

Chapter 4: The Re-emergence of the 'Alid Party

The sixteen-year period beginning with the caliphate of 'Uthman (24/644) and ending with the assassination of 'Ali (41/661) represents a marked difference from the preceding period of the caliphate of Abu Bakr and 'Umar in the development of Shi'ism in Islam. It was a turning point in many ways. Firstly, this period created an atmosphere which encouraged Shi'i tendencies to become more evident and conspicuous. Secondly, the events which took place gave an active and sometimes violent character to the hitherto inactive Shi'i movement. Finally, the circumstances which prevailed involved the Shi'i outlook, for the first time, in a number of political, geographical, and economic considerations.

The period was therefore one in which the desire of the first Shi'is to express their ideas on the succession of 'Ali, the religious zeal of the Companions, personal hatreds, provincial and economic interests, political intrigues, and the discontent of the poor against the rich were fused together. This fusion not only provided a new sphere of activity for the Shi'i movement, but also widened its circle of influence to those who needed an outlet for their political grievances, especially those against Mu'awiya, the representative of the Umayyad aristocracy and Syrian domination. Seeing in 'Ali a champion of the political independence of Iraq, as opposed to this Syrian domination, these groups supported him and were for the time being of the same mind as the religious supporters of 'Ali, who believed in his right to the caliphate based on the theocratic principle.

The emergence of the political Shi'a is characterized both by the increase in its influence and its numbers and by the sudden rapidity with which it henceforth grew. An examination of the period in which this emergence occurred will result in a clearer insight into the split which developed within the main body of Islam.

Abu Bakr and 'Umar did not give their respective clansmen any particular share in the rule of the Muslim community, nor were their clans of much political consequence. Such was not the case with 'Uthman. His clan wanted to regain its past political importance after having taken second place to the Hashimites after the victory of Muhammad. When 'Uthman was elected, the Umayyads regarded this as a triumph for the whole clan, not solely as 'Uthman's personal success.¹ They considered it natural that the Caliph

should give them a share of the profits, and their demands could hardly be refused by the new caliph, who felt that his strength lay in the support and good will of his powerful clansmen.

He did what he could to satisfy their demands, and the people were painfully disillusioned when they found the Caliph committed to the improvement of the lot of his own family and clan rather than to the welfare of the community as a whole. 'Uthman made no secret of bestowing favours on his kinsmen, and justified this action by saying: "The Prophet used to bestow offices on his kinsmen, and I happen to belong to people who are poor. So I let my hands a bit loose in regard to that with which I have been entrusted by virtue of the care I take of it"²

It is an historical fact that within a few years of 'Uthman's accession the Umayyads claimed among themselves the governorships of Kufa, Basra (capital of a vast territory including Iran and Central Asia and extending to Sind), Syria, and Egypt: all the important provinces of the empire. These Umayyad governors, in turn, relied on the support of their own kinsmen, whom they placated and allowed to dominate the caliphal councils.³

The critical problem here was not so much that the Umayyads dominated all positions of power and advantage, but rather that they were allowed enough latitude to use their powers arbitrarily and unfairly for the benefit of themselves and their kinsmen, thus incurring the dissatisfaction and hatred of many Muslims. 'Abd Allah b. Sa'd b. Abi Sarh, 'Uthman's milk-brother, who administered Egypt, was an extremely unpopular man, whom the Prophet had ordered to be killed during the conquest of Mecca.⁴ Al-Walid b. 'Uqba, 'Uthman's half-brother, was even more intensely hated by the Kufans, whom he treated in brutal fashion.

He divided lands among his favourites and finally disgraced himself by drunkenness.⁵ 'Uthman was obliged to recall him and appointed another close relative, Sa'id b. Al-'As, who infuriated the local notables by his high-handed treatment of them, then alarmed them by declaring that the Sawad of Kufa would become a "Garden of the Quraysh". Provoked by such abuses, a group of the Qur'an readers in Kufa, such as Malik b. Harith an-Nakha'i, Sulayman b. Surad al-Khuzai, Hujr b. 'Adi al-Kindi, Shurayh b. 'Awf al-'Absi, and others, protested in vain against Sa'id's behaviour. Instead of making proper inquiries,

'Uthman ordered the agitators to be sent to Syria for Mu'awiya to deal with.⁶

The names of these distinguished Qur'an readers are to be taken seriously as they afterwards appeared as the leaders of the Shi'i movement in Kufa. They stood at the forefront of 'Ali's army at the battles of Al-Jamal and Siffin, and even after 'Ali's assassination they never reconciled themselves with Mu'awiya. Similarly, the groups of the Qur'an readers from Egypt and Basra were not less violent in their protests against the free hand given by the Caliph to his Umayyad governors and their highhanded treatment of the people.

This clash with the Qur'an readers set the seal on 'Uthman's unpopularity in religious circles in the provinces. Here we must point out that the word qurra' (Qur'an readers) used by our sources implies those who distinguished themselves and were recognized by the people as learned in religious matters, and who taught the people the Qur'an and religious observances. Naturally they carried great prestige among the masses and were regarded as the intelligentsia of the people.

In addition to appointing many of his clansmen to lucrative posts, 'Uthman made large gifts to others.⁷ At the same time, he treated some of the Companions of the Prophet very harshly. 'Abd Allah b. Mas'ud, then in charge of the treasury in Kufa, was recalled after a quarrel with Al-Walid b. 'Uqba, and the Caliph allowed him to be manhandled in his presence.⁸ Even worse was the treatment received by 'Ammar b. Yasir, who was reviled and beaten into unconsciousness when he arrived from Egypt with a letter of complaint against Ibn Abi Sarh.⁹

During the last few years of 'Uthman's reign, the major part of the population was seething with discontent over the spectacle of Umayyad aristocrats seated in high offices, enjoying wealth and luxury, indulging in debauchery, and lavishly spending the immense wealth which they appropriated to themselves illegitimately. The resulting disequilibrium in the economic and social structure naturally aroused the jealousy of various sections of the population and provided ample combustible material for an explosion. One outspoken leader of the criticism against 'Uthman's regime was Abu Dharr, a fearless and uncompromising partisan of frugality and asceticism who violently protested against the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few and demanded the distribution of lands among the community. 'Uthman, who did not like the idea of Abu Dharr thundering against the wealthy in the mosque of Medina, sent him to Syria. Before long, the Caliph received a letter from Mu'awiya complaining of Abu Dharr's dangerous activities and ordered that Abu Dharr be bound to a wooden camel saddle and be sent back to Medina under escort. He arrived in the city half dead, with the flesh torn off his thighs, and he was shortly thereafter exiled to Ar-Rabdha, where he soon died.¹⁰ His misadventures were widely related throughout the provinces, awakening an echo of bitterness against 'Uthman and the class of the rich concurrently with the propagation of 'Ali's claims to the caliphate.

In this connection the speeches of Abu Dharr, frequently delivered in the mosque of Medina, are of special interest. Gathering people around himself, he used to say:

"... 'Ali is the legatee (wasi) of Muhammad and the inheritor (wraith) of his knowledge. Oh you bewildered and perplexed community after its Prophet, if you give preference [in leadership] to those whom God has given preference, and set aside those whom God has set aside, and if you firmly place the succession and inheritance in the people of the house of your Prophet, you will certainly be prosperous and your means of subsistence will be made ample.¹¹

We must strongly dissent from the viewpoint of such writers as have laboured to present the rebellion against 'Uthman as being due to only the evil machinations of some mischief-mongers, and the

grievances they voiced as being all forged and artificial. Such writers ignore the fact that these mischief-mongers—if such they were—had real grievances to protest and the tacit support of the Sahaba to provide the necessary sanction. For discontent to develop into open rebellion, two things are essential: leadership, which must come from those who command respect in society, and the time and opportunity to organize and concert action. Both of these prerequisites were present in the last few years of 'Uthman's caliphate.¹² The attitude of the Sahaba, prominent among them being 'Ali, Talha, and Zubayr, is quite clear.

There is ample material to prove that almost all of them, and especially these three, were equally loud in their opposition to the ways of 'Uthman. Even 'Abd ar-Rahman b. 'Awf (died 32/652), who had played an all-important role in the election of 'Uthman, is reported to have hinted long before the outbreak of disturbances that he held 'Uthman's actions to be a violation of the pledge given by him at the time of his election.¹³ Even if we disagree with the reports that they wrote letters to the provincials or actually incited them in a systematic manner, the fact remains that they made no secret of their views and moral support for the rebels.

'Ali's attitude towards the situation in this period is clearly illustrated by his reaction to the punishment given to Abu Dharr. When 'Uthman ordered the latter to be exiled, he gave strict orders that no one should see him off except Marwan, who was to escort him out of Medina. Despite these orders, 'Ali, accompanied by Hasan, Husayn, and his partisan 'Ammar b. Yasir, went along with Abu Dharr for quite a long distance. When reminded of the Caliph's directive by Marwan, 'Ali replied by cursing him and striking the head of Marwan's beast with his stick. When it was time to part, Abu Dharr wept and said, "By God, whenever I see you, I remember the Prophet.¹⁴ To console Abu Dharr, 'Ali said to him:

"You were annoyed for the sake of God, so entertain hope from Him for whom you were angry. These people were afraid of you for the sake of their world, and you feared them for the sake of your religion. So leave in their hands that by reason of which they were afraid of you, and flee away with that by reason of which you feared them; for how badly do they need what you have denied them, and how little do you need what they have denied you. If you had accepted their world they would have loved you; and if you had appropriated to yourself some part of it, they would have felt more secure in your presence."¹⁵

Marwan reported the entire matter to 'Uthman, who became quite indignant at such a breach of orders. When he questioned 'Ali, the latter replied that he was not obliged to obey orders that were not compatible with common sense and justice. "My merits and excellences are far beyond yours; I am far superior to you in every respect.¹⁶ Later these points were more commonly argued by supporters of 'Ali. The Shi'i poet Sayyid al-Himyari availed himself of these arguments to express his extreme Shi'i views.

After his acceptance of Abu Bakr and the subsequent weakening of his initial party of supporters, 'Ali remained aloof from all government activities until the end of 'Umar's rule, as mentioned above. The

protest raised after the selection of 'Uthman demonstrated that 'Ali's candidacy still had many partisans, but these acted only as individuals and did not form any particular group. Once the caliphate of 'Uthman gained widespread acceptance in the community, the spontaneous protests of men such as Al-Miqdad and 'Ammar ceased, though their dissatisfaction remained.

As the Caliph gradually began to lose popularity, the old partisans of 'Ali soon revived their grievances and gave full rein to their long-suppressed desires to see 'Ali as caliph. Fresh support rallied to the Hashimite candidate as discontented elements in the empire began to crystallize into factions that needed an effective and acceptable leader. Though Talha and Zubayr had considerable local followings in Kufa and Basra respectively, they were far less important than 'Ali and their support was doomed to remain limited in character. 'Ali found himself surrounded by groups of protesters arriving from the provinces, men who called upon him to support their cause, while at the same time 'Uthman approached 'Ali and appealed to him to mediate with the rebels. Perhaps compelled by the demands of justice, 'Ali had no choice but to stand in Defence of the offended Companions and demand punishment for the blame-worthy. He himself protested against the rich gifts made by the Caliph to his kinsmen.

From this position, he was urged by the qurra' to act as their spokesman, which he did to help meet the just demands of the people on the one hand, and to extricate the Caliph from his difficulties on the other.¹⁷

Two groups, different in outlook but with the same goals, were working simultaneously and serving each other's purposes, though not consciously. One group consisted of the discontented provincial elements discussed above which had been hardest hit by the disequilibrium in the economic structure of the empire, while the other mainly comprised the loyal partisans of 'Ali. This latter group, led by men like Abu Dharr, Miqdad, 'Ammar, Hudhayfa, and several of the Ansar, enlisted a number of new activist supporters such as Ka'b b. 'Abda an-Nahdi; Malik b. Habib ath-Tha'labi and Yazid b. Qays al-Arhabi.¹⁸

Also included in this circle were the Hashimites as well as 'Ali's clients and servants. Among the latter were Qanbar b. Kadam,¹⁹ Mitham b. Yahya at-Tammar, and Rushayd al-Hujuri. Due to their religious zeal for and devotion to the person of 'Ali as the custodian of Muhammad's message and the true exponent of Islam, these men are symbolic of this stage in the growth of Shi'ism. Both Mitham at-Tammar²⁰ and Rushayd al-Hujuri²¹ were crucified in Kufa in 61/680 by 'Ubayd Allah b. Ziyad because they refused to curse 'Ali and continued their zealous adherence to him and to his house even after his death.

Their hands, legs, and tongues were cut off and their bodies were hanged, a typical example of Ibn Ziyad's brutal behaviour. Besides these supporters, later writers mention the name of 'Abd Allah b. Wahb b. Saba, known as Ibn as-Sawda', as having become a great supporter of 'Ali, travelling from place to place sowing discontent against the rule of 'Uthman.²² He is described as a former Jewish rabbi

converted to Islam; however, modern Muslim scholars such as 'Ali al-Wardi strongly suggest that 'Abd Allah b. Saba never existed, and that the activities attributed to him were carried out by 'Ammar b. Yasir, whose nickname was also as-Sawda'.²³ Modern European scholars have also expressed their doubts as to the historical personality of Ibn as-Sawda' and tend to agree that he is a legendary figure.²⁴

It is an interesting phenomenon that both the hatred against 'Uthman and the numbers of the supporters of 'Ali grew side by side. The pious opposition to the Umayyad aristocracy became eagerly involved with the partisanship for 'Ali.²⁵ In addition to 'Ali's ardent supporters, Talha and Zubayr also conducted propaganda activities against 'Uthman. When Muhammad b. Abi Bakr and Muhammad b. Abi Hudhayfa went to Egypt to rouse the people against the Caliph, they met Muhammad b. Talha, sent there by his father for the same task.²⁶ Even the widows of the Prophet opposed the Caliph, and 'A'isha was especially loud in her denunciations of "Na'thal" (of the big beard and the hairy chest), as she nicknamed him.²⁷

The simmering discontent exploded into revolt in 35/656, when rebel contingents from Kufa, Basra, and Egypt marched on Medina under the leadership of the qurra'. It is interesting to note that most of the activists leading these contingents happen to have been of Yemeni origin. These were joined by some of the pro-'Alid Medinese Muhajirun and Ansar such as 'Ammar and others. The situation soon became chaotic. The events leading to the murder of 'Uthman are beyond the scope of this study, but it seems fairly certain that his assassination exceeded the desires of even those of the Sahaba who were openly opposed to the Caliph.

Their objectives had been only to depose 'Uthman, not to kill him. It also seems clear that even during these last tumultuous days 'Ali continued to play his conciliatory and mediatory role. He many times did succeed in dispersing the unruly mob that wanted to hurt the Caliph, and during the siege he appointed his sons Hasan and Husayn to stand at the house of 'Uthman and protect him from the angry crowd. They were, however, jostled and pushed aside by the mob, and the Caliph was killed. Hearing the news, 'Ali was the first to reach the scene and was so furious at what had transpired that he slapped the face of Husayn and hit Hasan for failing to save the life of the Caliph.²⁸

In the confused atmosphere following the murder of the Caliph, the only candidate for the caliphate that was acceptable to the Muhajirun and the Ansar, as well as to the rebellious qurra', was 'Ali.²⁹ After three previous but unfulfilled aspirations to gain the office, however, 'Ali was now reluctant to accept the responsibility of leading a community so badly entangled in the question of regicide, and thus to implicate himself in the murder. Ibn 'Abd Rabbih has preserved for us 'Ali's own statement on the situation in the form of an address delivered at the time of the battle of Al-Jamal. In it, 'Ali says:

"After 'Uthman was killed, you came to me saying that you wanted to pay homage to me. I said, 'I do not

want it.' I pulled back my hand, but you stretched it forth. I tried to snatch it [my hand] away from you, but you seized it. You said, 'We will accept no other than you, and we would not have gathered together except around you.' You thronged around me like thirsty camels on their watering day, set loose by their keeper who had unfastened their tethers, until I thought you would kill me [by rushing upon me] or that some one of you would kill the other [by jumping one over the other]. In this way all of you paid me your homage, and so did Talha and Zubayr."³⁰

Pressed by the demands from almost all quarters, 'Ali finally agreed to accept the office, but he specified that he would rule strictly according to the Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet and that he would enforce justice and law regardless of any criticism or clash with the interests of any group. Talha and Zubayr, though they both had some followings from Basra and Kufa, realized that they had no chance of mustering enough support to contest 'Ali's candidacy, and they were the first to swear allegiance to him. The Medinese, joined by multitudes of those from the provinces present in the capital, acclaimed 'Ali as caliph.³¹

Through this election, 'Ali became the first and the only caliph in whose selection a great majority of the community took an active part. He was also the first among the caliphs who, because of the circumstances of his birth, combined in his person both the dynastic and the theocratic principles of succession.

From the very start, 'Ali inherited great problems which none of his three predecessors had had to face. Marwan b. al-Hakam, 'Uthman's secretary, along with some other members of the clan of Umayya, managed to escape to Syria to join Mu'awiya, carrying 'Uthman's blood-stained shirt and the severed fingers of Na'ila, the murdered caliph's widow, to use for propaganda purposes. From Syria then came the call for vengeance for 'Uthman's death and a continuous propaganda campaign against 'Ali.

The murder of 'Uthman was not a simple assassination committed by an individual to settle personal grievances, as had been the case in 'Umar's death. 'Uthman's murder was the result of a popular revolt of the poor, discontented, suppressed, and deprived people against the economic, political, and feudalist domination of an old aristocratic family. The more religiously-minded people revolted to safeguard the Islamic ideals of socio-economic justice and equality taught by the Qur'an, enforced by the Prophet, and jealously maintained by Abu Bakr and 'Umar. 'Ali's role as the mediator between the rebel qurra' and the Caliph demonstrates that, on the one hand, he himself was convinced that the resistance movement had been based on just and right demands (and thus asked the Caliph to redress their grievances), while, on the other hand, he had tried his best to save the Caliph from the hands of the unruly mob. Tempers had flared beyond anyone's control, however, and the Caliph was killed by extremists who escaped in the midst of the utter confusion that followed. 'Ali found himself in a hopeless situation. The actual murderers had fled, and it was impossible for him to locate them for punishment; yet the fact remained that many of the qurra' around 'Ali had been nearly as responsible for the tragedy as the murderers themselves. 'Ali

himself repeatedly declared that:

”...the murder of 'Uthman was an act of the days of ignorance [al-Jahiliya: the common term for the pre-Islamic period in Arabia] I am not indifferent to the demand [of 'Uthman's blood], but at present [the murderers] are beyond my power. As soon as I get hold of them, I will not hesitate to punish them.³²

Even Talha and Zubayr agreed on this point and said “the insolent and imprudent people overcame the gentle and sober ones and killed ['Uthman].”³³ In vain, however, did 'Ali try to find a peaceful solution to the problem. The paradoxical position of deploring the murder of 'Uthman while supporting the justified demands of the qurra', and cursing the murderers of the Caliph while surrounding himself with their associates, would have been a serious challenge to even the shrewdest and most cunning politician, and this was even more so in the case of 'Ali, whose rigid adherence to principles so often prevented him from adopting a practical political policy. Before long, it became obvious that 'Ali's attempts to resolve the crisis by peaceful means had failed. Challenges to his authority included even 'A'isha, who refused to return to Medina from the 'Umra (lesser pilgrimage) and turned back to Mecca when informed of the nomination of 'Ali.

Some time later, Talha and Zubayr saw an opportunity to dissociate themselves from 'Ali, and asked permission to perform the 'Umra. Though aware of their plans, 'Ali granted their request. The two joined 'A'isha in the Holy City and then announced that they had been compelled to swear allegiance to 'Ali under duress.³⁴ Though both men were ambitious for the caliphate, neither of them had been a real leader of the masses with great popular support at his command; they could never have concerted their efforts had it not been for 'A'isha, who now shifted from the position of an extreme critic of 'Uthman to assume the role of his avenger. By marching to Basra in 36/656, the triumvirate threatened to cut 'Ali off from the east and compound the problem of a rebellious Syria by creating a similar problem in Iraq. After much hesitation, 'Ali finally marched to Kufa, where he succeeded in gathering a force strong enough to defeat 'A'isha and her associates in the battle of Al-Jamal. Talha and Zubayr were slain, and 'A'isha was taken prisoner and sent safely back to Medina.

Having secured his position in Iraq for the moment, 'Ali then turned to deal with the much more dangerous problem of Mu'awiya, who, as 'Uthman's kinsman, called for vengeance,³⁵ a protest which 'Ali rejected on the grounds that the sons of 'Uthman were more entitled to this right.³⁶ Mu'awiya realized that if 'Ali managed to consolidate his authority he would dislodge the former from his position as governor of Syria. The only way to avoid this was to question the validity of 'Ali's title to the caliphate; given the circumstances in which the new caliph had been installed in office, this was not difficult. 'Ali's supporters, especially the qurra', were vigorously opposed to any compromise with Mu'awiya, and Malik al-Ashtar advised the Caliph not to enter into correspondence with the governor of Syria. Nevertheless, 'Ali tried peaceful means in dealing with his adversary; only when this failed and it became obvious that Mu'awiya had resolved to fight did 'Ali march with his forces to meet the Syrians.

The conflict of Siffin and the resulting arbitration have been thoroughly and critically studied by a number of scholars, and it is not our purpose here to re-cover well trodden ground. It will suffice to note that 'Ali's position rapidly became critical as the emergence of the Kharijites and the arbitration of Adhruh steadily eroded his strength. While he was preparing for a final struggle against Syria, a Kharijite fanatic, 'Abd ar-Rahman b. al-Muljam, struck him with a poisoned sword in the mosque of Kufa. The fourth caliph died on 21 Ramadan 40/25 January 661.

This entire period is discussed by 'Ali in the last part of his speech of Shaqshiqiyya, and his own comments are useful in examining this confused era:

“In the end, the third of them ['Uthman] stood up shrugging his shoulders arrogantly; and there stood with him the sons of his father, eating up the property of God as the camels eat up the springtide verdure, until what he had twisted became untwisted.

His destruction was complete, and his greediness made him fall to the ground. Then all of a sudden I was frightened to see a crowd of people around myself, thick as the hyena's mane, thronging towards me from every direction until [my sons] Hasan and Husayn were mobbed and my two sides were split, gathering around me like a herd of goats.

“But when I took up the government, one group broke its pledge, another rebelled, and some others transgressed, as if they had not heard the words of God, who says: 'That is the abode hereafter which we allot to those who do not seek greatness and corruption on the earth, and the end is for those who fear.' (XXVIII, 83) Nay, by God, they have heard these words and comprehend them, but the world is sweet in their eyes and they are pleased by its gaudiness.

“Nay, by Him who has split the seed and created the soul, but for the presence of those who are present and the establishment of the arguments by the existence of the helpers, as also the fact that God has disliked for the knowing ones to watch idly the fullness of the oppressor and the hunger of the oppressed, I would have thrown back its [the caliphate's] rope on its shoulder and made its last drink from the cup of the first one, and you would have found that your world is as distasteful to me as the dripping from the nose of a goat.”³⁷

With this brief summary as a foundation, we will attempt to analyse the causes and consequences of the major events of 'Ali's short-lived caliphate. It must be remembered that his succession was greatly resisted by some of the Companions of the Prophet and resulted in the first civil war in Islam; but at the same time, his so-called “failures” proved to be epoch-making in the history of the development of Shi'ism. The bitterness of the supporters of 'Ali created by his defeats and disappointments provided an historical foundation for the development of their sectarian tendencies, and the destruction done to him gave the later Shi'a enough material for the formation of their own discipline within the body of Islam.

An attempt to grasp the situation as a coherent whole reveals the fact that the selection of CAI was at once a triumph for a particular view of succession hitherto frustrated, and a great shock to all those who had successfully adopted a principle of leadership devoid of notions of primacy based on hereditary sanctity after the death of the Prophet. With the succession of CAI, these two rival views came into genuine conflict for the first time and crystallized into definite forms.

The former view, soon defeated again, was to find expression in a separatist tendency towards a, so to speak, sectarian organization; the latter re-emerged victoriously and more vigorously, and eventually shaped itself in such a way as to become the centre of the Islamic Umma, or Jama'a.

Ya'qubi records for us those speeches with which 'Ali was hailed by his enthusiastic supporters, mostly from the Ansar, on the occasion of his installation, and which illustrate those tendencies and sentiments with which he was viewed by this group. For example, Malik b. al-Harith al-Ashtar pledged his allegiance with the declaration that 'Ali was the wasi al-awsiya', the legatee from among the legatees [of the prophets], and the warith ilm al-anbiya', heir to the knowledge of the prophets.³⁸ Hodgson doubts whether these terms were really used in reference to 'Ali at such an early date.³⁹ In the first place, we must bear in mind that Malik b. al-Ashtar was of Yemenite origin. South Arabia was a land of ancient civilization where for a thousand years kings had succeeded one another according to a dynastic principle and had been regarded as having extraordinary qualities. Even if the seventh-century Arabs had no personal experience of kingship, they must have been unconsciously influenced by this continuing tradition.⁴⁰ In this case, the use of terms like wasi and warith by a man of Yemenite origin occurs as a natural and spontaneous corollary of a deep-seated cultural tradition.

In the second place, there are numerous references in contemporary writings which reflect the same spirit. In praise of 'Ali, Abu'l-Aswad ad-Du'ali sings:

'Thou art the noblest of the Quraysh in merit and religion. I see God arid the ffiture state through my love for 'Ali. 'Ali is the Aaron, 'Ali is the wasi."⁴¹

Still more informative is the fact that the term wanth appears frequently in the Qur an, especially in connection with the family of 'Imran and Isma'il, and Muhammad uses it as a proof in his efforts to attract the "peoples of the book".⁴² It is thus very likely that some of the partisans of 'Ali could have used the same terminology to express their views.

Moreover, in reading the accounts of the battles of Al-Jamal and Siffin, one encounters a great bulk of war poetry exchanged between combatants of both sides in which wasi and such expressions are repeated by the partisans of 'Ali. Extensive quotations here would be cumbersome, and it will suffice to refer the reader to Ibn Abi'l-Hadid, who collected the verses describing 'Ali as the wasi⁴³ from the Kit4b al-Jamal of Abu Mikhnaf⁴⁴ (died i57/774). Another very early work wherein these verses are abundantly

quoted is the Kitab Waq'at Siffin by Nasr b. Muzahim (died 212/827), who also frequently quotes Abu Mikhnaf in addition to other early sources.⁴⁵

Apart from these considerations, we have already seen that there had been a devoted party which from the very beginning had expressed personal enthusiasm for 'Ali largely based on religious considerations. That this group should express its allegiance in appropriately religious terms is only to be expected. Later generations of Shi'i poets, best represented by Kumayl, Kuthayyir, Sayyid al-Ilmiyarī, and Farazdaq, frequently used the terms *wasi* and the like in reference to 'Ali, especially when describing the battles of Al-Jamal and Siffin.

The purpose of the preceding discussion has been to demonstrate that there was a party who viewed 'Ali's accession to the caliphate from an angle quite different from the viewpoint of the rest of the community. His rise to power was a great victory for his party, which held a particular conception regarding the leadership of the community, and thus it raised questions that had not arisen under the three previous caliphs, therefore causing him to face serious opposition from various quarters almost right from the start.

The initial resistance came from 'A'isha, Talha and Zubayr, who raised the call for vengeance and offered themselves as the agents for exacting satisfaction for the murder of 'Uthman.

But the question to be raised here is whether this was really the reason for their revolt. How could 'Ali alone be held responsible for the killing when Talha and Zubayr themselves had been equally active in supporting the grievances of the people? Was 'A'isha not an equal participant in arousing people against 'Uthman?⁴⁶ For the highly emotional and violent atmosphere in Medina at that time, we can do no more and no less than hold all the dissident groups and critics of the Caliph about equally responsible. In one of his speeches,

'Ali questions these pretenders, saying:

“By God, they have shown their dislike against me for anything unpleasant and have not appointed an arbitrator between me and themselves; yet they are demanding a right which they had themselves given up and revenge for a blood for which they themselves are responsible. Even if I had a share in it with them, they would still have a share of it; but if they were held responsible for it without me, the blame lies only with them: thus their strongest argument goes only against them. They are still suckling a mother who has already weaned them, and they are reviving an innovation which had been made to die.”⁴⁷

In the final analysis, it would appear that the vengeance for 'Uthman was made an easy pretext both by the triumvirate and later by Mu'awiya for efforts to check the obvious danger of the rule of the ascetic group in Islam, supported by the lower classes of society and by some of the Ansar of Medina, of whom 'Ali happened to be the representative. The emergence of these groups was a real threat to the old Meccan aristocracy, which had been suppressed by Muhammad's victory and his concept of society and had been kept under strict control by Abi Bakr and 'Umar. When 'Uthman, a member of the wealthiest

clan of Umayya, came to power, the old aristocratic ideals of his clan and other ruling families of Mecca found an opportunity to re-establish their power and aristocracy. Ironically enough, the impetus given to the ideas of unity and organization by Islam were brought to the service of this group to revitalize itself and re-emerge in power.

The revolt of the triumvirate represents Talha and Zubayr's last struggle to protect their interests. 'A'isha served as a symbol behind which they could unify their forces, and it certainly was not difficult to involve her in an attack on 'Ali. Her dislike for him is said to have been based on several factors, one of which was 'Ali's advice to Muhammad that he inquire with 'A'isha's slave girl concerning an incident wherein 'A'isha's late return after having been left behind on a journey caused people to start talking maliciously about her.⁴⁸ 'A'isha's quarrels with Fatima and 'Ali's questioning of the election of Abi Bakr, 'A'isha's father, also contributed to the hostility.⁴⁹ It is therefore clear that in the battle of Al-Jamal the triumvirate was fighting for personal reasons rather than for the blood of 'Uthman, which was only a convenient pretext.

Though they failed in their objectives, they made the task of Mu'awiya, the unseating of 'Ali and the reassertion of the ideals threatened by his succession, much easier. The fact that the claim of Mu'awiya for the blood of 'Uthman was only an excuse to enable him to remove 'Ali from power is further evident from a conversation between 'Amr b. al-'As and 'A'isha soon after the battle of Al-Jamal. 'Amr said to 'A'isha:

“I wish you could have been killed on the day of Jamal, and thereby you would have entered Paradise and we would have used your death as our strongest means for reviling and defaming 'Ali.”⁵⁰ The conflict at the battle of Al-Jamal brought about a serious split in the Muslim community. All of our sources reporting on these events use a number of particular designations to express the position adopted henceforth by different groups.

These designations are important in that they indicate how the religious outlook, personal loyalties, regional interests, and politico-economic considerations became involved with one another. Those who supported 'Ali at the battle of Al-Jamal and later at Siffin were at first called the “people of Iraq” (ahl al-'Iraq) as well as the “party of 'Ali” (shi'at 'Ali or al-'Alawiya). Their opponents were called shi'at 'Uthman, or more commonly al-'Uthmanyya. They included the faction of 'A'isha, Talha, and Zubayr (called the “people of the camel,” or *ashab al-jamal*) and the Syrians (*ahi ash-Sham*), who were also known as the shi'at Mu'awiya.

According to the tendency of the epoch, their positions were also described in more religiously oriented terms through the use of the word *din*, which was used in reference to both 'Ali and 'Uthman in expressions such as *din 'Ali* and *din 'Uthman*. Another way of expressing this was to assert that one held the 'Alawi or 'Uthmani opinion, *ra'y al-'Alawiya* or *ra'y al-'Uthmaniya*.⁵¹ However, besides these general terms used to describe opposing factions, the more precise titles of Shi'at Ahi al-Bayt and Shi'at Al Muhammad were frequently used from this time onwards by the religiously enthusiastic followers of 'Ali.

Occasionally the nickname at-Turab:ya was also used. This title was derived from 'Ali's kunya Abn Turab, Father of Dust, given to him by Muhammad.⁵² More revealing is the fact that 'Ali himself called his opponents by names which indicated their being misled from the true religious path. Those who fought against him at Al-Jamal he referred to as An-Nakithun, "those who break their allegiance". This is a derivation from the Qur'anic verse which says: "Then anyone who violates his oath (nakatha) does so to the harm of his soul."⁵³ 'Ali named his opponents at Siffin Al-Qasitun, "those who act wrongfully", taken from the Qur'anic verse which reads: "Those who swerve (al-qasitun) are fuel for Hell-fire."⁵⁴ Lastly, referring to a tradition of the Prophet, 'Ali referred to the Kharijites of Nahrawan as al-Manqun, "those who missed the truth of religion".⁵⁵ Obviously these names became common among 'Ali's followers to describe their opponents.

Throughout this period, however, the followers of 'Ali were developing a continuously broadening base of support. Until the battle of Al-Jamal, the Shi'at 'Ali consisted only of a small personal following who from the very beginning regarded him as the most worthy person for the office of the caliphate to lead the community after the death of the Prophet. After the battle of Al-Jamal the term Shi'at 'Ali came to include all those who had supported 'Ali against 'A'isha, and from this point onwards the original Shi'a group was confusingly included with other groups and individuals who supported 'Ali for other than religious reasons. It was in this wider sense that the term Shi'a was used in the document of arbitration at Siffin.⁵⁶

A few decades later, when the Shi'a started to formulate their official position, some attempts were made to sort out the various groups of 'Ali's supporters which had been so confusingly mixed up at that earlier stage. The ranks of the Shi'a were divided into four categories: Al-Asfiya, the "sincere friends"; Al-Awliya, the "devoted friends"; Al-Ashab, the "companions"; and the Shurtat al-Khamis, the "picked division".⁵⁷ To whom the first three terms refer is not quite clear, though various Shi'i sources indicate the group of earlier followers—Miqdad, Salman, 'Ammar, Hudhayfa, Abu Hamza, Abu Sasan, and Shutayr—as belonging to the Asfiya.

The idea of these classes is certainly of a later date. Nevertheless, we must make some distinction between those followers of 'Ali who emphasized the religious factor of his succession as the wasi and those who supported his cause mainly on political grounds, especially after he made Kufa his capital. In addition to a large political following, 'Ali left behind him a zealous personal party which had sworn to him that they would be "friends to those whom he befriended, and enemies of those to whom he was hostile."⁵⁸ Insisting that 'Ali was in accordance with truth and guidance" ('ala'l-haqq wa'l-huda) and his opponents consequently in error, they maintained that 'Ali, by the circumstances of his birth, was specially qualified to bear supreme authority in the community. The existence of this devoted band of religious supporters largely explains how Shiism managed to survive the multitude of decisive political defeats inflicted on the movement over the years.

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1. Aghani VI, pp.334 f.; Mas'udi, Muruj, II, pp.342 f.
 2. Tabari, I, pp. 2948 f. For other versions, see Ibn Sa'd, III, 64; Baladhuri, V, p.25; Ya'qubi, II, pp.164 ff.; Dinawari, Akhbar, p.139; Mas'udi, Muruj; II, pp.334 ff.; 'Iqd, IV, pp. 280ff.
 3. See Tabari, I, pp.29323; Mas'udi, Muruj, II, p.337
 4. Tabari, I, p. 2871 ; Baladhuri, V, p.49
 5. Baladhuri, V, pp.31 ff.; Tabari, I, p.2845; Mas'udi, Muruj, II, p.335; 'Iqd, IV, p.307
 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. Baladhuri, V, pp.27 f.; Tabari, I, pp.2953 f.; Ash'ari, Tamhid, p.99
 8. Baladhuri, V, pp.36 f.; Ya'qubi, II, p.170
 9. Baladhuri, V, pp. 48 f.; 'Iqd, IV, p.307. Also see Mowdudi, Abu'Ala, Khilafai wa Mulukiyat, pp.105 ff., 321 if, which gives an admirable exposition of 'Uthman's weakness for his kinsmen and of their misdeeds.
 10. Baladhuri, V, pp. 52 ff.; Tabari, I, pp. 2858 ff.; Mas'udi, Muruj, II, pp.339 ff.; Ya'qubi, II, p.171
 11. Ya'qubi, loc. cit.
 12. For these comments see S. M. Yusuf, "The Revolt Against 'Uthman", Islamic Culture, XXVI I (1953), pp.4-5
 13. Baladhuri, V, pp. 26, 57; Tabari, I, pp.2955, 2980; 'Iqd, IV, p.280
 14. Baladhuri, V, pp. 53ff.; Mas'adi, Muruj, II, pp.34' f.; Ya'qubi, II, pp.172 f.; Iladid, Sharh, VIII, pp.252 ff.
 15. Nahj al-Balagha, I, p.303
 16. Cf. sources in note 14 above
 17. Baladhuri; V, pp. 26, 60-61; Tabari, I, pp. 2948 f., pp.2955 ff.; Mas'udi, Muruj II, p.344; Ash'ari, Tamhid, p.54
 18. Baladhuri, V, p.40
 19. Kashshi, Rijal, p.72
 20. ibid., pp. 79-87
 21. ibid., pp. 75-78
 22. Tabari, I, p.2942; Ash'ari, Tamhid, pp.55 f.
 23. Wa' az as-Salat'n (Baghdad, 1954), pp.148 ff..
 24. Bernard Lewis, Origins of Isma'ilism (Cambridge, 1940), p.25; Marshal G. S. Hodgson, "How Did the Early Shi'a Become Sectarian ?" JAOS, LXXV (1955), p.2. For further sources, see E12 article "Abd Allah b. Saba".
 25. Hodgson, "Early Shi'a", p.3
 26. Baladhuri, V, p.49. The son of Abu Bakr, Muhammad was a devoted follower of 'Ali and a bitter critic of 'Uthman. Cf. Hodgson, "Early Shi'a", p.2
 27. Baladhuri, V, pp.34, 48-49; Tabari, I, p.3112; Ya'qubi, II, p.175; Al-Imama wa's-Siyasa, I, p.30
 28. Baladhuri, V, pp.62 ff., 69; Tabari, I, pp. 2988 f.; Mas'udi, Muruj, II, p.232; 'Iqd, IV, p.290
 29. Baladhuri, V, pp.70 f.; Tabari, I, pp.3066 ff.; 'Iqd, IV, pp.291, 310
 30. 'Iqd, IV, p.318
 31. Baladhuri, V, p.70; Tabari, I, p.3068; Ya'qubi, II, p. 178; Ash'ari, Tamhid, p.107; Dinawari, Akhbar, p.140
 32. Tabari, I, p.3080
 33. Tabari, I, p.3127
 34. Tabari, I, pp. 309 I, 3112 if.; Ya'qubi, II, p. 180; Hadid, Sharh, I, p.232
 35. Tabari, I, p.3255
 36. 'Iqd, IV, p.334. Also see Baladhuri, IVA, p. 108, where some companions rejected Mu'awiya's right to call for the blood of 'Uthman while there were other nearer relatives of 'Uthman to claim it.
 37. See Chapter 3, n. 8, above
 38. Ya'qu hi, II, p.179
 39. Hodgson, "How Did the Early Shi'a Become Sectarian?", JAOS, p.2

40. W. Montgomery Watt, "Shi'ism Under the Umayyads", *JRAS*, 1960, p. 161. Cf. 3. Ryckmans, *L'institution monarchique en Arabie avant l'Islam* (Louvain, 1951), pp.229 ff.
41. Mubarrad, *Kamil*, III, p. 205; Mas'udi; *Muruj*, II, p.416; Aghani; XII, p.326. R. Strothmann agrees that there are distinguishable religious honours accorded to 'Ali in the poetry of *ad-Du'ali* (cf. E11 article "Sh'a"). Also see similar verses composed by Kumayt and Kuthayyir in Mubarrad, *Kamil*, III, pp.204 f.
42. e.g. *Qur'an*, xlx, 6
43. Hadid, *Sharh*, I, pp. 144–9
44. Ibn Nadim, *Fihrist*, p.93
45. e.g. pp. 18,23 f., 43,49, 365, 382, 385. See also Askafi, *Naqdal- 'Uthmaniya*, p.84
46. Baladhuri, V, p. 34. Even the verses of Ibn Umm Kilb attribute to 'A'isha the responsibility for the murder of 'Uthman. Cf. Tabari, I, p 3112
47. Mufid, *Irshad*, p.146; *Nahj al-Balagha*, I, p.63
48. This incident is known as the *Hadith al-lfk*, and Bukhari records a detailed account of it (See *Sahih*, III, pp. 25 ff). Cf. other hadith works under the heading "*Hadith al-lfk*".
49. 'Umar Abu Nasr, *'Ali wa 'A'isha* (Baghdad, n.d.), pp.25 ff
50. Mubarrad, *Kamil*, I, p.267
51. These expressions are frequently used in the Arabic sources: e.g. Tabari I, pp.3196, 3199; *Ya'qubl*, II, pp.183, 183 199; *Aghanz*; XII, p.334; XIV, p.219
52. Tabari, I, p. 1272
53. XLVIII, 10. See Hadid, *Sharh*, I, p.201
54. LXXII, 15. See Hadid, *loc. cit.*
55. Hadid, *loc. cit.*; *Ya'qubi*, II, p. 193
56. Minqari; *Waq'at Siffin*, p.504; Tabari, I, pp.3336 f.
57. *Fihrist*, p. 175; Tabari, II, p. 1; *Kashshi, Rijal*, pp.4 f.
58. Tabari, I, pp.3350 f. Cf. W. Montgomery Watt, "Shi'ism Under the Umayyads", *JRAS* (1960), pp. 160–161