

## Chapter 3: 'Ali and the First Two Caliphs

The discussion above will suffice to elucidate our view that the origins of Shi'i feelings and inclinations may be found in the conception of the sanctity for which the Banu Hashim were widely known, in the special consideration with which 'Ali was held by Muhammad (who was, above all, fully conscious of his family's traditionally religious heritage and exalted position), and lastly, in the events in favour of 'Ali which took place during Muhammad's lifetime.

Since the first convergence of these convictions focused on the questions and issues involved in the Saqifa incident, this episode marks both the first open expression of and the point of departure for what ultimately developed into the Shi'i understanding of Islam. However, after the initial defeat of 'Ali's supporters and his own recognition of Abu Bakr's administration six months later, circumstances were such that Shi'i tendencies lost most of their open and active manifestations.

The period of the caliphates of Abu Bakr and 'Umar, between the Saqifa episode and the Shura (the election of 'Uthman), is thus one of comparative dormancy in the history of the development of Shi'ism.

Nevertheless, a close scrutiny of the early sources, and especially a careful comparison of the Shi'i and Sunni early records, reveals two distinct and important undercurrents in operation throughout this period ; firstly, 'Ali's passive attitude towards the ruling authorities; and secondly, the attempts of Abu Bakr and 'Umar to displace Banu Hashim, and especially 'Ali, from their prerogative claims to the leadership of the community according to their own understanding of the new order and the form they felt it should take. Both of these trends apparent in this period form an inseparable phase in the development of Shi'i ideas and therefore should be taken into consideration.

'Ali's passive attitude can easily be illustrated by comparing the active role played by him during the lifetime of Muhammad with his completely inactive and withdrawn life in the period immediately following the Prophet's death.

The most active and enthusiastic participant in all the enterprises in the cause of Islam and a great

warrior in the forefront of all the battles fought under Muhammad, <sup>1</sup> 'Ali suddenly reverted to leading a quiet life, almost confined to the four walls of his house. This marked contrast cannot have been without serious causes.<sup>2</sup> Seeing 'Ali's firm conviction that he had the best claims to succeed Muhammad, as is evident from all the sources, one would have expected him to fight for his rights to the bitter end.

He did not resort to this course of action, however, even though such opportunities presented themselves. He declined to make use of the strong military support offered to him by Abu Sufyan to fight for his rights, for he considered that such action would lead to the destruction of infant Islam.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, on the other hand, he did not recognize Abu Bakr and refused to pay him homage for six months. In addition to the demoralizing factor of Fatima's death, which occurred six months after the succession of Abu Bakr, what perhaps compelled 'Ali to reconcile his position with the existing order was the serious eruption of apostasy and rebellion among the Arab tribes in the peninsula.

This coincidence of Abu Bakr's succession and the rebellion of the tribes naturally forced people in Medina to forget whatever ideological or personal differences they had and to unite themselves against a common danger. Such a serious external threat to the very existence of the Islamic order proved to be a great advantage to Abu Bakr in reducing internal opposition to his rule.

The character of 'Ali as presented by both Sunni and Shi'i sources alike suggests that his feelings of love, dedication, sincerity, and undivided loyalty to the cause of Islam were above personal considerations. From the age of thirteen he had been committed to the service of the mission of the Prophet; seeing such a dangerous and widespread rebellion of the tribes against Islam, 'Ali had no choice but to reconcile himself with the existing order. This he did. But he did not take any active part in any of the apostasy wars, thus still preserving his withdrawn attitude; nor did Abu Bakr ask him to participate in the wars outside Medina.

In spite of maintaining his withdrawn and passive attitude towards Abu Bakr and 'Umar, 'Ali did occasionally help the caliphs. This co-operation rendered to the ruling caliphs appears to have been of the same nature as that expected of any reasonable opposition leader. He recognized that, under the circumstances, the solidarity, security, and integrity of the community could only be preserved if the diverse groups which it comprised were willing to co-operate and maintain harmonious relations among themselves. Yet within this framework he attempted, again as was to be expected, to correct what he regarded as mistakes of the government, and criticized policies which differed from his viewpoint.

The points of difference in religious and political matters between 'Ali on the one hand, and Abu Bakr and 'Umar on the other, are difficult to ascertain because both the Sunni and the Shi'i source materials are extremely tendentious. The Sunni sources, such as the works of Ibn Sa'd and those who followed him, were written in the period when the recognition of the first four caliphs as the Rashidun was firmly established in the fama'a.

(The English term “orthodoxy”, which is usually used for the central body of the Muslims, is in an Islamic context not only incorrect but misleading; we shall therefore use the Arabic term fama'a for this so-called orthodoxy.)

Naturally, every effort was made to show as much agreement as possible, at least between 'Ali, Abu Bakr, and 'Umar. 'Uthman tends to be excluded in religious and political matters, though attempts were nevertheless made to save even 'Uthman's position by blaming the abuses of his caliphate on Marwan, his notorious secretary.

On the other hand, the Shi'i sources give a completely different and extreme view of 'Ali's disagreement, not only with 'Uthman, but also with Abu Bakr and 'Umar, on almost every matter, whether religious or political. In short, according to the Sunni sources, 'Ali was a valued counsellor of the caliphs who preceded him.

According to the Shi'i sources, he was the person who, dominated by his heroic love and sense of sacrifice for the faith and disregarding his personal grievances, saved the caliphs from committing the serious mistakes to which they were often prone and which would otherwise have been suicidal for Islam. 'Umar is thus often reported to have said: “Had there not been 'Ali, 'Umar would have perished.” It is very interesting to note that this statement is reported by some of the important early Sunni authors too.<sup>4</sup>

Apart from some of the serious points of disagreement between 'Ali and his first two successful rivals, for which there is unanimous historical testimony, as we shall point out below, exactitude in the determination of the mass of this material is probably beyond our reach. The truth, however, seems to have been, as Veccia Vaglieri suggests, that “'Ali was included in the council of the caliphs, but although it is probable that he was asked for advice on legal matters in view of his excellent knowledge of the Qur'an and the Sunna, it is extremely doubtful whether his advice was accepted by 'Umar, who had been a ruling power even during the caliphate of Abu Bakr.”<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, evidence of 'Ali's opinions not being accepted on religious matters is manifested in the fact that his decisions very seldom find a place in the later developed Sunni schools of law, whereas 'Umar's decisions find common currency among them. On the other hand, 'Ali is a frequently quoted authority on matters of law in all Shi'i branches.<sup>6</sup>

On political and administrative matters, his disagreement with 'Umar on the question of Diwan (distribution of stipends) and his absence from all the wars fought under 'Umar can be well cited. Without further elaboration, it may safely be assumed from our evidence that, regardless of the exact nature of his feelings and aspirations, 'Ali maintained a passive and withdrawn attitude towards the caliphates of both Abu Bakr and 'Umar.

'Ali accepted the political realities of his day, but never the less remained convinced of the fact that he

was better qualified for the caliphate and that he had been unjustly deprived of the leadership of the community. 'Ali's feelings regarding his predecessors are best expressed in his own words in one of his famous speeches at the mosque of Kufa during his own caliphate.

This historic exposition of 'Ali, known as *ash-Shaqshiqiyya*, is recorded by Ash-Sharif ar-Radi in the *Nahj al-Balagha*,<sup>7</sup> which contains 'Ali's sermons, speeches, letters, and maxims. As with most of the material presented in this valuable work, there can hardly be any doubt as to the authenticity of this speech, since it was reported by many early authors long before Ash-Sharif ar-Radi 'Ali says:

“Nay, by God, the son of Abu Quhafa [Abu Bakr] had exacted the caliphate for himself while he knew full well that my position in it was like that of the pivot in a mill; the flood waters flow down beneath me and the birds do not soar high up to me; yet I hung up a curtain before it and turned aside from it [the caliphate]. I then started thinking whether I should attack with a severing hand or should watch patiently the blind darkness in which the old man becomes decrepit and the young man old, in which the believer tries his utmost till he meets his Lord, and I came to the conclusion that patience in a situation like this was wiser. So I adopted patience, although there was a mote rankling in my eye and a bone sticking in my throat on seeing my heritage being plundered, till the first one [Abu Bakr] died and handed over the reins of the caliphate to another person ['Umar] after him. [Here 'Ali quotes a verse from the poet A'sha, which reads] 'How vast is the difference between this day of mine when I am on the back of the camel [i.e. suffering from the hardship of a rough journey] and the day of Hayyan, brother of Jabir [i.e. when he was comfortably placed under the power and prestige of Hayyan].<sup>8</sup> How hard did they [Abu Bakr and 'Umar] squeeze its udders and how they made it [the caliphate] travel on a rugged path, which inflicts deep wounds and is rough to the touch, in which one stumbles frequently and has to offer excuses, so that its rider is like the rider of a difficult mount: if he draws its reins tight, its nose is pierced, and if he relaxes it, he plunges into destruction. And so the people were afflicted, by God, with stumbling, refractoriness, capriciousness, and cross-purposes. But I kept patience in spite of the length of time and the severity of the ordeal, until he ['Umar] went his way.”<sup>9</sup>

'Ali thus describes his feelings towards the reign of his two predecessors and summarizes their periods in the caliphate. Ibn Abi 'l-Hadid, writing a long commentary on this speech, explains major characteristics of the first two caliphs, their policies in arranging the affairs of the community, their attitude towards 'Ali, and 'Ali's reservations about the handling of matters by them.

We may now turn to the second observation made above concerning this interim period in the development of Shi'ism: the attempts made by both Abu Bakr and 'Umar to displace the Banu Hashim in general and 'Ali in particular from prerogatives in the leadership of the Umma. The first and most important step in this direction was taken by Abu Bakr on the day following the Prophet's death, when Fatima came to claim the estate of Fadak. She asserted that this estate was given to her father unconditionally as his share of the spoils of Khaybar.<sup>10</sup> Quoting Muhammad's words: “We [the Prophets]

do not leave as inheritance what we make legal alms,” Abu Bakr refused her claim, maintaining that Fadak belonged to the community as a whole and that Fatima, although entitled to the usufruct, could not hold the right of ownership.<sup>11</sup>

This question of inheritance soon became one of the most debated problems in the conflict between the Shi'a and their opponents.<sup>12</sup> It might seem that Abu Bakr's refusal in effect meant that no claims would be justified on family grounds.

To acknowledge the justice of one claim of inheritance based on family ties would open the door to further and more extensive claims, and Abu Bakr felt that to accept the rights of the family of 'Ali to the inheritance of Fadak might be regarded as equal to admitting their rights to the succession of the Prophet in all spheres, spiritual as well as material.

This fear was perhaps based on the grounds that Muhammad, as leader of the community, was entitled to one fifth of the spoils of war (Khums), and by this special right he became owner of the Fadak. To inherit a property as a token of an exalted position and prerogative was somewhat different from an ordinary inheritance. It is almost unanimously reported that after this event Fatima did not speak to either Abu Bakr or 'Umar till her death six months later. She asked 'Ali to have her buried at night, and not to allow Abu Bakr and 'Umar to take part in her funeral. 'Ali accordingly carried out her wishes and buried her at night, with only the family members accompanying her coffin.

The caliphate of Abu Bakr lasted just over two years, and on his deathbed he explicitly appointed 'Umar, already a ruling power behind him, as his successor. The way he arranged the problem of succession after him leaves us in no doubt that Abu Bakr had made up his mind in favour of 'Umar since his assumption of the caliphate. He took careful measures to preclude any possibility of opposition to his nomination of 'Umar and made sure that the latter should not face any difficulty. He was fully aware of 'Ali's claims to the caliphate and the support and respect he enjoyed from a certain group. Abu Bakr therefore first called 'Abd ar-Rahman b. 'Awf, told him about his decision, and after some persuasion secured his consent. The only other person whom the dying caliph called in to make his decision known was 'Uthman b. 'Affan. When the news of Abu Bakr's decision came out, some of the prominent Companions of the Prophet became extremely disturbed and apprehensive. Under the leadership of Talha, they sent a delegation to protest against the decision and tried to persuade the Caliph not to nominate 'Umar.<sup>13</sup> Nothing could change Abu Bakr's mind, and he asked 'Uthman to write down his testament in favour of 'Umar. The community at large had no share in the choice and was told by the Caliph to accept his nomination and obey

'Umar as the new caliph after him, for he could not think of anyone more suitable than him. The testament he announced before the people reads:

“This is a testament of Abu Bakr, the successor of the Prophet of God, to the believers and the Muslims... I have appointed as ruler over you 'Umar b. al-Khattab, so listen to him and obey him. I have not made him your ruler except for [your] good.<sup>14</sup>

Anyone reading the account of 'Umar's nomination by Abu Bakr will immediately notice that the decision was neither based on the method of consultation with the elite of the people, nor was the opinion of the community in general sought before the choice was made. It was simply Abu Bakr's own personal and arbitrary decision, which he wanted to be endorsed by only those of the Companions whom he considered most important from a clannish point of view, as will be seen below.

For our interest, however, at once the most important and revealing point is that in this entire process of the nomination of 'Umar by Abu Bakr, 'Ali was totally ignored and excluded from the ranks of those the dying Caliph called for consultation, if consultation it was, and whose support he tried to secure. In fact, as all of our sources unanimously report, from all the Companions of the Prophet only two, 'Abd ar-Rahman b. 'Awf and 'Uthman, were selected by Abu(65)Bakr for consultation and then were entrusted with the charge of wholehearted support for 'Umar.<sup>15</sup> This in all probability must have been on the suggestion of 'Umar himself, who planned to counteract any possible opposition from the Banu Hashim by appealing to this branch of the Quraysh. 'Abd ar-Rahman belonged to the Banu Zuhra and 'Uthman to the Banu Umayya, both of which had been serious rivals of Banu Hashim before Islam.

The emergence of these two Companions was very characteristic in many ways, especially for the development of the later history of the caliphate, for they represented the wealthiest circles of the Muslim community.<sup>16</sup> 'Abd ar-Rahman was 'Uthman's brother-in-law, and the two men could be expected to support each other. The former also had the wholehearted support of Sa'd b. Abi Waqqas, a fellow clan member and cousin from the Banu Zuhra.

In this way the direct support and influence of the most important political elements among the Muhajirun were secured to oppose any possible activity from the Banu Hashim and their partisans in favour of 'Ali's candidacy. 'Ali's serious disagreements with the policies of 'Umar in both political and religious matters will be discussed below in connection with the selection of 'Uthman. Here it may be pointed out in passing that during the most active and eventful ten years of 'Umar's caliphate, in which the most spectacular conquests of Persian and Byzantine provinces took place and in which all the prominent Companions of the Prophet took active part, 'Ali remained uninvolved. Nor did 'Ali hold any office under 'Umar, as had been the case under Abu Bakr and would continue later under 'Uthman. The only exception was his being in charge of Medina during

'Umar's journey to Palestine, when he took with him all the other leading Companions of the Prophet and military commanders to approve regulations of the conquest and the Diwan. 'Ali alone was absent from the historic surrender of Jerusalem and Syria. 'Umar is reported to have strictly prevented the Banu Hashim from going out of Medina.<sup>17</sup>

This is evident from the very fact that neither 'Ali nor any other member of the Banu Hashim has been reported to have taken part in any activity outside the capital.

'Umar's attitude towards 'Ali is best illustrated by a dialogue which took place between the former and Ibn 'Abbas. On a certain occasion 'Umar asked Ibn 'Abbas, "Why did 'Ali not join us and co-operate with us? Why did the Quraysh not support your family while your father is the uncle and you are the cousin of the Prophet?" "I do not know," replied Ibn 'Abbas. "But I know the reason," said 'Umar. "Because the Quraysh did not like to allow both the Prophethood and the caliphate to be combined in your house, for with this you would feel arrogant and rejoice."<sup>18</sup>

In another version, when 'Umar heard some verses of Zuhayr b. Abi Sulma which described the glory, nobility of descent, and virtues of the clan of Banu 'Abd Allah b. Ghatfan, he said to Ibn 'Abbas: "I do not know any other clan among the Quraysh to whom these verses can be better applied than the Banu Hashim, because of their relationship and superior claims to the Prophet, but the people did not like to allow the Prophethood and the caliphate in your family so that you would become arrogant and rejoice at it among the people. The Quraysh, therefore, preferred to choose the leader for themselves and they made the right choice and were guided by God in that." "O, Prince of the Faithful," said Ibn 'Abbas, "as for your statement that the Quraysh chose their own leader and were guided in the right choice, it may be correct if the choice of Quraysh for their leader was in the same sense as the choice of God from among the Quraysh.

As for your statement that the Quraysh did not like to allow both the Prophethood and the caliphate to be with us, it is not surprising, for God has described many people who disliked what God has sent down to them and thus render their deeds fruitless'.<sup>19</sup> At this point 'Umar became angry and said: "I have heard many things about you but I ignored them because of my regard for you. I am told that you think that we have taken away the caliphate from you through oppression and because of envy." "As for oppression, it is evident," said Ibn 'Abbas, "and as concerns envy, so it is obvious; Satan envied Adam and we are the children of Adam." 'Umar lost his temper and retorted, "Alas, O Banu Hashim, your hearts are full of hatred, rancour, and false pretensions." "Be gentle, O Prince of the Faithful," said Ibn 'Abbas, "and do not describe the hearts of the people from whom God has removed all kinds of uncleanness and purified them with complete purification.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the Prophet himself belonged to the Banu Hashim."

"Let us leave this topic," said 'Umar.<sup>21</sup> The dialogue speaks for itself and needs no comment. It will suffice to say that it is one of the most revealing statements in explaining the attitude of 'Umar towards 'Ali on the one hand, and the Hashimite attitude towards 'Ali's predecessors in the caliphate on the other.

However, the dominating personality of 'Umar and his realistic understanding of the tides of the time were strong enough not to allow any manifestation of discontent during his rule, which was continuously involved in the conquest of rich new lands for Islam. The occupation of Abu Bakr with quelling the rebellion of the apostate tribes within the Arabian peninsula, and of 'Umar in conquering foreign lands, served, consciously or unconsciously, to keep internal feuds at rest. On the whole, the caliphate of 'Umar, as that of his predecessor Abu Bakr, characterizes a period in which Islamic ideals of simplicity,

justice, equality, devotion to the cause, zeal for the faith, and a socio-economic equilibrium according to their understanding of these, were best represented. After a successful rule of ten years, however, the powerful caliph met his end by the dagger of a Persian slave and died on 26 Dhu'l-Hijja 23/3 November 644.

Unlike Abu Bakr, 'Umar during his long caliphate could not develop complete trust and confidence in any one person to justify nominating him as his successor.<sup>22</sup> He nevertheless restricted the choice to six of the early Companions among the Muhajirun, who had to choose one of themselves as the new caliph.

The members of this committee, later referred to by the Muslim jurists and theorists as the Shura or electorate body, were: 'Uthman, 'Abd ar-Rahman b. 'Awf, Sa'd b. Abi Waqqas, 'Ali, Zubayr, and Talha, with 'Umar's own son 'Abd Allah only in the capacity of an advisor, not as a candidate.<sup>23</sup> Two conspicuous factors are to be observed here. First, the community at Medina as a whole had no say in the selection of the new leader, as both candidacy and decision-making power were confined to the six persons nominated by the Caliph; thus the principle of so-called democracy or election by the people in choosing their leader cannot be applied.

Second and more important is the fact that the Ansar of Medina were completely excluded from expressing their opinion in the affair of the leadership. Perhaps this was due either to their pro-'Alid sympathies manifested at the Saqifa, or to 'Umar's desire to eliminate any possibility of an Ansari being suggested as a candidate. This proved to be a serious blow to the political influence of the Ansar, and one from which they were never able to recover.

It is not intended to record here in detail the events of the Shura as such, but rather to recall what had a direct bearing on the development of Shi'ism. According to the unanimous account given by our sources, 'Umar meticulously laid down the regulations which had to be followed by the committee.

These regulations were that:

- 1 : the new caliph must be one of this committee, elected by the majority vote of its members;
- 2: that in the case of two candidates having equal support, the one backed by 'Abd ar-Rahman b. 'Awf was to be nominated;
- 3: that if any member of the council shrank from participating, he was to be beheaded instantly; and
- lastly, 4: that when a candidate had been duly elected, in the event of one or two members of the conclave refusing to recognize him, this minority, or, in the case of equal division of three members on each side, the group opposed to 'Abd ar-Rahman, were to be slain. To enforce this order 'Umar called in Abu Talha al-Ansari<sup>24</sup> of the tribe of Khazraj, commanding him to select fifty trusted persons from his tribe to stand at the door of the assembly with swords in hand to ensure that the members of the committee should follow these orders.<sup>25</sup> By appointing the Khazrajites, who immediately after the death of the

Prophet had wanted the leadership for themselves, 'Umar guaranteed that his orders would not be taken lightly.

There is hardly any room to doubt the authenticity of the report that 'Umar imposed such stern regulations on the members of the committee. Few accounts in the early history of Islam have received such unanimous historical testimony as that of 'Umar's arrangements of the Shura and the regulations laid down by him.

A comparison of the texts of Baladhuri, Ya'qubi, Tabari; and Mas'udi, followed by numerous other historians such as Dhahabi and Ibn al-Athir, shows that the basic account is the same in all of them. All these writers cite different authorities belonging to different and often conflicting schools of thought and inclination.<sup>26</sup> Nabia Abbott<sup>27</sup> has recently published a papyrus fragment of Ibn Ishaq's Ta'rikh al-Khulafa' (with valuable commentary) which deals with the Shura and the terms fixed by 'Umar. Ibn Ishaq wrote at least one hundred years before any one of the historians cited above, and it is of great importance to note that the account given by Ibn Ishaq is strikingly the same.

This confirms the account of our historians. Besides this unanimous historical testimony, the circumstances of the time and other guiding factors strongly attest to the accuracy of the account. When we compare 'Umar's characteristic sternness dominant in his personality and the decisive policies that characterized his rule, with the nature of the regulations imposed by him on the members of the electorate council at such a critical moment, the two factors are in conformity with each other. In addition, the manner in which all the historians record the conditions makes it clear that, on the one hand, 'Umar was sure that only one of these six companions could become the next caliph, but, on the other hand, he was certain that they would oppose each other in order to avail themselves of the opportunity for leadership.

He was therefore afraid of critical dissension among the possible candidates and the disastrous consequences this would have for the young community. This is clearly evident from the report that 'Umar called in the members of the Shura and said: "I looked around and found that you are the leaders of the people and the caliphate cannot go except to one of you; but I am afraid that dissension will arise among you and [because of your dissension] the people will also split among themselves.<sup>28</sup> Thus motivated, he laid down such stringent restrictions as he deemed necessary to protect the community from the effects of disastrous schism.

These measures, however, did simultaneously accomplish two main purposes which seem to have been in the mind of the dying Caliph, and which he must have thought to be in the best interests of the community. On the one hand, these measures saved the young Umma, though only for the time being, from serious dissension; on the other hand, through these meticulous arrangements 'Umar completed the task of keeping the caliphate away from the Banu Hashim, an endeavour he had undertaken immediately after the Prophet's death. Being fully aware of 'Ali's claims and remembering that he had not even recognized Abu Bakr for six months,

'Umar knew that 'Ali would not agree to make his claims the subject of debate in a self-instituted council of electors unless he was bound to do so under compulsion. Though aware of the considerable ambitions of both Zubayr and Talha, 'Umar also realized that 'Ali and 'Uthman, among all other members

of the council, carried much more weight and realistically were the only ones who had the support necessary to advance themselves as serious candidates, each backed by his own clan, the Banu Hashim and the Banu Umayya respectively.

'Umar also seems to have realized that 'Ali stood a much better chance of success now than 'Uthman on the grounds which have been discussed in Chapter I. It was no longer possible for the Caliph to simply ignore the claims of 'Ali; and had he not forced him to become a member of the Shura, he would have given the Prophet's cousin and the candidate of the Banu Hashim a free hand to strive for office for himself.<sup>29</sup> By bestowing both the chairmanship and the final authority of the committee on 'Abd ar-Rahman b. 'Awf, 'Umar effectively blocked the chances of 'Ali and virtually guaranteed the nomination of 'Uthman. This was such an obvious fact that almost all of our sources record it in the very words of 'Ali himself. When he heard the regulations laid down by 'Umar and that 'Abd ar-Rahman was given the casting vote,

'Ali remonstrated, saying:

“By God, the caliphate (Amr) has again been taken away from us because the final authority rests in the hands of 'Abd ar-Rahman, who is an old friend and brother-in-law of 'Uthman, whereas Sa'd b. Abi Waqqas is 'Abd ar-Rahman's cousin from the Banu Zuhra; naturally these three will support each other, and even if Zubayr and Talha vote for me it would be of no

use.<sup>30</sup> In this way, 'Umar dealt a final blow to the superior claims of the Banu Hashim by giving their old rivals, the Banu Umayya, a new lease of power. The clan of Umayya, on its part, saw this as its golden opportunity, and Abu Sufyan in particular regarded the accession of 'Uthman as the return of the entire clan to a position of power which they should at all

costs preserve.<sup>31</sup> 'Abbas b. 'Abd al-Muttalib, the Prophet's uncle and head of the Banu Hashim, is reported to have warned 'Ali not to participate in the Shura and to maintain his freedom of action,<sup>32</sup> but 'Umar's provisions precluded such a course of action. All of our sources agree that 'Ali yielded only under direct pressure, threatened by fear of arms if he declined to abide by 'Umar's will.<sup>33</sup> When one recalls 'Ali's protests twelve years earlier against the nomination of Abu Bakr after the death of the Prophet, it is not difficult to imagine how deeply disappointed 'Ali must have been to see, for a third time, another man given preference over him. This he describes in his speech of Ash-Shaqshiqiyya, the first part of which has been quoted above:

”Umar [from his deathbed] entrusted it [the choice of caliph] to six persons among whom he claimed one was I. By God, and what a council [i.e., “what chance did I stand in it?"]. When did doubt about me cross anyone's mind, even in the case of the first of them [Abu Bakr] so that I was associated to a member of his like?<sup>34</sup> But I went along with them in all situations and I dropped low when they dropped and flew up when they flew. Then one of them [Sa'd] inclined towards his companion ['Abd ar-Rahman] while 'Abd ar-Rahman swayed in favour of his brother-in-law ['Uthman], and they did other unmentionable things.<sup>35</sup>

It is by no means easy to establish what really transpired in the deliberations and debates of the council which resulted in the appointment of 'Uthman. In the mass of the material handed down to us, there is, however, a commonly reported tradition, at once very important and most revealing. It is said that, after three days of long debates and wrangling, at the time of the morning prayer when the Muslims assembled in the mosque to hear the decision of the electoral body, 'Abd ar-Rahman b. 'Awf first offered the caliphate to 'Ali on two conditions: one, that he should rule in accordance with the Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet; and two, that he must follow the precedents established by two former caliphs. Accepting the first condition, 'Ali declined to comply with the second, declaring that in all cases in which he found no positive law of the Qur'an or decision of the Prophet, he would only rely on his own judgement. 'Abd ar-Rahman then turned to 'Uthman and put the same conditions before him. 'Uthman readily consented to them, whereupon 'Abd ar-Rahman declared him caliph.<sup>36</sup>

As will be discussed below, this point was later made the basis of the differences between Sunny and Shi'i legal theory and practice, whereby the Shi'i jurists rejected the decisions of the first three caliphs.

This tradition bears the unanimous testimony of both Sunni and Shi'i historians alike, and therefore its authenticity can hardly be questioned, as has been done by some scholars. If later Sunni theologians attempted to ignore it, it was simply because of the fact that the tradition compromised the newly established concept of the acceptance of the first four caliphs as the Rashidun (rightly guided), and their decisions as precedents for the foundation of the fama'a. Apart from this historical evidence, the most convincing factor in support of the accuracy of this tradition lies in 'Ali's own independent nature and in the marked individuality of his character.

When we try to delineate 'Ali's character from his conversion to Islam at the age of ten or so until his death, the following characteristics emerge. He was uncompromising in his principles, straightforward, and above all too stern in his religious outlook, a factor which may have contributed to the later failure of his own caliphate. These features predominate throughout his career. It is not possible here to go into the details of his biography, but the clearest expressions of his independent attitude are to be found in instances such as when he insisted that hadd (punishment) be carried out on 'Abd Allah b. 'Umar for the murder of Hurmuzan.<sup>37</sup> On another occasion, when all others refused to administer the flogging punishment on Walid b. 'Uqba, guilty of drunkenness, 'Ali took this task on himself.<sup>38</sup> A still stronger manifestation of his rigid adherence to principles was when he issued orders of dismissal to Mu'awiya and other Umayyad governors, though advised by his friends to first consolidate his strength in the capital.<sup>39</sup>

As has been discussed above, even during 'Ali's period of general inactivity there were points of serious disagreement between him and the Caliphs Abu Bakr and 'Umar. He was entirely opposed to 'Umar on the question of Diwan, and recommended the distribution of the entire revenue, holding nothing in reserve, a policy which 'Umar did not accept.<sup>40</sup> Involving, as it did, so many administrative and financial

questions, this disagreement can hardly be considered insignificant, and in fact it was only one of several major disputes to which the sources allude. Nasr b. Muzahim al-Minqari (died 212/827), one of the earliest writers of great importance and credibility, preserved for us the revealing correspondence exchanged between 'Ali and Mu'awiya.

Mu'awiya, in his letter to 'Ali, besides accusing him of responsibility for the murder of 'Uthman, which is the main theme of the letter, levelled other charges against him as well.

One of them was that 'Ali tried to rebel against Abu Bakr, delayed in recognizing him as the caliph, did not co-operate with the first two caliphs during their caliphates, and continually disagreed with them.<sup>41</sup> 'Ali in his reply, while rejecting all other accusations as false, argued that his delay in recognizing Abu Bakr and his resentment towards him was due to the fact that he considered himself better qualified for the leadership of the community on the same grounds as Abu Bakr had put forward against the Ansar. That is, if the Quraysh had better claims as against the Ansar because of the former's relationship to the Prophet, then the Banu Hashim had the strongest rights, being nearest to the Prophet in relationship.<sup>42</sup>

'Abd ar-Rahman knew these differences full well and at the same time he also knew equally well 'Ali's independent and uncompromising nature. But this time, with the deaths of the dominating personalities of Abu Bakr, 'Umar, and Abu 'Ubayda b. al-Jarrah, it was not so easy to set 'Ali aside without serious cause, for his possible rivals (or rival in the person of 'Uthman) were much inferior to him in many ways. The deed was, however, accomplished by involving 'Ali in an elective committee in which he had no chance of gaining solid majority support, and then offering him the caliphate on terms which would be unacceptable to him.

'Uthman was a weak man; apart from considerations of family relationships and personal friendship, this weakness was probably one of the reasons why 'Abd ar-Rahman supported him. Realizing the weakness of his own claims to the office, 'Abd ar-Rahman wanted to establish as caliph a man who would rely on him and serve his interests, which were those of the Quraysh aristocracy and the rich. 'Ali, who belonged to the poor and ascetically minded (zuhhad) class, had little in common with such interests and is reported to have repeatedly denounced worldly comforts by saying, "O gold and silver, try to tempt someone other than me."<sup>43</sup>

In contrast to this attitude, 'Abd ar-Rahman and other members of the Shura were men of prosperity and wealth, and now with the conquests of the Byzantine and Persian empires, they were avidly seeking the tremendous new opportunities opened up before them. 'Uthman's caliphate provided them with such an opportunity and within a few years they had accumulated enormous wealth and had become the richest people of the community. 'Uthman himself left at his death 100,000 dinars, 1,000,000 dirhams, and estates worth over 100,000 dinars in addition to herds of horses and camels. Similarly the riches of 'Abd ar-Rahman, Zubayr, Talha and Sa'd b. Abi Waqqas are described as running into millions.<sup>44</sup> Apart from group politics and party partisanship, it was therefore quite natural for such men to elect someone

representing their own class.

The selection of 'Uthman did not pass without serious protest from 'Ali himself and opposition from some of his old and ardent partisans. Keeping in view the long-standing disputes between the Banu Hashim and the Banu Umayya, going back to the days of Hashim b. 'Abd Manaf and his brother 'Abd ash-Shams over the religious and political leadership of the Quraysh, one can well imagine Banu Hashim's feelings now that the new authority stemming from Muhammad, a Hashimite, had been taken over by an Umayyad. T

he speeches made and the harsh words exchanged between the supporters of 'Ali and those of 'Uthman, following 'Abd ar-Rahman's announcement of the selection of the latter, manifest not only partisanship for one or the other, but the trends of thinking and the fundamental differences in approach. Ibn Abi Sarh, a notorious Umayyad, once condemned to death by the Prophet,<sup>45</sup> spoke enthusiastically in support of 'Uthman, with whom he had been suckled by the same wet-nurse, and said to 'Abd ar-Rahman, "If you desire that the Quraysh should not split among themselves, then appoint 'Uthman." On this 'Ammar b. Yasir, an ardent supporter of 'Ali, rebuking Ibn Abi Sarh and referring to his past anti-Islamic career, reproachfully said, "Since when have you become an advisor to the Muslims?"<sup>46</sup>

A heated exchange of words followed between the Banu Hashim and the Banu Umayya. Here the statement of 'Ammar is worth noting, when he said, "O people, God has made us most honourable through His Prophet and distinguished us through His religion, but you are turning away from the people of the house (Ahl al-Bayt) of your Prophet."

In reply to this, someone from the clan of Makhzum, an old rival of the Banu Hashim, retorted, saying: "This is a matter to be settled among the Quraysh themselves [Ammar was a South Arabian]. Who are you to interfere in our affairs?"<sup>47</sup> The protest of Miqdad in favour of 'Ali was even stronger than that of 'Ammar. He said: "It is very hard to see how the people are paying their respect to the members of the family (Ahl al-Bayt) of their Prophet after him. It is indeed shocking to see that the Quraysh have forsaken and by-passed the man who is the best among them."

Then someone asked Miqdad: "Who are these Ahl al-Bayt, and who is that man from them?" "Ahl al-Bayt means Banu 'Abd al-Muttalib and the man is 'Ali b. Abu Talib," replied Miqdad.<sup>48</sup> These protests may be taken as some of the documented remnants of much more serious vocal disputes: fragments that survived the dominant trends in the history of this critical period of Islam. What must particularly be noted here is the frequent use of the term Ahl al-Bayt of the Prophet in relation to the leadership of the community. Keeping in mind the importance of the noble families and the concept of sacerdotal lineages among some sections of the Arabs, as discussed in Chapter 1, it is easily understandable that some people were shocked to see the family of the Prophet so deprived after his death.

The most significant point in this whole event of the Shura, however, lies in 'Ali's historic refusal to follow the precedents established by the first two caliphs. This intransigent declaration of 'Ali forms the most important and the earliest theoretical point which ultimately gave rise to the later development of two different schools of law under the titles of Shi'i and Sunni, the former including the Ithna 'Ashari, Isma'ili, and Zaydi, the latter including the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i and Hanbali. If ideological differences between the two schools date back to the event of the Saqifa, the differences, in legal matters at least theoretically, must be dated from 'Ali's refusal to follow the precedents of the first two caliphs.

This refusal thus serves as a cornerstone in the development of Shi'i legal thought. An exponent of the history of ideas would tell us that it often takes a considerably long time for a given idea to present itself in a complete form, and as we shall see later, the idea expressed by 'Ali in the Shura took at least fifty years to become manifest in a distinguishable independent form and was not fully developed until the imamate of Ja'far as-Sadiq.

To conclude this phase, we can remark that the selection of 'Uthman was very largely based on economic, social, and tribal considerations, as exemplified by the speeches made on his behalf. On the other hand, the protests against 'Uthman's nomination and in support of 'Ali from men like 'Ammar and Miqdad were very largely based on religious aspirations. The arguments put forward by these supporters of 'Ali, as quoted above, concerning his relationship with the Prophet and his unsurpassed services to Islam, practically echo the statements made in favour of 'Ali's cause at the Saqifa over a decade earlier. Despite his passive and withdrawn attitude, 'Ali still retained a devoted core of supporters in the Muslim community.

---

1. For 'Ali's active participation and unceasing services in furthering the cause of Islam during Muhammad's lifetime, the fullest and most reliable source is Ibn Hisham's *Sira*.

2. This contrast is pointed out by Veccia Vaglieri, in EI2 article "'Ali".

3. Tabari, I, p. 1827; Baladhuri, I, p. 588

4. e.g. *Isti'ab*, III, p. 1104. For Shi'i sources see Majlisi, *Bihar*, VIII, p. 59; *Ihtijaj*, I, p. 103

5. L.V. Vaglieri, EI2 article "'Ali"

6. For the Ithna 'Asharites, see Kulayni, *Usul al-Kafi* and *Furu' al-Kafi*; for the Isma'ilites, see Qadi Nu'man, *Da'a'im al-Islam*

7. Some scholars have questioned the authenticity of the *Nahj al-Balagha* and have suggested that it was written by Ash-Sharif ar-Radi himself and attributed to 'Ali. This allegation, in light of my own research on the subject, is absolutely without foundation. Ash-Sharif ar-Radi, the compiler of the *Nahj al-Balagha*, died in 406/1115, but most of the material of the *Nahj al-Balagha* I have found word-for-word in sources written long before the fifth century of Islam. These sources include, for example, Nasr b. Muzahim al-Minqari's *Waq'at Siffin*, Ya'qubi's *Ta'rikh*, Jahiz *Al-Bayan wa'l-Tabyin*, Mubarrad's *Kamil*, Baladhuri's *Ansab al-Ashraf* and many other standard works of the second, third, and fourth centuries. I am currently

preparing a critical translation of the Nahj al-Balagha in which these sources will be fully analyzed and cited.

8. Hayyan had a princely estate in Al-Yamaha where he used to keep the poet A'sha, of the tribe of Banu Qays, under his protection and in luxury and comfort. After the death of Hayyan the poet lost all those privileges and was stricken by poverty, wandering about from place to place. By quoting a'sha, 'Ali compares his prestigious status and active life during the lifetime of the Prophet with the negligent attitude of the people towards him after the death of the Prophet. See Hadid, Sharh, I, pp. 166 f.

9. Nahj al-Balagha, ed. Muhammad Abu'l-Fadl Ibrahim (Cairo, 1963), I, p.29. For other references before Ash-Sharif ar-Radi see Ibn Abel's Hadid, Sharh, I, pp.205 f. and passim, where Abu Ja'far Ahmad b. Muhammad (d. 274/887) Kitab al-Mahasin, Ibrahim h. Muhammad ath-Thaqafi (d. 283/896) Kitab al-Gharat, Abu 'Ali Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Jubba'i (d. 303/915), and Abu 'l-Qasim al-Balkhi (d. 502/1108) Kitab al-Insaf, are quoted. Also see Saduq (d. 381/991), 'Ilal ash-Shara'i', p. 68; Ma'ani, Al-Akhbar, p. 132; Mufid (d. 413/1022), Irshad, p. 166; Tusi (d. 460/1067), Amali; p.237

10. Ibn Sa'd, II, pp. 314 ff; Ibn Hisham, III, pp.352, 368; Ya'qubi, II, p. 127; Isti'ab, II, p.57'. Also cf. Vaglieri, EI2 article "Fadak". For the Shi'i position see Tabarsi, Ihtijaj, I, pp. 131-149

11. Various versions in Ibn Sa'd, II, pp. 314 ff; Bukhari, Sahih, II p. 435. For the Shi'i position, see Ya'qubi, II, p. 127, also Amini, A'yan, II, pp.461 ff.

12. Jahiz, Rasa'il, ed. Sandubi, "Min Kitabih fi'l-'Abbasiyya", p.300

13. See the whole account in Tabari, I, pp.2137 ff.; Ya'qubi, II, p. 136 f.; Hadid, Sharh,, I, p. 163 ff.

14. Ya'qubi, ibid.; also see Tabari, I, p. 2138 ; 'Iqd, IV, p. 267, with slight variations in wording

15. Tabari, I, p.2137; Ya'qubi, loc. cit.; Hadid, Sharh, I, p. 164. Also see Mubarrad, Kamil, I, p.7

16. cf. Mas'udi, Muruj, II, pp.332 f.

17. cf. Vaglieri, EI2 article "'Ali"

18. Tabari, I, p.2769

19. Reference to Qur'an, XLVII,9

20. Reference to Qur'an, XXXIII, 33

21. Tabari, I, pp.2770 f.

22. Abu 'Ubayda b. al-Jarrah,, in whom 'Umar had full confidence and who was one of the triumvirate, had died in the plague of 639-640.

23. Ibn Sa'd, III, pp. 6i f., pp.331 ff; Baladhuri, V, pp. i6 ff.; Ya'qubi, II, pp. 160 ff.; Tabari, II, pp. 2778 ff.; Mas'udi, Tanbih, pp.290 f.; Dhahabi, Ta'rikh, II, pp.74 ff.; Hadid, Sharh, I,pp. 163 ff; pp. 185 ff.; 'Iqd, IV, p.275

24. Isti'ab, IV, pp. 1697-9; Tahdhib, III, p.414

25. Ibn Sa'd; III, pp.341 ff.; Baladhuri, V, p. 18; Ya'qubi, II.. p. 160; Tabari, I, pp.2770 ff.; Mas'udi. Tanbih, p.291 ; 'Iqd, IV, p.275; Hadid, Sharh, I, p. 187

26. e.g., see different isnads in Tabari, loc. cit., and Baladhuri, loc. cit., where the reports of Muhammad b. Sa'd from Waqidi, a die-hard pro-'Uthmanid, are exactly the same as that of Abu Mikhnaf, a confirmed Shi'i. Even reports going back to 'Umar's son 'Abd Allah and that of Ibn 'Abbas are the same.

27. Studies, I, pp. 80-99

28. Ibn Sa'd, III, pp.344 ff.; Baladhuri, V, pp. 16, 18; Tabari, I, p. 2778; 'Iqd, IV, p.275

29. See 'Umar's conversation with the members of the Shura and especially with 'Ali and 'Uthman in Tabari, I, p.2779; Baladhuri, V, p. 16. The oldest source on this subject, the fragment of the Ta'rikh al-Khulafa records the same conversations of 'Umar with the electors and indicates at least 'Umar's awareness (though not his acceptance) of the strength of 'Ali's claims. See Abbott, Studies, I, p. 81. Also see Ibn Sa'd, III, pp.62 and 339 ff, where a later version incorporates some dramatic changes in the tradition at the expense of 'Ali.

30. Baladhuri, V, p. 19; Tabari, I, p.2780; 'Iqd, IV, p.276; Hadid, Sharh, I, p. 191

31. Aghani; VI, pp.334 f.

32. Baladhuri, V, p. 19; Tabari, I, p.2780; 'Iqd, IV, pp.275 f.

33. Baladhuri, V, pp. 21 f.; Tabari, I, pp.2779 f.

34. i.e. "When my personal excellence was not questionable in comparison to Abu Bakr, how can it be then compared to men like Sa'd b. Abi Waqqas, 'Abd ar-Rahman, and 'Uthman etc.?"

35. See note 8 above
36. Baladhuri, V, p.22; Ya'qubi, I, p. 162; Tabari, I, p.2793; 'Iqd, IV, p.279; Hadid, Sharh, I, pp. 188, 194
37. Baladhuri, V, p.24; Tabari, I, p.2796
38. Baladhuri, V, p. 33 ; Mas'udi, Muruj III, p.225
39. Tabari, I, pp. 3082 ff, 3085; Dinawari, Akhbar, p. 142; Mas'udi, Muruj, II, pp.353 f.; Ya'qubi; II, p. 180
40. See Vaglieri, EI2 article "Ali,"
41. Minqari, Waq'at Siffin p.8
42. ibid., p.89
43. Ibn Khaldun, Muqaddima, pp.542 f; 'Iqd, IV, p.313; also see Mas'udi, Muruj, II, pp.425 ff
44. For the details of each one's wealth, see Ibn Khaldun, loc. cit.; Mas'udi, Muruj, II, p.332
45. Baladhuri, V, p. 49; Tabari, I, p.2871
46. Tabari, I, p.2785; 'Iqd, IV, p.279
47. ibid.
48. Tabari, I, pp.2786 f.; 'Iqd, loc. cit.

---

**Source URL:**

<https://www.al-islam.org/the-origins-and-early-development-of-shia-islam-sayyid-jafari/chapter-3-ali-and-first-two-caliphs>