

Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Fourth Caliph of the Muslims

Ali belonged to the clan of banu hashim, the most distinguished clan in all Arabia; and in Banu Hashim, he belonged to the most distinguished family – the family of Abdul Muttalib. Abdul Muttalib had ten sons. Two of them were Abdullah, the father of Muhammad Mustafa, and Abu Talib, the father of Ali. Abdullah and Abu Talib were the children of the same mother whereas their other brothers were born of the other wives of their father.

Ali's mother, Fatima, also belonged to the clan of Hashim. She was the daughter of Asad the son of Hashim. Asad and Abdul Muttalib were brothers. She was thus the first cousin of Abdullah and Abu Talib.

Ali's mother, Fatima bint Asad, was the second woman in all Arabia to accept Islam, the first being Khadija.

Fatima bint Asad was the foster-mother of Muhammad Mustafa, the Messenger of God. She brought him up as her own son, and in fact, loved him more than her own children, and he called her his mother.

Ali's father, Abu Talib, was the Defender of Islam, and he was the Protector and Guardian of Muhammad. He supported Islam and Muhammad consistently, and he was undaunted in the face of opposition and threats from the pagans.

Both in Makkah and Medina, Muhammad Mustafa declared that Ali was his brother in this world and in the Hereafter.

Ali was the victor of the battle of Badr. He alone killed half the number of all the Makkans who were killed in that battle.

Muhammad Mustafa, the Apostle of God, gave his only daughter, Fatima Zahra, in marriage to Ali. God blessed this marriage with children. Those children were God's most devout servants. Their greatest

pleasure in life was to wait upon their Lord.

In the battle of Uhud, most of the Muslims fled from the battlefield. One who did not flee, was Ali. He saved the life of his master, Muhammad, that day.

At the siege of Medina, Ali killed Amr bin Abd Wudd, and thereby saved Medina from being overrun, and its people from being massacred.

Ali captured Khyber. With Khyber's conquest, Islam became a state with territory. Until the conquest of Khyber, Islam was only a city-state, confined to the walls of Medina.

Ali was the secretary who indicted the Treaty of Hudaibiyya.

When Makkah capitulated to the Prophet, Ali rode his shoulders, and smashed the idols in the Kaaba. He and his master, Muhammad, purified the House of God for all time by removing all vestiges of idolatry and polytheism from it. In this manner, Ali collaborated with Muhammad, the Messenger of God, from beginning to end, in constructing the framework of the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth.

In the battle of Hunayn, the Muslims fled once again. Ali put himself between the Apostle and the pagan warriors who wanted to kill him. He fought against them until the Muslims rallied.

In October 630 (9 A.H.) the Apostle led an expedition to Tabuk, and he appointed Ali his viceroy in Medina.

Among all the companions of the Prophet, Ali was the most knowledgeable. He had thorough knowledge of the Qur'an, and its interpretation. He was the best of all judges, and he was the most eloquent orator of the Arabs.

Just before his death, the Prophet equipped and organized an expedition to Syria, and he appointed Usama bin Zayd bin Haritha, its general. With the exception of Ali, he ordered all the Muhajireen to serve under Usama. Ali was to stay with him in Medina.

In the defence of Islam, it was Ali's family which offered the greatest sacrifices. Obaidullah ibn al-Harith who was killed in the battle of Badr, and was the first martyr of Islam in the battlefield, was his first cousin. Mas'ab ibn Umayr and Hamza were killed in the battle of Uhud, and both of them were his uncles. Jafar Tayyar who was killed in the battle of Mootah was his elder brother.

When Muhammad Mustafa died, Ali performed his obsequies, and gave him burial. He knew what the other companions were doing when he was busy with these duties but he did not allow anything to distract him. He kept his duty ahead of his interests, and his principles ahead of politics.

Edward Gibbon

“The birth, the alliance, the character of Ali, which exalted him above the rest of his countrymen, might

justify his claim to the vacant throne of Arabia. The son of Abu Talib was, in his own right, the chief of the family of Hashem, and the hereditary prince or guardian of the city and temple of Mecca. The light of prophecy was extinct; but the husband of Fatima might expect the inheritance and blessings of her father; the Arabs had sometimes been patient of a female reign; and the two grandsons of the Prophet had often been fondled in his lap, and shown in his pulpit, as the hope of his age, and the Chiefs of the Youth of Paradise.

The first of the true believers might aspire to march before them in this world and in the next; and if some were of a graver and more rigid cast, the zeal and virtue of Ali were never outstripped by any recent proselyte. He united the qualifications of a poet, a soldier, and a saint: his wisdom still breathes in a collection of moral and religious sayings; and every antagonist, in the combats of the tongue or of the sword, was subdued by his eloquence and valor.

From the first hour of his mission to the last rites of his funeral, the Apostle was never forsaken by a generous friend, whom he delighted to name his brother, his vicegerent, and the faithful Aaron of a second Moses. The son of Abu Talib was afterwards reproached for neglecting to secure his interests by a solemn declaration of his right, which would have silenced all competition, and sealed his succession by the decrees of Heaven.

But the unsuspecting hero confided in himself: the jealousy of empire, and perhaps the fear of opposition, might suspend the resolutions of Mohammed; and the bed of sickness was besieged by the artful Ayesha, the daughter of Abu Bakr and the enemy of Ali.

The hereditary claims and lofty spirit of Ali were offensive to an aristocracy of elders, desirous of bestowing and resuming the scepter by a free and frequent election; the Koreish could never be reconciled to the proud pre-eminence of the line of Hashem.” (*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*)

The foregoing characterization is correct in general but some statements in it need qualification.

Gibbon has erred in stating that Ali did not secure his interests by a solemn declaration of his right by the Prophet. The Prophet had made such a declaration, not once but many times, as noted before.

The historian has also spoken of the Prophet's “fear of opposition.” The Prophet had no fear of anyone. He had overcome much more formidable enemies than those whose opposition could “frighten” him in his hour of triumph.

Gibbon further speaks of “a free and frequent election.” The aristocracy of elders was desirous of bestowing and resuming the scepter but only to itself, and not by a free and frequent election. Abu Bakr's accession to the throne was an “improvisation,” and Umar was the “king-maker” in his case. When Abu Bakr was dying, he appointed Umar as his successor by a fiat. In doing so, he dispensed with the farce of election. Umar, before his death, formed a panel of six electors, and restricted the choice of khalifa to

it. No one outside this panel could be chosen as khalifa.

The only election which was really free was that of Ali ibn Abi Talib. He was elected in the first and the last free election ever in the entire history of Islam.

Lastly, Gibbon says that Koreish could never be reconciled to the proud pre-eminence of the line of Hashem. He is right. But the same Koreish who could not be reconciled to the proud pre-eminence of the line of Hashem, were very eager to be reconciled to the proud pre-eminence of the line of the erstwhile idol-worshippers and the usurers of Makkah. In their eagerness to be reconciled to the latter, the Koreish who had resumed the scepter earlier, now bestowed it upon them.

[The Restoration of the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth – \(The Caliphate of Ali ibn Abi Talib\)](#)

After the murder of Uthman, fear and panic seized the companions of the Prophet. The members of Umar's electoral committee retreated into the safety of anonymity. The fate of Uthman had struck terror into their hearts. The whole country was seething with agitation, and no one, no matter how daring and ambitious, was willing to put his neck into the loop by accepting the responsibility of running the government. It was a responsibility fraught with the gravest perils.

But something had to be done. The vessel of Islam could not be left adrift for long, and a firm hand had to be found to keep it on an even keel.

Twelve years of misgovernment had shaken the Muslims out of their long slumber and smudginess. Now they realized that the leadership of the community ought to be in the hands of a man who would put public interest ahead of the interests of his own family. Therefore, as soon as Uthman died, all eyes turned to Ali. The companions of the Prophet could not think of anyone else who had the ability and the grit to put an end to graft in the government and to anarchy in the land, and to restore peace, and law and order to the Dar-ul-Islam which was battered by economic and social conflict, and was buffeted by a rapid succession of traumas.

All the leading Muhajireen and Ansar, therefore, gathered in the Mosque of the Prophet, and agreed, at a caucus, to ask Ali to take charge of the government, and to steer the ship of state to safety. A delegation then called on Ali, and requested him to accept this responsibility.

Tabari says in his *History* that the Muhajireen and the Ansar almost mobbed Ali. They told him that the *umma* was without a leader, and the government was without a head, and that he, i.e., Ali, alone was the most *qualified* person to fill the position, not only because of his propinquity with Muhammad Mustafa, the Messenger of God, but also because of his personal qualities and his services to Islam.

It was the first time since the death of the Apostle of God that it occurred to anyone in Medina that there

was such a thing as a “qualification” to be a caliph. In the past the question of qualification had been shelved each time a new ruler had to be found.

Umar made Abu Bakr khalifa because the latter was the oldest of the companions. Abu Bakr reciprocated Umar's gesture by choosing him as his successor. Uthman was chosen khalifa because he was rich and weak.

Ali, however, did not accept the offer of the companions, and said that he preferred to be an adviser rather than the caliph.

But the companions also did not accept Ali's refusal, and said:

“No man has given more distinguished service to Islam, nor is anyone closer to Muhammad than you. We consider you to be the worthiest of all men to be our Khalifa.” (*Tarikh Kamil, Vol. III, p. 98, Ibn Atheer*)

Ali still did not agree, and the companions still persisted, and said:

“We appeal to you in the name of God to accept the caliphate. Don't you see the state of the umma? Don't you see new perils rising everywhere in the lands of Islam? Who will check them if not you?” (*Tarikh Kamil, Vol. III, p. 99, Ibn Atheer*)

But Ali was unmistakably cool to the idea of accepting the caliphate. It was not a conventional coolness but was the result of long and sober reflection.

In the past, on one occasion, “ambition” had cost Ali the throne of Arabia. Umar had remarked that he would have appointed Ali as ruler of the Muslims if he (Ali) had not been too “ambitious.” Umar spoke as if to be ambitious was something reprehensible. His remark also presupposed that he himself and some others had become khalifas without any ambition.

Perhaps the khilafat was something that had been forced upon them much against their will; and they had no choice but to accept the burden of its responsibility!

Since Umar and Abu Bakr had no ambition, both of them, and Abu Obaida ibn al-Jarrah, all three, must have been either driven or dragged into the outhouse of Saqifa!

The reception by Ali of the request of the companions to accept the khilafat, would suggest that he had, at last, said farewell to ambition. In the past, he had never missed an opportunity to draw public attention to the primacy of his own rights, and to the justice of his case. He believed that it was his inherent right to become the first successor of the Apostle of God. This right was not something that other people could “give” him, even though they could take it away from him, and they did.

The keystone in the policy of the government of Saqifa, as noted before, was to debar Ali and the Banu

Hashim from the caliphate. In this its first two incumbents were successful. The third incumbent, however, was killed in the midst of a breakdown of law and order, and he did not have the time to appoint his own successor. But if he had lived, he would have, without a doubt, appointed his son-in-law, Marwan, or his cousin, Muawiya, his successor.

Ali was bypassed on three successive occasions in the past. But now, after the death of Uthman, the Muslims felt that they were, for the first time, really free to elect or select a caliph for themselves, and their choice for the position was Ali. A coincidence of events had, at last, brought the long-sought caliphate within his reach.

But to everyone's surprise, Ali was not showing any eagerness to grasp it. Why?

Actually, Ali's desire to become caliph was not prompted by ambition as Umar had claimed even though there is nothing wrong in being ambitious. Ali wanted to become caliph because he knew that he and he alone had the ability to steer the vessel of Islam on the same course which the Apostle of God had charted for it. Other people, he knew, lacked this ability.

The institution of khilafat which was the legacy of Muhammad, the Messenger of God, and which, therefore, ought to have been the symbol of the moral and spiritual authority of Islam to the rest of the world, had become, instead, in the course of the quarter-century since his death, the symbol of undiluted materialism and naked imperialism. Profound changes had taken place in the lifestyle of the Muslims.

Instead of imitating the pure and austere life of Muhammad, most of them imitated alien lifestyles. What propelled them now, was not the ideals of Islam but the lust to become rich and powerful at any cost. The pristine simplicity and the egalitarianism of the times of the Prophet of Islam, had become demoted. The quality of the life of the *umma* had visibly declined.

Ali knew all this better than anyone else. He had kept his finger on the pulse of the Muslim *umma*, and he had monitored its progress or its lack of progress in all directions.

Ali also knew that the caliphate was no longer something that one could take with "its roses and its thorns." The roses were all gone; and all that was left, were the thorns. Accepting the caliphate now would only mean wearing a crown of those thorns.

In 656 the caliphate was little more than a legacy of turbulence and deficits.

Ali figured that if he accepted the caliphate, there would be two courses open before him, and he would have to adopt one of them. One course would be to follow the drift of events; to acquiesce in the general moral decline; to connive at the corruption and rapacity of the provincial governors; to give the bureaucracy a free hand in exploiting and oppressing the *umma*; and to tolerate the anti-Islamic and neo-pagan practices of the new aristocracy. But such a course is repugnant to Islam, and therefore, was

even more repugnant to him.

The second course for Ali, was to accept the challenge of the whole world that would inevitably array itself against him, and to fight against it regardless of consequences as long as it disobeyed the commandments of God. If he did, he would only be imitating his late friend and master, Muhammad.

The latter had also challenged the whole world and had fought against it regardless of consequences when he had first proclaimed his mission. Ali knew that if he accepted the caliphate, the new Arab aristocracy would challenge him, and his reign would begin with a civil war. A civil war is not an auspicious beginning but what was the alternative for him?

The choice before Ali was not between winning the civil war if there was one, or not fighting at all; it was instead, between what is right and what is wrong; between truthfulness and deception; between adherence to principle and pursuit of *realpolitik*. He wanted to rebuild the infrastructure of the Islamic society or rather to restore the infrastructure just as it was in the times of the Apostle of God but he realized that he could do this only in the teeth of most determined opposition from the Quraysh.

Ali considered all this, and then wishing not to inaugurate his caliphate with a civil war, turned down the request of the companions to become the khalifa of the Muslims.

The author of the book *Kitab-ul-Imama was-Siyassa* gives the following account of these events:

When the delegation of the Muhajireen and the Ansar called on Ali and requested him to accept the khilafat, he refused. The delegation returned to the Mosque and reported its failure to the companions who were present there. But the latter said, "When the news of the murder of Uthman reaches the other parts of the empire, no one will pause to ask if a new khalifa has been elected or not, and the anarchy which now is confined to Medina, will spread to all the provinces.

There is only one way to check lawlessness from spreading, and that is to compel Ali to become caliph. Therefore, go back to him, and insist upon his taking charge of the government, and do not return until he agrees to do so. In this way, the news of the death of Uthman and the accession of Ali to the throne, will travel together to every part of the Dar-ul-Islam, and the situation will remain under control."

The delegation returned to see Ali, and this time, its members went beyond customary entreaties. They said that the Muslim umma was in an impasse, and if he didn't extricate it, he would be answerable to God and His Messenger for it. Would he abandon the umma of Muhammad in the impasse, they asked. This new wrinkle seemed to work. But being aware of the massive opposition to himself of the Quraysh, Ali was still lukewarm in accepting the proposal. He, therefore, hedged his acceptance with conditions of his own, and said to the delegates:

"I have perfect knowledge and understanding of the Book of God, and of the practices and precedents of His Messenger. In ruling the Muslim umma, I shall put their commandments and prohibitions before

everything else. I shall not show any flexibility in this matter. I shall take charge of the government only if this condition is acceptable to you. If it is, and the Muslims are willing to take the oath of allegiance to me, then tell them to assemble in the Mosque of the Prophet.” The delegation was ready to accept any conditions, and readily agreed to abide by Ali's terms.

(Kitab-ul-Imama was-Siyassa)

After the death of Umar, his confidante, Abdur Rahman bin Auf, had offered khilafat to Ali on condition that he would give a pledge to follow the policy and the regulations of Abu Bakr and Umar. Ali refused to give any pledge, and kicked at the offer made by Abdur Rahman bin Auf.

Now the same khilafat was being offered to him once again but without any conditions. In fact, it was he (Ali) who was placing conditions upon acceptance by him of the offer being made by the Muslim umma.

Ali told the companions that he would not defer to their judgment; instead, they would have to defer to his judgment if they insisted on his taking charge of the government. And he added that they – the Muslims – would have to give him unquestioning obedience – in peace and in war. They agreed. Their agreement was the victory of principle. The Muslim umma had, at length, surrendered to Ali's principles!

The umma of Muhammad, the blessed Messenger of God, in quest of security and salvation, had “drafted” Ali ibn Abi Talib to reverse the drift toward anarchy and chaos in Dar-ul-Islam. Tabari, the historian, says that Ali was “drafted” on Thursday. The citizens of Medina were very happy with their success in “drafting” him, and they said that they would offer their Friday prayer with their new caliph.

“Why not the best?” was the question in the mind of the Muslim umma when it “drafted” Ali as the caliph of Islam. When it was at last free to choose, it chose, instinctively and inevitably, *the very best*. Also, when the Muslim umma was insisting that Ali should occupy the highest position in Islam, it was unconsciously spurning all “the gluttons of privilege” who were infesting Dar-ul-Islam.

On Friday, 18th of Dhil-Hajj, 35 A.H. (June 17, 656), Ali ibn Abi Talib entered the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina, and walked to the pulpit through the crowd of the Muslims. The crowd sat in an expectant mood, the currents of excitement flashing through it, and it appeared to heave convulsively. There was an almost palpable sense of tension and renewal in the “national” spirit of the Muslims.

Ali held a bow in his hand, and he leaned against the pulpit as the Muslims began to take the oath of allegiance to him. Between him and them, it was “an open covenant openly arrived at,” and there was nothing clandestine about it. Most of the Muhajireen and the Ansar who were in Medina, gave him their pledge of loyalty.

Ibn Hajar Makki writes in his famous book *al-Sawa'iq al-Muhriqah*:

“The veterans of Badr said (to Ali): ‘No one is more worthy of khilafat than you. Put out your hand so that we may give you our pledge of loyalty.’¹ And they gave him the pledge of their loyalty.”

It was the first time, and the last time, in the history of Islam, that a ruler was not foisted upon the Muslims. They chose their own ruler, and their choice was spontaneous. Neither force, nor the threat of the use of force, nor pressure nor bribes, nor double talk, were employed in his election.

There was no hysteria to grab power. Everyone was free to give or to withhold his pledge. Ali himself was accepting the pledges almost mechanically, lost as he was in the reverie of the times of his master, Muhammad, when he was accepting the pledges of the Quraysh just after the conquest of Makkah in 630.

Edward Gibbon

A tumultuous anarchy of five days was appeased by the inauguration of Ali; his refusal would have provoked a general massacre. In this painful situation he supported the becoming pride of the chief of the Hashemites; declared that he had rather serve than reign; rebuked the presumption of the strangers; and required the formal if not the voluntary assent of the chiefs of the nation. (*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*)

Talha and Zubayr were the first of the companions of the Prophet to take the oath of allegiance to the new caliph. The Muhajireen and the Ansar were the next. They were followed by the commoners. The first non-companion who took the oath of allegiance to Ali, was Malik ibn Ashter, the most famous swordsman of Arabia.

Hudhaifa ibn al-Yamani was one of the leading companions of Muhammad. He was living in Kufa and was confined to bed with a protracted sickness. When he heard the news of the accession of Ali to the throne, he asked to be taken to the great mosque of Kufa. When the Muslims gathered to say prayers, he ascended the pulpit and read the sermon (khutba). He thanked God for His blessings, and he invoked His blessings upon His Messenger, Muhammad, and upon the members of his family, and said:

“O Muslims! I have received news that in Medina, Ali ibn Abi Talib has been elected the successor of the Messenger of God. I call upon you to give your pledge of loyalty to him because he is with Truth and Truth is with him, and next to the Prophet himself, he is the best of all those who have been created or will ever be created.”

Hudhaifa then symbolically placed his right hand on his left hand, and said: “O Lord! Be Thou a Witness that I have taken the oath of allegiance to Ali, my new caliph. Accept my thanks that Thou hast given me enough time to see him become the sovereign of the *umma* of Muhammad, Thy Apostle.”

Hudhaifa was taken back to his home, and a few days later he died. He was one of the most trusted and most beloved friends of Muhammad Mustafa.

The Ansar, in general, had shown very great enthusiasm in bringing Ali to the throne but among them there were some men who withheld their pledge of loyalty from him. They were:

Zayd bin Thabit

Hassan bin Thabit

Kaab bin Malik

Abu Saeed Khudri

Muhammad bin Maslama

Nu'man bin Bashir

Rafa' bin Khudajj

Maslama bin Mukhalid

Kaab bin 'Arja

Among the Makkans, the following companions did not take the pledge of loyalty to Ali:

Abdullah bin Umar bin al-Khattab

Saad bin Abi Waqqas

Mughira bin Shaaba

Abdullah bin Salam

Qadama bin Ma'azoon

Suhaib bin Sinan

Wahban bin Saifi

Usama bin Zayd bin Haritha

When Ali's attention was drawn to those men who had not given him their pledge of loyalty, he said that loyalty was not something that could be obtained by force. To be meaningful, he said, it had to be voluntary. Later, it was reported to him that the same men were quietly slipping out of Medina. Ali made no attempt to stop them. He said that under his rule, everyone was free to stay in Medina or to leave it, and that he himself was not going to force anyone to stay or to leave. His political opponents all left Medina, and most of them went to Syria or to Makkah.

(A few months later, the battle of Basra or the battle of the Camel was fought. Abdullah bin Umar bin al-Khattab and Saad bin Abi Waqqas declared their neutrality in it. Theirs was a moral neutrality over issues of right and wrong though they knew who was right and who was wrong. Some others also

claimed that they were “non-aligned,” but they were “non-aligned” in favor of Ali's enemies).

Yaqoobi, the historian, says that after the inauguration, Sa'sa'a ibn Sauhan 'Abidi, a companion, said to Ali:

“By God, you have brought honor and glory to the khilafat. Khilafat has not brought honor and glory to you. You have elevated it by accepting it; it has not elevated you. You didn't need it; it needed you.”

Another historian, Khatib Baghdadi, has quoted Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal as saying:

“Khilafat was not an ornament for Ali; he was an ornament for khilafat.”

Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal put the whole truth in a nutshell. Ali was indeed the ornament and glory of khilafat.

Presently, the *Muezzin* called *adhan* for the Friday prayer. Ali, the new caliph, led the congregation. After the prayer, he delivered the inaugural speech. He began his address by praising God, and by thanking Him for His countless and uncountable blessings and mercies one of which was that He had restored his (Ali's) right to him. He invoked God's blessings upon Muhammad Mustafa, and upon the members of his family, and then said:

“O Muslims! You have given me your pledge of loyalty, and I know that you have not done so without forethought. Yet, your aims and my aims in the tasks lying ahead of us, may not necessarily be the same. I want to mobilize you for obedience and service to God; but many among you are hoping that I will give them rich estates or high ranks in the government. This is something that will not happen.

“Remember that there are two ways of life; the right and the wrong. Some of you will adopt the right way and others the wrong. You are free to choose. But if you see that a majority has adopted the wrong way, do not be dismayed or surprised by it. It has often been like that, and the world is full of paradoxes. But Justice and Truth will triumph in the end even if at a given moment they may appear to be on the defensive.

“Verily, when God sent Muhammad as His Messenger to this world, there was not a single soul in all Arabia who knew anything about guidance and rectitude. He led the Arabs out of the wilderness of sin and iniquity until they saw the light of guidance, and found the road to eternal salvation. I was by his side from the beginning of his mission to its end, and I fought against disobedience to God all my life. I never felt weary of the struggle nor I was ever dismayed by the opposition of the guardians and champions of the pre-Islamic order, no matter how formidable it was.

“O Muslims! I call upon you to assist me in my program of reconstruction. God is a Witness to my statement that my paramount objective is to restore justice in Dar-ul-Islam, just as it is His wish that I do so. I shall not rest until I have destroyed injustice. Listen to this with attention: I shall not transgress the bounds of the Book of God for anything. I will not be partial to anyone whoever he may be. In my sight,

all of you are equal. I shall promulgate the Laws of God which are enshrined in His Book, and I shall do so in the light of the precedents only of His Apostle, Muhammad, the blessed one.

“My mission today is the same as it was in the times of the Messenger of God, Muhammad; may God bless him and his family, and it's to establish or to reestablish the Kingdom of God on this earth.”

In these words, Ali expressed the policy of his government. He defined his aims, and explained how he would realize them. He focused on refurbishing the highest office in Islam, and he outlined the principles of his political philosophy.

The men of perception could sense that Ali's government was going to be very different from the governments of the past, not only in style, expression and emphasis, but also in character, substance and philosophy. They sensed that there was going to be an absolute and qualitative difference between them. They knew that he would check the erosion and corrosion of private and public standards of morality. His accession to the throne, therefore, was not welcome to the guardians of a social system the underpinnings of which were privilege and force, and laxity and license.

Astoundingly, it appeared as if history was going to repeat itself. In Makkah, Muhammad Mustafa was confronted by the guardians of a social system which rested upon privilege, force and exploitation. When he tried to change that system, its guardians challenged him. Their challenge led to armed conflict. Now Ali was confronted with the same system, and his attempt to change it, was also going to end in armed conflict with its guardians.

On the other hand, Ali's accession to the throne was very welcome to another class of people – the one composed of the poor, the destitute, the disabled, the powerless, the exploited, and those who lived in fear and terror. The members of this class knew, as if by instinct, that Ali would give them freedom from fear and poverty. They knew too that given the opportunity, Ali would work on the whole ecology of Muslim society, and would change it. The rhythm, the lilt and the tenor of his speeches lighted little candles of new hope and new idealism in their hearts, and they could foresee that he would revive the political heritage of Muhammad, the Apostle of God, in his government.

The State of the Umma at Ali's Accession to the Throne

When Ali took the reins of the government in his hands, he was confronted with a most alarming situation. The whole country was seething with agitation, and his enemies swarmed everywhere like hornets. Two modern Pakistani historians, Professor Sayed Abdul Qadir and Professor Muhammad Shuja-ud-Din, have summed up the state of the Dar-ul-Islam in 656 as follows:

Muslims were no longer united. They had split into many camps. Most Muslims put their own interests ahead of the collective interests of the umma.

The recent conquests had delivered into the hands of the Muslims the immense wealth of two of the

richest empires of the world – the Persian and the Roman. Everyone wanted a share out of this bonanza, and tried to grab all that one could. In the ruthless quest for money, most Muslims quietly put aside the ideals of Islam as if they were irrelevant.

Though Talha and Zubayr, two of the most powerful companions, were the first to take the oath of allegiance to Ali, they were also the first to repudiate it. By breaking their pledge, they pushed the umma into civil war.

Muawiya was Uthman's governor in Syria. The rebellion of Talha and Zubayr against the lawful authority in Medina, encouraged him also to defy it. Ali invited him to give his pledge of loyalty to him but he refused, and instead, demanded from him (from Ali) action against the murderers of Uthman. Muawiya had little interest in Uthman, but he had great interest in compounding Ali's difficulties. He hoped that Ali would try to penalize all those men who had rebelled against Uthman; they would resist him, and their resistance would lead to civil war. Civil war in Medina, he figured, would make it possible for him to seize the khilafat.

But Ali did not walk into this trap, and said to Muawiya: "First give me your pledge of loyalty, and let me restore peace in the empire. Once conditions return to normal, then we shall, all of us, bring the killers of Uthman to trial, and justice shall prevail." But Muawiya had no intention of taking the oath of loyalty to Ali. He, therefore, kept insisting on the arrest and the execution of the murderers of Uthman.

Commenting upon Muawiya's answer to Ali, the two professors further say:

"In our opinion, Ali was absolutely right. The interests of individuals, no matter how important they may be, cannot be sacrificed over the interests of the 'nation.' Whatever the personal tragedies of some important figure, the integrity of the state must be protected at all costs.

'National' interests remain paramount, and cannot be sacrificed over the interests of an individual. To assure the security of the dominion of Islam is the first responsibility of the head of the Muslim umma.

If Ali had acted upon Muawiya's suggestion, war would have erupted in every part of the empire. But Ali's enemies did not share his solicitude for peace, and their attitude led to civil war among the Muslims. If Talha, Zubayr and Muawiya had any sincerity, they would have subordinated their own interests to the interests of Islam, and Muslims would not have shed each other's blood." (*History of Islam, Part I*)

The foregoing is a correct assessment of the political scene in the House of Islam when Ali took charge of the government. Many other historians have also analyzed the events which took place before the civil war of the Muslims. They have tried to pinpoint its causes but most of them, it appears, have missed an important point, or if they have not, then they have tried to suppress it.

The collapse of the house of Saqifa was bound to be followed by much turbulence. But the point which the historians have been unwilling to admit is that the dragon's teeth which sprouted during Ali's

caliphate, had all be sown in the times of his predecessors. The rebellions which broke out in his time, all had their roots in the past. Sir John Glubb, a modern historian, writes about the caliphate of Umar bin Abdul Aziz as follows:

“The reign of Umar bin Abdul Aziz, was remarkably free from sedition and civil strife, yet it may be argued that it was in his time that the seeds were sown of that revolution which was utterly to destroy the dynasty. This was not surprising but rather in accordance with normal political development.

For it has often occurred that a country has remained quiet throughout periods of arbitrary and autocratic rule but that sedition has broken out as soon as a more just and liberal administration has been established. Thus the benevolent khilafat of Umar bin Abdul Aziz inaugurated the movement which was to lead to the ruin of his family.” (*The Empire of the Arabs*, p. 175, 1963)

Sir John Glubb has made both a right and a wrong deduction in the foregoing paragraph. He is right in stating that “it has often occurred that a country has remained quiet throughout periods of arbitrary and autocratic rule but that sedition has broken out as soon as a more just and liberal administration has been established.”

The empire of the Arabs was quiet throughout the periods of the arbitrary and autocratic rule of the Saqifa government but sedition broke out as soon as the just and liberal administration of Ali was established.

But we cannot agree with the historian when he claims that it was in the time of Umar ibn Abdul Aziz that “the seeds were sown of that revolution which was utterly to destroy the (Umayyad) dynasty.” Such seeds were sown not in the time of Umar bin Abdul Aziz but were sown both by his predecessors and successors.

Nor can we agree with the assertion of the historian that “the benevolent khilafat of Umar ibn Abdul Aziz inaugurated the movement which was to lead to the ruin of his family.” The truth is just the contrary. It is most probable that the saintly conduct of Umar bin Abdul Aziz gave a reprieve to the Umayyads, and that, but for him, they might have perished much earlier than they did.

Umar bin Abdul Aziz does not fit the stereotype of the Umayyads. He was so God-fearing and God-loving and they were so godless that they just could not coexist. They liquidated him through poison.

Dr. Hamid-ud-Din

There was no great campaign nor any new country was conquered in the caliphate of Umar bin Abdul Aziz. And yet, his caliphate is very important in the history of Islam because of the reforms he instituted. He revived true Islamic democracy and the traditions of the Khulfa-i-Rashida (the rightly-guided caliphs).

From the time of Muawiya, the caliphate had become the personal government of the caliph. All those

evils which are a part of the autocratic and despotic governments, had entered the caliphate. The people had lost their freedom. *Bayt-ul-Mal* (the public treasury) had become the private purse of the ruler.

Nothing from it was spent to relieve the distress of the poor, and all of it was spent on the luxury and the pleasures of the ruling class. Umar bin Abdul Aziz resolved to put an end to these practices. The first thing he did, was to seize the vast estates which the Umayyad barons had appropriated for themselves.

Many unfair and illegal means were adopted to bring extra revenues in the state treasury. For example, those Dhimmi (non-Muslims living under the protection of the Islamic State), who accepted Islam, were forced to pay jizya (poll-tax).

According to the Qur'anic law, only non-Muslim citizens of the Islamic State have to pay jizya. Umar bin Abdul Aziz sent orders to all the governors in the provinces that if a Dhimmi accepts Islam, jizya must not be charged from him. He put an end to this practice, and many hundreds of thousands of Dhimmi became Muslim after the promulgation of this order.

Muawiya had begun the custom of cursing Ali ibn Abi Talib in public. He himself and his governors and state functionaries used most intemperate and abusive language from the pulpits in the mosques for Ali. After Muawiya, his successors carried on this practice. But Umar bin Abdul Aziz stopped it. He ordered his governors to read verses of Qur'an from the pulpits instead of cursing Ali.

These reforms were not welcomed by the Umayyad hierarchy, and the caliph's love for fair-play and justice did not make him very popular with it. The Umayyad barons believed that if he ruled the empire for any considerable length of time, then they would lose their power and their perquisites.

They, therefore, hatched a conspiracy, and administered poison to him in his food. He died from the effects of this poison in Rajab of 101 A.H. (A.D. 720). (*History of Islam, published by Ferozsons Ltd., Karachi and Lahore, Pakistan, pp. 324, 331, 332, 333, 1971*).

It was inevitable that a man like Umar bin Abdul Aziz would become a martyr. He is one of the martyrs of Islam. May God have mercy on his noble soul.

Ali faced challenges of monumental scope. But he was not overawed by them. With a pure heart and a mind totally committed to God's Will, he began the work of restoring peace and God's rule to the House of Islam. Oath-taking for Ali was hardly over when rebellions erupted all around him. If he dealt with one of them, another reared its head. Thus the few years of his reign were spent in trying to quell them. Some of his critics insinuated that the rebellions were the result of his "imprudence."

The rebellions in Ali's reign were not caused by his imprudence. As pointed out above, they had their roots in the past. Any other man would have faced the same set of problems, and it is most probable that he would have been unable to grapple with them.

Under the circumstances, Ali ran the administration of the country, and also tried to contain the

rebellions as was his duty. He defeated one group of rebels in Basra, and he would have defeated the other in Siffin if the latter had not taken recourse to treachery. Even during these turbulent times, he carried out important economic and social reforms.

Though the causes of the rebellions antedate the caliphate of Ali himself, a few of them may be amplified as follows for a better understanding of the events which took place later.

1. Ali's policy was purely Qur'anic. He was not going to compromise with Islamic ethics and principles for the sake of hanging on to power and authority. If he had also adopted the policy of realpolitik, he would have been eminently successful but doing so would have changed the character of his government from Islamic to "Aristotelian."

Ahmad Hasan Zayyat of Egypt, says in his book, *Adab al-Araby* (p. 174):

"Ali knew absolutely no flexibility in matters of religion, and he knew no double-dealing in worldly matters. It was this sublimity of his character of which Muawiya took every advantage."

2. Ali did not try to please the rich and the powerful at the expense of the poor and the weak. He invariably put the interests of the poor and the weak ahead of the interests of the Arab aristocracy. The Arab aristocracy resented this, and showed him its resentment.

When distributing the revenues of the state treasury, Ali made no distinction between high and low, rich and poor, and Arab and non-Arab. In his sight, they were all equal. The Arab lords protested against such treatment but he ignored their protests. Soon their protests exploded in civil war.

3. As soon as Ali took charge of the government, he dismissed all the governors and officers appointed by Uthman. But many of them had no intention of giving up their positions.

Dismissal of Uthman's Governors

When Ali took charge of the government, Uthman's governors and tax collectors were plundering the country without any fear of being questioned by the central government. Ali's first act was to issue orders of their dismissal.

Mughira bin Shaaba was one of the companions of the Prophet. Umar had appointed him governor of Kufa but Uthman had dismissed him. He had not taken the oath of allegiance to Ali but he advised him against making any radical changes in policy and personnel.

He said that if the governors appointed by Uthman did not acknowledge his (Ali's) authority as caliph, then he could not remove them from their jobs. He warned Ali that if he dismissed them summarily, before consolidating his own power, they would rebel against his authority.

Ali's first cousin, Abdullah ibn Abbas, also gave him advice which, in substance, was the same as that of

Mughira. Prudence, he said, dictated caution at the moment.

But such advice was not acceptable to Ali. He believed that he was accountable to God for all his deeds, and he could not, therefore, allow unworthy and corrupt men to rule over the Muslims. He, in fact, considered himself accountable to God, not only for his own deeds, but also for the deeds of his governors. He, therefore, placed his trust in God, knowing that he was doing the right thing, and refused to rescind his orders.

Colonel Osborne

Ali had been advised by several of his counselors to defer the dismissal of the corrupt governors previously appointed until he himself was secure against all enemies. The Bayard of Islam, the hero without fear and without reproach refused to be guilty of any duplicity or compromise with injustice. This uncompromisingly noble attitude cost him his state and life, but such was Ali. He never valued anything above justice and truth.

Some people imagine that if Ali had not dismissed Uthman's governors, he would not have provoked them into challenging him. But such an opinion rests upon naiveté. The governors of Uthman would have challenged Ali regardless of what he had done. They were his old enemies.

Following are some of the reasons why Ali dismissed Uthman's governors:

- 1.** Ali's aim was to restore the government of Muhammad Mustafa, and to enforce the Islamic system. To do this, he had to "purify" the government which he had inherited, by excising from it the ravaging pack of the Umayyads. In their stead, he had to appoint God-fearing men who believed they were accountable to God for all that they did.
- 2.** Muslims had requested Uthman to remove his conceited and egoistic governors, and to appoint pious men in their stead. But he turned a deaf ear to their request whereupon they took other steps to force a change of governors. If Ali had temporized in this matter, they would have toppled his government just as they toppled the government of his predecessor.
- 3.** If Ali had not dismissed the governors of Uthman, he would have made himself vulnerable to the charge of "guilt by association."
- 4.** Muawiya was not content with ruling Syria alone; he wanted to rule the whole empire of the Muslims as its khalifa. When he noticed that Uthman had made many enemies for himself, he tried to take advantage of the situation. He suggested to Uthman that he should leave Medina, and go with him (with Muawiya) to Syria, where, he assured him, he would be safe whereas in his own capital, he warned him, he might be killed.

Muawiya had very good reasons to try to take Uthman to Damascus. Once in Damascus, Uthman would have become a "figurehead khalifa." Muawiya would have taken all his authority out of his hands into his

own, and would, thus, have become khalifa *de facto* in his (Uthman's) lifetime, and *de jure* after his death.

But Uthman did not go to Syria, and Muawiya's strategy did not work. But when Uthman was killed, he launched his campaign against Ali seeking vengeance for his blood. Ali had little choice in the matter but to dismiss him.

5. Uthman had appointed governors not because they had any ability or because they loved to serve the Muslims. He appointed them only because they were related to him. Ali considered these appointments a trespass on the rights of those men who were qualified by their ability, piety, and service to Islam, to rule the Muslims. He, therefore, removed them.

6. Uthman had appointed members of his own family as governors of the provinces. His governors had men and materials necessary for war. Uthman was in a state of siege in his palace for 49 days. He sent many appeals to them to come and rescue him but they did not come, and he was killed. If these governors could abandon their own benefactor so casually, how could Ali depend upon them in an exigency to obey him? He, therefore, decided not to be at their mercy.

A certain Abu Tufail Kinani, a resident of Medina, once went to Damascus to see Muawiya. When they met, the following exchange took place between them:

Muawiya: Where were you when Uthman was killed?

Kinani: I was in Medina.

Muawiya: Did you do anything to save his life from his enemies?

Kinani: No.

Muawiya: Why not? You knew that it was your duty to do your utmost to save him.

Kinani: I suppose it was. But whatever it was that prevented *you* from trying to save his life, also prevented me from trying to save his life.

The New Governors

In Moharram of 36 A.H., Ali appointed the following governors:

1. Qays ibn Saad Ansari, the governor of Egypt.

Qays was able to enter Egypt without opposition and to take charge of the government. In Egypt, he found the Muslims divided into three groups. One was composed of his own supporters; the second of his opponents, i.e., the supporters of Uthman; and the third group was undecided in its loyalty. Qays

decided not to meddle with the last two groups, but to give his whole-hearted attention to the administration of the country.

Qays, in physical appearance, was the most impressive man in Medina. He was tall, stern and powerful in build; and he was noted for his knowledge, piety and eloquence. He was also a man of great perception and foresight, and was more than a match for men like Muawiya, Amr bin Aas and Mughira bin Shaaba in ingenuity and intelligence.

But like his own master, Ali, he too did not believe that ends justified the means. His philosophy of life was governed by the principle that political policy must be subject to the ethics of Qur'an.

2. Uthman bin Hunaif, the governor of Basra.

Uthman was also able to enter Basra and to take charge of the government. He too found the Muslims in Basra divided into three groups as Qays had found in Egypt, and he too adopted the same policy as Qays had in Egypt.

Uthman bin Hunaif belonged to a distinguished family of the Ansars. He was a close friend of the Prophet. During the khilafat of Umar, he was the financial commissioner of Iraq.

3. Ammara bin Shihab Ansari, the governor - designate of Kufa.

Ammara left Medina to take charge of his duties in Kufa. But when he reached Zabala, a way-station on the road to Iraq, he met one Talha bin Khuwaylid Asadi, coming from Kufa. He advised Ammara to return to Medina, or else, he said, he would be killed in Kufa. Thereupon, Ammara did not go to Kufa, and returned to Medina.

4. Sahl bin Hunaif Ansari, the governor - designate of Syria.

Sahl left Medina. Before he reached the Syrian frontier, he met a body of cavalry. They asked him who he was and where he was going. He told them that he was the new governor of Syria. They said they were Syrians and that they did not acknowledge anyone as their ruler except Muawiya. They also added that if he went any further, he would be killed. Thereupon, Sahl did not enter Syria, and returned to Medina.

Sahl was the brother of Uthman bin Hunaif. He too was a companion of the Prophet, and had fought in all his battles, distinguishing himself in them by his gallantry.

5. Obaidullah ibn Abbas, the governor of Yemen.

Obaidullah was the first cousin of Muhammad and Ali. He entered Yemen without opposition and took charge of the government. Yayla bin Umayya who was Uthman's governor in Yemen, had left before his arrival, and had taken the state treasury with him.

Qathm ibn Abbas, the governor – designate of Makkah.

Qathm was the younger brother of Obaidullah. He is said to have borne a striking resemblance to the Prophet. He was still in Medina when Makkah became a center of opposition to Ali. He, therefore, had to wait until conditions returned to normal in Makkah. After the death of Ali, he left Arabia, went to Samarkand in Central Asia, and died there.

A few months after his accession to the throne, Ali had to leave Medina for Basra to take up the challenge of the rebels, and he appointed Sahl bin Hunaif Ansari as governor of the capital in his own absence.

After the battle of Basra, Ali appointed Abdullah ibn Abbas as the new governor of that city. Abdullah was an “understudy” of his master, Ali, and won great fame for his knowledge. He was one of the earliest authorities on the science of the exegesis of Qur’an. He died in Ta’if at the age of 70.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/restatement-history-islam-and-muslims-sayyid-ali-asghar-razwy/ali-ibn-abi-talib-fourth-caliph#comment-0>