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28. The Imam's Policy Concerning Public Funds

Some of the students of history believed that one of the main factors in the absence of peace during the Imam's reign was his policy concerning the public funds. He tried to treat the leaders and the followers equally in distributing the public funds.

With Talhah and Al-Zubayr

Had he preferred some distinguished men such as Talhah and Al–Zubayr the two companions would have remained loyal to him and the war of Basra would have been avoided. The cause of war was the disagreement of Al–Zubayr and Talhah with the Imam conceriling the distribution of the public funds. The two companions and a number of other companions were accustomed to the poli cy of unequal distribution which was started by 'Umar.

They thought that the policy of the Imam meant to deprive them of their acquired privileges. Talhah and Al–Zubayr and other preferred companions and children of these companions believed that the Imam would return most of their properties and funds to the Islamic treasury for a good portion of their wealth was acquired through gifts they received from Uthman. 1

With Chiefs of the Arab Tribes

Had the Imam given preference to the chiefs of the tribes and presented them with gifts as Muawiya did the Imam would have earned the loyalty of those chiefs and he would have established the unity of his followers and prevailed against his enemies.

Does Islam Allow Preference?

These critics believed that the Imam could have done all that without breaking the Islamic Law. Such preference actually could have been in agreement with the Holy Qur'an and the precepts of the Holy Prophet.

The Holy Qur'an declares clearly that the recipients of the Zakat are eight categories including the ones who are to be attracted to Islam by generous gifts. The Holy Prophet gave Abu Sufyan Aqra-a Ibn Habis and Oyainah Ibn Hissn Al-Fuzari from the spoils of Hawazin much more than he gave righteous Muslims.2

The Three Leaders

The reliable information which we find in history concerning Ayeshah Talhah and Al–Zubayr does not support such criticism. It rather contradicts the opinion of these critics. Ayeshah declared her opposition to the Imam as soon as she knew of his election while she was on her way to Medina coming back from her pilgrimage.

She said to the man who informed her of the Imam's election: "I wish that the Heaven falls on the earth if your man ('Ali) succeeds in this affair." Then she returned to Mecca starting her campaign to avenge the blood of Uthman before she reached Mecca. She did all that before she knew anything about the Imam's policy concerning the distribution of the public funds.3

It is a well known fact in history that Uthman preferred Ayeshah Talhah and Al-Zubayr in his distribution of money. He granted Al-Zubayr six hundred thousand Dirhams. 4 He granted Talhah two hundred thousand Dirhams. 5

But his preference of these two companions did not prevent them from being the leaders of his antagonizers who called for his assassination. Why would they be expected to be in peace with the Imam if he had preferred them in distribution when we know that Ayeshah and Talhah were more resentful to the Imam than they were to Uthman?

Al-Zubayr was not less than Ayeshah and Talhah in resenting the Imam in his last years after he became obedient to his son Abdullah the one who carried a great deal of hatred towards the Imam.

Each of the two companions was thinking that the election of the Imam deprived him of reaching the caliphate which he thought to be within his reach.

Ayeshah's Grudge

In addition to her old unfriendly attitude towards the Imam Ayeshah thought that the leadership of the Imam would be a strong barrier to the return of the caliphate to her clan of Tyme which was headed by her father the First Caliph.

On more than one occasion during the days of Uthman Ayeshah expressed her hope that the caliphate would come back to Tyme through her cousin Talhah.6

She used to see in Al-Zubayr a good substitute for Talhah because Al-Zubayr was her brother-in-law

and she used to consider his son Abdullah a son of hers.

The Two Companions' Motives

It is reported that Talhah and Al–Zubayr criticized the Imam's policy in distributing the public funds and they complained that he equalized them in allotment with those who are below them. But their criticism of the Imam was nothing but propaganda aimed at arousing the preferred class from among the companions against the Imam.

They criticized his distribution of the funds equally while they knew that he did that because he wanted to follow the method of the Prophet. They accused him of the blood of Uthman while they knew his innocence and that they were the ones who were responsible for Uthman's blood. The motive for their criticism was the same as their accusation.

They were hopeful to reach the caliphate. Their ambition was inflamed when 'Umar made them members of the Electoral Convention. Because of this they instigated people against Uthman and sought his assassination and for the same reason they criticized the Imam and accused him of the murder of Uthman. And for the same motive they breached their covenant by which they pledged their loyalty to him.

With Chiefs of the Tribes

It is said that the Imam could have secured the loyalty of the chiefs of the Muslim tribes by showering them with gifts and preferring them in distribution. I do not believe that the Imam was religiously able to treat those chiefs as the Prophet treated similar chiefs when trying to attract them to Islam by financial preference.

The chiefs whom the Imam had to deal with had adopted Islam a long time before he came to power. They lived under the Islamic law for twenty-five years after the death of the Holy Prophet. 'Umar discontinued paying the appeased men their share from the Zakat less than ten years after the death of the Holy Prophet.

It should be mentioned though it does not have much bearing on the subject of discussion that it is doubted that the Messenger gave Abu Sufyan Aqra-a Ibn Habis and Oyaihah Ibn Hissn Al-Fuzari three hundred camels from the Zakat at the Battle of Hunain as the critics mentioned.

The share of the appeased men is to come from the Zakat. But the Messenger gave the three chiefs from the spoils of the battle and no Zakat is to be paid out of the spoils. The fifth is to be paid out of the spoils.

It seems that the Holy Prophet gave the three men from the fifth of the spoils which he had the right to administer its half (which belongs to God and to the Messenger and to the relatives of the Messenger)

as he found it in the public interest.

We believe that the Imam 'Ali had what the Messenger had of the right to administer half of the fifth. But the three Caliphs before him had ignored such a right for the duration of their regimes. I do not think that the Imam could have exercised that right without bringing a problem to himself.

Granted that he had the right and the capability of giving the influential individuals from the shares of the appeased ones and that he was able to give them out of the half of the fifth without difficulty. Yet it was difficult to secure the loyalty of the chiefs through the shares of the appeased or through half of the fifth. The time of the Imam was not like the time of the Messenger.

Those whom the Prophet tried to attract to Islam through his gifts were few. The recipients of his gifts whose names are recorded in books of history as far as I could determine do not amount to a hundred. It was possible to satisfy those people with what was less than the eighth of the Zakat or half of the fifty.

The greed of the people did not grow at the time of the Holy Prophet as it grew during the time of the Caliphs. The Holy Prophet gave Abu Sufyan one hundred camels. This was a very huge gift by the measure of the time of the Holy Prophet.

The Islamic State at the time of the Imam became vast and the number of the Muslims went up to millions. The number of chiefs of tribes went up to hundreds and thousands. For the Imam to open upon himself the door of purchasing people's loyalty with money it meant that he had to pay hundreds or thousands of chiefs. To give one chief would inflame the appetite of many other chiefs.

The price of loyalty went up very high. A gift of one chief sometimes reached one hundred thousand dirhams and sometimes hundreds of thousands of dirhams (a dirham is equivalent to \$2.00)

We have mentioned in the twenty-first chapter that Khalid Ibn Oseid (from the Umayyads) came to visit Uthman while heading a delegation. The Caliph gave him three hundred thousand dirhams. He also gave every member of the delegation one hundred thousand. This took place while the Third Caliph was ruling the whole Muslim World without any competitors where he did not need to purchase people's loyalty.

Should the number of the chiefs (who were to be paid for their loyalty) reach one thousand it would have required about one hundred million dirhams. Had the Imam opened on himself the door of gifts the eighth of the Zakat and the half of the fifth would not have been sufficient to satisfy the appetites of the chiefs. Nor would the whole fifth be enough.

We should not forget that the spoils of the war during the time of the Imam were not very abundant because the Islamic revenues were decreased during the years of his reign due to the civil wars.

Furthermore had the Imam wanted to open the door of gifts on himself he would have had to compete with Muawiya for purchasing the loyalty of the chiefs. This meant that he would have had to give most of

the public funds for pleasing the chiefs and deprive the masses of the people of their shares in the public funds. This is what the faith of Islam does not allow nor would Ibn Abu Talib do.

Was it politically sound?

It may be said that the Imam should have done that even if it were not permissible in the faith of Islam under normal circumstances. The Imam had to do that in compliance with the rule of necessity. In other words the Imam had two alternatives.

He had either to observe justice in distributing the public funds then he would lose the caliphate and the Muslims would lose the Righteous Caliphate forever or he would preserve his caliphate and sacrifice justice in distribution of the funds for a few years until he prevails against his opponents and reaches a peaceful time. By this he could preserve for Islam its future and for the Muslims the Righteous Caliphate for a long time.

These two duties were competing with each other. But securing a good future for Islam is more important than observing justice in distribution. It would be forbidden in Islam to give priority to the important above the more important. Why did the Imam give priority to the important above the more important?

It would be easy for a person who does not analyze the events of history and its factors to criticize the policy of the Imam without taking into consideration what the circumstances and the principles of the Imam were dictating at that time.

An objective criticism requires more than this superficial thinking. To try to understand the events which filled the period of the caliphate of the Imam we have to take into consideration the following factors:

The Islamic principles which the Imam was trying to live up to were expected to limit a great deal of his freedom of action.

The hard circumstances which preceded his election had accompanied his reign and continued to escalate the revolution during his era.

In addition to this we ought to consider the unlimited freedom of action which his opponents enjoyed due to their lack of principles.

The Imam was elected after an insane revolution which brought the life of the Third Caliph to an end. The source of the revolution was the policy of the Third Caliph in handling the public funds and preferring his relatives and friends allowing them vast lands and granting them hundreds of thousands and sometimes millions of dirhams from the Islamic treasury.

The rebellious groups were seeking through revolution to reform the situation and to bring the nation

back to its right road and to prevent the minority from enriching itself at the expense of the millions of Muslims. These rebels and those who shared their opinion from among the Muslims were the ones who prepared the election of the Imam.

These rebellious ones were in agreement with the Imam concerning justice in the distribution of the public funds.

They elected the Imam and pledged their loyalty to him on the condition that they would follow the Book of God and the precepts of the Messenger of God. The Imam would not have accepted their election on any other basis. These were the supporters of the truth and the representatives of the reformatory camp of the Muslim World.

Had the Imam reversed his attitude by following a policy of appeasement and purchasing the loyalty of people with public funds he would not have benefited politically. He would rather have lost the unity of his camp at the beginning of his reign and his supporters would have stood away from him as they did from Uthman.

History records that when the Imam appointed Abdullah Ibn Al-Abbas governor of Basra and his brother Obeidullah a governor of Yemen Malik Al-Ashtar with all his loyalty to the Imam said to him "Why did we kill the old man yesterday?"

He meant that the revolution which brought the life of Uthman to an end was caused by his policy of preference. 8 What would be the attitude of Al-Ashtar and others like him if the Imam had tried to purchase the loyalty of the chiefs of the tribes through public funds.

The majority of those who opposed him later from among his followers after the war of Siffin were not from the people of selfish interests. The Seceders who opposed him after the war of Siffin were the most remote people from materialism. They were radical immaterialists and excessive in keeping away from all selfish interests.

They were enemies of the policy of appeasement and of purchasing loyalty. Their excessiveness is what made them antagonize the Imam and fight him.

Of course there were among the followers of the Imam some hypocrites such as Ashaath. Yet it is not substantiated that the resentment of these people towards the Imam and their conspiracy with his enemy against him was the result of their materialism.

It is not substantiated that the Imam was able to purchase the loyalty of these people by gifts or bribery. In fact many were working with the Imam's opponents for no materialistic gain or a position they were seeking or wanted. They were doing that only because their sympathy was with his opponents. Take for example Abu Musa Al-Ashari whom the Imam appointed governor of Kufa the most important province in the Islamic State. He was able to preserve his position for the duration of the Imam's caliphate by co-

operating with him.

He chose to stand against the Imam and tried to prevent people from supporting him though he knew that this would put his own position in jeopardy. This shows that he did not oppose him for a material gain nor for a position. He did that only because he disliked the Imam and liked his opponents.

I think that the attitude and motives of Ashaath and others like him towards the Imam were like the attitude and motives of Abu Musa towards the Imam. However the Imam was not able to purchase the loyalty of Ashaath and others even if their loyalty was for sale. It was not possible for the Imam as a man of principle or a flexible statesman to purchase their loyalty.

Many companions and sincere followers of Islam would have opposed him and he would have expedited the hostility of the extremists such as the leaders who became Seceders later for reasons much less than the mismanagement or embezzlement of public funds.

Ashaath by himself would not have been able to bring the war of Siffin to its end if he did not have the support of extremist readers who later became Seceders. Only through their support he was able to do damage to the Imam and the Muslim world though Ashaath and the Seceders had different motives behind the attitude which they shared. The religious fanaticism of these leaders made them consider the rejection of the invitation to the Holy Qur'an a great sin and this attitude gave Ashaath the effectiveness which brought the Battle of Siffin to its saddening end.

Thus an objective look at the circumstances which preceded the election of the Imam and the foundation on which his election was based and the elements of which his supporters were composed would prove that the policy which he followed in distributing the public funds was not only righteous but also the wisest course he could take.

Thus the principles for which he lived and endeavored and the circumstances which surrounded him dictated the same policy which he chose.

Had the Imam followed what these critics suggested he would have lost politically and militarily and the Islamic history would have lost the only example of the idealism which was embodied in the person of the Imam.

- 1. Taha Hussein Al-Fitna tul-Kubra part 1 p. 77.
- 2. Ibn Hisham Al-Seerah Al-Nabaweyah (Biography of the Prophet) part 2 pp.493-494...
- 3. Ibn Al-Athir Al-Kamil part 3 p. 102.
- 4. Taha Hussein Al-Fitna tul-Kubra part 2 p.77.
- 5. Taha Hussein Al-Fitna tul-Kubra part 2 p.77.
- 6. Al-BaladhuriAnsab Al-Ashraf part 1 of volume 4 p.75.
- 7. Taha Hussein Al-Fitna tul-Kubra part 1 p. 193.
- 8. Taha Russein Al-Fitna tul-Kubra part 2 p. 53.

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