

The Struggle for Power 4

When Abu Bakr was acknowledged khalifa in Saqifa, he, Umar bin al-Khattab and Abu Obaida bin al-Jarrah returned to the Mosque of the Prophet. In the Mosque there were many people, among them, members of the clan of Umayya; Saad bin Abi Waqqas; Abdur Rahman bin Auf; and some other Muhajireen.

Seeing them huddled in little clusters, Umar shouted: "Abu Bakr has been elected khalifa of the Muslims. Now all of you here give him your pledge of loyalty. The Ansar, Abu Obaida and I have already done so."

The Umayyads present in the Mosque were the first to respond to Umar's call, and to take the oath of allegiance to Abu Bakr. Saad bin Abi Waqqas, Abdur Rahman bin Auf and others followed them, and took the oath of allegiance to Abu Bakr.

Almost all the "patricians" took the oath of allegiance to Abu Bakr on Monday. The "commoners" didn't know about Abu Bakr's election yet. They came to the Mosque on Tuesday. All day long they were coming and going in and out of the Mosque, and Abu Bakr was occupied in accepting their assurances of loyalty to him. It was only on Wednesday that he was at last free to give his attention to other matters.

In the meantime, during the entire furious scramble for power in Saqifa, and later, Ali ibn Abi Talib and the members of Banu Hashim, had been busy with the obsequies of Muhammad, the Messenger of God. When the latter had been given a burial, Ali and the Banu Hashim retired to their homes.

Many people in Medina had taken the oath of loyalty to Abu Bakr but there were some who had not. Most important among them all was Ali ibn Abi Talib, the new head of the clan of Banu Hashim. The new khalifa and his advisers believed that it was absolutely essential that Ali should also take the oath of loyalty same as other people.

They, therefore, sent for him from his home but he refused to come. His refusal infuriated Umar. A little earlier, he was the king-maker but now he had become the Chief Executioner of the new government of Saqifa. He, therefore, went with an armed escort to enforce the orders of the government, and

threatened to burn down the house of the daughter of Muhammad, the Messenger of God, if Ali did not come to the court to take the oath of loyalty to Abu Bakr.

Someone pointed out that the house belonged to the daughter of the Prophet, so how could Umar burn it. But Umar said it did not matter if the house belonged to the daughter of the Prophet. What really mattered, he asserted, was the oath of allegiance that Ali had to take.

Edward Gibbon

The Hashemites alone declined the oath of fidelity (to Abu Bakr); and their chief (Ali), in his own house, maintained above six months (sic), a sullen and independent reserve, without listening to the threats of Omar, who attempted to consume with fire the habitation of the daughter of the Apostle. (*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*)

Even a man like Shibli, the biographer of Umar, and one of his greatest admirers, has been compelled to admit that “Umar was a most violent-tempered man, and it is not improbable at all if he made an attempt to set fire to the house of the daughter of the Prophet.” (*Al-Farooq*)

How utterly charming, how utterly sweet, and how utterly heroic of Umar to try to burn down the house of Fatima Zahra! Three days after the death of Muhammad, the Last Messenger of God to mankind, Umar arrived at the door of the house of Fatima Zahra. A gang of other incendiaries was with him, and he demanded Ali's allegiance to Abu Bakr.

This demonstration of “heroism” must have “pleased” God very much, especially, when one remembers that besides Ali and Fatima, there were also present in their house, their four little children – the grandchildren of Muhammad Mustafa. They ranged in ages from two to eight years. The children must have been “thrilled” to hear the voice of Umar.

To them, he must have seemed to be a kind of “Santa Claus,” the Santa Claus of the desert, standing at the door of their house with the “gift” of fire for them. His “gift,” he might have told them, had the power to change the drab grey walls of their little house into leaping and crackling flames of many hues.

What else could he do for them to “comfort” them and to “cheer them up” after the death of their grandfather, Muhammad, who had loved them so much? Did they ever see a spectacle of “fireworks” so flamboyant as the one he could show them just then if their father, Ali ibn Abi Talib, did not take the oath of allegiance to Abu Bakr?

At this time, Zubayr bin al-Awwam was also with Ali. His wife was one of the daughters of Abu Bakr but his mother was Safiya bint Abdul Muttalib, the aunt of Muhammad and Ali. He, therefore, claimed that he was also a member of the clan of Banu Hashim.

Umar ordered him to take the oath of loyalty to Abu Bakr. But he refused and threatened to use his sword if pestered too much. Umar shouted to his myrmidons to snatch his sword. They succeeded in

overpowering him. He was disarmed, and was taken to the court of his father-in-law. It was in this state that he gave his pledge of loyalty to him.

Umar tried to achieve domination with threats, bluster, and bluff. In the past, one could call his bluff but now it was not possible to do so. With Zubayr thus disposed of, Umar turned his attention to Ali, and he was taken to the court. In the court, Umar repeated his demand for oath but Ali said:

“I am the slave of God and I am the brother of Muhammad, His Messenger. A slave of God cannot become the slave of anyone else. If you have succeeded in capturing the government of Muhammad because you are, as you said, closer to him than the Ansar, then I am his brother, and who among you can claim to be closer to him than myself? All Muslims should give me their allegiance, and not to anyone else.

You are robbing the family of your late master of their right. You convinced the Ansar with the argument that the Messenger of God was one of you, and he was not one of them, and they surrendered the khilafat to you. Now I use the same argument – your argument – which you used against the Ansar. We are the heirs of the Messenger of God in his lifetime and after his death. If you believe in his mission, and if you have accepted Islam sincerely, then do not usurp our rights.”

Umar replied to him thus:

“You are a slave of God but you are not a brother of His Messenger. In any case, you will have to take the oath of allegiance to Abu Bakr, and we will not release you until you do so.”

Ali said:

“O Umar, if you are advocating Abu Bakr's case with such zeal, it is understandable. Today you are making him a king so that tomorrow he would make you a king. I will not do what you are asking me to do, and I will not give him my pledge.”

Abu Obaida bin al-Jarrah was a member of the “troika,” and was, therefore, an ardent advocate of the government of Saqifa. He too made an attempt to persuade Ali to recognize the new government, and to take the oath of loyalty to its head. He said:

“O cousin of the Prophet! you are younger than these men. They are much older than you and they have much more experience than you have. You should take the oath of loyalty to Abu Bakr now, and then, someday, your turn may also come. You deserve to be the chief of the Muslims because of your precedence in Islam, your courage, your intelligence, your knowledge, and your services to Islam. And then you are the son-in-law of our Prophet.”

Ali answered him as follows:

“O Muhajireen! do not take the power and the authority of the Messenger of God out of his house into

your own houses. By God, succession of Muhammad is our right. He himself made this declaration, and not once but many times. Is there anyone among you who has a better knowledge and understanding of Qur'an than I have? Is there anyone among you who has better knowledge of the practices and sayings of the Messenger of God than I have? Is there anyone among you who can run his government better than I can?

If there is, name him, and I will defer to him. But there is not. I alone can give true peace, prosperity and real justice to all Muslims. Therefore do not yield to your temptations, and do not put your own ambitions and desires ahead of the commandments of God and His Messenger. If you do, you will deviate from Truth, and you will fall into Error."

Bashir bin Saad, the same who was the first Ansari to take the oath of allegiance to Abu Bakr in Saqifa, interrupted Ali's speech, and said:

"O Ali! if you had told us all this before, we would not have given our pledge of loyalty to anyone other than you."

Ali said to him:

"Didn't you know all this? What you are suggesting is that just as all of you abandoned the Messenger of God as soon as he died, I too should have abandoned him, and I too should have entered the Saqifa to contest the khilafat with you. This I could not do. Doing so would have been most unworthy of me. I could not forsake the Messenger of God in his death as I did not forsake him in his life."

After these remarks, Ali left the court of Abu Bakr which was held in the Mosque of the Prophet. Such were the mechanics of the election of Abu Bakr as the khalifa of the Muslims – a series of desperate, often convulsive improvisations.

When both the private oath-taking in the outhouse of Saqifa, and the public oath-taking in the Mosque of the Prophet, were over, Abu Bakr, the new khalifa, delivered his inaugural speech. After thanking God and praising Him, he said:

"O Muslims! those of you who worshipped Mohammed, let them know that he is dead; but those of you who worshipped God, let them know that He is Alive, and will never die.

O Muslims! though you have made me your chief, I am not the best among you. If someone else among you had taken charge of this burden which you have put upon me, it would have been better for me. If you expect that I should rule you just as the Apostle of God did, then I must tell you that it is not possible. The Apostle received *Wahi* (Revelation) from Heaven, and he was infallible whereas I am an ordinary man.

I am not better than you. Therefore, if you see me walking on the straight road, follow me; but if you see me deviate from it, reprove me. If I do right, support me; if I do wrong, correct me. Obey me as long as I

obey God and His Apostle. But if you see that I am disobeying them, you too disobey me.

You have the Qur'an with you, and it is complete. God's Apostle has shown you both by precept and example how to conduct yourselves in this life. The strongest among you all is he who fears God. The weakest among you in my sight is he who is sinful. A people that gives up jihad, loses its honor. Be punctual in saying your prayers, and do not miss them. May God have mercy on you, and may He forgive you all."

The new khalifa's speech was little more than some self-deprecating platitudes, a themeless pudding, devoid of uplift or insight. The opening remark, however, was significant. He told Arabs that if they worshipped Muhammad, he was dead! Did any Arabs worship Muhammad?

For 23 years, Muhammad, the blessed Messenger of God, was hammering the lesson of Tauheed (Oneness of God) into the heads of the Arabs. If after all that tremendous effort, they started worshipping him instead of worshipping God, then his whole mission as a prophet, must be adjudged a fiasco.

But Muhammad's mission was not a fiasco. The Muslims worshipped God and they did not worship Muhammad. They, in fact, repeated many times every day that Muhammad was a slave and a messenger of God, and Abu Bakr knew it. So why did he find it necessary to tell them that if they worshipped Muhammad, he was dead?

Abu Bakr's remark was a clever ploy. Muhammad Mustafa had just died, and it was natural for Muslims to feel sympathy for the members of his family in their great loss. But Abu Bakr was apprehensive of this sympathy. He considered it dangerous for his own security on the throne. A period of official mourning could also be dangerous for him.

He, therefore, equated mourning for the death of Muhammad with "worshipping" Muhammad, and what can be so reprehensible in Islam as "worshipping" Muhammad – a mortal – instead of worshipping God!

Abu Bakr, in this manner, turned the attention of the Muslim umma away from any sympathy it might have felt for the sorrowing family of Muhammad.

The Arabs did not worship anything better than pieces of rock or wood; Muhammad made them worshippers of Allah – the One Creator and Lord of the Universe. The Arabs were little better than shepherds or bandits; Muhammad made them kings and conquerors. The Arabs were barbarous and ignorant; Muhammad made them the most civilized nation on earth. He was the greatest benefactor not only of the Arabs of his own time but of all mankind for all time.

When such a man died, the Arabs, the Muslims, who were the beneficiaries of his work for them, ought to have been pulverized by sorrow. But astoundingly, shockingly and incredibly, they were not! Though they had lost the greatest blessing that God had ever sent to them – in the person of His Own Beloved, Muhammad – they didn't register any sense of loss at all.

It didn't occur to the Muslim umma that Muhammad who was its guide, and leader not only in life but also in death, ought to have a state funeral, and that there ought to be a period of official mourning for him.

The Muslim umma apparently figured that mourning for the death of Muhammad, and giving him a burial, were duties that could best be left to the members of his own family. The members of his family mourned for him, and gave him a burial.

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