten years (634-644). Next after him, was Uthman Bn Affan who governed for twelve years (644-656), and the last of them was Ali Bn Abi Talib; his Imamship lasted for five years (656-661). Therefore, all these Caliphs are regarded as the four rightly guided Caliphs. It was, however, extended to their successors as well especially the *Umayyad* and *Abbasid* dynasties in the history of the political administration of Islam till today (Adeleke, 2018:8).

Abbas (2010) enumerated some qualities that must be possessed by an individual wanting to become an Imam without which his Imamship is null and void. The qualities include: knowledge, masculinity, bravery, sound mind, Muslim, piety, uprightness, free status, age, justice and physical fitness. He also went on to state that there are three methods to install an Imam according to Shari'ah law: nomination, appointment or selection.

It is important to state that these are some of the qualities considered to be most suitable ones for anybody willing to become an Imam because the position is divine and should be occupied by someone who is divinely guided. Also, the Imam is expected to lead by example, serve as a model and live according to the dictates of the Holy Qur'an and Sunnah.

The term "tussle" merits examination. It conceptually signifies conflict, combat, discord, dispute, chaos, tension, crisis or hostility amongst individuals, groups, communities, states or nations, potentially resulting in the destruction of property, interests, lives and peace. According to the Oxford dictionary (1884), it is a vigorous struggle or scuffle, typically in order to obtain or achieve something. Therefore, the tussle in the present work is related to the struggle, fighting, argument and misunderstanding in the process of becoming an Imam. Struggle in respect of Imamship is conceived by the researcher in three different folds. Some struggle for Imamship for their own personal interest, and because they want the title to be attached to their names. Others struggle on the ground that it should be zoned to their family lineage in the form of hereditary succession, because they donated the land upon which the mosque was built or built by their family. Some others struggle because of politics, in the sense that some politicians might have an interest in subjecting Imam by nominating him or suggesting him purposely for their political aspiration.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Therefore, the theoretical framework adopted in this work is Conflict and Organizational Conflict Theories.

i. Conflict Theory: This is a social theory that establishes that society is in a state of perpetual contest and struggle because of competition for limited resources. Also, it is a social-political theory that seeks to explain political and economic events in terms of an ongoing struggle over finite resources. The theory has a profound influence on 19th and 20th-century thought and continues to influence political, religious and social groups today.

Also, the theory holds that social order is maintained by domination and power, rather than by consensus and conformity. According to the theory, the wealthy and powerful try to hold on to power by all means, chiefly by suppressing the poor and the powerless. A basic premise of conflict theory is that individuals and groups within society attempt to maximize their wealth and power. Therefore, the theory is credited to the philosopher, historian, economist, political was instrumental to the development of communism as a school of thought in economics. [Adam, 2024].

ii. Organizational Conflict Theory: It is a theory which studies the genesis and the remote causes of an organization especially the leadership tussle. It also connotes the resolutions made after a conflict within an organization. Again, the theory is an amalgamation of thoughts from various fields of study such as management, sociology, psychology and humanities.

Taher, (2016) outlines some important tenets of this theory, they are as follows:

- a. That conflict is inevitable in any organization and that there is positive and negative conflict
- b. That there are different types of conflict which arise within an organization such as leadership and departmental tussle

- c. That interpersonal conflict is the most popular within an organization
- d. That the cause of the conflict should be investigated before any possible resolution
- e. That conflicts must be resolved either by the insiders or outsiders for the smooth progress of an organization.

It is important to note that the theory is a product and template of Karl Marx's conflict theory. It was initiated in the year 1956 by Lewis Coser who opined that conflict is not always negative, but can be used in strengthening and helping the development of an organization. Subsequently, the theory was modified in 1959 by Ralf Dahrendorf who capitalized on the fact that change in leadership is often the cause of organizational conflict. Other contributors to the theory include Gunnar Myrdal, Mary Parker Follett.

The two theories discussed above are relevant to the present study in the sense that the theories depict the competition associated with the mantle of Imamship in this context and leadership in general. It is germane to the cause of leadership tussle in some mosques. Lastly, the latter suggests that there should be resolution after a conflict which the present work will consider.

### **Method of Data Collection**

The researcher has witnessed some leadership tussles in mosques, hence, these serve as his sources of information or data (primary). More so, secondary sources were also used in data generation.

## **Islamic Perspective on Imamship Tussle**

Imamship is an Islamic institution that plays a vital role, not only in Islam but also in other aspects of human endeavours. It is a system of selecting or appointing an Imam in Islam. Also, it is a concept in Islamic jurisprudence which studies the Imam as the head of the mosque, religious leader as well as a community leader [Adeleke, 2018:7].

A tussle is a conflict or disagreement that arises when two or more persons have similar opinions or interests, involving a struggle for power, influence or resources. Also, it is a situation where there is a clash of interest for the mantle of leadership and could lead to physical conflict or verbal disagreement.

Islam is a religion that encompasses all aspects of human endeavours. Therefore, the appointment of an Imam has been catered for in the Hadith of the Prophet. However, in Nigeria, the criteria are not in any way different from what is obtainable in the said Hadith, but the major problem is the procedure through which the Imam is appointed. The procedure differs from one state to another, and from one mosque to another. So, the general procedure followed in Nigeria, especially the Western part of the country while appointing a new Imam is a rotational system whereby two or more families who are entitled to an Imamship rotate it between themselves [Jawondo, 2005].

As such, Imamship tussle is an act of engaging in physical conflict or disagreement amongst the persons vying for the vacant position of Imam which mostly leads to division in Muslim communities. In this regard, it is

imperative to look at the factors that are instrumental to Imamship tussle in most mosques and Islamic approaches to Imamship tussle and why it is not Islamic.

1. Heredity: It is a way of transmitting the leadership position to one's offspring whether they are capable or not. This is a major reason for Imamship tussle in the Western part of Nigeria. The factor was responsible for the disagreement among Muslims in Alawonla mosque [Ilorin] in 1995 [Saheed Alawonla, personal interview, August 29, 2025].
2. Personal Interest: Majority of the people who show interest in Imamship, at times, do so based on personal interest and not for the sake of Allah or the benefit of the people they are to lead. This rationale is reason for disunity among Muslims at Jawondo and Adangba in Ilorin in 2009 and 2014 respectively. The tussle led to the emergence of seven mosques after the tussle, four from the former and three from the latter [Idowu Jawondo, personal interview, August 20, 2025].
3. Imposition: This factor plays a vital role in causing division in many mosques. This is because some persons impose themselves on people to become their Imam, especially when they think that they are the most knowledgeable of all without a concrete justification for their thought, forgetting the Hadith of the Prophet that warned against imposition:

The Prophet (may the peace and blessing of Allah be upon him) said, "O 'Abdur-Rahman son of Samurah; do not seek to be a ruler, because if you are given authority for it, then you will be held responsible for it, but if you are given without

asking for it, then you will be helped in it (by Allah): and whenever you take an oath to do something and later found that something else is better than the first, then do the better one and make expiation for your oath” [Bukhari, 6622].

4. Sense of Entitlement: This is yet another main factor responsible Imamship tussle in some mosques in the sense that some compounds do rotate the Imamship amongst themselves and hold it as their personal property or entitlement. That is why when other compounds show interest in Imamship, the rotating families kick against it and feel that their right should not be taken away from them. Seeing Imamship as an entitlement of one or more families is wrong in that anybody who is qualified as far as the Imamship requirements are concerned should be made Imam regardless of his background. Also, the Prophet did not limit Imamship to any race, colour or family, but made it generic and should be occupied by qualified persons. This could also be seen in Ilorin at Adangba mosque in 2014
5. Political Influence: It is obvious that politics has crept into mosques in that some people will show loyalty to a candidate in his presence and work against him in his absence. Also, some politicians do support their favourite candidate in order to use them for their political ambition (Alfanla Ibrahim, personal interview, August 25, 2024).

Islam does not stop anybody from contesting for a leadership position if he finds himself physically, mentally, spiritually or intellectually fit. This can be

seen in the life of Prophet Yusuf when he asked the king of Egypt to make him the supervisor in Q12:55. Allah says:

“He said, “Put me in charge of the storehouses of the land; I am indeed a knowledgeable, constant preserver.”

Based on this verse, if there is a vacant position, any person who considers himself capable of managing it can be considered so far there is no worldly motivation, but for the sake of Allah. Then, it is permissible to request for leadership position in that regard in as much he knows that it will not lead to division or disunity amongst Muslims if he is eventually deprived and that was why the Prophet prevented Abdur-Rahman Ibn Samurah from asking for the leadership position.

Also, request for Imamship is seen in the life of Prophet Ibrahim when Allah promised to make him an Imam of the Ummah (Muslim community). Ibrahim, therefore, requested in advance from Allah on behalf of his progeny, of which Allah attached a condition to its approval, saying it is only your righteous and just children that would occupy the position. Allah says:

And recall when Ibrahim was tried by his Lord with certain words and he fulfilled them. He said, “I am appointing you as a leader (Imam) for mankind.” He said, “And of my offspring?” He (Allah) said, “My covenant does not include the unjust. Q2:124

It is permissible for an individual to vie show interest when there is vacancy in the position of Imam in as much his request will not lead to physical combat

or disunity in the Muslim ummah. Therefore, the Prophet is reported to have said:

On the authority of Abu Mas'ud 'Uqbah bin 'Amr Al-Badri Al-Ansari [may Allah be pleased with him], who said the messenger of Allah [peace and blessings of Allah be upon him] said, "The person who is best versed in the recitation of Qur'an should lead the prayer; but if all those present are equally versed in it, then the one who has the most knowledge of Sunnah; if they are equal in that respect too, then the one who has migrated to Madinah first; if they are equal in that also, then the oldest of them. Man should not lead another person in prayer where the latter has authority, or sit in his house without his permission."(*Sahihul Muslim*, Hadith 1079).

A look into this Hadith critically shows that the Prophet had laid down the procedure for appointing Imam during his lifetime and for the years to come; that is why Hadith depicts competition between two persons. On the other hand, Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) warned against vying for the leadership if he found out that the person contesting for it was weak or the intention was worldly, and that was why he prevented Abdur-Rahman bn Samurah mentioned earlier.

Tussle, in this regard, is the physical conflict or disunity among the contestants that could eventually lead to division in the Muslim community or

the establishment of other mosques which is regarded as ‘*Masjid Dirar*’ (mischief mosque) in Q9:107:

And (there are) those who took (for themselves) a mosque to cause harm and disbelief and disunity among the believers, and as an outpost for those who fought Allah and His Messenger earlier, though they will most surely swear: “We only wanted the best,” but Allah bears witness that they are certainly liars”.

Also, Q3:103 talks about the brotherhood and unity of Muslims that are in jeopardy during the tussle. Allah says:

And hold fast to the lifeline of Allah, all together, and do not become disunited. And remember Allah’s blessing upon you: how you were enemies, then He reconciled between your hearts, and by His blessing you became brethren. And you were on the brink of a pit of fire, then He rescued you from it. Allah thus clarifies His signs for you, that you may be guided”.

Based on these verses, it is obvious that the main reason behind prohibition of Imamship tussle is because it can lead to the two evils pointed out in these verses - proliferation of ungodly mosques and disunity in the Muslim community.

Therefore, it is expected of the Shura members (consultation) or congregants after the selection stage to try and reconcile the contestants to

prevent division in the Muslim community, and if they reject and insist on establishing mosques, the whole congregants should fight against them till they come back to their senses. Allah says in Q49:9:

And if two factions of believers fall to fighting each other, reconcile between them. But if one group oppresses the other, then combat the one which oppresses until it complies with the command of Allah. But once it has complied, reconcile between them with justice and be equitable; indeed, Allah loves the equitable.

It is observed from this verse that the main duty of the Muslim community is to fight against anybody insisting on causing disunity or division. The Prophet also warned against enmity and disunity of the Muslims in one of his *Ahadith* where he said:

Beware of suspicion, for suspicion is the worse of the false tales; and don't look for the other's faults and don't spy, jealous one another, desert one another, and don't hate one another, and O Allah's worshippers, be brothers [as Allah as ordered you]. (*Sahihul Bukhari*, Hadith 6064).

Also, Shura committee should also be conscious of Allah and be objective in selecting the Imam by considering the criterion laid down by the Prophet, and no other considerations like race, colour, background, compound etc. On the other hand, the person who could not make it to be the Imam should

remember a verse attributing the dominion and authority to Allah alone, and that He extends it to whoever He likes; He takes it from whoever He wishes. Allah says:

Say, "O Allah, Master of the dominion, You grant dominion to whomever You will and You strip dominion from whomever you will, and You honor whomever you will and You humiliate whomever you will; in Your hand is all goodness. You are indeed All-Powerful over everything. Q3:26

It is worthy of mentioning that if the person contesting for the Imamship understands this verse properly and ponders over it, then, there would be peace, love, unity and tranquility among Muslims, and that will not stop anyone from contesting for the Imamship position. But if the verse is neglected and people seek to gain dominion and Imamship by all means as obtainable today in the Muslim community, the aftermath of tussle which is enmity and division will remain in Muslim communities until we return to the Prophet's ways of appointing an Imam.

## **Conclusion**

This research is expected to cause a turning point concerning Imamship tussle in Yorubaland specifically and Nigeria at large in that the work has pointedly justified the need for the eradication of restricted rotational system of Imamship which is rampant in majority of the mosques amongst Yoruba. The

paper has also vociferated the need to revisit and embrace the Prophet's procedure of Imamship as a means of preventing disunity and division in Muslim communities. Allah says:

O you who believe, obey Allah and obey the Messenger, and those in authority among you. Then, if you quarrel about something, revert it back to Allah and the Messenger, if you believe in Allah and the Last Day. That is good and more suitable at the end". Q4:59

Three sources of conflict resolution are mentioned in the quoted verse which are Allah, His Prophet, and those in authority. It is established from this verse that those in authority must be obeyed in as much they did not command us to disobey Allah. It is unfortunate that in this age people do not accept and obey the verdict of constituted authorities whenever the case of Imamship tussle is brought to them, rather raise their own mosques. So, this work lends credence to it that constituted authority be upheld wholeheartedly by the people in as much it is in tandem with the Qur'an and Sunnah.

### **Recommendations**

Tussle is not a contemporary concept but has been in existence right from the inception of the world. Below are some recommendations for Muslim communities to handle the situation:

- i. Mosque administrators should revisit the Prophetic pattern of Imamship which is void of any sentiment or favouritism because preference was

given by the Prophet to the most versed in Qur'an, Hadith, and other Islamic related sciences, and not to any family or tribe.

- ii. Restricted rotational system of Imamship practiced in many mosques be replaced with unlimited and unrestricted rotational system of Imamship among the worshippers. Preference should be given to the most qualified and pious after they might have examined.
- iii. There should be remuneration for Imams for their upkeep and periodic training in order to keep them abreast of the contemporary issues. Also, library, travelling and wardrobe allowances should be allocated to Imams. Again, there must be a functional Shura committee to oversee the affairs of mosques and appoint an Imam whenever there is vacancy without any worldly consideration.
- iv. Muslims should not be discouraged from contesting for the leadership positions be it Islamic or conventional. And if they lose, it should not lead to physical combat amongst the contestants or division amongst the Muslims as it is being experienced in most mosques currently.

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