

The Opinion of Imam 'Ali (as) on Caliphate

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

A contributor mentioned that, in one of the sermons of Nahjul Balagha it is written that Imam 'Ali mentioned consultation as one of the reason why he has the legitimate right for Caliphate. Here, 'Ali is contradicting the Shi'a thesis that Muhammad wanted to appoint 'Ali as the Imam. What you are referring to is not a sermon of Imam 'Ali to Muslims, and you have also taken it out of context. it was a part of his letter to Muawiyah when he refused to give his oath to Imam 'Ali (as).

Moreover, in contrary to your claim, in that letter Imam 'Ali (as) did NOT say that he believes in the function of election for Caliphate. (Please see the full text of the letter below). He rather wanted to use the argument of his opponents against themselves.

When all the people of Medina unanimously swore allegiance to Imam 'Ali (as), Muawiyah refused to comply apprehending danger for his own power, and in order to provide an excuse for his disloyalty, he claimed that since he did not participate in the election, the election of Imam 'Ali (as) was unlawful, and thus there should be another general election. This was while Abu Bakr was elected by a very few number of people and there was no national vote so that one could consider the caliphate of Abu Bakr as a result of people's election.

But the rulers who came after the Prophet imposed upon people that this is what election means, and this became a principle imposed on people and assumed to be their verdict that whoever the nobles of Medina elect would be deemed to represent the entire world of Islam, and no person has right to question it, whether he was present at the time of election or not, and that no one has right to reconsider the matter.

People, from whom Muawiyah was later receiving support, were those who had clamored the loudest about that argument. But when the rulership of the Muslim State in the form of caliphate came to Imam 'Ali, they rebelled against it, many of them were rebelling even after having sworn the oath of allegiance

to him.

Here, in this letter to Muawiyah, Imam 'Ali (as) is quoting the argument which was once employed against him when he refused to give his oath to Abu Bakr. Imam 'Ali (as) mentioned that if an election by people is the criterion to decide on the Caliphate, a general election took place in Medina to elect him as Caliph by Emigrants and Helpers and nobody can deny this fact. Therefore even according to the principles formulated by the opponents of Imam 'Ali (as), his election was lawful, regular and bonafide.

Thus Muslim who already accepted such principles to legitimize the election of the Abu Bakr, have no the right to speak or act against him ('Ali). And Muawiyah had no right to propose re-election nor to refuse allegiance when, in practice, he recognized this principle for Abu Bakr.

In his letter, the Imam wrote to Muawiyah:

"Verily those who swore allegiance to Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman have sworn allegiance to me on the same basis on which they swore allegiance to them. On this basis, he who was present has no choice (to reconsider), and he who was absent has no right to reject. And consultation was confined to Emigrant and Helpers. If they agree on an individual and name him leader, it was supposed that it is Allah's satisfaction. If any one goes against such decision due to innovation, they (used to) return him from what he kept away, and if he refuses (to abide the decision) they (used to) fight him for following a course other than of the believers, and Allah will put him back from where he had run away."

"O' Muawiyah, if you use your brain without your tendencies and desires, you will find me the most innocent of all in respects to Uthman's blood, and you surely know that I was in seclusion from him, unless you conceal what is quite open to you and attribute all these false rumors to me."

In the above letter Imam 'Ali is using counter argument to demolish the argument of Muawiyah. This method is known as arguing with the adversary on the basis of his wrong premises so as to demolish his argument.

On the point of religion, Imam 'Ali (as) never regarded consultation with chiefs or the common vote to be the criterion of the validity of Caliphate, otherwise he would not have allowed himself to delay to give allegiance to Abu Bakr for the first six month of his Caliphate which is an undeniable fact held by all Muslims. This is proof of the fact that he did not regard these self- concocted methods as the criterion for the validity of caliphate.

However, to place before Muawiyah meant opening the door to questions and answers. He, therefore, attempted to convince him with his own premises and beliefs so that there could be no scope for interpretation or for confusing the matter. Imam 'Ali cited the above argument merely as a stopple against Muawiyah (and in another occasion to Talha and Zubair) simply to prove how fictitious and flimsy were the points raised by his enemies to deprive him of his just rights and how they would go back upon their accepted principles to harm him.

One may recall that such counter argument was used by Prophet Abraham in the Qur'an where he once claimed to be the worshipper of the Sun and the moon to show people that how a wrong premise would result in self-contradictory result.

On this occasion, Imam 'Ali (as) did not argue on the strength of any saying of the prophet which would serve as his final say about the caliphate, because the grounds for refusal in his case was in respect of the style of the principle of the election. Therefore, in keeping with the requirements of the situation, a reply based on the opponent's principles could alone quiten him. Even if he had argued on the strength of the Prophet's command, it would have subjected to various interpretations and the matter would have prolonged instead of being settled.

In fact Muawiyah's real aim was to prolong the matter that at some point his own authority might get support. Imam 'Ali had already witnessed that soon after the death of Prophet (S) all his sayings regarding to appointment of his successor had been set aside. Therefore, how after the laps of a long time, could one be expected to accept it when habit had been established to follow one's free will against the Prophet's commandments?

Moreover, there are many sermons in Nahjul Balagha where Imam 'Ali unequivocally states his right was usurped from day one of the death of the Mercy to Mankind, Muhammad (S). below is one example of it:

Sermon 7 of Nahjul Balagha: Survey of the Period After The Demise Of The Holy Prophet (S)

(This is the famous sermon of Shiqshiqiyah. It is so named because while Imam 'Ali was delivering it an Iraqi got up and presented a letter to him. He got busy in reading it. When he had finished the letter Abdullah Ibn Abbas requested him to continue his sermon. The Imam replied, "Ibn Abbas! This speech of mine was extempore and was being delivered at the impulse of that moment like the Shiqshiqiyah (the roar of a camel), it can't be continued." So far as the subject is concerned the sermon is self-explanatory.)

Beware! By Allah the son of Abu Quhafah (Abu Bakr) dressed himself with it (the caliphate) and he certainly knew that my position in relation to it was the same as the position of the axis in relation to the hand-mill. The flood water flows down from me and the bird cannot fly upto me. I put a curtain against the caliphate and kept myself detached from it.

Then I began to think whether I should assault or endure calmly the blinding darkness of tribulations wherein the grown up are made feeble and the young grow old and the true believer acts under strain till he meets Allah (on his death). I found that endurance thereon was wiser. So I adopted patience although there was pricking in the eye and suffocation (of mortification) in the throat. I watched the plundering of my inheritance till the first one went his way but handed over the Caliphate to Ibn al-Khattab after himself.

(Then he quoted al-A`sha's verse).

My days are now passed on the camel's back (in difficulty) while there were days (of ease) when I enjoyed the company of Jabir's brother Hayyan.

It is strange that during his lifetime he wished to be released from the caliphate but he confirmed it for the other one after his death. No doubt these two shared its udders strictly among themselves. This one put the Caliphate in a tough enclosure where the utterance was haughty and the touch was rough. Mistakes were in plenty and so also the excuses therefore. One in contact with it was like the rider of an unruly camel. If he pulled up its rein the very nostril would be slit, but if he let it loose he would be thrown. Consequently, by Allah people got involved in recklessness, wickedness, unsteadiness and deviation.

Nevertheless, I remained patient despite length of period and stiffness of trial, till when he went his way (of death) he put the matter (of Caliphate) in a group(4) and regarded me to be one of them. But good Heavens! what had I to do with this "consultation"? Where was any doubt about me with regard to the first of them that I was now considered akin to these ones? But I remained low when they were low and flew high when they flew high. One of them turned against me because of his hatred and the other got inclined the other way due to his in-law relationship and this thing and that thing, till the third man of these people stood up with heaving breasts between his dung and fodder. With him his children of his grand-father, (Umayyah) also stood up swallowing up Allah's wealth(5) like a camel devouring the foliage of spring, till his rope broke down, his actions finished him and his gluttony brought him down prostrate.

At that moment, nothing took me by surprise, but the crowd of people rushing to me. It advanced towards me from every side like the mane of the hyena so much so that Hasan and Husayn were getting crushed and both the ends of my shoulder garment were torn. They collected around me like the herd of sheep and goats. When I took up the reins of government one party broke away and another turned disobedient while the rest began acting wrongfully as if they had not heard the word of Allah saying:

That abode in the hereafter, We assign it for those who intend not to exult themselves in the earth, nor (to make) mischief (therein); and the end is (best) for the pious ones. (Qur'an, 28:83)

Yes, by Allah, they had heard it and understood it but the world appeared glittering in their eyes and its embellishments seduced them. Behold, by Him who split the grain (to grow) and created living beings, if people had not come to me and supporters had not exhausted the argument and if there had been no pledge of Allah with the learned to the effect that they should not acquiesce in the gluttony of the oppressor and the hunger of the oppressed I would have cast the rope of Caliphate on its own shoulders, and would have given the last one the same treatment as to the first one. Then you would have seen that in my view this world of yours is no better than the sneezing of a goat.

Don't tell me this is the product of Sayyed Radhi. In fact, this particular sermon of Imam 'Ali was being

circulated among the Sunni scholars 200 years before the birth of Sayyed Radhi and they acknowledged that the above sermon is the genuine sayings of Imam 'Ali (as), and I have 27 documents to prove this. In fact, Nahjul Balagha is not merely a Shi'ite source, and many Sunni scholars have also written commentary to it.

Prophet (S) said:

مَنْ كُنْتُ أَنَا نَبِيهِ فَعَلِيٌّ أَمِيرُهُ

Whoever I am his prophet, 'Ali is his ruler.

– On the Khilafa of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (as): Abdullah Ibn Masud narrated:

The messenger of Allah (S) ordered me to follow him, on the night of the Jinn. I went with him until we reached the hight of Macca... (the prophet) said: "I was promised that the Jinn and human will believe in me. As to the human they believed in me, as to the Jinn you have seen"; he continued: "I feel that my end is drawing near." I said: O Messenger of Allah, won't you make Abu Bakr as your Caliph? He turned away from me, so I realized that he disagreed; I said: O Messenger of Allah, won't you make Umar as your Caliph? He turned away from me, so I realized that he disagreed; I said: O Messenger of Allah, won't you make 'Ali as your Caliph? He said: "(That's) him. By the One whom there is no God beside Him, if you chose him and obeyd him He (Allah) entered you into Paradise all together."

Sunni references:

- Majma' al-Zawa'id, by al-Haythami, v8, p314
- Also mentioned by al-Tabarani

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