Fadl ibn Sahl, the Famous Vizier of al-Mamun

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Al-Mamoon granted Fadl ibn Sahl the nucleus of power and his complete personal confidence when he permitted him to fare with all government issues, vesting upon him the responsibility of all state affairs without doubting even a little bit his loyalty and readiness to consume himself while safeguarding him and his throne.

Al-Fadl, on the other hand, made very good use of that confidence and generous award for the enhancement of his own status. He took hold of the reins of government and surrounded al-Mamoon with a curtain of deception, completely isolating him from the reality of the general political situation, acting on his own according to the dictates of his own interest as an absolute ruler single-handedly issuing decisions suitable to strengthen his own position.

Al-Fadl Controls the Government

With the talent of cunning and conniving, al-Fadl was able to control the sentiments of the leaders and heads who made up the governing apparatus, forcing upon them his own power and awe without anyone being able to go beyond the limits al-Fadl had defined for him, for the price would then be the loss of his job and maybe his life as well.

The only person whom he could not control nor influence was Imam al-Reza (A.S.) who was closely watching the suspicious movements of al-Fadl, trying from a distance to warn al-Mamoon against the sure danger awaiting him due to the actions of al-Fadl and his supporters, but al-Mamoon did not want to show any sign of mistrust of the man who saved his power and returned his usurped throne to him after the winds of dissension emanating from Baghdad almost eliminated him and his government.

Al-Fadl Tests al-Mamoon's Attitude Towards Him

Al-Fadl was not completely unaware of the secret warnings to al-Mamoon regarding his suspicious movements and what political gains he aspired to achieve in order to satisfy his aspirations and ambitions for which he had prepared plans with sure results.

Al-Fadl may have been contented with the strength of his own position and the invulnerability of the plans he had prepared to secure the safety of his status, without imagining that al-Mamoon might one day consider eliminating him. In Khurasan, he controlled all the centers of

power by winning the support of the leaders and chiefs there. In Iraq, he was able through his cunning to depose Tahir ibn al-Husayn from the post of leadership after he had subdued Baghdad to his control when al-Mamoon instructed al-Fadl to depose Tahir and banish him to Riqqa and install his own brother al-Hassan ibn Sahl in his place, and al-Mamoon immediately responded favourably to that.

Such a swift positive response from al-Mamoon was a clear signal to al-Fadl that he was the only man who monopolized control over the center of power and who could control al-Mamoon's mind regarding how to run the government, and that the whisperings which started being circulated inside closed halls suggesting a change in al-Mamoon's heart towards al-Fadl .were completely far away from the truth

Ambiguity of al-Mamoon's Handling of al-Fadl

We cannot understand the secret in the continuation of such a loose stance of al-Mamoon towards al-Fadl and whether it was due to a secret plan al-Mamoon had prepared to trap al-Fadl and get rid of him after going beyond reasonable limits in his control over the running of the general administration of the government. Was that the outcome of the element of trust in al-Fadl's actions and the complete confidence in his loyalty after all the sacrifices he had offered in order to bring authority back to him?

In fact, al-Mamoons's political insight and genius, and his alert awareness of events, make us doubt the second portion of this rhetorical question, for al-Mamoon was not a naive person who tried hard to freeze himself and practically isolate himself from government, while his minister had a free hand to do whatever he wished and whatever his own ambitions dictated to .him

Elimination of Harthama

No matter what the reason was, there are historical evidences asserting to us the fact that al-Mamoon was not reserved in adopting some suggestions inspired by al-Fadl. For example, Harthama was one of the leaders who did a very good job in creating a military atmosphere conducive to al-Mamoon's government and in securing its foundations. At the same time, he was one of those who were critical of the policies of al-Fadl and his brother al-Hassan ibn Sahl. Like other leaders, he did not appreciate such an extravagant norm of conduct adopted by al-Hassan ibn Sahl in his dealing with other leaders and chiefs and, in his view, that was according to instructions from his brother al-Fadl and to a plan agreed upon by both of them.

For this reason, he decided to speak his mind to al-Mamoon and to acquaint him with the disturbing situation clouding the government and with the failure of the extravagant policy adopted by al-Fadl and his brother.

Al-Fadl Incites About Harthama

Al-Fadl, possibly because of his intelligence and cunning, sensed the intriguing intentions of Harthama and that he was determined to incite the caliph against him and his brother, or maybe he came to know about that from his own watchdogs and informants whom he chose to monitor the movements of the leaders and chiefs and to inform him of their news; after all, it was only natural that al-Fadl should have an intelligence system to guarantee internal security. The result is that in order to foil the man's attempt, al-Fadl asked al-Mamoon to order Harthama to go to Syria and Hijaz, but Harthama was more stubborn than al-Fadl had expected. Ibn Khaldun narrates the following in his Tarikh:

"Having finished with Abul-Saraya, Harthama returned, and al-Hassan ibn Sahl was in Madain and he did not go to visit him there. He went from 'Aqr Qoob to Nahrawan heading towards Khurasan just to be faced with a barrage of letters from al-Mamoon ordering him to go to Syria and Hijaz, but he insisted instead on meeting him, remembering how he used to provide him and his father with counsel, with the objective to acquaint him with the schemes of al-Fadl ibn Sahl who was deliberately hiding news from him, about the worry of the public because of that, and because of his extravagance, and also about his stay in Khurasan. Al-Fadl came to know about that, and he incited al-Mamoon about him, claiming that the man had given a post to Abul-Saraya because he was among his soldiers, and that he had deliberately gone against his instructions expressed in the letters he had sent him. To forgive him, al-Fadl went on, would be to encourage others to do likewise. Al-Mamoon became angry and waited to see him. When he reached Marw, he ordered the drums to be beaten so that nobody could hide the news of his arrival from al-Mamoon. When al-Mamoon inquired about the beating of those drums, he was told that Harthama had arrived roaring and snarling, so he ordered him to see him at his court. Al-Mamoon said to him, `Harthama...! You have antagonized the Alawides! By the life of Abul-Saraya, had it been up to you to annihilate all of them, you would have done just that.' When he started to apologize, he was not given a moment to say anything; instead, al-Mamoon ordered him to be kicked in the stomach, to have his nose cut, and to be dragged to prison where he sent someone to kill him."[1]

Analysis of Harthama's Stance

We do not claim that Harthama was a loyalist, and that he was indeed trying to save the government from collapsing by inciting against al-Fadl and his brother. His motive, rather, may have been the wave of terror among the leaders and chiefs regarding the horrible fate which threatened their positions and influence as a result of deposing Tahir ibn al-Husayn and excluding him from prominent government positions and the appointment of al-Hassan ibn Sahl on the affairs of Iraq, according to the suggestion of al-Fadl to al-Mamoon. That provided us with an accurate specimen of the selfish nature of al-Fadl's policy which he used to apply towards those who showed strength in their military or political stances so that both he and his brother would remain the stronger pole round which the government revolved.

Harthama aimed by his incitement to protect his position which he rightfully deserved due to his sincere services to the government, but al-Fadl was successful in instigating al-Mamoon against him before he arrived there, and the rest is what you have just heard.

Leaders Move to Eliminate al-Fadl

Harthama's defeat before al-Fadl was a strong factor behind a swift move undertaken by the leaders who were expecting for themselves a fate similar to that of Harthama and Tahir ibn al-Husayn, but none of them alone possessed enough courage to disclose this dangerous situation the state was going through to al-Mamoon due to al-Fadl's behaviour.

Imam as Saviour

The only hope those leaders had had to save the deteriorating situation was to request Imam al-Reza (A.S.) to disclose the reality of the situation to al-Mamoon since he was the only one who could not be harmed by al-Fadl nor could anyone incite al-Mamoon against him. Ibn Khaldun writes:

"When these discords took place in Iraq because of al-Hassan ibn Sahl, and due to people's resentment of his and his brother's excessive influence over al-Mamoon, then the nomination of Ali ibn Mousa al-Reza (A.S.) and the transfer of the caliphate from the Abbasides, al-Fadl ibn Sahl was concealing all of that from al-Mamoon, and he was going to extremes in such concealment, for fear al-Mamoon might change his heart about him and his brother. When Harthama came, he knew that he was going to tell al-Mamoon about all of that, and that al-Mamoon trusted the advice of Harthama; so, he perfected his incitement against him with al-Mamoon till he made him change his mind about the man and kill him, and he did not even

listen to what he wanted to say; therefore, the displeasure of the Shi'as there as well as of the residents of Baghdad increased against him, and dissensions became widespread. The commanders of al-Mamoon's army started talking about it, but they could not inform him of it, so they approached Ali al-Reza (A.S.) and asked him to convey the matter to al-Mamoon. And so it was. He informed him of the rioting and killing in Iraq and that people criticized him for the favourite status of al-Fadl and al-Hassan, and for his (al-Reza's) nomination. Al-Mamoon asked, `Who else besides you knows all of that?' He said, `Yahya ibn Ma'ad, Abdul-Aziz ibn Imran and other prominent army leaders.' So he called them to him, and they did not reveal anything except after he had pledged for them their own security, and they told him exactly what al-Reza (A.S.) had already told him."2

Tabari provides us with a clear and more precise picture of Imam al-Reza's situation; he says: "It was rumoured that Ali ibn Mousa ibn Ja'fer ibn Muhammad the Alawide told al-Mamoon about the dissension and inter-killing among people, that since the assassination of his brother, al-Fadl was concealing the news from him, that his own family and the public criticized him for certain reasons and said he was a bewildered madman, and that since they saw that he was doing all of that, they swore the oath of allegiance to his uncle Ibrahim ibn al-Mahdi as the caliph. Al-Mamoon said, `They did not swear the oath of allegiance to him; rather, they accepted him as a governor ruling them in the way al-Fadl had instructed him.' He informed him that al-Fadl had indeed lied to him and that he cheated him as well, adding, `The war between Ibrahim and al-Hassan ibn Sahl is raging; people criticize him for the status you gave him (al-Fadl) and his brother, and they criticize your nomination of myself as your successor.' He asked, `Who else in my army is aware of that?' He said, `Yahya ibn Ma'ad, Abdul-Aziz ibn Imran, and a number of prominent military commanders.' So he called them to his court, and they were Yahya ibn Ma'ad, Abdul-Aziz ibn Imran and Mousa and Ali ibn Abu Sa'id who was son of al-Fadl's sister, and Khalaf the Egyptian, and he asked them about what he had heard, but they refused to tell him anything unless he guaranteed their safety against the threat revenge of al-Fadl ibn Sahl. He guaranteed that for them, and he wrote each one of them a statement in his own handwriting to that effect. Then they told him about the discords among his subjects, about the deliberate misinformation he heard from al-Fadl regarding Harthama, and that Tahir ibn al-Husayn had done an excellent job serving him and opened many lands to his government and strengthened his caliphate, and when he accomplished all of that, he was rewarded by banishment to Riqqa where he was not permitted to receive funds from anyone, till his authority was weakened and his troops mutinied, that had his caliphate been in Baghdad, he would have had a better control and nobody would have dared to mislead him as al-Hassan

ibn Sahl had, that the land from one end to the other was shaking under his feet, that Tahir ibn al-Husayn had been forgotten that year since the murder of Muhammad in Riqqa without being utilized in these wars while someone who was a lot less qualified was in charge..."3

Al-Mamoon is convinced of the Gravity of the Situation

The picture now was turned upside down in the eyes of al-Mamoon, but he did not try to change his conduct with al-Fadl because the latter was in charge of the government base in both Khurasan and Baghdad. In Khurasan, the psychological war which he waged by deposing Tahir ibn al-Husayn and by having Harthama murdered quenched the desire among the leaders and chiefs for mutiny, pushing them to yield to his wishes and expectations after having felt that al-Mamoon represented no more than a magic wand in the hands of al-Fadl. As regarding Baghdad, it was in the grip of his brother al-Hassan ibn Sahl who was considered the right hand of al-Fadl and the big stick whereby he threatened al-Mamoon.

Al-Fadl Seeks Revenge Against Instigators

As regarding those men who exposed to al-Mamoon the reality of al-Fadl's conduct and the dangers it implied, they were terrified when al-Fadl tore down the assurances of and were written by al-Mamoon guaranteeing their safety against his wrath and revenge upon coming to know about their incitement and their support of what Imam al-Reza (A.S.) had said about him.

Tabari says:

"When that became certain to al-Mamoon, he ordered preparations to go to Baghdad, and when al-Fadl ibn Sahl came to know about those preparations, he came to know only about some of them, so he interrogated them and even whipped and jailed some of them and pulled the hair out of the beards of others, so Ali ibn Mousa came to his court and told him what had happened to those men and reminded him of his assurances to them, and he answered him by saying that he was only tolerating."4

This historical text clearly tells us about the extent to which al-Mamoon went in avoiding a headlong collision with al-Fadl or letting him know that anyone had incited him against al-Fadl, especially since he came to know that he was harming the leaders who were pressured by him to speak the truth about al-Fadl, giving them written assurances that al-Fadl would not harm them. This text also tells us that al-Mamoon was the one who planned the assassination of al-Fadl which took place later as some assassins admitted to al-Mamoon face to face.

Al-Mamoon Pretends to be a Star Gazer

It is interesting that chance should play a major role in the execution of al-Mamoon's plan to eliminate al-Fadl, and it may even have been a deliberate "chance" arranged by al-Mamoon himself, and we do not think that is unlikely.

While on his way to Baghdad, al-Fadl, who was in the company of al-Mamoon, received a letter from his brother al-Hassan ibn Sahl in which he said, "I have looked in the changing of this year according to the calculation of the stars and I found out that you will in such and such month, on a Wednesday, taste the pain of red-hot iron and of the burning fire, and I am of the view that you should today go in the company of al-Reza (A.S.) and the commander of the faithful to the bath-house to take a bath and then pour blood over your body so that the ill luck of this omen leaves you." Al-Fadl, therefore, sent a letter to al-Mamoon asking him to go with him to the bath-house, and to request Abul-Hassan (A.S.) to join them too.

Imam Refuses to Go to the Bath-House and Gives a Warning

Al-Mamoon wrote a letter in that meaning to al-Reza (A.S.), and Abul-Hassan wrote him back saying that he would not enter the bath-house the next day, nor would he recommend that the commander of the faithful should enter it either, nor even al-Fadl. But al-Mamoon repeated his request twice, and Abul-Hassan wrote him again saying, "I shall not enter the bath-house tomorrow for I saw in a vision the Messenger of God (S.A.W.) last night telling me not to enter the bath-house tomorrow; therefore, I do not advise the commander of the faithful nor al-Fadl to enter the bath-house tomorrow," whereupon al-Mamoon wrote him saying, "You have, master, said the truth, and so has the Messenger of God (S.A.W.); I shall not enter the bath-house tomorrow, and al-Fadl knows best what he does..."[5]

Al-Fadl is Murdered

Finally, al-Fadl entered the bath-house just to be received by the swords of the assassins as the letter he had received from his brother al-Hassan ibn Sahl had predicted.

We do not think it is unlikely that that letter was prepared by al-Mamoon imitating the style of the man's brother, al-Hassan, in order to avoid being accused of murdering al-Fadl. It is also possible that al-Mamoon wished to get rid of both al-Fadl and Imam al-Reza (A.S.) by that method of mysterious assassination, but the Imam (A.S.) was alert in the face of al-Mamoon's cunning and scheming and he resisted the insistence of al-Mamoon in entering the bath-house with him and with al-Fadl by tact and caution. The last paragraph of the anecdote tells us clearly that the letter was a plot by al-Mamoon to kill both al-Fadl and the Imam (A.S.);

otherwise, why did al-Mamoon abstain from warning al-Fadl against entering the bath-house ?although the Imam (A.S.) had asked him to do just that

Assasins are Close Friends of al-Mamoon

What provides evidence is the fact that those who killed al-Fadl were among the closest courtiers and train of al-Mamoon and, according to one story, they later on faced al-Mamoon with their accusation that he was the one who asked them to do it. Al-Tabari says: "When he reached Sarkhas, a group of men assaulted al-Fadl ibn Sahl at the bath-house and struck him with their swords till he was dead, and that was on a Friday two nights before the end of Sha'ban in the year 202 A.H. They were arrested and it became clear that those who assassinated al-Fadl were among al-Mamoon's closest courtiers and they were four in number: Ghalib al-Mas'oodi the black man, Qistantine (Constantine) the Roman, Faraj al-Daylami, and Muaffaq of Sicily; they killed him and he was sixty years old and they ran away. Al-Mamoon posted a reward of ten thousand dinars for anyone who would bring them to him, and they were brought to him by al-Abbas ibn Haitham ibn Bazar-Jamhar al-Daynuri, and they said to al-Mamoon, `But you ordered us to kill him!' He ordered them to be killed. It is also said that when those who killed al-Fadl were arrested, al-Mamoon interrogated them, and some of them said that Ali ibn Abu Sa'id the son of al-Fadl's sister had dispatched them, while others among them denied that, and he ordered their execution. After that he ordered Abdul-Aiz ibn Imran, Ali, Mousa, and Khalaf, to be brought to him, and he interrogated them. They denied having any knowledge of the matter, but he did not believe them and ordered their execution too, sending their heads to al-Hassan ibn Sahl in Wasit as a trophy and informing him about his own pain because of the tragedy of the murder of al-Fadl and that he appointed him in his place."6

Thus did al-Mamoon get rid of the strongest power base within his government which threatened his authority and his fate, leaving only one obstacle in his way to guarantee to uproot the rebellion in Baghdad by dealing with its root causes which included the presence of Imam al-Reza (A.S.) who, according to the Abbasides, was a difficult knot they could not be loyal to al-Mamoon except if he untied it, for its presence meant the end of the Abbaside rule .and the beginning of the Alawide rule

Imam's Motives for Causing the Elimination of al-Fadl

The reason which caused the Imam (A.S.) to involve himself in the horribly violent struggle

which was raging between al-Fadl and the army commanders was the desire to safeguard the strength of the then Islamic entity and to distance it from the elements of disintegration and collapse which might cause its outside enemy to consider assaulting it and might push him to conduct hot adventures whose dear price would be paid by the Muslims.

Through his far sight, the Imam (A.S.) saw that al-Fadl's unloyal policy would certainly cause something like that in addition to what was being committed of iniquities, oppression and transgression from whose perils the Muslims were suffering, while the Imam (A.S.) viewed himself as being responsible to do something in the face of such an irresponsible behaviour. There was no method whereby the Imam (A.S.) could have limited such conduct except by acquainting al-Mamoon with the situation as it actually was and to uncover for him al-Fadl's cheating card.

The Imam (A.S.) had made that clear for us in a discussion he made with al-Mamoon in which he said, "O commander of the faithful! Fear God in your treatment of Muhammad's nation. God did not grant you such government and preferred you over others for it so that you might ignore the rights of the Muslims and hand such a responsibility over to someone else who would rule them contrary to what God has ordained..."7

The Imam (A.S.) was not concerned about a status or a post as much as he was concerned about maintaining the unity of the Muslims, about their strength and their collective power before the enemy which watched them within or without their ranks, as much as he was concerned about promoting social justice among the circles of the Muslims and lifting the nightmare of oppression from them. For these reasons, we find him suggesting to al-Mamoon that it was necessary to contain and put an end to dissensions, and that that would be possible only by dealing with their causes among which his own regency which was not in the best interest of the government, or that the causes which had necessitated them may have served their purpose already, for the post did not mean anything to the Imam (A.S.) as long as it collided with the supreme Islamic interest.

From here, we can see the Imam (A.S.) refusing the principle of sharing the responsibilities of the government upon becoming the regent, but he did not refuse to be an advisor counseling from a distance. That was only because he did not want to have a share in bearing the burdens of the oppression and the sins which he was not going to accept to be committed in his name as a member of the ruling system. But he was not unable of carrying the responsibility of offering advice and counsel when doing so would result in removing oppression and eliminating the danger of weakening the Muslims or disuniting them.

All of this did not contradict the Imam's attitude regarding the illegitimacy of the government

because of its being based on the usurpation of authority from its rightful owners, for the issue in the eyes of the Imam (A.S.) was not an issue of government but of the interest of Islam and the safeguarding of the unity of the Muslims in the face of the evils of adventurers and grudging people. This is what distinguishes the Imam (A.S.) from others. He could not possibly sacrifice the interest of Islam in order to maintain a post of influence. During various epochs, the Imams (A.S.) put up with their contemporary governments despite their belief in their illegitimacy only for the sake of looking after and maintaining the interests of the Muslims.

Notes:

1- Ibn Khaldun, Vol. 3, p. 245

2- Ibn Khaldun, Vol. 3, p. 249

3- Tabari, Vol. 8, p. 564

4- Tabari, Vol. 8, p. 565

5- Al-Kafi, Vol. 1, p. 491, and Al-Irshad, p. 294

6- Tabari, Vol. 8, p. 565. Ibn Khaldun mentions a similar story in Vol. 3, p. 250, of his work

7- 'Uyoon Akhbar al-Reza, Vol. 6, p. 159