Chapter - V

PRIME MINISTERS AND POLITICS

The nobility formed an indispensable organ of the monarchical system sharing with the emperor the social responsibility of being the protector for the well being of the people of the realm. Although the Mughal emperor was a despot he could not govern without the cooperation of his nobility whose perceptions and prejudices did play a significant role in defining state policies.

Since the nobility consisted of diverse racial and religious elements, the possibility of mutual jealousies and dissensions was always present. The personal interests of any section of the nobility especially the senior nobles (prime ministers fell under this category) was bound to have an impact on larger issues facing the empire.\(^1\) We therefore find them playing a significant role in court politics right from the inception of the empire under Babur. By virtue of being the senior-most official in administrative hierarchy, the Prime Minister was expected to strike a balance between divergent interests within the political circles; his whims and fancies often influencing his decisions.

By and large Prime Ministers were loyal to the emperor as they knew that their career depended upon his pleasure. However, in dealing with other co-administrators, his decision of siding with one faction or opposing the other often depended upon the extent

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\(^1\) Athar Ali, *The Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb*, p. 95.
of advantage he could derive by adopting a certain course of action.

With the establishment of Mughal rule in India under Babur began the trend that reveals the extent to which the senior most in the nobility could get involved in court politics and conspiracies that could influence the course of history.

Nizamuddin Khalifa, Babur’s life-long friend and counsellor who was his Wazir/Vakil-us-Sultanat and had served him for thirty five years came to possess tremendous power. Towards the end of Babur’s rule owing to the Emperor’s illness he plotted to set up Mahdi Khwaja on the throne rejecting the rightful claims of Babur’s sons. Gulbadan Begum, Babur’s daughter, says both Babur and Khalifa were aware of Humayun’s weaknesses and Khalifa could not have planned Humayun’s supercession had he not known Babur’s mind. However, the fact that the conspiracy for setting aside the assumed heir to the throne and his replacement by Mahdi Khwaja (husband of Babur’s elder sister Khanazad Begum) was confined to Amir Khalifa alone, reduces the conspiracy to a prime ministerial plan.

An anecdote regarding the conspiracy is related by Nizamuddin Ahmad, author of Tabaqat-i-Akbari, on the authority of his father Muhammad Muqim, who served under Babur, and

from whom he had heard about the episode as Nizammudin Ahmad was born almost twenty years later. He says the Khalifa who was the chief administrator of the state at the time of Babur’s death was unsure of Humayun and his ability to successfully govern the empire created by his father and therefore unfriendly to the idea of his succession. Since Mahdi Khwaja was a generous and liberal young man, friendly with the Khalifa, he promised to raise him to the throne. Mahdi Khwaja, however, became haughty and arrogant and began assuming airs even before the plans could be carried out. This is corroborated by Abul Fazl, Ahmad Yadgar, Shah Nawaz Khan and Gulbadan Begum, leaving no doubt as to the existence of the conspiracy at the time when Babur on account of his illness was confined to the bed and could do nothing in a situation of powerlessness. The plan was confined to Nizamuddin Khalifa alone and there is no evidence to show that leading amirs were taken into confidence by him.

Although Khalifa’s motives are not known, we go by Nizamuddin’s phrase that the old counsellor dreaded and suspected the succession of Humayun but he must have been aware of the risk he was taking by setting aside Humayun’s

7 Ishwari Prasad, *History of India under the first Two Sovereigns of the House of Taimur, Babur and Humayun*, p. 35.
claims, who on account of being Babur's eldest and favourite son had the unanimous support of the leading amirs. It is quite possible that Humayun's past conduct of being indecisive and one who could sustain only on Babur's strength was the reason behind Khalifa's fears.¹

Another possible reason could be the Irani-Turani rivalry which compelled Khalifa to ensure his position and gratify his ambition of playing the role of Wazir-i-Tafvid.² By placing his protege on the throne, he would definitely be enhancing his position as a Wazir who could determine state policies. It was also possible that as a sincere well wisher in rejecting the irresolute and pleasure loving Humayun he was furthering the interests of the state by placing a more worthy person on the throne.

Mahdi Khwaja was rash, indolent, extravagant and possessed an evil disposition.³ Seeing himself supported by the powerful Wazir, he began showing signs of arrogance and lost the sympathy of those who could support him. His overbearing attitude made Khalifa feel that if raised to the throne he would do more harm than good and abandoned the plan.⁴ The conspiracy therefore did not fail but fizzled out, as the Wazir realized that in the Timurid house succession had always been limited to a Timurid and to ignore Babur's sons was full of dangerous

¹ Mohibbul Hasan, Babur, Founder of Mughal Empire in India, p. 151.
² Radhey Shyam, Babur, p. 389.
⁴ Ishwari Prasad, Life and Times of Humayun, pp. 36-37.
implications.\(^1\) The Mughal amirs could never have given the same loyalty to Khwaja as they would have given to Humayun. He adopted the course open to a statesman loyal to the empire and rendered his support to Humayun to succeed to the throne that rightfully belonged to him.

The intrigue that was the outcome of dread and suspicion as well as lack of farsightedness was soon buried and Mahdi Khwaja continued to enjoy a position of importance without being deprived of royal favour in anyway. Mir Khalifa’s family remained employed in the administration in different capacities.\(^2\) The conspiracy had little practical importance except that it brought discredit to Khalifa’s otherwise irrefutable record of committed service to the Mughal house.

Under Humayun also there is an instance of his Prime Minister Qaracha Khan getting involved in a political conspiracy against his benefactor.\(^3\) Qaracha Khan on account of loyal service to Humayun became encouraged by Humayun’s indolence towards him\(^4\) and began showing signs of arrogance. In 1545 A.D., Humayun redistributed the powers of the Vakil by giving financial functions i.e. the Diwani in the hands of the Wazir\(^6\) (Khwaja Sultan Muhammad Rishdi) and retaining those of general administration with the Vakil, an arrangement not liked

\(^1\) Mohibbul Hasan, Babur, Founder of the Mughal Empire in India., p. 152.
\(^2\) Ishwari Prasad, Life and Times of Humayun, p. 39.
\(^4\) Humayun used to call him 'Walid-i-Mohtrim' at every official and semi-official function in view of his age and services to the Mughal throne. William Erskine, History of India under the First two Sovereigns of the House of Taimur Babur and Humayun, Vol. II, p. 350.
\(^5\) This was being done to use one office against the other. Iqtidar Alam Khan, ‘Wizarat under Humayun,’ P.I.H.C., XXIII. 1960, p. 249.
by Qaracha Khan. His instigation brought about the assassination of the Wazir Rishdi. The fact that the officials were a party to the murder of the Wazir suggests that there was a conflict of interest among the nobles regarding the control of the Wizarat. Qaracha Khan held charge of the department of Diwani and continued to be the Vakil.1 When in 1547 A.D. Khwaja Ghazi was appointed Mushrif-i-Diwan Qaracha Khan resented this and began mustering support against the Wazir. Over a trivial issue in which the Diwan refused to sanction a small amount from the treasury he was infuriated and began demanding his dismissal. When Humayun’s efforts to placate him failed,2 Qaracha Khan joined Kamran who had earlier shown dishonour to him and even threatened to kill his sons.3 This was an indication of the degradation in the character of Humayun’s Wazir as he was willing to go to any extent to act against his benefactor to serve his own interests.

When Humayun planned the conquest of Kabul for the third and final time and sent a message of peace to Kamran, it was Qaracha Khan, who was against the surrender of Kabul saying, “We will rather be hung on the gates of Kabul than give it up.”4 In the battle of Charikaran that followed, Kamran was defeated and Qaracha Khan, his advisor, who had shown treacherous infidelity

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1 Iqtidar Alam Khan, Mirza Kamran, A Biographical Study, Asia Pub. House, New Delhi, 1964, p. 34.
3 Gulbadan Begum, Humayunnamah, p. 186; Ishwari Prasad, Life and Times of Humayun, p. 278.
4 Jauhar Aftabchi, Tazkirat-ul-Waqiat, p. 100.
to Humayun was killed. Humayun, therefore lost a formidable enemy in the death of his Vakil, Qaracha Khan.

The involvement of a Mughal Prime Minister in court politics and misuse of his power is perhaps no where better illustrated than during the period of Bairam Khan's regency. Bairam Khan as Vakil-us-Sultanat enjoyed supreme position in the empire. This position of omnipotence (Wazir-i-Tafvid) manifested itself in several actions of the Khan-i-Khanan during his regency of four years (1556-1560 A.D.). To begin with Bairam Khan made use of the slightest opportunity to rid himself of a senior noble, Tardi Beg as the latter had become inconvenient for the Vakil's position in several respects. Tardi beg had been a friend of Babur and like Bairam had rendered valuable service to Humayun both in Humayun's earlier successes and the reconquest of Hindustan.

Soon after Akbar's accession to the throne the Mughals were defeated at Delhi by Hemu owing to the feeble generalship of Tardi Beg. The Khan-i-Khanan who was in charge of all affairs of the administration saw that the destruction of Tardi beg was to his advantage. He sent for him in Akbar's absence and had him beheaded. Later, Bairam Khan impressed upon Akbar that as
Tardi Beg had acted disloyally his execution was necessary. He felt leniency at such a critical time, when the only hope for the Mughals lay in every individual exerting himself to the utmost of his ability was undesirable. Although Akbar agreed to this extreme measure taken by the Regent, Abul Fazl strongly felt that left to himself, Akbar would not have agreed to Tardi Beg being killed.1

Farishtah also observes that had Tardi Beg not been punished by way of example the condition of the Mughal army was so precarious that the old scene of Sher Shah would have been acted over again.2 The effect of the execution of such an influential man was instantaneous. Bairam Khan’s authority over the army was absolutely established but scholars have different views regarding Tardi Beg being guilty and even if he was, whether his action was grave enough to justify Bairam’s extreme step of executing him.

Two contemporary authorities Bayazid Bayat and Muhammad Arif Qandhari give contradictory views. Bayazid says Tardi Beg Khan was defeated in the battle and therefore set out for court and Bairam Khan who was opposed to him made his defeat an excuse for executing him.3 Arif Qandhari who holds Tardi Beg guilty of negligence says he was confused at the ascendancy of Hemu who became victorious in the battle; and the Mughal army

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1 Abul Fazl, Akbarnama, Vol. II, pp. 52-53.
being defeated was forced to flee. Abul Fazl, Nizamuddin Ahmad and Abdul Qadir Badaoni also say that Tardi Beg fled from the battlefield as he could not resist Hemu successfully; none of them hint at deliberate negligence on the part of Tardi Beg. Even Abdul Baqi Nihawandi, Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan’s biographer and Jahangir who refers to the incident in his memoirs does not accuse Tardi Beg of desertion.

Almost all contemporary sources attribute Bairam Khan’s action to a personal motive. Badaoni, for instance, states that as Bairam Khan was not well disposed towards Tardi Beg he made the latter’s defeat by Hemu an excuse for his execution. Later scholars also reinforce rivalry between the two as the factor that was responsible for Tardi Beg’s killing.

However Shaikh Farid Bhakkari and Khafi Khan writing in the eighteenth century tried to acquit Bairam Khan of Tardi Beg’s murder as he had turned his back in the battlefield and therefore deserved to be killed. According to Khafi Khan, Akbar appreciated Bairam Khan’s stand saying “I have repeatedly declared that the authority is his (Bairam’s). He should not entertain fear from any quarters and pay no heed to rumours of

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1 Muhammad Arif Qandhari, Tarikh-i-Akbari, pp. 72-73.
selfish and jealous persons". Similarly Shah Nawaz Khan also considered Bairam Khan worthy of respect and has upheld the services of the Khan-i-Khanan in restructuring the Mughal rule in North India. However, Tabatabai condemns Bairam Khan for committing some wrongs (nata iqiha) such as assigning productive jagirs to associates and the murder of Tardi Beg.

Irrespective of the factors that motivated this extreme step the impact of this demonstration of power was instant as it replaced any kind of insubordination by the nobility to complete subservience to Bairam Khan. This would lead us to believe that Bairam Khan as Vakil-us-Sultanat did great service to the Mughal dynasty but it cannot be ignored that he also considered Tardi Beg who was looked upon by the Chagtais in the army as their leader, a threat to his position.

Although both called each other 'toqan' (elder brother) they were rivals not only due to their political ambition but also on religious grounds — Bairam being a Shia and Tardi Beg a Sunni.

Sukumar Ray rightly says:

"The historian of India can justify the execution of Tardi Beg because it led to authority of Bairam Khan, calmed all

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disaffection and established unity and discipline which was necessary for the restoration and consolidation of the Mughal kingdom in Hindustan..... the biographers of Bairam Khan cannot but regard it as a dark blot in his career”.¹

As Vakil-us-Sultanat, Bairam Khan’s dealings with Mulla Pir Muhammad Sherwani, a learned person,² (talib-i-ilm) reveals his innate jealousy at the success of others and the way he manipulated circumstances to bring about the ouster of those whom he took a dislike for.

Bairam Khan was instrumental in Pir Muhammad being made his Vakil (agent) after he distinguished himself in the battle against Hemu.³ He was loyal and sincere but Bairam Khan, under the influence of some envious men got suspicious of the Mulla’s actions and without the latter having done anything which merited dismissal he flung off an honest man who had put his faith in him.⁴ A trivial incident where the Khan-i-Khanan was not recognised by the Mulla’s attendant and therefore not allowed to visit the ailing Pir Muhammad proved to be the cause of his ouster.⁵ Since Akbar had handed over the whole business of administration to Bairam Khan he left the retribution of this undesirable deed to God, although personally he did not approve

¹ Sukumar Ray, Bairam Khan, p. 141.
³ Abul Fazl describes his services in the battle against Hemu, Akbarnama, Vol. II, pp. 49,70,71,72
⁴ Ibid., p. 131.
of it. Bairam Khan alienated a sincere servant at the instigation of shortsighted sychophants.

The fact that after Bairam’s downfall Pir Muhammad was honoured with the little of Khan\(^1\) a standard and a drum and later confirmed as Governor of Malwa proves he did not deserve the treatment that he received from his patron who in alienating the Mulla brought about his own misfortune.

Although Bairam Khan involved himself in court politics to bring about the elimination of those who could become inconvenient for him, his ouster after four years proves that there were others in the court who plotted against him on account of his assuming dictatorial powers.

Maham Anagah, who was regarded as Akbar’s prime confidante,\(^2\) was an intriguing lady who by her dexterous diplomacy and resourcefulness, masterminded the downfall of Bairam Khan and assumed charge of affairs in the months that followed his eviction. As Bairam Khan’s hold on Akbar increased day by day Maham Anagah along with some others resented it and grew more jealous and kept herself constantly busy behind the scene plotting against Bairam Khan.\(^3\) Maham Anagah kept

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1 Abul Fazl, Akbarnama, Vol. II, p. 156; Abdul Qadir Badaoni, Muntakhab-ut Tawarikh, Vol. II, p. 33; and Shaikh Farid Bhakkari, Dhakirat-ul-Khawanin, p. 73, say he was given the title of Nasir-ul-Mulk and a Mansab of 5,000.

2 Abul Fazl, Akbarnama, Vol. II, pp. 149-150, Maham Anagah not only wielded great influence at the court but participated actively in running of the central government. Iqtidar Alam Khan, Political Biography of a Mughal noble, Munim Khan, Khan-i-Khanan, p. 60; Rekha Misra, Women in Mughal India, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1967, p. 28.

3 Whenever the strife mongers gathered in open or secret assemblies they concocted false complaints against the Khan-i-Khanan and circulated rumours from camp to camp so that foe and friend alike heard them. Khafi Khan, Muntakhab-ul-Lubab, Vol. I, pp. 135-136; vide Iqtidar Alam Khan, Akbar and his Age, p. 243.
instigating Akbar by narrating incidents to the emperor, indicating how his Prime Minister had monopolised all the powers of the state, including the control of the privy purse.¹

Maham Anagah whose chief aim of taking part in the disturbed politics of the time was to advance the interests of her son Adham Khan was ultimately successful in freeing Akbar from the influence of Bairam Khan. The *Vakil-us-Sultanat* was forced to proceed on pilgrimage to Mecca while she, after having seized the property of Bairam Khan, pushed her advantages with such cleverness that traces of her ascendancy were soon visible in the tutelage of the emperor and in every department of civil and military administration.²³

The seriousness of court intrigues in the Mughal political circles is also reflected in the friction between Shamsuddin Atka Khan and Maham Anagah at the former’s appointment as the virtual head of the central government and subsequent appointment to the office of *Vakil*.³

Atka Khan’s rise to the *Vikalat* and subsequent changes in the power circles was resented by Maham Anagah and her coterie (which included Munim Khan), who were the greatest sufferers.⁴ An exchange of accusations and counter accusations which

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continued unchecked for several months culminated in the hatred of Maham Anagah reaching a point where she could no longer tolerate the rising influence of Atka Khan. She found enthusiastic supporters in Munim Khan and Shihabuddin Ahmad who instigated Adham Khan to murder the Prime Minister in May 1562 A.D.

The Prime Ministership of the loyal and devoted Atka Khan that was cut short by the intrigues in Mughal court circles reveals the dangerousness of these liaisons and the vulnerability of the highest office in the empire in such situations.

Another fact that emerges from the troubled politics of the period of Bairam Khan’s regency as well as that of the so called ‘Petticoat Government’ (1560-62 A.D.) is the involvement of the emperor himself. His competence in using one of the groups to overthrow or control the other and in ultimately retaining the strings of government in his hands are clearly visible.

The evidence of prime ministers involving themselves in court politics as a result of personal jealousies and rivalries is also seen in Todar Mal’s relationship with Khwaja Shah Mansur who was made Wazir in 1578 A.D., when the former held the position of Ashraf-i-Diwan. The execution of Khwaja Shah Mansur, a major architect of Akbar’s financial reforms, casts a shadow over Akbar’s reputation as a humane sovereign.

1 “This hatred led to the formation of two groups in the court circles. Maham Anagah, Munim Khan, Shihabuddin Ahmad and Adham Khan, the more powerful and the less influential circle of Atka Khan...” S.A. Rizvi, Religious and Intellectual History of the Muslims in Akbar’s Reign, with special reference to Abul Fazl, p. 177.
Khwaja Shah Mansur, joined Mughal service in the initial years of Akbar's reign and after having served in various capacities was appointed Wazir,\(^1\) where along with Todar Mal as Ashraf-i-Diwān and Muzaffar Khan as Vakil they introduced very significant administrative reforms. However Todar Mal had serious differences with Shah Mansur and always looked for an opportunity to humiliate him.

Todar Mal represented to Akbar that Shah Mansur who was expected to guard the finances honestly had adopted a very harsh attitude towards the servants of the empire in demanding arrears\(^2\) and these payments had become the cause of dissensions in the army.\(^3\) Accordingly Akbar who had implicit faith in Todar Mal removed Shah Mansur from office and put him under the surveillance of Shah Quli Mehram.\(^4\) However he soon realised that this complaint was baseless and that the Khwaja was not at fault and ordered his release.\(^5\)

Again, Todar Mal happened to be one of the persons blamed for the conspiracy against Khwaja Shah Mansur and through

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forged letters managed to establish that the Khwaja had been in league with Mirza Hakim\(^1\) during the Bengal-Bihar rebellion of 1580-81 A.D. Akbar received many incriminating letters that hinted at the Khwaja expressing loyalty to Mirza Hakim.\(^2\) Although Akbar initially ignored them as forgeries, he was provided with evidence about the Khwaja planning to join Mirza Hakim’s army.\(^3\) Akbar acted on this promptly and ordered his execution which was carried out in February 1581 A.D.\(^4\) Later Akbar was convinced that the letters used as evidence against Khwaja Shah Mansur had indeed been forged by Karamullah brother of Shahbaz Khan.\(^5\) Most contemporary authorities do not say who advised him, but Todar Mal is held responsible for being party to the conspiracy.\(^6\) However, Akbar often expressed regret at having ordered the execution of Shah Mansur.

Another political conspiracy that reveals the political intrigues involving the highest official in the state comes to light in the concluding years of Akbar’s reign. Mirza Aziz Koka who was appointed Vakil of the empire in 1595 A.D. and held the position


till the end of Akbar's reign was at the head of the conspiracy to place Khusrau on the throne overriding the claims of his father Jahangir. Although Akbar had been successful in raising a loyal bureaucracy by initiating reforms in the administrative set up, he could not provide any solution to the problem of succession to the imperial throne. This lead the nobility to support the claims of rival princes at the time of emperor's death. Since the Prime Minister was not sure whether he would be able to maintain his prominent position in the event of Jahangir's accession, he put forth the claims of his son-in-law who was a fine gentleman and loved by all. Therefore it appears that it was public good combined with private motives that prompted Mirza Aziz Koka along with some supporters to further the prospects of his succession.

When it became known that the emperor's illness was serious, the Khan-i-Azam Aziz Koka decided to take matters in his hands. Since both Aziz Koka and Man Singh were ill disposed towards Salim, they submitted the proposal for the succession of sultan Khusrau to the ailing Akbar, who even in the state of agony did not agree to the proposal. Aziz Koka even seized Jahangir when he came to see his ailing father, but he was warned of the plot and thereby saved. Had Aziz Koka taken Akbar into confidence about Salim’s supercession in favour of Khusrau, there was a remote possibility of the plan being successful. Since the influential nobles at the court were split into two factions, it

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became impossible to carry out the plan in secrecy. Although Aziz
Koka tried to win over the nobles by saying “the character of the
exalted prince is well known and the emperor’s feelings towards
him are notorious for he by no means wishes him to be his
successor. We must all agree to place sultan Khusrau on the
throne”. However, the Chagtaï tradition of the eldest son
succeeding the father was so deeply imbedded in the nobility that
it thwarted any such proposal, even though it came from Akbar’s
premier noble.

The Emperor, who died soon after, must have been pained to
hear of the conspiracy hatched by his trusted official Mirza Aziz
Koka. Such events also reveal the insecurity among the senior
nobility (which included the Prime Minister) about their future
which forced them to take crucial decisions on issues like imperial
succession on their own. Jahangir, indeed showed lack of
vindictiveness when he honoured most of his commitments and
gave a general order that ranks and jagirs held by his father’s
servants were to remain unchanged.

The involvement of prime ministers in court politics for
personal gains is nowhere more clear than in the times of
Jahangir where both Itmad-ud-Daulah and Asaf Khan were
involved in several intrigues and conspiracies concerning the
imperial family. They are known to have keenly collaborated in the

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1 Asad Beg, Wikaya-I-Asad Beg, in Elliot and Dowson, Vol. VI, p. 170.
2 Afzal Hussain, Nobility under the Akbar and Jahangir: A Study of Family Groups, p. 186.
4 Itmad-ud-Daulah was Jahangir’s Chief Diwan / Wazir from 1611 A.D. to 1622 A.D., Asaf Khan also his right hand man, was made Vakil in 1626 A.D. and continued to hold the office in the first fifteen years of Shah Jahan’s reign.
domestic issue involving the royal family which came to be known as the ‘Khusrau problem’. Since Khusrau had created trouble for Jahangir between 1603-1605 A.D. by emerging as a rival claimant to the throne and had rebelled against his father in 1606 A.D., he did become a victim of the power struggle during Itmad-ud-Daulah’s tenure as Diwan. He was imprisoned with the intention of preventing him from paying allegiance at the durbar. Throughout this time Itmad-ud-Daulah and Asaf Khan tried their best to convince Jahangir to let Asaf Khan have Khusrau under his surveillance so that he could be removed from any possibility of any imperial favour. They succeeded in doing so when Jahangir was supposedly under the influence of liquor and ordered his transfer to Asaf Khan’s care.

Although Itmad-ud-Daulah was later also responsible for the eventual freedom of Khusrau from imprisonment (as he convinced Nur Jahan and Asaf Khan to make peace with Khusrau) he worked hard to prevent any stable reinstatement of Khusrau’s position in the imperial durbar until his death in 1621 A.D. Irrespective of what Jahangir had in mind for his son, Khusrau’s chances of renewing his position at the court were remote owing

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2 This coincided with what is referred to by some scholars as the rise of the Nur Jahan Janta, Beni Prasad History of Jahangir, p. 160. but it is refuted by later researchers like Rekha Misra, Women in Mughal India, (1526-1748), p. 34; Chandra Pant, Nur Jahan and her family, pp. 50-62; K.S. Lal, The Mughal Harem, pp. 79-82.
3 Jahangir, Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri, Vol. I, p. 261. but he was provided all comforts and convenience of clothing and eating as well as a small number of servants.
to the ill intentioned manipulations of Itmad-ud-Daulah and Asaf Khan.

Although contemporary sources point to the direct responsibility of Shah Jahan in the killing of Khusrau,\(^1\) the compliance of Itmad-ud-Daulah and Asaf Khan cannot be ignored. Their manipulations behind the scene made them accomplices in the crime. Khusrau’s elimination gave them a sense of relief and also provided them a chance to promote the cause of a protégé. Asaf Khan and Nur Jahan were from this point of time to be led to opposite camps.\(^2\)

The involvement of prime ministers in political intrigues is reflected in the circumstances that led Mahabat Khan, a trusted noble of Jahangir, to rebel against the emperor as a result of courtly infighting around him and take charge of affairs of the empire for a ‘hundred days’.\(^3\)

Mahabat Khan had invited the enmity of Nurjahan by criticising Jahangir for entrusting too much power to a woman.\(^4\) but his enmity with Asaf Khan is also well known,\(^5\) for Mahabat


\(^{2}\) While Nurjahan began promoting the prospects of Shahriyar, her son-in-law, Asaf Khan got busy in cultivating a political environment that could lead to Khurram’s eventual succession.

\(^{3}\) Mahabat Khan’s sovereignty over Jahangir’s imperial camp lasted from March to the beginning of August 1626 A.D. a little over hundred days. Mutamad Khan, *Iqbalnama-i-Jahangiri*, Elliot & Dowson, Vol. VI, pp. 419, 429.

\(^{4}\) "The world is surprised that such a wise and sensible emperor as Jahangir should permit a woman to have so great an influence over him", *Intikhah-i-Jahangir Shahi*, extracts of a work written by a companion of Jahangir, Eng. trans. Elliot & Dowson, Vol. VI, p. 452.

Khan had overpowered Khurram (the future Shah Jahan), Asaf Khan's son-in-law and protégé and virtually had him exiled to the Deccan. Moreover, Mahabat Khan's role in crushing his rebellion was also enough reason for Asaf Khan to plot against him.¹

Asaf Khan, backed by Nur Jahan levelled false charges against Mahabat Khan and convinced the emperor of his ill intentions² who ordered him to proceed to Bengal. Asaf Khan and Nur Jahan were successful in separating Mahabat Khan from his protégé, Parvez, thereby undermining the young prince's chances of succession to the throne. Mahabat Khan saw through Asaf Khan's plan and wrote to Nur Jahan that as long as Asaf Khan remained at court he would not obey her summons.³ Later when Mahabat Khan decided to appear before Jahangir, complying with his orders, and sent his son-in-law Khwaja Barkhurdar as his representative, the emperor ill treated him.⁴ Mahabat Khan could not tolerate this insult. Since he was aware of the absence of any well-wisher at the court who could convince

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the emperor of his innocence, he forcibly met Jahangir, and informed him of his fears.

"I have assured myself that escape from the , malice and implacable hatred of Asaf Khan is impossible and that I shall be put to death in shame and ignominy .... If I deserve death or punishment, give the order that I may suffer it in your presence".1

Mahabat Khan also took Jahangir in his custody openly claiming that he had done so to escape Asaf Khan's hostility. Asaf Khan and Nurjahan were overpowered in the battle they fought against Mahabat Khan to rescue the emperor.2 Asaf Khan, Jahangir's influential brother-in-law and advisor who was the cause of this political adversity fled when he was certain that he could not offer effective resistance to Mahabat Khan.

However the rivalry between them ended with Mahabat forgiving Asaf Khan3 who surrendered on the promise that his life would be spared and promised to treat Mahabat Khan like a natural brother. Jahangir too showed full sympathy with Asaf Khan and offered him the office of Vakil-us-Sultanat empowering him to take charge of all revenue and political affairs.4 It is surprising how Jahangir could overlook such a conduct from his powerful brother-in-law. The last years of Jahangir's reign were full of turmoil and his Vakil was in no small measure responsible

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2 Ibid., p. 425; Afzal Hussain, Nobility under Akbar and Jahangir, A study of Family Groups, p. 177.
for the misery caused to the emperor. Although both Asaf Khan and Mahabat Khan were well rewarded by Shah Jahan on his succession, Mahabat Khan’s fear of Asaf Khan remained. The apprehensions nurtured by Mahabat Khan were not totally unfounded as later events revealed. Although Mahabat Khan and his family received promotions they were not given major positions in the court owing to Asaf Khan’s influence.

Soon after Jahangir’s death, Asaf Khan, the Vakil-us-Sultanat got involved in another political struggle to prevent his over ambitious sister, Nur Jahan, who was toying with the idea of retaining power in her hands as she had done in Jahangir’s life time. Asaf Khan came out in the open against her shrewd manipulations of controlling the succession to the throne by putting her son-in-law Shahriyar on the throne and had her shifted from the palace. The ambitious minister informed Shah Jahan, then in the Deccan, about Jahangir’s death. He put Dawar Baksh, son of Khusrau, on the throne temporarily while he

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1 When Shah Jahan went to Ajmer to pray at the dargah of Muinuddin Chisti, Mahabat Khan asked him to swear by the Koran that his offences had been forgiven because “Asaf Khan with whom you have a very close relationship would come and order my execution as he is thirsty of my blood” Shaikh Farid Bhakkari, Dhakirat-ul-Khawanin, Part II, p. 10; Abdul Hamid Lahori, Badshahnama, Vol. I, p. 181-182. Lahori refers to the visit of Shahjahan to Ajmer but does not refer to the incident, Afzal Hussain, Nobility under Akbar and Jahangir, A Study of Family Groups, p. 180.
went about mustering support for Shah Jahan.\(^1\) Shahryar, whose only strength lay in his scheming and powerful mother-in-law, made an attempt for the throne but was imprisoned and blinded by Asaf Khan.\(^2\) Surprisingly, Nur Jahan could not deceive her brother inspite of the influence she still enjoyed.\(^3\) Shahryar’s defeat was followed by the imprisonment of Dawar Baksh and death sentences to Daniyal’s sons, Hoshang and Tahmurs, by the orders of the Emperor designate Shah Jahan,\(^4\) who acquired the throne due to the shrewdness with which his well wisher Asaf Khan manipulated the state of affairs in his favour. He was rewarded by Shah Jahan with great lavishness on his succession to the throne.\(^5\)

Shah Jahan’s reign was by and large free from any apparent groupism. The cohesiveness between the crown and the nobility as well as within the nobility itself was the result of mutual interdependence on each other. Shah Jahan adopted a policy of compromise with his nobility which is reflected by the absence of

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\(^3\) Beni Prasad remarks if Nur Jahan had been free to act, she might have prolonged the affair but even she could have hardly succeeded against her brother in the end, *History of Jahangir*, p. 401.

\(^4\) Although Mutamad Khan, *Iqbalnama-i-Jahangiri*, pp. 269-97 and Qazvini, *Padshahnama*, pp. 115-117, assert that all the princes were put to death by the order of Shah Jahan but in the account of some European travellers, we come across a chance story about the survival of Dawar Baksh who escaped by substituting another man in his place, B.P. Saksena, *History of Shah Jahan of Dihli*, p. 62.

\(^5\) Asaf Khan was promoted to the mansab of 8,000 zat and 8,000 sawar du aspa sih aspa and the premier rank in the Empire, B.P. Saksena, *History of Shah Jahan of Dihli*, p. 64.
vindictiveness of the crown towards them. This led the bulk of the nobility to rally around the Mughal emperor and serve him with sincerity. The consciousness of racial and religious identities did exist but were subservient to imperial interests.

We find a reflection of the same attitude in the emperor’s dealings with his Diwans. He was always approachable and friendly towards them and even visited their homes at times. This resulted in lesser participation of these grandees in political intrigues and conspiracies.

An incident during the term of Islam Khan Mashadi, the Diwan-i-kul from 1639-1645 A.D. proves the smoothness with which administrative decisions were made. When Khan Dauran Nazrat Jang, the governor of Deccan was killed, Shah Jahan asked Islam Khan, who he thought would be the right person to replace him. Islam Khan, in fact, suggested his own name as he was convinced that Shah Jahan was keen to appoint Sadullah Khan as his Diwan. Apprehending a situation where he would be superceded, he displayed good judgement and wisdom whereby he was handed over the responsibility of the Deccan and Sadullah Khan confirmed as Wazir. This was in extraordinary contrast to the situation in the early years of Akbar’s reign where fear of

1 Jujhar Singh Bundela was pardoned and restored to his original mansab of 4000 / 4000 in 1629 A.D. Lahori; Badshahnama, Vol. I, pp.254-255; Sallih, Amal-i-Sallih, Vol. I, p. 330, cited in Firdoz Anwar, Nobility under the Mughals, 1628-1658, Manohar 2001, p. 44.
losing power and influence led Maham Anagah and Munim Khan to conspire to bring about the murder of Atka Khan. It also reflects the maturity which some members of the senior nobility had come to possess.

The tenure of Sadullah Khan as Diwan-i-kul of Shah Jahan 1645-1656 A.D., however witnessed an enemical relationship between the renowned Wazir and the emperor's favorite son Dara Shukoh\(^1\). Infact foreign travellers like Bernier\(^2\) and Manucci\(^3\) have even charged Dara Shukoh of poisoning Sadullah Khan. Although contemporary historians like Abdul Hamid Lahori and Muhammad Waris do not make mention of their mutual apathy towards each other, there are references of Dara Shukoh suspecting Sadullah Khan of using his position to deprive the prince of more productive parganas\(^4\) and even rejecting a request for a cash grant of rupees ten lakhs from the imperial treasury\(^5\). Ideologically they were incompatible for Dara Shukoh was known to be very liberal and broadminded as opposed to the narrow outlook of the Sunni minister \(^6\) Sadullah Khan. Politically also, it was alleged, that Sadullah Khan favoured Sultan Shuja as Shah

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Jahan's successor to the throne. Shah Jahan must have been unhappy at the strained relations between the two. In the Ruqqat-i-Alamgiri there are references of his disapproving Dara's conduct and advising him from time to time. However, one must keep in mind that this disapproval of Shah Jahan for Dara comes from a source very openly hostile to Dara Shukoh.

Claims of existence of hostile camps at the court, one headed by Sadullah Khan and the other by Dara Shukoh appear to be an exaggeration for as so long as Shah Jahan was in command of the situation, no groupism existed at the court and in the event of emperor's illness Dara was so much in command of affairs that no one could disregard his authority. However, the existence of a tussle between the Wazir and Dara Shukoh cannot be completely ruled out. If anecdotes recorded by Khafi Khan and those reproduced in Ruqqat-i-Alamgiri are to be believed it was the prince who was guilty most of the times. Conscious of the fact that Sadullah Khan was not likely to support him in the event of a contest for the throne, he nurtured feelings of hostility towards the Wazir, who otherwise enjoyed a flawless reputation in court

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1 "To quarrel with the good and the virtuous is to show enmity to oneself — It is good to win the hearts of these men. Able and intelligent servants are the source of increase of property and good name to their masters", Aurangzeb, Ruqqat-i-Alamgiri, pp. 54-55; Even Mirza Muhammad Kazim's Alamgirnama, the official history of Aurangzeb's time calls Dara 'be Shukoh' (undignified). However as an official historian he could only extol him (Aurangzeb) and belittle his enemies. Jigar Muhammad, 'Prince Dara Shukoh's Writings on Sufism and comparative study of Religion — A Study of Majma-ul-Bahrain' in S.M. Waseem, ed., Development of historiography from Second half of seventeenth Century to first half of eighteenth century, p. 8.

2 Shabbir Ahmad Khan, "Relations between Dara Shukoh and Sadullah Khan" P.I.H.C., 1986, p. 275.
circles and was equally respected by the emperor. Fortunately for Dara Shukoh, the death of Sadullah Khan in 1556 A.D. removed his most formidable opponent from the court and enabled him to temporarily establish his sway at the court during Shah Jahan's illness.

The last year of Shah Jahan's reign culminated into a crisis in the form of a war of succession amongst his ambitious sons. Shah Jahan's illness that precipitated the crisis paralysed the entire governmental machinery. Since each prince was keen to create his own support in the struggle, formation of cliques within court circles became unavoidable. The relationship between the prince and the concerned noble as well as what could be offered to them by way of reward, were considerations that determined their decisions.

Mughal Wazirs were also known to have openly supported individual members of the royal family. Sadullah Khan, who unfortunately died before the war of succession ensued, was favourably inclined towards Shah Shuja, whereas Mir Jumla (Muazzam Khan) was in league with Aurangzeb. It is surprising that the entire nobility including the Prime Minister abandoned the cause of the legitimate monarch and joined the victorious son. No one bothered to endanger his own position by fighting on behalf of the dispossessed sovereign. Everyone thronged to the side of the usurper. The trend of prime ministers by and large

3 Francois Bernier, Travels in the Mogul Empire, p. 124.
refraining from indulging in political intrigues (barring the succession years immediately after Shah Jahan's death) continued even after Aurangzeb's accession as one does not come across any blatant involvement of the nobility in intrigues, because of the conscious effort on the part of the emperor to keep them in good humour. In view of the circumstances in which he had acquired the throne and the cooperation he required from them to prove his capability over his father\(^1\) (through distinguished military successes) Aurangzeb avoided dissensions of any kind. As regards his relationship with his Wazirs there was an absence of any confrontation. They were always aware of their duties and constraints and fortunate to have enjoyed royal favour.

Muazzam Khan served the cause of Aurangzeb with utmost loyalty. He never gave Shah Jahan any reason to regret the confidence reposed in him.\(^2\) As Aurangzeb's Wazir, Muazzam Khan's personal ambitions never came into clash with his master, whose implicit confidence in his ever supportive Prime Minister is proof of his loyalty and worth. However, on account of his suspicious nature Aurangzeb, perhaps intentionally, kept Muazzam Khan busy in the north-eastern campaigns. Although he continued to enjoy the status of Wazir, he was not in a position to influence or control politics at the court.


Aurangzeb's desire to centralize power in his hands against the tendency of the Wazir to assert his position over that of the sovereign led his second Wazir, Jafar Khan, to remain subservient and contribute to an atmosphere free of conspiracies and manipulations. Moreover, Jafar Khan had a short tenure of six years which did not let major conspiracies to surface during his Wazirship. However, the situation changed during the last two decades of Aurangzeb's reign that coincided with the Wazirship of Asad Khan. Aurangzeb was very fond of his Wazir, who besides his loyalty to the emperor was a popular Wazir but the long drawn war in the Deccan without any decisive outcome led to a political crisis which was sure to test the endurance of the nobility which became critical of Aurangzeb's strategy. Asad Khan's suggestion to Aurangzeb of leaving the Deccan after substantial successes was not met with any positive response by the emperor.

In a situation where the majority of the nobility was anxious to leave the Deccan and the emperor unwilling to yield to pressure, suspicions and conspiracies became inevitable. The problems emerging from the failure of the jagirdari system undermined the loyalty of the old nobility that began harbouring designs of carving their own, spheres of influence. Aurangzeb's

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1 "There is not, nor will there (ever) be any Wazir better than Asad Khan", quoted in Jadunath Sarkar, *History of Aurangzib*, Vol. V, p. 262.
Wazir Asad Khan and his son Zulfikar Khan, the Mir Bakshi, were suspected of harbouring such ambitions.¹

Towards the beginning of the eighteenth century two groups emerged that were to dominate court politics for the next few years. The first led by Asad Khan, the Wazir-ul-Mumalik, who enjoyed the longest tenure of thirty one years and his son Zulfikar Khan, who had been appointed Mir Bakshi in 1702 A.D., believed in appeasing the Marathas and saving Mughal authority in the Deccan through a settlement with them.² There are references of Zulfikar Khan forwarding a proposal from the Maratha chief Rajaram for settlement to Aurangzeb only to be rejected by the emperor and Mir Bakshi writing conciliatory notes to Maratha sardars from time to time.³

The second group, consisting of Ghaziuddin Firuz Jang⁴ and his sons Chin Qulich Khan and Hamid Khan Bahadur adopted a rigid and unbending attitude towards the Marathas. This, coupled with the intense competition for possession of good jagirs further aggravated the situation and hampered unity in imperial policies with regard to military enterprise. Ghaziuddin is said to have harboured designs of becoming independent after Aurangzeb and the emperor had begun suspecting his credibility

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¹ Satish Chandra, Medieval India from Sultanat to the Mughals, Part II; The Mughal Empire, 1526-1748, Haranand Publications, New Delhi, 1999, pp. 353-354.
³ Mannucci, Storia do Mogor, claims that some of his friends had a secret agreement with the Marathas and avoided crushing them when he was governor of Carnatik in 1705 A.D., Vol. IV, pp. 228-229; Saqi Mustaid Khan, Maasir-i-Alamgiri, p. 511, quoted in Athar Ali, The Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb., p. 110; Jadunath Sarkar, History of Aurangzeb., Vol. I, p. 101.
and on inspecting his artillery in 1707 A.D. remarked he has all 
that he should have or rather should not have. ¹

The distrust and groupism within the Mughal nobility over 
imperial policies in the Deccan and the resulting sense of rivalry
was bound to usher in the serious political crisis that the Mughal 
empire faced in 1707 A.D. This also had a forceful impact on 
events that followed Aurangzeb’s death.²

The foregoing facts prove that political rivalries existed 
throughout the period under review and the involvement of prime
ministers in intrigues and conspiracies was always there, 
although the underlying motive and nature of involvement varied
from time to time. Whether to crush all possible challenge to their 
authority in an attempt to become Wazir with unlimited authority,
like Bairam Khan, or to support claims of succession to ensure 
their authority in the event of the emperor’s death as tenures of 
Nizamuddin Khalifa, Mirza Aziz Koka and Asaf Khan prove, 
their participation was always present.

There appears to be an absence of any attempt to dominate 
the emperor Aurangzeb’s Wazirs. This was to a great extent the 
result of Aurangzeb’s resolve to centralise all authority in himself. 
But the expansion of the empire, coupled with the prolonged 
inconclusiveness of the Deccan campaign led to formation of 
cliques and political rivalries, which though by no means 
unusual, were to assume such dangerous proportions in the post

¹ Satish Chandra, Medieval India, from Sultanat to the Mughals, Part II, The Mughal Empire, p. 456.
² Satish Chandra, Parties and Politics of the Mughal Court, p. 49.
Aurangzeb period that the office of Wazir became a hot seat of power and influence.

Although there is no authentic evidence that Nadir Shah received an invitation to invade India from any section of the nobility, the faction led by Nizam-ul-Mulk and Saadat Khan must have been responsible for inviting Nadir Shah. With the nobility involved in factional and self-seeking politics and no one to counter the rising power of the Marathas, the possibility of such an invitation, hoping it would lead to destruction of Maratha power and clear the field for them, seems quite possible. It is almost reminiscent of the manner in which Mughal rule was ushered in India, through similar invitations from the Afghan nobility to Babur in the first quarter of the sixteenth century.

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1 Satish Chandra, Parties and Politics of the Mughal Court, p. 285.