

Following is an attempt to answer this question.

Muhammad Mustafa and his Succession

As a statesman, Muhammad ranks among the greatest in the whole world. He was endowed with amazing perspicacity, vision and political genius. During the last ten years of his life, he was called upon to make the most momentous decisions in the history of Islam. Those decisions affected not only the Muslims or the Arabs but all mankind. He was also aware that his actions and decisions would affect the actions and decisions of every generation of the Muslims to the end of time itself.

Muhammad, the Messenger of God, therefore, did not make any decision, no matter how trivial, on an *ad hoc* basis; nor did he make decisions by a “trial and error” method. His decisions were all inspired. They were precedents for the Muslim *umma* (nation or community) for all time. It was with this knowledge and understanding that he said or did anything and everything.

Muhammad had succeeded, after a long and sanguinary struggle against the idolaters and polytheists of Arabia, in establishing the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth so that his *umma* (people) may live in it in peace and security, admired and envied by the rest of mankind.

The Kingdom of Heaven on Earth was the lifework of Muhammad. He knew that he was a mortal, and would die some day, but his work, as embodied in the “Kingdom” would live. He knew that after his death, someone else would have to carry on the work begun by him. He also knew that orderly succession is the anchor of stability. He knew all this and much else besides. No Muslim would ever presume to imagine that Muhammad, the Messenger of God, did not know all this better than anyone else.

The succession of Muhammad was also a subject of much speculation among many Muslims. One question that had been uppermost in the minds of many of them, especially since the conquest of Makkah, was, who would succeed him as the new head of the State of Medina, after his death.

This question admits of only one answer, viz., the best Muslim! The successor of Muhammad ought to be, not a second rate person, but the finest product of Islam; someone that Islam itself might uphold with pride as its “masterpiece.”

Such a “masterpiece” was Ali ibn Abi Talib. Muhammad had “discovered” him early in life; he had groomed him and designated him as his successor, thus assuring peaceful and orderly transfer of sovereignty. He was most anxious to avert a struggle for power among his companions after his own death.

But, unfortunately, this arrangement did not work out, and the succession, after the death of the Prophet, was not peaceful and orderly. There was a grim struggle for power among his companions in which some new candidates for power succeeded in capturing the government of Medina. Their success signaled an abrupt end of the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth, and signaled, at the same time, the birth of the Muslim State – a State run by people who were Muslims. The Kingdom of Heaven on Earth or the Islamic State did not survive the death of its Founder.

This demise of the Islamic State, while still in its infancy, may arouse the curiosity of the student of history. He may wonder why it was so short-lived, and how it was possible for these new candidates to subvert the arrangement made by the Prophet himself for a peaceful and orderly transfer of power, and to foist an arrangement of their own upon the Muslim *umma*.

Following is an attempt to answer this question.

The new candidates for power had not endorsed the arrangement made by the Prophet for transfer of sovereignty. They and their supporters had many reservations about it, and they were resolved to capture the government of Medina for themselves. For this purpose, they had mapped out a grand strategy and they had gone to work at implementing it even before the death of the Prophet.

The principal ploy in the strategy of these candidates for power was to put into circulation the canard that neither the Book of God had expressed any views on the subject of the leadership of the Muslim *umma* nor the Messenger of God had designated anyone as his successor.

They figured that if the Muslims believed such a claim to be true, then they (the Muslims) would assume that the Prophet left the job of finding the future head of his government to the *umma* itself, and in the *umma*, of course, everyone was free to enter the “lists” and to grab power for himself, if he could.

Dr. Hamid-ud-Deen

Al-Qur’an al-Majid has not mentioned anything about the manner of selecting a khalifa. The reliable traditions (Hadith) of the Prophet are also silent in this regard. From this, one can make the deduction that the *Shari’ah* (Holy Law) left this matter to the discretion of the *Umma* itself so that it may select its leaders according to its own needs, and according to the conditions prevailing at the time. (*History of Islam by Dr. Hamid-ud-Deen, M.A. (Honors), Punjab; M.A. (Delhi); Ph.D. {Harvard University, U.S.A.}, published by Ferozsons Limited, Publishers, Karachi, Pakistan, page 188, 4th edition, 4th printing, 1971*)

This ploy had a most astonishing success, and it has amazing longevity. It was used then and it is being used today. In the past it was used only in the East; now it is used in both East and West. Few in the East and none in the West have challenged it. Its success is attested by the testimony of the following historians:

Marshall G.S. Hodgson

Qur'an had, typically, provided for no political contingencies on the Prophet's death. (*The Venture of Islam, Vol. I, 1974*)

Dr. Muhamed Hamidullah

The fact that there have been differences of opinion, at the death of the Prophet, shows that he had not left positive and precise instructions regarding his succession. (*Introduction to Islam, Kuwait, 1977*)

Francesco Gabrieli

Mohammed died, after a brief illness, on June 8, 632. He did not or he could not make a political testament and he did not designate the one most worthy to succeed him. (*The Arabs, A Compact History, New York, 1963*)

G.E. Von Grunebaum

The Prophet died on June 8, 632. He had made no provision for a successor. (*Classical Islam – A History 600–1258*)

John B. Christopher

The most urgent political problem faced by the young Islamic commonwealth was the succession to the leadership of the *umma* when Mohammed died; this problem was met by the institution of the caliphate. Because Mohammed made no provision for the succession, the stricken Muslim community turned back to tribal precedents of electing a new sheikh as soon as the Prophet died. (*The Islamic Tradition, Introduction, New York*)

Bernard Lewis

In its origins, the great Islamic institution of the Caliphate was an improvisation. The death of the Prophet, with no succession arranged, precipitated a crisis in the infant Muslim community. (*The Legacy of Islam – Politics and War – 1974*)

George Stewart

Reviewing the history, one pauses to wonder how the Caliphate came into being. Mohammed left no will; he nominated no one to follow in his steps, he delegated no spiritual power, and he did not deliver the

keys of the Kingdom of Heaven to an apostle... (George Stewart in his article, *Is the Caliph a Pope?* published in the book, *The Traditional Near East*, edited by Stewart Robinson, published by Prentice-Hall, Inc., N.J., 1966)

Robert Frost once said: "A theory, if you hold it hard enough and long enough, gets rated as a creed." This statement may be modified slightly to read as follows: "A falsehood, if you hold it hard enough and long enough, gets rated as a creed."

An overwhelming majority of the historians of Islam have claimed that the Prophet did not specify anyone as the future head of the State of Medina after his own death. For them, and for many others, this claim has become a creed now.

But not for the Shia Muslims. They maintain that Muhammad, the Messenger of God, declared repeatedly and unequivocally that Ali was his vicegerent and the sovereign of all Muslims.

Muhammad charted a course for his *umma*, and warned it not to deviate from it after his death. But the *umma* deviated nevertheless, and this deviation led it, knowingly or unknowingly, into reviving a pagan tradition.

After the death of the Prophet, some of his companions gathered in an outhouse of Medina called Saqifa, and elected Abu Bakr as the leader of the Muslims. There was no precedent in Islam for such an election but there was a precedent for it in the political institutions of the pre-Islamic times.

Three contemporary Pakistani historians write in their *History of the Islamic Caliphate* as follows:

"After the death of Muhammad (S), the most important and the most complex problem which the Muslims had to face, was that of electing a khalifa. Qur'an is silent on this subject, and the Prophet also did not say anything about it. In pre-Islamic times, the custom of the Arabs was to elect their chiefs by a majority vote. (Unable to find any other precedent) the same principle was adopted in the election of Abu Bakr." (*History of the Islamic Caliphate (Urdu)*, Lahore, Pakistan. Professor M. Iqbal, M.A., L.L.B.; Dr. Peer Muhammad Hasan, M.S., Ph.D.; Professor M. Ikram Butt, M.S).

According to the three historians quoted above, the most important task before the Muslims at the death of their Prophet was to find a leader, since the latter had left them leaderless. Lacking precedent in Islam itself for finding a leader, they were compelled to adopt a pagan tradition, and they elected Abu Bakr as their new leader.

This mode of finding a leader for Muslims was alien to the genius of Islam. It was, therefore, a deviation, as already mentioned. This deviation has been noted by many Orientalists, among them:

R. A. Nicholson

That Mohammed left no son was perhaps of less moment than his neglect or refusal to nominate a

successor. The Arabs were unfamiliar with the hereditary descent of kingly power, while the idea had not yet dawned of a Divine right resident in the Prophet's family. It was thoroughly in accord with Arabian practice that the Muslim community should elect its own leader, *just as in heathen days the tribe chose its own chief.* (*A Literary History of the Arabs*)

Professor Nicholson says that the Arabs were unfamiliar with the hereditary descent of kingly power. He may be right. The Arabs, however, were unfamiliar with many other things such as belief in the Oneness of God, and they had great familiarity with their idols of stone and wood; they clung to them tenaciously, and many of them died for them.

Nevertheless, the “unfamiliarity” of the Arabs with hereditary descent of kingly power did not last long; it proved to be very short-lived. In fact, their “unfamiliarity” lasted less than thirty years (from 632 to 661). After those first thirty years of unfamiliarity with the principle of hereditary descent of kingly power, they became very much familiar with it, and their new familiarity has lasted down to our own times.

Being “unfamiliar” with the principle of hereditary descent of kingly power, the Arabs were groping in darkness, when suddenly they stumbled upon a precedent from their own pre-Islamic past, from the days when they were idolaters, and they grabbed it. They were thrilled that they had found “salvation.”

Francesco Gabrieli

With the election of Abu Bakr the principle was established that the Caliphate or Imamate (Imam in this case is a synonym of caliph) had to remain in the Meccan clan of the Quraysh from which Mohammed came. But at the same time the elective character of the post was sanctioned, as that of the sayyid or *chief of the tribe had been in the pagan society*, by rejecting the legitimist claims of the family of the Prophet (Ahl-al-Bayt), personified by Ali. (*The Arabs, A Compact History, 1963*)

Francesco Gabrieli says that with the election of Abu Bakr the principle was established that the Caliphate would remain in the Meccan clan of the Quraysh. But he does not say who established this “principle.” Does it have the authority of the Qur’an or the traditions of the Prophet to support it? It doesn't have.

Actually, it was an *ad hoc* “principle” invoked by those men who wanted to appropriate the Caliphate or Imamate for themselves. They found this “principle” very profitable because it enabled them to seize the government of Muhammad, and to hang on to it while precluding his children from it. But as pragmatic as this “principle” is, it has its sanction, not in Qur’an but in “the pagan society,” as pointed out by the historian himself.

Bernard Lewis

The first crisis in Islam came at the death of the Prophet in 632. Muhammad had never claimed to be more than a mortal man – distinguished above others because he was God's messenger and the bearer of God's word, but himself neither divine nor immortal.

He had, however, left no clear instructions on who was to succeed him as leader of the Islamic Community and ruler of the nascent Islamic state, and *the Muslims had only the meager political experience of pre-Islamic Arabia to guide them.*

After some arguments and a moment of dangerous tension, they agreed to appoint Abu Bakr, one of the earliest and most respected converts, as khalifa, deputy, of the Prophet – *thus creating, almost incidentally, the great historical institution of the Caliphate.* (*The Assassins, 1968*)

As stated earlier, the canard that Muhammad, the Messenger of God, did not leave any instructions on who was to succeed him as leader of the Islamic community, has become an Article of Faith with most historians, both ancient and modern, Muslim and non-Muslim.

One may perhaps condone the Sunni historians for clinging to this “article of faith” but it is incredible that scholars of such range and distinction as Nicholson and Bernard Lewis have done nothing more in their works on Islam than to recast a stereotype of history which was “handed down” to them by the court historians of Damascus and Baghdad of earlier centuries.

Bernard Lewis, however, has conceded, like Nicholson and Francesco Gabrieli, that those Muslims who appointed Abu Bakr as their khalifa, *had only the meager political experience of pre-Islamic Arabia to guide them.*

Bernard Lewis further says that the great historical institution of the Caliphate was born “almost incidentally.”

The most important political institution of Islam – the Caliphate – was thus born “almost incidentally!”

George Stewart

The office of the Caliphate came into being not from deliberate plan or foresight, but almost from accident ... the Caliphate was molded by the turbulent accidents of the age that gave it birth. (*The Traditional Near East, 1966*)

Writing about the pre-Islamic Arab society, Professor John Esposito, says:

“A grouping of several related families comprised a clan. A cluster of several clans constituted a tribe. Tribes were led by a chief (*shaykh*) who was selected by a consensus of his peers – that is, the heads of leading clans or families.” *Islam – the Straight Path, 1991, page 5*)

In the same book (and the same chapter), Professor Esposito further says – on page 16:

“...A society based on tribal affiliation and man-made tribal law or custom was replaced by a religiously bonded community (the Muslim *umma*) governed by God's law.”

(Abu Bakr was selected chief (*shaykh*) by “a consensus of peers – that is, the heads of leading clans or

families.” It was the “*man-made tribal law or custom*” which invested him with power. One thing that was not invoked in his selection, was the “*God's law.*”)

All the historians quoted above, are unanimous in stating that:

1. Muhammad, the Messenger of God, gave no instructions to his *umma* regarding the character of the future government of Islam, and he did not designate any person to be its head after his own death. In the matter of succession, he had no clear line of policy; and;
2. When Muhammad died, the Muslims had to find a new leader for the community. Lacking guidance and precedent, they had no choice but to fall back upon the political institutions or traditions of the Times of Ignorance to find a leader, and Abu Bakr was their choice.

If these historians are right, then it was a most egregious omission on the part both of Al-Qur'an al-Majid and its Interpreter and Promulgator, Muhammad, not to enlighten the Muslims in the matter of selecting their leaders.

But there was not and could not be such an egregious omission on the part either of Qur'an or of Muhammad. Qur'an has stated, in luminous and incisive words what are the qualifications of a leader appointed by God, and Muhammad has told the *umma*, in luminous and incisive words, who possesses those qualifications. (This subject has been dealt with in another chapter).

At the moment, however, Abu Bakr was elected khalifa of the Muslims. God's Law was not invoked in his election. His election, therefore, raises some fundamental questions, such as:

1. The wishes of God and His Apostle did not figure anywhere in Abu Bakr's election. Since he was elected by some companions of the Apostle, he was their representative or the representative of the Muslims. The Apostle alone could select his successor, and he did not select Abu Bakr. Can Abu Bakr still be called the successor of the Apostle of God?
2. The most important role in any social organization is played by the government or rather, by the head of the government. Qur'an asserts that it is comprehensive and has not omitted anything of importance. But the partisans of Abu Bakr say that Qur'an has not told the Muslims how to find the head of their government. If they are right, then can we claim before the non-Muslims that Qur'an is a complete and a perfect code, and has not overlooked any important detail of man's life from consideration?
3. If Muhammad Mustafa himself did not guide the Muslims in both the theory and the practice of government, then can we claim before the non-Muslims that he is the perfect model for all mankind in everything?
4. Were the teachings of Muhammad so imperfect and inconclusive that as soon as he died, his followers were compelled to invoke pagan customs, precedents and traditions? Since they did, doesn't he leave his own conduct open to question?

The truth is that Al-Qur'an al-Majid is a comprehensive and a perfect code of life. But only those people will find enlightenment in it who will seek it. There is no evidence that enlightenment from Qur'an was sought in the election of Abu Bakr. The "principle" invoked in his election was lifted out of the political experience of pagan Arabia. His leadership rested on a custom grounded in pre-Islamic tribal mandate.

Just as Qur'an is the perfect code of life, Muhammad Mustafa, its Bringer and Interpreter, is the perfect model for mankind. He knew that he was subject to the same laws of life and death as were the other mortals. He was also endowed with a sense of history, and knew what happened when great leaders died.

One thing he could not do, was to let his people become mavericks once again as they were in the Times of Ignorance. One thing that could not escape and did not escape his attention, was the principle of succession in the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth.

Abu Bakr was elected in the outhouse of Saqifa as the head of the government of the Muslims with the support of Umar bin al-Khattab. Therefore, his government, as well as the governments of his two successors – Umar and Uthman – all three, were the "products" of Saqifa. I shall identify their governments as the governments of Saqifa to distinguish them from the government of Ali ibn Abi Talib which was *not* a product of Saqifa. Ali's government was the (restored) Kingdom of Heaven on Earth.

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