

The Truth about Al-Husayn's Revolt

Different phenomena vary as to their realities. Similarly, every uprising or revolt is unique as to the truth/s underlying its eruption [and eventual success or otherwise].

In order to understand a particular matter, or a state of affairs, you should know the deeper reasons underlying its existing form and the characteristics that gave it that specific appearance. You should also be conscious of the material causes of that matter, or issue, i.e. its constituents or ingredients. In other words:

The forces/causes that produced the revolt or uprising, which signify its truth are called “the causes at work”.

The nature of the revolt and its goals represent “its intents and purposes”.

The actual action plan, implementing it, and all what goes with it represent “its material causes”.

The end result that the revolt has come to produce represents its “overall picture”.

[Applying these parameters], was Imam Husayn's uprising a result of an angry outburst?

Islam is different from some other movements for change or reform that took place as a result of certain circumstances that in turn led to eruptions. Dialectics, for example, encourages heightening disagreements, inciting discontent, and showing opposition even for genuine reforms in order to bring things to a head on collision, i.e. an explosive revolution, not a conscious one.

Islam does not subscribe to these types of revolutions. The history of most Islamic revolts or uprisings speaks of the rationale behind such revolts, in that they came as a result of a complete understanding of the status quo they were determined to change. Thus, Imam Husayn's revolt was not a result of an angry outburst, prompted by the pressures exerted by the Umayyad rule, especially during the reigns of Mu'aawiyah [the founder of the dynastic rule], and his son, Yazid.

Rather, it was a very well calculated move.

What substantiates the position the Imam (a.s.) took in this regard was the letters he exchanged with both the men; and the sermons he gave on different occasions, especially that one he addressed the Companions of the Prophet (s.a.w.) in Mina, [in present day Saudi Arabia] with. All this evidence points in the direction of one conclusion. That is, the Imam was fully aware of what he was intending to do, viz. taking on the ruling establishment. His revolt was free from any angry reaction; rather, it was a purely Islamic uprising.

Looking at Imam Husayn's revolt from another perspective, i.e. the way he was treating his followers, one can only come out with one conclusion. He was determined not to let the feelings of his companions run high, in a bid to avoid his revolt's earning any description of an explosive one. Of this strategy was his repeated attempts to appeal to his companions to leave his company, with a view to sparing them the fate that was awaiting them all, i.e. him included. He used to remind them every now and then that they should not expect any materialistic gain in their march, other than definite death.

After he commended his companions, describing them as among the best of friends, he pleaded with them one last time, i.e. on the eve of the 10th of Muharram, [62 AH, 680 CE], to leave if they so wished, making it clear to them that they would be safe, for the Umayyad's were after his head alone.

You can hardly find a leader who aspires to utilize the dissatisfaction of his people to push them to revolt who talks in the same way Imam Husayn (a.s.) was talking to his companions. It is true that he was responsible for outlining to them their religious duty to rise against the despotic rule, in that resisting injustice and repression is such an obligation they have to discharge, yet he was seeking that his companions would discharge their responsibility of their own accord, i.e. without coercion.

That was why he reiterated to them to melt away from the battlefield under the cover of darkness because the enemy was not going to pursue them had they taken flight, nor had he wanted to force them to fight. He further advised them that he would absolve them from their oath of allegiance to him, should they have chosen to forsake him, in that he left it to their own consciences.

That is, whichever way they decided, it had to be dictated by siding with the right, i.e. without compulsion, either from him or from the enemy. It would be their own choice alone. However, their decision to remain with the Imam gave the martyrs of Karbala' the high regard they are held with.

To draw a comparison between the position taken by Imam Husayn (a.s.) and Tariq bin Ziyad in the battle of Jabal Tariq [the Rock of Gibraltar], we would say that what Ibn Ziyad resorted to of action is symptomatic of a leader with a politician's mentality, whereas Imam Husayn was conscious not to force the fight on his comrades in arms.

What Ibn Ziyad did was to burn all the food supplies save that which could sustain his troops for twenty-four hours. He then addressed them in a sermon to the effect that they had no choice but to win the battle, making it clear that if they did not win, the result would be one of two: They would either be routed by the army of the enemy or got drowned in the sea, should they have chosen to flee. In contrast, Imam

Husayn (a.s.) left the choice to the small band of his followers to engage the enemy in combat or turn back, for neither the enemy nor he were coercing them to fight.

Indeed, the Imam's revolt had its roots in the complete understanding, by all parties of his camp, of its inevitability. Thus, it should not be described as though it were brought about by a disgruntled man. This responsible revolt had a multiplicity of factors, in that it was neither a single entity nor a single-aim movement.

Among the differences that exist between matters of the physical world and the social one is that in the material world minerals always demonstrate a single essence. For instance, you cannot find, as a raw material, gold and copper in a single entity. In contrast, in social phenomena, it is quite possible that a single phenomenon might demonstrate a variety of realities and essences. Man is such a wonder because he can boast several essences at the same time.

Jean-Paul Sartre, [1905 – 1980], the French existentialist philosopher and writer, maintained that the existence of man precedes his essence. He is right in this part of his statement. In addition to that, man could possess different semblances at the same time. For example, he could demonstrate a semblance of an angel, a pig, and a tiger.

[‘Existentialism’ is a loose term for the reaction led by Kierkegaard, against the abstract rationalism of Hegel’s philosophy. As against Hegel’s conception of ‘abstract consciousness’ within which all oppositions are supposedly reconciled, Kierkegaard insisted on the irreducibility of the subjective, personal dimension of human life. He characterized this in terms of the perspective of the ‘existing individual’. Kierkegaard rejected the claim that we can look forward to a time when the different interests and concerns of people can be satisfied through their comprehension within an all-embracing objective understanding of the universe.]

According to this, it can be said that social phenomena might exhibit multi-dimensional realities. Imam Husayn’s revolt is such a multi-faceted event, not least because several factors were jointly at work to produce it. For example, there might erupt a revolt in reaction to a particular occurrence, i.e. under the spur of the moment. It might as well be a positive reaction to a certain trend and a negative one in the face of another trend. All these factors were present in Imam Husayn’s revolt, hence the description, “a multi-character revolt”.

Historically, the first factor in the Imam’s uprising was the Umayyad’s demand of him to swear allegiance to Yazid, [their second Caliph]. In a bid to secure the following of the generality of Muslims to his son, Yazid, Mu’aawiyah sent an emissary to Medina to secure the pledging of such allegiance from Imam Husayn (a.s.). In so doing, Mu’aawiyah had aimed to set a precedent for those rulers who would follow him to appoint their successors, turning the caliphate into a dynastic rule.

It is noteworthy that insisting on securing the Imam’s swearing of allegiance meant giving legitimacy to the caliphate. What was Imam Husayn’s response to that demand? Naturally, it was turned down, not

least because Husayn (a.s.) was the grandson of the Prophet (s.a.w.) and was widely known for his piety and scant regard for worldly pleasures.

Upon receiving the news of the Imam's rejection, the ruling establishment issued threats to him. His response was that he would rather die than endorse Yazid's succession to the caliphate. Up to that point in time, the Imam's reaction was of the passive type to an unlawful demand. In other words, a reaction based on piety and a reality stemming from the slogan, "There is no god but God", which makes it incumbent on the believer to say no to any illegitimate demand.

That rejection was not the only reason for the Imam's revolt. There was another issue, which demonstrated the underlying principle of his revolt; it was a positive reaction. That is, after the demise of Mu'aawiyah, the people of Kufa, [Iraq] cast their memories some twenty years back, i.e. to the days of the caliphate of Imam Ali (a.s.). Despite the fact that many of Ali's disciples were liquidated by the Umayyad terror machine, such as Hijr bin Adi, Amr bin Hamq al-Khuza'ie, Rashid al-Hijri, and Maytham at-Tammar, just to render Medina bereft of the heavyweights among the companions of the Prophet, the people called to mind how Ali (a.s.) was the example of the true Muslim and his rule a just one.

Thus, they convened in Kufa and agreed among themselves to reject the endorsement of Yazid as caliph, turning their attention to Imam Husayn (a.s.) with the offer to become their Islamic caliph. They wrote to the Imam to this effect, expressing their readiness to welcome him to re-establish the Islamic rule in Kufa. Some one hundred thousand people signed those letters.

As a result, those people did not leave the Imam with any choice other than to accede to their request. That was the positive reaction. In conclusion, it can be safely said that the true nature of the Imam's movement was a legitimate one, in that a group of Muslims initiated the action and the Imam had to provide them with his positive response.

Upholding his religious obligation, the Imam had no choice but to announce his outright rejection to sanctioning Yazid's appointment [by his father] as Caliph, not least for raising his pure self above that blemish they wanted to stain him with. However, had he agreed to Abdullah bin Abbas's proposition to retire to the mountains of Yemen to escape the troops of Yazid, he would have secured his safety.

On the other hand, he would have absolved himself from condoning the appointment of Yazid as Caliph. And yet, since the issue was one which related to the appeal to him by those hundred thousand people, he had no alternative but to agree to that appeal out of a religious obligation.

That is, despite the fact that all the indications were telling him that the Kufans were not up to the task and that they were both inactive and apprehensive. Nevertheless, his sense of responsibility made it incumbent on him to respond to their call and thus provide the right answer to history. Had he chosen to ignore the plea of the Kufans, we would have stood today criticising him for "not doing so".

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