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Lesson 16: Khilافat & Consultation (a review of Saqifah)

1. The Authority of the Prophet

Muslims maintain that the Prophet of Islam is infallible and sinless, and that his speech is the same as reality and is the wish of Allah. If it were otherwise, they say, Allah could not have commanded unconditional obedience to him. So his command is Allah's command, and it is absolutely mandatory to obey him.

Moreover, the Prophet had the right to make laws for the people, and his orders took precedence over everyone else's idea or opinion, and his commands on social and other matters had to be carried out. Allah says, ***"The Prophet has a greater authority over the believers than they themselves have."*** (**33:6**) He also says, ***"When Allah and His messenger have decreed a matter, it is not for any believing man or woman to have a choice in the matter."*** (**33:36**)

An examination of the last verse and its explanation makes it clear that the decree of the Prophet in every matter, even in personal matters, is binding, since the verse was revealed concerning an individual matter, viz., the marriage of Zayd bin Haritha and Zaynab bin Jahash. Zaynab was the cousin of the Prophet whereas Zayd was a slave whom the Prophet had freed. In order to break the pre-Islamic custom whereby the noble and rich did not marry outside their own, the Prophet ordered Zaynab to marry Zayd. The verse revealed above shows that even in personal matters like marriage, the Prophet's command has to be obeyed, and so Zaynab married Zayd and was content with him.

2. Is the Prophet Subject to the Opinion of the Majority?

Some Sunni Muslims say that in social matters the opinion of the majority takes precedence over the commands of the Prophet. A deeper look at the verses mentioned above would make it clear that this view is incorrect. Now we shall proceed to an investigation of their evidence and then answer them.

Their evidence is verse 159 from chapter 3 of the Qur'ān:

It was by some mercy of God that you are gentle to them; had you been harsh and hard of heart, they would have scattered from around you. So pardon them, and pray [***to Allah***] ***for forgiveness of their*** [***sins***]***, and take counsel with them in the affair; and when you have resolved, put your trust in God, surely God loves those who put their trust*** [***in Him***]***.***

The answer to this is that this verse itself gives clear evidence that the Prophet is not subject to the opinion of the majority. In other words, the right of decision-making belongs to the Prophet even in social matters, and he has a duty, after consultation, to put his view into practice, not the opinion of others. We say so because the above mentioned verse says: "Take counsel with them in the affair, and when you have resolved, put your trust in God."

If it had been otherwise, and the view of others was to be acted upon, then it should have said, "When the opinion of the people has been obtained on a matter, then accept it and carry it out." But we see that the verse was not revealed in this manner.

What is more, there is evidence in history against the view of the Sunnis. For example, the peace treaty of Hudaybiyyah.

The Prophet of Islam left Medina to visit Mecca for the sole purpose of the minor pilgrimage (known as 'umrah). Near Mecca, the Meccan forces stopped him and said that the unbelievers of Mecca were not prepared to admit him into their city. The Prophet replied that he had not come for war, but only to visit the Ka'bah.

After much discussion, the Meccans agreed to make a peace treaty. The Prophet also agreed to the treaty although it had some conditions with which the Muslims were not happy.[1] On hearing of the Muslims' reluctance, Prophet told them: "I am the slave of Allah, and His Prophet. I will never turn away from the command of Allah, nor will He let me go."[2]

A reasonable question at this point would be that: 'What then is the meaning of the Prophet consulting with the people at all?'

The Prophet's consultation was part of the policy of both respecting the views of the people, and of using reason and thought for the progress of Islam. But this does not mean that the Prophet subjected himself to the majority opinion, and if he paid attention to the opinion of some person or group, it was, in fact, because that was also his own opinion.

3. Did Consultation Take Place after the Prophet's Death?

In light of the above, we can state that the Prophet was above the opinion of the people, even above the majority view. We also saw that the Prophet had selected Imam 'Ali to be his successor on the day of

Ghad□r and informed the people of his decision.

So consultations aimed at appointing a successor after the Prophet are clearly against the wish of Allah and His Prophet, and, therefore, lack any legal grounds. We want, however, to ask whether consultative meetings were held after the Prophet's death, and, if so, whether the majority view was upheld.

(A) Brief Look at Saqifah

The Muslims of Medina were of mainly of two groups: the Ansar (the 'helpers' — natives of Medina) and the Muhajirin (the immigrants — mostly the Qurayshi who migrated from Mecca). The Ans□r themselves consisted of two tribes: the Aws and Khazraj who were enemies of each other in pre-Islamic days.

After the Prophet's death and even before his burial, the Ans□r gathered in Saqifah and proposed to declare Sa'd bin Ubadah (an Ansari from the tribe of Khazraj) as the new leader of the Muslims. Some among them started a discussion about how should they respond if the Qurayshi disputed with them in the issue of leadership.

While this discussion was going on among the Ans□r in Saqifah, 'Umar ibn Khattab (a Qurayshi Muhajir) was informed about it. He sent for Abu Bakr who left the Prophet's body and joined 'Umar. In Saqifah, Abu Bakr gave a speech in which he exhorted the virtues of the Muhajirin and proposed that the leader should be from the Muhajirin. He ended his speech as follows: "So we are the rulers, and you are the ministers and the counselors. We will not do anything without consulting you."

Hub□b ibn Mundhir, an Ansari, stood up and said, "O Ans□r, beware! Take the reins of government in your hands; for the people [i.e., Muhajirin] are under your protection, no one can quarrel with you. Do not fall out between yourselves, so that what you do is ruined."

`Umar, a Muhajir, responded: "That can never be! The Arabs would never submit to your rule; they will not yield, for the Prophet was not from you." Then very heated words were exchanged between Hub□b and `Umar.

In the middle of all this chaos, `Umar swore allegiance to Abu Bakr. Then Bashir ibn Sa`d, leader of the Aws tribe of Ans□r, swore allegiance to Abu Bakr. Seeing this, the other Ansaris of the tribe of Khazraj also pledged allegiance so as not to lose favour in the eyes of Abu Bakr against their rival Aws!

This is the basis of Abu Bakr's khilafat.

A Short Review of Saqifah:

The event narrated above, which is based on Sunni historical sources, shows that the khilafat of Saqifah was not a consultation among the Muslims, but was a plot to usurp the khilafat of Imam 'Ali (a.s.).

Firstly, while on his way to Saqifah, `Umar sent word only to Abu Bakr, and not to anyone else. And Abu

Bakr, who was in the house of the Prophet with the great companions and Imam ‘Ali, did not tell anyone about the plot of Saqifah and left the corpse of the great man!

Does consultation mean that two or three people should go to the Ans□r, create division among them and then impose themselves upon those people?

In consultation over such a great and important matter, should not at least the great companions and the Banu H□shim have been called?

Secondly, the best comment on Abu Bakr's khilafat can be found in the words of `Umar ibn Khatt□b himself. During his own khil□fat, `Umar said, “We have heard that one of you said that if `Umar dies I shall swear allegiance to so-and-so. Someone said to him that the allegiance to Abu Bakr was without consultation. It is true that allegiance to Abu Bakr took place all at once without much thought, but Allah protected us from mischief. However, no one should give you the example of Abu Bakr to follow.” (Tabari, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 4, p. 1820-1823)

Thirdly, `Umar himself said, “After the Prophet, ‘Ali, Zubayr and their companions rose up against us, and assembled in Fatimah's house.” (ibid). We ask the Muslims whether this clear opposition to Abu Bakr's khil□fat be ignored, especially as it is acknowledged by `Umar himself?

Finally, if the matter of the khil□fat was to be resolved on the basis of consultation, the Prophet of Islam would certainly have explained before his death, the way it should have been done. Is it thinkable that the Prophet would explain some very obscure commands, but make no mention of such a great matter as the leadership?

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This lesson has been adapted and abridged from Dar Rah-e Haqq, *The Roots of Religion*, Qum, Iran.

Question Paper on Lesson 16

Question 1: [6 points]
State the Qur'□nic verse which clearly proves that the Prophet was not subjected to the majority opinion.

Question 2: [5 points]
What did `Umar ibn Khatt□b say that historically proves that Abu Bakr's appointment as caliph had no moral, legal or ethical basis.

Question 3: [5 points]
Who were present at the Prophet's funeral.

Question 4: [5 points]
Describe briefly in your own words what happened at Saqifah.

Question 6: [5 points]
Explain how a head of the state is selected/elected after a sudden death of the President or the Prime Minister in the modern political system prevalent in the major western democracies.

Question 7: [24 points]
True or False:
(a) Allah has commanded unconditional obedience to the Prophet.

(b) The Prophet is subject to the majority opinion.

(c) In the peace treaty of Hudaybiyyah, the Prophet followed the majority opinion.

(d) The Prophet had greater authority over Muslims than they themselves have.

(e) The Prophet was infallible in religious matters only but could make errors of judgment in social affairs.

(f) Zaynab was cousin of the Prophet whom he ordered to marry Zayd bin H□ritha.

(g) The Prophet used to consult with people only to encourage rational thinking.

(h) Some Sunni scholars maintain that in social matters, the Prophet is subject to majority opinion.

(i) Aws and Khazraj were two friendly tribes of Madinah.

(j) The leader of the tribe of Khazraj was first to pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr.

(k) Saqifah was a conspiracy to deprive Imam ‘Ali of his legitimate right to khil□fat.

(l) Upon receiving word from `Umar ibn Khatt□b, Abu Bakr left the Prophet's corpse to attend Saqifah's meeting.

1. Ibn Hisham, Sirah, vol. 3, p. 321.
2. Tabari, Ta'rikh, vol. 3, p. 1546.

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