

Overall Defense of Imam Ali's Statesmanship

Ali (a.s.) took over the caliphate due to the public demand and insistence, and with his martyrdom on Ramadan 21, 40 / January 28, 661 his caliphate came to an end. People had been accustomed to the rulership of the three caliphs for 25 years during which such policies had been carried out and such procedures in government had been taken that the Imam did not regard many of them as well-founded; for him changing people's disposition was as difficult as "returning upstream the water which has run down-stream", and in some cases even impossible.

Thus, he accepted the caliphate with extreme reservedness and prudence and only after frequently refusing it – so that nobody would even imagine that he coveted the rule. From the very beginning, however, he both explicitly stated his future plans and enumerated the hardships of the way.

Parts of Imam Ali (a.s.)'s policies and some of his political positions have since long been brought up in discussions and incited criticisms and critiques. Those who took politics as tools of power and aimed at dominance over people from a governmental position have not tolerated some of Imam's political stances. After all, it should be known that Ali (a.s.) had accepted the hukuma in order to administer justice, and adopted politics as tools for government on the basis of human rights and fulfillment of rightful human needs.

Looking at his rule and authority from this angle and evaluating it by this criterion, we will see that what the Imam has done has been precisely in line with his lofty goals, well-founded, and scrupulously organized.

But those who do not look from this angle, do not accept the Imam's position in the electoral council of 'Umar for appointing the caliph and regard insistence on deposal of Mu'awiya at the beginning of his rule when the foundations of his sovereignty was not yet firmly set as far from diplomatic mannerism and say that Ali (a.s.) was a brave and fearless warrior but not a political ruler!

They say if Ali (a.s.) were a man of diplomacy, why, in the electoral council appointed by 'Umar to assign a caliph after him, he didn't accept the proposal of 'Abdul Rahman to swear allegiance to him on the

condition that he acted according to the sira of Abu Bakr and 'Umar? It was diplomatic in case he would accept the condition but after establishment of his government, he would act in his own way and would follow his own path. Did 'Uthman, who accepted the condition, follow their steps?!

If the Imam acted diplomatically, he shouldn't have treated the opposition, especially Talha and Zubayr who were plausible figures and Mu'awiya who was influential in Sham (Syria), the way he did. He should have compromised for the moment and fulfilled their demands but after the establishment of his rule, he should have begun to extirpate them. But he didn't do so, and there were many similar occasions in his political life that Ali (a.s.) avoided diplomatic contrivances. The Imam's insistence on moral and Islamic values created problems in establishment of his authority and dominance, and made him encounter serious hardships. Before everything else, we refer now to the words of Ibn Abi al-Hadid in this respect:

Know that a group of those who do not realize Amir al-Mu'minin's superiority, regard 'Umar as more diplomatic than him, although they view him as more knowledgeable than 'Umar. [1](#)

Ibn Abi al-Hadid goes on to say:

In his Al-Shifa', Ibn Sina has confirmed this, and our master had a liking toward this (subject) and dealt with it in his Al-Ghurar. Also his enemies and opponents presume that Mu'awiya is more diplomatic and his management is more proper than Ali (a.s.)'s. [2](#)

What follows here for the sake of brevity, is a general response to all criticisms made about Imam Ali (a.s.)'s policies. However, detailed responses are presented in reply to individual questions in the following chapters.

The most important point in response to this issue is the emphasis on the way in which politics and government is looked upon. If politics is viewed as a means of ruling over hearts, or interpreted as ruling on the basis of people's rights and real needs of society, and if we look at Ali (a.s.)'s stances from such perspective, then we will realize that Imam Ali (a.s.) is the greatest statesman in history second to the Holy Prophet (S. A. W.); but if we consider politics and statesmanship as a means to achieve power and domineering or interpret it as taking advantage of people and exploitative domination over them, then the Imam's stances are not defensible.

It is evident that the Imam was aware of these issues and knew how to employ them, but due to his commitment to Divine law, ethical values, and his stress on people's rights, he did not deem their use as permissible. The following hadith quoted from him clearly indicates the above fact:

If it were not the case that plotting and deception have their place in fire, I would have been the best of plotters. [3](#)

Alas! If it were not for piety, I would have been the shrewdest all Arabs. [4](#)

He also said:

I swear by God that Mu'awiya is not cleverer than me, but he practices deception and commits debauchery; and if it were not for the hideousness of deception, I would have been the shrewdest of all people, but any kind of deception is sinful, and any sin is a covering, and for any deceiver there would be a banner raised on the Resurrection Day by which to be identified.[5](#)

Accordingly, the Imam well knew how to suppress voices; how to bring down loud cries to silence; how to deceive people with tricks; how to cast fear in their hearts by domineering; how to rectify the unruly greedy misers by allurements; and how to uproot the violation of human rights, massacres, and internal oppositions and rebellions. But he is Ali, the truth-centered, God-conscious, and a believer in Resurrection, whose commitment to the truth and ethical values, and whose stressing on Divine teachings prevented him from perpetrating illegitimate policies. The Imam has frequently referred to these facts, such as the following.

Certainly, I know what can improve you and how your crookedness can be straightened. But I shall not improve you by marring myself.[6](#)

He clearly states that he knows how to discipline people and is familiar with the bullying policies for suppressing them in a short time, but he does not apply them since he views them as corrupting to the discipliner.

Surprisingly, such actions, in Ali (a.s.)'s view, above all leads the statesman to the dreadful domain of bullying, domination, and as he puts it, to corruption. That is why he calls out: "Never reformation at the cost of corrupting the reformer!"

The Imam's dignified words indicate that imaginary reformation inevitably leads to corruption.

By this, obviously, the Imam meant the illegitimate reformation, similar to undergoing economical reformation at the cost of sacrificing social justice in modern world. The Imam does not tolerate such reforms. He well knew how to, on one hand, deceive the politically influential opponents and outlaws and keep them silent by promising to fulfill their avarices and little by little expunge them; and on the other hand to promise people to restore their rights and stress on developing Divine and human values, but as soon as he would have established the foundations of his rule, he would do whatever he wished and break all promises, as the statesmen have always done. If he did so, he would no longer be Ali ibn Abi Talib. Rather, he would have been a statesman like other statesmen.

So much passion and devotion of people in the history toward Ali (a.s.) is caused by his own Truth-centeredness. Now, we should carefully see where the power-centered hypocrites and imposters stand, and on the other hand, see what the reasons for durability of Ali (a.s.) in the history and over the span of time have been. Why have the hearts borne so much love for Ali (a.s.)? We iterate here that Ali (a.s.) regards politics as a means to establishing the truth and restoring people's rights, rather than a means to domination over them.

'Alawi reformations were solely intended to revitalize sira and sunna of the Prophet (S) and his method of government. Imam Ali (a.s.) could not have followed counter-value, antireligious and antihuman policies. That was why Ali (a.s.) was facing the same difficulties that the Holy Prophet (S) was involved in.⁷

Tolerating hardships and practicing patience before agonies and difficulties, Ali (a.s.) attempted to replicate once again the radiant vista of the Prophetic rule and the government policies of the Messenger of Allah in the history of Islam, and present an efficient, justice-spreading, and beautiful sira to the generations and the ages to come.

¹. Sharh Nahj al-Balagha, X, 212.

². Ibid.

³. Al-Kafi, II, 336.

⁴. See 3/1, hadith 75.

⁵. See, 3/1, hadith 77.

⁶. Nahj al-Balagah, Sermon 69. Also see The encyclopedia of Amir al-Mu'minin, VII.

⁷. Sharh Nahj al-Balagha, 10/214 p 222.

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