

The Imām - his rank according to *fiqh* rulings

This paper is a simple reminder of some important fiqh rulings relating to the Imām. From the examples provided, one will appreciate the rank given to an Imām in Islam.

i. A traveller can shorten his prayer, so that the four of *Dhuhr*, *Asr* and *Ishā* become two only. In congregational prayer, the state of the Imām is all that counts. If the Imām leading is a traveller, then he reads and leads two, even if everyone behind him are residents. If the same Imām now reads behind someone who is resident, he will have to read the full four.

ii. If the *muqtadī* (the one reading behind an Imām) deliberately tries to precede the Imām in *rukū* and *sajda*, his *salāh* is null and void. In fact, the Prophet (peace & blessings of Allāh be upon him) warned that Allāh could disfigure the faces of those who do it into donkeys (*al-Targhīb wa'l Tarhīb*, 99):

اما يخشي احدكم اذا رفع راسه من ركوع او سجود قبل الامام ان يجعل الله راسه راس حمار او يجعل الله صورته صورة حمار

'Behold! One of you should desist from raising the head from *rukū* and *sajda* before the Imām, lest Allāh makes his head into a donkey's head, or He makes his appearance into that of a donkey.'

iii. When the Imām makes a mistake in congregational prayer, everyone - led by the Imām - performs *sajda sahw*. When a *muqtadī* makes a mistake in the same *salāh*, there is no *sajda sahw*.

iv. If a *muqtadī* is positioned so that he is standing closer to the *qibla* than the Imām, then his *salāh* is invalid. Even if by a few centimetres. The Imām must always be the closest to the *qibla*. At the Ka'ba Sharīf, the books of jurisprudence mention that for this place alone, the *muqtadīs* can be closer to the Ka'ba Sharīf around three of the four sides, but not on the side the Imām is standing.

v. If the Imām leads the prayer and a *muqtadī* appears, convinced that the *qibla* is slightly in a different direction, he still has to follow the Imām's direction.

vi. In congregational prayer, all those who participate in the prayer gain an extra reward. Imām al-Bukhārī's report states they receive twenty-five times more reward (*al-Targhīb wa'l Tarhīb*, 80). In Imām Mālik's report the number is twenty-seven times more.

However, there are certain individuals who gain an extra reward on top of this. In short, the closer a person is to the Imām in the congregational prayer, the more reward one will receive. The Prophet (peace & blessings of Allāh be upon him) said:

خير صفوف الرجال اولها وشرها اخرها

'The best rows for the men and the first ones and the worse are the last ones' (*al-Targhīb wa'l Tarhīb*, 94).

In another hadīth, he (peace & blessings of Allāh be upon him) said:

ان الله و ملائكته يصلون علي الصف الاول

‘Indeed Allāh and His angels send blessings upon the first row’ (*al-Targhīb wa'l Tarhīb*, 95).

vii. Normally, the recitation of *Sūrah al-Fātiha* in *salāh* is extremely important. According to *hanafī fiqh*, a person who does not recite this in *salāh* will have to perform a *sajda sahw*. But when a *muqtadī* is behind an Imām, then he is not required to recite this *Sūrah*, irrespective of whether the *salāh* is a loud one (*Fajr, Maghrib & Ishā*) or a quiet one (*Dhuhr & Asr*). Rather, the Imām’s recitation is sufficient for everyone.

The above seven examples extol the rank of the Imām purely from a *fiqh* perspective. In my above analysis, I did not refer to the vast amount of hadīth literature on the subject of the rank of the Imām. How the Prophet, peace & blessings of Allāh be upon him, stated that the whole purpose of an Imām is to be followed (*Mirqāt al-Mafātīh*, III: 194):

انما جعل الامام ليؤتم به

‘Merely, the Imām has been appointed so that he is followed.’

In my above analysis, I did not refer to *Sīrah* literature. Of how the whole episode of who was the first, righteous Caliph was decided by who was the Imām in the Prophet's own lifetime. In my analysis, I did not explore how the word ‘Imām’ itself relates to أَمَام which means ‘ahead.’

And Allāh knows best.

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