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Islamic Welfare and Muslim Unity in the Path of Imam ‘Ali

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Abstract

After the demise of the noble Prophet (S) of Islam, there developed in his Ummah a most precarious situation surrounding the issue of *khilafah*. Amidst the various claims and counter-claims to this political post and due to its potentially explosive and schismatic nature, the policy and methodology adopted by Imam ‘Ali (‘a) is of paramount importance and interest.

While claiming his right to the *khilafah* in principle, the Imam strove to preserve the integrity of Islam and was extremely conscious of maintaining the general interest of the religion above all. His initial refusal to give allegiance to the first caliph, as well as his later concessions in this regard, must be interpreted in this light. The present article is the first part of a detailed study on the events of that tumultuous period—explaining the policies and principles that animated them from within, as well as expounding upon the Imam’s pivotal role with regards to them.

Keywords: *khilafah*, *wilayah*, Imam ‘Ali, caliphs, Muslim unity, Islamic good, sectarianism, ummah, companions of the Prophet, Shia–Sunni unity, Shia–Sunni cooperation, Shia–Sunni polemics.

In analyzing any event, a researcher must go beyond his own previously-held beliefs and assumptions to form a new and more objective analysis. He should not let his confessional and partisan beliefs become the spring board from which he makes his judgements. The following is a study of the life of Imam ‘Ali (‘a) that is based on common religious teachings and interpretations, which are agreed upon by all Muslim sects and schools of thought. One hopes that it becomes the common criterion and

standard to follow and in the light of which we may proceed.

Peaceful Opposition to the Outcome of Saqifah

After the demise of the noble Prophet (S), a group from among the *Ansar*¹ and the *Muhajirun* met in *Saqifah*² of *bani Sa'idah*. After many hours of deliberations and discussions, a party from among the *Muhajirun* along with some of the *Ansar* rushed to offer their allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, whose nomination was announced soon after. However, some other members of the *Muhajirun* did not agree with this nomination and did not, therefore, offer their allegiance; instead, they favoured the nomination of Imam 'Ali ('a).³

When Imam 'Ali ('a) found out about the event, he expressed his objection to the nomination of Abu Bakr, and he refused the calls of those who demanded he give allegiance to the newly elected leader. It is worth noting here, however, that his opposition, in this regard, was peaceful. In addition, he was clear in expressing his opinion in a commonly acceptable manner that was in consonance with this form of opposition. Among his statements challenging the nomination of Abu Bakr, is the following:

*"I have more rights to this matter than you, and I shall not offer my allegiance to you; rather, you ought to offer your allegiance to me. Surely you have stripped this matter from the Ansar under the pretext of your blood relationship to the Messenger of Islam (S) but then you usurped it from us, the Ahl al-Bayt. So I could argue and dispute about this matter using the same arguments which you presented against the Ansar."*⁴

During these charged circumstances, Imam 'Ali ('a) has directed the attention of the *Muhajirun* to the true characteristics and attributes which indicate who is the worthiest to succeed the Prophet of God (S) in accordance with the tenets of religion and intellectual principles. This situation can be seen when Imam 'Ali ('a) addressed the *Muhajirun*, and said:

*"By God, O community of Muhajirun, verily we have more rights to this matter than you. Surely there is no one among us except he is a reciter of the Book of Allah, an erudite in the religion of Allah, a knower of the Sunnah of Allah's messenger, one experienced in the affairs of His subjects, and one who repels from them evil and distributes among them equally. By God, such a person is from among us".*⁵

Certainly Imam 'Ali's opposition to the nomination of Abu Bakr was within his natural rights and in accordance with a substantial body of evidence. This granted him the right to express his opposition and to uphold his own nomination. In spite of these justifications, which are deemed sufficient proof for his right to succeed the messenger (S) of God—both in regard to the *ta'wil* (hermeneutic interpretation) and the *tafsir* (exegesis) of the Qur'an—and while accepting the major points of agreement among the companions in this regard, we still find that Imam 'Ali's opposition to the outcome of the *Shura* did not exceed the norms of disputation.

His request was balanced and within reasonable standards of political and social discourse. One of the most important grounds for his position was the fact that many of the companions of the Prophet and members of Bani Hashim were absent from the meeting at *Saqifa*, and hence did not participate in the *Shura*. Imam 'Ali ('a) alluded to this: "If it was by council (*Shura*) that you took charge of their affairs, then why is it that the councillors were absent?"⁶

In all the areas and issues of dispute, we find Imam 'Ali ('a) dedicated to preserving the religious rules and principles in the etiquette of opposition, dialogue and protest. His conciliatory stance did not venture beyond elucidating his right to the leadership. This can be seen in his statement to Abu Bakr, "It was evident to us that we had the right to this matter, but you acted despotically against us in this regard." Then the Imam continued addressing Abu Bakr and reminded him of his kinship to the messenger (S) of Islam and the rights of the *Ahl al-Bayt* ('a) upon all Muslims. The Imam did not desist from speaking in this manner until Abu Bakr began to cry.⁷

Imam 'Ali ('a) maintained his opposition toward the nomination of Abu Bakr, and he did not offer his allegiance until the demise of his wife, Fatima al-Zahra ('a), the daughter of the messenger (S) of God. In all the stages of his movement, he always considered the higher interest of Islam—both during the time when he abstained from offering his allegiance and that time when he eventually offered it. Hence, the general interest and welfare of Islam was the dominating force in all of his stands and disputes.

Muslim historians and narrators of traditions differ concerning the details regarding the allegiance of Imam 'Ali ('a) to Abu Bakr with respect to its period, circumstances, method, reasons, and motives. Nevertheless, all of them agree and share a common consensus that Imam 'Ali's approach and handling of this dispute was driven by his desire for preserving the integrity of the Muslim state and the unity of the Muslim ummah. Evidently, the Islamic state was in its infancy stage and hence, there was a dire need for Imam 'Ali ('a) to play his role, during this pivotal time, in ensuring its success and progress. This could only be guaranteed through ensuring the unity among the Muslims.

If we consider the account of Imam 'Ali ('a) being threatened with death unless he offered allegiance to Abu Bakr, we can conclude that [given the validity of this report] Imam 'Ali's decision [to pay allegiance] was certainly based upon his moral and divine obligations to preserve the general Muslim interest and the unity among Muslims. Imam 'Ali ('a) recognized that if he was killed due to his refusal to give allegiance, it would lead to bloodshed and sectarian violence between the Hashemites and his supporters on one side and the *khalifa* and his supporters on the other side. Moreover, this violence would ultimately destroy the infant Islamic state in a very critical time when the hypocrites and the polytheists were waiting for an opportune time to destroy the message of Islam.

However, if we consider the various narrations that allude to the positive reasons [ones that did not stem from any fear of threats] of his allegiance to Abu Bakr, we find them in line with the path of Muslim unity and within the framework of the general interest of Muslims. One such tradition is as follows:

‘Uthman ibn ‘Affan said to Imam ‘Ali (‘a): ‘O cousin, surely no one will leave to fight this [external] enemy while you have not given your allegiance yet.’ Immediately, Imam ‘Ali (‘a) set out to meet Abu Bakr and paid his allegiance. This event brought joy to all Muslims and consequently they were eager to fight the enemies of Islam.[8](#)

This tradition is recorded in the Shia books. In the case of its authenticity, we can conclude that the reason that Imam ‘Ali (‘a) gave his allegiance was to push forward the movement of jihad against the opportunists, apostates and those who carried enmity towards Islam. In wanting to fully realize the Islamic interest for the sake of unity, Imam ‘Ali (‘a) considered these dangerous elements threatening the stability of the Muslim state.

Furthermore, there are other traditions which allude to his peaceful and unifying position and the real circumstances and motives which led him to pay allegiance. In one such tradition, he states:

“When Allah received the soul of His Prophet (S), the Quraysh seized this affair from us and pushed us away from a right which we were more entitled to than all the people. So, I realized that adopting patience over this issue is vastly superior to causing divisions within the unified voice of the Muslims and the shedding of their blood. This is because the people were still new to Islam and the religion was still in its early development, and hence vulnerable to instability and weakness; a moment of negligence would revert it.”[9](#)

Keeping the ranks of Muslims united was of greater importance in the sight of Imam ‘Ali (‘a) than the *khilafah*. In taking this position, Imam ‘Ali (‘a) strove to maintain the greater good of Islam. On another occasion, in respect to his reasons for paying allegiance to Abu Bakr, he stated:

“What truly alarmed me was the gathering of people around Abu Bakr and their rushing towards him to offer their allegiance. I held back my hand and I was certain that I had more right to the station of Muhammad (S) amongst the people than the one who turned towards the affair after him. I remained in this way by what Allah willed until I saw many people revert from Islam. They called to destroy the religion of Allah and the creed of Muhammad. Hence, I was very concerned that if I do not aid Islam and its people then I would witness its breakup and collapse. Such a calamity would have a far greater impact upon me than the loss of the wilayah (guardianship) of your affairs. For this reason, I walked towards Abu Bakr and paid my allegiance to him. By so doing, I rose in the face of these challenging events until falsehood was contained and annihilated and the Word of Allah was the highest.”[10](#)

On another occasion, the Imam was more forthright in emphasizing Islamic unity and its greater good:

“By Allah, had it not been for the fear of causing divisions among the Muslims, the return of unbelief, and the demise of religion, we would have taken with them a different approach than what we have adopted towards them.”[11](#)

As seen from the above remarks, we find Imam ‘Ali (‘a) abandoned many alternatives and did not

choose to adopt any position which would cause a rift between Muslims or weaken their newly formed state. Instead, he chose the option of giving allegiance over other alternatives to preserve the unity of Muslims and the unity of the Islamic state.

His Position towards those who Instigated against the Khalifah

During the stage which preceded the allegiance, or shortly thereafter, Imam ‘Ali (‘a) rejected all types of reactionary positions which may have led to revulsion and hatred and which would have encouraged rebellion and civil disobedience. One example was in the Imam’s stance against ‘Utba ibn Abi Lahab, who said to some people:

“I was not expecting that the affair [of leadership] would depart from the Hashemites and from Abu Hasan (i.e., Imam ‘Ali). Is it not a fact that he was the first to perform prayer towards your qibla, the most knowledgeable in the Qur’an and the Sunna, the closest from among the people to the time of the Prophet, and the one who was aided by angel Gabriel to wash and shroud the body of the Prophet?”

When Imam ‘Ali (‘a) came to hear about these words, he summoned ‘Utba and commanded him not to resort to such speech. He uttered his famous statement: “the integrity of the religion is more beloved to us than anything else.”^{[12](#)}

Indeed, the integrity of the religion has a priority over all things and resides in the good of Islam and the best course of action for the betterment of Muslims. It is to be placed above all limited desires and personal interests. In fact, it has more priority than the *khilafah* and the right of the Imam (‘a) to it. It is for this reason that he abstained from seeking his right to this *khilafah*. Moreover, the Imam (‘a) did not just suffice himself from abstaining to seek his right but also forbade any speech or action that would contribute in stirring up commotion or cause disarray within the ranks of the Muslims. It is for this reason that the Imam forbade this provocateur to engage in such provocative discussions.

Also, when Abu Sufyan came to Medina, he said:

“I see (a vision of) smoke rising and nothing will put it out except blood. O people of ‘Abd Manaf, see your affairs and ponder about Abu Bakr’s abilities. Where are the two men, ‘Ali and Al-Abbas? What is going on that you let this affair [i.e., of the khilafah] fall to the lowest community from among the Quraysh?”

Then he turned to ‘Ali (‘a) and said to him, “Extend your hand to me that I may pay allegiance to you and by God, if you should so desire, I will fill the streets of Medina with cavalry and infantry.” Imam ‘Ali (‘a) rejected Abu Sufyan’s offer and rebuked him, saying:

“By Allah, you want nothing in this but fitnah (mischief) and by Allah, you have always wished evil for Islam. We have no need for your advice.”^{[13](#)}

Here, in the face of this provocative situation, Imam ‘Ali (‘a) refused such a position which emanated from a naive tribal vision influenced by racism and ethnicity. This insular approach did not conform to the lofty ideas of Islam nor its ascendancy. It also did not conform to Imam ‘Ali’s goals in preserving the Islamic order because the purpose of *khilafah* is to expound the principles of Islam in light of the challenges of life and to make these principles guide and direct the thoughts, emotions and aspirations of the people. These goals cannot be fulfilled in the presence of internal disturbances and marginal skirmishes. Therefore, without the fulfilment of these honourable goals, there is no real value to the *khilafah*.

Furthermore, it is important to remember that what was said and offered by Abu Sufyan would have contributed in the appointment of the Imam to the *khilafah* of the Muslims and the consequent deposing of Abu Bakr from its seat. In fact, many from the *Ansar* had refused to give their allegiance to Abu Bakr. This is explicitly mentioned by the second *khalifa* who said, “Surely ‘Ali and al-Zubayr and their supporters have distanced themselves from us in the house of Fatima, and the entire group of *Ansar* have also done so.”¹⁴ Another tradition states, “The *Ansar* chided each other [during the events at *Saqifa*] and remembered ‘Ali and hailed his name.”¹⁵

Despite all these circumstances and events which were in Imam ‘Ali’s favor and which would certainly have enabled him to assume the *khilafah*, he chose to give priority to the greater good of Islam and the unity of the Muslims over his right to leadership. This noble position was the means to preserve the divine tradition and the integrity of the Islamic entity. In this sense, there is no significance to the *khilafah* vis-à-vis the essential integrity of religion itself.

To be continued...

- ^{1.} The Ansar refers to those individuals residing in Medina who invited the noble Prophet when he was persecuted in Mecca. As for the Muhajirûn, they were the companions of the Prophet from Mecca who migrated with him to Medina.
- ^{2.} Saqifah was a roofed building used by the tribe of Sa’idah, a faction of the Khazraj in Medina.
- ^{3.} Tareekh al-Ya’qubei, 2:124.
- ^{4.} al-Imamah wa al-Siyasah, 1:11.
- ^{5.} Ibid., 1:12.
- ^{6.} Nahj al-Balagha, 503.
- ^{7.} Tareekh al-Tabari, 2:236.
- ^{8.} Bihar al-Anwar (Beirut: MuPasisah al-WafaP, 1403), Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi, ed., 28:310.
- ^{9.} Sharh Nahj al-Balagha, 1:308.
- ^{10.} Ibid., 6:95.
- ^{11.} Ibid., 1:307.
- ^{12.} al-Akhbar al-Mufaqqiyat, 581.
- ^{13.} al-Kamil fi al-Tareekh, 2:326.
- ^{14.} Tareekh al-Tabari, 3:205.
- ^{15.} al-Akhbar al-Mufaqqiyat, 583.

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