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Umar bin al-Khattab, the Second Khalifa of the Muslims

In the times of ignorance, Umar made his living as a broker. Shibli, his biographer, says that in his youth he grazed camels.

Before accepting Islam, Umar was one of the most rabid enemies of Muhammad, the Messenger of God.

When Muhammad proclaimed his mission, many people acknowledged him as the Messenger of God. Umar acknowledged him as Messenger of God after six years.

Some historians claim that Umar was a most awe-inspiring man, and when he accepted Islam, the idolaters were gripped with fear for their lives. But this is only a case of a dominant myth being in conflict with ugly facts.

When Umar accepted Islam, the idolaters remained where they were, and nothing changed for them; but it was Muhammad who was compelled to leave his home, and had to find sanctuary in a desolate ravine. He spent three years in that ravine, and during those years of exile, his life was exposed to deadly perils every day and every night. During this entire period of more than 1000 days, Umar, like many other Muslims in Makkah, was the silent spectator of the ordeals of his master. He made no attempt to bring those ordeals to an end.

Muhammad Mustafa established brotherhood among Muslims both in Makkah and in Medina. In Makkah, he made Umar the “brother” of Abu Bakr, and in Medina, he made him the “brother” of Utban bin Malik. For his own brother, Muhammad chose Ali ibn Abi Talib in both cities.

In 3 A.H., Umar's daughter, Hafsa, was married to the Apostle.

Umar was one of the fugitives of the battle of Uhud (Baladhuri). He himself said later: “When Muslim were defeated in Uhud, I ran toward the mountain.” (Suyuti in al-Durr al-Manthoor).

At the siege of Khyber, Umar made an attempt to capture the fortress but failed.

Umar was one of the fugitives of the battle of Hunayn. Abu Qatada, a companion of the Prophet, says: "In Hunayn when the Muslims were fleeing, I also fled, and I saw Umar with others." (Bukhari and Kitabul-Maghazi).

In 8 A.H. the Apostle sent Umar as a ranker with many others to report for duty to Amr bin Aas, their commanding officer, in the campaign of Dhat es-Salasil.

In 11 A.H. the Apostle of God organized the Syrian expedition and he appointed Usama bin Zayd bin Haritha as its general. He ordered Umar to serve as a ranker in the expedition.

Though Umar spent eighteen years in the company of Muhammad Mustafa, the Messenger of God, the latter never appointed him to any position of authority – civil or military.

When the Apostle of God was on his deathbed, he asked the companions to bring pen, paper and ink so he might dictate his will but Umar defied him. He did not let the Apostle dictate his will and testament.

Umar was not present at the funeral of the Prophet of Islam. He was brawling with the Ansar in the outhouse of Saqifa when the body of the Prophet was being buried.

Umar was the khalifa-maker of Abu Bakr. During Abu Bakr's khilafat, Umar was his principal adviser.

The Banu Umayya were the traditional champions of idolatry and the arch-enemies of Muhammad and his clan, the Banu Hashim. Muhammad had broken their power but Umar revived them. The central component of his policy, as head of the government of Saqifa, was the restoration of the Umayyads. He turned over Syria to them as their "fief," and he made them the first family in the empire.

A modern student of history might find claims made on behalf of some companions of the Prophet rather extravagant and baffling. He might notice in them the clash of popular imagination with historical reality. But if he wishes to make a realistic evaluation of the roles they *played in the lifetime of the Prophet*, there is no better way of doing so than to turn away from rhapsody and rhetoric, and to focus attention on facts and facts alone.

Principal Events of the Caliphate of Umar

When Umar took charge of the caliphate, the Muslim armies were fighting against the Persians in Iraq and the Romans in Syria. The army in Syria was under the command of Khalid bin al-Walid, the favorite general of Abu Bakr. Umar's first act as khalifa was to dismiss him from all his commands, and to appoint Abu Obaida bin al-Jarrah as the supreme commander of the Muslim forces in Syria.

Shibli says that Umar had, for a long time, nursed a secret hatred of Khalid because of the latter's excesses. Umar had indeed dismissed Khalid because of his excesses but it appears that personal

rancor was also at work. He was jealous of Khalid's fame and popularity. If he disliked Khalid's transgressions, he ought to have formally indicted him, and should have ordered full investigation of his crimes in murdering Malik ibn Nuweira and in appropriating his widow. If Khalid had been proven guilty, then Umar ought to have passed sentence on him according to the Islamic law. But there was no indictment and no investigation. Khalid was summarily dismissed and he died in poverty and obscurity in 21 A.H.

Umar's caliphate is notable for its many conquests. His generals conquered Iraq, Iran, Azerbaijan, Kirman, Seistan, Khurasan, Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Egypt, and incorporated them into the empire of the Muslims. All of these were permanent conquests. The Romans lost Syria, Palestine and Egypt for ever; and in Persia, the Sassani empire ceased to exist.

Among other events of the caliphate of Umar, were the first outbreak of plague in Syria in 18 A.H., and a famine in Hijaz in the same year. Between them, the plague and the famine killed more than 25,000 people (Suyuti and Abul Fida).

Civil and Military Administration and Policy

Since the empire had grown enormously in all directions, Umar had to establish an administrative system. But the Arabs did not have any experience in administration. Umar, therefore, left the Persian and the Roman framework of administration in the conquered provinces undisturbed. The Persian and the Roman staff carried on the day-to-day work as before.

Umar founded numerous military cantonments in Iraq, Syria and Egypt. Since he wanted the Arabs to be a purely fighting and ruling class, he did not allow them to buy land and to settle down or to become farmers in the conquered territories.

To assess land revenue, Umar again had to retain the Persian and the Romans systems. But in Iraq it was found necessary to survey the arable lands and to assess tax on them. Arabs knew less than nothing about assessing land revenue. There was, however, one exception in Uthman bin Hunaif of Medina. He was a man of outstanding ability as a revenue expert.

Though it was Umar's policy not to appoint the citizens of Medina (Ansar) to any important positions, in this particular case he had no choice, and he appointed Uthman bin Hunaif as the commissioner of land development in Iraq. Qadi Yusuf says that Uthman bin Hunaif was an authority in all Arabia on taxation, assessment of land revenue and land reclamation (Kitabul-Kharaj and Siyar-ul-Ansar).

Within less than a year, Uthman bin Hunaif had completed the job of taking measurements of the whole new province, and of making assessments for the collection of land revenue. He was, thus, the first Financial Commissioner of Iraq, and incidentally, one of the few Ansaris to hold any position of authority in the caliphates of Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman bin Affan.

When Syria, Jordan and Palestine were conquered, Umar appointed Yazid bin Abu Sufyan the governor of Syria; Shurahbil bin Hasana governor of Jordan, and Amr bin Aas the governor of Palestine. Abu Obaida bin al-Jarrah was appointed governor of the city of Damascus. When Amr bin Aas conquered Egypt, Umar made him its governor.

Yazid bin Abu Sufyan, the governor of Syria, died in the plague of 18 A.H. When Umar heard the news of his death, he went to see Abu Sufyan to offer condolences to him. But Abu Sufyan interrupted Umar's commiseration, and asked him, "Whom are you going to appoint governor of Syria in place of my late son, Yazid?" Umar said: "Of course, his brother, Muawiya." Abu Sufyan immediately forgot his sorrow at his son's death, and rejoiced in the elevation of Muawiya, his second son, as governor. Umar appointed Muawiya the new governor of Syria. When Abu Obaida died, Umar placed Damascus also under Muawiya's jurisdiction. He fixed his salary at 60,000 pieces of gold a year (*Isti'ab*, Volume I).

After dismissing Khalid bin al-Walid as supreme commander of the forces in Syria, Umar had appointed him, for a time, governor of the district of Kinnisirin but dismissed him again for his alleged "pomposity."

Saad bin Abi Waqqas, the victor of the battle of Qadisiyya fought against the Persians, was Umar's governor of Iraq. He too was dismissed in 21 A.H.

Amr bin Aas was Umar's governor in Egypt. Umar did not dismiss him but curtailed his powers by appointing Abdullah bin Saad bin Abi Sarah as a "watchdog" over him in fiscal matters.

Umar was a most exacting taskmaster for all his generals and governors. He was quick to lend his ears to any complaint against them, and he was even quicker to dismiss them –with one exception – Muawiya! He was forever indulgent to the sons of Abu Sufyan and the clan of Banu Umayya.

Muawiya, the son of Abu Sufyan and Hinda, the governor of Syria, lived in Damascus in imperial splendor, surrounded by a glittering retinue. It was a lifestyle that Umar did not tolerate in any other governor. But Muawiya, for him, was a "special," and the rules which applied to others, did not apply to him.

Tabari has recorded the following incident in Volume VI of his *History*. Umar was in Damascus and Muawiya came to see him every day – mornings and evenings – bedecked in regal outfit, with splendidly caparisoned mounts and escorts. When Umar commented, rather acidly, upon his pageantry, he said that Syria was swarming with Roman spies, and it was necessary to impress them with the "glory" of Islam. His pageantry, he said, was only the outward emblem of that glory – the glory of Islam.

But Umar was not convinced, and remarked: "This is a trap laid by the slick and guileful man."

Muawiya answered: "Then I will do whatever you say, O Commander of the Faithful."

Umar said: "If I raise an objection to anything, you baffle and bewilder me with words. I am at a loss to know what to do."

Here Umar can be seen utterly “helpless” before his own protégé. He could condone Muawiya anything and everything. He, in fact, appeared to be ostentatiously courting Abu Sufyan and his sons. Once he placed them at the helm of affairs, they consolidated their position, and it became impossible to dislodge them. It was in this manner that the secular, predatory, imperialist and economically exploitative Umayyads were foisted upon the Muslims. The cultivation of the Umayyads, it appears, was one of the constants in Saqifa's policy equation.

Some Reflections on the Conquests of the Arabs

Umar's generals had conquered Persia, Syria and Egypt. His successors in the Umayyad dynasty pushed those conquests as far as southern France in the west, and the western frontiers of China and the Indus valley in the east. The students of history have expressed amazement at the speed and the extent of the conquests of the Arabs in the seventh/eighth centuries. They achieved all those conquests within 100 years – truly one of the most remarkable series of conquests in world history.

Many centuries later, the search goes on for the answer to the question: How did the Arabs conquer so much so soon? Many reasons have been given by the historians for the success of the Arab arms, among them: civil war and anarchy in Persia; a war between Persia and Rome that lasted for 26 years, and which left both empires utterly exhausted, bleeding and prostrate; the disgruntlement of the Roman subjects in Syria and Egypt who welcomed the Arabs as liberators, and the loss to Rome of the “umbrella” of local support; the dependence both of the Persians and the Romans upon mercenaries and conscripts who lacked morale; persecution on grounds of religion of dissident sects and creeds by both the Persians and the Romans; and the enormous burden of taxes that the alien races ruled by Persia and Rome, and the peasants in both empires, had to carry.

Also, the Persians and the Romans were handicapped by heavy baggage, and they lacked mobility. The Arabs, on the other hands, were highly mobile. They could strike at a target of their choice, and then retreat into the desert on their swift camels where the enemy cavalry could not enter as it did not have logistical support.

In their campaigns, the Arabs were invariably outnumbered by their enemies but this was not necessarily a handicap for them. History abounds in examples of small forces of volunteers standing up to and defeating large conscript armies.

But the Muslims themselves, discount most of these reasons for their success. According to many of them, the secret of their success was in the piety and the religious zeal of the Muslim soldiers. The propulsive power behind the Arab conquests of the seventh century, they say, came from Islam, and every Arab who left the peninsula to attack the Fertile Crescent, was a *mujahid* or a holy warrior, fighting for the glory of God.

This claim, however, is only partly true. Without a doubt there were those Muslims who wished to spread

the light of Islam in the world but also there were others, and they were the overwhelming majority, who fought for the material rewards that the conquests promised to bring to them. They had developed a distinctly secular appetite for power and riches.

Joel Carmichael

The predominant incentives that drove the Bedouin out of the peninsula were bodily hunger and greed, natural consequences of the straitened circumstances there and of the endless opportunities for enrichment offered by the cultivated societies they overran. Thus, though there were doubtless also men who “killed for the sake of the hereafter,” the masses of tribesmen surely “killed for earthly lust.”

The otherworldly aspects of Mohammed's preaching were completely eclipsed during the conquests by the incredible booty that could be won: thus a Qurayshite notable, who was considered so pious that he was one of the ten men to whom Mohammed could give his personal word during their lifetime that they would get into paradise because of their zeal for Islam, left behind an estate whose net worth seems to have been between 35 and 52 million dirhems; he had eleven houses in Medina alone, as well as others in Basra, Kufa, Fustat and Alexandria.

Another of these ten pious men personally promised paradise by Mohammed owned real property in the amount of 30 million dirhems; on his death his steward had over two million dirhems in cash.

Once this process is seen in perspective, it becomes clear how remarkably obtuse is the old, traditional conception of the Arab expansion as being a pietist movement aroused by Mohammed's personal religious zeal.

...there seems to be no doubt that the last thing the Muslim Arabs were thinking of was converting anyone. More particularly, the pietism that was to become the hallmark of later Islam, at least in certain of its manifestations, was utterly alien to the initial Arab conquerors.

It has been pointed out, the driving force behind the Muslim Arab conquests was not religious in the least, but a migratory impulse rooted in the millennial condition of the Arabian peninsula. Men like Khalid and Amr (bin Aas), for instance, were obviously no pietists or mystics; their interests were thoroughly practical.

The switching over of the Meccan aristocracy to the side of the Muslims is a telling illustration of the swift and irresistible injection of purely secular elements into the earliest enterprises of the Umma, which though formulated on the basis of religion, was articulated on the basis of politics. (*The Shaping of the Arabs, New York, 1967*)

It is true that religion was the factor that propelled the Muslims out of Arabia; but once it had done so, it did not play any significant role in the conquests that followed. Its role was catalytic in the eruption of the Arabs. If religion and piety were the cause of the success of the Muslims in their campaigns, then how

would one explain the success of the nations which were not Muslim? Some of those nations were the enemies of Islam yet they were, at one time, triumphant on a scale that matched, and sometimes surpassed, the conquests of the Muslims.

The conquests of the Arabs were astounding in their vastness but they were not, by any means, unique.

Almost one thousand years before the rise of Islam, Alexander the Great, a young Macedonian, conquered, within ten years, all the lands from the Balkan peninsula to the frontiers of China, and from Libya to the Punjab in India. He was a polytheist. Wherever he went, he worshipped the local gods. He worshipped Zeus in Greece, Ammon-Re in Libya; Marduk in Babylon; and Ahura in Persepolis. His conquests were not inspired by any religion. In fact, religion did not figure anywhere in his conquests. If he had not died at 32, he would have conquered the rest of the world.

After the ancient Greeks, the Romans were the greatest conquerors and administrators. They built one of the greatest and most powerful empires of history, and one that lasted longer than any other empire before or since. Like the Greeks before them, they too were worshippers of idols, though the Eastern Roman Empire was converted to Christianity in early fifth century A.D.

In the thirteenth century, the Mongols, led by Genghiz Khan, shook the whole earth. They were the most dangerous enemies that Islam ever met. All of Asia was at their feet, and they came within an ace of blotting out Islam in that continent. Their conquests were more rapid and on an even grander scale than the conquests of the Arabs.

Within fifty years, they had conquered all of China, all of Russia, all of Central and Western Asia, and had penetrated into Europe as far as Hungary. While the Muslims in their career of conquest, were defeated at Tours in the West, and at Constantinople in the East, the Mongols were consistently victorious everywhere. They retreated from Central Europe only because of the death, in distant Karakorum, of their Great Khan.

The Mongols did not have any religion at all. What was it that launched them on the career of world conquest? Certainly not religious zeal and piety.

In the 16th century, the Castilian Conquistadores put Spain in the front rank of the nations of the world. A mere handful of them left the shores of Spain, and conquered the whole new world. They laid two continents at the feet of the king of Spain. It is true that they were inspired by religious zeal even though they did not have much piety – but it was Catholic zeal. Their zeal was not so much unIslamic as it was anti-Islamic. Just before discovering and conquering the Americas, they had defeated the Muslims of Granada in 1492, had expelled them from Spain, and had obliterated every vestige of Islamic culture from the Iberian peninsula.

In the 17th century, the Dutch rode the crest of glory. Their story of that epoch reads like a saga of great and heroic deeds. At home they had been locked up in a deadly struggle against two enemies – the

Spaniards and the sea, and they had overcome both. They had expelled the Spaniards from the Netherlands, and they had tamed the wild and the rampaging North Sea.

Having conquered these two enemies, the Dutch looked outward for new worlds to conquer. The dynamics of war against Spain and the North Sea, gave them a momentum of victory and success that carried them around the world. In an outburst of energy, the Dutch girdled the earth, conquering, colonizing and building.

The Dutch were not only good sailors and navigators; they were also good merchants and colonizers. They built factories in India, and they founded colonies in North and South America, and in South Africa. Their colony in South Africa became one of the most successful in the history of settlement and colonization in the whole world.

The Dutch were empire-builders too. Twelve thousand miles away from home, they conquered the East Indies which was much the richest of all the empires of the Age of Imperialism, and they held it for 350 years.

And yet, in their Golden Age, the 17th century, the Dutch were so few in number. But as few as they were, their quality was superb. They did not allow lack of numbers to put a crimp upon what they could accomplish, proving in this manner that there is no correlation between large numbers and achievement.

It's a most remarkable record of achievement for such a small nation as the Dutch. They also proved that there is not, necessarily, a correlation between religion and achievement. Centuries before the dawn of their greatness, the Dutch had been devout Christians but it was only in the 17th century that their dizzying and dazzling rise began.

In the 19th century, the British carved out an empire for themselves over which the sun never set. In North America, they ruled the northern half of the continent; in Africa, their empire extended from Alexandria in the north to Cape Town in the south; and in South Asia, they conquered from Kabul to Rangoon. They colonized Australia and New Zealand. They established Pax Britannia over all this immense area, one-fourth of the earth.

In the 18th century when the British were building their empire, they had only 35,000 men in arms, and 7,500 out of them were busy in pacifying Ireland.

While the Royal Navy held the British Empire together, their merchant marine built another – an invisible empire. It was their commercial empire which comprehended many of those countries which were out of the orbit of their political power.

At one time, when the power of the British was at its zenith, no nation on earth could challenge them on land or on sea.

Concurrently, with the extension of their political power and commercial influence, the British also

established their cultural hegemony. They spread the English language over most of the world so that it is spoken or it is understood in most of the countries of the world.

The British accomplished all this and much more but not because of their piety and religious zeal. They were only tepidly interested in religion. They did not conquer an inch of foreign territory for the sake of Christ or the Bible; they conquered only for Britain, and to build the British Empire.

The old imperial system of Britain, France and the Netherlands held the world in an iron grip for nearly two centuries. Muslim states everywhere were at the feet of these powers. But in the aftermath of the two World Wars, their empires broke down. From the debris of their empires rose a multitude of new nations. One of these new nations was the Zionist State of Israel.

On May 14, 1948, the British relinquished their mandate over Palestine, and the Jewish settlers of the country proclaimed the birth of the State of Israel. On the following day (May 15) five Arab states invaded Israel with the avowed intention of “pushing Israel into the sea.” But they could not push Israel into the sea. Israel defeated them all, and they had to retreat into their own shells.

Since then, there have been other wars between the Arabs and Israel. There was one in 1956 and another in 1967. In both wars, Israel defeated the Arabs, and captured much territory from them including Old Jerusalem.

In August 1969, a part of the Masjid-ul-Aqsa in Jerusalem caught fire. It was an act of arson. All Muslims – Arab as well as non-Arab – were inflamed at this outrage. The shock waves of the incident reached the remotest corners of the Muslim world, the two ends of which are 10,000 miles apart – from Indonesia in the east to Mauritania in the west.

The Muslim nations held a conference in Rabat(Morocco) to consider some action to recover Jerusalem from Israel. But all they did, was pass resolutions and denounce Israel. An insolent Israel dared and defied the vast, sprawling Muslim world, but the latter lacked the grit and the gumption to take up the challenge.

In October 1973, Egypt attacked Israel on Yom Kippur when the Jews were occupied with their devotions. The Jews were caught off-guard but they recovered from the surprise, and immediately struck back. They raced through the Sinai desert, crossed the Suez, established a beachhead on the west bank of the canal – 60 miles from Cairo, and surrounded the whole Egyptian Third Army!

It was American pressure on Israel that saved the Egyptian Third Army. But curiously, Egypt claimed the military action against Israel a “victory” for herself. War and “victory,” the Egyptian government said, had restored the morale and self-respect of Egypt even though it was the United Nations and the United States which on this, as on earlier occasions, had rescued them from disaster.

In June 1982 Israel rode rough shod into Lebanon. She evicted the Palestinian guerrillas from the

country as the whole Arab world sat gazing in silent despair – a truly helpless giant if ever there was any.

In all these wars one thing the Arabs did not lack was economic power. They had more of it than any other country in the Third World. As for manpower, the Arabs outnumbered Israelis by more than 50 to 1.

And yet, never before did they face the paradox of the combination of wealth and powerlessness; material abundance and moral bankruptcy; strategic importance and humiliation, as they are doing in their confrontation with Israel. It may even be said that some Arab countries, e.g., Jordan, are enjoying their “independence” only by the “courtesy” of Israel.

Thus it appears that religion, any religion, pagan, animistic, Christian or Islamic, had little, if anything, to do with the military conquests of a nation.

A recurring phenomenon in world history is that at any given time, any one nation, is supreme, militarily, politically, and in many cases, also intellectually. At that moment or in that epoch, it is irresistible and invincible.

The hundred years from 632 to 732 were the century of the Arabs. They were supreme, they were triumphant, they were irresistible and they were invincible – in that century. Islam united them and gave them a sense of direction, purpose and propulsive power. Without Islam, their future would have been just as irrelevant and barren as their past had been. But there is no correlation between their conquests on the one hand, and piety and religious enthusiasm on the other.

The Last Days of Umar bin al-Khattab

One of the friends of Umar was a certain Mughira bin Shaaba. Umar had appointed him governor, first of Basra, and later of Kufa.

A slave of Mughira had a certain grouse against him. He requested Umar's intercession, and upon the latter's refusal, he attacked him, and mortally wounded him.

A physician was called. He gave Umar some medicine to drink but all of it came out of the gaping wound in his navel. When the physician noticed this, he told Umar that there was no hope of his recovery, and advised him to make his will since little time was left for him in this world.

Word rapidly spread that the khalifa was mortally wounded, and the news caused much commotion in the city.

Many companions called on Umar to enquire after his health. Some of them suggested that he designate someone as his successor. Umar said:

“If I designate someone as my successor, nothing would be amiss with it since Abu Bakr designated me

as his successor, and he was better than me. But if I do not designate anyone as my successor, nothing would be amiss with that either since the Apostle of God did not designate his own successor, and he was better than both of us (Abu Bakr and Umar).”

Ayesha also sent word to Umar urging him to appoint someone as khalifa before his own death, or else, she warned, “anarchy and chaos may spread in the land.”

Umar asked Ayesha's messenger to tell her as follows:

“I have considered this matter, and I have decided to appoint six men as members of an electoral committee, and to charge them with the task of selecting one out of themselves as khalifa. The six men are: Ali, Uthman, Abdur Rahman bin Auf; Talha, Zubayr and Saad bin Abi Waqqas. The Apostle of God was pleased with all six of them when he left this world, and each of them is qualified to become the khalifa of the Muslims.”

Umar then called all six members of his electoral committee to his home to explain to them what they had to do. When they came, he addressed them as follows:

“O group of Muhajireen! Verily, the Apostle of God died, and he was pleased with all six of you. I have, therefore, decided to make it (the selection of khalifa) a matter of consultation among you, so that you may select one of yourselves as khalifa. If five of you agree upon one man, and there is one who is opposed to the five, kill him. If four are one side and two on the other, kill the two. And if three are on one side and three on the other, then Abdur Rahman ibn Auf will have the casting vote, and the khalifa will be selected from his party.

In that case, kill the three men on the opposing side. You may, if you wish, invite some of the chief men of the Ansar as observers but the khalifa must be one of you Muhajireen, and not any of them. They have no share in the khilafat. And your selection of the new khalifa must be made within three days.”
(*Tabari, History*)

Umar ordered his son, Abdullah, also to attend the meetings of the newly-formed electoral committee, though not as a candidate for caliphate, and said to him:

“If the members of this committee disagree among themselves, you support those who are in majority. If there is a tie with three on each side, then you support the party of Abdur Rahman bin Auf.”

Sir John Glubb

Umar had prescribed a maximum of three days for their (the electoral committee's) deliberations. At the end of that period, they must willy-nilly unanimously choose a khalif. In the event of the decision not being unanimous, the majority candidate was to be adopted, the members of the minority being all immediately put to death.” (*The Great Arab Conquests, 1967*)

When Umar was satisfied that he had done his duty in the matter of his succession, he asked some of those men who were around him, whom out of the six nominees, they would like to see as their new khalifa. One of them present named Zubayr. Umar said: "Will you make your khalifa a man who is a believer when he is happy, and an unbeliever when he is angry?" Another man named Talha. Umar said: "Will you make your khalifa a man who has mortgaged the gift of the Apostle of God to a Jewess?" A third named Ali. Umar said: "If you make him your khalifa, he will not let you deviate from truth but I know that you will not."

Walid bin Aqaba, a half-brother of Uthman, was also present in the assembly. When he heard Umar's comments on the candidates, he exclaimed: "I know who will become the next khalifa." Umar who was lying down, sat up in the bed, and asked, who. Walid said: "Uthman."

Umar ordered Abu Talha Ansari to lead the Muslims in prayer during the interregnum, and also to watch the members of the electoral committee during their deliberations. He also gave him fifty armed men to enable him to carry out his duties. These men were to act, if necessary, as executioners (Tarikh Kamil).

On the following day, Umar called the members of the electoral committee again, and when they came, he said: "So everyone of you wants to become the khalifa after me?" Everyone kept quiet. Umar repeated his question whereupon Zubayr said: "And what's wrong with that? You became khalifa and you managed it. Why can't we?" Umar then asked: "Shall I tell you something about each of you?" Zubayr answered: "Go ahead; tell us." Umar commented upon them as follows:

"Saad bin Abi Waqqas is a good archer but he is arrogant, and khilafat is beyond his reach. Talha is rude, greedy and conceited. Abdur Rahman is too much given to comfort and luxury; if he becomes khalifa, his wives will run the government. Zubayr is a believer when he is in a happy mood but is an unbeliever when he is angry. Ali is worthy of being the ruler of the Muslims in every respect but he is too ambitious."

Umar then turned to Uthman, and said:

"Take it from me. It is as if I am seeing with my own eyes that the Quraysh have put this necklace (khilafat) around your neck, and you have foisted the Banu Umayya and the Banu Abi Muayt (Uthman's family) upon the Muslims, and have given them all the wealth of the umma. Then the wolves of the Arabs came, and slaughtered you. By God, if they (the Quraysh) do, you will certainly do; and if you do, they (the Arabs) will certainly do." (If the Quraysh make Uthman their khalifa, he would give all his power and authority to Banu Umayya; and when he does so, the Arabs will come and kill him).

Umar told the members of the electoral committee that the Apostle of God was "pleased" with them when he left this world. But was the Apostle pleased only with these six men? Was he displeased with the rest of the Muhajireen and the Ansar? If he was not, then why did Umar exclude all of them from his electoral committee? He did not give the rest of the Muhajireen and Ansar the right even to express an opinion much less the right to select their ruler.

Though Umar chose six Qurayshites as electors because as he said, the Apostle was pleased with them, he himself found nothing commendable in them. He found them arrogant, rude, greedy, conceited, henpecked, temperamental, venal and ambitious.

If, at the election of Abu Bakr, the principle was accepted that it is the right of the Muslim *umma* (people) to select or elect its own rulers, then how is it that the leading companions of the Prophet, and Ayesha, his widow, urged Umar to appoint his own successor? Didn't they know that a ruler was to be chosen by the *umma*?

But Umar, instead of denying or affirming this right of the *umma*, said that if he appointed someone as khalifa, he would be following the precedent of Abu Bakr; and if he did not, then he would be following the precedent of the Prophet himself.

In practice, however, he followed neither the precedent of Abu Bakr nor the precedent of the Prophet. He named six men as members of an electoral committee, and made them responsible for selecting a khalifa out of themselves – regardless of the opinions and wishes of the Muslim *umma*.

It is true that Umar did not name anyone as his successor but his electoral committee was, in point of fact, a de facto designation. Its constitution guaranteed the selection only of Umar's own candidate. His first stipulation was that the candidate who gets most of the votes, would become khalifa. There was no way for Ali to get most of the votes. Abdur Rahman bin Auf was the husband of the half-sister of Uthman. (This lady was the daughter of the mother of Uthman and her second husband). Saad bin Abi Waqqas was the first cousin of Abdur Rahman, and was under his influence. "Tribal solidarity" or "tribal chauvinism" was very strong among the Arabs. Talha belonged to the clan of Abu Bakr, and was married to one of his daughters (the sister of Ayesha).

Therefore, it was unthinkable that any of them would vote for Ali. Thus Ali had to count out four votes even before the beginning of the parleys. All he could do, was to hope that he might get Zubayr's vote. In any case, Abdur Rahman bin Auf – the self-appointed king-maker, had the casting vote. As Umar's confidante, it was inevitable that he would give his vote and his support only to his (Umar's) favorite, and the brother of his own wife – Uthman.

Now the minority in the electoral committee had one of the two choices open before it, viz., either acquiesce in the king-maker's selection and acknowledge Uthman as khalifa or pass the sentence of death to itself!

Hudhaifa, a companion, reports that sometime before the attempt was made on his life, a few companions had asked Umar who would succeed him as khalifa, and he had told them, Uthman. (Kanz-ul-Ummal and Tarikh-Ahmedi).

The author of *Riyadh-un-Nadhra* writes in the same connection as follows:

“In the Hajj season someone asked Umar who would be the khalifa of the Muslims after him, and he said, Uthman bin Affan.”

Umar desired nothing so much as to appoint Uthman as his successor but for some reason known only to him, he did not wish to do so openly. At the same time, he did not allow the Muslims to exercise their freewill in the matter of choosing their ruler. Left to themselves, they would not have chosen his favorite, and he knew it. He, therefore, devised a new mode of giving the umma its leader. This new mode, spun out with intricate sophistication, guaranteed the election of Uthman.

Umar had assembled the Electoral Committee only to dissemble!

Perhaps it would have served the interests of the umma better if Umar had openly appointed Uthman as his successor instead of framing a panel of electors for this purpose. A direct and open appointment would have averted the civil wars in Islam. His panel of electors proved to be the catalyst of the battles of Basra, Siffin and Nehrwan. He achieved his aim at the moment but only at the expense of the integrity of Islam in the future.

Abdullah ibn Abbas ibn Abdul-Muttalib was the first cousin of Muhammad Mustafa and Ali ibn Abi Talib. When he heard that Umar had given special powers to Abdur Rahman bin Auf in the panel of electors, he said to Ali:

“Khilafat is lost to us once again. This man (Umar) wants Uthman to be the new khalifa. I know they will keep khilafat out of the house of Muhammad.”

Ali made the following comment:

“I agree with what you say. I have no illusions in this matter. Nevertheless, I shall attend the meeting(s) of the *Shura* (electoral committee), and the Muslims will see with their own eyes the conflict between Umar's words and his deeds. By placing my name in his electoral committee, he has, at least, acknowledged my right to become caliph whereas in the past, he went around saying that prophethood and caliphate ought never to combine in the same house.”

How did Abdullah ibn Abbas know that Umar wanted Uthman to become the khalifa? As noted before, it was obvious from the constitution of the electoral committee. One look at its terms of reference was enough to convince anyone that the outcome of its quest was predetermined. Those terms of reference declared, loudly and unmistakably, that khilafat was going to be the prize of Uthman and the Umayyads.

Therefore, after the promulgation by Umar of the constitution of his electoral committee, if Ali had any interest still left in it, and in its professed purpose, it was purely academic and abstract, and as he himself said, his participation in its meetings would do nothing more than point up the contradictions inherent in it.

This is the age of democracy. The people choose their leaders. Elections are held from the lowest to the

highest levels of public life; from the chairmen of school committees and fund-raising groups to the heads of governments and states. But it has never so happened that those candidates for office who lose the election to their opponents, are put to death. The candidates who lose, become leaders of the opposition, and the existence of a healthy opposition is considered essential for the existence of democracy itself. If the opposition is liquidated, then democracy becomes a casualty, and the state becomes totalitarian.

Umar's order to kill the minority in his electoral committee has no parallel in the history of mankind. He ordered the execution of all those companions of Muhammad Mustafa, who as candidates for caliphate, would get fewer votes than their opposite numbers, even though he knew that it is the job of others to give or to withhold their votes. In other words, he decreed that it is a "crime" to get fewer votes than one's opponent, and the penalty is death!

This was the last decision of the man who once said: "The Book of God is sufficient for us." Did he really believe in what he said? Did he read that Book? Did he find sanction in that Book for his order to kill a candidate for a certain office because he scored lower than his opponent?

Here it should be pointed out that no one out of the six Muhajireen had applied to Umar for membership in his electoral committee. His action in choosing them was totally arbitrary. He then imposed upon them the duty of electing a khalifa with the stipulation that if anyone of them disagreed with the majority, he would forfeit his life.

Umar had obviously opted for the totalitarian "remedy" of taking the right of dissent away from the Muslims.

For many centuries, the Sunni Muslims have raved over what they call "the justice of Umar." Is his order to kill the dissenting member or members of his electoral committee a sample of that "justice?" Is it the sample of justice that they proudly uphold to the nations of the earth?

Umar died on the last Saturday of Zil-Hajj (the last month of the Islamic calendar) of 23 A.H. (A.D. 644), and he was buried next to the Prophet and Abu Bakr.

The Members of the Electoral Committee

Umar, on his deathbed, had appointed six Muhajireen as members of a panel which was to choose one out of themselves as the future khalifa of the Muslims. They were Ali ibn Abi Talib, Uthman, Talha, Zubayr, Abdur Rahman bin Auf and Saad bin Abi Waqqas. Except Ali, all other members of the panel were capitalists, or rather, neo-capitalists.

When they came from Makkah, they were penniless and homeless but within twelve years, i.e., from the death of Muhammad Mustafa in 632 to the death of Umar in 644, each of them, except Ali, had become rich like Croesus. Between these two dates, they had accumulated immense wealth, and had become

the richest men of their times.

Ali did not qualify as a member of this exclusive “club” but Umar admitted him anyway. Apart from the fact that Ali made his living as a gardener whereas his other five co-members lived on the revenues of their lands and estates, there was another gulf, even more unbridgeable, that separated him from them. In character, personality, temperament, attitudes, philosophy and outlook on life, Ali and the rest of them were the antithesis of each other.

In an earlier chapter, it was pointed out that the famous line of Keats, “Beauty is Truth and Truth Beauty,” can be transposed to read as “Economic power is political power and political power economic power.” Economic power and political power are reciprocal.

Karl Marx said: “Whatever social class has economic power, also has political and social power.” And George Wald, professor of Biology at the Harvard University, said in an address in Tokyo in 1974: “Private wealth and personal political power are interchangeable.”

There can be no doubt that economic power is a springboard of political power. This has been a consistent pattern throughout history.

President Abraham Lincoln had defined democracy as the government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

In the American presidential elections of 1984 when President Ronald Reagan was reelected, the Russians quipped:

“The United States Government is of the millionaires, by the millionaires and for the millionaires.”

All the members of Umar's electoral committee, were millionaires – except Ali ibn Abi Talib! Following is a portrait left by historians of the members of Umar's Electoral Committee:

D. S. Margoliouth

Othman, son of Affan, six years the Prophet's junior, was a cloth merchant; he also did some business as a money-lender, advancing sums for enterprises of which he was to enjoy half the profits (Ibn Sa'd, iii, 111), and in money matters showed remarkable acuteness (Wakidi W. 231). His sister was a milliner, married to a barber (Isabah, i. 714). He was no fighting man, as his subsequent history proved, for he shirked one battlefield, ran away from another, and was killed, priest-like, ostentatiously reading the Koran.”

Ibn Sa'd says in his *Tabqaat* about Othman: “When he died, he left 35 million dirhems, 150,000 dinars, 3000 camels, and many horses. He built himself a palace in Medina with marble and teakwood. He had 1000 slaves.” (*Mohammed and the Rise of Islam, London, 1931*)

E. A. Belyaev

In his youth, before the rise of Islam, Uthman had been very rich and gained much money from profitable usurious transactions. Uthman's acquisitiveness and business talents gained full scope when he became caliph. He built himself a stone house in Medina with doors of precious wood and acquired much real estate in that city, including gardens and water sources.

He had a large income from his fruit plantations in Wadi-ul-Qura, Hunain and other places, valued at 100,000 dinars, besides large herds of horses and camels on these estates. The day Uthman died his personal treasury was found to contain 150,000 dinars and one million dirhems.

Multiplying his riches at the expense of the Moslem treasury, Uthman also gave free use of the latter to some of the closest companions of Muhammad, attempting to justify his illegal actions by associating these most authoritative veteran Moslems with his own depredations. The "companions" applauded the caliph Uthman for his generosity and magnanimity, no doubt for solid reasons of self-interest.

Zubair ibn al-Awwam, for example, one of the better known amongst them, built tenement houses in Kufa, Basra, Fustat and Alexandria. His property was estimated at 50,000 dinars, in addition to which he possessed 1000 horses and 1000 slaves.

Another "companion," Talha ibn Ubaidullah, built a large tenement house in Kufa and acquired estates in Irak which brought in a daily 1000 dinars; he also built a luxurious house of brick and precious wood in Medina.

Abd-ar-Rahman ibn Auf, also an outstanding "companion," also built himself a rich and spacious dwelling; his stables contained 100 horses and his pastures 1000 camels and 10,000 sheep, and one quarter of the inheritance he left after his death was valued at 84,000 dinars.

Such acquisitiveness was widespread among the companions of the Prophet and Uthman's entourage. (*Arabs, Islam and the Arab Caliphate in the Early Middle Ages, New York, 1969*)

Bernard Lewis

Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas built his house in Al-Aqiq. He made it high and spacious, and put balconies around the upper part. Sa'id ibn al-Musayyib said that when Zayd ibn Thabit died, he left ingots of gold and silver that were broken up with axes, in addition to property and estates to the value of 100,000 dinars. (*Islam in History, New York, 1973*)

Dr. Taha Husain of Egypt writes in his book, *al-Fitna-tul-Kubra* (The Great Upheaval), published by Dar-ul-Ma'arif, Cairo, 1959, p. 47:

"When Uthman became khalifa, he not only lifted the ban placed by Umar upon the companions to go to the other countries, but also gave them rich present from the public treasury. He gave Zubayr 600,000

dirhems in one day, and he gave Talha 100,000 dirhems in one day enabling them to buy lands, property and slaves in other countries.”

Abdur Rahman bin Auf was a member of the inner circle of the friends of Uthman. About him Sir William Muir writes:

“Abd al-Rahman, when in after years he used to fare sumptuously on fine bread and every variety of meat, would weep while looking at his richly furnished table and thinking of the Prophet's straitened fare.” (*The Life of Mohammed, London 1877*)

The love that Abdur Rahman bore his late master, Muhammad, was deeply moving. His wives and concubines prepared delicacies of many colors and tastes for him. When he sat down to eat, recollection came to him of the Spartan times of the Apostle. He “missed” him and he “missed” those times, shed many a tear, and then gobbled up everything on the table.

Sir William Muir sums up his impressions of the companions of the Apostle of God as follows:

“In pursuing the annals of the ‘companions’ and first followers of Mohammed, few things so forcibly illustrate the spirit of Islam as, first, the number of their wives and concubines and the facility of divorce; and, next, the vast riches they amassed; a significant contrast with the early days of Christianity.” (*The Life of Mohammed, London, 1877*)

Sir William Muir has done a great injustice, in the first place, in lumping the companions all together whereas there were two distinct categories of them. The first category which comprised the overwhelming majority, is the one he has correctly depicted in his book, but there also existed another, though very small, category, and he has taken no notice of it.

In the second place, Sir William Muir has attributed the insatiable acquisitiveness of the companions to “the spirit of Islam,” and this is an even grosser injustice. The acquisitiveness of the companions, or rather, the acquisitiveness of most of the companions of the Apostle, illustrates, not the spirit of Islam, but a reaction against that spirit. The obsession with materialism runs counter to the spirit and genius of Islam. Qur’an has castigated those people who amass gold and silver.

If anyone wishes to see the real spirit of Islam, he will find it, not in the deeds of the nouveaux riches of Medina, but in the life, character and deeds of such companions of the Apostle of God as Ali ibn Abi Talib, Salman el-Farsi, Abu Dharr el-Ghiffari, Ammar ibn Yasir, Owais Qarni and Bilal. The orientalist will change their assessment of the spirit of Islam if they contemplate it in the austere, pure and sanctified lives of these latter companions.

It may be noted that the members of the electoral committee were all men of Makkah. There was no man of Medina among them. Umar had studiously kept them out. When he was explaining to the members of the committee what they had to do, he addressed them as “O group of Muhajireen.”

He told them that the khalifa had to be one of them, and that the men of Medina had no share in khilafat. Some companions pressed Umar to appoint his own successor. He named a number of people who were dead, and said that if any of them were alive, he would have appointed him as his successor.

Dr. Taha Husain

“The Prophet of Islam had been dead, not days but only a few hours when Islam was confronted with its first crisis – in the matter of his succession. The Ansar said to the Muhajireen: ‘One chief from us and one from you.’ But Abu Bakr did not agree to this, and he quoted the following tradition of the Prophet: ‘The rulers shall be from the Quraysh.’ Then he said to the Ansar: ‘We shall be rulers and you will be our ministers.’ The Ansar accepted this arrangement (with the exception of Saad ibn Ubada).

This is how the ‘aristocracy’ of Islam was born. Its right to rule rested on its propinquity to Muhammad. All authority was vested in the Quraysh. The Ansar were the advisers. Every Muslim has the right to offer advice. The Quraysh were to rule, and the Ansar and the other Muslims were to give advice but not to rule.

When Umar was dying, he was questioned about his successor, and he said: ‘If Abu Obaida bin al-Jarrah were alive, I would have made him the khalifa. If Khalid bin al-Walid were alive, I would have appointed him the amir of the Muslims. And if Salim, the client of Abu Hudhaifa, were living today, then I would have designated him as your ruler.’

This Salim was a slave who came from Istakhar in Persia. He was emancipated, and became a ‘mawali’ (client) of Abu Hudhaifa. He was well-known for his piety. Many Muslims deferred to him in matters of Faith even in the times of the Prophet. Sometimes he led the Muslims in prayer also. He was killed in the Ridda wars during the khilafat of Abu Bakr. He was a devout and God-fearing man.” (*al-Fitna-tul-Kubra* {*The Great Upheaval*}, published by Dar-ul-Ma’arif, Cairo, 1959).

It was really unfortunate for the *umma* that Salim was dead or else Umar would have made him his successor, and he might have made an excellent khalifa. At any rate, Umar knocked down that “tradition” of the Apostle which Abu Bakr had quoted before the Ansar in Saqifa according to which no one but the Quraysh had the right to become rulers. Here was Umar, the greatest “pontiff” of the Sunni establishment, ready, willing and eager to make Salim the khalifa of the Muslims, who was:

(a) a non-Qurayshi

(b) a non-Arab

(c) a ‘non-free’ man, a client, a man who was emancipated by an Arab, and who was under his protection.

Umar “proved” on his deathbed that the “tradition” of the “Qurayshi connection” by which the Muhajireen had claimed their “superiority” over the Ansar in Saqifa, was spurious, and he “proved” that to be a

khalifa of the Muslims, it was not necessary to be a Qurayshi after all.

Umar could consider a former slave who was not distinguished for anything except for his piety, for the most important position in Islam but he could not consider an Ansari for it, even if he had distinguished himself in war and peace. The Ansaris, in fact, could not fill even less important positions.

In his book, *Al-Farooq*, M. Shibli, the Indian historian, has published a list of the names of the civil and military officers of his (Umar's) time. With one solitary exception (Uthman bin Hunaif), the entire list is made up of names of men who were noted for their animosity to Ali, to Banu Hashim, and to the Ansar.

These Ansaris were the same people who had, at one time, given sanctuary to Umar in their city. They had given him food, clothing and shelter when he did not have any of these things. Now he was repaying them!

Umar's attitude toward the Ansar is in sharp contrast to the attitude toward them of Muhammad, the Messenger of God. The latter loved the Ansar. He appointed many of them as governors of Medina, and he made many of them commanders of various expeditions. On one occasion he said that he would rather be with them (the Ansar) than with any other people. He also considered them capable of and qualified to rule the Muhajireen.

Montgomery Watt

The remark of Muhammad about Sa'd bin Mu'adh when he was about to judge the case of Banu Qurayza, "Stand for your chief (Sayyid)," could be taken to justify the view that the Ansar were capable of ruling over Quraysh, and the story was therefore twisted in various ways to remove this implication. (*Muhammad at Medina, Oxford, 1966*)

The Apostle of God called Sa'd the Chief of the Quraysh. Sa'd was obviously capable of ruling the Quraysh, and why not? After all what was there in the "credentials" of the Quraysh that the Ansar didn't have? Nothing. But the Ansar lost their capability of ruling the Quraysh as soon as Muhammad, their master, died. During the caliphate of Abu Bakr and Umar, it was a "disqualification" to be an Ansari to hold any important position in the government.

Laura Veccia Vaglieri

As he lay dying, Umar was anxious about the succession and he appointed a committee of six, all Qurayshites, whose duty it should be to choose one of their number as caliph. The inhabitants of Medina no longer had any share in the election of the head of the state. (*Cambridge History of Islam, Cambridge, 1970*)

Far from having a share in the election of the head of the state, not to speak of themselves becoming the head of the state, the inhabitants of Medina, did not have a share in anything. They might have given some "advice" to Abu Bakr and Umar. In Saqifa, Abu Bakr and Umar had told them that they would

consult them (the Ansar) in all matters.

Few, if any, would challenge the general interpretation of this poignant fact that the most important and most indispensable single factor in the year 1 of Hijri, namely, the support of the Ansar, had become the most striking non-factor in the year 11 Hijri.

The Cassandra utterances of Hubab ibn al-Mandhir in the bedlam of Saqifa proved only too true. He had expressed the fear that the children of the Ansar would beg for food at the doors of the houses of the Muhajireen, and would not get any. Much worse was to come for them in the times of Yazid bin Muawiya.

The Ansar fought in all the campaigns of Abu Bakr and Umar but only as other ranks and never as generals. The new wealth which came flooding into Medina after the conquest of Persia and the Fertile Crescent, also appears to have bypassed them with the exception of a few, who collaborated with the Saqifa government.

Among the latter were the two spies from the tribe of Aus who had squealed on the Khazraj to Umar and Abu Bakr. Others were Muhammad bin Maslama, Bashir bin Saad, and Zayd bin Thabit. They had shown great zeal in taking the oath of loyalty to Abu Bakr in Saqifa.

Zayd bin Thabit was fanatically devoted to Uthman, and for this reason, he received many gifts and rewards from the treasury. He was the son of poor parents but during the caliphate of Uthman, became one of the richest men in Medina.

Two officers of the public treasury in Medina and in Kufa who had been appointed by Abu Bakr, had thrown the keys of the treasuries in their charge, before Uthman, in protest against the plunder of the public funds by himself and by one of his governors. Uthman gave both keys to Zayd bin Thabit.

Zayd bin Thabit was also the chairman of the committee appointed by Uthman to collect the verses of Qur'an, and to publish them in one volume, as noted before.

Zayd bin Thabit was one of the few Ansaris who shared the bonanza in the times of Umar and Uthman. He was also one of the few Ansaris who did not take part in the campaigns of Ali in Basra, Siffin and Nehrwan. Most of the Ansaris fought on Ali's side against his enemies in these battles.

Following deductions can be made from Umar's arrangements for finding a khalifa:

1. It is not necessary for the khalifa of the Muslims to be a Qurayshi. Even an emancipated slave like Salim can become their khalifa. The "tradition" that the leaders must be members of the tribe of Quraysh, was cooked up and was attributed to the Prophet on a special occasion, and for a special purpose; it worked in Saqifa, and checkmated the Ansar.

2. The incumbent khalifa can arbitrarily restrict the right and power to choose a new khalifa to five or six men without any reference to the Muslim *umma*. The Muslim *umma* can be safely ignored.
3. Within the electoral committee, if a man disagrees with the majority, he merits death, even if he is a friend of the Prophet of Islam; even if he fought at Badr; and even if he is a “Companion of the Tree.” Nothing can save him.
4. The Muslim *umma* can be left leaderless for three days. It is not necessary to select a new khalifa immediately after the death of the incumbent khalifa. A khalifa was chosen immediately after the death but before the burial of Muhammad Mustafa, on the ground that the Muslim *umma* ought not to be without a head even for a moment. Umar thus set a new precedent, viz., flexibility in the application of political “principles.”
5. Those drawbacks and shortcomings of character which Umar found in the members of his electoral committee, such as lust, anger, arrogance, conceit, greed, nepotism and ambition, etc., are not a disqualification for khilafat. A man may be arrogant, conceited, henpecked and greedy; he can still become a khalifa of the Muslims. A khalifa does not have to be a man of outstanding character and ability.

Muawiya's Verdict on Umar's Electoral Committee

Ibn Abd Rabbeh writes in his famous book, *Iqd-ul-Farid* (The Unique Necklace), Volume II, page 203, that many years after Muawiya was firmly established on the throne, and had consolidated his position as the khalifa of the Muslims, he posed, one day, the following question to one of his courtiers:

Muawiya: You are a wise, intelligent and knowledgeable man. I would like to know what in your opinion, exactly, was the cause of the civil wars of the Muslims.

The Courtier: The murder of Uthman.

Muawiya: No.

The Courtier: Ali's accession to the throne.

Muawiya: No.

The Courtier: Then I will request the Commander of the Faithful to enlighten me in this regard.

Muawiya: Well, I will tell you what was the real cause of the civil wars of the Muslims. All the conflicts and civil wars of the Muslims had their origins in the electoral committee which Umar appointed to choose a khalifa.

Muawiya was right. The seeds of civil war in Islam were planted on the day when Umar picked out the

members of his electoral committee. Instead of one candidate for caliphate, he made six candidates. If his decision to appoint his successor had been as direct and forthright as that of Abu Bakr had been, Islam might have been spared the traumatic and horrendous experience of civil wars so early in its career. The Muslims who fought against and killed each other in these civil wars, did not belong to the distant future; they belonged to the generation of the Prophet himself.

Civil wars broke out in Islam at a time when its idealism was supposed to be still fresh. But the elective system devised by Umar had built-in confrontation, and it took Islam across a great divide. His policy proved to be counter-productive, and his mode of giving the Muslims a leader through his panel of electors turned out to be one of the greatest misfortunes of the history of Islam.

Umar and Muhammad Mustafa, the Messenger of God

Umar had accepted Islam at the end of the year 6 of the Call. Seven years later, he migrated with other Muslims to Medina. In Medina, these immigrants (Muhajireen) made a fresh start in life.

In Medina, there were occasions when Umar had to remind Muhammad that in him (in Umar), he (Muhammad) had to reckon with a man who had great reserves of moral courage. If he disagreed with him (with Muhammad), he was not at all queasy about expressing his disagreement. Thus, among all the companions, he (Umar) alone had the moral courage to show his resentment and insolence to him (to Muhammad) at Hdaybiyya when he (Muhammad) signed a treaty of peace with the Quraysh.

There were other occasions when Umar found it his unpleasant “duty” to “correct” the “errors” of Muhammad, the Apostle of God. Following are some incidents in which Umar figured as a critic of the actions of Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam.

When Abdullah bin Ubayy died, the Apostle attended his funeral, and prayed to God to forgive him and to bestow mercy upon his soul. Umar tried to dissuade him from doing so by pointing out that Ibn Ubayy had been a *Munafiq* (hypocrite).

It is true that Abdullah bin Ubayy was a hypocrite. But his hypocrisy was not a secret from anyone in Medina. Everyone knew that he was a hypocrite. On the eve of the battle of Uhud, he withdrew his contingent of 300 warriors from the army on the ostensible pretext that the Muslims had not accepted his plan of the battle.

In that battle, the Muslims were defeated. But they were defeated not because of Ibn Ubayy's defection but because of their own greed and indiscipline. The withdrawal of Ibn Ubayy's troops did not affect the fortunes of war in any way.

Since Ibn Ubayy played a divisive role in a crisis, the Muslims were alert at all times for what he might do. He could, therefore, never catch them off-guard. He was a known and an “open” hypocrite.

Far more dangerous to Islam were the hypocrites who were “hidden” from the sight of the Muslims. The true believers considered them to be sincere Muslims and trusted them. This trust of the Muslims in them made the Muslim society and the State of Medina much more vulnerable to sabotage by them. Al-Qur’an al-Majid is a witness to the presence in Medina, in large numbers, of these hypocrites, and has castigated them repeatedly. It were they – the hidden hypocrites – and not Abdullah ibn Ubayy and his supporters – who were the real source of danger to the security of Islam.

Abdullah ibn Ubayy's son was a true believer. He volunteered to kill him (his father). But Muhammad, the bringer of mercy, did not let him. And when Ibn Ubayy died, he (Muhammad) condoned all his transgressions, most of which, he knew, were products of frustration. Before the Prophet's arrival from Makkah, he (Ibn Ubayy) had hoped to become the king of Medina.

To forgive and to forget was characteristic of Muhammad's magnanimity. Earlier, he had shown the same magnanimity toward the idolaters of Makkah when he conquered that city, and granted amnesty to them all. It was, therefore, entirely, “in character” for him to conduct the funeral services for Ibn Ubayy, to see that he was given a proper burial, to pray for his soul, and to offer condolences to his son, notwithstanding Umar's remonstrance.

In late 630, Muhammad, the Messenger of God, sustained a personal loss. His son, Ibrahim, from his Egyptian wife, Maria the Copt, died when he was 11 months old (some say 16 months). Muhammad was very much attached to him. He was deeply aggrieved at his death, and could not withhold his tears. Umar took it upon himself to call his (Muhammad's) attention to the “impropriety” of shedding tears at the death of his son.

If Umar was right in his attempts to prevent the Apostle of God from commiserating with the bereaved members of the family of Abdullah ibn Ubayy, and in invoking God's mercy upon his (Ibn Ubayy's) soul; or if he was right in trying to prevent him from crying at the death of his own son, then it must be said that Islam is a highly “dehumanized” religion which denies Muslims even the “right” to forgive their enemies, and withholds from them the freedom of expression of such innocuous feelings as sympathy and sorrow.

But such is not the case. Islam is not “dehumanized.” It is, in fact, the most humane of all religions, and urges its followers to be forgiving, kind, courteous and considerate to others; and commands them never to be vindictive. Vindictiveness was considered a pagan characteristic. Islam also commands Muslims, in the following verses of Al-Qur’an al-Majid, to return good for evil:

And turn off evil with good. (Chapter 13; verse 22)

Repel evil with that which is best. (Chapter 23: verse 96)

Nor can goodness and evil be equal. Repel (evil) with what is better: then will he between whom and thee was hatred, become as it were thy friend and intimate. (Chapter 41: verse 34)

Muhammad Mustafa, the Interpreter of Al-Qur'an al-Majid, gave a demonstration of the application of these commandments of Heaven at the death of Abdullah ibn Ubayy.

In the summer of A.D. 632, Muhammad, the Messenger of God, lay on his deathbed in his house in Medina. His last wish was to comply with the commandment in the Book of God to write his will and testament. But Umar did not countenance this idea. In his opinion, writing a will was not the right thing for the Prophet of Islam to do.

At Hdaybiyya, he had opposed the Prophet but had failed in his opposition; this time, however, he had no intention of failing. He opposed the dying Prophet, and he scored a brilliant success in his opposition. The will the Prophet wished to write, was never written.

If Umar was right in his attempts to inhibit the freedom of action of Muhammad, the Messenger of God, then it means that the latter was "wrong." And if he (Muhammad) was "wrong," then it means that Al-Qur'an al-Majid was also "wrong" because it claimed that:

Nor does he (Muhammad) say (anything) of (his own) desire. It is no less than inspiration sent down to him. (Chapter 53; verses 3 and 4)

If Umar was right, then Muhammad and Qur'an were "wrong." This is the only conclusion to which such a line of argument can lead. It is now for the Muslims to decide if this is the "logic" which appeals to them, and therefore, is acceptable to them.

When Muhammad Mustafa died in A.D. 632, his successors – Abu Bakr and Umar – lost no time in seizing the estate of Fadak from his daughter. Umar was a conscientious man, and he was presumably prompted by his moral courage to "rectify" the "error" which Muhammad had made in giving the estate of Fadak to his daughter in A.D. 628.

Umar had, to all intents and purposes, appointed himself a "censor" of the words and deeds of Muhammad while the latter was still alive. If he countermanded his (Muhammad's) orders after his death vis-à-vis his succession or the estate of Fadak, there is nothing odd about it. If he had any inhibitions in this matter, he threw them overboard as soon as Muhammad died.

Muhammad, the Apostle of God, had expressed the wish, on his deathbed, to write his will, and as noted before, Umar had thwarted him by shouting that the Book of God was sufficient for the Muslim *umma*, and that it did not need any other writing from him.

Umar, it appears, actually believed in what he said, viz., a will or any other writing of the Prophet was redundant since Qur'an had the ultimate answers to all the questions. And if any doubts still lingered in anyone's mind on this point, he removed them when he became khalifa.

Muhammad lived in the hearts of his companions and friends. After his death, they wished to preserve all their recollections of his life. These recollections were of two kinds – his words and his deeds. The

two together formed his *Sunnah* (the trodden path). Anything he said, and was quoted by a companion, is called a *hadith* or 'tradition.'

But Umar did not want the companions to preserve any recollection of the words and the deeds of the Prophet. He, apparently, had many reservations regarding the usefulness, to the Muslim umma, of these recollections. He, therefore, forbade the companions to quote the sayings of the Prophet in speech or in writing. In other words, he placed the *Hadith* of the Prophet under a proscription.

Following is the testimony of two modern Sunni historians on Umar's ban on *Hadith*:

Muhammad Husayn Haykal

Umar ibn al-Khattab once tried to deal with the problem of committing the *Hadith* to writing. The companions of the Prophet whom he consulted, encouraged him, but he was not quite sure whether he should proceed. One day, moved by God's inspiration, he made up his mind and announced: "I wanted to have the traditions of the Prophet written down, but I fear that the Book of God might be encroached upon. Hence I shall not permit this to happen."

He, therefore, changed his mind and instructed the Muslims throughout the provinces: "Whoever has a document bearing a prophetic tradition, shall destroy it." The *Hadith*, therefore, continued to be transmitted orally and was not collected and written down until the period of al-Mamun. (*The Life of Muhammad, Cairo, 1935*)

Dr. Mohammad Hamidullah

Abu-Dhahabi reports: The Caliph Abu-Bakr compiled a work, in which there were 500 traditions of the Prophet, and handed it over to his daughter 'Aishah. The next morning, he took it back from her and destroyed it, saying: "I wrote what I understood; it is possible however that there should be certain things in it which did not correspond textually with what the Prophet had uttered."

As to Umar, we learn on the authority of Ma'mar ibn Rashid, that during his caliphate, Umar once consulted the companions of the Prophet on the subject of codifying the *Hadith*. Everybody seconded the idea. Yet Umar continued to hesitate and pray to God for a whole month for guidance and enlightenment.

Ultimately, he decided not to undertake the task, and said: "Former peoples neglected the Divine Books and concentrated only on the conduct of the prophets; I do not want to set up the possibility of confusion between the Divine Qur'an and the Prophet's *Hadith*." (*Introduction to Islam, Kuwait, pp. 34-35, 1977*)

One of the companions whom the Sunni Muslims consider one of the greatest authorities on *Hadith*, was Abu Hurayra. He was ever ready to quote a *Hadith*. There was never an occasion when recollection did not come to him of something he had heard the Prophet saying or something he had seen him doing. Once Umar asked him:

“O Abu Hurayra! Tell me this. Did the Messenger of God have nothing in the world to do except to whisper *Hadith* in your ears?”

Umar then ordered Abu Hurayra not to narrate any more *Hadith*.

Abu Hurayra was a very gregarious and a garrulous man. When Umar gagged him, he felt bottled up. But he was a patient man, and quietly awaited the time when he would be unmuzzled. His opportunity came when Umar died, and he returned, with a vengeance, to the business of relating *Hadith*. Today, the books of *Hadith*, compiled by Sunni collectors, are brimming with traditions narrated by him.

It is perhaps interesting to speculate on Umar's decision in placing the traditions of the Prophet under proscription. Did he believe that the proscription would outlast his own caliphate? There is no way of knowing the answer to this question. But he could not have meant the proscription to be effective only during his own lifetime; he could only have meant it to be everlasting. If so, then did he want to deprive the Muslims of the record of the precepts and precedents of their Prophet forever?

Muhammad Husayn Haykal says in the passage quoted above from his book that Umar was “moved by God's inspiration” to place the *Hadith* of the Apostle of God under proscription. This means that Umar's authority to order the suppression of *Hadith*, was implicit in the “inspiration” of which he was the recipient, and he didn't hesitate to exercise it. In exercising his “inspired” authority, he overrode even the consensus of the companions.

Consensus, incidentally, is a very important principle in Sunni jurisprudence. But Umar was right in overriding it. After all the consensus of fallible, earth-bound mortals could never supersede the authority of Umar's “inspiration.”

But Umar's ordinance suppressing *Hadith* leaves one vital question unanswered, viz., is it possible to understand and to practice Islam at all, and to obey the commandments of God embodied in Al-Qur'an al-Majid, without the knowledge and understanding of the sermons, statements, speeches, commands, prohibitions, precedents, examples and explanations of Muhammad Mustafa?

Was it, for example, possible for the companions to know, merely by reading Qur'an, how to say the five canonical prayers if Muhammad himself had not taught them? Or, would they have known how much Zakat (poor-tax) to pay, when to pay and whom to pay if they had not seen the Apostle himself paying it?

Without *Hadith*, Muslims could never understand the ideology of Islam nor could they grasp its practicability. In this regard, the contemporary, Austrian-born scholar, translator and commentator of Qur'an, Muhammad Asad, writes in his book, *Islam At The Crossroads*, as follows:

The Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad is, (therefore) next to Qur'an, the second source of Islamic law of social and personal behavior. In fact we must regard the Sunnah as the only valid explanation of the

Qur'anic teachings and the only means to avoid dissension concerning their interpretation and adaptation to practical use.

Many verses of the Qur'an have allegorical meaning and could be understood in different ways unless there was some definite system of interpretation. And there are, furthermore, many items of practical importance not explicitly dealt with by the Qur'an. The spirit prevailing in the Holy Book is, to be sure, uniform throughout; but to deduce from it the practical attitude which we have to adopt is not, in every case, an easy matter.

So long as we believe that this Book is the word of God, perfect in form and purpose, the only logical conclusion is that it never was intended to be used independently of the personal guidance of the Prophet which is embodied in the system of Sunnah. (pp. 117–118)

The Apostle's statements and his actions were a detailed interpretation and application of the principles of the Book of God. That Book has repeatedly and emphatically called upon the Muslims to obey him and to follow him, as per the following verses:

Say: if ye do love God, follow me: God will love you and forgive your sins; for God is oft-forgiving, most Merciful. (Chapter 3; verse 31)

God did confer a great favor on the believers when He sent among them an Apostle from among themselves, rehearsing unto them the signs of God, sanctifying them, and instructing them in Scripture and Wisdom, while before that they had been in Manifest Error. (Chapter 3: verse 164)

Those are limits set by God: those who obey God and His Apostle, will be admitted to the Gardens with Rivers flowing beneath, to abide therein (forever) and that will be the supreme achievement. (Chapter 4: verse 13)

O ye who believe! Obey God, and obey His Apostle, and those charged with authority among you. if ye differ in anything among yourselves, refer it to Allah and his apostle... (Chapter4: verse 59)

We sent an Apostle but to be obeyed, in accordance with the will of God. (Chapter 4: verse 64)

But no, by thy Lord, they can have no (real) faith, until they make thee judge in all disputes between them, and find in their souls no resistance against thy decisions, but accept them with the fullest conviction. (Chapter 4: verse 65)

He who obeys the Apostle, obeys God. (Chapter4: verse 80)

Obey God and His Apostle, if ye do believe. (Chapter 8: verse 1)

It is such as obey God and His Apostle, and fear God and do right, that will win (in the end).

(Chapter 24: verse 52)

Ye have indeed in the Apostle of God a beautiful pattern of conduct for everyone whose hope is in God and the final day, and who engages much in remembering God. (Chapter 33: verse 21)

O ye who believe! Obey God, and obey the Apostle, and make not vain your deeds. (Chapter 47: verse 33)

Whatever the Messenger assigns to you, take it, and deny yourselves that which he withholds from you, and fear God. (Chapter 59: verse 7)

From the foregoing verses, it is clear that Umar's ban on *Hadith* was in a head-on collision course with the commandments of Al-Qur'an al-Majid. Quran as the explicit Word of God, and *Hadith* as the explicit word of His Last Messenger, form one integral whole, each elucidating, amplifying and illuminating the other.

Sunni jurists perhaps did not want to set themselves at odds with Umar but they also realized that there was no way for them to dispense with *Hadith*, and still call themselves Muslims, and that his ban (on *Hadith*) could not coexist with Islam. They, therefore, discreetly tiptoed around the issue. "Let the *Hadith* of our Prophet be free of bans," was their tacit consensus even if such a reorientation of thought was painful to some of them, and they decided to address themselves to the most vital task of collecting, collating, and preserving, for themselves and for posterity the record of the sayings and the deeds of Muhammad Mustafa, their Guide and Leader in this world and in the world to come.

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