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The Sunni View of the Caliphate

The most important part of the introduction concerns the development of the Sunni view of the caliphate, which he describes as `Sunni realism'. He selects three thinkers, Abu al-Hasan al-Mawardi (d. 450/1058), al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111) and Badr al-Din ibn Jama'ah (d. 732/1332) to discuss this realism.

At a time when the Sunni Ghaznavids wielded the real power, and the authority of Abbasid caliph was just nominal, al-Mawardi defended the supremacy and indivisibility of the caliphate, but he justified the legitimacy of the transfer of power to rulers other than caliphs. Al-Ghazali took the next step.

At a time when the caliphate had lost its credentials to confer authority on rulers, and was reduced to merely an instrument of legitimizing power acquired by force, he provided the powerful with a religious justification for gaining power by force with the condition that he ought to declare allegiance to the caliph. What was anticipated by al-Mawardi was realized by al-Ghazali.

With the overthrow of the Abbasid caliphate the stage was set for further change in the attitude of Sunni theologians, and Ibn Jama'ah fully legitimized the right of military power to rule. This realism or flexibility reached a point at which maintenance of security was considered to be the only function of the state. Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728/1328) declared that even an unjust ruler could be accepted, if the alternative was chaos. Thus, what is called `realism' ends in legitimization of unjust rule too.

All the three-thinkers, al-Mawardi, al-Ghazali and Ibn Jama'ah were high functionaries at one time or another in the administration of the `Abbasids, Saljuqs and Mamluks. For their masters they had to bend the yard-stick of the caliphate to the extent of breaking it.

The development or rather deterioration of the concept of the caliphate virtually separated rulership from religious obligations. Hamid Enayet calls it conservative realism at another place, which means willingness to forgo all principles for the sake of adjusting to ephemeral conditions. This flexibility was criticized by some later Sunni scholars, who wished to adhere to the Islamic ideals of social justice.

This indignation was expressed in the writings of `Abd al-`Aziz al-Badri, himself a victim of official displeasure because of his fundamentalist views. H.A.R. Gibb says that `in the Sunni community there

was no one universally accepted doctrine of the caliphate'. But he adds that Sunni thought `excludes the acceptance of any one theory as definitive and final.

What it does lay down is a principle: that the caliphate is that form of government which safeguards the ordinances of the Shari'ah and sees that they are put into practice'. Because of this disagreement among Sunnis, the Turks could abolish the caliphate, and all opposition to the abolition proved futile. Some Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia and Egypt, tried to acquire the status of the caliphate, but in vain. The Saudis were supported by the British empire for its own ends.

As the Saudi kingdom was a creation of the imperialist interests, it could have served its cause faithfully. All such attempts to revive the caliphate were doomed to fail because of two reasons: firstly, the changing conditions rendered the caliphate redundant, and secondly, the very notion of the caliphate had been diluted so much that it had lost all religious and political relevance. In India the Khilafat Movement was not actually motivated by any genuine religious sentiment for the Turkish caliph, but was mainly directed against the British rule in India.

Hamid Enayet, in the second chapter of his book, has dealt with this issue in depth. The author says that Azad was in favour of retaining the caliphate for the sake of providing spiritual leadership to the Muslim Ummah, while Iqbal agreed with Mustafa Kamal and supported his arguments for the abolition of the caliphate. Hamid Enayet is of the view that Azad reproduced Mawardi's theory with some alterations, but he was aware of the necessity of the reconstruction of Islamic thought. On the whole, Enayet's comments are well thought out. The point which he misses is the basic difference between the approaches of the two Indian thinkers.

Azad was in the front rank of the nationalist leaders of the Indian freedom movement and subscribed to the secular policy of the Indian National Congress. His support for retaining the caliphate was determined by the policy of the Congress that used the issue of Khilifat as a platform for attacking the British involvement in the issue. Iqbal, on the other hand, supported the creation of a separate Muslim state in the Sub-continent, and he, like many Muslims of his times, regarded the emergence of the new Turkey as a sign of Islamic resurgence.

Thus, in the context of Indian politics, the whole issue of Khilifat was confused due to extra-Islamic considerations. Similarly, the response of the Egyptian and other Arab intellectuals was different, for most of them were convinced of the fact that the caliphate had become redundant in the present context.

Nevertheless, as Enayet indicates, some Arab thinkers were also guided by local or narrow national interests. The second chapter of the book brings the issue of the caliphate into focus in a broader perspective. It is obvious that the Shi'ah world, because of its different view of Islamic rulership, did not participate in the controversy.

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