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## **COLUMN: THE PEOPLE'S MUFTI**

[Harris Khalique](#) Published October 3, 2021 - Updated a day ago

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**Masjid Qasim Ali Khan is a historic landmark in the city of Peshawar. Built in the late 17th century, this 350-year old mosque is located near**

**Qissa Khwani Bazaar in the old city. The importance attached to the mosque is such that its khateeb [prayer leader] is considered the final authority in the city to announce the sighting of the moon.**

A large population in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has traditionally followed the announcements from Masjid Qasim Ali Khan, to begin fasting in the month of Ramazan and to celebrate Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Azha. This is perhaps the reason that, in many previous years, we have seen a controversy over the sighting of the moon between the current khateeb, Maulana Shahabuddin Popalzai, and the central Ruet-i-Hilal [moon sighting] Committee, established by the federal government in order to have a synchronised lunar calendar to observe religious occasions in Pakistan.

Another significance of Masjid Qasim Ali Khan is that one of the noblest and greatest freedom fighters of his times lies buried in its extended premises. Mufti-i-Azam [Grand Mufti] Maulana Abdur Rahim Popalzai II was born in 1890 in Peshawar into a family of religious scholars. He received his early education at home before being sent to Rampur, Delhi, and Deoband for specialisation in Hadith and Fiqh [Islamic jurisprudence]. He was a pupil of Sheikh-ul-Hind Maulana Mahmudul Hasan.

Soon after, Maulana Popalzai began leaning towards the anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist ideology professed by Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi and Maulana Hussain Ahmad Madani. From Maulana Hasrat Mohani to Maulana Sindhi to Maulana Madani, there was a strong tradition that had emerged among a section of Muslim religious scholars in British India, where Marxism was seen by them as a revolutionary tool in the modern world to accomplish the universal Islamic ideals they believed in: equality, fraternity and social justice.

Maulana Popalzai was instrumental in organising the Naujawan Bharat Sabha, a youth organisation with leftist leanings. After it was proscribed by the British, he became a leader of the Socialist Party. He established a religious seminary in Masjid Qasim Ali Khan, founded a group of Pakhtun students and youth, edited newspapers in Urdu and wrote poetry in Pashto.

While on the one hand his fatwas [religious edicts] were sought and followed by people across the province and beyond, on the other hand

Maulana Popalzai dedicated his life to mobilising farmers and workers in different parts of the then North West Frontier Province (NWFP), now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. He was sentenced to rigorous imprisonment more than once for propagating his ideals of anti-imperialism and freedom of his country from British colonial rule.

However, what makes Maulana Popalzai unique among the religious scholars of his time was the active leadership he provided to the organisation of a movement of sweepers and sanitation workers across his province. It was hard for anyone to believe that a Grand Mufti of Muslims would devote himself to the uplift of the most marginalised segment of the population, which belonged to the untouchable Hindu caste Shudhras, Balmikis and local Christians.

Popalzai's grandson, Dr Abdul Jaleel Popalzai, has chronicled the whole movement in Urdu in a book titled *Achhut Khaakrob Mufti-i-Islam Ki Qayadat Mein* [Untouchable Sweepers Under the Leadership of Mufti-i-Islam]. This book was published in 1994 by Al-Mahmood Academy, Urdu Bazaar, Lahore, to mark Maulana Popalzai's 50th death anniversary. An interesting feature of the book is the provision of references from secret reports prepared by the police and intelligence of the time, on the activities of Maulana Popalzai and his followers.

Courtesy my friend Aslam Khwaja in Karachi, I received a copy of the book recently, 27 years after its publication. But, as the saying goes, better late than never. I thought it is an important book to be introduced to those readers who are unfamiliar with the illustrious life and struggle of Maulana Popalzai. The book also helps us understand the inbuilt cruelty and machinations of colonial rule, by giving other relevant examples when setting the context of the sweepers' movement.

Having earned the title of 'Marxist Maulana', it was but natural for Maulana Popalzai to be moved by the plight of the most invisible and voiceless people around him: sweepers and sanitation workers. According to declassified official reports, it was in 1938 that Maulana Popalzai and his disciples began to work on organising a convention and procession of sweepers from across NWFP in Peshawar.

The movement began and Maulana Popalzai appointed his right-hand man, Muhammad Younus Qureshi, as the principal organiser. Over the next few years, there were conferences, conventions, unionisation and agitation, staged by sweepers and sanitation workers across the province, from Bannu and Kolachi to Peshawar and Mardan. Their demands were highlighted and there was continuous engagement with the authorities for the realisation of their rights.

After the first provincial conference in 1939, Qureshi was elected president of the sweepers' union, with Vanjara and Daulat Ram as vice presidents. M. Chatterjee was elected general secretary, with Sohan Lal, Boota Chaudhary, Dwarka Nath, Sadhu Singh and Achran Ram as members of the cabinet. Maulana Popalzai became their most notable voice, led their processions and presided over many sweepers' conferences.

Because of the recent political developments in Afghanistan and what we're witnessing in Pakistan, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, it is important to remind people of what Maulana Abdur Rahim Popalzai II and his like stood for. Rather, it has become all the more evident today to insist on retelling such stories from Pakhtun history, when a section of the powers-that-be in Pakistan insists on branding all Pakhtuns as politically conservative since ever, and inherently introverted because of tribalism.

In addition to the politically secular Bacha Khan, who inspired the progressive Pakhtuns to aspire for freedom and dignity, there were also these purely Islamic scholars among Pakhtuns who took a clearly inclusive and pro-people stance during the freedom struggle in British India.

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No Fortunes to Tell

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