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Ali and the Ideals of Freedom and Liberty

If in the *Umma* of Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, Ali was the greatest apostle of peace, he was, without a doubt, also the greatest defender in it of the freedom and liberty of the individual.

In the selection of a leader for the Muslims, Ali had been bypassed thrice but by a supreme irony, it was with him that they found the privilege, for the first time and for the last time in their entire history, to freely choose their own leader, and they chose him. In choosing Ali, they were unconsciously choosing the guarantor of their own freedom.

As noted before, when the Muhajireen and the Ansar in Medina insisted that Ali should take charge of the government, and he agreed to do so, he declared that no one was under any obligation or under any pressure to take the oath of loyalty to him. Therefore, all those men who took the oath of loyalty to him, did so voluntarily.

But there were many people in Medina who not only withheld their pledge of loyalty to Ali but also began to leave Medina. Ali made no attempt to stop them. When his attention was drawn to their departure, he said that under his rule everyone was free to live in Medina or to leave it, and that he was not going to force anyone to live or to leave. His enemies wanted to leave Medina and he let them leave, and he did not ask them any questions.

Most of the companions of the Prophet who were in Medina, had taken the oath of allegiance to Ali. Among them were Talha and Zubayr. They had hoped that Ali would make them governors of Kufa and Basra. But Ali selected other men for those two positions whereupon both of them left Medina with the intent of breaking their solemn pledge. Ali let them go.

This policy of "laissez-faire" is in sharp contrast with the policy of Umar bin al-Khattab, the second khalifa, who had forbidden the principal companions of the Prophet, especially the Muhajireen, to accompany his armies into Persia or Syria or Egypt, and had ordered them to stay in Medina, much to their chagrin.

He had done so ostensibly because of his fear that they would exploit their influence and prestige which they enjoyed as companions of the Prophet, if they were allowed to go into the newly-conquered provinces. The companions, as yet, had not done anything to exploit their influence. But Umar presumed that they would, and on grounds of this presumption, restricted their freedom of movement.

Ali did not detain Talha and Zubayr in Medina on grounds of his presumption that they nursed treason in their hearts against the state, which both of them did.

A few months later, Ayesha, Talha and Zubayr, rose in rebellion against Ali, and marched on Basra. But Ali still did not use any "strong-arm" methods to bring them into line. He had to take up their challenge but he preferred to do so without using his powers of state.

In the first place, Ali did not conscript anyone. He went into the Great Mosque of Medina, and told the Muslims about the insurrection of Ayesha, Talha and Zubayr. He appealed to them to support him in maintaining peace in Dar–ul–Islam, and in protecting the integrity of the state. He also reminded them that they had given him their pledge to obey him in peace and in war. But there was no answer. He renewed his appeal on the second day and the third and the fourth.

After many days, only seven hundred men responded to Ali's appeal, and it was with this tiny force that he left Medina. At no time did he try to dragoon anyone into his army. All those men who fought on his side were volunteers.

In the second place, Ali gave amnesty to the citizens of Basra though they had merited the penalty for treason. He, in fact, did not even make them prisoners when they were defeated in battle. He thus allowed his friends as well as his foes to enjoy the blessing of freedom.

Ali's refusal to arrest those men in Medina who did not give him their pledge of loyalty, his permission to Talha and to Zubayr to leave Medina, and his amnesty to the rebels of Basra, are an eloquent testimony to his resolve to uphold the ideals of freedom and liberty.

Ali proved that in the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth, freedom and liberty were not some remote and shadowy ideals to be cherished by the Muslims but were their right, and that they were not to live like prisoners in any sense of the term. Curtailed freedom is incompatible with the privilege of citizenship of the Kingdom of Heaven. Whoever was admitted to the Kingdom of Heaven was emancipated; he became free and remained free.

When Ali took charge of the government, the Muslim *umma* was in a state of anomie. Its ruling classes had reached a state of undreamed–of affluence, and the ultimate arrogance of power. He realized that the social, economic and political order of the state called for a restructuring of government and society. But his attempt to restructure government and society was resented by the rich and the powerful, and their resentment erupted in the battles of Basra and Siffin, as noted before.

A third group which declared its opposition to Ali's policy of reform, was made up of the Kharjis. They wished to achieve their aims through violent revolution and upheaval. They made it obvious that they would not let Ali restore efficiency, integrity and strength to the government through peaceful and systematic means.

The Kharjis abused the freedoms that Ali gave to the Muslims. They not only criticized his policies but also questioned his faith itself. But he did not try to stifle them. He tolerated their most intemperate and stinging criticism as long as they did not disrupt peace, and did not imperil the security of other Muslims.

Ali left error of opinion to be tolerated if reason was left free to fight it. But the Kharjis took every advantage of their freedoms, and began to spread anarchy, lawlessness and terror in the land. It was only when they passed beyond the threats of killing law-abiding citizens, and actually killed many of them, that Ali was compelled to move against them to check their excesses.

The city of Kufa, Ali's capital, was open to the Kharjis and to his other enemies. They enjoyed as much freedom as his friends did. They lived in Kufa, or they came in and went out as they pleased. Ali never placed any of them under surveillance.

All subjects of the Islamic State – men, women and children – were paid a stipend from the State Treasury. The Khawarij collected their share same as other citizens. Ali and his officers never made any attempt to make them affable, docile and pliant through economic pressure. They remained hard-boiled enemies of state and society committed to subvert both. Eventually one of them killed him.

Yet through it all, even in the darkest moments, Ali never allowed adverse fortunes to obliterate the ideals of freedom and liberty from the psyche of the *umma* of Muhammad. Freedom and liberty remained for him sacrosanct, indestructible, and indomitable, like his own faith in the ultimate and inevitable triumph of Justice and Truth.

Perhaps nothing is easier than to sing the praises of freedom and liberty but Ali is the only statesman in the whole world who paid his tributes to them, not in rhetoric, but in palpable deeds. No ruler in world history ever gave more freedom to his subjects – friends and foes alike – than Ali!

The freedom which he gave to his subjects first cost him victory in the battle of Siffin, and then cost him his own life. But it appears that in his opinion, their freedom was a most precious entity, and he did not begrudge the price he had to pay to preserve it.

Ali's reign was a new dispensation for the human race, and a new hope for humanity. Never again, in their history, the Muslims and the non–Muslims were ever to enjoy such freedom and liberty as they did during the caliphate of Ali ibn Abi Talib!

Ali and his Legacy

Ali had contempt for wealth and ostentation; he had respect for the individual; and he had faith in the ultimate power of reason if left unfettered by myth or privilege. He was an enemy of privilege, and he fought against it all his life.

As the true guardian of Islam, Ali kept his eye only on the interests of Islam. If he had to sacrifice his life to protect the interests of Islam, he did so gladly. On the night of the Migration of his master, Muhammad, from Makkah to Medina, he slept in the jaws of death. From that day, his life was consecrated to the service of Muhammad and the defense of Islam.

In studying Ali and his career, three principal components become obvious. The first is his character, which is almost universally acknowledged to be one of the loftiest. In person and in office, he stood behind the ideals and the principles that are codified in the Qur'an. The record of his caliphate shows that his ideals and principles are a challenge to every generation of the Muslims: equality for all people; freedom, inviolable even in times of war and "national" emergency; peaceful human progress, through personal opportunity and the help of the institutions of the government. He, thus, represented the ultimate triumph of character and ideology.

The second is Ali's achievements as a military leader. He was an inspired general whose humanity astonished everyone. He led the Muslims in battle with superb skill, intuition, forbearance and clemency. He alone succeeded, among all the sovereigns, in blending the idealism and the philosophy of Islam with the strategy and tactics of politics and war.

The third is the extent to which Ali's conduct and moral influence made a contribution to the welfare and greatness of the Muslims. He taught them that the means to achieve an end were just as sacrosanct as the ends themselves, and that the means no less than the ends, had to be beyond any question. He clearly was concerned with the most fundamental things.

The ideal Islamic society is the one in which the people and their rulers obey the law of God. Ali's aim, therefore, was to induct the masses into the ranks of those people who obey that law. By doing so, he extended the range of the ethos of Islam, and strengthened its bases.

Ali presented to the Muslim *umma* the same symmetry of character as his master and leader, Muhammad, had done before him; and both of them demonstrated the same ability and the same moral fortitude of successfully meeting the most cruel tests and challenges with which victory and adversity alike confronted them.

The spirit of making sacrifice for duty and principle, is the heritage of all the apostles of God. The same spirit is the "legacy" of Ali ibn Abi Talib to the *umma* of Muhammad Mustafa. May God bless both of them and their families.

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