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Facts about Uthman's murder

Eleven years and many months passed. The resentment of the people against the policies of Uthman went on increasing day after day. The citizens of all Islamic territories were deadly against Uthman, so much so that there was tension all round. The thing which frightened the Muslims most was that during Uthman's rule all the ways and practices prevalent in the days of the Prophet and Abu Bakr and Umar which they liked most, were made topsy-turvy and nothing of the past period remained intact.

They were used to see that the caliph protected their rights and promoted their interests. As and when the governors and the officers oppressed someone or mis- behaved, the caliph dismissed them and redressed the grievances of the people. However, as soon as Uthman became caliph he ignored the rules and regulations based on justice, and founded his government on the policy of nepotism, which the people had never previously seen, and which they could not tolerate.

The thing which disgusted the people most was that Uthman's relatives usurped their rights and became richer day by day and the common man was deprived even of the necessities of life. They also resented the treatment meted out by the caliph to their deputations which approached him to complain against the governors and other officers.

The people were also very much annoyed on account of the insults and humiliation to which the distinguished companions of the Prophet like Abu Dharr, Ammar, and Ibn Mas`ud, were subjected. They also disliked his policy of removing reliable and popular governors and officers and replacing them by the persons who were unjust and oppressive.

The pious Muslims did not also like that the rulers should oppress the *Zimmis*, because, after all, they too were human beings. They did not wish that the society should be poisoned with discrimination and egotism, and incompetent persons should be given preference over honest and competent ones.

During the last days of the caliphate of Uthman the people became so impatient that they revolted against him. This was quite natural because the seeds of revolt were present in his own policies. It is said that one day Uthman chanced to pass by the house of a man named Jabala bin Amr Sa`di. Jabala was sitting amongst the people of his tribe and held a chain in his hand. Uthman saluted them and those

present replied to his salutation, with the exception of Jabala. He said to his tribesmen: "Why have you replied to the salutation of a man who has done such and such thing". Then he addressed Uthman saying: "I swear by God that unless you turn away your wicked favourites like Marwan, Ibn Aamir and Abi bin Sarah, I will put this chain round your neck".

Allama Ibn Abi'l Hadid says that the people had become so daring that one day when Uthman was addressing the people holding in his hand the stick which was held by Prophet and Abu Bakr and Umar while delivering sermons, a person named Jehjah Ghifari snatched the stick from his hand, pressed it on his knee and broke it.

In the beginning the people did not pick up enough courage to misbehave towards Uthman. However, when the malpractices of Marwan and others continued to increase and Uthman, instead of restraining them from their evil deeds showed indulgence to them the disturbances and rebellion also became widespread. Till then only the people individually opposed and criticized Uthman and only one or two persons misbehaved towards him. However, as time passed on the entire Muslim nation became his enemy. The people of Madina wrote letters to the Muslims of other cities on these lines: "If you are desirous of undertaking jihad you should come here, because the religion of Muhammad is being made corrupt by your caliph. Come and remove him from the caliphate".

The residents of all the cities turned against Uthman. By the year 35A.H. the events took such a turn that the inhabitants of various cities wrote letters to one another suggesting that something should be done to get rid of Bani Umayyah and Uthman and all his governors and officers should be removed from their offices. The news about these activities reached Uthman also. He wrote letters to the residents of different cities and tried to reconcile them.

Then he called his governors and senior officers and held consultations with them. Some of them suggested to Uthman that he should rule justly and adopt the policies of Abu Bakr and Umar. Others minced their words and did not give any clear-cut advice. One of those belonging to the latter group was Mu`awiya ibn Abi Sufyan. There were still others who were not fit to tender any sincere advice because their suggestions were always based on selfishness. One such person was Sa`id bin Aas who said that the state of affairs then prevailing was only transitory and the only remedy for them is the unsheathing of the sword.

The conference ended without taking any unanimous decision to tackle with the situation. The reason for this was that all the governors and officers of Uthman liked his policy through which they could encroach upon the people's rights and make as much money as they could. They did not, therefore, give any sincere advice.

There were some amongst them however, who thought that their interests would be best served if they could get rid of Uthman and were, therefore, endeavouring secretly, and some of them even openly, to achive this end. Reasons for this attitude of the persons concerned will be explained later. And the most

important thing about the conference was that Marwan was keeping a very close watch on all the participants. Hence, even if some of them had made good suggestions they would have been of no use because the last word on the subject was to be that of Marwan. Uthman always acted on his advice.

Eventually rebellion broke out. The Muslims of all the countries and provinces had turned against Uthman's administration, policy, and caliphate, which were virtually in the hands of Marwan and his associates.

In the meantime some persons from Egypt approached Uthman to complain against Ibn Abi Sarah, the Governor of Egypt. Uthman heard them attentively, reproached Ibn Abi Sarah for his malpractices and promised those people that their grievances would be redressed. Then he wrote a letter to Ibn Abi Sarah asking him to mend his ways and threatened him that if he disobeyed his orders he would be punished. Marwan did not like these developments. When the complainants came out of the caliph's palace he too came out and rebuked them. Then he insisted that the caliph should ignore the promises made by him to those persons and should not take any notice of their complaints.

The Egyptians returned with the letter and handed it over to Ibn Abi Sarah. He was very much displeased on reading it and declined to obey the caliph's orders. He became so furious that he killed one of the members of the deputation. This arrogance of Ibn Abi Sarah was due to the fact that he was the foster–brother of Uthman and it was on account of this relationship that he had appointed him the Governor of Egypt.

The people of Egypt resented the treatment meted out to them by Ibn Abi Sarah. They decided to send another deputation to Madina consisting of one thousand persons. They stayed in the masjid of the Prophet and proclaimed that they would not interfere with those who remained within doors and did not take up arms against them. Thereafter some of their distinguished persons met the companions of the Prophet. They explained to them the atrocities committed by Ibn Abi Sarah including the murder of an innocent person whose only offence was that he was a member of the deputation which had waited on Uthman earlier. Some companions saw Uthman and discussed with him the state of affairs prevailing in Egypt.

Thereafter many other persons headed by Ali met Uthman in this behalf. They spoke to him in a very rational and logical manner and said: "These people only want that you should remove Ibn Abi Sarah from governorship and appoint some other person in his place. Earlier also they had complained about the murder of an innocent person. You should remove Ibn Abi Sarah from office and also take a decision on their complaint. If Ibn Abi Sarah proves to be guilty you should punish him and thus provide justice to these people".

Uthman swore before the people and assured them that he would try his best for the good of the people. He also asked them to suggest the name of a person who might be appointed Governor of Egypt in the place of Ibn Abi Sarah. The Egyptians after due deliberations suggested the name of Muhammad bin Abi

Bakr. Uthman appointed him as governor and sent with him a party consisting of the Muhajirs and the Ansar to investigate the malpractices of Ibn Abi Sarah.

Three days after their departure from Madina Muhammad bin Abi Bakr and his companions saw on the way an Ethiopian slave who was driving his camel hastily towards Egypt. These people felt surprised. They therefore stopped him and enquired of him why he was running so fast and what was the purpose of his journey. After some questioning he said: "I am the slave of the Commander of the Faithful Uthman and have been sent to go and see the Governor of Egypt". The people said to him: "The Governor of Egypt is here with us". The slave replied: "I don't mean him". When Muhammad bin Abi Bakr was informed of the matter he called for the slave and asked him as to who he was. He said: "I am a slave of the Commander of the Faithful". Then contradicting himself he said: "No, no. I am a slave of Marwan". He thus went on saying contradictory things. Then Muhammad asked him: "Where are you going?" He replied: "I am going to Egypt to see the governor". "What for?" asked Muhammad. The slave replied: "I have to convey a message to him".

Upon Muhammad asking the slave whether he was carrying a letter he replied in the negative. Thereupon Muhammad ordered his person to be searched. After a very minute search a letter was found with him which was addressed by Uthman to Abdullah Ibn Abi Sarah. Muhammad opened the letter in the presence of the Muhajirs and the Ansar who were accompanying him. It read as follows: "When Muhammad son of Abu Bakr and other such and such persons arrive in Egypt you should kill them on one pretext or another. Consider the letter which Muhammad is bringing to you as cancelled and continue to occupy your office until further orders. Imprison any person who approaches you with a complaint and then await instructions from me".

When the letter was read out all those present were bewildered and complete silence prevailed. No one could imagine that the caliph could make such a wicked plan to take the lives of his subjects including the Muhajirs and the Ansar.

Muhammad bin Abi Bakr closed the envelope again and affixed on it the seals of the Muhajirs and the Ansar. The party then decided to return to Madina and to show the letter to the companions of the Prophet. When the letter was read out in Madina before the companions, including Imam Ali all of them were deeply grieved. This conspiracy against the Muslims and Islam which was unprecedented made them furious.

The wrath of the people who were already annoyed on account of the treatment meted out to Abu Dharr, Ammar Yasir, etc. knew no bounds. A deputation headed by Ali which included Sa`d bin Abi Waqas and Ammar Yasir was formed and they went to see Uthman. They also took with them the letter, the slave and the camel on which he was mounted. The following conversation took place between Ali and Uthman:

Ali: Is this your slave?

Uthman: Yes

Ali: Is this camel also yours?

Uthman: Yes

Ali: Is the seal affixed on the letter also yours?

Uthman: Yes

Ali: Then does it mean that this letter was sent by you?

Uthman: No. I swear by God that I neither wrote this letter myself nor ordered anyone else to write it, nor sent this slave to Egypt.

The companions got the impression that Uthman was telling the truth. On further scrutiny they realized that the letter was in the hand-writing of Marwan. They, therefore, asked Uthman to call Marwan before them so that they might inquire into the matter, and ask him as to why he wrote the letter. Uthman declined to summon Marwan. Although Marwan was then present with him in the capital he did not have the moral courage to appear before those persons, admit his fault, and thus prove the innocence of Uthman.

The companions, therefore, returned to their house in consternation. They believed that Uthman could not swear falsely, but some of them said that they would consider him to be innocent only when he handed over Marwan to them so that they might question him and investigate the matter, and find out the real facts about the letter. They also said that if the letter had been written by Uthman they would depose him, but if it had been written at his behest by Marwan they would ponder over the matter and decide as to how Marwan should be dealt with. However, Uthman did not agree to surrender Marwan. The insurgents now began insisting all the more vehemently that Marwan should be handed over to them, so that they might question him and inquire into his activities. Uthman, however, flatly refused to agree to this demand.

Thereafter many developments which are recorded in the books of history took place. Imam Ali tried his level best to bring about reconciliation between the insurgents and Uthman so that bloodshed might be avoided. He saw Uthman again and suggested to him that he should come before the public and deliver a speech which should be heard by all, and in that speech he should confirm the promises made by him with the people so that they might be satisfied. He also said to Uthman: "I swear by God that all the Islamic territories have turned against you. I am afraid the people of Kufa and Basra may also come to Madina like the Egyptians and you may be obliged to ask me to cool them down".

Uthman came out of his house and delivered a speech before the gathering. He expressed his regret for his past lapses and promised that such things would not happen in future. He also promised that their demands would be met and Marwan and his associates would be cast aside.

Uthman's speech had a salutary effect. While he was speaking tears trickled from his eyes. Others also began to weep and their beards became wet with tears. When he dismounted from the pulpit of the

masjid and went home, he saw Marwan, Sa`id bin Aas, and some other members of the Umayyad Family waiting for him. They had not been present when Uthman was speaking but had become aware of what he had said. When Uthman sat down Marwan asked him: "O my chief! Should I say something or keep quiet?" Uthman said: "Say what you want to say".

Marwan then said in a reproaching manner: "You have only encouraged these people and done nothing else". Uthman replied somewhat regretfully: "I have said what I have said. I cannot take back my words". Marwan said: "The people are crowded before the gate of your house like a mountain and this is so because you have encouraged them. If one of them complains of oppression the other demands the dismissal of a governor. You have been very cruel to your caliphate. It would have been better for you if you had remained patient and quiet".

Uthman said: "I feel ashamed of going back on my words. You may, however, go and talk to them".

Having got the permission Marwan came at the gate of the house and said to those who were gathered there: "What is all this crowd? It appears that you have come to plunder the house. May your faces be blackened! Have you come to wrest the government from us? By God, if you intend doing harm to us we shall deal with you in a manner that you will never forget. Go to your houses. We cannot tolerate interference with our authority by anyone".

The people went away in despair, abusing and threatening the rulers. Some one informed Ali about the new development. As Uthman had ignored his suggestion and acted on the advice of Marwan, Ali could very well refrain from going to Uthman again and tendering him any advice. However, pity for the aged caliph, heart–felt desire for reconciliation among the Muslims, and a slight hope that Uthman might follow the path of prudence compelled him to advise Uthman once again.

When night fell and Uthman came to see Ali for consultations on the suggestion of his wife Na`ela, Ali said to him: "After making a speech from the Prophet's pulpit you went home and then Marwan came out and abused the people. Thereafter what is left to be done and what can I do for you?"

Uthman cursed himself much for his lapse. Ali then said to him: "I swear by God that I have endeavoured more than anyone else to keep the people away from you. However, whenever I suggest to you something which I hope will please you Marwan intervenes. And unfortunately you accept what he says and ignore what I suggest". Ali was quite correct in saying this because this time also Marwan had spoiled the case.

The insurgents began insisting on their demands once again. They wanted the fulfilment of all the promises made with them. They also demanded that Marwan, who was the root–cause of all the mischief, should be surrendered to them so that they might take revenge on him. However, Uthman's attitude hardened and he sternly refused to hand over Marwan to them. The insurgents also became adamant. The disturbance and rebellion became acute and the insurgents besieged the house of Uthman.

In fact the insurgents did not want to harm Uthman. All they desired was that he should repent for his lapses and abdicate. This is proved by the fact that a man named Nayyar bin Ayaz who was one of the companions of the Prophet took his place in the first row of the insurgents and said to Uthman loudly: "You should abdicate and I assure you that you will remain unhurt". While he was saying this Kathir bin Salat Kandi, who was a supporter of Uthman and was in his house at that time shot an arrow and killed Nayyar bin Ayaz. The insurgents cried: "Hand over the murderer of Ibn Ayaz to us". Uthman replied: "How can I surrender to you a man who is defending me?"

The insurgents attacked the gate of the house which was closed immediately. They then put it on fire and their archers began to shower arrows on the caliph's palace.

Eventually Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr and his two companions entered the house from the side of the house of Muhammad ibn Abi Khurram Ansari. When they reached near him they found his wife Na`ela with him. The two companions of Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr attacked him with a sharp weapon and put him to death. 1 Then they escaped through the way they had entered the house. Na`ela cried: "The people have assassinated the Commander of the Faithful!"

Uthman met his death in this manner. The people who were responsible for his murder were of two kinds. To one group belonged those who became furious for the sake of truth. They asked Uthman to repent of his lapses and when he declined to do so they besieged his house and killed him. Amongst them were included the people of the Hijaz, Egypt and Iraq and all the Islamic cities. To the second group belonged those who were mad after the war booty. With them there was a leader who was obeyed and these people left Uthman in the lurch. We have already written about the persons belonging to the first group. As regards the second group we shall speak about them in the chapter entitled. "The greatest conspiracy" because these people are closely concerned with the treatment which was meted out to Ali and the fraud and deception to which he was subjected.

1. Although it is said that Ali tried to save Uthman and sent his two sons Hasan and Husayn to guard the gate of his house but the factual position is that Ali was not present in Madina when Uthman was killed and the assertions made in this behalf are not correct.

Refuting a similar narration Allama Haithmi says: "It is quite clear that this narration is not authentic. Ali was not present in Madina either when Uthman's house was besieged or when he was killed. (Majma` al–Zawaid, Vol.7, p.63). Uthman had himself asked Ali to go to his estate at Yanb`u so that people might not suggest his name for the caliphate. Such a request had already been made many times as has been mentioned by Ali in Nahj al–Balaghah: "Uthman treats me like a camel which carries water to and fro. At times he tells me that I should go to Yanb`u. When I go there he calls me back to solve some problems. And when I have relieved him of his difficulties he again asks me to go back to Yanb`u".

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