Book Review: The Killing of the *Imām*

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This book is about *Imām* Abdullah Haron, who fought against the racist system of apartheid political rule in South Africa until he died of injuries caused by severe torture while incarcerated in a Cape Town prison in 1969. The book details an account of some of his political activities, his detention, and the apartheid security police's subsequent torture of *Imām* Haron. The book also provides insights into the political climate in South Africa during the 1950s and 1960s, particularly in the Western Cape.

Haron's appointment as the *Imām* of the *Al Jāmia Masjid* in Claremont in 1956 begins the book. He is described in the book as a simple, modest, and pious man who enjoys rugby, comedy, and movies. It also discusses the complex cultural dynamics of the Muslim population, of predominantly Malaysian and Indonesian ancestry, in Cape Town. Haron's unavoidable participation in politics and the fight against apartheid is made abundantly evident.

As his understanding of the Holy *Qur'ān* and the history of Islam expanded, many were drawn to *Imām* Haron's teachings despite some congregation members' concerns about his youth and secular interests. He established a *madrasah* where he taught Arabic to children so that they could read the *Qur'ān* with comprehension, as opposed to merely memorizing lengthy parts of the text. He was open to learning from those whose political consciousness had been cultivated by secular education. In what turned out to be a stroke

of genius, he declared, at a Muslim Judicial Council[1] meeting, that *Masājid* are sacred forever and can never be sold or demolished. As a result, *Masājid* were exempted from the Group Areas Act[2] because of the fear by the apartheid government that their demolition could start a "holy war".

By his third year as an *Imām*, Haron had established a thriving congregation. His awareness of the long-standing Muslim tradition of participation in community politics encouraged him to look outside his own community. He made it his mission to connect with African migrant workers that inspired him to seek a deeper knowledge of their conditions. His mission allowed him to find innovative ways of circumventing the "pass laws", which were established under the Pass Laws Act of 1952. The laws were designed to segregate the population, by requiring black South Africans over the age of 16 to carry a passbook, known as a *dompas*, everywhere and at all times. Haron ventured into black townships where he discovered an increasingly pervasive expression of disdain for Christianity, due in large part to the cruelty of the State, whose policies were often justified using Christian rhetoric. Later, many found the inclusivity and equality in *Islam* appealing and eventually converted.

"The Brotherhood of Man" became a recurring theme for *Imām* Haron's lectures and study sessions that he had incorporated into the *masjid's* daily schedule. His political consciousness gradually increased; under his leadership, many young Muslims discovered a space where their activism and faith could coexist. At the same time, he also had to carefully consider the tone of his political pronouncements while continuing his unwavering commitment to the fight against tyranny and oppression, because the apartheid government had begun to position police informants in his

1 The Muslim Judiciary Commission (MJC) is a Muslim judicial body whose primary role is Islamic guidance, education, rulings, propagation, *ḥalāl* certification, and social development (especially marriage counselling). In a country where Muslims are a minority, it is a non-profit organization. The MJC follows the *Sunnī* system of belief. It is the most prominent Muslim religious group in the Western Cape, and its religious, cultural, and organizational activities in South Africa are acknowledged locally, nationally, and worldwide.

2 The Group Areas Act which came into law in 1950, was the title of legislation passed by the South African Parliament under the apartheid regime. The policy had the effect of excluding people of colour from the most developed neighbourhoods, which were reserved for Whites.

mosque. By 1965, his Friday *khuṭab* (sermons) had developed into significant occasions that were eagerly awaited and hotly debated afterwards. He quickly rose to idol status among young Muslims. This drew the attention of the police, who decided that he was a security risk.

Haron left for a fourth *ḥajj* at the end of 1966. He was in desperate need of a break from the oppressive political atmosphere in South Africa, as well as a chance for social, political, and spiritual revitalization. Arrangements were made to meet a friend, identified in the book only by the name Abraham, who was living in exile in Mecca. Abraham convinced Haron to first travel to Cairo, to meet representatives of the Pan-African Congress and then to London, before returning to South Africa. It was also an opportunity to approach members of the Islamic World Council, who happened to be in Cairo for a meeting, to inform them about the situation in South Africa and urge them to lobby their governments to join the fight to end apartheid.

When searching for ways to bring aid to South Africa, Haron met Canon John Collins of the Defence and Aid Fund, in London. They forged an important alliance despite their contrasting religious styles. Haron then returned to South Africa reenergized and eager to tackle the tasks at hand.

The book's later chapters recount the heart-breaking story of how the security police thwarted all his political endeavours. He made every attempt to deflect the attention of the police, committing himself to the spiritual activities of his *Masjid* as well as his career as a salesperson. However, he had become visible on the radar of the security police. Many of his previous friends and supporters abandoned him, frightened of the repercussions of being associated with him.

Eventually, he was constantly under surveillance. His bank accounts and documents were monitored, and even the *Masjid* and its library were meticulously searched. However, no incriminating evidence was ever discovered. Nevertheless, he was summoned to Cape Town's police headquarters in May 1969, where he was interrogated. He was stunned to learn that they knew many details about his travels. They even knew the names of his contacts, Abraham and Mujaheed. Such was the level of scrutiny placed on his travels to Mecca, Cairo, and the UK.

After the interrogation, the police surveillance intensified so much that Haron considered fleeing the country. The tension was exhausting; more than what any normal person could bear. Ultimately, he placed his trust in Allah to protect him and accepted whatever might happen to him, submitting to the will of Allah. He was arrested on 28 May 1969, which was followed by months of interrogation and brutal torture, which resulted in his death on 27 September of the same year.

Although the book is noticeably lacking in resources, the author makes up for this by skilfully reconstructing the horrific account of the last four months of Haron's life using two letters he managed to smuggle out of prison. The author also drew on similar experiences of others who were detained, tortured, and interrogated in the same detention centres and by the same people, using information acquired from the hearing held after Haron's death.

The ending of the book is incredibly painful because of the graphic depiction of the effects of apartheid policies on the majority of South Africans. Nevertheless, this is an essential read for young South Africans in particular, so they will know the sacrifices made by anti-apartheid leaders and activists, so they can appreciate the freedom they have today.

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