

Imams – Clear and Coherent Policy

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A question has puzzled some believers a great deal, namely why did al-Husayn fight with the sword, while his successors refrained from doing so, especially as all the Imams subscribed to a single and coherent ideology. For, if al-Husayn, in spite of the small number of his followers rose up against injustice, demanding his usurped rights, why did Imam al-Sadiq, for example, not rise up when the numbers of his partisans had increased.

This question necessitates knowledge of the circumstances faced by al-Husayn, compared to those which faced the other Imams, so that we can recognise our task today.

It is, naturally, well-known that the Prophet started his mission peace- fully and secretly, and that this continued for more than ten years. During these years he succeeded in forming a group of followers, who firmly believed in the new message and rejected everything which was connected with the time of the jahiliyya. Eventually the Prophet felt that this group was capable of confronting the power of the jahiliyya, and so raised the jihad with the sword, and, after a bitter military struggle, succeeded in founding the Islamic state in Medina.

This hard task which led to the Prophet's establishment of a new society, was left, in its entirety, to Imam Ali, so that he could complete what the Prophet had initiated, as regards the complete elimination of the beliefs of the Jahiliyya, and then establish a society which would base its relationships upon the prescribed rule of God's law.

However Imam Ali did not come to power immediately after the death of the Prophet. On the contrary he was prevented from achieving power, and had but a few loyal supporters, having discovered that many of those who had been converted to Islam had only embraced it externally, without true belief in their hearts, and acted according to the customs of the Jahiliyya, while covering it with a superficial belief in Islam.

Such a situation confirmed the predictions of the Quranic verse which says,

“If he dies or is killed you shall turn your backs” (Imran, 3: 144),

that is you shall return to your old beliefs. The Imam found that he could not rise to recover his rights, so he did not rebel. but strove throughout his life, to organise a group of sincere believers from among the Community, attentive to the objectives of the new religion, believing in the legitimacy of Ali's claims to the Imamate, and applying the Sunna of the Prophet in their daily lives.

When he finally came to power, after the death of Uthmans Imam Ali did not demand silence as regards economic and political corruption, but rather encouraged the Community to purify their hearts and their actions, and fought those Muslims who sought to exploit the Islamic expansion to their own ends, or interpreted the laws of Islam according to their own desires and interests, at the expense of those of society at large.

Al-Hasan followed in the footsteps of his father in the fight against the power of the Jahiliyya, and against some of the Muslims, whose souls had not been purified by the fear of God, and who were exploiting the economic and political advantages of the Islamic expansion into Syria.

For this reason he continued to fight and encourage his followers in their struggle, but some of his followers refused to obey his commands, and one even tried to assassinate him in al-Mada'in, which resulted in al-Hasan's receiving a serious leg injury, which contributed to his later agreement to a truce.

The splits amongst the followers of al-Hasan, and the spread of the disturbances amongst his army on, one hand, and the unity of the opposition and their insistence on continued hostilities on the other, forced al-Hasan to sign the truce with Mu'awiya. Some of the most important stipulations of this truce was that Mu'awiya would not endanger the life or the properties of al-Hasan's followers, or curse the People of the House, in the mosques, and that al-Husayn should succeed Mu'awiya on the death of the latter.

Imam al-Husayn committed himself to acting according to the stipulations of this agreement, whereas the opposition, during the twenty years of Mu'awiya's rule, systematically broke the points of agreement one after another. In the last years of his rule Mu'awiya designated Yazid as his successor, thus breaking his promise to al-Hasan, that al-Husayn would succeed him.

Al-Husayn had been keeping a careful watch on the activities of Mu'awiya during his rule, and had, accordingly, prepared his followers for any eventuality. In the light of what reached him from Iraq al-Husayn believed that the people were ripe for rebellion on one hand, while, on the other hand, he noticed that the Community as a whole had become stagnant and needed somebody to bring it back to life.

Therefore he advanced towards Kufa and, in spite of the fact that the Kufans who had previously premised to help him, had withdrawn their support and listened to the overtures of the authorities, he determined to fight despite the fewness of his followers, until all of them perished at the Battle of Karbala.

From this it is clear that al-Husayn's decision to fight was by no means an innovation but rather a continuation of the policy of his brother, father and grandfather, as regards opposition to the power of the Jahiliyya whenever possible. The assassination of al-Husayn led al-Sajjad and the other Imams to adopt their quiescent policy towards the authorities who had seized power, because he realised that:

i. (Firstly) In spite of their numbers, the followers of al-Husayn did not possess sufficient loyalty to surrender themselves and their possessions in the path of God, according to the instructions of the Imam;

ii) (and secondly) Many of the Community were unaware that al-Husayn was the rightful Imam and the leader of the Islamic community, by the Prophet's designation, just as they were unaware that the existing authorities were illegal.

For this reason we find al-Sajjad following a policy of silence towards the authority of the Umayyads, however this silence did not indicate recognition of their authority, but rather that his own followers were few. Similarly his isolation from society was by no means an escape from reality, but was in fact tacit opposition to the corruption and tyranny which had brought about the assassination of al-Husayn, the burning of the Ka'ba, and the attacking and plundering of the City of the Prophet, which had lasted for three days.

Al-Sajjad, during the time of his Imamate, concentrated his efforts on purifying the souls of his people and encouraging fear of God in their acts and in their statements, giving priority to the purification of the soul by applying the rules of God firstly upon the individual, discouraging him from the self-interest which had contributed to al-Husayn's death.

Al-Sajjad's intentions were to bring together a group of sincere Muslims, who adhered to the objectives of Islam and performed its rules, called people to obey God in their actions before their tongues, and followed the Imam in all things. Furthermore, al-Sajjad insisted that his followers understand that any war with the sword could only be a jihad, if the one who proclaimed it possessed the necessary quality of calling people to God through his acts rather than his statements. It is stated that he mentioned the following Qur'anic verse,

“They are the ones who turn to God in repentance, who worship him, who praise him, who go about in the land serving him who bow down to God, who prostrate themselves in prayer, who enjoin good and forbid evil, and who watch the limits set by Allah And give glad tidings to those who believe.” (Tawba, 9: 112).

Thereafter he stated, “When we find those who possess these attributes, jihad with them is better than the Pilgrimage.” (Kafi, 5/22).

Imam al-Baqir followed his father's policy and did not rebel against the Umayyads, and advised his brother, Zayd, not to rise in arms against the illegal authority of the Umayyads, because the Community

was not sufficiently politically aware to rebel against the government.

So al-Baqir began to disseminate political awareness in the Community, by means of Prophetic tradition just as he commanded some of his followers to remind the people of al-Husayn's struggle and his martyrdom during the Hajj each year, thereby hoping to kindle the feelings of the Community, to move their hearts and to inflame their emotions so that they could sympathise with the ideology of revolution for upright causes.

For, the time of the Hajj is one of gathering for Muslims from all countries, and the dissemination of the objects of the struggle and martyrdom of al-Husayn, and the illustration of his close relationship to the Prophet, encouraged both complaint and doubt concerning the legitimacy of the authorities, which in turn created a fertile environment for a movement towards bring about their downfall.

Despite the fact that the cultural activities of al-Sajjad and al-Baqir drew a large number of followers to them, al-Baqir did not consider them suitable for rebellion, because they lacked the necessary loyalty and organisation. Al-Kulayni reports that 'Abd Allah b. al-'Ata once said to al-Baqir, "Indeed your party is large in Iraq. By God, there is nobody amongst your people like you. So why do you not rise in arms?" So he replied, "O 'Abd Allah b. al-'Ata, you have taken to listening to the masses." While it is also related that al-Sadiq himself did not count the large number of his followers as an integral part of his plans for revolt. On the contrary, he gave precedence to their faith, their fear of God, their courage in standing by the truth, and their loyalty and obedience to the Imam.

The resolute policies of the Imams al-Baqir and al-Sadiq, were not unplanned, but were in fact based on bitter experience. Many reports state that the plans of the Imams involved a rebellion in 70 A.H., but the martyrdom of al-Husayn delayed these plans. There is also evidence in these plans of a revolt to be staged in 140 A.H. But due to the lack of organisation amongst the Imam's followers, and their inability to keep the date of the revolution secret, their plans became known to their enemies, and so, the later Imams did not inform their followers of any subsequent intended uprising.

From this survey, it is clear that the Imams actually possessed a clear and coherent policy. For example Imam Ali made a truce with the contemporary rulers when he had only a few followers, but, when the numbers of his followers increased, he took arms openly, and similarly al-Hasan fought when he and his party were strong, but made a truce in the time of weakness. Al-Husayn did likewise, and rebelled in the way of God, depending upon the loyalty of the Kufans, while the other Imams refrained from doing so, until they had established a strong body of loyal followers, capable of transforming the ideology of the Community in favour of God's law.

The main task of the faithful at the present time, is to cleanse themselves of any act related to the era of the Jahiliyya, and this can be achieved by following the orders of God, as illustrated by the behaviour and daily life of the Prophet and his Household. Every believer who claims allegiance to the present Imam should present his allegiance and his loyalty to the Imam by performing the obligatory commands

and rules, such as the prayers, fasting, the zakat, the Hajj, and by showing obedience to the legal 'Ulema of Ahl al-Bayt, following their instructions and calling people to good and forbidding evil acts.

Similarly they should perform actions which strengthen the social ties of society and establish it firmly and safely, such as obedience to parents and relations, respect towards neighbours, trustworthiness in agreements and contracts, loyalty in their occupations and in their dealings with people and to the country in which they live.

The one who is loyal to Ahl al-Bayt and the Imam of the Age, is the person who refrains from bad deeds, such as polytheism, disobedience to their parents, slandering women as adulteresses, killing innocent people, lying, theft, the drinking of alcohol and any act which separates one from God.

If the faithful perform the obligatory deeds, refrain from what is forbidden and obey God loyally, this will lead to the establishment of a society free from complexity and corruption, in which the faithful can be sincerely loyal to the commands of the Imam of the Age.

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