

Political Movements and Political-Legal Thought in Central Asia in the Middle Ages

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ABSTRACT: Central Asia has long served as a stage for resilience and socio-political struggle among Turkic peoples. In the early Middle Ages, the Muqanna' uprising dealt a significant blow to Arab rule, destabilized the Caliphate, and contributed to dynastic changes. Centuries later, the Sarbadar movement temporarily ended Mongol domination and briefly realized the long-sought ideal of a "people's state" envisioned by many intellectuals. Central Asian Turkic scholars made invaluable contributions to the history of science and political thought during the Middle Ages, significantly influencing the region's intellectual and cultural development.

Keywords: *Central Asia, Muqanna', Sarbadars, Middle Ages, Islam, Renaissance, Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Feudalism, People*

INTRODUCTION

Central Asia and its neighboring territories have historically been among the primary cradles of human civilization. During the Middle Ages, under the influence of the Islamic Renaissance, this region achieved remarkable advancements in science and culture despite enduring severe feudal exploitation and foreign invasions. Renowned scholars such as Al-Farabi

and Ibn Sina (Avicenna) contributed profoundly to the fields of statecraft and legal thought.

For centuries, Central Asia also served as a battleground for local populations resisting Arab conquests and Mongol domination. Liberation movements, notably the Muqanna' uprising and the Sarbadar movement, exemplify this historical struggle.

Geographically, Central Asia—often referred to as Turkestan—occupied a strategic location at the heart of Asia, bordering China, India, and Iran. Its position at the crossroads of major civilizations facilitated cultural exchange and enabled it to benefit from the Islamic Renaissance. By the early Middle Ages, the region's cities, situated along the Great Silk Road, became vital centers of trade, science, and culture, although they were also vulnerable to foreign invasions.

By the mid-7th century, the emerging Caliphate from the Arabian Peninsula launched expansive campaigns to spread Islam and expand its territory. Arab armies, benefiting from superior mobility, organization, and morale, quickly extended their control from Spain to India. The Byzantine Empire and Sasanian Iran, weakened by internal crises, were unable to resist this advance. While the unification of diverse peoples under Islam facilitated political consolidation, economic development, and cultural exchange, the local population bore the burden of maintaining the Arab armies and bureaucratic apparatus. Although the elite often cooperated with the Arabs, lower classes resisted foreign domination, and movements inspired by ideas such as Mazdakism persisted in some areas.

Islam, as a sophisticated and progressive religious doctrine, played a dual role. On the one hand, it promoted social cohesion and cultural advancement; on the other hand, it legitimized feudal hierarchy, private property, and exploitation, functioning as a pillar of the ruling social order. Religious authority dominated public life, and all political and legal thought—including both orthodox and sectarian perspectives—had to be expressed within a religious framework. Both factions sought legitimacy through religious doctrine and Sharia, with each claiming to represent the true Muslim community.

Among the most influential political movements in medieval Islamic Central Asia was the Muqannaʿ movement, spanning the region and adjacent territories. Medieval Arab historians, including Al-Biruni, Al-Tabari, and Dinawari, as well as the statesman Nizam al-Mulk, analyzed the movement and its political-legal thought. Contemporary interpretations have been provided by scholars and thinkers such as Sadriddin Ayni, A. Yakubovsky, and Islam Karimov.

The Muqannaʿ movement originated in the 8th century during the Umayyad period. In 715, Arab forces led by Qutayba ibn Muslim advanced into Central Asia, incorporating the region, known as Mawarannahr (“land beyond the river”), into the Caliphate’s domain.

The Muqannaʿ Uprising and the Sarbadar Movement in Central Asia

As in other conquered territories, the spread of Islam in Mawarannahr was accompanied by heavy taxation and harsh exploitation. The introduction of cheap slave labor and the expenses of maintaining Arab armies severely burdened the Sogdian peasantry and the nomadic Turkic populations. Even after the local population adopted Islam, Arab officials continued to collect the jizya tax, showing no urgency to abolish it. Oppression by foreign rulers prompted active participation in uprisings, including the revolt led by Abu Muslim against the Umayyad dynasty. However, the Abbasids, who overthrew the Umayyads with Abu Muslim’s assistance, subsequently massacred many participants. In 755, Caliph al-Mansur ordered Abu Muslim’s execution, further intensifying the exploitation of the subjugated peoples. This cycle of oppression paved the way for new movements across the Caliphate’s territories.

One of the prominent leaders of these rebel movements was Hashim ibn Hakim, a craftsman from Merv. After several years of imprisonment under the Caliph, he escaped to Central Asia and initiated an uprising against the Abbasids around 776. To protect himself and inspire his followers, Hashim concealed his face with a veil, earning the epithet “the Veiled One” (Muqannaʿ). In contrast to the black-clad Arab troops, his followers wore white garments, leading historical sources to refer to them as “the White-Clad.”

Hashim ibn Hakim was not only the movement's leader but also its ideological architect. He propagated the belief in the divine incarnation in humans and the transmigration of souls. To disseminate his doctrine and recruit followers, he dispatched letters and missionaries (da'is) to settlements in the Kashkadarya and Zeravshan valleys. These communications declared: *"God, who manifested Himself in Adam, Noah, Moses, Abraham, Jesus, Muhammad, and Abu Muslim, has now manifested Himself in my person. Power, sovereignty, glory, and truth belong to Muqanna'. Obey me and know that exaltation such as kingship and supreme creative power also belong to me. Those who follow me will attain paradise; those who reject me will face hell"* (10, p. 47).

Under Muqanna's direction, 'Abdallah ibn 'Amr, one of his closest associates of Arab origin, crossed the Amu Darya River and incited the impoverished populations of Nakhshab, Kesh, and Subakh in the Kashkadarya Valley, as well as surrounding villages, to rebellion. Provinces such as Samarkand and Bukhara also joined the insurgency, and nomadic Turkic tribes—including the Karluks and Türgesh—aligned with the rebels.

Alarmed by the movement's rapid expansion, Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdi (775–785) dispatched a large, well-equipped army to suppress the insurgents, personally directing operations from Nishapur. Heavy losses and strategic errors weakened the rebellion; moderate factions distanced themselves, and many Sogdian dehqans, merchants, and artisans allied with the Arabs. Ultimately, the uprising was crushed in 783, and Muqanna' committed suicide to avoid capture. Nevertheless, resistance against Arab domination continued to inspire subsequent uprisings in Central Asia.

The Muqanna' movement's political and legal doctrines closely resembled the earlier Mazdakite movement in Iran. Followers sought to confiscate property not only from Arab feudal lords but also from local landowners, redistributing holdings to village communities in pursuit of social equality. This ideal of property equality remained a recurring theme in later anti-feudal and national liberation movements throughout Central Asia.

Throughout the Middle Ages, popular resistance against foreign invaders and compliant local feudal lords persisted. One of the most notable of these movements was the Sarbadar uprising in the latter half of the fourteenth century. Aimed at overthrowing existing political structures, the Sarbadars represented a broad-based popular movement encompassing various social strata, making it comparable to the contemporaneous Hussite movement in Europe.

Although relatively little studied, historical sources on the Sarbadars include Nizam al-Din Shami's *Zafarnama*, Sharaf al-Din 'Ali Yazdi's *Zafarnama*, and the anonymous fifteenth-century *History of the Sarbadars*, partially preserved and attributed to Hafiz-i Abru. In modern times, Russian historians V. V. Bartold and I. P. Petrushevsky conducted significant studies on the movement.

Initial interpretations often mischaracterized the Sarbadars as a bandit-state or religious extremists rejecting lawful governance. In reality, they sought to establish a society governed by justice, achieving this only occasionally. Religious orders and Sufi brotherhoods were integral to their organization, a common feature in medieval Islamic societies, including the later Safavid Empire.

The Sarbadar movement emerged in Khorasan in the 1330s, reacting to the oppression of the Ilkhanate's military-nomadic aristocracy and exploitation by local feudal lords. Its main supporters were peasants, artisans, and small landowners seeking to end Mongol rule. Ideologically, the movement drew upon Shi'ite sectarianism and Sufi currents, including belief in the coming of the Twelfth Imam (Mahdi) to eradicate injustice. Shaykh Khalifa of Sabzevar and his disciple Shaykh Hasan Juri mobilized urban and rural populations, establishing Sarbadar organizations modeled on dervish orders. Members maintained readiness for armed rebellion, with peasants, artisans, urban poor, and small landowners forming the movement's core forces, closely allied with artisan guilds.

The Sarbadar Movement in Khorasan: Social, Political, and Military Developments

In 1336, Shaykh Hasan Juri was arrested and imprisoned by order of the Khorasan nobility. In response, a widespread Sarbadar uprising erupted across the province. At a public gathering, the peasants declared: "*The rulers have become oppressors. If*

Almighty God helps us, we shall abolish oppression and punish the oppressors; if not, let our heads be hung on the gallows, but we shall not tolerate injustice and tyranny” (6, p. 582). This declaration gave rise to the term *Sarbadar*, meaning “those ready to go to the gallows” or “those who place their heads on the scaffold” in Persian.

Initially, the movement took the form of guerrilla warfare. The first large-scale Sarbadar uprising began in March 1337 in Bashtin, Khorasan, targeting the arbitrariness of Mongol tax collectors. By August, the rebels captured the city of Sabzevar, establishing it as the capital of the newly formed Sarbadar state.

Within a short period, Sarbadar forces repelled three major assaults by the Mongol-Ilkhanid aristocracy and destroyed their military detachments. The city of Nishapur and all of western Khorasan came under rebel control. By 1344, the Sarbadar state extended approximately 550 kilometers in length and 200 kilometers in width. The last Mongol ruler of Central Asia, Khan Tugha Timur, attempted to neutralize the Sarbadars through deceitful negotiations. Yahya Karabi, head of the Sarbadar state, preemptively struck at the khan’s camp with 300 supporters (some sources cite 1,000), killing Tugha Timur and decimating his army. A significant portion of the khan’s property fell into Karabi’s hands as war booty.

Following this victory in December 1353, the Ilkhanid horde was effectively destroyed. Under Yahya Karabi, the Sarbadar state expanded its borders considerably, annexing Tus and Mashhad to the east, and Gurgan (Astarabad) and Kumis to the west under the leadership of Amir Jani Qurbani.

The Sarbadar state exerted a broad influence on neighboring regions, stimulating uprisings against the feudal order. In 1350, a successful revolt led by Sayyid Qivam al-Din Marashi in Mazandaran established the Sayyid state (1350–1392). Its social composition and ideological foundations mirrored those of the Sarbadars, emphasizing peasant and artisan participation and pursuing social equality and equitable distribution of essential goods.

The movement spread to Samarkand in 1365, when the troops of Mongol commander Ilyas Khoja invaded Mawarannahr. Sarbadar detachments, led by

madrassa student Mawlanzada, artisans' guild head Abu Bakr, and marksman Khurdak Bukhari, successfully defended the city. The Mongol cavalry suffered losses of nearly 2,000 men and was forced to retreat. Despite these achievements, the Samarkand Sarbadars were soon suppressed by local feudal lords, including Amir Timur and Amir Husayn.

In 1373, the Kirman Sarbadars rose against local feudal lords, with peasants and urban poor as their primary force. They confiscated the property of feudal lords and imprisoned officials. However, this uprising was short-lived and suppressed in 1374 by provincial ruler Shah Shuja' Muzaffarid. New uprisings against Amir Timur in Sabzevar in 1383 were also crushed, culminating between 1383 and 1392 with the complete suppression of the Sarbadar state by Timur's armies, aided by fearful Iranian feudal lords.

The Sarbadar state, which existed from 1337 to 1381, functioned as an oasis of relative justice amid widespread tyranny. Governed as a popular republic, theoretically any citizen could become an amir regardless of property status. Sources indicate that thirteen or fourteen amirs succeeded one another, including notable rulers such as Wajih al-Din Mas'ud, Khwaja Taj al-Din 'Ali, Yahya Karabi, and Khwaja 'Ali ibn Mas'ud (11).

Amir Khwaja Shams al-Din Ali (1347–1353), a radical Sarbadar leader, enjoyed broad support among peasants and artisans. Historical sources describe him as “a companion of the artisans of Sabzevar and a friend of the dervishes of the Hasan Juri order. During his rule, the *ra'iyyat* (peasants) lived in conditions of prosperity and security” (12). Yahya Karabi (1353–1358) succeeded him, representing the moderate Sarbadar faction, seeking compromise with the radical dervishes.

Throughout the Sarbadar period, political life was marked by a continuous struggle between moderates, representing small and medium feudal lords, and radicals, advocating property equality and representing poor peasants and artisans. These tensions led to frequent coups and changes in amirs, notably during the rule of Pahlavan Hasan Damghani (1360–1364). Radical uprisings led by Hasan Juri and his disciple Aziz were repeatedly suppressed, followed by further power struggles

involving Khwaja Ali Mu'ayyad. Although Mu'ayyad retained Shi'ism as the official doctrine, he banned dervish orders and destroyed the mausoleums of Shaykh Khalifa and Hasan Juri, ultimately alienating the population. By 1381, the Sarbadar movement was completely crushed.

The Sarbadars implemented a socially progressive system for their time. Peasants paid only three-tenths of their total produce as tax, exclusively in kind, with no additional levies. Emirs and officials wore simple camel-wool garments. The army comprised irregular detachments of peasants and small landowners, initially 12,000 men, eventually growing to 22,000. All received pay in kind. Sarbadar warriors were renowned for their bravery (6, p. 583).

Social Practices, Governance, and Intellectual Developments in Medieval Central Asia

The Sarbadar state in Khorasan demonstrated remarkable social and administrative progressiveness for its time. Communal dining tables were laid daily at the court for all who wished to partake, reflecting the egalitarian ethos of the movement. The state actively engaged in construction and development, notably under Amir Jani Qurbani, who oversaw the building and restoration of irrigation installations, qanats, and canals, significantly improving local agricultural infrastructure.

Despite their organizational skill and occasional military victories, the Sarbadars, like all peasant uprisings of the Middle Ages in both Eastern and Western societies, were ultimately doomed to defeat. They could not withstand the regular armies of formidable commanders such as Timur. Nevertheless, the movement achieved important outcomes: it paved the way for subsequent popular struggles, mitigated feudal exploitation, and dealt a decisive blow to one of the most oppressive regimes in Central Asian history—the Chagatai Ulus.

Central Asia, by virtue of its advanced economy, culture, and later the influence of the Islamic Renaissance, contributed significantly to intellectual developments during this period. Many eminent thinkers, statesmen, philosophers, and jurists, some associated with the renowned scholarly society of the Ikhwan al-Safa, were active in the region. Among them was Abu Nasr Muhammad ibn Tarkhan al-Farabi al-Turki

(873–950), born into a military family in Otrar, Turkestan. Al-Farabi received madrasa education in Baghdad and Damascus and studied under prominent scholars such as Abu Bisr. His profound mastery of Eastern and Greek philosophy allowed him to produce sophisticated commentaries on Aristotle and Porphyry. Al-Farabi earned widespread renown in the Muslim East, receiving the title *al-Mu'allim al-Thani* (“the Second Teacher”) after Aristotle.

Among his numerous works are *The Political Regime*, *Aphorisms of the Statesman*, *The Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City* (*Ara' Ahl al-Madina al-Fadila*), *The Attainment of Happiness* (*Tahsil al-Sa'ada*), and *The Enumeration of the Sciences* (*Kitab Ihsa' al-'Ulum*), in which he classified knowledge into five branches, designating the fifth as “the science of governance, jurisprudence, and theology.” Al-Farabi rejected purely theological explanations for the origin of the state, arguing instead that states emerged from human association to satisfy collective needs. He distinguished three levels of society: humanity as a whole, societies formed by a single people, and societies formed by city inhabitants. From a governance and welfare perspective, he preferred city-states over imperial structures.

Al-Farabi categorized city-states into three types: virtuous, ignorant, and collective. In virtuous city-states, life was organized according to high moral principles; citizens cooperated, assisting one another, thereby achieving the highest happiness. In ignorant city-states, violence, oppression, and arbitrariness prevailed. Collective city-states, exemplified by the Qarmatian state in Bahrain, represented transitional forms that could lead to virtuous governance. He further identified five social strata in virtuous cities: sages and worthy persons; clerics, poets, musicians, and scribes; accountants, physicians, astrologers, and others; warriors; and the wealthy, farmers, herdsmen, merchants, and artisans, whose relations were based on justice, respect, and mutual benefit.

Another luminary of the Islamic East was Abu Ali Ibn Sina (Avicenna) (980–1037), born in Afshana near Bukhara into a family of local officials. He studied under Abu Abdullah al-Khatili and benefited from al-Farabi’s intellectual legacy. Working in major scientific centers such as Bukhara, Khwarezm, and Isfahan, Ibn Sina acquired encyclopedic knowledge and later gained recognition in Europe as Avicenna. He also

worked at the Ma'mun Academy in Urgench, which gathered leading scholars, including al-Biruni and Abu Nasr ibn Iraq.

Ibn Sina was not only a philosopher and physician but also an accomplished political figure, serving in various capacities in the Samanid state and the Daylamite sultanate, eventually rising to vizier in Hamadan. He authored over 450 works across 29 disciplines, of which 274 survive today, encompassing medicine, jurisprudence, logic, mathematics, physics, metaphysics, philosophy, music, and chemistry. His extraordinary contributions make him one of the most influential scholars of the medieval Muslim East.

Together, the Sarbadar state's progressive social policies and the intellectual achievements of figures such as al-Farabi and Ibn Sina illustrate the dynamic interplay between political experimentation and scholarly thought in Central Asia during the medieval period, reflecting a society striving for justice, knowledge, and ethical governance.

Ibn Sina: Medicine, Philosophy, and the Ideal State

Abu Ali Ibn Sina (Avicenna) (980–1037) was a polymath whose influence spanned medicine, philosophy, law, and political thought. He authored the monumental 18-volume *Kitab al-Shifa* ("Book of Healing") and the five-volume *al-Qanun fi al-Tibb* ("Canon of Medicine"), which served as the principal medical textbook in universities throughout the Middle Ages. Following Hippocrates, Ibn Sina is widely regarded as the greatest physician in world history. He is credited with introducing the white medical coat, a symbol of cleanliness and purity previously reserved for caliphs, and with originating the medical emblem of the serpent, symbolizing healing through controlled poison.

In political and legal philosophy, Ibn Sina was a follower of al-Farabi, developing his ideas primarily in *Kitab al-Insaf* ("The Book of Justice") and *Isharat*. He envisioned an ideal society and state organized into three social groups based on material status and share in social wealth: rulers, workers, and warriors. Each group was hierarchically structured, with society governed by laws and legal norms to ensure order and justice.

Ibn Sina emphasized that all members of society should work and produce material goods for both public and personal welfare. Unemployment or idleness was to be minimized, and material resources distributed equitably to prevent extreme wealth or poverty. Those unable to work, the sick, and warriors without other professions were to receive support from a common state fund, financed through taxes and voluntary contributions. Although he considered a limited form of slavery acceptable for heavy labor, Ibn Sina himself owned only a small number of slaves.

The ideal state, according to Ibn Sina, had three key duties: maintaining public order, enforcing laws through coercive measures, and ensuring the welfare of all citizens. In line with Sunni doctrine, he advocated for the election of rulers rather than hereditary succession and opposed aggressive wars, favoring diplomacy and negotiation to resolve interstate conflicts. Laborers were to occupy a higher social position than warriors, whose sole duty was the defense of the state. This perspective represented a fundamentally new approach to the social estate structure in the medieval Islamic East.

For Ibn Sina, moral and intellectual development were paramount. He argued that proper laws and education could transform human nature and even promote longevity. Rulers, in particular, were responsible for guiding society, and their ethical and intellectual cultivation was crucial for historical progress.

Conclusion

Situated at the heart of the Great Silk Road, Central Asia was a critical segment of global trade, and its economic, cultural, and political development left a lasting legacy. Movements such as the Sarbadar uprisings illustrate early attempts to establish social justice and equitable governance, while the intellectual contributions of figures like al-Farabi and Ibn Sina reflect the region's engagement with philosophy, ethics, and statecraft. Studying this history not only enriches our understanding of medieval Central Asia but also offers enduring lessons on governance, social equity, and the pursuit of knowledge.

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