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Prelude to the War

As noted before, Ali's governors had been unable to enter Syria and Kufa because of the opposition of Uthman's governors to him. But Syria and Kufa were not the only centers of sedition. Trouble was brewing for Ali in Medina itself threatening the security of the State. He was therefore compelled to defer action on the problems arising from sedition in distant provinces for sometime.

As noted before, when Ali was inducted into office as the caliph of the Muslims, two the most powerful men in Medina, viz., Talha and Zubayr, were the first to take the oath of loyalty to him. Both of them, like many others, had grown immensely rich during the reign of the three khalifas before Ali.

They kept growing wealthier and wealthier, and now, with Ali's accession to the throne, they also wanted to become the governors of the rich provinces of Basra and Kufa. When they were taking the oath of allegiance to Ali, they were secretly hoping that as a quid pro quo, Ali would appoint them governors. But Ali selected other men as governors, and he did not offer them anything. This disappointed them. Though they were heart-broken, they did not mull over their frustration, and being pragmatic men, decided to act for themselves.

Talha and Zubayr worked out a plan to circumvent Ali. They called on him, and informed him that they were going to Makkah to perform *umra* (the lesser pilgrimage). As soon as the two grandees were in Makkah, they broke their pledge of loyalty to Ali.

They declared that they had given their pledge with many mental reservations. At this time Ayesha, the daughter of Abu Bakr, and one of the widows of the Prophet, was also in Makkah. She had performed the Hajj but did not return to Medina when she heard that Ali had become caliph, and she declared that she would seek vengeance for the murder of Uthman. Talha and Zubayr called on Ayesha at her home in Makkah. They briefed her on the events in Medina. What she heard from them, strengthened her in her resolution to become the champion of Uthman.

In Talha and Zubayr she found enthusiastic supporters in her "enterprise." This made up the "triumvirate" of Ayesha, Talha and Zubayr, arrayed in a confrontation with Ali, the successor of

Muhammad Mustafa, and the lawful sovereign of the Muslims. The “linchpin” of this triumvirate was the hatred of Ali.

A brief introduction of each of the “triumvirs” is given hereunder to enable the reader to understand the concatenation of the events that led to the second civil war in Islam.

Talha bin Obaidullah

Talha's father, Obaidullah and Abu Bakr's father, Abu Qahafa, were brothers. Talha's mother was the daughter of Hadhrami, and his father, Obaidullah, was her second husband. For a short time, she had also been the wife of Abu Sufyan, the father of Muawiya but he had divorced her.

Talha was married to Umm Kulthoom, the daughter of Abu Bakr, and this made him Ayesha's brother-in-law. When Abu Bakr appointed Umar his successor, Talha strongly protested, and drew his attention to the highhandedness of the khalifa-designate. Later, when Umar himself was dying, he had made Talha a member of his electoral committee.

Talha broke his pledge of loyalty to Ali because the latter did not make him the governor of Basra. He had, probably, the same reason for his opposition, earlier, to Uthman, who also had not appointed him a governor. Baladhuri, the Arab historian, says in his book, *Ansab-ul-Ashraf*, vol. I, p. 113:

“Among the companions of the Messenger of God, there were few who castigated Uthman so viciously as Talha did.”

When Uthman's palace was besieged by the rebels, it was Talha who did not let his (Uthman's) slaves bring water in it. At night, he shot arrows at the palace but Uthman knew about it. Tabari, the historian, says in his *History*, vol. III, p. 411:

“Uthman often prayed: 'O God! Save me from the harm that Talha might do to me. He is the one who has inflamed the people against me, and he is the one who has caused my house to be besieged.'”

Talha's hatred of Uthman must have been colossal. He could not condone his aberrations even after his death. He ordered Uthman's bier and his pall-bearers to be stoned. Uthman could not even be buried in the cemetery of the Muslims; he had to be buried in the cemetery of the Jews.

Zubayr bin Awwam

Zubayr's mother was Safiya, the daughter of Abdul Muttalib bin Hashim. Thus his mother was the paternal aunt of Muhammad and Ali.

Zubayr also was married to one of the daughters of Abu Bakr, and this made him a brother-in-law of Ayesha. Like Talha, he too protested to his father-in-law against the appointment of Umar as khalifa.

And when Umar was dying, he made Zubayr also a member of his electoral committee.

Ibn Saad says in his *Tabqaat* that Zubayr was also incredibly rich like Talha.

Zubayr shared Talha's lust for gold and the ambition for political power. He had hoped that Ali would treat him in the same manner as Uthman had treated his cousins, i.e., by making him a governor. After all, he was Ali's cousin.

But Ali did not treat his cousin, Zubayr, as Uthman had treated his cousins. When no doubt was left in Zubayr's mind that Ali would not appoint him a governor, he broke his pledge of loyalty to him, and rose in rebellion against him.

Zubayr shared Talha's hatred of Uthman, and often urged the rebels to kill him.

Ibn Qutayba, the Arab historian, says that a few days after Ali's accession to the throne, Talha and Zubayr came to see him, and the following exchange took place between them:

T & Z: Do you know why we took the oath of loyalty to you?

Ali: You took the oath of loyalty for the same reason as the other Muslims – to obey me.

T & Z: No. We took the oath in the hope that you would reciprocate our gesture by giving us a share in the government. After all, it was with our support that you became the caliph.

Ali: I may consult you in affairs of the government but there is no such thing as a “share” for you in the government.

Talha and Zubayr were deeply mortified at Ali's refusal to share power with them, and following was their comment on the outcome of their meeting with him:

Talha: In Medina, there were three members of the electoral committee. Out of them, one (Saad bin Abi Waqqas) withheld his pledge of loyalty from Ali but Zubayr and I gave him our pledge. Both of us made it possible for him to become khalifa but he has forgotten so soon what we did for him.

Zubayr: We drew up the list of the blunders of Uthman, and we censured him, all for the sake of Ali. During this tumult, Ali stayed in his home. Then, with our help he became khalifa. But as soon as he became khalifa, he forgot our services, and gave all the prize posts to other men.

The purport of these remarks was brought to the attention of Ali. He called Abdullah ibn Abbas, and sought his advice in the matter. Ibn Qutayba writes in his book *Kitab-ul-Imama wa-Siyassa*, that Abdullah ibn Abbas said:

“It's my opinion that you should appoint Talha governor of Basra, and Zubayr governor of Kufa. This will satisfy them and silence them.”

Ali paused to reflect on his cousin's advice, and then said:

“No. I don't think I can agree with you on this point. I know both of them well. If I make them governors, then tyranny, oppression and exploitation will get reprieve in Basra and Kufa, and the cry of the oppressed will be smothered once again. If I were to appoint men like Talha and Zubayr as governors, then I ought to suffer Muawiya also to remain as governor of Syria.”

Ibn Qutayba further writes:

“Amr bin Aas, Talha and Zubayr were the first to revile Uthman. They were the first to openly instigate the people to kill him. Talha and Zubayr were the first to take the oath of loyalty to Ali, and both of them were the first to break their solemn pledge.”

Ever since Umar had appointed them members of his electoral committee, Talha and Zubayr had nursed the ambition to become khalifa. But Abdur Rahman bin Auf made Uthman khalifa instead of any of them.

A second opportunity to become khalifa came immediately after the death of Uthman. But this time, they sensed that the Muslims did not want them. They realized that no matter what they did, the Muslims would not accept them. Everyone in Medina had seen with his own eyes their conduct toward Uthman during the siege of his palace.

Talha and Zubayr also noticed that it was not Ali who was jockeying to get to the top but the Muslims who were “jockeying” to put him there. Ali's election as caliph was spontaneous, and whatever resistance there was to it, it was from himself. Talha and Zubayr also knew that if they withheld their pledge of loyalty from him, they would make themselves too conspicuous. Not wishing this to happen, they took the oath of loyalty to Ali.

Finding khilafat beyond their reach, Talha and Zubayr eyed Basra and Kufa as consolation prizes for themselves. They hoped that Ali would not ignore their status in the *umma*, and as members of Umar's electoral committee. They also assumed that Ali could not overlook their prestige and influence with the people of Basra and Kufa. But Ali was not impressed by their status and prestige, and did not give them Basra and Kufa. Talha and Zubayr realized that Medina had proven to be a rather poor springboard for their ambitions. They, therefore, decided to go to Makkah, and try luck there. Ali made no attempt to stop them. Talha and Zubayr left Medina with treason in their hearts.

If Ali had appointed Talha and Zubayr governors of Basra and Kufa, they would have consolidated their position in their respective provinces, and then they would have repudiated allegiance to the central government. The *umma* then would have found itself ruled by four independent and mutually hostile rulers – Talha in Basra; Zubayr in Kufa; Muawiya in Syria; and Ali in Hijaz. At the outbreak of the inevitable civil war among them, the Islamic State would have dissolved into anarchy to become a “government” of the Arabian tribes once again as it was in the *Times of Ignorance*.

It was the vision and genius of Ali that saved the Dar-ul-Islam from such a tragic fate.

It is a well-known fact that governmental decisions and policies, in many cases, are shaped by the pressures of special interest groups. Talha and Zubayr, and their supporters formed such a group. They applied pressure but when it met resistance, they went to war.

Ayesha bint Abu Bakr

Ayesha was the daughter of Abu Bakr, the first khalifa of the Muslims. She was born four years after the Prophet of Islam proclaimed his mission, and she was nine years old when she was married to him. She was his third wife. Since she remained childless, she adopted Abdullah bin Zubayr, the son of her sister, as her own child. It was from this circumstance that she was called Umm Abdullah, the mother of Abdullah.

Ayesha was present in the battle of Uhud. Bukhari says on the authority of Anas that he saw Ayesha and Umm Saleem bringing water in leathern bags, and giving it to the wounded soldiers to drink. Ayesha fiercely hated Ali. She hated him so much that she could not even mention him. Bukhari has recorded the following incident:

“Ayesha says that when the condition of the Apostle of God deteriorated, he sought the permission of his other wives to spend all the time in my chamber as he wanted me to nurse him. That day he was in the chamber of Maymuna. Since he was weak, he had to be supported by two men who brought him from Maymuna's chamber into my room. One of those two men was Abdullah ibn Abbas.”

Ayesha's account of this story was reported to Abdullah ibn Abbas, and he said that the other man who supported the Apostle when going from Maymuna's chamber, was Ali.

Historians have tried to find out the reasons why Ayesha hated Ali. One of the reasons is supposed to be the incident of *ifk*, i.e., “the lie.” This incident occurred in the sixth year of the Hijra. When the Medinese army was returning from an expedition to the Banu Mustaliq, Ayesha who had accompanied the Apostle, was inadvertently left behind. She turned up later with a camel driver.

The incident occasioned some loose talk among the people, and caused much heart-burning to the Apostle. He is said to have consulted Usama bin Zayd bin Haritha and Ali ibn Abi Talib in this matter. Usama reportedly told him that Ayesha was absolutely innocent but Ali is reported to have said to him that it was unnecessary for him to endure such torment because he could always find other women to marry.

Ayesha also claimed that Ali beat up her maid-servant in an attempt to make her disclose the “truth.”

The Prophet was on tenterhooks not knowing what the truth of the matter was when a new revelation came from heaven that exculpated Ayesha of all guilt or blame. Her innocence was upheld and the

unpleasant incident was apparently closed.

Though this incident had a happy ending for Ayesha, she never forgave Ali for the “advice” he is alleged to have given to her husband, i.e., to have told him that other women were available to him all the time, and that he ought not to grieve over the incident too much.

If Ali ever gave such advice to the Apostle, then he did nothing more than paraphrase the fifth verse of the 66th chapter of Qur'an (Surah Tahreem) which reads as follows:

It may be if he (the Prophet) divorced you all, that God will give him in exchange consorts better than you...

According to this verse of Qur'an, there were women who were better than the consorts of the Prophet, and God could give them to him.

The story that Ali beat up Ayesha's maid, does not jibe with his character. He was the most chivalrous of men, and even in the battlefield, did not want to be the first to strike at his enemy. He invited his enemy to strike at him first. Only when the enemy had struck a blow, did Ali feel free to defend himself. It is unthinkable that he would beat up a helpless girl.

When the army marched out, and Ayesha was left behind, she was all alone, and her maid was not with her. How would she know what had happened if she was not with her mistress? Even if someone had threatened to kill her, she still could not tell anything.

Sir William Muir, the British historian, has pointed out that the narrator of this incident was Ayesha herself, and this, he says, “makes her testimony suspect.”

But Ayesha did not need the incident of *ifk* to hate Ali. Her hatred of Ali went to earlier times – beyond this incident. She was jealous of Khadija, her daughter and her daughter's children. Muhammad was coddling and cuddling the children of the daughter of Khadija all the time, and Ayesha might have thought that if she had any children, he would have loved them as he loved the daughter and the grandchildren of Khadija, but she had none.

To be jealous of the daughter and the grandchildren of Khadija might have been normal and natural for Ayesha. But what was not normal and not natural, especially for a wife of the Messenger of God, was to allow her jealousy to become an ungovernable and irrational obsession.

Ayesha herself often said that though she had never seen Khadija, she was more jealous of her than she was of any other of her co-wives. One reason for her jealousy was that her husband always remembered Khadija with genuine love and gratitude. On one occasion, he was praising and complimenting Khadija when Ayesha lost her patience, and snapped: “Why do you talk about that old woman all the time? Hasn't God given you better wives than her?”

“Never!” answered the Apostle. “God never gave me a better wife than Khadija. She believed in me when others contradicted me. She supported me when I had no one to support me. She was the first one to accept Islam when everyone else was an idolater. And God blessed me with children through her, and through her alone.” (*Bukhari and Siyar-us-Sahabiyyat*)

But Ayesha could not suppress or conceal her hatred of Khadija, her daughter and her grandchildren. Even the death of Khadija and Fatima could not persuade her to forget her old hatred. She hated Ali and the grandchildren of Khadija.

It was inevitable that Ayesha would tangle with Uthman. Once Uthman was using abusive and profane language, from the pulpit, for Abdullah bin Masood, a friend of the Apostle of God, and she had risen to his defense. There had been other occasions when she had tried to cut Uthman to size. A door of her chamber opened into the Mosque, and from time to time she put on its floor a pair of shoes and a shirt which belonged to the Apostle, put her head out, and addressing Uthman when he was in the pulpit, said:

“Before these things which belong to your Prophet, could accumulate any dust on them, you have changed his commandments, his traditions, and his customs, and you have corrupted his religion.”

Ayesha had suspected that Uthman “ignored” her. Then he curtailed her stipend. This made her furious. This and many other petty irritations made her a bitter enemy of Uthman. Abbas Mahmud Al-Akkad of Egypt says in his book, *Abqarriyet al-Imam Ali* (Cairo, 1970), that Ayesha had given the name “Na’thal” to Uthman. Na’thal was an old Jew in Medina. It is said that Uthman's beard bore some resemblance to his beard. Ayesha, in moments of pique, openly incited the people against Uthman, and said: “Kill this Na’thal. He has become a kafir.” Umar Farookh writes on page 190 of his book, *The History of the Arabic Thought Till the Days of Ibn Khaldoon*, published in 1983, by Dar-ul-‘Ilm lil-Malaeen, Beirut, Lebanon:

“It is reported that Ayesha used to say: ‘Kill this Na’thal (Uthman bin Affan); he has become an apostate.’”

The siege of Uthman's palace had already begun when Ayesha left Medina for Makkah to perform Hajj. Marwan begged her to stay in Medina but she paid no attention, and left the city. During her absence from Medina, Uthman was killed.

In Makkah, Ayesha was exceedingly anxious to hear the news of the events taking place in Medina. After the Hajj, she packed her baggage to return to Medina. Before leaving Makkah, however, she was informed that a man called Akhdhar, had arrived from Medina. She called him and asked him what was happening in Medina, He said:

“Uthman has killed the rebels and has brought the city under control.”

Ayesha was shocked to hear this report, and she said:

“Did Uthman kill those people who came to Medina only to protest against tyranny, and to demand justice? By God, we are not pleased with this.” (*Tabari, History, Vol. III, p. 468*)

But on the following day, another traveler came from Medina, and he told Ayesha that the rebels had killed Uthman, and that Akhdhar had given her a wrong report. She said:

“May God put distance between His Mercy and Uthman. Whatever has happened, Uthman brought it upon himself. God does not oppress anyone.”

When the news of Uthman's death was confirmed, Ayesha decided to leave Makkah immediately. Her presence in Medina, she believed, was absolutely essential before the election of a new khalifa. She left Makkah but she had not gone far when she met a third traveler, one Obaid bin Abi Salma, coming from Medina. She asked him what had happened in Medina before he left it. He said:

“Uthman has been killed, and the people of Medina have given the pledge of loyalty to Ali ibn Abi Talib.”

The accession of Ali to the throne of caliphate, was not the kind of news that Ayesha was prepared to hear. But hoping that she had not heard the report correctly, she asked: “Did you say that the people of Medina have given the pledge of loyalty to Ali?” Obaid replied: “Yes, they have. And who else was there to whom they could give their pledge of loyalty?”

Ayesha moaned:

“O how I wish, the earth had split open or the sky had fallen on earth if Ali has become the caliph. Now I cannot go to Medina. I shall return to Makkah.” (*Kamil, History, Vol. III, p. 105*)

Ayesha ordered her camel-driver to return to Makkah, and said:

“Uthman was killed while he was innocent. By God, I shall now seek vengeance for his blood.”

Ayesha's remark surprised Obaid bin Abi Salma, and he asked:

“O mother of the believers! Are you going to seek vengeance for Uthman's murder? But wasn't he the man you called ‘Na'thal,’ and were you not the woman who instigated the Muslims to kill him because, as you said, he had become an apostate?”

Ayesha answered:

“Yes, it's true that I called Uthman by that name, and other people also called him by the same name. It is also true that I said that he had gone astray, and that he ought to be corrected. But what I am saying now is truer than what I said before, and what I am saying now is that Uthman had repented before his death. Therefore, when he was killed, he was innocent, and I am going to seek vengeance for his

blood.”

How did Ayesha know that Uthman had repented? Until she left Medina, he had not repented. Even after she had performed Hajj, and was ready to return to Medina, he had not repented, or else she would not have expressed satisfaction at his murder. But when she heard the news that Ali had become caliph, she suddenly made the discovery that Uthman had repented, and was innocent. She declared that she was Uthman's champion, and that she would launch a campaign to get vengeance for his blood.

Presently Marwan who had left Medina at the accession of Ali to the throne, also arrived in Makkah. He called on Ayesha, and gave her a graphic account of the murder of Uthman which is said to have deeply moved her, and to have brought her to the edge of tears.

Ayesha launched a two-pronged campaign; she had to prove (1) Uthman's “innocence,” and (2) Ali's “guilt.”

Travelers carried the news of Ayesha's campaign to Medina. Talha and Zubayr were thrilled to hear the news. They saw a glimmer of hope for themselves in her campaign. They wrote letters to her, gave her their blessings, admired her for her initiative and enterprise; encouraged her and urged her to step up her propaganda against Ali. Soon they themselves were to go to Makkah “to perform umra.”

Ayesha, under the guidance of Marwan, began to rally support. The first man to respond to her call, was Abdullah bin Aamir al-Hadhrami, Uthman's governor in Makkah. With him he also brought Saeed bin Aas, Walid bin Aqaba and other Umayyads who were in Makkah, into Ayesha's “camp.”

In the meantime, Talha and Zubayr also arrived from Medina, and they formed an alliance with Ayesha and Marwan – an alliance against Ali ibn Abi Talib. Now most of the behind-the-scenes sponsors of the assassination of Uthman were present in Makkah. Since there was unity of aims and identity of purpose among them all, the formation of alliance presented no difficulty.

The ostensible aim of this alliance was to seek vengeance for the blood of Uthman, and the allies agreed that there was no better way of getting it than by capturing the caliphate itself. But behind the screen of the quest for vengeance, lurked the lust for power, and the fears of men, and the jealousy and implacable vindictiveness of a woman.

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