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Criticism against The Caliphs

The next point with regards to this subject is the issue of criticism against the Caliphs. Criticism by 'Ali (A.S.) against them is an indisputable fact, and the method adopted by Hazrat in this regard is highly instructive. 'Ali's criticism against the Caliphs is not emotional or prejudiced but analytical and logical and it is for this reason that great importance is attached to his criticism.

If criticism is based on emotions and the outburst of annoyance, it takes a particular shape and if it is logical and based on true judgment in the realities, it takes another shape. Emotional criticism is usually the same for every human being because it is due to a series of curses and taunts that it is offered. Vilification and curse in such a case has no foundation.

But logical criticism is based on moral and spiritual qualities and depends on special historical features of a person's life and as such, they cannot be the same for all the individuals. It is due to this that the value of degree of a criticizer's realism becomes evident.

Some of the criticism leveled against the Caliphs in Nahj al-Balaghah is general and implicit while others are particular and explicit. The general and implicit criticisms are those very ones which 'Ali (A.S.) categorically expresses about his clear and definite right being snatched away from him.

Ibn Abi al-Hadeed says: "Complaint and criticism by Imam against the Caliphs is widely transmitted (متواتر) even if it is in the form of general and implicit criticism. Once Imam heard an oppressed person crying out: "I have been oppressed and injustice imposed on me." 'Ali (A.S.) replied to him: (Come let the depressed hearts gather together) Let us cry out together because I too have been put to oppression persistently."

Moreover, he narrates from one of his trusted contemporaries famous by the name of Ibn A'alia who said: "I was in the presence of Ismail bin 'Ali Hanbali, the Imam of Hanbalites. At that moment he inquired from a traveler who had returned from his journey to Kufa about his journey and all that he had seen in Kufa. While narrating the events, he expressed with deep regret the incident of severe criticism by the Shi'ah on the day of Ghadeer against the Caliphs. The Hanbali 'Faqih' said:

“What is the fault of those people? ‘Ali has himself opened this door”. The traveler replied: “Then what is our duty in these circumstances? Should we consider these criticisms as valid and correct or false and wrong? If we consider them as correct, we have to leave one side and if we consider them to be incorrect, we have to leave the other side”!

When Ismail heard this question he moved from his place and dispersed the gathering. The only thing which he said was that this was a question for which he too had not found an answer.

Abu Bakr

Criticism of Abu Bakr has come in an explicit form in the Sermon of Shiqshiqiya and has been concluded in two sentences.

Firstly that: “He was very well aware that I am more worthy than him and Caliphate is a garb which fits properly on me only. In spite of knowing this fact why did he do such a thing? During the period of Caliphate, I was similar to a person having a thorn in his eyes or a bone stuck in his throat.

و اللّٰه لقد تقمصها ابن أبي قحافة و انه ليعلم أن محلي منها محل القطب من الرحي

“By Allah, Ibn Abi Quhafah (Abu Bakr) dressed himself with it (the Caliphate) while he certainly knew that my position in relation to it was the same as the position of the axle in relation to the mill.

Secondly: why did he select the next Caliph after him, especially since once during his period of Caliphate he asked the people to cancel the agreement of allegiance and release him from this commitment? When one is doubtful of his own ability in this affair and asks the people to accept his resignation, then on what basis does he appoint the next Caliph?

«فواعجبا بيناهو يستقبلها في حياته اذعقدها لآخر بعد وفاته»

“It is strange that during his lifetime he wished to be released from it (the Caliphate) but he confirmed it for the other for after his death.”

After mentioning the above sentence, ‘Ali (A.S.) uses the most severe words against the two Caliphs thus laying bare the root of their connection with one another. He says:

« لشد ما تشطرا ضرعيها »

“Together they shared its udders strictly between themselves.”

About the matter of Abu Bakr’s resignation, Ibn Abi al-Hadeed says that two versions exist about the sentences once uttered by Abu Bakr on the pulpit during the period of his Caliphate. Some narrate that Abu Bakr said:

وليتكم و لست بخيركم

i.e. the responsibility of Caliphate has been put on me while I am not the best among you.

However most narrate that he said:

اقبلوني فلست بخيركم

“You excuse me for I am not the best among you.”

The sentences of Nahj al-Balaghah approve that the sentence of Abu Bakr was presented in its second form.

'Umar

Criticisms against 'Umar in Nahiul-Balagha have taken another form. Apart from the joint criticisms leveled against him and Abu Bakr by use of the sentence « لشد ما تشطرا ضرعيها » a series of criticisms have been leveled against him taking into consideration his moral and spiritual characteristics. 'Ali (A.S.) has criticized two moral qualities of 'Umar:

Firstly, his harsh and rude behavior – in this regard, he was just the opposite of Abu Bakr. In character, 'Umar was rough, harsh-tempered, and incited fear.

Ibn Abi al-Hadeed says:

“The distinguished companions refrained from meeting 'Umar. Ibn Abbas expressed his opinion about the matter of « عول » after 'Umar's death. He was asked as to why he didn't disclose his opinion before and he replied: “Due to fear of 'Umar.”

The whip of 'Umar (درّة عمر) had become a proverb for his harshness such that afterwards it was said:

«درّة عمر أهيب من سيف حجاج»

The whip of Omar is more fearful than the sword of Hajjaj.

'Umar's rudeness was more towards the women and hence they were fearful of him. At the time of Abu Bakr's death, when the women from his household were lamenting over his death, 'Umar was persistently forbidding them from such an act. However the women continued their lamentation and crying. Finally 'Umar dragged out Umm Farwa, sister of Abu Bakr from among the women and lashed her with his whip. After this incident, the women dispersed.

Another moral quality of 'Umar which has come under criticism in the sayings of 'Ali (A.S.) is the matter of making haste in judgment and then turning back from the same judgment i.e. his self-contradiction.

Repeatedly, he would pass judgments and later on when he would realize his mistakes, he would confess to them.

Many instances have been narrated in this regard. For example ‘Umar has himself said:

كلكم افقه من عمر حتي ربات الحجال

“All of you, even women, are more learned than ‘Umar.”

Similarly the sentence:

لو لا علي لهلك عمر

“Were it not for ‘Ali, ‘Umar would have perished.” It is said that this sentence was heard from him over 70 times. It was in connection to these very mistakes that ‘Ali (A.S.) used to correct him.

Amir al-Mu’minin ‘Ali (A.S.) has reproached ‘Umar on these two very qualities, which have been strictly approved by history i.e. his severe harshness such that his companions were fearful of expressing the truth, and secondly his haste and repeated mistakes and consequently his apologies in wrong decision making.

About the first matter ‘Ali (A.S.) says:

فصيرها في حوزة خشناء يغلظ كلمها و يخشن مسها.....فصاحبها كراكب الصعبة ان اسنق لها خرم و ان اسلس لها تقحم

“He (Abu Bakr) put the Caliphate in a rough enclosure where the utterance was crude and the touch was harsh.... The one in control of it was like the rider of an unruly camel. If he pulled up its rein, the nostril would be slit but if he let it loose he would be thrown.”

About his haste, numerous mistakes and consequently his apologies, ‘Ali (A.S.) says:

« ويكثر العثار فيها و الاعتذار منها»

“His mistakes were plenty and also the excuses there-from.”

Murtadha Mutahhari says:-

“As far as I can recollect, the first and second Caliph have been remembered and come under criticism in Nahj al-Balaghah in an explicit manner only and only in the Sermon of Shiqshiqiya. In other places, if at all it exists it has either come in a general form or possesses a sarcastic remark like in the famous letter which he writes to ‘Uthman b. Hunayf in connection to the matter of Fadak.”

Or for example in Letter No.62 where he says: “It never occurred to me and I never imagined that after the Prophet, the Arabs would snatch away the Caliphate from me. Suddenly, I noticed people gathering around the man for pledging allegiance to him.”

Or in Letter No.28 in reply to Mu’awiya, he says:– “You have said that I was dragged like a camel with a nose string to swear allegiance.... What humiliation is it for a Muslim to be the victim of oppression so long as he does not entertain any doubt in his religion or any misgiving in his firm belief?”

‘Uthman

‘Uthman has been mentioned in Nahj al-Balaghah more than the previous two Caliphs have. The reason is obvious – In an incident, which history named it as the great conspiracy and the close relatives of ‘Uthman himself i.e. the Bani-Umayyah had a greater hand in it than others, ‘Uthman was killed and the people immediately surrounded ‘Ali (A.S.).

Hazrat too, willingly or unwillingly accepted their allegiance and this affair naturally created a problem for him during his period of Caliphate. On the one hand, those desirous of the seat of Caliphate accused him of having a hand in the death of ‘Uthman and so, he was bound to defend himself and clarify his position in this matter.

On the other hand, there was a revolutionary group which had revolted against ‘Uthman’s rule and was reckoned to be a powerful force and was amongst the followers of ‘Ali (A.S.). The enemies of ‘Ali (A.S.) wanted him to force them surrender so that they could be brought to justice for their crime in the killing of ‘Uthman. Hence ‘Ali (A.S.) was supposed to set forth this matter in his speeches and explain his position.

Besides, during the life-time of ‘Uthman, when the revolutionary group had surrounded ‘Uthman and forced him to either mend his ways or else resign, the only one who was trusted by both the sides and who acted as a mediator between them and expressed one side’s views to the other (besides his own views) was ‘Ali (A.S.)

Moreover, corruption in ‘Uthman’s organization was much more rampant and as his duty, ‘Ali (A.S.) could not remain silent and avoid discussing these matters either during the lifetime of ‘Uthman or the period after him. Collectively, these factors are the reasons for ‘Uthman’s name being mentioned more than others in the sayings of ‘Ali (A.S.).

In Nahj al-Balaghah, altogether on sixteen occasions, discussions on ‘Uthman have taken place and most of them are related to the matter of his assassination. In five instances, ‘Ali (A.S.) seriously acquits himself from having taken any part in the assassination and in one instance introduces Talha who made the topic of ‘Uthman’s assassination a pretext for instigating the people against ‘Ali (A.S.) as the one having a hand in the conspiracy against ‘Uthman.

On two occasions, he seriously reckons Mu'awiya to be the guilty one; the same Mu'awiya who used 'Uthman's assassination as a pretext for plotting and disrupting the moral and heavenly Government of 'Ali (A.S.) and who shed crocodile tears and provoked the helpless people to bring to justice the killers of the innocent Caliph (for his own benefit).

Mu'awiya's Skilful Role in the Killing of 'Uthman

In his letters to Mu'awiya, Hazrat 'Ali (A.S.) says: "What more do you wish to say? Your unseen hand, right up to your elbow, is stained with 'Uthman's blood, yet you continue to speak of his blood!"

This part is extremely interesting. 'Ali (A.S.) raises the curtain from a mystery which (even) the sharp eyes of history have barely been able to discover. It is only in this present era that researchers, by seeking help and guidelines from the fundamentals of psychology and sociology have brought out this point from the hidden angles of history. Otherwise, it was extremely difficult for most of the people who lived in the past to believe that Mu'awiya had had a role in 'Uthman's murder or at least had been negligent in defending him.

Mu'awiya and 'Uthman were both from Bani Umayyah and had tribal connections. Such strong connections were based on pre-calculated objectives and definite policies, which the historians of today reckon to be similar to party connections of today.

That is to say, it was not the racial or tribal sentiments only, which connected them to one another. The tribal connections were a base for pulling them together to organize and coordinate mutual materialistic goals. Personally too, Mu'awiya had seen kindness and support from 'Uthman and was open with his friendship and support. Therefore no one could believe that Mu'awiya had an inside hand in this affair.

Mu'awiya who followed only one aim and regarded all possible means to achieve that aim to be permissible, never allowed any feelings nor emotions to enter his destructive and inhumane logic. He decided that with the death of 'Uthman he could reap much better benefits than when he was alive and he could have more power by shedding his blood than by the blood circulating in his veins. Thus, he prepared the ground for his assassination. Moreover, at that time when he was in perfect control of extending his useful help and able to prevent his assassination, he abandoned him in the days before his death.

However, the sharp-sighted eyes of 'Ali (A.S.) could see the invisible hands of Mu'awiya and he was aware of the events occurring behind the curtain. For this reason, he officially introduced Mu'awiya as the one responsible and answerable for 'Uthman's death.

In Nahj al-Balaghah we find a lengthy letter which Imam (A.S.) has written in reply to the letter of Mu'awiya. In his letter, Mu'awiya accuses Imam (A.S.) of having participated in the assassination of 'Uthman and Imam (A.S.) replies to him as such:

ثم ذكرت مل كان من امري وامر عثمان فلك ان تجاب عن هذه لرحمك منه، فاينا كان اعدي له و « اهدي الي مقاتله امن بذل له نصرته فاستقعه و استكفه؟ ام من استنصره فتراخي عنه وبت المنون اليه حتي اتي قدره؟...و ما كنت لاعتذر من اني كنت انقم عليه احداثا فان كان الذنب اليه ارشادي و هدايتي له فرب ملوم لا ذنب له و قد "يستفيد الظنة المنتصح و ما اردت" الا الاصلاح ما استطعت و ما توفيقى الا بالله عليه توكلت

*"Then you have recalled my position vis-a-vis 'Uthman, and in this matter an answer is due to you because of your kinship with him. So (now tell me), which one of us was more inimical towards 'Uthman and who did more to bring about his killing; or who offered him his support but he made him sit down and stopped him (from helping); or who was it whom he called for help but turned his face from him and drew his death near until his fate overtook him? Of course, I am not going to offer my excuse for reproving him for (some of) his innovations. If my good counsel and guidance to him was a sin, then I accept it, for many an innocent people are blamed. Verily, sometimes a counselor sees no result from his work but mistrust from the other side. My intention was "... **only to put things in order as far as I can; and my success lies only with Allah: in Him I have put my trust..**"(11:88). [1](#)*

In another letter addressed to Mu'awiya he writes:

فاما اكنارك الحجاج في عثمان و قتلته فانك انما نصرت عثمان حيث كان النصر لك و خذلته حيث كان النصر له

"As regards your frequent arguments in the matter of 'Uthman and his murder, you only helped 'Uthman when it was really to your own benefit and you forsook him when it was only to his benefit." [2](#)

'Uthman's murder itself gave birth to sedition and opened the door to other sedition in the Islamic world, which has entangled it for centuries and its effect still remains. From the collective speeches of 'Ali (A.S.) in Nahj al-Balaghah, it can be inferred that he was a severe critic of 'Uthman's policies and reckoned the revolutionaries to be rightful in this regard.

At the same time, he has not reckoned 'Uthman's murder committed by the hands of the rebels to be in conformity with the general interests of Islam. Before 'Uthman's assassination, Hazrat 'Ali (A.S.) was already worried about this matter and was foreseeing its consequences and aftermath. Whether or not 'Uthman's crimes were to such an extent that, according to the Shari'ah, he deserved to be killed, and whether the motives for killing 'Uthman were intentionally or unintentionally provided by his associates, and all paths other than killing him were closed to the rebels, is one matter; and whether 'Uthman's being killed by the rebels while he was on the seat of Caliphate, was in the interests of Islam and the Muslims or not, is another matter.

From the speeches of 'Ali (A.S.), it can be inferred that he wanted 'Uthman to forsake the path which he was following and choose the true and fair Islamic path – And in the event of non-acceptance, the revolutionaries would dismiss and perhaps imprison him and the Caliph who would be worthy of taking over the seat of Caliphate would later on investigate into 'Uthman's crimes and pass the necessary

judgment.

Thus ‘Ali (A.S.) neither issued any orders concerning the killing of ‘Uthman nor did he aid him against the revolutionaries. The entire efforts of ‘Ali (A.S.) were directed in this course that the legitimate demands of the revolutionaries be fulfilled without the need for a drop of blood to be shed or that (at least) ‘Uthman himself repents from his past actions or willingly entrusts the affair to his citizens. ‘Ali (A.S.) judged the two sides as such:

«استأثر فاساء الاثرة و جزعتم فاسآتم الجزع»

“‘Uthman appropriated everything for himself and did it in an evil manner. You (revolutionaries) were impatient and agitated against it and did it in an evil manner.”³

At the time when he set forth the demands of the revolutionaries before ‘Uthman (as a mediator) he expressed his apprehension as to the possibility of ‘Uthman getting killed in the seat of Caliphate and the door of sedition thus being opened before the Muslims. He addressed ‘Uthman as such:

و اني انشدك الله الا تكون امام هذه الامة المقتول، فانه كان يقال: يقتل في هذه الامة امام يفتح عليها القتل و القتال
الي يوم القيامة، و يلبس امورها عليها، و يبث الفتن فيها، فلا يبصرون الحق من الباطل، يموجون فيها موجاً؛ و
يمرجون فيها مرجاً

“I adjure you by Allah that you should not be that Imam of this Ummah who will be killed, because it has been said: An Imam of this Ummah will be killed after which the path to killing and fighting will open for them till the Day of Judgment. He will confuse their affairs for them and spread dissension amongst them. As a result, they will not discern truth from falsehood, and will be in a state of agitation and utter confusion.”⁴

Just as previously narrated from ‘Ali (A.S.) himself, during ‘Uthman’s lifetime Imam (A.S.) has objected and criticized and admonished him either in his presence or in his absence. Similarly after his death too, Imam (A.S.) has perpetually reminded the people about his deviations. He did not follow the principle of:

اذكروا موتاكم بالخير

“Remember your dead with goodness”. (It is said that this is the saying of Mu’awiya and was uttered for the benefit of corrupt governments and personalities whose past lives were tainted till their death so that there would remain no lesson for the future generation and no danger for the future corrupt governments). Here are some instances of criticism:

(1) In Sermon No. 128 in the sentences which ‘Ali (A.S.) has used at the time of bidding farewell to Abu

Dharr when the latter was being exiled to Rabdha on the orders of ‘Uthman, he has clearly objected and criticized such action and has implicitly introduced ‘Uthman’s government as a corrupt one.

(2) In Sermon No.30 there is a sentence which was already narrated:

إِسْتَأْتَرَ فَاسَاءَ الْأَثَرَةَ

“He appropriated everything for himself and did it in an evil manner.”

(3) ‘Uthman was a feeble-charactered person and did not possess self-determination or steadfastness. His relatives, especially Marwan b. al-Hakam who was once banished by the Holy Prophet but was summoned by ‘Uthman to go to Medina and made his minister, had a strong dominance over him and they did whatever they liked in his name. ‘Ali (A.S.) openly criticized him in this regard and said:

فَلَا تَكُونَنَّ لِمَرْوَانَ سَبْقَةً يَسُوقُكَ حَيْثُ شَاءَ، بَعْدَ جَلَالِ السِّنِّ وَتَقْضَى الْعُمُرِ

“Do not be like the driven beast for Marwan so that he may drive you wherever he likes, despite your seniority of age and length of life.” [5](#)

(4) ‘Ali (A.S.) was an object of suspicion for ‘Uthman. The latter reckoned the presence of ‘Ali (A.S.) in Medina to be disturbing and detrimental to himself. ‘Ali (A.S.) was thought to be a haven and the source of hope for the insurgents since they would sometimes shout slogans in his name and were openly calling for the dismissal of ‘Uthman and the establishment of ‘Ali’s (A.S.) leadership.

Thus ‘Uthman wished for ‘Ali’s absence from Medina so that the forces of insurgents would be ineffective due to his absence. However, on the other side he could see with certainty the manner in which ‘Ali (A.S.) was mediating with good-intentions between him and the insurgents and how his presence was a source of peace. Anyhow he asked ‘Ali (A.S.) to leave Medina and go temporarily to his farm in Yanbu’ which was approximately 12 Km or more from Medina.

But it did not take long before ‘Uthman left uneasy by the vacuum created by ‘Ali’s absence and sent a message for him to return to Medina.

Naturally, when ‘Ali (A.S.) returned, the slogans shouted in his favour gained force and so he was once again asked to leave Medina.

Ibn Abbas had brought ‘Uthman’s message requesting ‘Ali (A.S.) to once again leave Medina and

proceed towards his farm. ‘Ali (A.S.) was upset by this insulting behavior of ‘Uthman and said:

يا ابن عباس ما يريد عثمان الا ان يجعلني جملا ناضحا بالغرب اقبل و ادبر، بعث الي ان اخرج ثم بعث الي ان اقدم
ثم هو الان يبعث الي ان اخرج، و الله لقد دفعت حتي خشيت ان اكون انما

“O Ibn Abbas, ‘Uthman only wants to treat me like the water-drawing camel so that I go forward and backward with the bucket. Once he sent me word that I should depart, then sent me word that I should return. Now again he sends me word that I should go. By Allah I continued protecting him till I feared lest I become a sinner.”⁶

(5) More severe than all these is what has been mentioned in the Sermon of Shiqshiqiya:

إلى أن قام ثالثُ القومِ نافعاً حِضْنِيهِ بَيْنَ نَثِيلِهِ وَ مُعْتَلَفِهِ، وَ قَامَ مَعَهُ بَنُو أَبِيهِ يَخْضِمُونَ مَالَ اللَّهِ حِضْمَ الْإِبِلِ نَبْتَةَ
الرَّبِيعِ ، إلى أن انتكثَ فتلُّهُ، وَ أَجْهَزَ عَلَيْهِ عَمَلُهُ، وَ كَبَّتْ بِهِ بَطْنَتُهُ

“...Till the third man of these people arose lifting his chest from out of his excrement and his trough. With him his cousins also rose up, swallowing up Allah’s wealth like a camel devouring the foliage of spring, until his rope broke down, his actions finished him and his gluttony brought him down.”

In describing this part, Ibn Abi al-Hadeed says:

“These expressions are the most bitter expressions and I think it is even more severe than the famous Hatee’ah poem which is said to be the most satirical poem of the Arabs.” The famous Hatee’ah poem is as follows:

دع المكارم لا ترحل لبغيتها

و اقعد فانك انت الطاعم الكاسي

- ¹. Nahj al-Balaghah, Letter no. 28.
- ². Nahj al-Balaghah, Letter no. 37.
- ³. Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 30.
- ⁴. Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 162.
- ⁵. Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 162.
- ⁶. Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 235.

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