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The Struggle for Power 1

The Sunni Muslims assert that all companions of Muhammad Mustafa, the blessed Messenger of God, were models of exemplary deportment, and that they were untouched by greed for money, lust for power or any other worldly ambition. They also say that all companions loved each other and that their mutual relations were uncontaminated by any cynicism or jealousy.

Such, unfortunately, is far from being the case. We wish it had been so but the evidence of history does not support such an assumption, and brutal facts rip apart the myth and rhetoric the admirers of the companions have passed on to us.

Their most rabid admirer cannot deny that the struggle for power among them erupted even before the body of the Prophet was given a burial. The evidence of history, therefore, should make it possible for us to make a more realistic assessment of the character of the companions of the Prophet, and their various roles in the story of Islam.

It would, of course, be humanly impossible for all the companions of the Prophet to be alike in all respects. No two individuals register identical behavior reactions to extraneous events and circumstances. Acceptance of Islam, and the companionship of its Prophet did not necessarily sublimate the instincts of every Arab. They were a mixed group. After accepting Islam, some of them reached great heights; other remained where they were.

The difficulty in evaluating the role of a companion of the Prophet is compounded by the looseness of its definition. According to one definition, any Muslim who saw the Prophet of Islam, was his companion.

A great many Muslims saw him during the 23 years of his ministry as God's Messenger, and all of them, therefore, were his “companions.” But the Shia Muslims do not accept this definition. They say that the title of a companion was something that Muhammad alone could bestow upon someone. If he did not, then it was not for others to claim this honor.

The Sunni Muslims quote a “tradition” of the Apostle in which he is alleged to have said: “All my companions are like stars. No matter from which one of them you seek guidance, you will find it.” He is

also reported to have said: “All my companions are fair, just and right.”

If these traditions are authentic, and all companions of the Prophet are indeed “stars,” then very strangely, very surprisingly, one of the stars themselves; in fact, one of the most dazzling stars in the whole galaxy of the companions, expressed some serious reservations about them. The star in question is Umar bin al-Khattab, the second khalifa of the Muslims.

Not only did he show that he disagreed with these two and other similar traditions; he even defied them. During his own caliphate, he ordered the companions of the Prophet– the stars–to stay in Medina or not to leave Medina without his permission. He thus restricted their freedom of movement, and they resented this restriction. But he took pains to explain to them that he was doing so in their own interest!

In this regard, Dr. Taha Husain writes in his book, Al-*Fitnatul-Kubra* (The Great Upheaval), published in 1959 by the Dar-ul-Ma'arif, Cairo, Egypt:

Umar had a policy vis-à-vis the leading Muhajireen and Ansar. They were among the earliest men to accept Islam, and they were held in great esteem by the Prophet himself. During his lifetime, he put many of them in charge of important affairs. Umar also consulted them in all matters of public interest, and he too made many of them his companions and advisers.

Nevertheless, he feared *fitna* (mischief) for them, and he also feared mischief *from* them. Therefore, he detained them in Medina, and they could not go out of Medina without his permission. He did not allow them to go to the conquered countries except when he ordered them to go. He feared that people in those countries would “lionize” them (because of their status as companions of the Prophet), and feared that this would lead them (the companions) into temptations.

He also feared the consequences of this “lionization” of the companions, for the government. There is no doubt that this restriction was resented by many of the companions, especially by the Muhajireen among them.

It would only be fair if we critically examine the policy of Umar vis-à-vis this distinguished group among the companions. When he ordered them to stay in Medina, he was perhaps right in his policy. Why should we not call things by their right name? Or, better still, why not translate the reason that prompted Umar to detain the companions in Medina, in modern terms? Umar feared that the companions, if they go into the provinces, might yield to the temptation of exploiting their influence and prestige!

If the events following the death of the Prophet are studied in their human context, it will provide a cushion to absorb the shock for those Muslims who expect the companions to be angels but find them common, garden-variety men. If many of the companions revealed themselves as men driven by ambition and self-interest *after* the death of the Prophet, it was so because in his lifetime they had no hope or opportunity of realizing them. But as soon as he died, they felt that they were free to pursue their own goals in life.

The traditional Sunni approach to the assessment of the role of the companions has been what Thomas Fleming has called “the golden glow approach.” This approach depicts everyone of the companions as a combination saint-hero and genius. But this depiction is not true to life, and because it is not, it puts them out of focus.

A more realistic view would be that the companions were human like the rest of mankind, and that they too could yield to the temptation of taking advantage of an opportunity or of power in their hands.

Lord Action, the famous British historian, and himself a devout Catholic, once offered the following admonition to those people who made excuses for the excesses of the Catholic Church's Renaissance Popes:

“I cannot accept your canon that we are to judge Pope and King unlike other men, with a favorable presumption that they did no wrong ... Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely ... There is no worse heresy than that the office sanctifies the holder of it.”

Al-Qur’an al-Majid has paid rich tributes to those Muslims who proved themselves worthy of the companionship of Muhammad. But it has also indicted those among them who were unworthy of it. Many verses were revealed in their indictment.

The reputation of many of the companions of the Prophet was smudged with jealousy. Their resentment at the appointment of Usama bin Zayd bin Haritha as Supreme Commander of the Syrian expedition, was a manifestation of this jealousy. In later years, the same jealousy led to the murder of one caliph, and led to rebellion against another. Not many among the companions made a conscious effort to suppress their jealousy in the broader interests of Islam, and of the *umma* of the Apostle.

The conflicts of the companions have long since passed into history. It should, therefore, be possible for the modern Muslim to rise above the emotional commitments of the past, and to take a critical look at the “track record” of all of them. It may be difficult but it is possible to do so if the object of his devotion is not the personalities but only truth. What is important after all, is perception and not sentiment!

Muhammad Mustafa had formally “crowned” Ali ibn Abi Talib as his successor at Ghadeer-Khumm, and had declared him to be the future sovereign of all Muslims. There were a few companions who were aware that the actions of the Prophet were beyond any question.

They believed that all his deeds were inspired by heaven, and that they were not prompted by any tribalism. They knew that if he had elevated Ali as the Chief Executive of the Islamic State, it was because the latter had all the qualities essential for such responsibility.

But there was another group of the companions which believed that the Prophet was not altogether free from the feelings of *asabiyya* (tribal solidarity; a kind of tribal nationalism; “my tribe, right or wrong;” clan spirit).

They attributed his declarations and statements pointing out Ali's excellence, to his *asabiyya*. The sovereignty of Ali was not acceptable to them. They considered themselves just as well-qualified to run the nascent state of Medina as Ali, and they were aware that to actually run it, they would have to act before it was too late.

There was only one way for members of this group to realize their ambition, and that was to capture the government of Medina at the opportune time. With this aim in view, they began to publicize a doctrine of their own, viz., the Prophethood and the caliphate ought not to combine in the same house. There was no way for them to take Prophethood out of the house of Muhammad but perhaps it was possible to take caliphate out of it.

They decided to try. The campaign was opened by Umar bin al-Khattab. He was the leader of the group which wished to capture the government. There is on record a brief exchange he once had, during his own reign, with Abdullah ibn Abbas, in which he said that since the Prophet was a member of the clan of Hashim, the "Arabs" did not like the idea that the caliph should also be a member of the same clan. Their exchange went as follows:

Umar: I know that the Arabs did not want that you (the Banu Hashim) should become their leaders.

Abdullah ibn Abbas: Why?

Umar: Because they did not like the idea that both spiritual and temporal authority should become the monopoly of the Banu Hashim for all time.

Abbas Mahmood Al-Akkad, the modern Egyptian historian, says in his book, *'Abqariyyat al-Imam Ali,* published in Cairo in 1970:

Umar disclosed the reason in the following statement why after the death of the Apostle, Ali could not become his successor:

'The Quraysh elected a khalifa out of its own freewill. They were not willing to see that Prophethood and Caliphate both should belong to the Banu Hashim.

Those Qurayshites who were impelled by their ambition to seize the government of Muhammad, had worked out an elaborate plan for this purpose, leaving nothing to chance.

Bukhari, Abu Daud and Tirmidhi (the collectors of traditions) have quoted Abdullah bin Umar bin al-Khattab as saying:

In the times of the Prophet we used to say that the best men in the *umma* are Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman. (*The Virtues of the Ten Companions – by Mahmood Said Tantawi of the Council of Islamic Affairs, Cairo, Egypt, 1976*)

John Alden Williams

Ahmad ibn Hanbal said: “The best of this *Umma* – after the Prophet – is Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, then Umar ibn al-Khattab, then Uthman ibn Affan. We give preference to those three (over Ali) as the Companions of God's Messenger gave preference. They did not differ about it. Then after those three come the Five Electors chosen by Umar as he lay dying (as-hab al-Shura): Ali ibn Abi Talib, Zubayr, Talha, Abd al-Rahman ibn Auf, and Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas.

All of them were suited for caliphate, and each of them was an Imam. On this we go according to the hadith of Umar's son: When the Messenger of God was living – God bless him and give him peace – and his Companions were still spared, we used to number first Abu Bakr, then Umar, then Uthman, and then keep silent.” (Some Essential Hanbali Doctrines from a Creedal Statement). (*Themes of Islamic Civilization, 1971*)

The statement of Abdullah bin Umar is a testimony that the campaign of the companions to elevate Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman at the expense of Ali, was launched in the lifetime of the Apostle himself, in anticipation of and in preparation for, the times ahead. The Quraysh had decided beforehand who would be the leaders of the *umma* after the death of the Apostle, and in what order.

When the Apostle of God died, Abu Bakr was not in Medina; he was at his home in Sunh, a suburb of Medina. But Umar was present at the scene. He drew his sword and began to shout:

“The hypocrites say that the Apostle of God is dead. But he is not dead. He is alive. He has gone, as Moses did, to see his Lord, and will return in forty days. If anyone says that he is dead, I will kill him.”

Many Muslims were thrown in doubt when they heard Umar ranting. By brandishing the sword, and by threatening to kill, he had succeeded in silencing the people. Some of them thought he might be right, and the Apostle might not be dead.

Some others began to whisper to each other and to ask if the Apostle had really died. But presently Abu Bakr arrived in the Mosque and read the following verse from Al-Qur’an al-Majid before the crowd of the Muslims:

Muhammad is but the Apostle of God. If he dies or if he is killed in battle, will you all relapse into idolatry? (***Chapter 3; verse 144***)

When the Muslims heard this verse, they were convinced that Muhammad, the Apostle of God, had really died, and no doubt was left in anyone's mind about it.

As noted before, Umar did not let Muhammad Mustafa write his last will and testament fearing that he would designate Ali as his successor. Then the Prophet died. But during the interval between the death of the Prophet and Abu Bakr's arrival, Umar was still fearful lest the Muslims present in the Mosque, acknowledge Ali as their sovereign.

To forestall this possibility, he drew the sword, and began to shout that Muhammad was not dead but was alive so that it would not occur to anyone that a new leader of the *umma* had to be chosen. Umar was suggesting by his manner that while the Prophet was still alive, who would need a successor; after all successors were for the dead and not for the living!

Many politicians, both before and since Umar, have concealed the news of the death of a king or the head of a state from the public until his heir has succeeded him into the purple.

The death of the Prophet was a fact. But was Umar going to kill a man if he stated that fact? Was he going to kill someone for speaking the truth? Is it a crime to say that a dead man is a dead man, and is the penalty for saying so death?

To convince the Muslims that Muhammad was not dead, Umar brought up the analogy of Moses. But the analogy suffered from an obvious flaw. The Israelites had seen Moses going away from them until he had gone out of their sight. But here the body of Muhammad Mustafa was lying in his chamber, and it had not gone out of the sight of any one. The Muslims, including Umar himself, could see it, and touch it, and feel that it was cold and lifeless.

Umar's Indian biographer, M. Shibli, and some others say that he (Umar) was threatening to kill Muslims out of his love for Muhammad. He was, they say, in a state of shock, and was unable to come to grips with reality!

Umar was in his mid-fifties when the Prophet died. Is it possible that he had never seen any man dying, and he didn't know what it means to die?

The brutal truth is that Umar was only playacting. His histrionics were a screen for his real intentions. His insistence that Muhammad was not dead, was one of a series of maneuvers to obscure the locus of authority and sovereignty from the public eye.

One moment he was ready to kill anyone for saying that the Prophet had died but the very next moment, when Abu Bakr arrived, and read a verse from the Qur'an, he became an instant convert to the idea that he (the Prophet) was a mortal, and being a mortal, could die, and had actually died. He even pleaded his ignorance of the Qur'an, and said that it seemed to him that it was the first time that he heard the verse which Abu Bakr read to him and to the other Muslims in the Mosque.

Abu Bakr's arrival had reassured Umar, and all his senses returned to him with a vengeance. Then he rushed, with Abu Bakr, to Saqifa, to stake claims to khilafat, and to capture it before the Ansars could capture it. The burial of the body of the Prophet was something they could leave to the members of his own family.

Umar's campaign to prove that Muhammad Mustafa was alive, had suddenly collapsed. He was, at last, able to come to grips with reality!

A rule of the ancient Roman law was that *suppressio veri* is equal to *suggestio falsi*. This means that suppressing truth is equal to disseminating falsehood!

Earlier, in this chapter, I quoted a passage from the book, Al-*Fitnatul-Kubra or The Great Upheaval*, by Dr. Taha Husain, apropos of the restriction, imposed by Umar bin al-Khattab, the second khalifa of the Muslims, on the freedom of movement of the Muhajireen.

Umar forbade the Muhajireen to leave Medina without his permission. But who were these Muhajireen who were forbidden to leave Medina? All Muhajireen had left Medina – with two exceptions, viz., Uthman bin Affan and Ali ibn Abi Talib!

Since Uthman had little aptitude for conquest or administration, he might have voluntarily stayed in Medina. Umar, therefore, had to enact this ordinance exclusively for Ali.

Umar could not openly say that of all Muhajireen, Ali alone was forbidden to leave Medina. For what reason Umar could forbid Ali to leave Medina? Apparently none. He, therefore, had to employ the generic term “Muhajireen” to restrict Ali's freedom of movement.

And yet, it was Ali, if anyone, who would not be tempted to exploit his influence with the army, if that is what Umar was afraid of.

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