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Archaeology of the Concept of General Deputyship in the Interaction of Usulis and Akhbaris with Safavid Rulers

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Abstract

The primary aim of this study is to provide a historical-analytical examination of the concept of "general deputyship" (*niyāba ʿāmma*) during the Safavid era, tracing its evolution from the establishment of the Safavid state to its decline. The research seeks to demonstrate how this concept played a significant role in legitimizing the monarchical structure and how it gradually waned and became disrupted within the Akhbari discourse. Rather than identifying the origin of the general deputyship concept in the Safavid period, this article focuses on analyzing its transformation and discontinuation through the interactions between Usuli and Akhbari scholars with the Safavid monarchy. The primary research question is based on the premise of whether "general deputyship," initially employed by Usuli scholars as a tool for religious legitimation of the Safavid state, was entirely disrupted during the transition to the Akhbari discourse. If so, what theoretical, social, and political factors contributed to this transformation, and how did the differing approaches of Usuli and Akhbari scholars in their relationship with the monarchy influence this process? The research methodology adopted in this article is historical-theological analysis based on documentary study and discourse analysis, conducted through an examination of Safavid historical, jurisprudential, and theological sources, as well as an analysis of the propositions of Usuli and Akhbari scholars. Within this framework, the research relies on primary sources, including jurisprudential texts, treatises, and historical reports, to explore the discursive transformations within the Imami jurisprudential tradition during the Safavid era. Furthermore, through a comparative analysis of the positions of Usuli scholars such as al-Muḥaqqiq Karakī (Karakī, 1989), al-Shahīd al-Thānī (Shahīd al-Thānī, n.d.), Muqaddas Ardabīlī (Ardabīlī, 1983), and others, alongside Akhbari scholars such as Muḥammad Amīn Astarābādī (Astarābādī, 2005), Fayḍ Kāshānī (n.d./a; n.d./b), and Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī (Majlisī, n.d.), the study seeks to elucidate the points of divergence and convergence between the two approaches regarding the concept of general deputyship (Gleave, 2018; Jafarian, 2000). The research findings indicate that at the outset

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of the Safavid dynasty, Usuli scholars, leveraging the capacities of general deputyship, played a prominent role in the governance structure. Al-Muḥaqqiq Karakī, recognized as the general deputy of the Imam by Shah Tahmasp, exemplifies this theoretical and practical linkage. During this period, general deputyship extended beyond issuing fatwas to encompass judicial matters, leading Friday prayers, and overseeing other social affairs. However, with the gradual dominance of the Akhbari approach, this concept was theoretically undermined. Akhbaris, by rejecting ijtihad and *taqlīd* as innovations derived from Sunni practices, reduced the role of religious scholars to mere transmitters of hadiths and denied the concept of general deputyship. They maintained that religious rulings are fully contained within hadiths, eliminating the need for juristic inference or the intervention of a general deputy. This transformation in the concept of general deputyship directly impacted the interaction between religious scholars and the Safavid monarchy. Although both Usuli and Akhbari scholars collaborated with the state, Usulis grounded this cooperation in the theory of general deputyship, whereas Akhbaris viewed it merely as a practical partnership, rather than arising from religious legitimacy. This dynamic led to a situation in the late Safavid period where prominent scholars, such as ʿAllāma Majlisī, assumed political roles like *mullābāshī* and *shaykh al-Islām* without relying on the theoretical framework of general deputyship, thereby redefining the structure of religious authority from within the power system. In conclusion, the article emphasizes that the concept of general deputyship, once utilized as a tool to establish religious order in the Safavid state, was marginalized during the dominance of the Akhbari discourse. This disruption stemmed not only from theoretical shifts within the Imami jurisprudential tradition but also from the complex interplay of scholars with political power, changes in theoretical priorities, and the transition of authoritative discourses within the Shia domain. Consequently, general deputyship, which once symbolized the scholarly authority and religious legitimacy of jurists, was reduced to a theoretically insignificant concept by the end of the Safavid era, without necessarily eliminating the presence of scholars in political power structures.

Keywords

Archaeology. General Deputyship , Safavid Period, Usulis, Akhbaris.

1. Introduction

The Safavids ruled Iran for nearly two and a half centuries. Their confrontation and rivalry with the Ottoman Empire following the defeat at Chaldiran, coupled with the commitment and inclination of some military and administrative elites toward Shiism, alongside the heterodox nature of Safavid religious rhetoric and practice, presented a complex and unstable situation. In the early years of Safavid rule, religious scholars were generally reluctant to collaborate with the dynasty. "At least from 910 AH/1504 CE, three years after the conquest of Tabriz, only [Shaykh] ʿAlī Karakī, a Lebanese scholar, aligned himself with the court, receiving considerable rewards in return. By 916 AH/1510 CE, he held significant influence in the administrative apparatus of the newly conquered Iraqi territories and received an annual stipend ..." (Newman, 2007, p. 51). Al-Muḥaqqiq Karakī's collaboration with the Safavid rulers drew criticism from some Shia scholars. For instance, Ibrāhīm Qaṭīfī, in a pointed critique of Karakī, who held the positions of chief minister and shaykh al-Islām under the Safavids, criticized the conduct of Safavid officials, writing: "Shah Ismail sent for us from the farthest reaches of Khorasan while we were in Iraq, inviting us to promote religion and highlight the superiority of Shiism and its followers. Now, if we abandon religion and accept illicit wealth, how can we be worthy of promoting the faith?" (Qaṭīfī, 1993, p. 94). This text not only indicates that Qaṭīfī and other Iraqi scholars had the opportunity to join the Safavid court as Karakī did but also reflects the criticism by some Shia scholars of Karakī's collaboration with the Safavid rulers (Ranjbar & Mashkourian, 2010, pp. 107–136). The criticism of Shia scholars toward Muḥaqqiq Karakī was not limited to his collaboration with the Safavid sultan, as highlighted by Qaṭīfī. Karakī's scholarly stance on the issue of the right to the Imam's deputyship was equally controversial, drawing criticism from scholars with Akhbari leanings, such as Qaṭīfī, as well as those aligned with the Usuli jurisprudential discourse, such as al-Shahīd al-Thānī. These scholars may have acknowledged the legitimacy of the position of a religious judge or the Imam's deputy during the occultation, but the contentious issue was Karakī's belief in the Imam's deputyship encompassing all religious matters: "For the jurist is appointed by them [the Imams], peace be upon them, as a judge in all religious affairs" (Karakī, 1989, p. 143). This view diverges from al-Shahīd al-Thānī's perspective on general deputyship. In critiquing Karakī's arguments for the obligation of Friday prayer conditional on the permission of the Imam or his deputy, al-Shahīd al-Thānī holds that the requirement of the Imam's permission is nullified during the occultation. In

other words, while he believes the obligation of Friday prayer is absolute and required the Imam's permission during his presence, in the time of occultation, it operates under that same absoluteness without the need for permission from the Imam's deputy (Shahīd al-Thānī, n.d., pp. 56–57). Similarly, the Akhbari scholar Qaṭīfī authored a treatise on the prohibition of Friday prayer, indicating that certain matters, such as Friday prayer, were obligatory only during the Imam's presence. In the time of occultation, no deputyship exists to make Friday prayer contingent on such permission, rendering its performance impermissible. The title of Qaṭīfī's treatise is "A Treatise on the Absolute Prohibition of Friday Prayer During the Occultation, in Refutation of Muḥaqqiq Karakī's Assertion of Its Obligation in the Presence of a Jurist Meeting the Conditions for Issuing Fatwas" (Qaṭīfī, 1993).

The concept of the Imam's deputyship during the Safavid era, which emerged within the discourse of ijtihad in that period, has also attracted the attention of later researchers and historians.[1] According to Roger Savory, the power of Safavid kings rested on three pillars: first, the ancient Persian theory of the divine right of kings, endowed with divine glory (*farr-i īzadī*), which in the Islamic era was expressed as "the shadow of God on earth" (*ẓill Allāh fī al-arḍ*); second, the Safavid kings' claim to deputyship and representation of Imam Mahdi; and third, their status as the perfect spiritual guide (*murshid-i kāmil*) of the Sufi order's followers (Suyūrī, 2010, p. 2). Additionally, some Iranian researchers have addressed the claim that Safavid sultans considered themselves deputies of the Imam (Yousef Jamali, 1997, p. 247; Ghadyani, 2005, p. 167). Abdi Beg Shirazi also referred to Shah Tahmasp, the Safavid sultan, as the deputy of the Imam in the following verses:

> King with a celestial throne, commander of angels,
> Shadow of God, His Majesty Shah Tahmasp.
> King with the splendor of Alexander and Darius,
> With a hand like a cloud and a heart like the sea's grandeur.
> He has uprooted the foundations of oppression,
> The heavens have cast their shield before him.
> He is the master of the era and ruler of the world,
> The deputy of Mahdi, not a tyrant king. (Abdi Beg Shirazi, 1986, p. 29)

1. In another article titled "Archaeology of Theological and Jurisprudential Thought in Relation to the General Deputyship of the Imam and Religious Authority in Shiism" (*Imamiyya Research Journal*, forthcoming), I have addressed the issue of general deputyship in the pre-Safavid period.

In any case, it appears that in the early years of their rule, the Safavid kings were persuaded to delegate the authority of the Imam's general deputyship to religious scholars and jurists. Shah Tahmasp referred to Muḥaqqiq Karakī as the "Seal of the Mujtahids" (*khātam al-mujtahidīn*) and described him as the deputy of the Imam of the Age, namely Imam al-Mahdī the last Shiite Imam (Afandī, 1981, vol. 3, p. 456).

According to historical reports, various positions such as the chancellorship (*ṣidārat*) and *mullābāshī* were assigned to religious scholars and jurists until the end of the Safavid era. Despite these roles, it appears that the position of general deputyship, from the early years of Safavid rule to its final years, underwent disruption and discontinuity. Although in the initial years, religious scholars assumed the chancellorship motivated by the concept of general deputyship, by the late Safavid period, scholars who held positions such as chancellorship, *mullābāshī*, and other offices no longer did so under the framework of general deputyship. This shift occurred because the dominant discourse in the final years of the Safavids was Akhbarism, and according to the principles of this discourse, the presence of a general deputy was deemed unnecessary for many matters, including even Friday prayer (Fayḍ Kāshānī, n.d./a, vol. 1, p. 68). Some researchers argue that the concept of general deputyship pertains to the Usuli discourse of the Safavid era (Feirahi, 2010, p. 319; Sabourian, 2019, p. 102), a discourse initially established by al-Muḥaqqiq al-Ḥillī in the seventh century and significantly developed with the emergence of Muḥaqqiq Ardabīlī. Prior to Ardabīlī, the concept of general deputyship was solidified by al-Shahīd al-Thānī and Muḥaqqiq Karakī. This idea, rooted in the Usuli discourse, was challenged by the discourse of scholars led by Mullā Muḥammad Amīn Astarābādī, the author of *Al-Fawāʾid al-Madaniyya*. Akhbaris argued for a return to the early Imami tradition before the establishment of Muḥaqqiq Ḥillī's school of ijtihad (Astarābādī, 2005, vol. 1, p. 479; Ṣadr, 1986, vol. 1, p. 80). They maintained that *taqlīd* (emulation) of anyone other than an infallible Imam is impermissible, except when a scholar transmits a narration from an infallible Imam, which, from the Akhbari perspective, constitutes a layperson's consultation with a scholar (Karakī, 1989, p. 194). According to Astarābādī, everything the community needs until the Day of Judgment is definitively addressed in existing narrations (Astarābādī, 2005, vol. 1, p. 75). Unlike mujtahids, Akhbaris do not recognize varying rulings or multiple mujtahids; they believe there is only one ruling for each matter (Karakī, 1989, pp. 189, 192). Consequently, they see no disputed issues requiring religious scholars to engage in ijtihad on behalf of the Imam

to resolve ambiguities. From the Akhbari perspective, the primary deputyship that Usuli scholars claimed on behalf of the Imams in addressing religious rulings lacks validity, let alone deputyship in other matters. Through Astarābādī's scholarly efforts to dismantle the Usuli school and promote the Akhbari discourse, a religious scholar like Majlisī II emerged, whose political thought posed no conflict with the concept of order based on the sultan's authority. Given this context, the fundamental issue and primary research question is to explore the disruption and discontinuity of general deputyship during the Safavid period, from the Usuli to the Akhbari discourse. To this end, key propositions of the two approaches are compared and evaluated to understand the transformations, disruptions, and discontinuities in the concept of general deputyship, influenced by the rise of the Safavids and the roles of the Usuli and Akhbari discourses during this era.

2. Grounds for Proposing General Deputyship in the Safavid-Era Ijtihad Discourse

The Safavids ruled Iran for nearly two and a half centuries. In their confrontation with the Ottoman Empire, they laid the foundation for supporting Twelver Shia communities. Some researchers have sought to demonstrate that the Safavids, while promoting and expanding Shia centers, invited scholars from various regions to collaborate (Ranjbar & Mashkourian, 2010, pp. 107–136; Norouzi & Ramezani, 2015, pp. 5–24). As evidenced by certain documents, at the invitation of Shah Ismail and to promote Shiism, some Shia scholars traveled to cities such as Mashhad (Qaṭīfī, 1993, p. 94). This invitation and support for Shia scholars occurred while Shah Ismail simultaneously eliminated many of his Sufi rivals (Norouzi & Ramezani, 2015, pp. 5–24). If the Safavid kings sought to leverage the presence of religious scholars as a resource to strengthen their rule, the scholars, in turn, endeavored in various circles to express their aspiration for the protection of the state from adversities and calamities (Norouzi & Ramezani, 2015, pp. 5–24). The theoretical discourse of Shia scholars during the early Safavid period was based on ijtihad and *taqlīd*. In the seventh century, al-Muḥaqqiq al-Ḥillī employed the term "ijtihad," defining it as the derivation of religious rulings from legitimate sources. He emphasized that if one claims the Imami tradition also adopts an ijtihad-based approach, this is not incorrect, provided that analogy (*qiyās*) is excluded from the scope of ijtihād (Muḥaqqiq al-Ḥillī, n.d., p. 179). Separating discussions of *Uṣūl al-Fiqh* (principles of jurisprudence) from theological matters, highlighting the role of reason in the

science of *Uṣūl*, and introducing principles such as rational exemption (*barāʾat ʿaqliyya*) and continuity (*istiṣḥāb*) were innovations by al-Muḥaqqiq al-Ḥillī in his work *Maʿārij al-uṣūl*. Consequently, the role of ijtihad in Shiism during al-Muḥaqqiq al-Ḥillī's time became distinct from previous eras (Ṣadr, 1986, vol. 1, p. 49).

The scholars of Jabal Amil who collaborated with the Safavid kings adhered to an Usuli approach, and their theoretical discourse on jurisprudential matters was based on ijtihad and *taqlīd*. The context for the emergence of the concept of general deputyship among Shia scholars, who were committed to an epistemological discourse rooted in ijtihad and *taqlīd*, can be studied in light of certain prevailing rulings. This context, tied to the discourse of ijtihad and *taqlīd*, underwent a transformation in structure with the rise of the Akhbaris. The rulings that provided the basis for the concept of general deputyship during the Safavid period can be categorized into four key propositions:

First: Division of Labor between the Sultan and the Imam's Deputy

Roger Savory argues that the power of Safavid kings rested on three pillars: first, the ancient Persian theory of the divine right of kings, endowed with divine glory, which in the Islamic era was expressed as "the shadow of God on earth"; second, the Safavid kings' claim to deputyship and representation of Imam Mahdi; and third, their status as the perfect spiritual guide of the Sufi order's followers (Suyūrī, 2010, p. 2). It can be argued that the affairs of the Safavid sultans, tied to the second and third pillars, were constantly under threat due to the presence of Sufi leaders and Shia scholars. The Safavids marginalized the Sufis, effectively blocking their influence, but with regard to Shia scholars and jurists who considered themselves deputies of the Imam of the Age, they were compelled to reach a mutual agreement. Consequently, they granted a special status to Shia scholars to legitimize their rule in their eyes. Shah Ismail I placed particular emphasis on the position of the chancellorship. According to some Safavid historians, to ensure that the Safavid king's authority as the deputy of the Imam was not threatened, it was necessary to supervise the class of mujtahids and scholars. For instance, "during the reign of Shah Tahmasp, when the influence of the chancellor (*ṣadr*) had diminished, signs emerged of the mujtahids' desire to reclaim their rights." Shah Abbas I suppressed any efforts by scholars to challenge the sultan's dominance. While Shah Abbas was capable of managing the Shia scholars, his successors increasingly lacked the ability to oversee them, and the scholars progressively gained more power. After ascending to the throne,

Abbas II divided the crucial position of chancellorship into two branches: *khāṣṣa* (elite) and *mamālik* (provincial). The *ṣadr* was responsible for managing endowments and judicial duties. The political role of the *ṣadr* was assigned to the *shaykh al-Islām*, and during the reign of Shah Sultan Husayn, the successor to Sulayman, the political role was entrusted to a new religious position called the *mullābāshī*. A defining characteristic of the period from Shah Abbas II onward was the increasing power of the scholarly class (Suyūrī, 2010, pp. 232–233). Following the death of Shah Ismail, when the throne passed to Shah Tahmasp, who was deeply religious, he issued a public decree that marked a turning point in the establishment of Shiism and religious authority. Shah Tahmasp referred to Muḥaqqiq Karakī as the "Seal of the Mujtahids" and described him as the deputy of the Imam of the Age. In his decree, Shah Tahmasp, acknowledging Muḥaqqiq Karakī's position, stated: "In governmental affairs, no one dismissed by Shaykh Karakī should be appointed, and no one appointed by him should be dismissed." In this decree, written in Shah Tahmasp's own hand, it is argued, based on the narration of ʿUmar ibn Ḥanẓala from Imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, that Karakī is the embodiment of this narration. It further states: "He is the deputy of the Imams (peace be upon them), and anyone who opposes his ruling is accursed, rejected, and deserving of punishment" (Afandī, 1981, vol. 3, p. 456).

Second: Highlighting the Honors and Virtues of Scholars in Place of Sufi Leaders (*Aqṭāb*)

During this period, the status of religious scholars among the people was enhanced by emphasizing their miracles and virtues, enabling their popularity to partially supplant the position of Sufi leaders in the hearts of a populace that, until recently, had been devoted to spiritual guides and sought the path through them. As the Safavid kings reduced their spiritual ties with the Qizilbash tribes, they required a source of legitimacy independent of the Qizilbash Sufi tradition. Consequently, to consolidate their rule, they needed a substitute that could also legislate and oversee public affairs such as trade, agriculture, and justice (Jafarian, 2000, p. 119). The call to emulate a mujtahid can be understood within the context that, while earlier Shia scholars such as al-Kulaynī and al-Shaykh al-Mufīd did not accept *taqlīd*, during this period, and with the model of emulating Sufi leaders to weaken their influence, *taqlīd*—rooted in the Usuli discourse—gained greater practical traction within Shia society. It should be noted, however, that in the Safavid era, the call to emulate a single mujtahid and restrict oneself to the rulings of one jurist marked a departure from the past. For instance, Shah Abbas's directive to

Shaykh Bahāʾī to write *Jāmiʿ ʿAbbāsī* or the "Treatise on the Prohibition of the Slaughter of the People of the Book" provided the groundwork and governmental support for encouraging Shia emulation of a scholar like Shaykh Bahāʾī (ʿĀmilī, 2008, p. 7).

Third: Distinction Between Absolute and Partial Mujtahid

The discourse of ijtihad, established by al-Muḥaqqiq al-Ḥillī in the seventh century, underwent significant development during the Safavid era with the emergence of Muḥaqqiq Ardabīlī. While al-Muḥaqqiq al-Ḥillī had previously addressed the aspects of general ijtihad, it appears that absolute ijtihad was fully realized only during the Safavid period. Muqaddas Ardabīlī distinguished between absolute (*muṭlaq*) ijtihad and partial (*mutajazzī*) ijtihad. He argued that claiming it is obligatory for every individual to engage in ijtihad is highly implausible. He explains how one could expect an elderly or infirm person who cannot grasp basic principles, or a young girl who has just reached the age of nine, to undertake ijtihad—an endeavor whose principles and prerequisites are challenging even for eminent and distinguished scholars and often unattainable for many until the age of fifty or sixty (Ardabīlī, 1983, vol. 3, p. 380).

Fourth: Not Limiting General Deputyship to Issuing Fatwas

Rasul Jafarian argues that with the establishment of their formal rule, the Safavids were influenced by the Ottomans in incorporating religious and governmental positions such as *shaykh al-Islām* and chancellorship, as well as establishing administrative roles. For instance, Friday prayers were held throughout the Ottoman Empire, and the Shia, having achieved a centralized state in Iran under the Safavids, needed to devise a mechanism for conducting Friday prayers (Jafarian, 1991, p. 92). Some Shia scholars who believed in the absolute obligation of Friday prayers did not consider the permission of the Imam or his specific or general deputy as a prerequisite. However, Friday prayers cannot be held in an Islamic country without the involvement of the ruler or sultan in selecting the prayer leader. If a sultan appoints a prayer leader unacceptable to the jurists, or if a jurist selects a prayer leader to whom the sultan does not consent, the Friday prayer will inevitably not be held unless the two reach an agreement. Consequently, Muḥaqqiq Karakī wrote a treatise on the optional obligation of Friday prayers, contingent on the permission of the Imam's deputy, to establish his role in appointing the prayer leader. In this treatise on Friday prayers, Karakī introduced the concept of the guardianship of the jurist (*wilāyat al-faqīh*) to first clarify his legal and religious status in this matter. Jafarian highlights the significance of this

treatise for two reasons: first, Karakī had not yet attained the position of chancellorship when he wrote it, and second, the treatise predates that of al-Shahīd al-Thānī (Jafarian, 1991, p. 95). Karakī's treatise on Friday prayers consists of three chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter includes three introductions: the first addresses a principle in *Uṣūl al-Fiqh* regarding whether an act whose obligation has been lifted remains permissible. The second introduction notes the consensus among Shia scholars that a just Imami jurist, meeting the conditions for issuing fatwas, is the deputy of the Imams during the occultation, and judicial matters must be referred to him. The third introduction discusses the condition that Friday prayers require the presence of the Imam or his deputy, asserting a consensus on this matter. In the third chapter, Karakī argues that Friday prayers are not legitimate during the occultation unless conducted by a jurist meeting the necessary conditions, claiming this view is consensual. In the conclusion, Karakī elaborates on the qualities of the jurist as the Imam's deputy during the occultation. According to Karakī, the notion that the jurist is appointed solely for issuing rulings and fatwas is incorrect: "It cannot be said that the jurist is appointed for judgment and fatwa issuance, and that prayer falls outside these roles, for we respond that this claim is profoundly flawed. The jurist is appointed by the Imams (peace be upon them) to govern all religious matters, as we established in the introduction" (Karakī, 1989, vol. 1, p. 153).

3. The Emergence of Akhbaris in Contrast to the Ijtihad-Based Discourse

Were the Akhbaris a distinct discourse separate from the ijtihad-based discourse, or do both fall within the same discourse, differing only in certain issues? The efforts of some disciples of Mullā Muḥammad Amīn Astarābādī, the author of *al-Fawāʾid al-Madaniyya*, such as Shaykh Ḥusayn Karakī, author of *Hidāyat al-abrār*, and Baḥrānī in *al-Ḥadāʾiq al-nāẓira*, in enumerating the differences between the Akhbari and ijtihad-based approaches suggest that the Akhbaris were not grounded in a theoretical foundation independent from the Usulis. Shaykh Jaʿfar Kāshif al-Ghiṭāʾ also outlined the scholarly differences between Usulis and Akhbaris in his book *al-Ḥaqq al-mubīn fī taṣwīb al-Mujtahidīn wa-takhṭiʾat al-Akhbāriyyīn*. In this work, Kāshif al-Ghiṭāʾ sought to demonstrate that both currents within Imami Shiism agree on referring to narrations and hadiths, and both engage in ijtihad: "The mujtahid, upon scrutiny, is an Akhbari, and the Akhbari, upon careful examination, is a mujtahid" (Kāshif al-Ghiṭāʾ, 1940, p. 3). Shaykh Yūsuf

Baḥrānī, in *al-Ḥadāʾiq al-nāẓira*, similarly downplays these differences (Jahangiri, 2009, p. 42). Robert Gleave also argues that traces of the Akhbari movement are vaguely present about seventy years after Astarābādī's death (Gleave, 2018, p. 255). Nevertheless, the Akhbaris rose to prominence during a period when they fully benefited from the power facilitated by the coordination and efforts of Usuli scholars from the early Safavid era. From the reign of Shah Abbas II onward, Safavid kings progressively reduced their oversight of religious scholars, thereby increasing their influence. Consequently, as the sultans' supervision over religious scholars diminished, the Akhbaris did not require the framework of general deputyship to gain power. However, Akhbari scholars who attained governmental positions engaged in scholarly disputes with Usulis, critiquing their foundations within the epistemological discourse of ijtihad and *taqlīd*—a critique that ultimately led to the rejection of the concept of general deputyship.

First: Return to the Imami Approach before al-Muḥaqqiq al-Ḥillī and Suspension of Ijtihad

The Usuli and jurisprudential developments of the early Safavid period were challenged by scholars led by Mullā Muḥammad Amīn Astarābādī, the author of *al-Fawāʾid al-Madaniyya*, who argued for a return to the emulation of the early Imami tradition before al-Muḥaqqiq al-Ḥillī and the school of ijtihad (Astarābādī, 2005, vol. 1, p. 479; Ṣadr, 1986, vol. 1, p. 80; Ali Haydar, 1997, p. 58). Astarābādī notes that Thiqat al-Islām al-Kulaynī, in his book Al-Kāfī, dedicated a chapter to the Imams' directives to adhere to the hadiths compiled during the occultation. He then refers to two chapters in which *taqlīd* and ijtihad are declared invalid. Astarābādī further states: "ʿAllāma (al-Muḥaqqiq) al-Ḥillī and his companions neglected these three chapters of Al-Kāfī" (Astarābādī, 2005, vol. 1, p. 251). He considers the division of the community into mujtahid and muqallid, along with the establishment of conditions and rulings for taqlīd and ijtihād among the Shia, as a model that Usulis adopted from the Sunnis. According to Astarābādī, the Sunnis, who embraced ijtihad and *taqlīd*, did so because they did not believe in the obligation to adhere to the Imams and did not regard them as a means to understand the Qur'an and the Prophet's Sunnah (Astarābādī, 2005, vol. 1, p. 61). The Akhbaris were opposed to the ijtihad school of Muḥaqqiq Ardabīlī. They believed that ijtihad and the Usuli school were an imitation of the Sunni tradition and argued that ijtihad and *Uṣūl al-Fiqh* led to a departure from sacred texts and diminished their significance. According to the Akhbaris, even the terminology of *Uṣūl al-Fiqh* was borrowed from the Sunnis.

Astarābādī identifies Ibn Junayd al-Iskāfī, an advocate of analogy (*qiyās*), and Ibn Abī ʿAqīl al-ʿUmmanī, a theologian, as the first to err by relying on rational-based theological and jurisprudential knowledge derived from Sunni thought. He claims that al-Shaykh al-Mufīd held a favorable opinion of their works, followed by al-Sayyid al-Murtazā and al-Shaykh al-Ṭūsī, who also paid attention to their writings. This approach was passed down from one generation to the next until it reached later scholars and al-Muḥaqqiq al-Ḥillī. Al-Ḥillī, in turn, adhered to most of the general principles of Sunni legal theory in his works, and subsequently, al-Shahīd al-Awwal and al-Shahīd al-Thānī followed his lead (Astarābādī, 2005, vol. 1, p. 78). Furthermore, Astarābādī maintains that the Akhbari approach was predominant among Shia scholars and that during the time of al-Kulaynī and al-Ṣadūq, it was the only approach recognized. However, after the fourth century, some Imami scholars began to deviate from the Akhbari path, turning to reason and rational deductions, thereby straying from the Akhbari approach and inclining toward the Sunni method of ijtihad. Although Astarābādī is renowned as the leader of the Akhbaris, he himself considers the Prophet of Islam and the infallible Imams as the true leaders of the Akhbaris, as they did not engage in ijtihad and relied on narrations for rulings. Following them, their companions and the remaining Shia of that era, for approximately 350 years until the occurrence of the occultation, and then for about 700 years after the occultation (up to the time of composing *al-Fawāʾid al-Madaniyya*), all scholars adhered to narrations (*akhbār*) (Astarābādī, 2005, vol. 1, p. 7). Astarābādī goes so far as to accuse the Usulis of undermining religion: "The destruction of religion occurred twice: once on the day of the Prophet's passing, and again on the day the rules of *Uṣūl al-fiqh* were implemented" (Astarābādī, 2005, vol. 1, p. 368).

Astarābādī, emphasizing the approach of the early scholars, which he considers Akhbari, holds that everything the community needs until the Day of Judgment has definitive evidence, and many of the rulings brought by the Prophet, as well as what we need to know regarding abrogation, restriction, specification, and interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah, are preserved with the Ahl al-Bayt (the Prophet's Household). He believes that the Quran, in many instances, is presented in general terms relative to the understanding of the common people, as is the case with the Prophet's Sunnah. There is no way to comprehend the rulings of the Sharia from these sources except by referring to Imam al-Bāqir and Imam al-Ṣādiq. According to Astarābādī, even deriving theoretical rulings from the apparent meanings of the Quran and the Prophet's Sunnah is impermissible; instead, one must pause and exercise caution. The

author of *al-Fawāʾid al-Madaniyya* asserts that if a mujtahid errs in discerning God's rulings, he has falsely attributed something to God, and if his opinion aligns with reality, he receives no reward for it (Astarābādī, 2005, vol. 1, p. 104). Given this premise, when Akhbaris encounter contradictions in hadiths, they have no recourse like ijtihad to resolve them. Moreover, unlike mujtahids, Akhbaris do not recognize multiple rulings or various mujtahids; rather, they believe there is only one ruling for each matter. As Mullā Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī states in his book *Safīnat al-najāt*, which was written to refute ijtihad: "Since God, the Exalted, is one, the Messenger of God, peace be upon him, is one, and the Quran is one, it follows that there can only be one ruling for any given event" (Fayḍ Kāshānī, n.d./b, vol. 1, p. 75).

Second: The Rise of Literalism and Superficiality

Akhbari scholars, who gained prominence during the late Safavid period, not only emphasized the apparent meaning of hadiths and narrations but also reinforced a form of literalism and superficiality. By abolishing the concepts of ijtihad and *taqlīd*, upon which general deputyship was based, attention needed to be redirected to subjects that could serve as substitutes for religious authority and deputyship. Drawing the attention of Safavid kings to the tombs and shrines of the Imams is an example of initiatives possibly encouraged by the Akhbaris. The compilation of the book *Faḍāʾil al-Sādāt* or "The Virtues of the Family of Prophethood and Imamate" by Mīr Muḥammad Ashraf Ḥusaynī ʿĀmilī, a descendant of Mīr Dāmād, in 1102/1690, is another indication of this focus on traditional heritage. ʿAllāma Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī (d. 1110/1699) also compiled an extensive collection of Shia hadith heritage in his work *Biḥār al-Anwār* during this period. According to Mīr Muḥammad Ḥusayn Khātūnābādī (d. 1151/1738), who wrote a treatise on the number of Majlisī's works, Majlisī authored ten books in Arabic and forty-nine in Persian. By calculating the total lines of Majlisī's written works and dividing them by the span of his life, Khātūnābādī concluded that Majlisī wrote approximately thirty-three pages of three hundred words per day (Khanifarzadeh, 2002, p. 32).

Third: From Doctrinal, Religious, and Denominational Intolerance to the Theory of Continuity

Some historians argue that ʿAllāma Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī was literalist, rigid, and zealous. He played a significant role in promoting Shiism and suppressing Sunnis and Sufis. It is claimed that Majlisī persuaded over seventy thousand Sunnis to convert to Shiism. He was also harsh and zealous toward Sufis, as they adhered to the doctrine of the unity of existence (*waḥdat*

al-wujūd) and many of their prominent figures were Sunnis. Majlisī's hostility toward these groups reached such an extent that he resorted to slander and accusations against them, persecuting those who did not follow their approach. While the religious movement in the early Safavid period had fostered unity, such harsh measures by religious scholars had the opposite effect, alienating people instead of uniting them. The struggle against Sunnis provoked and discontented the few remaining Sunni warriors. Majlisī's strictness also extended to followers of other religions, such as Zoroastrians and Jews (Lockhart, 2022, p. 81). "His death, shortly afterward, brought calamities that led to the great catastrophe of 1722, and it is believed that the absence of such a devout figure exposed Iran to dangers. However, some scholars argue that this catastrophe was, to some extent, a consequence of the excessive zeal and rigidity promoted by him and his like-minded peers" (Brown's *History of Literature*, p. 120; as cited in Lockhart, 2022, p. 82; see also on intolerance in that era: Tabatabaei, 2013, p. 62; Matthee, 2020, p. 183). Both Usulis and Akhbaris may, for various reasons and under different circumstances, exhibit tolerance or intolerance toward their intellectual and ideological opponents. However, there are documents and statements indicating that the Akhbaris took advantage of the opportunities provided by the Safavids to suppress and eliminate "manifestations of corruption and sin" in society. While adhering rigidly to the implementation of the authentic religion, they confronted intellectual, religious, and doctrinal opponents (Newman, 2007, pp. 162–163).

From the period of Akhbari dominance, there are statements indicating significant opposition to philosophy. For instance, Maryam Bigum, the daughter of Safi, aunt of Shah Sultan Husayn, and wife of the chancellor of the time, established a school where, "according to the conditions of the endowment deed and in deference to opponents of philosophy, the revenues from the endowments were conditional on not teaching the works of Ibn Sīnā [Avicenna] in this school" (Newman, 2007, p. 163). Additionally, "the teaching of philosophy in the [Chahārbāgh] school was prohibited in favor of focusing on hadith, jurisprudence, and Qur'anic exegesis, as a sign of the influence of the powerful orthodox Imami group" (Newman, 2007, p. 164). The state's support for opposition to the rationalist discourse and its concessions to Akhbari scholars in combating religious and denominational opponents indicate that, in the late Safavid period, the discourse that produced general deputyship in favor of mujtahids no longer posed a competitive or challenging threat to the monarchy. On the other hand, opponents of the Usuli and rationalist discourse, in the late Safavid era, introduced the concept

of a state paving the way for the reappearance of Imam al-Mahdī. Some researchers, including Rasul Jafarian, have considered the theoretical foundation of this concept as a framework for legitimizing and justifying Safavid rule. While Akhbaris in the later Safavid period supported this theory, mujtahids of the early and middle Safavid periods paid it no heed. Jafarian refers to a treatise written during the reign of Shah Tahmasp, in which the author, in the introduction, cites certain hadiths emphasizing the obligation to pray for and obey "this eloquent and radiant state." The author then attempts to legitimize Safavid rule by applying certain hadiths to the emergence of the Safavid state. Jafarian explains that such efforts, because the influential scholars of Shah Tahmasp's era were mujtahids, remained unsupported and unnoticed. However, when the Akhbari trend gained strength, "they had no qualms about claiming that all hadiths were authentic. Thus, the Akhbari movement once again sought to serve as a tool to justify Safavid rule, which, from the perspective of jurists, could not have a legitimate basis. Jurists generally interpreted the term 'just ruler' (*sulṭān ʿādil*) as referring to the infallible Imam and explicitly affirmed this" (Jafarian, 2011, pp. 738–740; see also, regarding its application to Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī, Jafarian, January 11, 2011; Ali Haydar, 1997, p. 61). The theory of continuity evokes the perspective of hadith-centric Qummi scholars in the early centuries of the occultation, who did not envision a prolonged period of occultation. Consequently, for them, establishing the position of general deputyship for scholars was unimportant due to the anticipated brevity of the occultation and the imminent return of the Imam.

Fourth: From Dispensing with the Position of General Deputyship of the Imam to Interaction with the Sultan

An examination of certain rulings and key propositions of the Akhbaris indicates that, based on their principles, they were not inclined to strengthen the position of religious scholars as the general deputy of the Imam during the occultation. This is in contrast to reports from some historians suggesting that, in the early Safavid period, Safavid kings feared rivalry with religious scholars over the Imam's deputyship. "If the authority of the Safavid king as the representative of Imam al-Mahdī on earth was not to be threatened, political control over the mujtahids and the clerical class was necessary, as the right to represent Imam al-Mahdī truly belonged to the mujtahids, and this right had been usurped by the king. In the past, during the reign of Shah Tahmasp, when the influence of the *sadr* [chancellor] had diminished, signs had emerged of the mujtahids' desire to reclaim their rights" (Suyūrī, 2010, p. 232). The

Akhbaris believed that the notion of requiring the permission of the Imam's deputy for matters such as leading Friday prayers originated with al-Shaykh al-Ṭūsī and was influenced by Sunni practices, whereas other Shia scholars did not hold such a view (Fayḍ Kāshānī, n.d./a, vol. 1, p. 40).

In the absence of a perceived necessity for establishing general deputyship for Shia scholars and the lack of a theory for overseeing political power among Akhbari scholars, some, like Majlisī, believed that obedience to the ruler or sultan takes two forms:

a) If the sultan has embraced the true religion, he holds numerous rights over the people. The people must protect the integrity of his rule, ward off the enemies of the faith, safeguard the honor, wealth, and life of such sultans, pray for them, and recognize their rights—especially if the sultan follows the path of justice. Protecting a just sultan is akin to protecting God. Majlisī, after describing these qualities, notes that the apparent meaning of these hadiths pertains to upholding the Imam's status, not the sultan. However, he observes that similar expressions regarding the rights of the sultan over the people exist in Sunni hadiths. It seems Majlisī, by referencing the presence of such hadiths in Sunni tradition, seeks a basis to suggest that these hadiths may indeed refer to sultans, rather than being exclusively about the Imam, as found in Shia tradition.

b) The second category includes sultans and rulers who have deviated and lack justice. Majlisī argues that the subjects should pray for such rulers or strive to reform themselves so that God may reform the rulers, as the hearts of rulers, sultans, and all creation are in God's hands. He then emphasizes that subjects are inevitably obligated to obey every type of sultan or ruler, whether just or unjust. For those unable to endure the oppression of an unjust sultan, Majlisī recommends practicing *taqiyya* (dissimulation) to avoid incurring the ruler's wrath (Majlisī, n.d., vol. 1, p. 268).

The Safavid dynasty declined while Akhbari scholars like Majlisī advocated such interactions with the sultan. These Akhbari scholars were at the center of power, but it should not be overlooked that, at the same time, there were scholars like Mullā ʿAbdullāh Tūnī, known as Fāḍil Tūnī, who adopted a moderate approach to Akhbarism (if he was not an Usuli scholar indeed). Similarly, Āqā Ḥusayn Khwānsārī, the author of *Mashāriq al-shumūs*, was an Usuli scholar who blended principles of *Uṣūl al-Fiqh* with philosophical insights in his works. He lived during the reign of Shah Sulayman and accepted the position of *shaykh al-Islām* of Isfahan at the king's request. Muḥaqqiq Karakī, one of the earliest Shia scholars closely associated with the

court, was also an Usuli. However, he believed that sovereignty belonged to the Imam, with general deputyship entrusted to scholars, and that the sultan ruled with their authorization. Thus, both Usulis and Akhbaris collaborated with the state, but each held a distinct approach to governance. It should not be overlooked that the Safavid kings, in their rivalry with religious scholars over general deputyship, were not unhappy when they assigned numerous governmental positions to them, as the concept of general deputyship of the Imam became overshadowed or forgotten under the weight of various responsibilities. Over time, the religious scholars themselves, by accepting governmental roles, saw no need to emphasize the concept of general deputyship. The power derived from positions like chancellorship, *shaykh al-Islām*, and *mullābāshī* practically eliminated the need for them to prioritize the theory of general deputyship. While Muḥaqqiq Karakī sought to establish the position of general deputyship in his interactions with the Safavid sultans, Majlisī II, who held both the positions of *shaykh al-Islām* and the newly created role of *mullābāshī* until his death (Suyūrī, 2010, p. 233), accepted governmental positions not to advance a political theory or ideology but solely to promote Shia teachings. Their assumption of the chancellorship was not because they considered themselves the general deputy of the Imam.

4. Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that the two currents of Akhbari and Usuli thought underwent a disruption and discontinuity in the concept of general deputyship over the two and a half centuries of Safavid rule. This concept, initially exclusive to Safavid kings in the early years of their reign, was transferred to mujtahids due to the dominance of the Usuli discourse during the initial Safavid period. However, this situation did not persist due to the discursive and non-discursive practices of the Akhbari approach and the dynamics of power relations from the middle to later periods. During the Safavid era, many scholars—whether Akhbari, Usuli, philosopher, Quranic exegete, or theologian—benefited from proximity to power, and many were honored with titles such as *shaykh al-Islām* and *mullābāshī*. Some reports mention the names of over fifty prominent religious scholars from this period. The author examined various scholars associated with the Safavids to compile the following list. The degree of their proximity or distance from power, however, warrants further investigation.

Usuli Scholars (Seven Usulis): Āqā Ḥusayn Khwānsārī, Muqaddas Ardabīlī, Sulṭān al-ʿUlamāʾ, Ḥasan ibn Zayn al-Dīn ʿĀmilī, Muḥammad

ibn Isḥāq Ḥamawī, Muḥammad Bāqir Sabzawārī, Sayyid Nūrullāh Ḥusaynī Shūshtarī.

Akhbari Scholars (Nineteen Akhbaris): Khalīl ibn Ghāzī Qazwīnī, Ibrāhīm Qazwīnī, Sayyid ʿAbd al-Ḥusayn Khātūnābādī, Sayyid Mujāhid ibn Hāshim Baḥrānī, ʿAbdullāh Fāḍil Tūnī, Sayyid Niʿmatullāh Jazāʾirī, Shaykh Ḥurr ʿĀmilī, ʿAbd ʿAlī ibn Jumaʿa Ḥuwayzī, Muḥammad ibn Ḥasan ibn Zayn al-Dīn ʿĀmilī, ʿInāyatullāh Qahpāʾī, Muḥammad Amīn Astarābādī, Muḥammad Taqī Majlisī, Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī, Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ ibn Aḥmad Māzandarānī, Muḥammad Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī, Mīr Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ Khātūnābādī, Aḥmad ibn ʿAbd al-Riḍā, Ḥusayn ibn Shihāb al-Dīn Karakī (known as Ibn Jāndār), Sayyid Hāshim Baḥrānī, Mīr Muḥammad Ashraf Ḥusaynī ʿĀmilī.

Philosophers, Theologians, and Exegetes (Ten Philosophers and Exegetes): Ibrāhīm Hamadānī, Abū al-Fatḥ Ḥusaynī, Mīr Findiriskī, Ḥusayn ibn Ibrāhīm Tankābunī, Sayyid Aḥmad ibn Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn ʿAlawī, Mīr Dāmād, Mullā Ṣadrā, Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad Dārābī, Mullā Rajab ʿAlī Tabrīzī.

Overall, the prevalence of Akhbari scholars, considering their temporal and geographical distribution during the Safavid period compared to the presence of Usulis, indicates that the Akhbari approach wielded greater influence than the Usuli discourse. This approach, which opposed the acceptance of the Imam's general deputyship, effectively ceded governance and monarchy to the king in theory, even though in practice it had significantly extended its reach

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