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Home > The Hidden Truth about Karbala > Chapter 11: Imam Ali, The only Caliph by Public Choice

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If, at all, any real democratic choice of its ruler is to be found in the entire history of Islam, it is to be found only in the case of Imam Ali (a.s.), when the entire population of Muslims, after the murder of Uthman, unitedly and repeatedly requested Imam Ali (a.s.) to assume the religio-political governance of the Islamic world. Though he refused in the beginning, he yielded when he was told that his refusal would be tantamount to abdication of his duties as the Imam. Imam Ali (a.s.) accepted the political leadership of the *Ummah* in addition to the religious leadership that always remained with him. Imam Ali (a.s.) in his famous sermon called 'Shaqshaqiyah' elaborates the dilemma facing him: "At that time nothing surprised me more than the vast crowd of people rushing to me [demanding that I accept the Caliphate]. It [the crowd] advanced towards me from every side like the mane of the hyena so much so that Hasan and Husayn were neigh being trampled and crushed and both ends of my garment [tunic] were torn [due to being pulled by the crowd to draw my attention] ... Behold, by Him Who splits the seed and creates life, had there not gathered such multitude of supporters, and had they not exhausted all the arguments, and had there not been a covenant between God and the learned scholars [Imams] that [the Imams] shall not sit quietly watching the gluttony of the oppressor and the burning hunger of the oppressed poor, I would have cast the rope of Caliphate on its own shoulders [declined to accept the Caliphate] and I would have continued to give the last of them the same treatment as the first one. You would then have realized that in my view [for me] worldly life is not better than the sneeze of a goat."1

Thus, when by popular demand, Imam Ali (a.s.) accepted the *Caliphate*, after a lapse of over thirty years after the Prophet (S), for the first time once again, the temporal authority [*Caliphate*] and the religious authority [*Imamate*] came to be vested in one person (Imam Ali (a.s.)). His leadership stands in stark contrast to the period of the three earlier *Caliphs*.

Firstly, Imam Ali (a.s.) never planned territorial expansion. Secondly, he subdued the internal threat from the hypocrites [*Munafiqin*] like Mu'awiya and those who were solely interested in acquiring power or expanding territory like Talha and az–Zubair. Thirdly, he removed corrupt officers, eliminated all lavish state expenditure, and directed that the state funds should be utilized only for public welfare and to help

the needy and downtrodden. He directed that every person, irrespective of his religion or belief, should be dealt justly and equitably without fear or favour. His written instructions to his Governors, Judges and Commanders of the army are eloquent testimony to his Just Governance.

In the early days of Islam, Abu Sufyan incited people and waged war against the Prophet (S). After he died, his son Mu'awiya continued the family tradition and waged war against the Prophet's beloved cousin and successor Imam Ali (a.s.). In addition to physical warfare, Mu'awiya made false propaganda that Imam Ali (a.s.) was instrumental in the murder of Uthman.

During one of the savage battles against the enemies of Islam, Malik al–Ashtar a great warrior was surprised to see that Imam Ali (a.s.) was nowhere to be seen fighting. He found Imam Ali (a.s.) conversing with some one. He asked Imam Ali (a.s.) what he was doing at that crucial stage of the battle, and he said, "What are we fighting for, Malik?" Malik replied, "We are fighting for God." Imam Ali (a.s.) replied, "This man has just asked me to explain the concept of God in Islam. If I am able to convince him through dialogue, there is absolutely no need for any war or blood–shed." This clearly shows that Imam Ali (a.s.) was more interested in propagating Islam through discussion and dialogue rather than for its territorial expansion through war.

Every battle that Imam Ali (a.s.) fought during his *Caliphate* was against those who were enemies in the garb of Muslims. Imam Ali (a.s.) treated the Jews and the Christians in a just manner, permitting them to practice their faith openly and fearlessly. For his personal needs, Imam Ali (a.s.) worked in his spare time. He never used the state funds for himself or his family. Though Imam Ali (a.s.) was the religious and temporal head of the Islamic State, his simple house in Kufa is a witness of his simple way of life. During that time, Mu'awiya had occupied his grand Syrian palace, well–known for its revelry, pomp and Grandeur. History records the fact that Imam Ali (a.s.) ate simple food, wore ordinary clothes that often contained patches sewn together. History also records that Imam Ali (a.s.) chose to mend his own shoes.

In the battlefield, if the opponent lost his sword or was disarmed, Imam Ali (a.s.) let him go. Imam Ali (a.s.) never chased an enemy who lost his steed or weapon and was unable to defend himself. Talha son of Abi Talha was the bitterest enemy of the Prophet (S) and Imam Ali (a.s.). In the battle of Uhud, he challenged Imam Ali (a.s.) to face him in single combat. Imam Ali (a.s.) invited him to strike first and warded off Talha's blow. In return, Imam Ali (a.s.) gave such a blow that Talha fell down and found it difficult to get up. When, instead of killing the fallen Talha, Imam Ali (a.s.) left him and walked away, the warriors shouted that it was the best opportunity to finish off the bitter enemy. Imam Ali (a.s.) replied that he would not kill even an enemy, if such enemy was not in a position to defend himself.

In the battle of *an–Nahrawan*, an enemy soldier lost his sword in the combat with Imam Ali (a.s.), and was trembling with mortal fear. Imam Ali (a.s.) raised his sword to strike him but stopped when he saw that the enemy had lost his sword. Imam Ali (a.s.) said, "Run away my friend, for you are now unable to defend yourself." The soldier said, "Why don't you kill me and thus get rid of one more enemy?" Imam

Ali (a.s.) replied, "We the Ahlul Bayt (a.s.) do not kill any person who is unable to defend himself." The soldier said, "If what I hear about your generosity is true, let me see if you would give me your sword." Imam Ali (a.s.) immediately gave his sword. The enemy soldier now said, "Who will defend you now against my attack?" Imam Ali (a.s.) calmly replied, "O ignorant man! If He so Wills, He will defend me. Neither you nor any one else can cause even the slightest harm to me. If death, which is sure to come, is destined for me now, by God, none can save me." This reply impressed the soldier so much that he threw the sword, glorified God and accepted Islam at the hands of Imam Ali (a.s.). There are numerous such incidents where Imam Ali (a.s.) won converts to Islam without waging war, merely on the strength of his character.

Mu'awiya, during 39–40 AH, organized the systematic looting, plunder, arson, rape and other harassment of the villages bordering Syria where mostly Jews and Christians lived. Kumail, who was appointed as governor, wrote asking for permission to carry out similar attacks on other villages in retaliation. Imam Ali (a.s.) condemned the proposal and wrote, "It is your duty to protect your subjects from the enemy's attack more diligently and vigorously, instead of imitating his mean and vile acts. Though they live under the control of your enemy, they are civilians and human beings like us, though they may follow other beliefs. Beware of following the deeds of the evil doers."

When his brother Aqeel fell in dire need, he approached Imam Ali (a.s.) and requested that his share might be paid before its due date with something more than what he actually deserved from the state treasury. Imam Ali (a.s.), who was then the *caliph*, refused to give anything in excess of Aqeel's share or before the due date from the state treasury. Instead, Imam Ali (a.s.) helped Aqeel from his personal funds. A similar incident is also recorded about Abdullah ibn Jafar the son-in-law of Imam Ali (a.s.).

Imam Ali (a.s.) never tolerated corruption in high office. He removed all the corrupt governors who were misusing public funds. When one of the governors appointed by him attended a sumptuous dinner hosted by some rich people, Imam Ali (a.s.) scolded him by writing, "It is unfortunate that you attended a dinner where only rich people were invited and poor people were scornfully excluded."

Osborne wrote, "Ali (a.s.) had been advised by several of his counselors to defer dismissal of corrupt governors previously appointed until he himself was secure against all enemies... 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 his life; but such was Ali (a.s.) who never valued anything above justice and truth."3

Imam Ali's strict control of state funds and his exhortations to lead an astute and simple life in the way of God, enraged persons like Mu'awiya, who were enamoured of worldly wealth and a pompous and sinful life. In one of the battles, Mu'awiya's army had gained control of the only water source available and they deprived Imam Ali's troops of water for three days. On the fourth day Imam Ali's troops gained control of the water source. Mu'awiya was afraid that Imam Ali (a.s.) would take revenge by denying access to water. Mu'awiya consulted Amr bin al-Aas who said that it was not the cunning Mu'awiya but

the noble Ali (a.s.) who controls the river. Imam Ali (a.s.) allowed access to the river saying that water was a basic necessity provided by God to all living things and therefore should not be denied to anyone, even if he was your bitter enemy.

Imam Ali (a.s.) is the most read about and researched personality in the history of Islam. Nahjul Balagha, a book having collections of Imam Ali's sermons, letters and sayings is well–known in the East and the West. Many books have been written and several writers in the East and the West have expressed their opinion praising Imam Ali (a.s.). Another popular book is Nahjul Asrar, published from Hyderabad, India. In addition to this, there are several books of Imam Ali's traditions, sermons, sayings, supplications and writings, such as *as–Sahifa al–Alawiyya*.

It may be recalled here that Imam Ali (S) presented the complete bound volume of the Qur'an written down by him to the dictates of the Prophet (S), to the first *Caliph*. When it was refused to be accepted, Imam Ali (a.s.) took it back saying that it could be again seen only in the hands of the twelfth Imam (a.s.) at the time of his reappearance.

Imam Ali (a.s.) told Talha, "The Prophet (S) made me write each verse of the Qur'an as and when it was revealed. I have the entire Qur'an here in this book, written down in my own handwriting together with its meaning, every prohibition [haram] and permission [halal], every limit and every command, the details of the amount of compensation [diya] payable for the tiniest scratch and all that the Ummah will need, right from the first day until the Doomsday."

Imam Ali's character is unique in that he possessed a rare combination of opposite qualities. He was an undefeated warrior yet very kind, sympathetic and most gentle towards the poor and downtrodden people and those enemies whom he subdued. He was a great orator, moralist and philosopher. He was God–fearing, and an erudite teacher of religious tenets. He was a just and noble ruler, who led a simple life, bereft of all ostentation and grandeur that goes with the crown. He bore a noble countenance, wore simple clothes, and ate the most common food that was the staple food of the poor people of his time. He was always available to his subjects and he moved among them freely. He was bereft of all pomp and pretensions, so much so that when he moved about in the street, he was identified as one among the citizens. He neither feared any harm from his subjects, nor did the citizens have any fear or hesitation in meeting and conversing with him so easily.

Gibbon wrote, 4 "He [Imam Ali (a.s.)] 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 combat of tongue or of sword was subdued by his eloquence and valor. From the first hour of the mission to the last rites of his funeral, the apostle was never forsaken by this generous friend, whom he delighted to name as his brother, his vicegerent and the faithful Aaron of second Moses."

Abdullah ibn Abbas, the governor, used to treat his non-Muslim subjects with contempt. When they complained, Imam Ali (a.s.) wrote, "They may be heathens and polytheists; nonetheless, they are our

subjects and human beings like us. They deserve better treatment than what you appear to have shown them. Make yourself available to them, hear their complaints and give proper consideration, and justly redress their grievances." The directions 5 given by Imam Ali (S) in his letter to Malik al–Ashtar form a self-contained code of conduct for Governance.

George Jordaq, an Egyptian Christian scholar in Arabic, Persian, English, German and French languages, has compiled a book of the excellent judgments rendered by Imam Ali (a.s.). The book has been translated into Urdu.

Apart from being the *Caliph*, Imam Ali (a.s.) was and is always known as the *Imam* and *Ameerul Mo'minin* [Commander of the Faithful]. After his martyrdom, the title of *Caliph* was lost in history and the title '*Ameerul Mo'minin*' was usurped by Mu'awiya and later rulers for some time to denote the temporal authority– the person who was at the helm of the affairs of Muslims. Now, even the word *Ameerul Mo'minin* is not used by rulers of any Islamic state. However, it is noteworthy that neither Mu'awiya nor the subsequent rulers of the Islamic world ever claimed that they were *Imams*. Until today, the number of the infallible *Imams* remains restricted to the twelve *Imams* named by the Prophet (S) in numerous traditions.

Ibn Muljim and a few other *Kharijites* supported by Mu'awiya conspired to eliminate Imam Ali (a.s.). They chose a day in the month of *Ramadan* and they planned to assassinate Imam Ali (a.s.) at Kufa early during the Morning Prayer. Mu'awiya created a legend that the conspirators had also planned to eliminate Mu'awiya but that on the appointed day, he fell ill and could not go to the mosque to lead the prayers. A story was thus spun and popularized that Mu'awiya escaped assassination and, instead, the person, who was deputed by Mu'awiya to lead the prayers, was injured by the conspirator. However, when Imam Ali (a.s.) was leading the Morning Prayer in the great mosque of Kufa, the wicked Ibn Muljim struck him on the head with his poisoned sword and seriously wounded him. The gathering of worshippers chased ibn Muljim, and Huthaifa al–Yamani caught him and tied his hands and feet. The crowd attempted to assault the accursed Ibn Muljim. Imam Ali (a.s.) saw this and noticed that the ropes tying ibn Muljim were so tight that they were cutting into his flesh. Imam Ali (a.s.) abjured the gathering saying, "He has not yet been tried according our Shariah. Until he is tried and found guilty, you have no right to hurt any under trial prisoner in any manner, whatever be his crime."

What we have discussed above is with reference to the human side of Imam Ali's personality. There is also the spiritual aspect of the Fourteen Immaculate and infallible persons, which elevates them above man but below God. This aspect is discussed separately.

Abu Sufyan sowed the seed of hatred, Mu'awiya nurtured the tree and Yazid reaped the harvest by slaying the Ahlul Bayt (a.s.) openly and defiantly in the Battle of Karbala. Abu Sufyan and his progeny invented absolute falsehood, and they propagated and popularized such falsehood, through their gullible henchmen. The coffers of the public treasuries flowed in the hands of the corrupt Umayyads to propagate that Imam Ali (a.s.) never offered prayers. The result was that when news of Imam Ali's

martyrdom reached Syria, people exclaimed: 'Ali in the mosque!?' By the time Yazid assumed power, people only remembered the grandeur of the Umayyad rulers, and forgot the simple Islamic way of life, and they knew little about Imam Husayn (a.s.) the pious and noble grandson of the Prophet (S).

- 1. Nahjul Balagha, Sermon No.3. The authenticity of this sermon is testified by twenty–seven learned scholars mentioned in the note appended to this sermon...
- 2. Nahjul Asrar, p. 262.
- 3. Osborne, Islam Under the Arabs.
- 4. The History of the Decline and the Fall of the Roman Empire, Vol. 5.
- 5. Nahjul Balagha, translated by Sayyid Ali Reza, published by Abbas Book Agency, Lucknow, U.P.

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