



THE SOCIO-POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT OF THE PERIOD IN WHICH SHAHAB AL-DIN SUHRAWARDI LIVED

Robiya Saidkhanbaleva

*Researcher at the International Islamic Studies
Academy of Uzbekistan*

Abstract. *This article examines the socio-political environment of the period in which Shahab al-Din Abu Hafs Umar Suhrawardi (1145–1234), one of the major representatives of medieval Sufism and the founder of the Suhrawardiyya order, lived and worked. Against the background of the decline of the Abbasid Caliphate in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the study analyzes the political instability, dynastic rivalries, and socio-economic crises of Iraq, together with the reform efforts of Caliph al-Nasir. Particular attention is given to Suhrawardi's role as "Shaykh al-Shuyukh" and political adviser to the caliph, and to his diplomatic missions to the Ayyubids, the Khwarazmshahs, and the Seljuks of Anatolia. The article shows that both Suhrawardi's religious and Sufi worldview and his political activity were shaped by these conditions and reflect an important stage in the consolidation of the Sufi orders.*

Keywords: *Shahab al-Din Suhrawardi, Suhrawardiyya order, Abbasid Caliphate, Caliph al-Nasir, Sufism, socio-political environment, Baghdad, medieval Islamic history, Sufi orders, diplomacy.*

INTRODUCTION

The period in which Shahab al-Din Suhrawardi lived was marked by complex socio-political processes in the history of the Muslim East. Political instability, rivalries among the various dynasties, and shifts in religious and spiritual life all exerted a significant influence on the development of society.

The relevance of this study lies in the fact that examining the socio-political environment of the age of Shahab al-Din Umar Suhrawardi (1145–1234) — one of the major representatives of Sufi teaching in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries — makes it possible to understand the essence of the historical processes of that time more deeply. In particular, analyzing the environment in which the scholar worked allows the period itself to be assessed more accurately. The aim of this article is therefore to characterize



that socio-political environment and to clarify the place Suhrawardi occupied within it as both a Sufi shaykh and a political figure.

MAIN PART

Shahab al-Din Suhrawardi's lifetime coincided with the decline of the Abbasid dynasty, which had ruled the vast Arab-Muslim state for nearly five hundred years, from 750 to 1258. Named after its capital, this state was also known as the "Baghdad Caliphate."

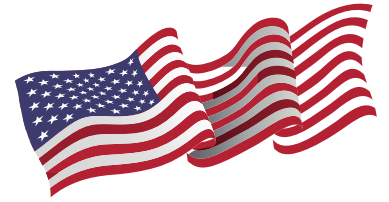
From the very outset, the Abbasid state was not a unified sovereign realm, and within its first decades it was already evident that the height of the political power of the Arabs and their state lay behind them.

When the Abbasids came to power, Iraq lay in post-war ruin. Irrigation systems had fallen into disrepair, many dams on the Tigris and Euphrates had been destroyed, and efforts to restore them met with only partial success. The new caliphs devoted greater attention to building the new capital, Baghdad, where 100,000 conscripted peasants erected magnificent palaces and mosques. Overall, the economic situation was favorable.

At the end of the ninth century, the political fragmentation of the caliphate was further aggravated by the revolts of the Zanj and the Qarmatians. The Zanj rose in rebellion in 869 and held the province of Basra for fourteen years. A Shiite group known as the Qarmatians, belonging to the Ismaili movement, joined their uprising.

During the Seljuk period, the Abbasids retained a certain significance as a rallying banner against the Fatimids. Under the energetic caliph al-Nasir (1180–1225), they managed to restore secular authority in Baghdad and the surrounding territories, though this did not last long. It should be noted that the caliph, despite his limited functions, continued to be regarded as the supreme ruler of all believers.

The rule of the Buyids is characterized as a period of wars and unrest that brought disorder and devastation and hindered population growth. Such periods are termed transitional. In this case, the transitional period spanned more than a century. In the social sphere, it was marked by a process of social stabilization, and the socio-economic development of Iraq during the Seljuk period is defined as an interaction between demographic processes and processes of social stabilization.



These socio-historical processes led to the decline of the large landholdings formed in the preceding period and to a restructuring of the entire social system.

The years 1060–1090 were a period of recovery, characterized by the construction or restoration of recently destroyed settlements. The process of social synthesis, however, ended unsuccessfully and gave way to a nationalist reaction. This brought about the restoration of feudalism and a sharp deterioration in the condition of the peasantry. The nationalist reaction provoked internecine wars and developed into an ecological and social crisis whose defining features were demographic catastrophe, famine, epidemics, uprisings and civil wars, foreign wars, and the death of a large part of the population. Once the caliphs' authority over Iraq was established, the wars finally ceased. The caliph's social policy was distinguished by a commitment to justice: he cared for the poor, shelters were built in every neighborhood, and registers were drawn up among the population for the distribution of allowances. Friendly relations were established with the Ismailis, and the caliph sought to help bring an end to the internecine wars of the Muslim world.

The establishment of friendly relations with the Ismailis in 1211–1212 was an important success of al-Nasir's foreign policy. Relations between the caliph and the Khwarazmshahs, by contrast, developed unevenly, and this affected the fate of the entire Muslim world. Al-Nasir watched closely the conduct of the Khwarazmshahs — their aggressive expansionist policy and their claims to the title of sultan. While they were at war with the last Seljuk, Tughril III (1176–1194), the caliph aided the Khwarazmshah in the hope of dividing the lands of Western Iran with him. The Khwarazmshah, however, was unwilling to relinquish even an inch of the conquered territory. Recognizing that the Khwarazmshahs posed no less a threat to the dynasty than the Seljuks had, the caliph severed all relations with them.

Al-Nasir's contemporaries regarded this as a failure of political foresight; the hostility with the Khwarazmshah weakened the Muslim world, and some even accused the caliph outright of colluding with the Mongols. The caliph had indeed demanded that the Khwarazmshah place the territories of Western Iran under his authority, while the Khwarazmshah, for his part, demanded investiture with sultanic authority from the caliph.

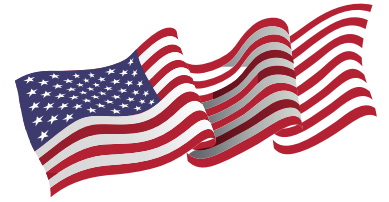


After al-Nasir's death, the country's economic condition began to deteriorate in 1225–1227, and the first major famine in half a century occurred; specialists note the ruin of the peasantry and the enrichment of the large landowners. Prices rose gradually while nominal wages remained unchanged at 1.5 dinars per month, and real wages fell by more than half between the mid-twelfth and mid-thirteenth centuries.

During the reign of Caliph al-Mustansir, the successful domestic policy of the Baghdad Caliphate weakened, and the alliance of Muslim states founded on al-Nasir's futuwwa declined. His successor, the last Abbasid caliph al-Musta'sim (1242–1258), was a weak ruler, remote from politics and given to amusement, and under him the economy of the caliphate fell into complete decline. Moreover, in 1244 storms and floods caused a famine that lasted until 1249. It is worth noting that the Abbasid period saw the emergence of the important state office of vizier (prime minister) — the official who helped the ruler bear the burden of state power and who wielded very great authority. At times the caliphs, fearing the power of their viziers, dealt harshly with them, as in the case of the famous vizieral dynasty of the Barmakids. Under the Abbasids, administrative governance and other aspects of state life were organized on the model of the Sasanian state of Iran, regarded as exemplary at the time; in the works of the Arab historian and geographer al-Mas'udi (d. 956), the Sasanian kings and their customs are mentioned repeatedly.

It was under such conditions that the personality of the founder of the Suhrawardiyya order took shape. To a considerable degree, the religious and Sufi worldview of Shahab al-Din Abu Hafs Umar Suhrawardi was a product of the socio-political, cultural, and economic circumstances in which he lived.

Suhrawardi also pursued a political career, becoming the foremost Sufi of Baghdad: during the reign of the Abbasid caliph al-Nasir (1180–1225), he served as “Shaykh al-Shuyukh” and adviser to the caliph. On al-Nasir's behalf he undertook diplomatic missions in Anatolia, Syria, and Egypt, as well as in the city of Aleppo, which after his visit became a center of Sufism and religious life. His contemporaries wrote of his activity in Aleppo: “Suhrawardi delivered a speech at the court of al-Malik al-Zahir. It



was not only eloquent in its rhetoric but so moving that the hearts of the listeners were humbled and tears came to their eyes.”

Caliph al-Nasir relied on advisers such as Suhrawardi to forge alliances against his enemies and to win the support of uncommitted groups. Shaykh Suhrawardi was a key adviser for two reasons. First, he was among the most respected scholars and a member of the renowned Suhrawardi family, as well as a public figure whose opinion was valued by ordinary people. Second, he was a gifted orator of strong character, able to captivate his listeners completely.

The caliph sent Suhrawardi to Tabriz, to the ruler Atabeg Uzbek ibn Muhammad (607–623 / 1229–1245), and in 1207 Suhrawardi traveled to Egypt and Syria as an envoy to meet the Ayyubid rulers. The mission had two aims, political and religious. There he met Khalil al-Hamawi and, in his effort to help Caliph al-Nasir suppress the revolts and restore the devastated social order, he was warmly received and offered many gifts. He was hailed as the “prince of his time” (al-malik).

In 1217–1218, Suhrawardi conducted diplomatic negotiations with the Khwarazmshah Muhammad. A year later he set out on a diplomatic mission to Anatolia, to Ala al-Din Kayqubad I (d. 1237), the Seljuk ruler of Konya. On this mission Abu Hafs Umar Suhrawardi was received as a high-ranking statesman; ceremonial processions were held in honor of the Shaykh’s arrival, and on his return he was received by the caliph in Baghdad.

CONCLUSION

Suhrawardi’s active involvement in affairs of state raises several questions concerning the development of the Sufi orders. His political activity reveals another important dimension of the growth and consolidation of the Sufi orders in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. For many years he served as a political adviser to the Abbasid caliph, who valued his skill in forging alliances and his tolerance toward other Muslim authorities.

In sum, the life and work of Shahab al-Din Suhrawardi cannot be separated from the turbulent socio-political conditions of the late Abbasid period. Both his Sufi worldview and his role as a statesman were shaped by the political instability, dynastic struggles,



and socio-economic crises of the age, and at the same time his activity contributed to the religious and institutional consolidation of Sufism. The study of this environment thus makes it possible to understand more fully both the scholar's legacy and the broader processes that defined the era in which he lived.

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