



Social and Political Transformations in the Timurid Period, with a Focus on the Structure of Power under Shāhrukh Mirzā

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Abstract

The Timurid period, particularly during the reign of Shāhrukh Mirzā, was marked by a profound transformation in the understanding and exercise of power. In the historiography of the Timurid dynasty, Timur is commonly depicted as the founder of a militaristic and authoritarian form of rule, one that relied on continuous and often ruthless conquests to establish a conception of sovereignty grounded in coercion and personal authority. However, with the accession of Shāhrukh Mirzā to power, a more nuanced perception of the tension between physical and symbolic forms of power emerged, prompting a shift in the structure of governance from predominantly military models toward bureaucracy, institutionalization, and cultural rationality. The principal objective of this study is to demonstrate how, during the reign of Shāhrukh Mirzā, power evolved from a physical and person-centered phenomenon into a structured, rational, and institution-based system, and was subsequently redefined as a cultural and intellectual construct. Employing a descriptive–analytical methodology and drawing on library-based sources, court historiographies, administrative records, and the cultural and architectural productions of the period, this research offers a renewed examination of transformations in power within the Timurid political order. The findings indicate that under Shāhrukh Mirzā, the model of governance shifted from an emphasis on military dominance toward bureaucratic administration and the active participation of cultural and religious elites. Furthermore, the role of women—most notably exemplified by Gawhar Shād Begum—attained a level of managerial and political influence that can be understood as a reconfiguration, and indeed a reconstruction, of prevailing forms of governance. Ultimately, by foregrounding knowledge and culture, Shāhrukh Mirzā relocated power from the realm of coercion to that of thought, rendering it a rational, meaning-laden, and structured phenomenon.

Keywords: *Bureaucracy, Shāhrukh Mirzā, Political Power, Timurids*

1. Introduction

The social and political transformations of the Timurid period, particularly during the reign of Shāhrukh Mirzā, represent a pivotal juncture in the history of Central Asia, reflecting the emergence of new complexities in governance, bureaucracy, and social structure. The Timurid Empire, established

through the military conquests of Timur, was grounded in personal authority and the logic of military campaigns—a structure in which power was sustained not through civil institutions but through military dominance and the loyalty of commanders. The survival of the empire under such a system depended on individual charisma and leadership capacities, a legacy rooted in the Chinggisid model of governance. Amid this turbulent context, the rise of Shāhrukh Mirzā, like a calm breeze amidst the storm-tossed waves of history, heralded an alternative approach to rulership—one that not only overcame crises but also laid the foundation for a renewed political authority. By the late fourteenth century CE, the Timurid Empire played a transformative role in the cultural and scientific development of Central Asia (Kadirova, 2025: 240).

Unlike his father, Shāhrukh Mirzā transformed the Timurid framework of power from a purely military system into an administrative and cultural order. This period, which can be considered the beginning of the Timurid Renaissance, reflects a deliberate effort to move beyond the logic of warfare and replace it with administrative, scholarly, and cultural institutions. The reorganization of the state apparatus and the elevation of bureaucrats over military commanders exemplify this fundamental transformation. By promoting culture and the arts, Shāhrukh turned Herat into one of the major centers of civilization of his era, introducing a new mode of governance in which power was exercised not only through the sword but also through intellect, knowledge, and art. This transformation indicates that the Timurid state gradually moved away from purely military legitimacy and, by relying on knowledge, culture, and the support of civil institutions, established a form of cultural and civilizational legitimacy (Kadirova, 2025: 239–245). This metamorphosis in governance was so profound that the fall of the Timurid Empire in the early sixteenth century did not erase its cultural impact; Timurid architecture, literature, and modes of governance influenced subsequent regional dynasties (Begali, 2025: 257). The Timurid legacy also served as a reference for Safavid rulers, who reproduced certain symbols and administrative practices from the Timurid period (Szuppe, 1998: 328).

Meanwhile, one of the most significant aspects of power and political transformation during this period was the role of women in the Timurid court, particularly under Shāhrukh. Although women in the social and political structure of the time remained largely under male authority, their political and cultural influence became increasingly pronounced, particularly in figures such as Goharshād Begum, Shāhrukh's consort.

Investigations into Timurid history are by no means unprecedented; Timur's world-conquering campaigns and ambitions—riding as far as “the gates of Europe” (Lamb, 2008: 12)—are better known than many of the detailed historical studies of Eastern and Western scholarship might suggest. Shihāb al-Dīn ‘Abdallāh Khwāfi, known as Ḥāfez-e Abrū (d. 823 AH), provides in his work *Joghrafiyā-ye Ḥāfez-e Abrū* a relatively comprehensive account of the administrative divisions, provinces, and geographic extent of the Timurid realm. Since Ḥāfez-e Abrū was both a historian and geographer at the Timurid court, and wrote this work by direct order of Shāhrukh, much of the information regarding the administrative structure, financial system, and geographic divisions of Shāhrukh's era is considered reliable and unavailable in other sources. In the West, Harold Lamb's *Timur the Lame: The Last Conqueror of the World* stands as a prominent work on the life and conquests of Timur Gūrkanī. The author, a renowned twentieth-century orientalist, sought to portray a multidimensional image of Timur and his governance based on Persian, Arabic, and European sources—a portrait oscillating between military violence and political organizational genius. Walter Fischel in *Ibn Khaldun and Timur the Lame*, ‘Alī Aḥmad Na‘īmī in *The Painters and Calligraphers of Herat in the Timurid Era*, and a group of Cambridge University scholars in their joint work *History of Iran: Timurid Period* have each illuminated various obscure aspects of Timur's life, his governance, successors, and the transformations of the Timurid era.

Existing studies have largely focused on events and the genealogy of power at Timur's court, providing little insight into the inner nature of power and its relationship with culture and religion,

particularly during Shāhrukh's reign. Therefore, the significance of the present research lies in moving beyond mere historical narrative to explore the philosophy of power in one of the rare periods of history under Shāhrukh—an era in which the coexistence of religion, knowledge, and political authority shaped a new form of governance in Central Asia.

The primary objective of this study is to revisit the political rationality embedded in the Timurid system during Shāhrukh Mirzā's reign—a rationality through which power shifted from individual charisma toward a structured administrative, cultural, and spiritual order. Accordingly, the questions addressed in this research pertain to deep historical reflections on power and governance in this period: How did Shāhrukh succeed in transforming the basis of Timurid power from a military order to a bureaucratic and cultural structure? How can the role of women in the Timurid court, particularly under Shāhrukh, be assessed? And how did the educational and cultural developments during Shāhrukh Mirzā's era leave enduring impacts on the region's history and the future of the Timurid Empire?

2. A Page from History: The Social and Political Conditions of the Timurids before Shāhrukh Mirzā

2-1. The Thunderbolt of Chinggis and the Thunderbolt of Timur

Greater Khorasan had not yet recovered from the devastations wrought by the Mongols when Amir Timur, unlike Chinggis—who was not a Muslim and whose descendants were primarily Buddhist or Nestorian (Umberto Cerato, 1997: 4)—began his bloody campaigns while maintaining an outward appearance of scholarship, asceticism, and Islam, presenting himself as a protector of religion and the poor (Arzu, 2022: 55; Tabibi, 1985: 2–3). From every corner of the conquered lands, he summoned scholars, architects, and skilled artisans to Samarkand to participate in the city's reconstruction—albeit at the cost of widespread devastation elsewhere. Unlike Chinggis's sword, which recognized neither laymen nor scholars, Timur granted protection to intellectuals and men of learning and treated Islamic saints, Sayyids, Sufis, dervishes, and judges with full respect (Arzu, 2022: 52; Cambridge University, 1999: 61).

Despite his inherent violence and ferocity, Timur's upbringing in an environment rich in knowledge, art, and Sufism moderated his Chinggisid brutality. He sought to transform Samarkand into a gathering place for scholars and artists (Bartold, n.d.: 67). To legitimize his conquests, Timur sought the permission and prayers of religious leaders and clerics before each campaign and visited the poor and dervishes after each victory (Tabibi, 1989: 5–6).

One of his most significant cultural engagements was with Ibn Khaldun, the Moroccan scholar. In January and February 1401 CE (803 AH), Timur, while in a military camp outside Damascus, engaged in extensive discussions with Ibn Khaldun on history, geography, the myths of the ancient East, and the legitimacy of the Abbasid caliphate. He tasked Ibn Khaldun with preparing a detailed report on Morocco and new historical and political topics. In his *Al-Ibar*, Ibn Khaldun describes Timur as possessing exceptional insight, perceptiveness, a passion for debate, and deep reflective thinking, demonstrating that even in old age, he had an active mind and clear judgment. Timur's recognition and respect for scholars and culture reveal a marked contrast with Chinggis (Cambridge University, 1999: 96–97; Fischel, 1951: 10).

2-2. The Structure of Power and the Dominance of Military Commanders during Timur's Reign

The power structure of Amir Timur was not based on a coherent bureaucracy or a formalized taxation system; rather, the spoils economy derived from his military campaigns formed the main pillar of

his authority. Although Timur ostensibly established a bureaucratic apparatus and employed officials, his governance was primarily dependent on personal charisma and his powerful personality, with agents and administrators appointed according to their position and type of relationship with him (Razavi & Azadbakht, 2018: 114). To overcome obstacles posed by tribal forces and to assert his legitimacy among diverse ethnic groups, Timur built an army whose foremost loyalty was to him alone. He deliberately kept capable military commanders away from the center of power to reduce the risk of collusion and potential threats to the throne (ibid.: 116). Consequently, Timur's era was marked by extensive conquests, the subjugation of empires, and a prominent role for the military within the structure of power.

Timur's reign lasted from 1368 to 1405 CE. Despite his kinship with the descendants of Chinggis, he pursued a distinctive path in conquest and politics. Initially serving under Chagatai Khan, Timur rose to power and launched extensive campaigns across Afghanistan, Khorasan, the Middle East, Anatolia, and India, inflicting severe defeats on his enemies. By securing Baghdad, Mesopotamia, and Anatolia, he captured Bayezid I (Razavi & Azadbakht, 2018: 100). Following the conquest of India and the mass slaughter of captives, Timur returned to Samarkand in the summer of 1404, established diplomatic relations with Europe, and prepared for further campaigns against China. Ultimately, Timur passed away on 18 February 1405 at the age of seventy-one, after thirty-six years of rule characterized by warfare, conquests, and extensive travels, and was buried in Samarkand (ibid.: 23).

2-3. The Death of Amir Timur and the Succession Crisis: The Rise of Shāhrukh Mirzā

The vast empire established by Timur over thirty years of conquest was entirely dependent on the personal authority of its founder, with his sons and grandsons serving only as subordinate rulers. Upon Timur's death, this authority came to an end, and the princes neglected his succession directives. Each, in a position of opportunity, claimed independent rule, and the empire was divided into several separate principalities. Although some of these units were later reunified for a few decades under a single state, the original expanse and influence of the empire were never fully restored, and conflicts among Timur's descendants and local commanders over territorial control continued for years (Cambridge University, 1999: 108–109).

Among Timur's sons, Jahangir died in 777 AH / 1375 CE, and Umar Shaikh in 796 AH / 1394 CE, while Miran Shah was sidelined from power due to mental illness. Shāhrukh, Timur's fourth son, born in 799 AH / 1377 CE, was known for his peaceful disposition and personal piety, and he initially lacked the full capability to govern the empire. For this reason, Timur appointed his grandson, Pir Muhammad ibn Jahangir—then thirty-one years old and ruling Kandahar—as his successor. However, Pir Muhammad did not enjoy sufficient support, failed to maintain the throne, and was eventually assassinated by his own minister in 809 AH / 1407 CE (Cambridge University, 1999: 108).

Following Timur's death, it was decided that the campaign against China, led by Khalil, would be completed and Pir Muhammad would ascend the throne in accordance with Timur's will. However, Sultan Husayn, Timur's maternal grandson, asserted a claim to the succession of Amir Gurkān and advanced toward Samarkand. At this juncture, the commanders of Tashkent recognized him as ruler. Upon reaching Samarkand and after the mourning ceremonies, Khalil Sultan ascended the throne, engaging in extensive acts of generosity and largesse (Mir Jafari, 2009: 84).

2-4. Khalil Sultan: A Prince Driven by Passion

Khalil Sultan, the son of Miran Shah, was born in 786 AH and, like many Timurid princes, was raised under the supervision of Saray Malik Khānum, Timur's first wife. His intelligence and acumen became evident during Timur's campaign in India, earning him Timur's special attention and the assignment of critical missions. Among Timur's descendants, Khalil Sultan was unparalleled in the

number of his conquests and victories, often fighting alongside Timur in most battles (Mir Jafari, 2009: 85).

At the outset of his reign, Khalil Sultan faced three main rivals: Shāhrukh, Sultan Husayn, and Pir Muhammad ibn Jahangir. Shāhrukh did not press opposition and maintained friendly relations, such that Khalil Sultan ruled independently in Samarkand while Shāhrukh ruled in Khorasan. Sultan Husayn was defeated after several skirmishes and reconciliations and, on Shāhrukh's orders, was executed. Pir Muhammad was also overcome by Khalil Sultan through the betrayal of six of his own commanders. Khalil Sultan seized Timur's vast treasuries and governed with generosity, assuming the title of "Khan," previously reserved for the direct descendants of Chinggis Khan (Cambridge University, 1999: 108–109).

Despite his courage and generosity, Khalil Sultan's excessive indulgence in pleasure and attachment to Shādmalik-Aghā led to his downfall. The elders and commanders of Samarkand rebelled against him, resulting in his deposition and imprisonment, while Shādmalik-Aghā was arrested and tortured. Shāhrukh intervened militarily to free him but removed him from the governance of Transoxiana, appointing his son Ulugh Beg in his place. Khalil Sultan died in 814 AH in Iraq-e Ajam, and Shādmalik-Aghā, in despair, committed suicide. According to Ibn Arabshāh: "She thrust a dagger with such force into her chest that it came out from her back, and those who witnessed the event were consumed with heart-wrenching grief. Both were then buried in the same grave" (Mir Jafari, 2009: 85–86).

3. Shāhrukh's Era and the Rise of the Amirate Bureaucrats

3-1. Shāhrukh in the Seat of Power

Shāhrukh, the fourth son of Timur, was born on 14 Rabi' al-Thani 799 AH in Samarkand and, from his youth, was recognized as one of the key pillars of the Timurid state and a principal commander in Timur's army. Timur placed full trust in Shāhrukh among his sons and grandsons, frequently deploying him in most battles and military campaigns. In 799 AH, Shāhrukh was appointed to govern Khorasan, Sistan, and Mazandaran. After Timur's death, he made peace with Khalil Sultan and ultimately ascended the throne in Herat in 807 AH (Cambridge University, 1999: 108–109; *ibid.*: 86–87). Shāhrukh held a deep attachment to Herat and chose not to move to Samarkand, ruling the Timurid realm from this city until his death in 850 AH / 1447 CE.

Immersing himself in the civilization of Khorasan and Afghanistan, Shāhrukh tempered his father's hardness and martial temperament with the virtues of scholarship, justice, and compassion, transforming the court of Herat into a center of learning, literature, and the arts. He successfully managed disputes among brothers and nephews, consolidating the Timurid realm, which had been near collapse following Timur's death (Tabibi, 1989: 29). Ottoman chroniclers note that after Timur's death, developments began to move toward a centralized administration and bureaucracy in the Timurid territories, indicating a gradual departure from purely military rule (Bacqué-Grammont, 2003: 338).

Timur's empire comprised two major regions: the eastern sector, including Khorasan and Transoxiana, which reached its zenith under Shāhrukh, and the western sector, encompassing western Iran, Iraq, Georgia, and Armenia, governed by Jalal al-Din Miran Shah and his descendants. The western territories were under pressure from the Jalayerid and Qara Qoyunlu rulers and were soon lost to the Timurids. Through numerous campaigns, Shāhrukh not only maintained his domain but also conquered regions such as Gorgan, Sistan, Kerman, Fars, Iraq-e Ajam, and Azerbaijan, while establishing diplomatic and commercial relations with China, Egypt, and India. His policies included promoting agriculture, supervising rivers and irrigation systems in Herat and Merv, and urban development (Cambridge University, 1999: 113–114).

Shāhrukh's reign, despite occasional conflicts and bloodshed, remained free from the anarchy that followed Timur's death for four decades. In some regions, significant economic, cultural, and scientific progress was achieved; for this reason, scholars have termed this period the "Timurid Renaissance" (Grousset, 1974: 758). The Timurid Renaissance influenced subsequent dynasties, including the Safavids and the Mughals, in architecture, administration, and cultural patronage (Yuldosheva & Saidakbarova, 2025: 37). Hāfez-e Abrū, emphasizing Shāhrukh's piety, scholarly pursuit, and cultural promotion, observes: "During his reign, knowledge, literature, and the arts flourished greatly" (Hāfez-e Abrū, 1996: 2/818). Recent studies underscore that Shāhrukh, through policies of institution-building, bureaucratic consolidation, and support for knowledge and culture, laid the foundations for a new phase in the Timurid Empire (Koraboev, 2025: 15–19).

Contrary to Mongol and Gūrkanī traditions, Shāhrukh administered his court independently of Chinggisid puppet khans. Favoring political stability and tranquility, he focused inward on the prosperity of his realm. He emphasized urban development, patronage of scholars and artists, and public welfare, transforming Herat into a thriving city and a hub for intellectuals and artists, attracting poets and scholars from across the Islamic world (Szuppe, 1997: 323). Similar patterns were evident in other cities under his rule, such as Samarkand and Shiraz. Furthermore, through trade and diplomatic relations with China, Egypt, and India, along with careful oversight of agriculture and water resources, Shāhrukh enhanced the economy and public welfare of his domain while elevating scientific and cultural development (Aka, 2011: 261; Bahramnejad & Sarijlu, 2023: 68). During his forty-three-year reign (817–850 AH), Shāhrukh never engaged in new conquests; he was a man of literary taste and calligraphy (Group of Authors, 2004: 200).

3-2. Bureaucracy in the Era of Shāhrukh

During Shāhrukh's reign, the administration of finances, or the *dīwān*, was a central locus of power and, accordingly, a site of competition for supremacy. In *Ma'āz al-Ansāb*, which reflects the administrative organization of the Timurid state, two independent groups of officials are mentioned: first, the *amīrs*, who were entirely Turkic or Mongol, and second, other posts usually held by Chagatai elites, followed by a list of Iranian scribes, Turkic scribes, and *šadrs* (Manz, 1998: 124). Identifying the precise terminology used in these structures and the functions of each office is extremely difficult. Although events related to the *dīwān* are recorded in several historical texts, historians were inconsistent in naming offices and showed little inclination to explain the administrative structure. Nevertheless, reliable evidence indicates that Shāhrukh and his governors maintained a council of *amīrs* for consultation; membership in this council was a great honor, typically granted to high-ranking Chagatai *amīrs* and, occasionally, to an Iranian official or commander (Samarqandī, 1993: 634, 717, 795; Kāteb, 1966: 250). It is likely that the term *Amīr al-Dīwān* in *Ma'āz al-Ansāb* refers to membership in this council, though the formal duties of the office remain unclear (Ma'āz al-Ansāb, fol. 133).

Shāhrukh sought to promote the more independent and newly capable *amīrs* to higher positions. Fīrūzshāh and 'Alīka were two of the most powerful *amīrs* of his era, and historical sources describe both as holding unrivaled authority in administration, as *Amīr al-Dīwān* and *Amīr al-Umara*. Their sons later succeeded them (Razavi & Āzādbakht, 2018: 122). However, 'Abd al-Razzāq Samarqandī notes that, since these successors were young and inexperienced, Shāhrukh appointed the eldest, Amīr Sulṭān Shāh Barlas, to oversee the *dīwān* (Samarqandī, 1993: 841).

The term *Amīr al-Dīwān* appears to have been applied broadly to all *amīrs* holding positions within the *dīwān* or, at least, those in the central council. While we cannot be certain of the precise offices held, it is clear that some possessed formal authority and substantial power over the financial affairs of the state (Razavi & Āzādbakht, 2018: 123). Importantly, the *dīwān* was not merely a conduit for transferring wealth from the populace to the state; it also managed state assets, including confiscated property, estates

of captured families, and taxes on livestock and grain, which were brought under its supervision (Manz, 1998: 128). Shāhrukh occasionally exercised his powers directly, apparently making key appointments himself, though assessing the extent of his personal involvement in administrative matters is difficult. Sources originating from the central court provide a somewhat chaotic picture, attributing *dīwān* dismissals and appointments to him (Fasihi Khafī, 1961: 3/257; Samarqandi, 1993: 670).

Shāhrukh likely intervened to monitor officials, prevent major abuses, or utilize their presence in the *dīwān* strategically. Minor abuses were seemingly tolerated, to be leveraged against officials when needed. How responsibilities were distributed among different groups remains unclear. Although powerful viziers such as Sayyid Fakhr al-Dīn and Ghiāth al-Dīn Pir Ahmad enjoyed considerable autonomy, they were not the sole administrators of the *dīwān*. Princes and *amīrs*, some with their own offices and others participating in the central *dīwān*, also exercised administrative influence. The degree to which their responsibilities differed from the senior viziers is uncertain. For example, after the death of Bāysanghar, Shāhrukh's son, his *dīwān* responsibilities were formally transferred to his sixteen-year-old son, 'Alā' al-Dawla (Samarqandi, 1993: 142).

Within Shāhrukh's *dīwān*, strength of character was necessary for success. Moreover, all actors—from ambitious subordinates to the ruler himself—used envy and court intrigue to advance their interests. Undermining an individual's reputation was a common strategy, with ample pretexts readily available. For the ruler, princes, and *amīrs*, the most effective method to curb an official's power was to expose financial misconduct (Manz, 1998: 142). The bureaucratic class, while inclined toward hereditary positions, regularly incorporated new individuals, though networks tended to remain concentrated within the bureaucratic elite (Lambton, 1993: 297). Among officials in the central *dīwān*, members of local families were more likely to gain employment, and in provincial offices, most staff were locally rooted—for instance, the ministers of the Herat *dīwān* were often linked to Tus, Sabzevār, and Mahestān (Ma'āz al-Ansāb, fols. 127, 96).

Clearly, the central bureaucracy under Shāhrukh was a key instrument of power, with Iranian *dīwānīs*, Chagatai *amīrs*, and Timurid princes all playing active roles. While the precise coexistence of Turkic and Mongol officials within the *dīwān* is uncertain, it is reasonable to assert that those deeply involved in administrative affairs could attain significant authority. Although the influence of individuals may have varied over time, these three groups remained consistently active, with power circulation likely determined by personal position. During Shāhrukh's reign, officeholders often served longer terms with greater authority, yet even powerful *dīwān* officials faced constraints (Razavi & Āzādbakht, 2018: 122). Overall, political authority under Shāhrukh was deliberately distributed among princes, military elites, and bureaucrats to prevent the internal concentration of power characteristic of Timur's reign (Koraboev, 2025: 15).

3-3. From the people of the sword to the people of the pens: Transformation of the Timurid Military Structure under Shāhrukh

Every government, after a period of turbulent establishment, eventually enters an era of consolidation, institutionalization, and structural governance. Following Timur's death, and under the conservative and pragmatic character of Shāhrukh, the ambitions of military elites were curtailed. The increasing institutionalization of power and the strengthening of administrative-executive structures created greater opportunities for bureaucrats. The prestige and influence of the *dīwānīs* grew to such an extent that some military *amīrs* and representatives of the warrior aristocracy turned their attention to administrative and bureaucratic affairs. In essence, the political and administrative transformations during Shāhrukh's reign and that of his successors weakened the Timurid military aristocracy and induced a more pragmatic approach to their roles (Razavi & Āzādbakht, 2018: 128).

Shāhrukh lacked his father's belligerent tendencies and restricted military campaigns to strictly necessary situations. Compared to Timur, he also demonstrated a greater inclination toward power-sharing. Consequently, his reign witnessed greater provincial autonomy and the rising influence of Iranian and Turkic-Mongol elites. These traits, combined with his serious religious orientation, shaped the reputation of a ruler devoted to faith while delegating governance to capable subordinates and co-rulers, such as Goharshād (Ākā, 2011: 293). This assessment rests on the assumption that Timur left behind a politically cohesive unit that was easy to govern; in reality, Shāhrukh had to assert his authority over the realm through both military action and political acumen, balancing countless familial, provincial, and local centers of power (Razavi & Āzādbakht, 2018: 125).

Given the military dominance of the Chagatai *ulus* and the aristocratic military leadership therein, Timur's power center lay in Transoxiana, where Chagatai *amīrs* exercised substantial influence. Under Shāhrukh, however, political preeminence shifted to Khurasan, and the influence of bureaucrats increased markedly. Furthermore, Shāhrukh's cultural orientation and that of his successors, emphasizing civic responsibility and social development, reinforced institutionalized governance, centralization, and reduced centrifugal tendencies among military elites, thereby weakening their authority. The fragmentation and competing claims of local powerholders focused Timurid rulers on maintaining the existing territory rather than pursuing expansion, further elevating the importance of political and bureaucratic institutions at the expense of military influence (Fayaz Anush, 2009: 66). Consequently, during Shāhrukh's reign, the administrative apparatus was strengthened, with ministers and bureaucrats replacing purely military commanders in key governance roles (Karimov, 2025: 30).

Overall, Shāhrukh's long rule can be considered a transitional era from a predominantly military-based regime to a civil-military governance system. While military campaigns and coercive measures remained politically necessary, serious efforts were made to institutionalize the Timurid empire and to emphasize the civil and administrative dimensions of rule. These initiatives significantly reduced the influence of military elites while consolidating the position of political and cultural officials. In this period, the tension between "men of the pen" and "men of the sword" was still observable; however, under Shāhrukh's pragmatic leadership, military ambition was mitigated, and bureaucrats gained greater opportunity. It should be noted that, after Timur's death, the nascent empire never experienced the unity of its founding era and remained vulnerable to fragmentation and claims of military princes. Nevertheless, the changes under Shāhrukh—whether due to the weakening of military power, his successors' cultural inclinations, or a combination of both—reached a point where some military *amīrs* and aristocratic representatives assumed administrative and bureaucratic roles. This development represents, arguably for the first time in medieval Iranian history, a transformation whereby military elites abandoned exclusively martial functions in favor of administrative-executive patterns—a novelty seldom seen in the Central Asian states from which the Timurid dynasty emerged (Razavi & Āzādbakht, 2018: 128).

4. Hidden Power: The Political Role of Women in the Timurid Court and the Era of Shahrukh

4-1. The Political Role of Women in the Timurid Period

In the history of the Eastern world, the presence of women is paradoxical. History begins with matriarchy but gradually assumes a predominantly male character. In this context, men occupy central and prominent roles, while the misfortunes of women outweigh their effective presence. However, during the Timurid period, the situation was different. Compared to other eras, Timurid women played a significant role in the fields of economy, politics, and state-building (Arzu, 1401: 76). Scholars attribute this to the tribal structure and culture, identifying the "tribal origin" (Mirjafari, 1387: 209) as a key factor in determining the social status of women during this period (Arzu, 1401: 75). From a broader perspective, women have consistently played an important and notable role in the political and economic spheres of Central Asian society throughout its transformative periods (Mukminova, 1997: 203 & 204).

The status of women within tribal structures is a stimulating topic in sociology. Tribes live close to nature; the children of nature do not yet recognize walls or boundaries. The conventional distinctions between men and women are not rigidly defined. Women, like men, cooperate in both war and peace. The existence of the tribe is defined through the existence of each of its members. ‘Asabiyyah’ functions as the vital force of tribal identity. Indeed, ‘asabiyyah’ is one of the substantial sociological concepts in Ibn Khaldun’s view (1332–1406). Through this analytical framework, Ibn Khaldun emphasizes that nomadic peoples “are unwilling to sell their freedom for anything. Living in a free and natural environment, their nature remains untainted and pure; they possess a clean spirit. Their morality is sound, and they are religious and pious. Their attachment to family, women, and children is strong and enduring” (Radmanesh, n.d.: 10). This loyalty and empathy are such that Ibn Battuta writes: “What greatly astonished me in these lands was the respect they had for their women. The status of women among these people exceeds that of men” (Ibn Battuta, 1361: 1/369). This status reflects an inseparable bond between men and women, both in sedentary and nomadic life (Arzu, 1401: 79). Women were not only the mainstay of the family but also the driving force of the tribal economy (Hafez-e-Abro, 1380: 1/24). This feature is unique to Turkic and Mongol tribes (Beyani, 1352: 79).

There is no doubt that the presence of influential women during the Timurid period is one of the marvels of history. This very marvel may well explain the civilization of the Timurids (Arzu, 1401: 76). Timurid princesses played vital roles in the political and social spheres of the empire, influencing succession, governance, and provincial administration (Primov & Jamshidova, 2025: 5). Based on historical and scholarly sources, the influential women of the Timurid period include:

- Consorts of Amir Timur Gurkani: Saray Malik Khanum, Tuman-Agha, and her daughter-in-law Khan-zadeh;
- Consorts of Shahrukh Mirza: Goharshad Agha and Sultan-Agha;
- Consort of Khalil Sultan: Shad Malik-Agha;
- Consorts of Sultan Husayn Bayqara: Bigh Begum and Khadija Begum;
- Mother of Sultan Husayn Bayqara: Firouzeh Begum (Aka, 1390: 246–247).

This influence took various forms. During the life of the sultan, Timurid women primarily sought to manage the anger of their husbands and protect the heads of nobles from the executioner’s sword. The beloved consort of Amir Timur, Saray Malik Khanum, excelled in this regard. Three notable examples can be cited:

1. With the intercession of Saray Malik Khanum, Amir Timur pardoned the rebellious Amir Musa, a Timurid governor in Transoxiana, who in 773 AH had revolted with other local amirs against Timur’s authority (Bartold, n.d.: 57).
2. In 806 AH, Amir Timur, through Saray Malik Khanum’s intercession, pardoned his son Miran-Shah, gifting him wealth and allowing him to live alongside his son Abu Bakr in Baghdad (Yazdi, 1336: 1/172).
3. Amir Timur also heeded the intercession of his consort Tuman-Agha and pardoned Amir Idku, the governor of Kerman, who had misappropriated the treasury, allowing him to continue his duties (Yazdi, 1336: 2/397).

Alongside Saray Malik Khanum, the role and influence of Goharshad Begum in Timurid politics is noteworthy. Beyond her cultural contributions, Goharshad Agha played a significant role in governance and administration (Chaqmag, 2024: 15–29). It is unnecessary to dwell on Timur’s centralized and unyielding authority; despite her youth, Goharshad could challenge Timur’s firm decisions (Arzu, 1401: 84). Two illustrative cases suffice:

1. Amir Timur intended to massacre the people of Anatolia. Goharshad used the birth of Timur's first grandchild as an excuse, persuading him to spare his daughter-in-law and abandon the mass killing (Samarqandi, 1373: 256).
2. Abdul Qadir Maraghi, a prominent musician of the era, fell under Timur's wrath. Seeking protection, he turned to Goharshad. Familiar with Timur's psychological tendencies, she instructed Maraghi to recite the Quran musically in the Timur household, which successfully averted Timur's anger (Ibid.).

In any case, one of the most important political functions of Timurid women was the upbringing and promotion of children for succession. To ensure that the shah would select one of his children as heir, the royal women resorted to every means possible. Capturing the shah's favor, nurturing capable and intelligent offspring, exercising influence among court officials, and networking to expand their sphere of power were among these functions (Arzu, 1401: 78). Women of the court, through any maneuver or strategy, sought to maintain and strengthen their own and their children's position within the power structure (Clavijo, 1344: 265), and at times acted as ambassadors of peace, preventing swords from being drawn (Khafi, 1339: 145).

4-2. Goharshad Begum: The Embodiment of Wisdom and Influence in Shahrukh's Politics

Goharshad was the daughter of Amir Ghiyas al-Din Tarkhan. Ghiyas al-Din's ancestors were soldiers under Genghis Khan, who conferred the title "Tarkhan" on them in recognition of their bravery and loyalty. Amir Ghiyas al-Din, coming from this lineage, held a special position at the Timurid court. From this perspective, the Tarkhans served as a connecting link between two distinct and independent dynasties—the Ilkhanids and the Gurkanis—and Goharshad was the central figure of power and prudence in Shahrukh Mirza's court (Arzu, 1401: 80). Her mother was Khan-zadeh Begum, and Goharshad Agha was born in 780 AH (Ibid., 81). Goharshad's mother passed away in Rajab 814 AH in Mashhad and was buried near the shrine of Imam Reza (Khatib, 1393: 9). This event motivated Goharshad to build the Mashhad counterpart of the Herat Mosque (Arzu, 1401: 81).

After joining Amir Timur, Ghiyas al-Din Tarkhan not only married his daughter Goharshad to Shahrukh Mirza but also gave two other daughters in marriage to Timur's sons (Bartold, n.d.: 75). Thus, the Tarkhans became part of the Timurid family and administration. During Shahrukh Mirza's reign, the center of Tarkhan authority was Queen Goharshad Agha. It was through Goharshad's prudence and prestige that her brother Amir Qara Yusuf (790–802 AH) attained the ministerial office, and key Tarkhan nobles were appointed to important positions (Manz, 1390: 74). Although none of these amirs were the most powerful military leaders, together they formed the most significant familial faction (Aka, 1390: 230), with Queen Goharshad at its head constantly striving to enhance Tarkhan influence (Mirkhond, 1373: 6/1067). Naturally, "this support caused anxiety and fear among the Timurid amirs" (Azarnyushe, 1390: 12).

Queen Goharshad married Shahrukh Mirza in 790 AH (Tatu, 1372: 7/4783) at the age of fourteen (Hassanzadeh, 1397: 93). The marriage produced two sons and three daughters. Unfortunately, little definitive information exists about the daughters. Among Shahrukh's sons, Ulugh Beg Mirza and Baysunghur Mirza became enduring figures in politics and culture (Arzu, 1401: 82). The mind can focus on Ulugh Beg's observatory in Samarkand and Baysunghur's *Shahnameh* (Sekandari, 1383: 85–84/205). Shahrukh ruled with authority for about forty-three years. This authority was not limited to his own prudence; Goharshad, Ulugh Beg, and Baysunghur institutionalized peace, piety, generosity, and cultural and civic engagement. Together, Shahrukh and Goharshad could lay the foundations of Herat's civilization. Goharshad's companion, Mehri Heravi, also reflects Goharshad's cultural refinement. One might argue that Goharshad's dual role in politics and culture represents a remarkable historical exception. Her outstanding cultural achievements are self-evident, but her political conduct remains a

matter for careful study (Arzu, 1401: 84). To understand this fully, a review of her political record is necessary.

Having learned political and cultural acumen from her father and being familiar with the power struggles following Genghis Khan, Amir Timur Gurkani, and the succession disputes after Timur's death, Goharshad understood the role of women in court and the tools of influence at their disposal. With such insight, she earned her husband's trust and gradually became his advisor (Ibid., 85). Undoubtedly, managing the succession challenge after Timur's death was a key historical moment. Shahrukh, by suppressing rival claimants, could manage this challenge, with Goharshad playing a tangible role (Blunt, 1363: 215). Forty-three years later, at Shahrukh's death, the succession issue again became central in Timurid political life. Goharshad Agha, however, emerged in a different role. To understand this role, one must trace the historical sequence of events. The key question concerns Shahrukh's children in relation to Goharshad—how many children did she have?

Shahrukh had two consorts and multiple children. The Iranian encyclopedia authors believe Goharshad had three daughters and three sons: daughters Maryam Sultan, Saadat Sultan, and Qatlaq Turkan Agha; sons Ulugh Beg, Baysunghur, and Muhammad Juki (Arzu, 1401: 92). However, Kazem Modirshanechi asserts that Goharshad was not Ulugh Beg's mother: "Shahrukh had two harems: Goharshad Begum and Sultan Begum; it is unclear which marriage occurred first. Since Ulugh Beg, Shahrukh's eldest son, was likely not her son, one may assume that Shahrukh's first consort, Sultan Begum, bore Ulugh Beg in Jumada al-Awwal 796 AH when Shahrukh was seventeen. Another son, Ibrahim Sultan—apparently Goharshad's child—was born in Shawwal of the same year, one month after Ulugh Beg. In the *Encyclopaedia Islamica* (2/513), Ulugh Beg's mother is listed as Goharshad; based on the evidence, we prefer that Ibrahim Sultan was Goharshad's son, making it impossible for two children to be born five months apart. Thus, Ulugh Beg belonged to Shahrukh's other harem" (Modirshanechi, 1380: 572–549). Soheila Hassanzadeh, citing Zangeneh (Zangeneh Qasemabadi, 1390: 28), repeats Modirshanechi's account (Hassanzadeh, 1397: 8/94). Dr. Abdul Ghafur Arzu does not consider Ulugh Beg Goharshad's biological son (Arzu, 1401: 94), but Muhammad bin Khawand Shah Balkhi believes Goharshad gave birth to Ulugh Beg in Soltaniyeh (Mirkhond, 1373: 6/1092).

There remains considerable uncertainty regarding Ulugh Beg's maternal lineage. In any case, at Shahrukh's death, none of his sons except Ulugh Beg were alive (Tabibi, 1368: 32). With Shahrukh's death (850 AH / 1446 CE), the succession became a major challenge. This challenge resulted from Goharshad's political decision. Rather than supporting Ulugh Beg, she preferred that Ala al-Dawla, son of Baysunghur, ascend the throne (Arzu, 1401: 96). Mirkhond narrates: "When Shahrukh passed away, Goharshad Agha sent a swift messenger to Herat to inform Ala al-Dawla" (Mirkhond, 1375: 1173). But why did she not inform Ulugh Beg or send a messenger to Samarkand? These subtle historical details indicate that, from Goharshad's perspective, the continuation of Shahrukh's rule through Baysunghur's line was preferable. This preference shaped a major historical calamity (Arzu, 1401: 97).

At Shahrukh's death, Abdul Latif, son of Ulugh Beg, commanded the army and informed his father. Two political maneuvers confronted each other, heightening political and military tensions. Ulugh Beg's supporters warned Abdul Latif (Arzu, 1401: 97) that "Goharshad Agha intends to enthrone Ala al-Dawla, plotting treachery. The young man unwittingly orders her belongings to be plundered" (Mirkhond, 1375: 1172). Mirza Ala al-Dawla, aware that the rightful heir was his cousin Ulugh Beg, acted contrary to Goharshad's wishes, seeking to protect Ulugh Beg and sending him gifts and wealth to Samarkand. But upon hearing of Abdul Latif's actions toward Goharshad, he abandoned this plan and declared independence (Ibid., 1173). These tragic events unfolded while Shahrukh's body was still on display (Arzu, 1401: 99). Ala al-Dawla in Herat, Ulugh Beg in Samarkand, and Mirza Abu Bakr—another grandson of Shahrukh—in Takharistan and Balkh proclaimed independence. Shahrukh's vast realm fragmented into scattered power zones, and the queen mother (Goharshad), supporting Ala al-Dawla,

could not maintain her consort's political authority, turning the succession crisis into disaster (Arzu, 1401: 99).

A review of historical texts and careful analysis suggests that through cultural finesse and noble conduct, Goharshad subdued and rendered Shahrukh passive. Her influence was so extensive that during Shahrukh's lifetime, the country was effectively governed by Goharshad, her children, and the commanders (Ibid., 105). Her power was so wide-ranging that she could elevate one person to authority and strip another of rulership and imprison him at a gesture (Hassanzadeh, 1397: 102–103). As the dominant and unyielding queen during her consort's forty-three-year reign, Goharshad feared any limitation of her authority, her mind filled with events that succession disputes might provoke. Since her children Baysunghur and Ibrahim Sultan were deceased, the prospect of Shahrukh's death alarmed her. Shahrukh, too, was ill and trapped under Goharshad's charismatic power. Although her only surviving knowledgeable child was Ulugh Beg, she did not appoint him heir apparent. The principal reason was Goharshad's opposition (Arzu, 1401: 106–107).

Different motivations may have underlain this opposition. One explanation is that Ulugh Beg was the son of Goharshad's concubine, Sultan-Agha, though raised by Goharshad herself. For this reason, during Shahrukh's illness, Goharshad sought to secure the throne for her grandson, Ala al-Dawla, son of Baysunghur. Her emotional attachment to Ala al-Dawla was such that Sultan Muhammad, Ala al-Dawla's brother, was deprived of Baysunghur's wealth (Ibid., 107). Another possible explanation is that Goharshad Begum's opposition to Ulugh Beg in post-Shahrukh succession disputes related to Ulugh Beg's Mongol Akabigi lineage. Timur viewed Ulugh Beg, Shahrukh's son, similarly to Muhammad Sultan, son of Jahangir, recognizing in him noble qualities, fortune, and rulership (Taj al-Salmani, 1393: 38). To strengthen Ulugh Beg's political position after Muhammad Sultan's death, his marriage to a daughter of the Akabigi family was arranged (Ibid., 43; Bartold, 1336: 231). Goharshad may have feared that Ulugh Beg's enthronement, due to his Mongol Akabigi heritage, would threaten the Tarkhan family's political position (Arzu, 1401: 95).

After the death of his first two consorts in 822 AH / 1422 CE, Ulugh Beg married Khan-Sultan Khaniqa, daughter of Sultan Muhammad Khan Mongol, a powerful Timurid commander. Shahrukh presumably sought legitimacy through this alliance with the Mongols and Chinggisid appointment. He also hoped the Mongols would support Ulugh Beg against other political factions. However, Ulugh Beg later divorced Khan-Sultan, ending this marriage tragically (Bartold, 1336: 233). This misstep may have weakened Ulugh Beg's position vis-à-vis the Tarkhans under Goharshad Begum, as breaking ties with the Mongols implied a loss of political legitimacy. Despite Ulugh Beg being, in Khwandamir's words, "a king of exceptional virtue and cultivation, unparalleled in justice, knowledge of Galen, and mastery of mathematics and astronomy, and versed in the seven readings of the Qur'an" (Khwandamir, 1362: 4/20), the failed marriages diminished his political support from the Mongols and influenced the post-Shahrukh succession conflicts (Group of authors, 1399: 25).

In any case, Goharshad Begum's loyalty to the Tarkhans and the interests of her paternal lineage led her to overlook Ulugh Beg in the succession issue (Arzu, 1401: 95). Regardless of which interpretation is accepted, it does not change the central point: Goharshad's political miscalculation. Ulugh Beg Mirza was deserving and qualified to ascend Shahrukh Mirza's throne. Had Shahrukh actively appointed Ulugh Beg as heir and Goharshad endorsed it, the bloody calamities following Shahrukh's death might have been averted, and even Goharshad Agha, this wise and virtuous Timurid lady, would not have been killed by Abu Sa'id, and the civilization of the early Timurid period could have continued, shaping the fate of Greater Khorasan differently (Ibid., 95, 103, 109).

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the period of Shāhrukh Mirzā in Timurid history was marked by fundamental changes in the structure of power and the organization of governance. The most significant transformation was the shift from a purely individualized concentration of power toward the institutionalization and systematization of bureaucratic and governmental institutions. This finding differs from previous research, which primarily emphasized Timur's personal power and the extreme centralization of authority, and shows that Shāhrukh Mirzā, by utilizing a developed bureaucracy and organized governmental networks, sought to ensure political balance and stability.

Furthermore, the present study emphasizes that the legitimacy and stability of Shāhrukh Mirzā's rule were not based solely on military power but also relied on cultural, scholarly, and religious participation. The influence of Goharshād Begum and other cultural-political figures demonstrates that governmental institutions, with the capacity for broad social participation, were able to prevent the negative effects of power concentration. These findings are relatively consistent with comparative studies of power in other Islamic periods, such as the Seljuk dynasty, yet the level of institutionalization during Shāhrukh Mirzā's reign appears to have been unique.

The limitations of this research include the scarcity of written sources and limited access to certain reliable historical documents, which could have provided a more precise and comprehensive picture of power relations and governmental mechanisms in that period. Additionally, the study's focus on Shāhrukh Mirzā's reign means that short-term changes immediately before and after his rule are less examined.

Conclusion

After an in-depth study and analysis of the social and political transformations of the Timurid period, particularly through an examination of the power structure during Shāhrukh Mirzā's reign as a dialectical process in the history of power, it becomes evident that the internal structural changes of this era were not merely a superficial reconstruction of governance but a profound redefinition of the fundamental concepts of power and rulership. Shāhrukh Mirzā, as the heir to the military and autocratic power left by his father Timur, through his intellectual and strategic capabilities, established a government grounded not in force or violence but in wisdom, bureaucracy, and cultural cultivation.

One of the most significant achievements of this period was the transformation in the role of women within the power structure. This era not only redefined male authority, which had been exercised through military instruments and, in Shāhrukh's time, through civic and bureaucratic means, but also affirmed a new and meaningful position for women in politics and governance. Goharshād Begum, as a symbol of these transformations, played a significant role in both political and cultural spheres. She embodied the "hidden power" that could exert vital influence within social and cultural institutions, and even at the Timurid court. Her contributions to cultural and civil arenas are among the distinguished achievements of Central Asian history; however, her impact in political and governance fields, while important, cannot be considered entirely flawless or unproblematic.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, it is recommended that future studies focus on a comparative analysis of governmental institutions across different Timurid periods and other Islamic regimes to better understand patterns of institutionalized power and their effect on political stability. Additionally, examining less-studied sources, including administrative records and correspondence from

Shāhrukh Mirzā's court, could provide a more precise perspective on decision-making processes and governmental organization. Such research would contribute to a deeper understanding of the principles of rulership and power management in the region's political history.

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Dedicated to my mother...who devoted forty-three years of her fruitful life to teaching, education, and nurturing. She sacrificed her youth and many comforts of life in this path. Every line of wrinkles on her face speaks of knowledge, and every white strand on her cheek is a lesson in life. A generation owes its gratitude to her selflessness. She truly belongs to the lineage of devoted teachers. What I have learned from my mother's school, I have neither read in any book, nor received in any classroom, nor heard from any other teacher. I warmly kiss her great hands and humbly bow before the threshold of her wisdom and knowledge.

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