

Compensatory Legitimation of Emir Sayyid Abd Al-Ahad Khan's Authority (1885–1910) Under the Russian Protectorate: Religious-Dynastic and Representational Practices

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Abstract: This article examines the political portrait of the Emir of Bukhara, Sayyid Abd al-Ahad Khan (r. 1885–1910), through the analytical framework of his legitimation which was mainly compensatory as the dependency on the Russian empire kept increasing. Drawing on Russian, local (Bukharan/Uzbek), and selected Anglophone sources, the study argues that the emir's authority was sustained not only by external support - above all Russian recognition and diplomatic patronage - but also by internal symbolic and political mechanisms, including dynastic sacralization, genealogical constructions, religious projects, courtly representation, gift exchange, and public charity. Furthermore, the article also identifies limits pertaining to this model: tensions with the religious milieu, the strengthening of favoritism, strains brought about by the ethno-confessionals and a broader crisis of governability. The political image of Abd al-Ahad Khan is mainly portrayed in the sources as a protectorate monarch of a hybrid nature: externally loyalist yet internally positioned as a guardian of sacral status, whose authority increasingly depended on symbolic compensation for diminishing sovereignty.

Keywords: Emirate of Bukhara; Abd al-Ahad Khan; political legitimacy; Russian protectorate; symbolic politics; Manghit dynasty; religious legitimation; court representation.

Introduction: Problem Statement and Relevance. The historiography of Emir Sayyid Abd al-Ahad Khan's political image has often oscillated between two opposing poles: on the one hand, a "pro-Russian" and dependent ruler; on the other, a traditional Muslim monarch who preserved sacral and dynastic legitimacy within the emirate. This duality becomes especially visible when Russian imperial, local Bukharan, and later interpretive accounts are placed in comparison.

The resulting historiographical problem is therefore not simply descriptive. The key analytical task is to explain how these seemingly contradictory dimensions of rule coexisted and functioned together within the same political order.

Aim of the Article. This article aims to reconstruct a model of compensatory legitimation in Abd al-Ahad Khan's rule based on the interaction of:

- external recognition and patronage;
- religious-dynastic sacralization;
- representational and charitable practices;
- court-centered personalist governance.

Scholarly Contribution. The article's novelty lies in treating Abd al-Ahad Khan's political image not as a sum of isolated characteristics (personal traits, reforms, dependence on Russia, etc.), but as a coherent political technology of power retention in a protectorate regime. In this interpretation, symbolic resources functioned as compensatory mechanisms for a growing deficit of sovereignty.

METHODS

Source Base. The analysis draws on a multi-layered corpus that includes Russian-language materials, local Bukharan/Uzbek narratives, and selected Anglophone

works used as a comparative frame.

Methodological Approach. The article combines the following methods:

- historical-comparative analysis (cross-reading Russian, local, and Anglophone narratives);
- discourse analysis (languages of legitimation, imperial description, and moralizing critique);
- source criticism (authorial positionality, genre, and political optics);
- analytical reconstruction of a political portrait (distinguishing empirical claims, evaluations, and interpretive inferences).

RESULTS

1. External Legitimation of Succession as a Foundational Resource. Several Russian-language accounts present Abd al-Ahad Khan's accession not merely as a dynastic event but as an externally supported political transition. In O.A. Chernov's reconstruction, the Russian government sought to prevent internal conflict among the sons of Muzaffar and preemptively backed the candidacy of the "pro-Russian" Sayyid Abd al-Ahad. This strategy reportedly included confidential contacts, the involvement of N.V. Charykov, and later participation in suppressing the uprising of Abd al-Malik (Chernov, 2008, p. 4).

A.G. Nedvetskii's synthetic narrative adds the motif of preliminary symbolic legitimation, emphasizing the heir's trip to Moscow and de facto recognition as future ruler prior to the transfer of power in 1885. P. Shubinskii similarly underscores that recognition by the Russian emperor gave the young prince "strong guarantees" of future authority (based on the cited fragments in the working corpus).

2. Compensatory Religious-Dynastic Legitimation within the Emirate. As external dependence deepened, the sources indicate a parallel intensification of internal sacral modes of legitimation, especially in local narratives.

Sayyid Mansur Olimiy recounts episodes associated with Abd al-Ahad Khan's attempt to inscribe his authority in Mecca through a rabat and frames the emir's status through a religious-genealogical linkage to the line of 'Ali and Fatima. Even if this narrative bears signs of retrospective sacralization, its political function is clear: the emir's rule is represented as grounded in a compensatory sacred genealogy under conditions of constrained sovereignty (Olimiy, 2004, pp. 40–41).

From a Russian colonial perspective, D.N. Logofet nevertheless corroborates the importance of the religious dimension by describing the emir as a sacralized monarch whose authority was at once

reinforced and limited by the shari'a framework and by the religious establishment (Logofet, ch. VII, pp. 231–235). This is analytically significant because it shows that the emir's power was not perceived solely as administrative dependence.

Mirzo Salimbek, in a more favorable register, presents Abd al-Ahad Khan's support for sacred sites, religious institutions, and charitable works as part of his governing ethos and public mission (based on the working fragments, including p. 306 and related passages).

3. Practices of Representation as an Instrument of Rule in a Protectorate Order. Russian materials - especially Nedvetskii, and to a lesser extent Shubinskii and Tsviling - suggest that Abd al-Ahad Khan's authority was reproduced not only through administration but also through representation.

Among the key elements identified in the corpus are:

- repeated travel across imperial space (Moscow, St. Petersburg, Crimea, the Caucasus, etc.);
- exchange of gifts;
- award and decoration politics;
- public charity (including Yalta and participation in the construction of the St. Petersburg Cathedral Mosque);
- protocol gestures of loyalty toward the Russian Empire.

These practices operated in two directions simultaneously:

1. imperial signaling (demonstrating loyalty and political reliability);
2. internal prestige-building (converting imperial recognition into symbolic capital within elite and urban circles).

D. Kavkazskii's artistic-travel perspective highlights an additional dimension: power as staged order. Aesthetics, ritual, and palace visibility appear as mechanisms through which political authority remained visible and performative despite a reduction in substantive sovereignty. Even where the observer's tone is ironic, the testimony remains valuable: emirial power continued to function as a theater of authority. Shubinskii's descriptions of enthronement and court ritual similarly point to the persistence of traditional forms of public political sacralization.

4. Limits of the Model: Religious Tensions, Favoritism, and Crisis of Governability. The compensatory model strengthened regime resilience, but it also had clear internal limits.

Nedvetskii identifies a turning point in the emir's

conflict with the Bukharan religious milieu and the subsequent residential distancing of the ruler (movement to Kermine/Karmina and the refusal to reside permanently in Bukhara after 1894). This can be read as a sign of tension between claims to sacral authority and the practical requirements of political coordination.

G. Tsviling presents a more radical diagnosis, describing a personalist-fiscal regime mediated by officials and favorites, in which tax extraction and gift-reward practices formed a single chain (Tsviling, 1910, pp. 79–85, 127–132). In his account, the figure of Astanakul-bek and the “Persian factor” becomes central to explaining the crisis of elite balance (ibid., pp. 82–85). Although Tsviling’s text is overtly journalistic and potentially biased, it remains important as evidence that some contemporaries viewed the emir’s rule as having lost the function of just mediation between elites and population.

Local sources diverge in tone but collectively confirm systemic tension:

- Ahmad Donish offers a sharply negative, moralizing portrait of Abd al-Ahad Khan as a figure of degradation and dependence (Donish, 2014, pp. 110, 121–124, 131);
- Salimbek emphasizes mildness, order, charity, and pragmatic responses to confessional conflicts and personnel shifts;
- Olimiy records confessional and personnel conflicts (including episodes around Ostonakul/Astanakul-bek in 1909), showing that religious legitimation did not eliminate conflict and could, under some conditions, intensify it (Olimiy, 2004, pp. 61–62).

DISCUSSION

1. Abd al-Ahad Khan as a «Hybrid Protectorate Monarch». A comparative reading of the sources suggests that Abd al-Ahad Khan’s political portrait is best understood neither as simply “puppet-like” nor as simply “traditional.” A more analytically productive category is that of a «hybrid protectorate monarch», combining:

- external loyalty and political dependence (especially in succession and regime stabilization);
- internal sacral representation (nasab, religious projects, ritual authority);
- personalist governance mediated by the court apparatus;
- symbolic-public practices (awards, gifts, charity, and ceremony).

This model helps explain why contradictory depictions

persist across the source base: they capture different functional dimensions of the same political order.

2. Why the Sources Diverge. The divergence of assessments reflects not only factual disagreement but also differences in genre, position, and political perspective:

- **Russian imperial observers** often move between orientalist aestheticization and administrative critique;
- **local critical authors** (such as Ahmad Donish) frame the period through moral and political decline;
- **loyalist or court-adjacent traditions** (Salimbek, partly Olimiy) emphasize piety, patronage, and order;
- **crisis journalism** (Tsviling) foregrounds the most destructive features visible in moments of systemic stress.

Accordingly, the most productive strategy is not to identify a single “correct” image of the emir, but to reconstruct competing regimes of representation and the political work they performed.

CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of Russian, local, and selected Anglophone materials supports the conclusion that Sayyid Abd al-Ahad Khan’s rule (1885–1910) operated as a compensatory political system, in which the erosion of substantive sovereignty was partially offset by:

- Russian recognition and patronage;
- religious-dynastic sacralization of authority;
- courtly and representational practices (ceremonial, gift exchange, charity, public prestige);
- personalist governance through appointees and intermediaries.

At the same time, this model had structural limits. It depended heavily on the quality of intermediaries and on the maintenance of confessional and social equilibrium; in moments of crisis, it exposed a deficit of institutional resilience. For this reason, the political image of Abd al-Ahad Khan in the sources appears divided - ranging from a cautious ruler and patron to a symbol of dependence and decline. This very multilayeredness should be treated not as a historiographical obstacle, but as the central characteristic of his historical image.

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