

Ruler is one of the people

Before Ali attained to the caliphate it was likely that the Umayyad governments might be converted into kingship – rather it had already been so converted. The rulers and other persons at the helm of affairs were of the view that the caliphate was their special right and only they were entitled to it on account of their belonging to a noble family. In order to strengthen their hold and establish a firm government they considered all unlawful acts like tribal bias, formation of groups, bribes etc. to be lawful.

According to them a ruler was the master of the lives, property and honour of the ruled and could exploit them in any manner he liked, without the oppressed persons having any right of protest. They viewed the common people as quadrupeds whom they could load with the heaviest burden and beat as much as they wished.

During the time of Uthman the Umayyad governors got an opportunity of despotic rule and they availed of it to their heart's content. They endeavoured to strengthen the Umayyad rule in all parts of the Islamic territories. They bribed the Shaykhs and dignitaries of the Arabian tribes heavily to win their support. They also gave full freedom to the persons in position to oppress the common man in any manner they liked.

They also bought the armed forces by giving them excessive wealth and promising them high offices. And in fact the people could not oppose them because whoever sided with them was honoured, and whoever opposed them was condemned and disgraced.

In short the government was established on new principles. This was done by Bani Umayyah whose hearts had not sincerely acknowledged Islam. They embraced Islam owing to fear and continued to remain within its fold on account of their avarice for riches. History shows that these people remained after embracing Islam as they were during the age of ignorance. The distinguished companions of the Prophet who managed the affairs previously were discarded and disgraced. ¹ They were held to be of no consequence now.

Of course, those companions who co-operated with Bani Umayyah to destroy the rights of the Muslims and to strengthen the Umayyad government were exalted. These persons handed over the keys of the

public treasury and the sword of government to Bani Umayyah to make the people obedient to them. The public was also divided into two groups. One group consisted of pious persons who were the well-wishers of the society. They wanted a just ruler, although he might not endow riches on them and might not let them plunder the wealth of the public treasury. The second group had deviated from the right path. They wanted to sell their faith to Bani Umayyah at the price fixed by them. If Bani Umayyah paid that price well and good, otherwise they intended to dilly-dally till the price demanded by them was paid.

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When Ali, the Commander of the Faithful attained to the caliphate the conditions were very precarious. The people were divided into two groups. The persons belonging to one of those groups were prepared to lay down their lives in support of the pious and just Imam. The other group supported Bani Umayyah and endeavoured to strengthen their government and kingdom. Bani Umayyah had also been endeavouring for years to establish their rule on a permanent footing. They knew that their program was beset with difficulties, but they were determined to succeed and had decided to do away with anyone who obstructed them, although he might be a very great and respectable religious personality.

Ali was not very keen to become a caliph. He assisted Abu Bakr and Umar as and when they were faced with a difficulty. [2](#) Whenever the Islamic caliphate was confronted with a problem Ali solved it.

He showed kindness even to Uthman and never complained against Uthman's attaining to the caliphate instead of himself. The only thing for which he was anxious was the establishment of truth and justice. People beseeched him to accept the caliphate but he did not evince any interest in it. History shows and his own remarks are also available to the effect that when, after the assassination of Uthman, the people came to him collectively and requested him to assume the caliphate he said: "Leave me and find out someone else for the job. If you leave me alone I shall be a member of the society like you and shall be more attentive and obedient than you to the person whom you select as the caliph. I shall be more useful for you in the capacity of an adviser than in that of a caliph".

On that day Ali was not agreeable to accept the caliphate as with his far-sightedness he could see up to the last end of the future. If he was a claimant of the caliphate earlier, it was not because he desired to become a ruler. On the contrary what he desired was that Muslims should develop within themselves those morals and virtues which the Prophet wanted to inculcate in them. And if he declined to accept that office at that stage (i.e. after the assassination of Uthman) it was because owing to the policies of the former rulers the habits of the Muslims had been spoilt and their way of thinking had changed.

The kingdom which was established with the name of Islamic state had been moulded into worldly authority and carried the signs of the despotism of Kaiser and Kisra. Ali's object differed from the desires of the people. Neither Ali could condescend to the wishes of the people, nor could people agree to Ali's achieving the ends he had in view. He himself draws the picture of that period in these words:

"The time is extremely incompatible and disagreeable. In these days a righteous person is considered to

be wicked and the refractoriness of the tyrant is on the increase. This is so because the sky is covered with dark clouds and the signs of the paths have been obliterated. The people are involved in doubts and sensuality. They have ears but they are deaf. They have eyes but they are blind. They are neither steadfast in the battlefield nor reliable in difficult circumstances”.

Ali knew very well that if he accepted the request of the people and assumed the responsibilities of the office of caliphate they would not tolerate the manner in which he would run the administration and would not obey his orders unless he was harsh to them.

These were the conditions which Ali had to face after the assassination of Uthman. The dignitaries as well as the common people gathered outside the door of his house again and again and insisted upon his accepting the oath of allegiance from them. However, notwithstanding the fact that he entertained very good wishes for the people in his heart he was reluctant to accept the oath of allegiance from them. There was, however, one thing which obliged him to think of accepting their request. The Muslims were too much insisting upon his accepting that office, which meant that a responsibility was being placed on them to guide those, who were in need of reformation and guidance from him. Furthermore, at that time social equity and justice were in danger. Persons in authority were encroaching upon the rights of the weak, and the life, property, and honour of the common man did not carry any value.

Ali could not tolerate that he should sit quietly in his house when the poor citizens were being subjected to oppression. A brave and steadfast person like Ali could not let the Muslims fall a prey to the atrocities of the wolves of Bani Umayyah and remain silent. If he had not come to the rescue of the Muslim at that difficult moment he would have been treated to be a coward and not the brave and valiant person as he is known in history.

He himself says: “I was worried and alarmed lest the foolish and wicked persons should become the rulers of this nation and make the property of God their plaything and the creatures of God their slaves and fight with the righteous and make the tyrants their helpers”.

For these reasons he considered it obligatory for himself to accept the oath of allegiance although many other righteous persons found themselves incapable of bearing the burden of caliphate

Ali hated sequestered life. Except when it was possible to serve the people by remaining in seclusion it was impossible for him to spend his time in retirement. A person who neglects serving the creatures of God inspite of his being in a position to do so spoils his faith as well as his world. Ali accepted the caliphate with firm determination and considered it in the interests of the Muslims that he should assume that office.

In order to understand the nature of Ali's administration and his economic and financial policies it is necessary to learn how Ali himself has explained the caliphate and mastership, what position caliphate enjoyed in his eyes from the religious point of view, and what benefits it carried in its lap.

While addressing the people at the time of taking the oath of allegiance from them, Ali said to them: “O People! I am one of you. I enjoy the same rights which you enjoy. My responsibilities are also the same as yours. Nothing can invalidate truth. (i.e. a ruler or caliph cannot change the commands of God”.

In another sermon he said: “I swear by God that in the first instance I myself obey those commands of God which I invite you to obey and I myself refrain first from those things, from which I ask you to refrain”.

On this basis the ruler and caliph is not to be obeyed in his personal capacity. It is necessary to obey him because he enforces equity and justice and the laws of the **Sbari'ah**. The caliphate does not entitle the ruler and the caliph to appropriate to himself as much of the property of the public treasury as he likes, and to spend it himself or give it to his friends, associates and kinsmen. On the contrary the object of the institution of caliphate is that justice should be administered. The ruler should mete out equal treatment to everyone, should regard the efforts of a person who propagates the Divine religion and serves the public, should prohibit hoarding, and prevent oppression, and should not deviate from truth in any circumstances. He should not abandon his program even though the wicked and cruel persons dislike his just conduct and may be after his life. It is also his duty to acquaint the people with the rules of justice and to prevent their deviation from it.

Ali wrote to one of his governors as under: “Your holding this office does not entitle you to accumulate wealth or to take revenge from any person. Your only duty is that you should destroy falsehood and revive truth”.

In the eyes of Ali son of Abu Talib rulership and caliphate did not mean that the ruler should sit on the throne of dignity, strengthen his power and make his position the means of enslaving the people. He says: “Generosity and munificence is a greater source of love and affection than consanguinity and kinship. There is no greatness like meekness and no virtue like knowledge”.

Caliphate does not mean that people should be subjugated at the point of the sword, and by means of bloodshed and force, or that they should obey the caliph on account of fear or covetousness. Ali was a man who did not worship God because he desired forgiveness or because he feared punishment. On the contrary he worshipped God because He deserved to be worshipped. He wished that the people should obey the caliph on account of his being worthy of obedience and not because of fear or greed of gain.

Now as regards consulting others the Commander of the Faithful has said: “One who faces different opinions recognizes the spots of mistakes and errors”.

The person who realizes mistakes arrives at truth and right action. The opinions of the people are essential things which benefit the state as well as the people, and the affairs are conducted in such a way that they do not entail shame and regret. Ali acknowledges this fact in very clear words and says: “Correctness cannot be achieved by abandoning consultation”.

It does not behove a ruler to keep his doors shut before the people and try to achieve some object by keeping the people in the dark. The Commander of the Faithful draws attention to this point by saying: “Acquire light from a kindled lamp”

According to the Commander of the Faithful it is not proper for a caliph to seek distance from them, to be proud and haughty, or to ignore the needs of the people. Caliphate is a means of the ruler associating with the people, showing kindness to them and behaving with them meekly. If the ruler remains aloof from the people none of his excuses and arguments can be accepted.

If the people are annoyed with the ruler on account of any such thing they will become a burden on him in the same manner in which his rule will be burden on them, because the people will behave with him as he behaves with them. The Commander of the Faithful says in this behalf: “The hearts of the subjects are the treasury of the ruler. He will get from there what he places there, whether it be equity and justice or cruelty and oppression”.

In the eyes of Ali the caliphate was not based on party-spirit or family bias which are very bad qualities. He considered caliphate to consist of good qualities, pious deeds, meting out justice to the people and refraining from tyranny and mischief.

In any case according to Ali rulership was not meant for those people about whom he said: “If these people become your rulers they will behave like Kaiser and Kisra”. Nor did those persons deserved to be the rulers who were deceitful and oppressive.

Keeping all these things in view Ali accepted the caliphate with a firm determination to establish truth and destroy falsehood and failing that to sacrifice his very life. It was on this account that he insisted that the people should watch the activities of their rulers and should not accept a ruler who did not prove to be a public servant. He also advised them to express displeasure on the bad activities of a ruler or to approve them on merit. He said: “Do you not feel annoyed and displeased if foolish persons become your rulers and consequently you are humiliated, afflicted and ruined?”

In his eyes being annoyed at cruelty and oppression was as important a thing as welcoming equity and justice.

He respected the personal freedom of the individuals and also kept in view the rights of the nation. As regards those who did not take oath of allegiance to him he said: “It does not matter if they do not take the oath of allegiance. However, they should stay indoors and should not interfere in the affairs of the nation”.

Sa'd son of Abi Waqas who was a member of the Consultative Council declined to take oath of allegiance to Ali. Ali did not compel him to take the oath and left him free. Sa'd had said: “You need not feel worried about me. I shall never rise against you”.

Similarly Abdullah son of Umar did not take the oath of allegiance. Ali asked him to produce a guarantor, who should guarantee that he would not create any disturbance, but he declined to do so. Thereupon Ali said to him: "You have been ill-mannered since your childhood and I know you from the very first day". Then he turned to the people and said: "Leave him as well. I guarantee that he will not create any disturbance".

There were some other persons also who remained hidden in their houses and were inclined to take the oath of allegiance. Ali said about them: "I, too, am not desirous of those persons who do not need me". He left them free on the condition that they would not create any disturbance and would not harm the people. Many revolutionaries wanted to free such persons to take the oath of allegiance but the Commander of the Faithful did not agree to this. In the matter of the oath of allegiance his usual attitude was what he says: "I shall accept the oath of allegiance from one who takes it voluntarily and shall ignore one, who declines to take it".

Hence, the freedom of the individuals was fully secured in the government of Ali and could not be violated except when they were guilty of harming the people, because in that case it was not possible for Ali to leave them free. It was for this reason that he did not leave Talha, Zubayr and Mu'awiya alone as he had done in the case of Sa'd son of Waqas and Abdullah son of Umar. These three persons were dreaming of attaining to caliphate and were keen to usurp wealth and authority. They wanted to create trouble so that they might remove Ali from his office and appropriate to themselves the public property which belonged to all Muslims. They had accumulated immense wealth, and had also equipped an army to fight against Ali's government. It was on account of this state of affairs that Ali did not leave them alone, and all these facts go to prove that the opinion formed by him about these three persons as absolutely correct. Later we shall mention in detail what disturbances took birth from the conspiracy of these three persons against Ali.

In short, rulership and caliphate is the right of the people and it is not permissible to compel a person to take the oath of allegiance. Such a compulsion can possibly be exercised in the public interest but not in the personal interest of the ruler. Good relations can subsist between the ruler and the subjects only when the people elect a ruler themselves and take oath of allegiances to him voluntarily.

As Ali freely associated and mixed with the people, it was, therefore, natural that he should desire that every one of the governors and other officers should also associate with the people as one of them. He recommended to the officials emphatically to respect the rights of the people. Ali introduced the best tradition of the association of the rulers with the people. This tradition is also compatible with the tradition of the civilized nations of modern times. He made the subjects the supervisors of the actions of the rulers so that they might act according to the wishes of the people.

As and when the Commander of the Faithful entrusted the rulership of a province, a territory or a city, to a person he wrote a testament and gave it to him so that he might read it out before the people. If the people of that place accepted the testament it constituted a treaty between them and the ruler which

neither of them could violate. If the treaty was violated by either party it was necessary for the Imam to punish the party concerned and to remove the ruler from his office in case he happened to be the violator.

1. It was the earnest endeavour and the heartfelt desire of caliph Uthman that the despotic government of the Umayyads should be established firmly in all Islamic cities and he spared no effort in this behalf. Two or three days after Uthman's becoming caliph Abu Sufyan came to congratulate him. As Uthman's partiality towards his kinsmen was well known Abu Sufyan told him what he had in his heart saying: "Play with the caliphate like a ball and make Bani Umayyah its pillars". Although Uthman rebuked him at that time, but from that very day he made the words of Abu Sufyan his own motto and entrusted the governorship of all big cities to the young and inexperienced lads of Bani Umayyah. These persons were neither educated nor good natured. By making such appointments Uthman opened the gates of mischief and disturbance, and provided means of the destruction of the Muslim society as well as his own death.

Allama Abu Amr, the author of *Isti'ab* says that once Shabil son of Khalid arrived when Uthman was sitting with others consisting of Bani Umayyah only. Shabil said: "O Quraysh! What has happened to you? Has no child, whom you might exalt been left with you? Is there among you no indigent person whom you might like to make rich? Is there among you no unknown person whom you might like to become known? Why have you made Abu Musa Ash'ari the governor of Iraq and given him that province as his freehold wherefrom he is earning a lot?" Thereupon Uthman enquired as to who should be appointed as governor to replace Abu Musa. Those present suggested the name of Abdullah son of `Asmir, a cousin of Uthman. He therefore, dismissed Abu Musa and appointed Abdullah in his place, although he was only sixteen years of age. These youngster of Bani Umayyah did not care as to what they did nor said. Uthman did not pay heed to any complaint against these boys nor did he attach any importance to reproaches on this account. One of these young men was sa'id son of Aas, the governor of Kufa. He was a hot-headed and pleasure-loving person who said to a gathering from the pulpit: "These lands of Iraq are gardens for the young men of Quraysh".

These were the boys about whom the Prophet had already said: "My followers will be ruined at the hands of foolish lads of Quraysh". (*Sahih Bokhari Kitab al-Fitan* part 10, p.146 and *Mustadrak*, vol.4, p.470)

2. It is true that the Commander of the Faithful was not keen for wordly government. If he desired the caliphate it was because the Prophet's Islam could not be propagated and spread except by him. This was so because he had been brought up in the lap of the Prophet and was the treasure of his wisdom and knowledge. The Prophet had fed him with knowledge in the same manner in which a bird feeds its offspring. From the very day of his birth till the Prophet's death he was not separated from the Prophet. Every moment of his was spent in the company of the Prophet. None knew the Sunnah of the Prophet better than he did. He was the exact picture of the ways and manners of the Prophet and successor to all his attainments. This is a fact which was acknowledged not only by his friends but also by his enemies and even by those who had assumed the office of caliph. God willed and the Prophet also desired that after him Ali should be at the helm of affairs, because only he possessed the capability to enforce and expand the religion of Islam in the manner desired by God and His Prophet.

As regards the question whether or not he objected to others usurping the caliphate the pages of *Nahj-al-Balaghah* as well as history go to show that he protested against this on all occasions and put forth his arguments. He said: "I deserve the oath of allegiance more than you do. I shall not take the oath of allegiance to you rather you should take the oath in my favour. You have assumed this office in preference to the Ansar on the basis of your kinship with the Prophet and now you are bent upon usurping it from the members of his household. Did you not put forth this argument before the Ansar that you were more entitled to the caliphate because Muhammad was one of you. And accepting this argument they surrendered this office to you and let you assume the government. Now I put forth the same argument before you which you advanced against the Ansar. We are successors of Muhammad during his life as well as after his death. In case, therefore, you believe in Muhammad and Islam, you must do justice to us, failing which you will be guilty of wilful oppression".

Ali's rendering assistance to the three caliphs at difficult times is a clear proof. of his magnanimity and high morality. The greatest quality of man is that when there is a conflict between personal interests and collective interests he should prefer public welfare to his own interests. Another great quality of man is that he should be honest and sincere even in his dealings with his enemies.

To keep personal interests in view in all matters, and to be influenced by personal likes and dislikes on all occasion, are the qualities of mean persons whose actions are governed by animal instincts rather than human values. It is true that the majority of human beings has always endeavoured to serve individual interests, but if the action of the majority is accepted to be the criterion every meanness will become civilization and culture and every good quality will become a vice and defect.

It is however, a matter of regret that the people have been looking at the method of action of the great men according to their own mentality and have been drawing wrong conclusions.

Ali son of Abu Talib was a perfect specimen of Islamic teachings in the world of Islam and the best image of human qualities and perfection. His conduct was replete with all the qualities which are considered to be the essence of human perfection and the most prominent aspect of his disposition was this that he never allowed his personal differences, egotism or enmity to interfere with Islamic and collective matters, nor did he permit his personal interests and feelings to disregard honesty and integrity.

The inhabitants of the world who have become accustomed, on account of their own conduct as well as that of their so-called leaders, to keep in view the aspect of personal interest in everything conclude from the conduct of Ali that he had no personal differences with anyone and entertained great love and friendship for all in his mind. However, if one reflects a little with broadmindedness it becomes known that to provide correct guidance to others for the sake of public welfare, in spite of personal differences, is the supreme human quality which can be observed clearly in the conduct of Ali. This characteristic of the Commander of the Faithful is reflected in different forms in the events of his life with which the pages of history are replete. The rulers who acquired the caliphate ignoring the qualities of Ali and his entitlement to that office, and claimed to be the only persons who could look after the welfare of the society, consulted him as and when they were faced with any difficulty and on every such occasion he gave them the best advice suited to the circumstances of the time.

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