

## The “Indispensability Equation” of Islam

The early years of Islam were a time of stern tests and grim trials for the Faithful. Every day brought for them new confrontations with, and new challenges from the polytheists, and merely existing in a hostile environment, was an unending struggle. The entire ministry of Muhammad as God's Last Messenger to this world, which spanned the last 23 years of his life, was overshadowed by this struggle.

It was a titanic struggle. Only men and women of invincible faith, indomitable courage, and unflagging strength could have lived through its stresses and tensions. To grapple with it, therefore, Islam produced its own “titans.” The “titans” of Islam were two individuals and two groups. The two individuals were Abu Talib ibn Abdul-Muttalib and his son, Ali; and the two groups were the Banu Hashim in Makkah, and the Ansar in Medina.

The “base of operations” of Abu Talib and the Banu Hashim was Makkah whereas the “theater” of the conflicts in which Ali and the Ansar were drawn, was Medina. Together, they made up what might be called the “indispensability equation” of Islam. Each of the four components of this “equation” was indispensable for the existence of Islam, and each of them was destined to play a very special role in its history.

The first component of this equation was Abu Talib. God charged him with the duty of protecting Muhammad and defending Islam. His house in Makkah was the cradle of Islam. Muhammad, the future Prophet, was born in his house. Later, the same house became, first the “school” of Muhammad, and then the “fortress” of Islam.

Abu Talib was a man of great prestige, resourcefulness and power but the problems he faced, as the defender of Islam, were of such magnitude that he could not have overcome them all by himself. He had, therefore, to enlist support. But who in Makkah would support him against the Quraysh except the members of his own clan – the Banu Hashim? He rallied them, and it was their collective support that guaranteed the existence and the survival of Islam in Makkah.

The clan of Banu Hashim was consistent and monolithic in its support of Muhammad and Islam. Its members dared three years of perils and privations as exiles in a mountain ravine but they did not

forsake Muhammad. The polytheists were daunted and dismayed by the united and defiant front presented by the Banu Hashim to them, and to the rest of the world.

The day Abu Talib died, it appeared to Muhammad that the mighty bulwark of Islam had caved in. The death of Abu Talib did not, however, interrupt the tradition of protecting Muhammad and defending Islam that he had founded; it was carried on by his son, Ali, who was destined to distinguish himself even more than his illustrious father in service to Islam.

His genius unfolded in Medina. He busted up the pagan monolith of Arabia. But just as the support of Banu Hashim was found to be indispensable for Islam in Makkah, the support of the Ansar was found to be indispensable for it in Medina. The Ansar rallied behind Muhammad in Medina just as the Banu Hashim had rallied behind him in Makkah.

Abu Talib and Ali, and the men and women of the Banu Hashim and the Ansar were extraordinary by the standards of their day as well as by our own. They took up every challenge to Islam, and they overcame every crisis in its career. They alone protected and defended the principles, the honor and the heritage of Islam. The names of all these heroes are not known to history but each of them was indispensable for Islam. Each of them, man or woman, made up the “indispensability equation” of Islam. Without the contribution in services of each of them, the “equation” of Islam might not have “jelled” at all.

There were other Muslims also – the companions of the Prophet – who played roles of their own in varying degrees of importance in the history of Islam. Some of them played major roles and others played minor roles but no one among them played roles that were great enough to make them indispensable.

Many of them distinguished themselves *after* the death of the Prophet but if they had died in his lifetime, they would not have even been heard of. In his lifetime, they were secondary and marginal characters who assumed individual reality and complexity only after the death of their master.

John Kenneth Galbraith, the American economist and diplomat, once isolated the journalistic malady he called “the build-up.” The essence of the build-up, he said, is to recast a personage of average attributes into historic, indeed immortal image. This appears to have been done in the case of many of the Muhajireen.

Most extravagant praise has been lavished on some of them, and in many cases, the praise has been attributed to the Prophet himself, and has thus been given the “status” of hadith (tradition of the Prophet). Actually, countless of these “hadith” or traditions are nothing more than fanciful embroideries of the fertile and fervent imagination of some admirer or admirers of the companions.

Examples of “hadith” glorifying some of the companions of the Prophet are legion but here it is possible to quote only one of them. One of the most famous “traditions” is the one called the “Hadith of Ashra Mubasharra.” The Prophet is alleged to have given his personal assurance to ten of his principal

companions that all of them would enter heaven. They were:

1. Abu Bakr
2. Umar
3. Uthman
4. Ali
5. Talha
6. Zubayr
7. Abdur Rahman bin Auf
8. Saad bin Abi Waqqas
9. Abu Obaida Aamir bin al-Jarrah
10. Saeed bin Zayd

The authenticity of this tradition is open to question on the following grounds:

(1). All these ten companions are Muhajireen and not one of them is an Ansari – a very curious omission indeed! Just as the Ansar had no share in the Saqifa government, now it would appear that they had no place in heaven either. It is truly fantastic that the Prophet could not find a single Ansari who was worthy of belonging to this group of ten. And yet, it were the Ansar who gave sanctuary to Islam and to the Muhajireen themselves.

Muhammad Mustafa was neither ungrateful nor forgetful. He could not have forgotten the hospitality shown by the Ansar to him. He had, in fact, accepted the hospitality of the Ansar with great pleasure. On the other hand, he appeared to have had many reservations in accepting any obligation from any of the Muhajireen, and he never did. If he was not ungrateful, and he was not, then this “tradition” cannot be genuine.

(2). Some of these citizens of paradise, when they were living on this earth, were fighting against each other, and were trying to kill each other. Two of them – Talha and Zubayr – were rousing the mob to kill an incumbent khalifa – Uthman – who was also a member of the same group. Later, both of them broke their solemn pledge of loyalty to another incumbent khalifa – Ali – and shed the blood of thousands of innocent Muslims. Ali had, in fact, tried to save the same Muslims from butchery. And yet, according to this tradition, the potential killers and the potential victims – both would enter heaven!

(3). Even among the Muhajireen, there were men who were more distinguished than some of these ten

men but the Prophet didn't assure any of them that they would enter heaven. Mas'ab ibn Umayr, Abdullah ibn Masood, Bilal ibn Ribah, Zayd ibn Haritha, and his son, Usama, and Abdullah ibn Rawaha, were far more distinguished than Uthman, Abdur Rahman bin Auf, Obaidullah bin Aamir al-Jarrah, and Saeed bin Zayd, and yet the Prophet did not give them any assurance that they would enter heaven.

It is not known what was the standard for judging who would enter heaven, and who would be refused admission to it. If piety was the touchstone for admission to heaven, then among the companions – both Muhajireen and Ansar – there were many others who were more pious and more devout than some of these ten men. Five out of them were great capitalists. They were the pillars of the capitalist system of the Muslims.

There is nothing wrong in being a capitalist as such; but capitalism, especially in its undiluted form, was the symbol of an economic system against which Muhammad, the Messenger of God, had fought all his life. He fought against it because it rested upon the principle of ruthless and unconscionable exploitation of the poor.

He found predatory capitalism nursed and protected by the powerful cartel of the Quraysh of Makkah. The cartel was entrenched, fortified and impregnable but through long and persistent effort he was, at last, able to demolish it.

Muhammad never identified himself with the guardians of the capitalist system. On the other hand, he identified himself with the poor. He often said: *Alfaqru fakhri* (Poverty is my pride). But after his death, the capitalist system was exhumed and was resurrected. The Electoral Committee which Umar had appointed to select a new khalifa, was a cartel of the (new) capitalists, reconstituted in Islamic times. It is true that he had made Ali one of the electors but the latter did not belong to the group. Actually, his relationship with this cartel was the same as that of Muhammad with the cartel of the Quraysh in Makkah.

Both cartels were exclusive. The cartel in Makkah excluded the non-Qurayshites and the poor from its membership; the cartel in Medina excluded the Ansar and the poor from its membership. Both cartels were run by the Qurayshites for the exclusive benefit of the Qurayshites.

The new capitalism was “sanctified” because of its connection with the principal companions of the Prophet, and very soon it rose into such a position of dominance in Dar-ul-Islam that it could not be dislodged again. When Ali made an attempt to dislodge it, its guardians challenged him, and Dar-ul-Islam erupted into civil war.

Soon Ali was assassinated, and after his assassination, predatory capitalism found itself free to swagger unchecked and unbridled over the landscape of Islam.

The Shia Muslims consider the “Ashra Mubasharra” a fake tradition because it does not jibe with reason, and still less with the ethos of Islam. They consider it a product of the malady called “the build-up.” Its

essence, they believe, was to recast common, garden-variety men into historic, indeed immortal image.

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