Al-Islam.org
Ahlul Bayt Digital Islamic Library Project
Published on *Al-Islam.org* (https://www.al-islam.org)

Lesson 9: The Formation of the Caliphate System at the Saqifah

The blessed and fruitful life of the Most Noble Messenger, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, each moment of which had been filled with resplendent deeds, had come to an end. The great founder of Islam, the soul of the world, the savior of mankind, had bid farewell to life and departed for the eternal realm. With his departure the link of revelation with this world was severed, and the heavenly manifestations of that blessed being, to describe which is beyond human power, faded away forever. May God's peace and blessings be upon him and his family.

His immaculate body had not yet been interred. 'Ali, peace be upon him, some members of the Bani Hashim, and a few Companions were busy washing and enshrouding the body in preparation for burial; they, and they alone, were fully preoccupied with the great blow that had descended and the urgent duty they had to perform.[1]

At the very same time, a group of the Helpers had convened a meeting at a pavilion nearby known as the Saqifah of the Bani Sa'idah in order to settle the matter of succession to the Prophet in conformity with their own wishes. 'Umar immediately sent a message to Abu Bakr, who at that time was in the house of the Prophet, telling him to join him immediately. Abu Bakr realized that something significant was about to happen, so he left the house and hurried together with 'Umar to the meeting place where the Helpers were meeting, being joined on the way by Abu 'Ubaydah b. al-Jarrah.[2]

Ahmad Amin, a well-known Sunni and Egyptian writer whose stance toward the Shi'ah is negative to the point of fanaticism, writes as follows:

"The Companions of the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, were at odds over the question of the succession. It was a sign of their unworthiness that they began arguing over it before the Prophet had even been buried. It was only 'Ali b. Abi Talib, peace be upon him, who did not behave in this fashion, busying himself instead with the washing, enshrouding and burial of the Prophet The foremost among the Companions were all intriguing over the succession; they had abandoned the body of the Prophet, and no one was present at the burial save 'Ali and his family, or showed any respect for

the one who had guided them and brought them forth from the darkness of ignorance. They did not even wait for the burial to take place before they started fighting with each over his legacy."[3]

Different groups were advancing arguments on their own behalf at the Saqifah. The Helpers claimed to be exceptionally privileged in that they had preceded others in Islam, had enjoyed the respect of the Messenger of God, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, and had struggled hard for the sake of Islam; this, they claimed, entitled them to the leadership. They suggested that the reins of power be entrusted to Sa'd b. 'Ubadah, and had him brought to the Saqifah even though he was ill.

Similarly, the Migrants claimed that they were the most deserving of the leadership, given the fact that they were from the same city as the Prophet and had abandoned everything for the sake of Islam and the Prophet.

The logic of both groups derived from an essentially tribal spirit, for they were determined to obtain a monopoly on power for themselves, excluding their rivals and condemning them as less deserving.[4]

The discussions wore on and turned into a bitter dispute. The group headed by 'Umar supported the claims of Abu Bakr, urging everyone to grant him allegiance and threatening anyone who opposed him.

Abu Bakr then rose and began to expound the virtues of the Migrants and the services they had performed:

"The Migrants were the first group to embrace Islam. They despite the arduous circumstances they persevered and refused to abandon monotheism despite the pressures exerted on them by the polytheists. Naturally it should not be forgotten that you, O Helpers, also have rendered great service to Islam and that after the Companions you have primacy over all others." He then added: "We must be the rulers (*umara'*), and you, our deputies (*wuzara'*)."

Hubab b. al-Mundhir then rose and said: "O Helpers, you must seize the reins of power so firmly that none dare oppose you. If you permit disagreement among yourselves, you will be defeated, with the result that if we choose a leader for ourselves, they will also choose a leader for themselves."

To this 'Umar responded: "There can never be two rulers in one realm. I swear by God that the Arabs will never agree to be ruled by you, for their Prophet was not from among you. Our argument is strong and clear: we are the Companions of the Messenger of God, so who can oppose us, other than those who choose the wrong path or wish to cast themselves into the whirlpool of perdition?"

Hubab b. al-Mundhir stood up again and said: "Pay no heed to what this man says. They want to usurp your rights and to deny you your claims. Take the reins of power into your own hands and banish your opponents, for you are the most worthy to rule. If anyone opposes my proposal, I will rub his nose in the dirt with my sword." Thereupon 'Umar began to tussle with him and kicked him hard in the stomach.[5]

Bashir b. Sa'd, the cousin of Sa'd b. 'Ubadah rose to support what 'Umar had said. Addressing the

Helpers, he proclaimed: "It is true that our record of fighting in God's way and spreading Islam is superior. However, we never had any aim other than God's pleasure and the satisfaction of His Messenger, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, and it is therefore unfitting that we should boast of precedence over others, for we have no worldly goal. The Prophet was from among the Quraysh, and it is therefore appropriate that his heirs should also be from among them. Fear God, and do not oppose or argue with them."

After a further series of discussions and arguments, Abu Bakr addressed the people as follows:

"Shun dispute and disunity. I desire nothing but your good and your welfare, It is best that you give your allegiance either to 'Umar or to Abu 'Ubaydah."

To this, however, 'Umar countered: "You are more worthy of ruling than either of us, for you preceded us all in following the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family. In addition to this, your financial resources are greater than those of the rest of us. You were at the side of the Prophet in the cave of Thawr and you led the prayers in his stead. Given all this, who could imagine himself more fitted than you to rule over us?"

As for Abd al-Rahman b. Awf, he expressed himself as follows: "O Helpers, you have indeed many virtuous qualities, which none can deny. We must nonetheless admit that there is none among you comparable to Abu Bakr, 'Umar and 'Ali."

Mundhir b. al-Arqam supported his view: "No one can deny the virtues of those three, and there is in particular one among them whom none will oppose if he assumes the leadership of the Islamic community." By this he meant 'Ali b. Abi Talib, peace be upon him, and a group of the Helpers accordingly began exclaiming in unison: "We will give our allegiance (*bay'ah*) to none but 'Ali."[6]

'Umar recalls that this outcry caused him to fear the emergence of serious dissension. "So I told Abu Bakr to give me his hand for me to swear him allegiance."[7] Without delay Abu Bakr extended his hand. First Bashir b. Sa'd came forward and grasped his hand as a token of allegiance, and he was followed in this by 'Umar. Then the others rushed forward and gave Abu Bakr their allegiance.[8] While this was proceeding an argument broke out between 'Umar and Sa'd b. 'Ubadah, with the result that Abu Bakr found it necessary to instruct 'Umar to calm himself. Sa'd told his friends to remove him from the scene, so they carried him home on their shoulders.[9]

The crowd that had given allegiance to Abu Bakr accompanied him to the mosque so that others might also pledge him their allegiance. 'Ali, peace be upon him, and Abbas were still engaged in washing the body of the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, when they heard cries of *Allahu akbar* coming from the mosque. 'Ali asked: "What is this uproar?" Abbas replied: "Something quite unprecedented," and then added, looking at 'Ali, "Did I not tell you that this would happen?"[10]

Abu Bakr mounted the Prophet's pulpit and continued receiving the allegiance of the people until

nightfall, without paying any attention to the task of preparing the body of the Prophet for burial. This process continued the following day, and it was not until Tuesday, one day after the death of the Prophet and the pledging of allegiance to Abu Bakr, that the people went to the house of the Prophet to perform the funerary prayers.[11] "Neither Abu Bakr nor 'Umar participated in the burial of the Prophet."[12]

Zubayr b. Bakkar writes: "After the pledging of allegiance to Abu Bakr was all over, a large number of the Helpers regretted what they had done and began blaming each other and mentioning the claims of 'Ali."[13]

The celebrated historian al-Mas'udi writes: "After the events at the Saqifah, 'Ali told Abu Bakr, "You have trampled on my rights, refused to consult with me, and ignored my claims." Abu Bakr's only answer was to say, "Yes, but I was fearful of chaos and disorde[14]

The meeting that took place at the Saqifah was ***not*** attended by such prominent personalities as 'Ali, peace be upon him, Abu Dharr, Miqdad, Salman, Talhah, al-Zubayr, 'Ubayy b. Ka'b, and Hudhayfah, and only three of the Migrants were present.

Should not all the principal Muslims have been invited to express their views on what was to be done? Was a brief and disorderly meeting, attended by only three of the Migrants, enough to decide on a question on which the future destinies of Islam depended? Did not the gravity of the issue necessitate that it be put before a gathering of the leading Muslims for a final decision to be reached in accordance with their freely expressed views?

What right had those who considered themselves entitled to make a decision have to deprive others of the same opportunity and to disregard them completely? If a certain group citing public opinion as its justification choose a leader or ruler for their society, but does so out of the sight of thoughtful and respected individuals, does their choice truly reflect the wishes of the people? When Sa'd b. 'Ubadah refused to pledge his allegiance, was it necessary to issue an order for his execution?[15]

Historians record that when some of the Bani Hashim as well as the Migrants and the Helpers refused to pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr, they took refuge in the house of Fatimah in order to swear allegiance to 'Ali.[16] A crowd then attacked the house and even entered it in order to disperse the dissidents and if possible, compel their allegiance to Abu Bakr.[17]

The election of Abu Bakr was so unexpected, hasty and careless that 'Umar remarked later: "It was an accident that Abu Bakr became leader. No consultation or exchange of views took place. If anyone in future invites you to do the same again, kill him."[18]

In addition to this, the fact that the first caliph designated his own successor itself demonstrates that the notion of a consultative government having come into being after the death of the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, is entirely baseless. The Prophet issued no directive for such a government to be established; if he had, different groups of people would not have proposed to the first

caliph that he designate his own successor to prevent the chaos and disorder that would have engulfed Muslim society because of the lack of a leader.[19]

The caliph responded to this request of the people by saying that if Abu 'Ubaydah were alive, he would have appointed him, for the Prophet had called him "the trustee of the *ummah*." Likewise, if Salim the client of Abu Hudhayfah had been alive, he too would have been worthy of the leadership, because he had heard the Prophet describing him as "the friend of God."[20]

Considering the measures taken by Abu Bakr, how can anyone say that the Messenger of God did not choose a successor before he died?

Likewise, the selection of a successor to 'Umar by a committee he himself appointed was in conformity neither with divine precept nor with the principle of consulting public opinion. If the caliph is meant to appoint his own successor, why turn the matter over to a six-man committee? If, on the other hand, the choice of leader is a prerogative of the people, why did 'Umar deprive people of this right and assign it exclusively to a committee of his own choosing? He also acted restrictively in that he spoke of certain members of the committee in terms that completely disqualified them for the caliphate.

When the Qur'an expounds the principle of consultation, it orders the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, to consult the people in matters affecting them. (3:159) It proclaims, on another occasion: "*The affairs of the believers are to be settled by means of consultation.*" (42:38) What is at issue is consultation concerning social matters, matters that affect the people, not the Imamate which is a divine covenant. Something that is a divine covenant and pertains to the guidance of mankind cannot be a subject for consultation.

The adoption of the caliphal system in the fashion we have described led necessarily to the exclusion of the Imams from the realm of rule and leadership.

1. Ibn Kathir, al-Bidayah, Vol. V, p.260; al-Ya'qubi, al-Tarikh, Vol. II, p. 94; Ahmad b. Hanbal, al-Musnad, Vol. IV, p. 104; al-Tabari, Tarikh, Vol. II, p. 451; Ibn al-Athir, Usud al-Ghabah, Vol. I, p.34; Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, al-'Iqd al-Farid, Vol. 111, p.61.
2. al-Tabari, Tarikh, Vol. II, p. 456
3. Yawm al-Islam, quoted in al-Amini in A'yan al-Shi'ah, (Persian translation), Vol. 1, p.262.
4. al-Tabari, Tarikh, Vol. V, p.31; Ibn al-Athir, al-Kamil, Vol. III, p. 3.
5. Ibn Abi '1-Hadid, Sharh, Vol. VI, p. 391.
6. al-Ya'qubi, al-Tarikh, Vol. II, p. 103; al-Tabari, Tarikh, Vol. III, p. 108.
7. Ibn Hisham, al-Sirah, Vol. IV, p.336; Ibn Kathir, al-Bidayah, Vol. V, p.246.
8. Ibn Qutaybah, al-Imamah wa al-Siyasah, Vol. II, p. 9.
9. al-Tabari, Tarikh, Vol. II, pp. 455-59.
10. Ibn Abi 'l-Hadid, Sharh, Vol. I, p. 133; Ibn Abd Rabbih, al-'Iqd al-Farid, Vol. III, p. 63.
11. Ibn Hisham, al-Sirah, Vol. IV, p. 343; al-Muhibb al-Tabari, Riyad al-Nadirah, Vol. I, p. 164.
12. al-Muttaqi al-Hindi, Kanz al-'Ummal, Vol. III, p. 140.
13. Ibn Bakkar, al-Muwaffaqiyat, p. 583.
14. al-Mas'udi, Muruj al-Dhahab, Vol. I, p. 441; Ibn Qutaybah, al-Imamah wa al-Siyasah, Vol. I, pp. 12-14.

15. al-Ya'qubi, al-Tarikh, Vol. II, p. 124; al-Tabari, Tarikh, Vol. IV, p.843.
16. Abu al-Fida', al-Tarikh, Vol. I, p. 156; al-Diyar Bakri, Tarikh al-Khamis, Vol. I, p. 188; Ibn Abd Rabbih, al-'Iqd al-Farid, Vol. III, p. 63; al-Muhibb al-Tabari, Riyad al-Nadirah, Vol. I, p. 167. Ibn Abi'l-Hadid, Sharh, Vol. I, pp. 130-34;
17. al-Ya'qubi, al-Tarikh, Vol. II, p. 105; al-Tabari, Tarikh, Vol. II, pp. 443-46; al-Muhibb al-Tabari, Riyad al-Nadirah, p. 167. al-Diyar Bakri Tarikh, al-Khamis, Vol. I, p. 188; al-Muttaqi al-Hindi, Kanz al-'Ummal, Vol. III, p. 128; Ibn Abi'l-Hadid, Sharh ., Vol. I, pp. 122, 132-34.
18. Ibn Hisham, al-Sirah, Vol. IV, p.308.
19. Ibn Qutaybah, al-Imamah wa al-Siyasah, p. 19.
20. al-Tabari, Tarikh; Ibn al-Athir, al-Kamil.

Source URL:
https://www.al-islam.org/imamate-and-leadership-sayyid-mujtaba-musavi-lari/lesson-9-formation-caliphate-system-saqifah#comment-0