Historical Aspect of the Imam Rida's (A.S.) Biography

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Imam and Alawide Revolts

We have already indicated that one of the reasons which prompted al-Mamoon to bring Imam al-Rida (A.S.) to Khurasan and nominate him as his successor was to avoid a direct collision with the Alawides who were of the view that the Abbasides had monopolized authority and robbed them of their right to rule the Muslims. Al-Mamoon tried to deal with this problem which always used to push the Alawides to assault the government from time to time. Rebels were always inviting all fellow Alawides to join them in their rebellions, as was the case regarding the Abbasides when they moved against the Umayyad rule.

Al-Mamoon suffered the agonies of the most serious Alawide rebellion against his government, namely the rebellion of Muhammad ibn Ibrahim al-Hassani. He was well known as Ibn Tabataba the Alawide; his chief executive was Abul-Saraya al-Sari ibn Mansour, and his call was in the name of al-Rida (A.S.) from the Progeny of Muhammad (S.A.W.). Several Alawide uprisings branched out of that revolution. After the rebellion of Abul-Saraya, his .Alawide governors declared autonomy in the areas under their control

Alawide Uprisings

In Yemen, Ibrahim ibn Mousa ibn Ja'fer rose and took control of the government after banishing al-Mamoon's governor. In Mecca, al-Husayn ibn al-Hassan al-Aftas rose, and Muhammad ibn Ja'fer was named caliph. In Basrah, Zayd ibn Mousa ibn Ja'fer rose in rebellion. He was nicknamed "Zayd of the fire" due to the number of the homes of the Abbasides and their followers which he had burnt. Whenever he came across a man draped in black, he would burn him, and he confiscated a great deal of money from the merchants except Abbaside money.

Ali ibn Sa'id marched towards him. Zayd requested him to give him an assurance to safeguard his life should he give up, and Ali did so. But he nevertheless arrested him1 and sent him to al-Hassan ibn Sahl who ordered to have him executed while al-Hajjaj ibn Khaythama was present, so he said, "Prince! Do not rush, for I have a piece of advice for you.

" He stopped the executioner and came close to him. He said, "Prince! Did you receive instructions from the commander of the faithful to do what you are about to?" He answered in

the negative, so he asked again, "Then why are you executing the cousin of the commander of the faithful without his knowledge or consultation?" Then he narrated for him the story of Abu Abdullah al-Aftas whom al-Rashid put in jail under the watchful eyes of Ja'fer ibn Yahya. Ja'fer killed him without his knowledge and sent his head on a platter to him together with other Nawrooz presents. When al-Rashid ordered Masrour to kill Ja'fer, he said to him, "If Ja'fer asked you about his crime for which you are killing him, tell him that you are killing him for his own killing of my cousin Ibn al-Aftas whom he killed without my knowledge." Then al-Hajjaj ibn Khaythama said to al-Hassan ibn Sahl, "O Prince! Do you feel secure should anything happen between you and the commander of the faithful if you kill this man and use it as an excuse just as al-Rashid used against Ja'fer ibn Yahya?" Al-Hassan said to al-Hajjaj, "May God reward you!" Then he ordered Zayd to be returned to his prison where he was kept till he was transported to al-Mamoon. When he was there, he sent him to his brother al-Rida (A.S.) who set him free.2

Zayd and al-Mamoon

One of the interesting anecdotes narrated about him is the following: When he was brought to al-Mamoon, the latter said to him, "O Zayd! You led the uprising in Basrah, and instead of starting with the homes of our common enemies the Umayyads, Banu Thaqeef, Uday, Bahila and Aal Ziyad, you targeted the homes of your own cousins." Zayd, who had a humorous temper, said, "I indeed erred from each direction, O commander of the faithful! If I go back, I will start with our enemies!" Al-Mamoon laughed and sent him to his brother al-Rida (A.S.), saying, "I have pardoned him to please you." When he was brought to the Imam (A.S.), he rebuked him and released him.3

Imam Rebukes His Brother Zayd

Yasir the servant narrates that when Zayd entered the Imam's house, Abul-Hassan (A.S.) said, "O Zayd! Were you duped by the speech of some lowly people in Kufa who said that Fatima safeguarded her modesty, therefore God shunned Hell-fire from her progeny? Those were only al-Hassan and al-Husayn in particular. If you think that you could go against God's Will and still enter Paradise, while Mousa ibn Ja'fer (A.S.) obeyed God and entered Paradise, do you think you are more worthy in the eyes of God Almighty than Mousa ibn Ja'fer? By God! Nobody achieves the rewards with God except after obeying Him, while you claim that you will achieve it by your disobedience..." Zayd said to him, "But I am your brother and the son of your

father!" Abul-Hassan (A.S.) said to him, "You are my brother as long as you obey the Dear and Glorified God. Noah had said, `Lord! My son is of my family, and your promise is true, and you are the best of judges,' and God Almighty said to him, `O Noah! He is not of your family! It is indeed a wrongful deed,' thus God excluded him from his family due to his disobedience..."4

Imam's View of the Alawide Revolutionary Method

What we try to get acquainted with by examining the Imam's stance towards his brother Zayd of the fire was the reality regarding the Imam's viewpoint of the revolutionary method employed by the Alawides in their revolutions against the Abbasides. We find the Imam (A.S.) taking a strictly negative stance towards his brother Zayd. Yet he did not rebuke him and blame him simply because he had revolted against the government, but rather because he had committed several unlawful acts according to Islamic Shari'a such as looting, confiscating, burning, in which acts he did not distinguish between the innocent and the guilty.

Other than that, the sincere Alawide revolutions which aimed at standing in the face of injustice and oppression used to enjoy the support of the Imams who considered them the only way which could disclose to the nation how corrupt the government was and make them become aware of its mistakes and transgressions. From here we find Imam al-Rida (A.S.) in his stance with his brother not expressing his displeasure against his brother for the principle of the revolution and the movement against the government,

but his rebuking was due to committing some Islamically unlawful transgressions which did not please God. Al-Mamoon's tolerance towards those who rebelled against him was not in contradiction with his general conduct. On one hand, he wanted to compete with the Alawides in winning the public opinion to his side. On the other hand, he was trying to stay away from getting involved in shedding their blood and seeking revenge against them which did not agree with his theoretical inclination towards the Alawides.

Imam's Stance Towards Abul-Saraya's Revolution

There is a previous stance in which the Imam (A.S.) had sided with the Alawide revolution of Ibn Tabataba under the command of Abul-Saraya. Muhammad ibn al-Athram, chief of the police force of Muhammad ibn Sulayman al-Alawi at Medina during the days of Abul-Saraya, is quoted saying, "His near in kin and some people from Quraish gathered around him and swore allegiance to him saying, `If you send word to Abul-Hassan (A.S.), he would surely support us and we will be united.' Sulayman said to me, `Go to him and convey my greetings to

him and tell him that his kinfolk have gathered and desired that he should join them; so, if you wish, please do so.' So I met him at al-Hamra and I conveyed the message to him. He said, `Convey my greeting to him and tell him I will join him after twenty days.' So I conveyed to him the message with which I was sent, and we stayed for a few days. On the 18th day, Warqa, al-Jalloudi's commander, marched towards us, whereupon I ran in the direction of the two Soors. When I heard someone calling me, `O Abu Athram!' I turned back, and it was Abul-Hassan (A.S.) asking me, `Did the twenty days pass already?!"[5]

Why Did the Imam Refuse to Participate in the Revolution?

The Imam (A.S.) was not objecting to the revolution but he simply wanted to assure those persons that the revolution whose success he could not secure was one he would not join. According to his serious foresight into events, it seemed to him that the revolution whose movement was arbitrary would end up with elimination and failure. For this reason, he was hinging his participation in the revolution on the passage of twenty days, for he calculated that the opposite move from the Abbasides would show during such a period of time and would gauge the extent of success achieved so far by the revolution.

This cautious stance of the Imam (A.S.) was not due to evading his participation in the revolutionary movement but was the result of a realistic calculation of the development of events in the sphere of the movement of revolutions along the Abbaside rule and before them the Umayyad. For this reason, we cannot conclude that the Imam's lack of participation in a rebellion meant that he was not convinced of the principle of its necessity.

Why Did the Imam Decline From Demanding Caliphate?

It is worth our research time to dispel the ambiguity which clouds the motives which prompted the Imams (A.S.) not to claim authority by force and thus upset the oppressive governments which were controlling the sustenance of the Muslim nation and its general conditions. These are as follows:

Lack of a Popular Front of Confrontation

To move within the framework of the revolution needs the existence of an alert public base of confrontation which responds immediately to the plans put by its leader no matter what the outcome might be. The Imams always complained that it simply was not there. As regarding

the fragile public support base, which is not united by a unifying belief in the means and objectives, this cannot be made the base from which a revolution can start because it is doomed with failure in advance.

Suffices us for proof on that the shaky circumstance which surrounded the caliphate of the Commander of the Faithful Imam Ali (A.S.) whose government took full control over all Islamic lands with the exception of Syria which was under the control of Mu'awiya ibn Abu Sufyan. The reason why Mu'awiya was able to stand firm and score a victory in some of his battles against the Imam (A.S.) was due to the fact that he had that public base which was united in concept and in objective. As regarding the Imam (A.S.),

his public base was fragmented and it lacked harmony in its elements whose ideas and goals differed, and probably what happened to the Imam's army during the masquerade of arbitration is sufficient proof for that. Suffices us also the revolutionary movement led by Imam al-Hassan (A.S.) to confront Mu'awiya after his father had died, leading in the end to a peace treaty with Mu'awiya. The reason for the failure was none other than the lack of that base which would enable him through its cementation to steer the situation to his own advantage, and we have already explained that clearly in our book Sulh al Imam al-Hassan.

Imam's Main Responsibility was Disseminating Awareness

With a situation like that, we cannot blame the Imams for keeping silent about revolutions, or for their reluctance to prepare for them, or permit ourselves to pass a judgement about their own lack of necessary qualifications to assume government responsibilities, or even tell them that the role which was assigned to them was only to be leaders of the spiritual authority alone, and that they simply do not have the qualities required for temporal authority. Rather, their responsibility is confined to create a public base that is alert and with the sense of direction, and this cannot be achieved except when they are free to direct others and disseminate awareness among the various segments of the nation.

Governments' Persecution of Imams

Their contemporary caliphs, Umayyad or Abbaside, made sure to rob them of that freedom and besiege them with a siege of strict surveillance which counted their movements and monitored their breath, so much so that to belong to their school of thought was considered a crime punishable by the ruling authority with execution or banishment.

The matter became so difficult and so straitened that their sincere followers tried to hide their

creed fearing for their lives should they otherwise disclose it and even demanding that their Imams, too, should hide it if any among them was destined to declare his Imamate. All of that was out of their concern about the lives of those Imams lest they should be endangered as actually happened to Imam al-Rida (A.S.) when he declared that he was, indeed, the Imam (A.S.) succeeding his father. Moreover, the Imams were contemporary to the revolutionary experiences of the Alawides who rebelled against both Umayyad and Abbaside dynasties and which ended in their utter defeat despite the fact that some rebels such as Muhammad and Ibrahim sons of Abdullah ibn al-Husayn were able to subject large tracts of Islamic territories to their control.

Imams' Support of Alawide Revolutions

The Imams did, indeed privately support those successive revolutions without publicly announcing their support. They viewed them as means of public awareness against oppressive government systems. For example, Imam al-Kazim (A.S.) is quoted saying to his cousin al-Husayn, who was murdered in an ambush, upon saying farewell to him, "O cousin! You are certainly going to be killed; so, fight very well, for these folks are corrupt. They feign belief and hide atheism...

We are God's and unto Him is our return... I plead the Almighty on your behalf to grant you the strength of unity."6 Having said all of this, we see no reason to oppose and criticize the negative stance of the Imams towards the rebellions which took place against their contemporary governments, for they evaluated their political circumstances and they knew that the end result of each revolution against the government would be defeat..., and nothing but defeat.

Notes:

1 Ibn al-Athir, Vol. 5, pp. 175-177

2 Uyoon Akhbar al-Rida, Vol. 2, p. 233

3 Uyoon Akhbar al-Rida, Vol. 2, p. 233

4 Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 234

5 Uyoon Akhbar al-Rida, Vol. 2, p. 208

6 Maqatil al-Talibiyyin, p. 443