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Minbar Guidelines

MAKING THE BEST OF
THE PROPHETIC PULPIT





In the name of Allah (swt), the All-Beneficent, the Ever-Merciful

Introduction

The word minbar (Arabic: منبر, lit. 'pulpit') is derived from the root word n-b-r which means 'to raise' or 'to elevate'. It is reported on the authority of Abu Dharr that Prophet Muhammad (s) used to sit with his companions and any stranger that would approach would not be able to ascertain who Prophet Muhammad (s) was, so as to direct his question. The companions sought permission from the Prophet (s) to make some arrangement, so that any stranger would be able to recognise him. Thus, they made a bench from clay. The Prophet (s) would sit on it and the companions would sit on both of its sides.[1] Furthermore, a lady from Medina named Aisha suggested to the Holy Prophet (s) to build a minbar for his Friday sermons; he welcomed this idea, and her Roman slave Yaqum made a minbar. [2]

Throughout the ages, the primary function of the minbar has been the dissemination of knowledge and to promote the teachings of the Qur'an and Ahl al-Bayt (as). The first verses to be revealed to the Prophet (s) were:

'Read in the name of your Lord who created, He created man from a clot. Read and your Lord is the most generous, Who taught with the pen, taught man that which he knew not. [3] Being the first verses to be revealed, Allah (swt) highlighted, from the onset, the importance of gaining knowledge.'

The hadith corpus is similarly full of narrations on seeking knowledge. The Holy Prophet (s) said: *'Seeking knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim. Let it be known that Allah (swt) loves those who seek knowledge.'* [4] Imam Ali (a) has stated: *'O people, you must know that the completion of religion is through seeking knowledge and acting accordingly. You must know that seeking knowledge is more obligatory than seeking wealth. Indeed, the wealth is allocated and guaranteed. A just God has already divided the wealth among you and has taken responsibility of it and sooner He will fulfil that. Knowledge, however, is preserved with those who possess it. You are commanded to seek knowledge from those who possess it. So you must seek knowledge.'* [5]

[1] Biḥār al-anwār, vol. 16, p. 229.

[2] Ibid, vol. 21, p. 47. This is reported on the authority of Jabir.

[3] Qur'an, 96: 1-5.

[4] al-Kāfī, vol. 1, p. 30.

[5] Ibid.



Aims and objectives

Undoubtedly, minbar has been an integral part of our religious structure and hence has always been remembered with great reverence and respect. It has not only been a platform for the promulgation of knowledge, but it has also been a key element for uniting the community at large and bringing them together in a single gathering. It has shaped the religious ideology of the community and has strengthened the relationship of its audience with their creator through teaching daily rituals and societal well-being. Minbar has played a vital role in the commemorations of the virtues of Ahl al-Bayt (as) by conducting the ceremonies of their wiladat and shahadat.

Despite these outstanding achievements of minbar, in recent times minbar has become vulnerable due to various challenges, from geo-political issues to the quality of the content presented from it. These challenges, necessarily, do not detract from its primary aims, but they do present an opportunity to enhance its usage and function in a more productive way. The need, therefore, for a series of generic guidelines for our religious centres has never been more felt.

Thus, the objective of this paper on one hand is to demonstrate the values and beliefs that a particular region/jamaat holds and stands by, and on the other hand it will help a scholar shape the content of his material as per the requirement and needs of a particular centre. The ultimate goal is to 'maximise our benefit from the minbar', and this goal serves the needs of all parts of the community.

The paper will also suggest some supplementary methods to minbar which could place the minbar into a more appropriate context.

Scope

The primary stakeholders of these guidelines are the core elements of our organisation, i.e. the jamaats. As the title suggests, this paper deals with guidelines and has no binding status unless a region/jamaat signs it in a legally binding contract.

The paper assumes that due to globalisation and technological advancement, the gap between the regions have disappeared, and we, the Khoja Shia Ithna Asheri Muslim Communities, share common challenges from Lindi to London and from Mahuva to Melbourne. This approach will also demonstrate the unity and strength of the Khoja community across the world adhering to religious values in an utmost rational manner. Needless to mention, it could be used by any Islamic centre due to its broad content.

The guidelines address all the three categories of scholars/muballighin, namely: ulama, dhakirin, and academics.

It should be noted that the philosophy of providing these generic guidelines is not to limit the scholarship of a scholar, but rather to ensure that the jamaats and scholars are aligned in their thoughts and ideas.

Hypothesis

Scholars, resident or invited, are perceived as the interpreters of the tenets of the religion as understood by our grand maraji. They have the necessary knowledge and tools to critically analyse, understand, and translate what they have learned and understood. This is a very important distinction to be made especially in regards to jurisprudence, and will greatly maintain harmony in the community. Indeed, the community is a tiny fragment and a well-knit part of the large fold of the Shia faith. Hence, the mainstream Shia faith is the central focus of the community. The discussion of what makes a mainstream Shia belief is out of the scope of this paper and could be referred to the maraji on particular cases.

Ayatullah Sistani (DZ) delivered a very important message providing his advice to scholars lecturing around the world in Muharram, and this is provided in the Appendix.

This document, by no means, is to curtail the genuine scholarship of the scholars nor to limit the right of the intellectual listener; rather, it aims to harmonise the affairs of the community from a platform which is shared by a broad audience with differences in age, gender, educational background, and life experience. Therefore, it is equally stressed that the region/jamaat should entertain and encourage critical and challenging issues in focus groups to enhance the learning of the inquisitive minds of community youths.

Religious and legal requirement

We firmly believe that our regions/jamaats should be aligned with fundamental Islamic tenets serving the community as a beacon of spirituality for those seeking it. A community can only flourish in this arena if the scholars and respective jamaats are focused on the broader vision of the community. Mapping this charter not only guarantees cohesion in the community but also would prevent us from issues which would distract our centers from that lofty goal. The last thing which any community would want is to put the reputation of any scholar, center and leadership at the risk by not having any set of rules and regulations for the productive use of a minbar.



Setting out the guidelines to use the pulpit in the best way possible is not only an internal necessity but also a legal requirement especially when it comes to state related issues. As centres within specific countries, we are bound by the laws of that country. In addition, where the organisation is a charity, it is bound by the charity laws too.

For instance, Compliance Toolkit, Protecting Charities from Harm, a UK-based effort, states:

'Trustees have a duty of care to protect the assets of their charities from abuse and must ensure that the charity's funds, assets and reputation are not placed at undue risk, including from becoming involved in extremism issues. In addition, some charities, because of the nature of their particular charitable work or because of which beneficiaries they support, for example people at particular risk of radicalisation, will have an important role to play through their work in helping to prevent the promotion and support of extremist ideas and views that may encourage terrorism, or that incite criminal acts or racial or religious hatred.' [6]

The community must abide by all the statutory laws of the land for it has always been an integrated part of the fabric of the community wherever we have resided. We must not seek to undermine the legitimate processes of our countries of residence. Moreover, to remain a law-abiding citizen in one's own nation is a value we all should stand by and be proud of. This paper is divided in two sections: Minbar guidelines and guidelines for tableegh departments.

1. Minbar guidelines

The body of scholars/muballighin form an integral part of our community. The impact of their meaningful presence and profound contributions transcend our worldly lives. Due to various geo-political challenges, in recent days, their sermons are exposed to unfair assessment. Below are some considerations which any scholar/muballigh cannot afford to overlook, placing themselves and the centres at undue risk.

Respecting the laws of the land

1.1 The content from the minbar must not contravene the law of the land.

Religious tenets

1.2 A speaker must refrain from any speech which demonises the oneness of Allah (swt) and undermines the status of His Prophets (s) and Imams (a). The tenets of the Shia faith should not be undermined or demonised. At the same time, he/she must avoid any exaggerated belief in regards to the status of prophets and imams. For instance, comparing them with Allah (swt).

[6] Compliance Toolkit, Protecting Charities from Harm, p6
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/351342/CT-5.pdf (11 November 2016).

The instigation of criticism towards well-established socio-cultural beliefs which are supported by marja'iyah is highly discouraged for the reason that such controversies cause tension and friction among members of the community and do not serve the purpose of the minbar.

Marja'iyah

1.3 Speakers should not undermine the institution of marja'iyah.

Extremism

1.4 The minbar must refrain from any sort of extremism, hate speech, and radicalisation. A speaker should not promote extremism in either action or inaction. A speaker is expected to talk about the path of moderation avoiding any incitement of unaccepted hatred against others. The minbar must avoid any rhetoric which helps to create an environment conducive to extremism. A speaker should not promote, support, or glorify any terrorist organisation or acts in an explicit or implicit manner.

Sectarian issues

1.5 Promoting any kind of sectarian strife and confrontation against any ideology, religion, or Islamic sect should be avoided in rhetoric and substance. This should not retain the right of discussing our faith in a scholastic way. The corrosive impact of sectarian issues is long lasting. Contrary to that, minbar should take the lead in advocating the promotion of inter-faith and intra-faith activities and encourage community members to engage in civil society for our shared set of norms and ethos.

Discrimination

1.6 Promoting discrimination against any age, gender, race, culture, or ethnicity is not permissible. Any sort of hate speech or abusive language in this regard should be avoided.

Bullying

1.7 The minbar should not be used to undermine, bully or mock any individual, institution, sect or religion.

Abusive language

1.8 Using abusive and foul language against any personality or practice revered by other religions and other Islamic denominations should be strictly avoided. This includes the use of derogatory, inflammatory, and insulting language. This does not mean that factual statements on the position of the speaker cannot be provided; rather, it must be done in an honourable manner that is in line with Islamic etiquette.

Superstitions

1.9 Superstitions and unfounded beliefs should not be preached from the minbar. Maintaining the intellectual and cultural level of the audience, a speaker should refrain from narrating ungrounded stories.

References

1.10 A speaker should ensure that her/his sermon(s) are credible and backed up by sound sources.

Political issues

1.11 A speaker should not promote any political party or candidate in any international, national, or local election, including jamaat elections. This is not to bar a speaker from the duty of amr bil-ma'ruf, but rather it is to make sure that sanctity of the minbar is preserved by not allowing it to be used for promoting the candidacy of one person over another. At the same time, scholars are advised to encourage the audience to take the route of democracy for their legitimate demands from their leaders in generic terms.

Personal or institutional agenda

1.12 A speaker should not use the pulpit to collect any sort of funds for his/her personal or institutional benefit. Prior consent must be sought from the jamaat management to advertise any sort of personal projects.

Radical change

1.13 Radical or rapid change should not be advocated from the minbar unless it pertains to a wajib or haram activity. Instead of this, the speaker is encouraged to discuss the issue with the tableegh committee and explore the best way to address it so that community cohesion may be maintained.

Media and journalism

1.14 A speaker should consult the jamaat before engaging with any media or journalist in the capacity of being a community scholar. This will ensure that there is a common and consistent message given to media outlets from our institutions. There have been cases where scholars have been baited for the media to draw a hasty conclusion.

Topics

1.15 A speaker is highly encouraged to include topics pertaining to the overall wellbeing of the community in his/her address. The negative effects of social vices, necessity of premarital screening tests, importance of mental and physical health etc. are some of the areas which could broadly fit in the religious sermons.

Mediation

For the definition of any of the subjects mentioned in this paper, if there arises a difference of opinion between the speaker and the tableegh department of any particular jamaat, the issue may be escalated to the tableegh department of the regional federation for mediation who will then involve senior scholars and leaders for mediation. Necessarily, the process and procedure would heavily depend upon the individual case.

2. Guidelines for tableegh departments

Where relevant, the tableegh department of any jamaat is the first point of call for any scholar. They work very closely with scholars and ensure that the scholar is provided with the necessary resources which may assist him/her in various tableegh activities. Below are some recommendations for their consideration:

Female scholars

2.1 The tableegh department should ensure that the jamaat has female scholars to cater for the religious needs of the women of the community given the fact that male scholars are not always available for consultation, or due to other religious and cultural restrictions.

Duration

2.2 The jamaat should bear in mind the level of attention of their community members and subsequently suggest a specific time allocation to the scholar. A lecture that lasts very long proves to be ineffective because the audience is unlikely to concentrate fully for lengthy durations.

Hadiyah

2.3 The tableegh departments need to make sure that the scholar is duly appreciated by a notable and appropriate hadiyah (financial gift) that a scholar deserves, because honouring scholars financially for propagating the religion of Allah (swt) and message of Ahlul Bayt (a) was a sunnah and practice of the Imams (a). The travel expenses from door to door must also be provided with due respect and dignity.

Expertise

2.4 The tableegh department should not undermine the intellectual level of the community and hence should invite the scholars who are experts and well-grounded in their understanding of religion. The crucial factors to be taken under consideration for the selection of a scholar are piety, humility, knowledge, critical thinking, research skills, articulation and credentials.

Exemplary figures

2.5 The role of a scholar is a very significant part of the community. Youths may look at them as role models. It is of paramount importance that tableegh departments invite those scholars who are able to fulfil this, as opposed to those who may merely entertain the crowd for a limited amount of time.

Mutual work

2.6 The tableegh department should make sure that they hold regular meetings with scholars to give them constructive feedback and to also be obliged to listen to them and learn from them. They should look to them for ideas in the religious upliftment of the community.

Focused sessions

2.7 The tableegh department should cater for the needs of all the community members. Ladies, youths, and children typically do not get as much attention as they deserve. Therefore, special arrangements should be made to meet the needs of these integral parts of the community. A private session with youths and an equal opportunity of interaction for the ladies should be of serious consideration. Moreover, the comprehension levels of children being different to adults could lead to the misunderstanding of certain topics. The tableegh department should consider providing an option for children in a more accessible format/language.

E-Minbar

2.8 The tableegh department should use social media to make lectures more effective. This could include posting effective quotes, forums discussing the topic in question, polls to vote on a certain issue pertaining to the topic of lecture. We also need to understand that minbar is a podium and seeks to achieve an end; it must not be degraded by making it an end in itself. It should also be considered that social media and websites are available for public conception, and so content should also be considered from the non-Muslim perspective to ensure there will be no/minimal controversy or misunderstanding.

CPD & Resources

2.9 Continuous Personal Development (CPD) for the scholars is of paramount importance. The tableegh department should make sure to assist the scholars for their CPDs, in case they opt for it. If scholars want to get professionally and adequately trained in social works, counselling, youth working, psychological guidance etc., they should be supported fully.

Community scholar

2.10 The tableegh department should give preference to a community scholar, for no other reason than being gifted with the privilege of holding the nerve and pulse of the community members.

Post-lecture requirement

2.11 The tableegh department should ensure a variety of sessions are facilitated to consolidate and enhance the learning of minbar through sessions such as Q & A, debates, etc., after the lectures.

Contemporary issues

2.12 The tableegh department is encouraged to engage with the scholars and enhance the understanding of the scholars in regards to the problems of the grassroots and contemporary issues facing the community including ladies, youths, families, parenting, etc.

Topics of the lectures

2.13 The tableegh department is encouraged to conduct a survey of the topics which are relevant to the community members and subsequently update the scholars. This would include the format of the series of lectures as well. For instance, one topic per night or a series of lectures over the course of a few days.

Due Diligence

2.14 Due diligence must be undertaken before booking any scholar. This could include:

- Recording the rationale for inviting said speaker at EC/sub-committee level conducting security record checks
- Ensuring the content of sermon(s) or the very presence of the individual would not bring the jamaat into disrepute
- Consulting previous hosts of the scholar
- Review of available written or oral material

Feedback

2.15 The tableegh department should ensure regular feedback sessions to the scholars on content. This will help the scholars to frame their style and content in their future endeavour.

Conclusion

As part of the challenge of the twenty-first century, there must be supplementary means and methods to engage with an audience, from the pedagogic style of communication to a more interactive style. Ted-style talks, seminars, Q & A sessions, workshops, short courses, etc. are just some examples of how the role of the minbar in our community may be supplemented.

Jamaats should also facilitate engagement with non-Muslim and non-Shia scholars in order to expose them to alternative narratives and so that they are equipped to answer the challenges to their own beliefs. Open debates, exchanges of opinion, and academic discourse would allow our youths to mould and shape their ideology with a holistic approach.

Minbar has always been and will remain an integral part of our religious identity. It has served the community not only in imparting the knowledge but also as a magnet for attracting the spiritual hearts and minds of the congregation. It holds an esteemed position to the extent that it is named as minbar al-rasul (pulpit of the Prophet (s)). The primary aim in documenting minbar guidelines is to preserve the sanctity of this holy platform and to prevent it from being abused /misused or taken out of context. Our religious institutions must ensure that the platform and its holder be respected and fully supported to the best of our abilities.