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Gunābādiyya

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The **Gunābādiyya** is the largest of the three main Ni‘matallāhiyya orders and the predominant Shī‘ī Ṣūfī *silsila* (“chain” of spiritual authority) in Iran. Under Sulṭān ‘Alī Shāh (d. 1909), the order grew rapidly to several thousand affiliates. His reflections on *valāyat* (friendship with God) shaped the order's intellectual profile. Riḍā ‘Alī Shāh (d. 1992) maintained relations with the ruling establishment in post-war Iran but also to the clergy, including Āyatallāh Khumaynī (1902-1989). The order maintains a ‘sober’ religiosity in which silent *dhikr* and a strong orientation on *fiqh* are central. Until 2005, the Gunābādiyya fared better through the revolution and the Islamic Republic than did other Ṣūfī orders. The presidency of Aḥmadīnizhād saw intensified state-Sufi confrontations.

The **Gunābādiyya** is the largest of the three main Ni‘matallāhiyya orders and the predominant Shī‘ī Ṣūfī *silsila* (“chain” of spiritual authority) in Iran (Modarrisī Chahārdahī, 188ff.). (The Ni‘matallāhiyya, historically influential in Central Asia and India but today mostly in Iran, with significant groups in western Europe, goes back to Shāh Ni‘matallāh Valī, d. 843/1431, a Syrian-born Iranian mystic and author who settled in Kirmān, in southeastern Iran.) Under the Ni‘matallāhī master Zayn al-‘Ābidīn Raḥmat ‘Alī Shāh, who was deputy governor of Fars under Muḥammad Shāh Qājār (the third ruler of the Iranian Qājār dynasty, r. 1834-48), the order had “reached the apogee of its external power” (Nurbakhsh, 11), but fragmentation set in upon his death, in 1861. Two claimants to his succession were Munavvar ‘Alī Shāh (d. 1884), pivot of the Munavvar ‘Alī Shāhī (or Dhū l-Riyāsatayn) order, and Ṣafī ‘Alī Shāh (d. 1899), who founded the Ṣafī ‘Alī Shāhī order. The third claimant, Ḥājj Muḥammad Kāzīm Iṣfahānī Sa‘ādat ‘Alī Shāh (d.1876), was nicknamed *ṭāvūs al-‘urafā’* (peacock of the gnostics) by Muḥammad Shāh, on the basis of which the order is sometimes referred to as the Ṭāvūsiyya. Its common names, however, refer to Sa‘ādat ‘Alī Shāh’s pupil Sulṭān Muḥammad Sulṭān ‘Alī Shāh (d. 1909), the order’s “real founder” (Nikitine, 397)—Sulṭān ‘Alī Shāhī (Ni‘matallāhī) or Gunābādī, referring to the latter’s residence in Gonabad (Gunābād), in Khurāsān. (Here is the list of the Qutḥbs (lit., poles or pivots, i.e., heads of the order): Sa‘ādat ‘Alī Shāh (d.1876), Sulṭān ‘Alī Shāh (d. 1909), Nūr ‘Alī Shāh II (d. 1918), Ṣāliḥ ‘Alī Shāh (d. 1966), Riḍā ‘Alī Shāh (d. 1992), Maḥbūb ‘Alī Shāh (d. 1997), Majdhūb ‘Alī Shāh (alive)).

Under Sulṭān ‘Alī Shāh, the order grew rapidly to several thousand affiliates, and the *quṭb* became wealthy (Gramlich, 1:66). He appointed his son Nūr ‘Alī Shāh II (d. 1918) successor, and the patrilineal succession continued until 1997 when Majdhūb ‘Alī Shāh’s paternal uncle, the current master Majdhūb ‘Alī Shāh, assumed the *quṭbiyyat* (lit., poleship, i.e., Šūfī spiritual authority) after his deceased nephew. Both Sulṭān ‘Alī Shāh and Nūr ‘Alī Shāh were murdered. Sulṭān ‘Alī Shāh was a quietist amidst the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1905-11 (Tābanda, *Nābigha*, 122), which led to the establishment of a constitution and a parliament; and accused of greed (Miller, 345) and *kufr* (Tābanda, *Nābigha*, 461). Nūr ‘Alī Shāh’s successor, Šāliḥ ‘Alī Shāh (d. 1966), faced a modernist challenge to Gunābādī Šūfism from the order’s former *shaykh*, Kayvān Qazvīnī (d. 1938), who attacked practices deemed superstitious and included a plea to abolish the *quṭbiyyat*. This challenge resembled Āyatullāh Sangilajī’s concurrent critique of *taqlīd* (emulation) and *shafā‘at* (intercession). Šāliḥ ‘Alī Shāh, nevertheless, saw the order’s fortunes rebound. He continued Nūr ‘Alī Shāh’s tendency to prescribe general Islamic morality—as in the latter’s children’s book, *Khūbī-nāma* (“Book of being good”)—with *Pand-i Šāliḥ* (“Šāliḥ’s advice”), which, a former *amīr al-ḥajj* – Abū l-faḍl Ḥādhiqī – claimed, became “a household word amongst the religious of Iran” (Tabandeh, viii) (the *amīr al-ḥajj* was responsible for coordinating the *ḥajj* to Mecca and Medina). National integration was further evident in the expansion of the order to include members from higher social circles (Gramlich, 1:64), including statesmen such as the prime minister Qavām al-Saltāna (Miller, 347). Šāliḥ ‘Alī Shāh’s successor, Riḍā ‘Alī Shāh (d. 1992), was able to retain maintain the order’s status.

Sulṭān Ḥusayn Tābanda—called Riḍā ‘Alī Shāh following his appointment as successor in 1960—obtained in 1951 an authorisation for “independent judgement” (*ijtihād*) from Āyatallāh Muḥammad Ḥusayn Āl-i Kāshif al-Ghiṭā’ (d. 1954) and assumed the *quṭbiyyat* of the order in 1966. He maintained relations with the ruling establishment in post-war Pahlavi Iran but also cultivated ties to the clergy, congratulating Āyatallāh Rūḥallāh Khumaynī (Khomeini, 1902-1989) in writing in April 1964 upon his release from prison (Tābanda, *Khwurshīd*, 498). He voiced increasingly direct religious criticism of the state and society in the shah’s Iran (e.g., Tābanda, *Naẓar-i mazdhabī*, 67). Khumaynī showed appreciation for Sulṭān ‘Alī Shāh’s Qur’ānic exegesis in his own *Tafsīr-i sūra-yi Ḥamd* (“Qur’ānic commentary on the *sūra* ‘al-Ḥamd’”) (pp. 93-4; cf. Parīshānzāda, 76-7), and a meeting on 1 July 1979 between Riḍā ‘Alī Shāh and the *imām* (reported in *Bāmdād*, 2 July 1979) is put forward by the order as vindication of the Gunābādī *ṭarīqa* (“way,” hence “order”) (Tābanda, *Khwurshīd*, 81).

The Gunābādiyya fared better through the revolution and two and a half decades of the Islamic Republic than did other Šūfī orders, such as the Šafī ‘Alī Shāhiyya. This success has been ascribed to the Gunābādiyya’s *sharī‘a* orientation (cf. Algar, Ni‘mat-Allāhiyya) and effective accommodation with the new social and political order of the Islamic Republic (van den Bos, 153-9). The order nevertheless faced significant attacks on its religious credibility, leaders, and buildings; in November 1979, the Ḥusayniyya

Amīr Sulaymānī in Tehran was burned to the ground (a *Husayniyya* is a place dedicated especially to mourning for the martyrdom of Imām al-Ḥusayn). Pressure continued, but the brief *quṭbiyyat* of Maḥbūb ‘Alī Shāh (1992-7)—author of *Khwurshid-i Tābanda*, the monumental biography of his father—was apparently less eventful. He was followed, in 1997, by the secular jurist Majdhūb ‘Alī Shāh, who acknowledges collaboration with the moderate religious nationalist Nahḍat-i Āzādī (Liberation movement); had aided the Islamic revolution; occupied high positions in Mahdī Bāzargān’s (d. 1995) provisional government; and was imprisoned in 1990 for championing human rights in Iran (Khibra-Farshchī, 10-1, 14). The *quṭb*’s political ambivalence (see below) reflects the attitude of the order in general towards the post-revolutionary Iranian state and does not substantiate the claim that “the Gunābādī Ṣūfis remain active supporters of the fundamentalist ideology of the Islamic Republic” (Lewisohn, 453).

The Gunābādī masters, with the partial exception of Sulṭān ‘Alī Shāh, are often considered “sober” in doctrine (e.g., Burqa‘ī, 168-9; Zarrinkoob, 198; Zarrīnkūb, 346). Sulṭān ‘Alī Shāh held that, through the oath of allegiance or faith (*bay‘at*), taken with the spiritual master (*murshid*), the celestial figure of the Hidden Imām enters the believer’s heart. This grafting (*payvand*) of *valāyat* (friendship with God) is nourished by such practices as *dhikr* (a Ṣūfī spiritual exercise consisting of the repetition—individual or collective, loud or silent, with or without movements—of a divine name or a litany meditation) and “bringing the image of the *shaykh* into one’s mind” (*ba naẓar āvardan-i ẓurat-i murshid*). Invigoration of the *payvand* leads to the Imāmīc illumination of the heart (*Valāyat-nāma*, 93; pt. 9, chaps. 2, 6-7; 330). Contemporary Gunābādī statements omit reference to this parousia and trace the Prophetic ‘pact of faith’ (*bay‘at-i valāviyya*), carried over by the Imāms and their delegates. Junayd (d. 298/910) was charged with taking *bay‘at* in the Hidden Imām’s name, and a chain of appointed *shaykhs* since then have been the latter’s “indirect representative” (*nīmāyanda-yi ghayr-i mustaqīm-i imām*) (Tābanda, *Mulāḥiẓātī*). Sulṭān ‘Alī Shāh is renowned for an orthodox *tafsīr* entitled *Bayān al-sa‘āda* (1314/1896-7).

From Nūr ‘Alī Shāh onwards, the order’s writings reinforce a *fiqhī* (jurisprudential) tendency (e.g., *Dhū l-faqār*, 1318/1900-1). The main example in the late Pahlavi era is the so-called Religious Perspective (*naẓar-i madhhabī*, 1354/1975) of Riḍā ‘Alī Shāh (the order’s third *mujtahid-quṭb* (jurist-pole), after Sulṭān ‘Alī Shāh and Ṣāliḥ ‘Alī Shāh), which rejected fundamental principles of the Universal Human Rights Declaration by insisting on the legal superiority of Muslims over non-Muslims. With a license only to transmit (*ijāza-yi rivāyat*), Maḥbūb ‘Alī Shāh was less of an *‘ālim* (religious scholar) than his father, Riḍā ‘Alī Shāh. Majdhūb ‘Alī Shāh has a doctorate in law but lacks *fiqhī* credentials, although he did publish wide-ranging “*fiqhī* and social essays” (Tabanda, *Majmū‘a*). In January 1997, he proclaimed a division of spiritual authority (beyond the realm of personal judgement) between the *mujtahid-i jām‘ al-sharā‘i‘* (all-round jurist), to whom Gunābādī *fuqarā* (poor) owed *taqlīd* (emulation) in *sharī‘a* rulings, and “the great one of the age,” whose precepts of the *ṭarīqat* (spiritual path)

they were to adopt (Tābanda, *Āshinā'ī*, 81). Like Riḍā 'Alī Shāh since before the revolution (Tābanda, *Khawshid*, 156-9), Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh, supported a "system based on Islam," while holding involvement in politics in Ṣūfism's name beyond the pale (see Khibra-Farshchī, 129; 121, but cf. below).

Qazvīnī charged in the Riḍā Shāh (r. 1925-41) era that the Gunābādiyya performed heterodox (*jāhili*) rituals (e.g., *Ustuvār*, 329; cf. *Rāzgushā*), which the order vigorously contests (e.g., Īzād-Gushasb, *Javābiya*, 35; cf. Parīshānzāda, *Pāsukh*). Gramlich's staid portrait from the late Pahlavi period highlights initiation (*tasharruf*), ritual greeting (*ṣafā*), *dhikr* gatherings, and "festive congregations." In the latter category, the pole had not for years authorised an "assembly of supplication gifts" (*majlis-i niyāz*), while depiction of the *dīg-jūsh* ritual meal is referred to Qazvīnī. Qazvīnī's reports also form the basis for descriptions of initiation (3:18, 39-40, 52, 49, 75). The core element of initiation has always been *bay'at* (cf. Algar, *Gonābādi order*), and continuity is seen also in the order's "sober" *majālis* (lit., gatherings, Ar. plur. of *majlis*) which are held mostly on Thursday and Sunday evenings and Friday mornings. The *vaqf-nāma* (religious endowment document) of the Ḥusayniyya Amīr Sulaymānī from 1947 gives a precise prescription for *majālis*, which commenced with the *qutb's dhikr* and provided, for instance, for canonical prayer, a "*dhikr-i khudā*" (*dhikr* of God) and Qur'ān readings, commemorated the martyrdom of Sulṭān 'Alī Shāh and Nūr 'Alī Shāh II, and included meditation on the life and work of the mentioned poles named *dhikr-i khayr* (Hermann and Rezai, 302). The practice reported in the late Pahlavi era differed from that prescription, with *dhikr* between religious prose reading and poetry recitation rather than at the beginning of the session (see Gramlich, 3:40). In the Islamic Republic, evening gatherings commenced with *namāz-i jamā'at* (congregational prayer, *maghrib* and *ishā'*), and included *dhikr* throughout under the order's prescription for its "perpetual" (*davām*) practice. Underlining the general tendency of their orthopraxy, the order's *dhikr* is individual and "silent" (*khafī*), either verbal (*lisānī*) or "of the heart" (*qalbī*) (van den Bos, correspondence with the order; van den Bos, *Mystic regimes*, 227, 191).

With Aḥmadīnīzhād's presidency, beginning in August 2005, the situation of the order deteriorated sharply. Several grand *āyatullāhs* issued anti-Ṣūfī *fatwās* (e.g., Fāḍil Lankirānī, 23 August 2006, Ḥusayn Nūrī Hamadānī, 11 September 2007), which were often followed by violence and destruction. Gunābādī Ḥusayniyyas in Qom and Borujerd (Burūjird) were demolished in February 2006 and November 2007, and their *takiyya* (religious gathering place) in Isfahan destroyed in February 2009. Other centres were damaged (e.g., Shahrekord/Shahr-i Kūrd, January 2013), attacked (e.g., Karaj, June 2010) or closed (e.g., Kish/Kīsh, November 2008), and tombs vandalised or destroyed (e.g., that of *shaykh* Īzād-Gushasb in Isfahan, February 2009). In September 2011, *darvīsh* Vahīd Banānī was shot and killed by security forces in Kavār. Many members of the order lost their jobs and faced arrest, harassment, criminal conviction, incarceration, or corporal punishment for their affiliation with Ṣūfism. The *qutb* was sent into internal exile in Tehran in May 2007 and was forced to stay away from his

home and the order's Mazār-i Sulṭānī mausoleum in Baydukht (Bīdukht), in Gonabad County.

The Ṣūfis' quietist ethos has receded since more than a thousand of them took to the streets in February 2006, in defence of the Gunābādī Ḥusayniyya in Qom. Their unparalleled mobilisation is demonstrated, for instance, on the annual Day of the Dervish (*rūz-i darvīsh*, celebrated on 3 Esfand), which they proclaimed on 21 February 2008, in front of parliament. Despite their oppression, the order still claims many adherents and institutions, among them more than a dozen active Ḥusayniyyas, international schools and foundations, health clinics, libraries, bookstores, and a publishing house (Intishārāt-i Ḥaḳīqat). Aḥmadīnīzhād's controversial re-election in 2009 brought new tensions between the order and the state, as Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh endorsed the candidacy of Mahdī Karrūbī (*I'timād-i millī*, 7 June 2009), who had protested the maltreatment of Ṣūfis since "the tragedy" (*fāji'a*) in Qom; Iran's Leader Āyatullāh Khāmānī denounced "false mysticisms" (*'irfānhā-yi kādhib*) in a speech in November 2010; and pro-regime media outlets such as kherghe.blogfa.com vilify the Gunābādiyya as a part of "the sedition" (*fitna*).

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