

Imam Husayn's revolt, the causes

As we have already mentioned the invitation of the Kufans to Imam Husayn (a.s.) to come to Kufa and set up an Islamic government there represented the third side [of the triangle] of causes of his revolt. The request of the Umayyad's from the Imam that he endorsed Yazid's appointment to the office of the caliphate epitomized the "defensive strategy".

However, as is known, the Imam consequently turned that request down, and set out to oppose the corrupt ruling establishment with all means at his disposal out of upholding the religious duty of "enjoining what is good and forbidding what is evil". This ingredient, [or the third side of the triangle], should be dubbed "the attacking strategy" of the Imam's revolt.

Let us now dwell a while on those factors to examine which of them carried more weight than the others. It goes without saying that each of the three factors is different from the others in its cumulative value and importance to the revolt. That is, each of the contributory causes added, in its own right, a unique and significant dimension to the revolt.

For example, the Imam's acceptance of the Kufans' invitation to go to Kufa is as significant as the other two factors, and yet in accordance with their importance and impact on the [overall result] of the revolt. Among the factors is that which enhances the significance of a certain [reformist] movement. Similarly, the leader of the movement can influence that particular factor, by way of raising its profile.

The human being, for instance, is well aware of many things that he attaches importance to. For example, his appearance could be regarded as an asset; his coveting jewellery could be deemed another valuable experience. There are as well other material and abstract things which man would wish to acquire as they are considered exhibits of beauty. And no doubt, power and high profile, especially divine positions, are viewed by man as sources of pride, splendour and value. Even the external material appearances, which denote these added values, confer on man an added value.

To illustrate this, take a person who has put on the special garb of the clergy. Although, in itself, the attire is not indicative of the godliness of the one who wore it, in that it is not a criterion by which one can measure erudition of the wearer, nor the level of his piety, yet it can be seen as giving such an

impression to the person putting on such garb.

Likewise, the person who wears such clothes could earn the respect and regard of others. By the same token, such attire becomes a source of pride for the person who is dressed up in it. The parable of this is the jewellery worn by women, in that how items of jewellery can adorn women and how the latter can derive satisfaction from and pride in wearing them.

The same comparison can be applied to revolutions, in that there may be factors that are capable of enhancing their richness and appeal. This is the result of the theoretical differences between one revolution and the other. Some are bereft of the moral dimension and characterized by bigotry, instead; others may be purely materialistic, giving them their distinctive features. And yet, if a revolution is characterized by the moral, human, and divine aspects, it should stand head and shoulders above all other revolutions.

Thus, all the three factors which contributed to the initiation of Imam Husayn's revolt, gave it the significance it boasts, especially the third factor. Sometimes, a particular person with a particular significance in a particular uprising could add a new value to it, i.e. a special added value and significance.

In as much as a certain factor adds a new value to the value of the person, he in return gives a boost to this value. For example, the attire of a spiritual person (cleric) or a university professor could exude pride and aesthetic appearance to those who wear those uniforms. The opposite is also true, in that the person in those garbs is the source of pride and aestheticism due to their impeccable character, probity, and knowledge.

Sa'sa'a bin Sawhan was one of Imam Ali's companions and a renowned and consummate orator; he was commended by the famous man of letters, al-Jahidh. When he wanted to congratulate the Imam on his election to the office of Caliphate, he said something to the Imam that was different from what all the other people said, thus, "O Ali! You adorned the caliphate with splendour. You are the source of its pride. It granted you neither grandeur nor pride. The caliphate was in need of a person of your calibre, and yet you were not in need of its [allure]. I, therefore, congratulate the caliphate because your name has become synonymous with it; I do not applaud you because you have become the Caliph!"

As a result, it can be said that the factor of "enjoining what is good and forbidding what is evil" had given Imam Husayn's revolt an added significance. And by his, his family's and companions' ultimate sacrifice, the Imam has raised the profile of this institution. There are many people who might claim the upholding of this religious obligation.

Imam Husayn (a.s.) demonstrated this on the ground, "I seek to enjoin what is good and forbid what is evil and follow the traditions of my grandfather and my father." This is the parable of Islam that might be a source of pride for many a man. And yet, there have been Muslims whom Islam holds dear and feels proud of.

The various titles, which were earned by many luminaries, such as “Fakhrul Islam – the Pride of Islam”, “Izzuddin – the Glory of Religion”, and “Sharafuddin – the Honour of Religion”, are indicative of this meaning. Abdu Thar, Ammar bin Yasir, [among the Companions of the Prophet (s.a.w.)], and Ibn Sina (Avicenna), [(980 – 1198 CE), the famous Muslim philosopher and physician], were brought up on the ideals of Islam and thus have become a source of pride for it.

Islam, in return, feels proud of some of its sons, who had been moulded in its image, so much so that they have earned an international renown, not least because they have left their mark on the human civilization.

The world cannot deny the contribution of Khawaja Nasiruddin at-Tusi, [(597 – 672 AH, 1201 – 1274 CE), the Muslim philosopher, vizier, and theologian], to the human civilization, because the credit goes to him for some discoveries relating to the moon.

So, it can be said that Imam Husayn bin Ali (a.s.) has indeed given the required momentum to the tradition of “enjoining what is good and forbidding what is evil”. And when it is maintained that this institution raises the weight of Muslims, this does not come from a vacuum. The Holy Qur’an has stated this:

“You are the best of peoples evolved for mankind. Enjoining what is right, forbidding what is wrong, and believing in Allah..” (3: 110).

Just ponder the couching of this verse, especially with regard to the quality bestowed on “the best people”. That is, it is merely by virtue of their upholding the religious duty of “enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong”, they have earned that sublime praise. So, the worth of this umma (community) is in its upholding this obligation.

However, insofar as Imam Husayn’s revolt is concerned, it is the Imam who has conferred that sublime honour on this obligation by the sacrifices he personally made, and those of his family and companions. However, it is not enough that we, Muslims, are not up to the responsibility of upholding this religious obligation, we are proving to be a liability to it. It is regrettable that people have paid much attention to not so important things, such as growing one’s beard and prohibiting the wearing of gold [for men], and paid lip service to significant matters that should be upheld.

In contrast, Imam Husayn (a.s.) revolted to keep the principle of “enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong” live in all spheres of life. He used to say that Yazid was the epitome of rejection and that he should be effaced from the world of Islam. He further affirmed that the Imam of Muslims must be the one who upholds the injunctions contained in the Book of God, [i.e. the Holy Qur’an], administer justice, and follow the true religion.

Imam Husayn sacrificed everything in the way of safeguarding this institution and enforcing it. The Imam gave a more sober meaning to death in this cause. It has become to imply grandeur and honour. Since

he set out on his journey from Medina to Karbala', he was always talking about death in dignity and honour, i.e. the death in the cause of right, truth, and justice. Such a death is akin to a beautiful necklace that adorns the neck of a young woman. The Imam often recited a line of poetry en route in his fateful journey to Karbala'.

The poem read something like this: Despite the fact that this life is sweet and beautiful, yet, the next life is sweeter and more beautiful. Since, in the end, man will leave behind, after death, all his worldly possessions, the good comes out of giving away one's wealth in good causes, instead of hoarding it. By the same token, since the human body would turn to dust after death, why should not man die a sweet and honourable death? Thus, dying with the sword in the cause of God is much greater and lovelier.

On the other side of the equation, the example of Abu Salama al-Khallal, who used to be dubbed "the Minister of the Household of Mohammad" in the court of the Abbasid Caliph, serves the reverse of the above-mentioned honourable death.

His story goes like this: When he fell out of favour with the Abbasid Caliph, an incident which he later paid with his life for, he wrote two letters, one to Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (a.s.) and the other to Mohammad bin Abdullah al-Mahdh, offering them his services and those of Abu Muslim, [i.e. intending to stage a palace coup]. This was his message to them: Should you be prepared for this, [i.e. taking over the caliphate], and accept our offer, we will kill those, [i.e. the Abbasid rulers].

The immediate impression the contents of this letter gives is that the writer is disloyal because he addressed his letter to two different people, but only when his relationship with his masters turned sour.

As soon as Imam as-Sadiq received the letter and read it, he burned it before the eyes of the emissary who carried it to him. When the messenger asked the Imam as to his reply, the Imam informed him that he had nothing to add to what the messenger had just seen, [i.e. of burning the letter].

The Abbasid killed Abu Salama before he could meet with his messenger. Some people seem to raise the objection as why the Imam did not respond positively to the invitation of Abu Salama who called on him to rise to assume power with his help. That is, while the intension of Abu Salama was known; he was not sincere in his appeal as he wrote his letter immediately after he had fallen out favour with the Abbasid Caliph, who was sure that he could not be trusted any more. Thus, he met his violent death soon after.

Nevertheless, if Imam Husayn (a.s.) turned a blind eye to all those letters he had received from the Kufans, inviting him to go to them and set up an Islamic government there, he would have never escaped similar criticism. In Imam Husayn's case, he responded positively to the Kufans' appeals when he realized that they were genuine in their call for him to come to them. Thus, it became incumbent on him to respond.

Let us examine which of the following two matters came first and consequently had precedence over the

other. Did the Imam's rejection of the Umayyad's call to him to endorse Yazid as Caliph come first, i.e. prior to the Kufans' invitation to him to come to Kufa and form an Islamic government? It goes without saying that the former came first for demanding Imam Husayn's swearing of allegiance to Yazid was made immediately after the demise of his father, Mu'aawiyah.

The messenger, who brought the news of Mu'aawiyah's death to the governor of Medina, brought with him a letter containing a demand that Imam Husayn, and some other personalities, endorsed the succession of Yazid to the caliphate. It is quite probable that the Kufans did not know then of the news of the demise of Mu'aawiyah.

Historical events lend support to this theory. That is, many days had elapsed on Imam Husayn's rejection of the demand from him to swear allegiance to Yazid before he was forced under pressure to leave Medina and embark on his opposition movement there and then, i.e. 27th Rajab on the way to Mecca, [in a sort of self-imposed exile]. He arrived in Mecca on 3rd Sha'ban. He received the letters from the Kufans on 15th Ramadhan. [In the Islamic Hijri Calendar, those three months run consecutively, thus, Rajab, Sha'ban, and Ramadhan.].

That is, a month and a half after the Umayyad's made their intention of demanding the Imam to swear allegiance known, and his subsequent flat rejection of the demand. Imam Husayn stayed in Mecca for forty days. Accordingly, he did not reject the Umayyad's call for him to endorse Yazid as Caliph because of the Kufans' appeals to him to head to Kufa to form the next Islamic government. He made his position manifestly known that he would not give in to Yazid, even if not a foothold in the entire globe was left for him. This is the second reason for the rising of al-Husayn (a.s.).

The third pillar of the Imam's rising is the upholding of the Islamic duty of "enjoining what is good and forbidding what is evil". The Imam (a.s.) started his dissident movement from Medina determined to shoulder the responsibility of this duty.

However, even if he was not asked to pay allegiance to Yazid and there was no invitation for him to go to Kufa to set up a rival caliphate there, he was resolved that it was his duty to uphold that tradition, not least because corruption was about to take a stranglehold over the Islamic world then.

To recap, in each one of the three aspects of his revolt, the Imam (a.s.) had had a particular issue to address and a duty to discharge. As regards the first aspect, it was his decision to refuse the Umayyad's demand to endorse Yazid's succession to the caliphate. Regarding the second facet, he responded positively to the appeal of the Kufans for him to set up a rival caliphate in Kufa. In relation to the third aspect, he took the necessary action to take on the corrupt ruling establishment.

Thus, he can be safely branded a revolutionary. So, when we dub Imam Husayn's revolt as multifaceted, this is clearly manifested in the required positions he took vis-à-vis the three different issues. For example, the Imam's duty towards pledging allegiance to Yazid was downright rejection; and should he have agreed to the proposition of Ibn Abbas to choose a self-imposed exile in the mountains of Yemen,

such rejection would have materialized.

Thus, his was a personal decision, i.e. it was not incumbent on him to ask others to team up with him on this point. As for the Kufans' appeal, there was no choice left for him but to respond to it, so long as they remained faithful to their word. If they broke it, the Imam would be absolved from any undertaking, as the issue of caliphate, [and who the caliph should be], would be no more, i.e. it would cease to remain a religious duty.

Yet, why did the Imam continue on that path? This is indicative of the fact that his religious obligation was not confined to the contentious issue of caliphate. The Kufans' appeal proved to be a blip, as the news of the killing of Muslim bin Aqeel, his cousin and emissary to the Kufans, reached him while en route to Kufa, Iraq. Another development was that the Imam met before his arrival al-Hur bin Yazid ar-Riyahi, [during which it was revealed that the Kufans had changed their mind and no longer supported him in his bid to become caliph with their help].

So, with the Kufans' appeal falling through, the Imam had become free from any obligation. To make it absolutely plain to them, he reminded them that he would return from where he came, in that he came to them in response to their appeal. This, though, did not mean that he had changed his mind regarding the caliphate of Yazid, which he still was adamant that he did not approve of. As far as he was concerned, his position of not recognizing Yazid as caliph was irreversible, hence the reference to not giving in to the ruling establishment's demand, even if all routes were closed in his face. What other options did he have? The answer is his upholding the principle of "enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong".

Among the mistakes the author of the book, "Ash-Shaheedul Khalid – The Immortal Martyr" did was that he over-exaggerated the factor of the "Kufans' invitation", so much so that he has given the impression that it was the overriding stimulant for Imam Husayn's revolt. In fact, this factor was not the most important; rather, it was the least important among the contributory factors that led to the Imam's revolt. Even if we assume that it was the principal cause of the revolt, the Imam, after knowing that the Kufans did not keep their word, could have resigned to the fact that there was no point in carrying on with his plans, contemplating swearing allegiance to Yazid and abandoning his bid to uphold the principle of "enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong".

The opposite was precisely what had happened, in that the fieriest sermons by the Imam were those given in the aftermath of the fall of Kufa to the Umayyad's. In that, there was a clear message that he was acting in accordance with the obligation of "enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong", and that he was under no illusions that that was his prime motive for launching his revolt. For his part, it was an action of a revolutionary against the ruling establishment of that time.

On his way to Iraq, he met by chance two men coming from the direction of Kufa. He asked them to stop in order to have a conversation with them. The moment they knew it was al-Husayn (a.s.), they took a detour and disappeared, to avoid talking to him. Meanwhile, a man among the Imam's companions, who

happened to have met the two men, arrived at the scene.

He broke to the Imam the news of the killing of Muslim bin Aqeel and Hani bin Irwah, having received it from the two men he had met earlier. It was through the same men, although indirectly, that the Imam knew of the fall of Kufa to the Umayyad's. His companion also informed al-Husayn that the two men felt ashamed to let the Imam know of the distressing news, especially the report about dragging the headless corpse of Muslim in the streets of Kufa. Upon hearing the news, the Imam's eyes became filled with tears, reciting this Qur'anic verse,

“Among the Believers are men who have been true to their covenant with God: of them some have completed their vow (to the extreme), and some (still) wait: but they have never changed (their determination) in the least.” (33:23).

The Imam (a.s.) wanted to prove to the people that he did not come for Kufa alone. So, if that province fell to the enemy, it would not change anything. He did not launch his movement in response to the Kufans' appeal per se. That appeal was among the factors that made him march to Iraq. Imam Husayn made it very clear that he saw himself responsible for discharging a more important duty.

So, if Muslim bin Aqeel got martyred, he would have honoured his covenant and passed away in the line of duty. Thus, the Imam must continue treading the same path he had mapped out for his movement.

Since the Imam had decided to take an attacking position against the Umayyad rule, and marched on that revolutionary path, his rationale for doing so was different from a person who was in a defensive position or that of an acquiescent one. The position of a person who is repelling an attacker, who has, for example, come to rob him of his possessions, would be getting what was stolen from him and protect it.

The person who is intent on taking on his rival is in a different league; he would not accept anything other than annihilating the enemy, and achieving his goal, even if they got killed in the process. Imam Husayn's drive was that of upholding “enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong.” It was the mindset of a martyr and the path he decided to walk on.

He who wants his appeal to reach his community advocates the logic of the martyr. This appeal bears a signature made with his blood. Examples of people who wanted their message to reach others abound. In many a place all over the world, we come across relics of bygone personalities who wanted their exploits to be remembered, so much so that some of them had such accomplishments written as epitaph on their gravestones. Hundreds of years later such relics are excavated and displayed in museums to be kept as heritage for future generations.

In contrast, Imam Husayn (a.s.) wrote down with his own blood his epic on the airwaves of everlasting frequencies. His message is stamped on people's hearts because it was laced with blood, thus leaving an indelible mark there.

The hearts of millions of people, be they Arab or non-Arab, who understood the message of the Imam, are conscious of the sincerity of his message, especially when he recited, "I look upon death as felicity and regard life in the shadows of the oppressors as nothing but unhappiness."

That is, living in indignity in the doldrums of injustice and repression, and barely surviving is not the type of life a free man would want to live. Thus, "better die with honour than live in shame" was his motto, i.e. that of martyrs.

Imam Husayn (a.s.) chose the position from which he would attack the regime; his rationale was that of a person racing to martyrdom. From the inhospitable terrain of Karbala', Iraq, he wanted the whole world to know his rejection of the ruler of his days, [who was not fit to rule]. He did not have the tools to write his call, and yet his message transcended the barriers of time, place, and race to rest in the hearts and minds of people.

As is customary each and every year, come Muharram and there the light of Imam Husayn shines on us like beams of light emanating from the sun. His message is heard loud and clear, "The similitude of the inevitability of man's death is that of necklace worn by a young woman. I therefore yearn to have reunion with my predecessors in the same way Jacob was yearning to be reunited with [his son] Joseph", and this glaring statement, "The bastard and the son of a bastard has left us but two choices, either resorting to the sword or capitulating. How preposterous! Humiliation is not our cup of tea! Allah shall never let this happen to us; so shall His Messenger, the believers, chaste and pure laps and proud souls. For the sake of these ideals we would rather die in honour and not give in to the ignoble."

There is a reference in this sermon to Ibn Ziyad, who had offered the Imam one of two choices, either the sword or ignominious surrender.

That was the message the Imam wanted to live on through time and generations. That is, neither God nor His Messenger and the believers would let a pious believer experience the bitter taste of disgrace. The generations and believers would come to know about the resistance of the Imam when no one would accept the notion of the Imam's surrendering to the enemy. It was inconceivable that a person, such as the Imam, who was purebred, under the wing of Fatima, the Prophet's daughter, could give in to indignity.

When he left Medina, armed with his refusal to endorse Yazid's succession to the caliphate as a reason for his attack on the repressive regime, he wrote a will and left it with his brother Mohammad bin al-Hanafiyah; among its contents was this statement, "I did not set out driven by arrogance, or recklessness, or a desire for spreading corruption, or injustice. All what I am intent on is seeking to reform the community of my grandfather. "

This was the rationale behind the Imam's movement.

In the letter he wrote to his brother, Bin al-Hanafiyah, the Imam mentioned the incident of the

Umayyad's demanding from him to pledge allegiance to Yazid, but not even a single reference to the call of the Kufans to him [to come over and form a rival caliphate in Kufa].

That unequivocal rejection underlined the Imam's determination to walk the road of martyrdom to the end. Had his logic stemmed from the love for defending oneself alone, it would have been rational that he would not have given his companions the choice, on the eve of the tenth of Muharram, of either parting his company or sticking it out with him.

All along, he was clear in his mind and sincere with them that the army of Ibn Ziyad was after him alone, i.e. he either gave in and endorsed Yazid as caliph or got killed on the battlefield. In his judgement, his position, on not recognizing Yazid's rule, was dictated by his sense of religious duty, as he did not think Yazid was fit to rule. Yet, his companions chose, of their own accord, to stay with him to the end, preferring to get martyred rather than part his company. For this noble stance, the Imam turned to his Lord and prayed for his companions, asking Him to reward them on his behalf.

This is reinforced by the fact that on that same night, the Imam requested that Habib bin Mudhahir al-Assadi go and ask for the help of members of his tribe. Suppose that Habib managed to galvanise some fifty or sixty combatants.

What difference would this number make in comparison to some thirty thousand soldiers on the other side? Certainly, it would have made no difference to tilt the impending battle in favour of the Imam's side. So, what was the reason for this request?

The Imam wanted to win the 'media' war in order that the news of his revolt travelled far and wide. This is the rationalization of the revolutionaries and martyrs. That was why he started this move in his own immediate circle by bringing with him all members of his family for he wanted them to be messengers for his revolt.

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