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**IMAAMAH OF & WITHIN
THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY**

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ABOUT THE MAJLIS UL ULAMAA (MAJLISTT)

The Majlis ul Ulamaa is a forum to facilitate the collaboration of Islamic Scholars resident and active within Trinidad and Tobago. It seeks to define the authentic Islamic position as it relates to Islam and the Muslim community of the country, considering the various scholastic positions and schools of law. To this end, it deliberates on issues of importance, and defines the Islamic position. The due process is meticulous, spanning the issuing of a draft position paper, inviting stakeholders and public comment and consultations before a final position is issued.

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Bismillaahir Rahmaanir Raheem
Allahumma salli alaa sayyidinaa Muhammadin wa baarik wa sallim

IMAAMAH OF & WITHIN THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY

1. DEFINITION

The Arabic word Imam is a derivative of the word “*amma*” which means “to stand in front of” or “to lead”.

It refers to that person who leads the prayer (*salaat*) in a group, and is also used to refer to leaders in religion, leaders in a community, persons who are examples to others, a book (Qur’an 11:17; 17:71) or even a highway (Qur’an 15:79).

The word Imaamah refers to the position held by the Imam. It is one of the official leadership positions established in Islam, and appears in the Qur’an.

“He [Allah] said: Surely I will make you an imam of men.” (Qur’an 2:124)

“And We made them imams who guided (people) by Our command...” (Qur’an 21:73)

“And We desired to bestow a favor upon those who were deemed weak in the land, and to make them the imams, and to make them the heirs” (Qur’an 28:5)

“And We made them imams who call to the fire, and on the day of resurrection they shall not be assisted.” (Qur’an 28:41)

“And We made of them imams to guide by Our command when they were patient, and they were certain of Our communications.” (Qur’an 32:24)

2. THE ROLE OF THE IMAM AS LEADER

2.1 The Imam as Leader of Salaat

The primary responsibility of an Imam is to lead the *salaat*, typically (but not limited to) prayer in a mosque or *masjid*. This can include leading the five daily *salaah* in the mosque, *salaatul Jumu’ah* (the Friday congregational prayer performed just after noon, and comprising of 2 parts), and extra *salaah* such as *salaatul Taraweeh* in the month of Ramadan, both Eid *salaats*, and also leading other prayers such as *salaatul Janaazah*, prayers for rain, during an eclipse and so on.

The Imam also delivers (or arranges for the delivery of) the khutbah (sermon) on salaatul Jumu'ah and other occasions as required. In addition, the Imam is usually the one to initiate zikr and meditation sessions within the mosque.

In light of these, the Imam is seen as, and assumes the role of, the spiritual head of the mosque.

The Imam, serving in these capacities, becomes part of (and in some cases the central figure) of the larger leadership team of the mosque or the Muslim community served by the mosque.

There is a difference between leading the salaah and functioning as Imam of a community.

Anyone who wants to **lead congregational salaah** – the one most deserving to lead the salaah is the one most knowledgeable of the Quran and versed in its recitation, who knows more sunnah, and if equal, then the older one.

Abu Mas'ood al-Ansaari (r.a.) said: The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: "The people should be led in prayer by the one who has most knowledge of the Book of Allah; if they are equal in knowledge of the Qur'an, then by the one who has most knowledge of the Sunnah." [Muslim, 1530]

In a hadith, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) is reported to have said, "If you wish your salaah to be accepted, then you should let your Ulamaa lead you" [Imam Tabrani and Majma' Azawaid by ibn Hajar Al Haithami]

2.2 The Imam as Leader in the Community

The Holy Qur'an tells us of the role of the leader within the community:

"...obey God, and His Messenger, and those in authority over you..." (Quran 4:59)

"And We made them leaders, guiding by Our command; and We inspired them to do good works, and to observe the prayer, and to give out charity. They were devoted servants to Us." [Qur'an, 21:73]

A community is expected to appoint a leader:

"If three of you are on a journey, appoint one as your leader." (Abu Dawood #2601)

In this regard the Imam serves in a leadership role within the community in various functions:

Officiating Role: Given his role in the community, the Imam's advice and/or participation is sought on matters affecting individuals' or families' personal or religious matters. Events can include officiating at Aqeeqa, Marriage and Funeral ceremonies, other religious gatherings and programs by members of the community.

Educational Role: The Imam is generally expected to organise for the edification of the community in religious and spiritual matters (Tarbiyah), but can also extend this to include other non-religious areas as deemed necessary. A central theme is the Imam's contribution to ensure members have a correct understanding and practice of Islam, and do not become misguided by other influences.

Community Engagement: The Imam is also typically expected to oversee services to the community. These can include such programs as identifying the Muslim families and members within the community, arranging programs for visiting the sick, engaging the various segments of the community (such as youths, women folk, etc.).

The Imam is typically also expected to serve as the representative of the community in interfaith or other events.

3. PRINCIPLES AND CONDITIONS GOVERNING IMAAMAH

The Imam must be Muslim, and therefore must have correct 'aqeedah (beliefs) according to the Quran and Sunnah. (Qur'an 4:141; 4:59)

The principle governing Imaamah is the best in the community must lead. This principle is understood in 2 ways:

- The best in recitation of the Holy Qur'an
- The one most knowledgeable of the Holy Qur'an and Sunnah

Being the most knowledgeable, the Imam of a community should be able to demonstrate the following to conduct Islamic services:

- Knowledge of the Qur'an (including memorization or Hifz) and its accurate recitation (Tajweed)
- Knowledge of jurisprudence of salaah and Taharah (purification) is very important
- Knowledge of basic jurisprudence [for example the jurisprudence of Marriage, Janazah, Zakaat, Dawah, Fasting in Islam]
- Demonstration of love for the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) and give due respect to the him as the most perfect example.
- Having awareness of issues that may confront the community and having the knowledge of the guidance from the Qur'an & Sunnah to respond

Additional Conditions for Imaamah

Morality: An Imam cannot be an open transgressor, but should demonstrate sound Islamic moral values and lifestyle. The Imam should not engage in open sin or innovations. The Imam has to be steadfast in adherence to Islamic beliefs. Otherwise praying behind such a person would be makrooh tahreemi (gravely disliked). (Qur'an 24:55)

Health: The person leading the prayer must be fit-for-purpose in both 'ilm and jism (knowledge and body/physical health). This excludes some differently-abled persons such as the hearing-impaired.

Dress: When the Imam is leading the prayer he should be properly dressed in accordance with Islamic requirements. (Qur'an 7:31)

Age: If a person has not yet attained the age of puberty, then he should not lead the fard salaah. He can be allowed to lead the nawaafil, at the discretion of the Imam.

Patience and Tolerance: from the teachings of Islam, we are guided that the Imam must be patient and tolerant with his community, as this is the best of faith. (Qur'an 32: 23; 3:159)
[Musnad Ahmad 22210]

Justice: Muslims are commanded to uphold justice, and not let favoritism or hatred of others prevent us from being just. (Qur'an 5:8; 7:29)

Trust: Muslims are commanded to render trusts to whom they are due (Qur'an 4:58)

Consultation: The Imam should consult with, and be consulted by the community in the affairs (Qur'an 42:38; 3:159)

Accountability: Each Muslim is accountable for every one of his / her actions – good or evil (Qur'an 99:7-8)

Knowledge and Wisdom: as characteristics of a suitable leader within a community (Qur'an 16:125; 6:162)

Spirit of Sacrifice and Striving: in the cause of Almighty Allah (Qur'an 22:78; 61:2-3; 29:69; 6:162)

4. ISSUES SURROUNDING IMAAMAH

4.1 Is it possible for a Woman to be an Imam?

It is not permissible for a woman to lead salaah with men in the congregation. Some schools of fiqh are of the position that she can lead a Jama'ah with only women, while others say this is makrooh.

4.2 Using the Khutbah to Target Individuals

People accuse some Imams of using the Khutbah to criticize specific individuals. This is consistent with the practice of khutbah in Islam, in that everyone should take every khutbah personally. It is the duty of the Imam to address issues affecting the people of the community in the khutbah, but in so doing he must be tactful and not criticize individuals.

Our Beloved Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) used to address specific issues in his khutbah, but not call names. It is recorded in ahadith that Hazrat Abu Bakr (may Allah be pleased with him) sometimes thought the khutbah was directed to him.

The Imam is allowed to address specific issues but should not call names or imply specific individuals in his address.

4.3 Imams Engaged in Questionable Conduct

The Imam is and should constantly strive to be the role model of the community.

It is not permissible for a man to lead salaah in a congregation who dislikes him, where what they are disliking must be related to the Shariah. This principle does not sanction those who hate the Imam for non-shariah-related matters, such as for personal or petty reasons.

The Imam should be careful to engage in conduct where he avoids suspicion.

Where the imam is involved in questionable conduct or activities, and it is known within the community, he should be suspended from his role pending resolution. If it is not widely known, the Imam can be allowed to continue to serve, and take help from different members to address and resolve the matter; or the imam can be replaced.

Where there are accusations of questionable conduct or activities are levelled against an Imam, the larger leadership team of the community, or any other governing body as applicable, should investigate the accusations and arrive at a decision. If the Imam is proven guilty of transgression, he cannot lead the salaah.

4.4 Trustees / Executive vs. Imam:

Given the principles governing the Imam and his responsibilities – no one can tell the Imam how to conduct the affairs under his purview, or bring someone to the mosque to tell him such, without his permission. The Imam on his part should follow the Islamic injunction to consult (shura) with the community on matters affecting the Jama'ah. (Qur'an 3:159; 42:38)

For other functions with respect to non-spiritual matters, it is fine that others shoulder the responsibilities and even seek external advice (such as maintaining facilities, raising money and

so on) without the direct involvement of the Imam. We hasten to add the Imam should be aware of the activities that are being undertaken within the Jama'ah, in the spirit of Shura that should be practiced.

4.5 Different Ideologies:

Some within a Jama'ah may have different recitations, different fiqh, and so on. Every Muslim should avoid conflict between the Imam and the community. The Imam is also responsible for ensuring the people are not confused with their recitation of different qirat or alternative practices from other schools of thought or fiqh. The Imam is also not allowed to mix the different qirat in recitation of one salaah. The hadith guides us on how this should be addressed:

Allah's Messenger (peace be on him) said, "He who sees from his ruler something he dislikes, let him be patient with him, for he who splits away from the Jamaa'ah by a handspan and then dies, dies a death of Jaahiliyyah" [al-Bukhari and Muslim] and in a narration, "then he has thrown off the yoke of Islam from his neck." [at-Tirmidhee 2867; Ahmad (4/130)]

We are also instructed in ahadith on how addressing the issues as Muslims should be done:

'Iyaad ibn Ghunum who said, "The Messenger of Allah (saaws) said, 'Whoever desires to advise the one with authority then he should not do so openly, rather he should take him by the hand and take him into seclusion (and then advise him). And if he accepts (the advice) from him then (he has achieved his objective) and if not, then he has fulfilled that which was a duty upon him.'" [Ahmad (3/403)]

4.6 Some Manifest Limitations or Errors on the Part of the Imam

It is not uncommon for persons to observe some limitations on the part of imams in the performance of their duties. These include, among others, the recitation of Qur'an (where tajweed is poor); and knowledge of shariah (especially the rules of salaah) is poor or inaccurate. The Imam, as with every Muslim, should constantly seek to improve his knowledge. We take the opportunity to remind all Muslims of the guidance in the Holy Qur'an:

"And every soul earns not [blame] except against itself, and no bearer of burdens will bear the burden of another. Then to your Lord is your return, and He will inform you concerning that over which you used to differ." (Quran 6:164; 58:11)

In such instances, we are reminded of the guidance in the speech made by Hazrat Abu Bakr (may Allah be pleased with him) on assumption of the Caliphate in the 11th year after the Hijra, wherein he said:

"I have been appointed as ruler over you although I am not the best among you. I have never sought this position nor has there ever been a desire in my heart to have this in preference to anyone else... If I do right, you must help and obey me; if I go astray, set me aright... Obey me so long as I obey Allah and His Messenger. If I disobey them, then you have no obligation to follow me." [Al-Bidaayah wan-Nihaayah (6/305,306)]

4.7 Receiving a Salary for His Services

This is not a problem – the job entails leading the salaah and attending to the other needs of the community (ceremonies, classes, etc.). In some cases, the requirements can constitute a full-time job. The imam should be remunerated. It is up to the Imam if he wants to accept a payment or not.

4.8 Passing on the position of Imaamah to Offspring or Family

This position is a noble position within the community based on key competencies. It is not a position of private property that is inherited by the family members, but should be given to the person most suited for the position.

5. CONCLUSION

The position of an Imam is a very serious and important position in Islam, and persons who have assumed the role should shoulder the responsibilities and accompanying accountabilities very seriously. In choosing an Imam, we should be mindful of the various requirements that would be applicable. Upholding of morality and piety is an integral part of being an Imam.

We acknowledge the Imams of this country and in our history, who have in many instances assumed the role of Imaamah out of a sense of duty to Almighty Allah and care for the spiritual and religious well-beings of their community. The demands on their time, their resources, their families and their comforts have been and can be intense, if not overbearing at times, and to continue to strive is testament to their dedication and sacrifice.

It is too easy for the contributions of Imams to be either taken for granted, overlooked, questioned or challenged. Some persons may be prone to criticize their Imams liberally, but cannot or are unwilling to assume the role or fulfill the obligations even for a short period of

time or with anywhere near the extent of success that the Imam can realize. Others may lack the competencies required, or full awareness of the information possessed by the Imam.

That being said, the persons assuming the role of Imam must recognize that they are responsible for the religious and spiritual well-being of the community. Their responsibility is an ongoing endeavor that would require continuous learning, adjustments and measures to ensure the community builds and maintains a relationship with Almighty Allah. Their impact on the community is something they would be held accountable for. And for this, they have the perfect example in the life of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him). We pray they are given ample rewards in this life and the next, for themselves and their families, based on the efforts they expend and the sacrifices they endure.

If the Imam and the members of the Jama'ah interact properly, they will promote love and the entire Jama'ah will benefit. We are reminded in a hadith where the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) is reported to have said:

“You will never enter Jannah until you believe, and you will never believe until you love each other. Shall I not tell you of that, if you do it, you would love each other?” They [his companions] said “Certainly O Messenger of Allah”. He said, “Spread peace amongst yourselves.” [Imam Muslim]

May Almighty Allah preserve the institution of Imaamah, increase its quality of contribution and effort, and cause it to lead to the upliftment of the entire community.