

Saqifa and the Logic of History

In the introduction to this book, I had called attention of the reader to the tendency and the readiness of most of the Orientalists, to accept, at face value, many of the false statements and spurious claims which were put into circulation, long ago, by the historians who were on the “payroll” of the governments of Damascus and Baghdad – both heirs to the government of Saqifa.

There is, for example, a consensus among them that Muhammad Mustafa, the Messenger of God, did not appoint his own successor nor did he tell the Muslims how they ought to select their leaders for the government which he had founded; and he died leaving everything, apparently, to their resources and discretion.

Some examples of the uncritical acceptance by Orientalists of this claim, were given in Chapter 45. Following is one more example:

“Mohammed died at Medina on June 8, 632, without leaving any instructions for the future government of the Muslim community...”

This statement occurs in the article captioned *Caliphate*, on page 643, volume 4, 14th edition (1973) of the Encyclopedia Britannica. It is a patent piece of propaganda but the Encyclopedia Britannica, that great disseminator of knowledge, has swallowed the line. It is the most divisive historical canard in Islam, but surprisingly, it goes unchallenged, century after century.

The Orientalists may not challenge this time-honored falsehood but it nevertheless raises some fundamental questions. These questions which relate to the ethos of Islam and the political philosophy of Muhammad, the Apostle of God, are listed below.

All of them rest on the premise that Muhammad did *not* (repeat not) appoint his own successor nor did he give any instructions to his companions for the future government of the Muslim community. Therefore, when he died, his umma (people) found itself in a state of utter bewilderment.

1. Did Muhammad, the Messenger of God, and the Founder of the Government of Medina, consider himself qualified to appoint his own successor or not?

2. What could be the possible, hypothetical reason(s) for Muhammad's failure to appoint his own successor?
3. Since Muhammad did not appoint his own successor, did he charge the Muslim community with the task of electing or selecting its own leader?
4. Since the Muslim community lacked guidance for the selection of a leader, did the companions of Muhammad, by their common consent, and before appointing a leader (or even after appointing a leader) prepare a set of rules or guidelines to which they adhered (subsequently)?
5. What was the attitude and the conduct of the principal companions of Muhammad toward the leadership of the Muslim community after his death?
6. What was the practice of Muhammad in regard to the selection and appointment of officers?
7. What is Quran's verdict on Muhammad's practice?
8. What did Muhammad actually do about his succession?
9. What actually happened after the death of Muhammad?
10. What importance does the question of succession have in history in general?

An attempt has been made to answer these questions as follows:

Question 1

Did Muhammad, the Messenger of God, and the Founder of the Government of Medina, consider himself qualified to appoint his own successor or not?

Answer

No one would suggest, least of all a Muslim, that Muhammad was not qualified to appoint his own successor. A Muslim cannot imagine that the Apostle lacked the ability to select a successor for himself.

The Arabs were a notoriously arrogant, ignorant, turbulent and lawless breed. Muhammad promulgated the laws of God among them, and he compelled them to respect and to obey those laws. He created a political organization called the State or the Government of Medina. In that State, his powers were unlimited. He chose all its functionaries, civil and military. He could appoint an officer or he could dismiss him, arbitrarily, and without giving any reason(s) to anyone for doing so.

Muhammad's pattern of conduct was consistently consistent. He was, in fact, so consistent that he became almost "predictable." All Muslims knew that he would select and appoint capable men for all key

positions, and they also knew that he would do so without consulting them. He did not even delegate authority to any of his companions to appoint officers. Muhammad, the Apostle of God, alone was qualified to select and to appoint his own successor, and no one else could have done it for him.

Question 2

What could be the possible, hypothetical reason or reasons for Muhammad's failure to appoint his own successor?

Answer

If Muhammad died without nominating his heir and successor, he is laid open to the charge of dereliction of duty. Whoever claims that he did not nominate his successor, is suggesting that he launched the frail vessel of Islam on turbulent seas without a compass, without a rudder, without an anchor and without a captain, and left it completely at the mercy of wind and wave.

It is to presuppose that he was unmindful of the most vital interests of the Muslim umma, and that he was heedless of the welfare of the generations of Muslims yet to come. Such "heedlessness" on his part could have had three possible reasons, viz.,

(a) All members of the Muslim umma had become intelligent, wise, God-fearing and God-loving; and each of them had acquired perfect knowledge of the interpretation of Qur'an. Also, every individual was equal, in every respect, of every other individual. It was impossible for Satan to tempt or to mislead any of them.

Therefore, Muhammad could leave the duty of selecting and appointing his successor to blind chance. He could take comfort in the thought that whoever was made the leader of the community by the drift of events, would be the right man; and the government of Medina and the community of the faithful, both could be entrusted to his care.

But such was not and could not be the case. It is impossible even for two individuals to be identical in ability, character and temperament. Muhammad knew that all the Arabs who had accepted Islam, were not necessarily sincere Muslims. Among them, there was a very large number of "hypocrites" or "nominal Muslims."

Their presence in Medina is attested by Qur'an itself. They professed Islam outwardly but at heart they remained pagans. They were the enemies of Muhammad, of Islam, and of the State he had founded. They constituted a "fifth column" of paganism in Medina, ready to seize the first opportunity to subvert Islam. If Muhammad were to leave the new State without a head, he would, in effect, place in the hands of these ideological saboteurs, the very weapons with which they would destroy it.

Muhammad knew all this, and he died, not suddenly, but after a protracted illness. He had abundant

time to attend to the important affairs of State the most important of which was the selection and nomination of his own successor. One thing he could not do, was to abandon his government, which was the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth, to the care of some unknown favorite of fortune or some swashbuckling adventurer.

(b) Mohammed did not really love Islam. He was animated only by personal ambition. He wanted to bring the Arabian Peninsula under his control, and Islam was the means through which he succeeded in doing so. But once he realized his ambition he did not care if after his death, the government which he had founded, held together or went to pieces. He did not care if, after his death, the Arabs remained faithful to Islam or they relapsed into idolatry and barbarism.

What can be more absurd than to imagine that Muhammad did not love Islam? In Makkah, he endured torture, hunger, thirst, privation, indignity and exile, all for the sake of Islam. Once in Medina, he was called upon to make even greater sacrifices for Islam. Two of his uncles, three of his cousins, two adopted sons, and one foster brother, and numerous friends were killed in the defense of Islam.

In due course, he became the sovereign of Medina but nothing changed in his lifestyle. Many members of the new community were destitute, and he fed them. He fed them his own food so that quite frequently, he and his children had to go hungry. This went on year after year. He made all these and countless other sacrifices only to make Islam viable and strong.

In Makkah, the Quraysh had offered Muhammad power, wealth and beauty if he would abandon his mission as Prophet of Islam. But he spurned them all. In spurning them, he was spurning “ambition.”

Perhaps it did not even occur to him that there was such a thing as ambition. The mainspring of his work for Islam was only his love for it. This love sustained him from beginning to end. He did have one “ambition” in life, and that was to see Islam become everlasting. He realized this “ambition” since we know that Islam is everlasting.

(C) Mohammed did not appoint his successor because he was afraid of opposition. Muhammad was an absolute stranger to fear. He challenged paganism at a time when he was all alone in the whole world, and that whole world was seething with hostility toward him. Paganism spent all its power to break him but it failed. He broke it.

By dint of personal courage, he triumphed over a whole world. In two out of the five major campaigns of Islam, the Muslims were defeated, and they fled from the battlefield. But he stood firm and did not flee, and in fact, became the rallying point of the fugitives. His presence of mind revived the courage of the Muslims, and they returned to the battle.

After the battle of Hunayn, all Arabia was at the feet of Muhammad, and no tribe or even a coalition of tribes could challenge his power. His power, within the peninsula, was supreme. The question of his being afraid of anyone's opposition, therefore, does not arise.

Question 3

Since Muhammad did not appoint his own successor, did he charge the Muslim community with the task of electing or selecting its own leader?

Answer

The appointment of the Chief Executive of the community of the faithful was an important matter. Muhammad realized its importance. But for some unknown reason(s), he refrained from appointing him. The only possible reason that he did not appoint him can be that he charged the community with this duty.

But neither Abu Bakr and Umar nor the latter-day Sunni historians, ever made such a claim. They never claimed, for example, that Muhammad Mustafa said:

“O Muslims! I do not wish to appoint my own successor,”

or

“I cannot appoint my own successor,”

or

“I lack the ability to appoint my own successor. Since I lack this ability, I charge you with this responsibility. When I die, you elect or select a leader for yourselves.”

No one has ever tried to attribute any such statement to Muhammad Mustafa. Muhammad Mustafa did not give his companions the authority to appoint even a petty official much less the future head of the State of Islam!

Question 4

Since the Muslim community lacked instructions for the selection of a leader, did the companions of Muhammad, by their common consent, and before selecting a leader (or even after selecting a leader) prepare a set of rules or guidelines to which they subsequently adhered?

Answer

The companions of Muhammad did not prepare, at any time, a set of rules to guide them in selecting a leader. In this matter, they adhered to the rule of expediency. First they appointed a leader, and then they formulated a “rule” or a “principle” for his selection.

The Muslims “appointed” the first four, the “rightly-guided” caliphs. The appointment of each of them led to the discovery of a new “rule” or a new “principle.” These four “principles” were duly incorporated in the political thought of the Muslims.

But soon a new caliph came to power in Syria. His rise led to the discovery of a new “principle” known as “Might is Right.” This “principle” made the first four “principles” obsolete. From this time, caliphate was to be the prize of the candidate who could use brute force more brutally than his opponents. This “principle” has found the most universal acceptance among the Muslims throughout their long history.

Question 5

What was the attitude and conduct of the principal companions of Muhammad toward the leadership of the Muslim community after his death?

Answer

The Sunni Muslims say that Abu Bakr and Umar were the principal companions of Muhammad Mustafa. It were both of them, the principal companions, who seized the government of Medina at a time when Ali and all members of Banu Hashim were busy with his obsequies.

As soon as the Prophet died, his principal companions gathered in the outhouse of Saqifa to claim leadership of the community. This leadership, in their opinion, was so important that they could not pause even to bury their dead master and benefactor. The naked struggle for power erupted within minutes of the death of the Prophet. Zamakhshari, one of the most authoritative Sunni scholars and historians, writes in this connection:

“It was the consensus of all the companions that after the death of the Prophet they had to appoint his successor immediately. They believed that doing so was more important than even to attend the funeral of their master. It was this importance that prompted Abu Bakr and Umar to address the crowd of Muslims.

Abu Bakr said: ‘O people, listen to me. Those of you who worshipped Muhammad, let them know that he is dead; but those who worshipped God, let them know that He is alive, and will never die. Since Muhammad is dead, you should now decide who should be your future leader.’ They said: ‘You are right; we must have a new leader.’

We Sunnis and Mu'tazilis, believe that the community of the Muslims must at no time be without a leader. Sheer logic dictates this. Also, the Apostle of God had enacted laws, and had promulgated orders about the defense of Islam, the defense of Medina and the defense of Arabia. After his death, there ought to be someone to enforce his laws, and to execute his orders.”

From the foregoing testimony, it is obvious that the companions of the Prophet realized how important it

was for his *umma* to have a leader. They knew that if there was no one to implement the laws and orders promulgated by him, his *umma* would fall into disarray.

The situation reeks with irony. The companions were convinced that it was vitally important for the Muslim *umma* to have a chief executive but there was one man who was not convinced that it was important, and he was Muhammad! After all, if he were, he would have given it a chief executive. He was the only man to whom it did not occur that there ought to be someone to implement the laws and orders which he himself had promulgated.

The principal companions did not attend his funeral. For them, much more important than attending the funeral of their master, was to find a new leader. The problem was quite complex but they “solved” it by appointing one out of themselves, i.e., Abu Bakr, as the new leader of the Muslims.

Two years later, Abu Bakr lay dying. On his deathbed, he appointed Umar his successor, and the leader of the Muslims. In appointing Umar as his successor, he not only knew that he was discharging his most important duty but he was also aware that if he did not, he would be answerable to God for his failure to do so.

“Asma, the wife of Abu Bakr, says that when her husband was on his deathbed, Talha came to see him, and said: ‘O Abu Bakr! you have made Umar the amir of the Muslims, and you know well that he was such a tyrant while you were the khalifa. But now that he will have a free hand, I do not know how he will oppress the Muslims.

In a short time you will die, and you will find yourself in the presence of God. At that moment you will have to answer Him for your action. Are you ready with an answer?’ Abu Bakr sat up in the bed, and said: ‘O Talha! are you trying to frighten me? Now listen that when I meet my Lord, I will say that I have appointed the best man as the amir of the Muslim *umma*.’“

Abu Bakr added that his knowledge of and long experience with Umar had convinced him that no one in the Muslim *umma* could carry the burden of khilafat as well as he (Umar) could. He was, therefore, confident that his answer would satisfy God.

Abu Bakr knew that he would have to vindicate himself in the Tribunal of God for appointing Umar the ruler of the Muslims. He was convinced that he could not have chosen anyone better than Umar to be his successor. And Talha's anxiety for Abu Bakr's accountability to God, only points up his own conscientiousness about his duty “to command others to do good and to forbid them to do wrong.”

Irony again! All companions were idolaters before Muhammad, the blessed Messenger of God, converted them to Islam. Now, as devout Muslims, they were aware that they were answerable to God regarding their obligation to appoint his successor. But curiously, incredibly, there was one man who apparently had no awareness that, some day, he too might have to stand in the Tribunal of God, and be questioned regarding his obligation to appoint his successor.

He was Muhammad, God's Own Messenger! Muslims believe that Abu Bakr was ready to defend his action in appointing his successor, with an answer which he knew, would satisfy God. Do they also believe that Muhammad, their Prophet, was ready, to defend his failure to appoint his own successor, with an answer that God would find satisfactory?

After the death of Abu Bakr, his successor, Umar bin al-Khattab, ruled as khalifa for ten years. During the later years of his life, he was often seen engrossed in deep thought. Whenever questioned by his friends what he was thinking about, he said: "I do not know what to do with the *umma* of Muhammad, and how to appoint an amir who would lead it after my death."

Umar obviously considered appointing his successor a matter of great importance since he was devoting so much of his time and attention to it.

Umar's anxiety regarding the leadership of the *umma* after his own death, was shared by Ayesha, the widow of the Prophet. Tabari, the historian, reports the following in this connection:

"When Umar was dying, he sent his son to Ayesha seeking her permission to be buried near the Apostle and Abu Bakr. Ayesha said: 'With the greatest pleasure,' and she added: 'Give my salam to your father, and tell him that he must not abandon the Muslims without a leader otherwise there would be chaos after his death.'"

Ayesha was showing great solicitude for the welfare of the Muslims just as she should have. When Umar was dying, she counseled him not to abandon the Muslim *umma* without a leader, or else, she warned, chaos would follow his death. It is amazing that Ayesha never counseled her own husband to appoint a leader for the Muslims, and she did not warn him that chaos would follow his death if he left them leaderless.

But Ayesha, the daughter of Abu Bakr, had good reasons to be "discreet" with her husband, and did not bring up, for discussion with him, the subject of the appointment of a successor, at any time.

Question 6

What was the practice of Muhammad Mustafa in regard to the selection and appointment of officers?

Answer

During the last ten years of his life, Muhammad organized more than eighty expeditions. He sent out many of them under the command of some officer; others he led in person.

Whenever Muhammad sent out an expedition, he appointed one of his companions as its captain. He ordered the rankers to obey him, and he made him (the captain) answerable to himself. When the expedition returned to Medina, he debriefed the captain. It never so happened that he told the members

of an expedition or a reconnaissance party that they had to elect or select their own captain.

In the event when Muhammad was himself leading an expedition out of Medina, he appointed a governor for the city, and made him responsible for maintaining law and order during his own absence. He never told the citizens that in his absence, it was their duty to elect or select a governor for themselves.

In 630 when Muhammad captured Makkah, and incorporated it into the new State, he appointed an administrator for that city, and he did so without consulting either the Makkans or his own companions.

Montgomery Watt

The extent of Muhammad's autocratic powers in his last two or three years is illustrated by his appointment of 'agents' to act on his behalf in various areas, and indeed by the whole matter of administrative appointments.

From the beginning Muhammad had appointed men to perform various functions for which he was responsible. Thus he appointed commanders for the expeditions where he was not present in person. Another regular appointment from the earliest times was that of a Deputy in Medina when Muhammad was absent from the city. (*Muhammad at Medina, 1966*)

Maxime Rodinson

He (the Prophet) either appointed a leader or took command himself. He seems to have had a gift for military as he had for political strategy. He delegated certain of his functions to individuals who acted as his personal agents. Whenever, for example, he left Medina, he used to leave a representative behind him. (*Mohammed translated by Anne Carter, 1971*)

Such was the policy and practice of Muhammad, the Messenger of God, in selecting and appointing his officers, and there was never a deviation from it at any time.

Question 7

What is Qur'an's verdict on Muhammad's practice?

Answer

According to Qur'an, the actions of Muhammad are the actions of God Himself. The Muslim reader is invited to reflect on the meaning of the following verses (of Qur'an):

When thou threwest (a handful of dust), it was not thy act, but God's. (Chapter 8; verse 17)

Verily those who plight their fealty to thee, do no less than plight their fealty to God; the hand of

God is over their hands: then anyone who violates His oath, does so to the harm of his own soul, and anyone who fulfills what he has covenanted with God, – God will soon grant him a great reward. (Chapter 48; verse 10)

All Muslims believe that whatever Muhammad said or did, was inspired by Heaven. In other words, he was the instrument through which the commandments of Heaven were executed.

As noted before, Muhammad, the Apostle of God, did not share his authority to appoint a governor for a city or a commander for a military expedition, with anyone else. He and he alone exercised it from beginning to end.

Much more important than the appointment of a governor or a commander, was the selection and appointment of his own successor, and the future sovereign of the Muslim umma. There was no reason for him to reverse his own policy and practice, and to abandon his whole umma leaderless. His conduct was consistent, and following is the testimony of Qur'an on it:

No change wilt thou find in God's way (of dealing): No turning off wilt thou find in God's way (of dealing). (Chapter 35; verse 43)

(Such has been) the practice (approved) of God already in the past: No change wilt thou find in the practice (approved) of God (Chapter 48; verse 23)

There was no change in the practice of God's Messenger. He did not abandon the Muslims so they would be like sheep without a shepherd. He selected his cousin, Ali ibn Abi Talib, to be his successor, and the future sovereign of the Muslim umma. He introduced Ali to the umma as its future sovereign, at the Banquet of Dhu'l-'Asheera, just after the first public proclamation of his mission as the Last and the Greatest Messenger of God upon earth.

Question 8

What did Muhammad actually do about his succession?

Answer

Muhammad created a new state – the Islamic State. In creating the Islamic State, his purpose was to establish the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. This he did with the support and collaboration of his cousin, Ali ibn Abi Talib. He picked out Ali among all his companions, to succeed him, as head of the Islamic State, and as the Sovereign of all Muslims.

To appoint Ali as his successor, Muhammad did not wait until he had actually created the Islamic State, and had consolidated it as the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. He declared Ali to be his successor at a time when the State did not have any existence. He declared Ali to be his successor at the same time

when he declared that God had sent him as His Last Messenger to mankind.

Muhammad designated Ali ibn Abi Talib as his successor at the Banquet of Dhu'l-'Asheera in Makkah when the latter was only thirteen years old; and he spent a lifetime in grooming him for the tremendous responsibilities ahead of him.

Twenty years later, in the vast plain of Khumm, near Ghadeer, Muhammad gave finishing touches to his work, and invited his *umma*, at a mass rally, to meet its future sovereign. In doing so, he complied with a commandment of Heaven enshrined in verse 70 of the fifth chapter of Qur'an; and he fulfilled an obligation toward his *umma*. His *umma* had a right to know who would lead it after his (Muhammad's) death.

Muhammad Mustafa did not appoint Ali his successor merely to expound or to interpret the laws of Islam. He appointed Ali his successor to implement and to enforce those laws. In other words, he appointed Ali to run the government of Islam.

If there is a law, there must be someone to enforce it – in the city–state of Medina – as elsewhere. The mere act of passing a law does not mean anything. By itself, a law cannot guarantee the safety, welfare and happiness of man.

After a law is enacted, it is necessary also to create executive power to enforce it. If a law cannot be enforced, it is nothing more than a piece of paper. If a government lacks executive authority, it cannot even be called a government. Therefore, when Islam enacted laws, it also created executive authority.

In the time of Muhammad, the Apostle of God, laws were not only expounded and promulgated; they were also implemented and enforced. He implemented and enforced them.

Muhammad appointed Ali to implement the laws of Islam, and to enforce God's ordinances as revealed to him in Qur'an. He appointed Ali to exercise executive authority over the Muslims, after his own death.

Question 9

What actually happened after the death of Muhammad Mustafa?

Answer

After the death of Muhammad Mustafa, the blessed one, the Ansar, gathered in the outhouse of Saqifa to select a leader. Abu Bakr, Umar and Abu Obaida – the three Muhajireen – paid them a visit. They told the Ansar that since Muhammad had not designated his own successor, they had to appoint someone to fill that position. Their action, they said, was not only justified but also was absolutely necessary, if only to save the *umma* from anarchy and chaos.

The three Muhajireen engaged in an animated debate with the Ansar in Saqifa. The theme of the debate was: 'Should the successor of Muhammad and the ruler of the Muslims be a Muhajir (Makkan) or an Ansari (Medinan).'¹ The fiery orators discussed this theme threadbare.

Although there were some other important issues which were not altogether irrelevant to the debate, such as the wishes of God and His Messenger, the qualifications required in the candidate(s) for the vacant throne of Arabia, and the interests of Islam and the Muslim *umma*, they were not discussed. These issues were not on the "agenda" of the meeting in Saqifa. The orators, therefore, did not digress from their theme.

Eventually, with skill, patience and ingenuity, the three Muhajireen ironed out the problem, or, rather, they "improvised" a solution to it.

Francesco Gabrieli

At the tumultuous council held in the headquarters of the Banu Saidah in Medina, Omar, almost as a surprise, imposed Abu Bakr as khalifa or successor of the Envoy of God. Like so many events and institutions, *the caliphate was born of an improvisation. (The Arabs – A Compact History, 1963)*

Caliphate or the leadership of the Muslim *umma* is the most important political institution in all Islam. In fact, the physical existence of Islam hinges upon the caliph or the leader of the *umma*. It's, therefore, incredible that it was left to nothing better than an *improvisation!*

It should occasion no surprise that the Muslim world has been repeatedly deluged in blood over the question of succession and leadership. Wars, civil wars, revolutions, conflicts, subversion and anarchy became inevitable when the *umma* chose *improvisation* in Saqifa, in preference to the heavenly design and the inspired "blueprint" of Muhammad Mustafa, for an orderly and peaceful transfer of power from himself to his successor.

The protagonists of Saqifa say that Umar's action was prompted by his desire to prevent leadership of the *umma* from forever becoming the monopoly of one family – specifically, the family of Muhammad Mustafa. They say that such a monopoly of power would have been a "disaster" for Islam. This convoluted argument of the Sunni historians has become a regular latter-day Greek chorus intoning doom. But no one among them has ever explained how.

If after the death of Muhammad, the leadership of the Muslims had become the "monopoly" of his own family, would the Arabs have abjured Islam, and relapsed into idolatry? Or, would the Persians and/or the Romans, have invaded and overrun Arabia, and exterminated all Muslims?

In the perceptions of Abu Bakr and Umar, there was only one way of "saving" the *umma* of Muhammad from "disaster," and that was by blackballing his family, and by appropriating his government for themselves!

Umar was very anxious that caliphate should not become hereditary in any one family, and that it ought to keep circulating among the Muslims so that “every Arab boy may have the opportunity to become the khalifa.” And yet, notwithstanding all the vision and foresight of Umar, caliphate did become hereditary within sixteen years of his own death.

But it became hereditary not in the family of Muhammad but in the family of his arch-enemies – the crypto-pagans of Makkah – the children of Abu Sufyan and Hinda. Thus Umar's foresight did not extend beyond sixteen years *unless* it was his purpose that caliphate should become hereditary in the house of Abu Sufyan. If it was, then it must be conceded that he was truly remarkable for his foresight.

Abu Bakr and Umar achieved a prodigy of extemporization in Saqifa.

Commenting on the turmoil following the death of Muhammad, and giving his reasons why his cousin, Ali, was blackballed from caliphate, Sir John Glubb writes:

The Arabs have never been willing to pay respect to pomp, rank, or hereditary privileges or titles. (*The Great Arab Conquests, 1963*)

This analysis, by the historian, of the Arab character, runs counter to the evidence of history. The Seljuks, the Mamlukes and the Ottoman Turks ruled the Arabs for many centuries. The Arabs submitted to them like sheep. They, in fact, accepted the axiom that the Turk was to command, and they (the Arabs) were to obey. No one can tell how much longer the Turkish domination of the Arab lands would have lasted if the British and the French had not put an end to it.

In their total and abject surrender to the Turks, the Arabs were paying respect precisely to “pomp, rank, or hereditary privileges or titles.” For many centuries, the Turks ruled the Arab countries with an iron hand, and no one ever heard the faintest murmur of protest from the Arabs.

Actually, the Arabs are no different from any other people including the British, to which the historian himself belongs. If others pay respect to pomp, rank or privileges and titles, Arabs pay respect to them. It is not clear why Sir John Glubb is eager to make so many sacred cows out of the Arabs!

The same writer further says:

“Hereditary was never admitted by the Arabs as a sufficient basis for succession. In the selection of ordinary chiefs, the most suitable candidate of the ruling family was normally chosen. In the selection of a khalif, the most natural choice, and that which in theory was made in the cases of the first four, was that of the most suitable Muslim leader.

In practice the difficulty of selecting the best candidate and the resulting danger of civil war often resulted in the use of primogeniture in later Muslim dynasties. The Arabs, however, have never adopted the principle of the automatic succession of the eldest son.” (*The Great Arab Conquests, 1963*)

The historian, it appears, is, once again, at odds with facts. When he says that heredity was never admitted by the Arabs as a sufficient basis for succession, he ought to make it clear, that the Arabs he is referring to, belonged to the generation of the Prophet himself, and not to those which came after it.

Within thirty years of the death of the Prophet, the same Arabs were prostrate at the feet of the Syrian khalifa, and they admitted heredity as a sufficient basis for succession without batting an eye. Not only did they acknowledge Yazid, the son of Muawiya, as their lawful khalifa, but for the next 600 years, i.e., until the extinction of the khilafat itself in 1258, they never raised a question regarding the right of the son of a khalifa to succeed his father.

Geoffrey Lewis

With the fifth caliph, the powerful Mu'awiya (661 – 680), the office (caliphate) had become hereditary. His Umayyad dynasty was supplanted by the Abbasids in 750. (*Turkey, 1965*)

Dr. Hamid-ud-Din

“From the time of Muawiya, the throne of caliphate became the hereditary right of the Umayyads. Every khalifa appointed his own son or some other relative as his successor, and the Muslims meekly acknowledged him as their khalifa, and did not ask any questions.” (*History of Islam, 1971, page 364, published by Ferozsons Ltd., Karachi and Lahore, Pakistan*).

The only Arabs who did not admit heredity as a basis for succession, were the companions of Muhammad himself. Their reason for not admitting heredity as a basis for succession, was pragmatic. If they had admitted heredity as a basis for succession, then there was no way for them to become khalifas.

In the Shia theory of government, heredity is not considered as a basis for succession. According to the Shia theory, the right to designate his own successor, belonged exclusively to Muhammad Mustafa, and not to his companions; and he designated Ali. He did not designate Ali because of propinquity, but because it was the command of God to him to do so.

When the Arabs refused to acknowledge the designation by Muhammad Mustafa of Ali ibn Abi Talib as his successor, they were not exactly upholding a “principle.” Their refusal was only a gambit to take the locus of power and authority out of the house of Muhammad. Once this “principle” had served its purpose, they – the Arabs – were the first to ditch it.

Laura Veccia Vaglieri

“Towards the end of his reign, Muawiya, using all his diplomatic skill, managed to persuade the notables of the empire to recognize his son Yazid as heir to the throne, leaving untouched the rule that homage must be paid at the moment of succession.

In this way he achieved a compromise. Theoretically, the will of the electors was respected, since it was admitted that they could reject the heir appointed by the reigning sovereign (in actual fact, only four or five notables refused to accede to Muawiya's request), but in reality it implied the abolition of the elective system, which had been the cause of so much trouble in the past, and introduced hereditary succession. Muawiya's innovation was followed by all the caliphs who came after him, and enabled the Umayyads to retain power for 90 years, and the Abbasids for five centuries." (*Cambridge History of Islam, 1970*)

Muawiya junked the "principle" of election which had never been anything more than a farce anyway.

And yet, in all this crooked business of "electing" or "nominating" or "selecting" a ruler for the Muslims, there was one "principle" at work. It was the "principle" of excluding the members of the family of Muhammad Mustafa, the blessed Messenger of God, from the locus of power and authority. Saqifa, in fact, was a monolithic, unified and integrated movement of the principal companions and their proxies to exclude the Banu Hashim from the government of Islam.

If there was any consistency either in the deeds of the first three khalifas, or, of the majority of the companions, or of the Umayyads and the Abbasids, it was in the application of this "principle."

On this point, there was consensus among them all. It was the denominator in, and the linchpin of, the planned and coordinated policy of all of them. Even to the dynasties which were to follow the Umayyads and the Abbasids, the Saqifa signals were strong, clear and unmistakable.

They faithfully, almost fanatically, toed the line of "policy" formulated in the outhouse of Saqifa. The centerpiece of that policy was blatant antagonism to Ali ibn Abi Talib, the first cousin of Muhammad, and to the Banu Hashim, the clan of Muhammad.

Question 10

What importance does the question of succession have in history in general?

Answer

The question of succession or transfer of power from one incumbent to another, has been one of the most complex and thorny problems of human history. In most cases, the problem has been solved in a no-holds barred struggle, and power has been the prize of the most ruthless of the contenders. The fact that a nation has a constitutional government, is no guarantee that it will be immune to the struggle for power.

The struggle of Stalin and Trotsky after the death of Lenin in 1924, and the liquidation of Beria after the death of Stalin in 1953, are two out of many of its examples from current history.

On countless occasions in history, the question of succession has triggered civil war in which countless

men and women have perished. Many of us may be tempted to boast that we have outlived that barbaric past in which thousands of men and women were killed before the question was settled who was going to be the ruler. But there is no reason to be complacent. The struggle for power can erupt anywhere anytime just as inevitably in the future as it did in the past. A sub-surface struggle perhaps simmers all the time but it actually comes to a boil when the head of a state dies.

Geoffrey Blainey

“A search for causes common to many wars of the eighteenth century reveals one obvious clue. The death of a king was often the herald of war. The link is embodied in the popular names given to four important wars.

Thus there was a War of the Spanish succession, and a war of the Polish succession, and they were followed by wars of the Austrian and then the Bavarian succession. Their names persuasively imply that the question of who should succeed to a vacant throne was the vital cause of the wars.

These four wars of succession were not the only wars which were preceded by and influenced by the death of a monarch. In 1700 the rulers of Saxony, Denmark and Russia went to war against Sweden whose boy ruler, Charles XII, had not long been on the throne. In 1741 Swedish troops invaded Russia whose tsar was one year old.

In 1786 the death of Frederick the Great of Prussia prepared the way for the Austro-Russian campaign against Turkey in the following year. And in March 1792 the death of the Emperor Leopold II in Vienna was one of the events that heralded the French Declaration of war against Austria in the following month.

In all eight wars of the 18th-century had been heralded and influenced by the death of a monarch; and those wars constituted most of the major wars of that century. Nor did those death-watch wars entirely vanish after 1800.

Thus two wars between Prussia and Denmark were preceded by the death of Danish kings, the American Civil War followed the departure of a president in 1861, the First World War was preceded by the assassination of the Austrian heir.” (*The Causes of War, 1973*)

The struggle for power is a permanent feature of human history. In the past, on many occasions the death of a king was the signal for uprisings in his own country. If he had held the country together with a firm hand, his death was considered to be an opportunity to strike at the central government, and to assert the independence of a dissident region.

On other occasions, the death of a king was an invitation to ambitious neighbors to invade his country in the hope that the new ruler, lacking experience, would not be able to offer effective resistance to them, and they would capture new territory for themselves.

The history of the Muslim dynasties is soaked in the blood of the Muslims. In the past, whenever a king or sultan died, his sons and brothers flew at each other's throats to slit them. Sometimes minors and even infants were not spared if they were in the direct line of descent from the sovereign, and therefore, were potential sources of trouble. At the death of a ruler, outbreak of wars and civil wars, and rebellions in the provinces, were considered normal.

Many modern historians who have studied Islam's political theory and practicability, and have tried to correlate causes and effects, have attributed the intra-Muslim conflicts and wars to the "failure" of Muhammad Mustafa to appoint his own successor. There is a veiled hint or equivocal reflection in their works that he was "responsible" for them. But some other reflections are not so veiled or equivocal.

Edward Jurji

The state of war, existing between the Prophet and his kinsmen, was brought to an end in the total victory of the Islamic forces climaxed by Muhammad's triumphant entry into the city of his birth to destroy the monuments of idolatry. Prophetic though his career remained, Muhammad had increasingly come to wield the sword of a militant ruler and to head the affairs of an aggressive political state, conscious of its role in history.

When his death occurred on June 8, 632, he bequeathed to his followers a religio-political heritage ever burdened and harassed for many centuries with the task of finding an acceptable caliph (successor) to fill the highest office in Islam. The caliphate (succession) as an issue, aggravated by the uniform silence of the Prophet on the subject of who was to follow him, became the root of much evil, the chief internal misfortune of Islam, the origin of rifts and schisms, and a sad patrimony of tears and blood. (*The Great Religions of the Modern World, 1953*)

According to this historian, it was the "uniform silence" of the Prophet on the subject of who was to follow him, which became "the root of much evil, the chief internal misfortune of Islam, the origin of rifts and schisms, and a sad patrimony of tears and blood."

Is this the "legacy" that Muhammad left for his *umma*? If the modern Muslims still believe the Saqifa myth that Muhammad did not appoint his own successor, then they will have to agree with the judgment of this historian. But if they agree with his judgment, they will have to disagree with Al-Qur'an al-Majid which has called Muhammad a "mercy for all the worlds."

Sir John Glubb

The Prophet died without leaving any instructions regarding the successor. No sooner was it known that he was dead than the people of Medina gathered together and decided to elect their own chief. Rival claimants to the khilafate were to give rise to endless Muslim civil wars, which might perhaps have been avoided if Mohammed had laid down rules for the succession. (*A Short History of the Arab Peoples, 1969*)

If the modern Muslims, after reading this verdict of a historian, still insist that their Prophet did not appoint his own successor, then they will have to concede that all the bloody civil wars of their history, were a “gift” to them from him – from him who was the embodiment of mercy.

Are wars, especially, civil wars, a curse or a blessing? If they are a curse – and there is no greater curse on the face of earth than wars – would they believe that their Prophet was the Bringer to them of Islam – of Peace?

Actually, one of the aims of Muhammad, as God's Messenger, was to obliterate war, and to restore genuine peace to the world. War is the most unmitigated curse, and peace is one of God's greatest blessings. He was the Apostle of Peace. In fact, the movement which he launched, was itself called *peace* or Islam. If a Muslim believes that Muhammad was a catalyst of wars and bloodshed, he will cease to be a Muslim.

Now the choice before a Muslim is simple: either he believes that Muhammad did *not* (repeat not) appoint his own successor, or he believes that he did. If he believes that he (Muhammad) did not, then it would mean that he brought all the sorrows and tragedies of the past and the future upon the Muslim *umma*.

Such a belief would, in fact, be a tacit “indictment” by a Muslim, of Muhammad for his “dereliction” of duty. But he should ask himself if he can “indict” the Last and the Greatest Messenger of God, and still be a Muslim.

If the modern Muslim believes that Muhammad appointed his own successor, then he will have to concede that the meeting held in Saqifa was “*ultra vires*” because it was held in defiance of the commandments of God and His Apostle. All the evils, the internal misfortunes of Islam, the rifts and schisms, the sad patrimony of blood and tears, and the endless civil wars of the Muslims, had their origin in Saqifa.

Islam has given freedom of choice to all Muslims. On the one hand they have the inspired judgment of Muhammad; on the other, there is the judgment made in the outhouse of Saqifa. They can choose whichever they like.

Muhammad, the Messenger of God and the Interpreter of Qur'an, was the most knowledgeable of men. Not only he had knowledge of history, and knowledge of the causes of the rise, decline and fall of nations, he also had knowledge and understanding of human nature. The patterns of history were all familiar to him.

Because he was endowed with such knowledge, he did not leave the matter of succession to blind chance. He had begun the implementation of the program of the reconstruction of human society, and he had established the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. And he knew that he would not live for ever.

Muhammad knew that he would die but his mission would live. His mission called for continuity. Continuity was all important for the success of his mission, and nothing was to interrupt it, not even his own death. To give continuity to his mission, therefore, he picked out Ali who though young in years, was the personification of all the qualities of leadership in Islam.

Muhammad made an inspired declaration in the Banquet of Dhu'l-'Asheera that Ali was his wazir, his vicegerent and his successor. But he had also made a lifelong study and analysis of Ali's character and abilities, and had found him incomparable.

Ali was unique. He was a transcendent character in Islam!

Even if no historical evidence were available that Muhammad appointed his own successor, it is still possible to make a few deductions from his disposition and temperament. He was most meticulous, circumspect and punctilious in private and public life.

Prudence, vision and thoughtful planning characterized his work. The allegation that he did not tell his umma who would lead it in war and in peace, and who would guide it in other exigencies of life, is clearly at variance with his character.

Muhammad was the teacher of the Muslims. He taught them everything they knew. Of the knowledge of Islam, he withheld nothing from them. To claim that he withheld from them the information most vital for them, viz., the name of the person who would steer the vessel of Islam, after his own death, defies all the canons of commonsense and reason.

It will be remembered that when Muhammad Mustafa was in Makkah, the citizens of Makkah, brought their cash and other valuables to him for safe-keeping – both before and after he began to preach Islam because they trusted him. His truthfulness and fidelity were beyond any question.

In A.D. 622 Muhammad Mustafa migrated from Makkah to Medina. Before leaving Makkah, he made Ali *responsible* for returning all the deposits to their (pagan) owners – the same owners who were lusting to kill him for preaching Islam. But a trust is something sacred, and must be honored by everyone, especially by an Apostle of God!

“Trusts may be expressed or implied. Express trusts are those where property is entrusted or duties are assigned by some one to some other whom he trusts, to carry out either immediately or in specified contingencies, such as death. Implied trusts arise out of power, or position, or opportunity; e.g., a king holds his kingdom on trust from God for his subjects.” (*A. Yusuf Ali, Translator and Commentator of Al-Qur'an al-Majid*).

After Muhammad's departure from Makkah, Ali returned all the deposits to their owners.

But for Muhammad, there was no “trust” greater than Islam. God imposed upon him the duty of delivering this trust to all mankind. Therefore, before his death, he had to make someone responsible to

take charge of this “trust.”

Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, made Ali *responsible* to take charge of this “trust,” and its political expression – the government of Medina.

The best guarantee of the security of the State that Muhammad had founded, was in informing the Muslims who would be their leader after his own death. The security of the State would, in fact, be fatally compromised if he failed to inform his followers who would succeed him as its Chief Executive.

No Muslim would dare to imagine that Muhammad, the Messenger of God, would say or do anything detrimental to the interests of Islam. Nor would any Muslim dare to imagine that Muhammad would say or do anything illogical.

The assumption that Muhammad did not appoint his own successor, and did not introduce him to the Muslim umma, is supported neither by facts nor by logic. Facts and logic are on his side – perennially and inevitably. It was in the outhouse of Saqifa that the logic of history went awry.

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