

The Martyrdom of Imam Husain

(radi-Allah anhu / may Allah Bless him)

by SYED MUMTAZ ALI

In Islam, it is binding on every Muslim to acknowledge Allah as the Sovereign, the Master, the King and the Absolute overlord in his moral, social, cultural, economic and political spheres of life.

The Holy Qur'an reiterates this fundamental doctrine repeatedly. I will quote only a few short verses:

"Say: I seek refuge in the Rabb (Lord) of mankind, the King of mankind (114:1-2)

"Say: O Allah! Master of all the Kingship" (3:26)

"Is not Allah the best of all judges" (95:8)

"No one has the authority to pass judgment except Allah (6:57)

"To Him belongs whatever is in the Heavens and in the earth, and all that lies between them, and all that is beneath the soil" (20:6)

According to this principle, then, it follows that anyone who holds power and rules in accordance with the laws of God could undoubtedly be viceregent of the Supreme Ruler. In such a capacity, i.e., by virtue of his delegated authority, he will not be authorized to exercise any powers other than those delegated to him.

"It is He Who had made you viceregent on the earth" (35:39)

The Caliphate granted by God to the faithful is the popular viceregency and it is not limited to any family, clan or race etc. And even in this context, the guiding principle that determines superiority of one individual over the other depends solely on his piousness and good moral character (taqwa) which serves as the sole criterion.

"Surely the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is he who is the most righteous" (49:13)

In view of this limitation on his authority and powers, the head of the state shall not function in an autocratic but in a consultative (shura) manner. He is required to discharge his

duties in consultation with persons holding responsible positions in the government and with the elected representatives of the people. This fundamental principle that in an Islamic State, the government should be constituted and run in mutual consultation with people is clearly set out in the Qur'an. The Chapter which contains this verse is itself given the designated title/name of 'Alshura'. Verse 38 says: *"Conduct their affairs with mutual consultation" (42:38)*

This injunction has come to be known popularly in our times as the basic democratic principle of Islam. In his book, *Introduction to Islam*, Dr. M. Hamidullah elaborates this point in the following words: "Islam attaches no importance to the external forms of government. It is satisfied if two conditions are fulfilled:

- 1) the well-being of man in both worlds is *aimed at*, and
 - 2) the Divine Law is applied."
- To further clarify, he states that "the constitutional question takes a secondary place and a republic, a monarchy, or a joint-rule, among other forms of government, are all valid in the Islamic Community."

When discussing the background and the turmoil that led to the declaration by Amir Muawiya to appoint his son Yazid as his successor, we must bear this in

mind that it was not the external form of government *per se* which alone caused Imam Husain, r.a. to take exception and vehemently oppose Yazid's succession after his father's death which occurred four years after his appointment as an heir-apparent or crown-prince was initially made.

It was the abuse of power by Yazid which made it impossible for Imam Husain to put up with the prevailing state of affairs. Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely! It was indeed the absolutely corrupt power of hereditary monarchy which became the bone of contention because the indications and signs of such corruption had already become quite apparent. The beginning of the gradual decline



Husain's Shrine in Karbala, Iraq

of the moral fibre of the Islamic society was gaining a rapid momentum. As a matter of fact later developments proved it to be so. The tragic consequence was that Islam never recovered from that political epidemic and the creeping moral cancer.

Sovereignty of God was marginalised and the Rule of law was openly jeopardised. These two fundamental concepts received lip-service, and remained a mere theory. Everyone was aware of the fact that these human characteristics have been commonplace among monarchies throughout human history. Imam Husain had the wisdom, and the deep insight deep inside to recognize that the trends of corruption and gage the speed of the potential destruction. He felt he had to try to stop it at any cost. He knew it was his religious duty to follow Allah's Commands to try his best and leave the rest to Allah as the Qur'an clearly directs us all:

"These are the people who, if We establish them in the land, will establish Salah, (ritual service of worship) and pay Zakah, (religious dues) enjoin justice and forbid evils; the final decision of all affairs is in the hands of Allah" (22:41)

Imam Husain had no difficulty in recognizing the fact that the breach of a Divine Trust (of governing people) placed in the hands of a ruler of an Islamic state was a very grave matter that could cause much irreparable harm to the Community and future generations.

The Qur'an commands: *"Allah commands you to give back the trusts to their rightful owners, and when you judge between people, judge with fairness" (4:58-59)*

Let me explain: Just as a servant is entrusted with certain property for which he is responsible to the master, the king or the ruler is entrusted with the care of the people and guarding their rights. Accordingly, in order to discharge his duties, he is *responsible* in the *first place* to God Who is the Real Master, and then to *people* in relation to whom he occupies a position of a *servant*. The signs of grossly abusing the power and instances of nonchalant disregard of the terms of the sacred trust were becoming apparent for anyone to see.

For instance it was not difficult to observe that:

- ! politics was getting more and more devoid of morality and ethics.
- ! the king, the members of his family, the nobility and the governing class were being given preferential treatment and were often exempt from many routine religious or legal obligations.
- ! the king was becoming the master of the life, property and honour of his subjects - sovereignty of man was

replacing sovereignty of God.

- ! justice, law and order were being replaced by oppression, disorder and injustice.
- ! a life of luxury, pomp and splendour was becoming the norm and the cherished goal.
- ! instead of encouraging people to fear God and obey the laws, strengthen their faith and conscience, they were being bought and sold through enticing offers of power, position and gold.
- ! distinctions between the haram and halal and the desirable and the doubtful were getting blurred; undesirable social activities were spreading like wildfire.

Granted that in the time under discussion these evils were not yet as fully developed as they did in later years. Nevertheless the trends were obvious to all those who cared about such things. The potential for total destruction of the true spirit of Islamic life was so very apparent.

However it was clear that the rulers were not really functioning as servants of humanity as they were supposed to. How then to deal with the flagrant breach of the divine trust?

The answer to this question is to be found in the Qur'an which lays down the ground rules of a clear-cut policy: *"O believers! Stand firmly for justice, giving witness for Allah, maybe therein your own loss, or of your parents or of your relations." (4:135)*

And the basic philosophy of life, or philosophy of martyrdom, if you will, has never been a hidden secret:

"Say you, 'Undoubtedly, my prayer, and my sacrifices, and my living and my dying are all for Allah, who is the Lord of all the worlds'" (6:162)

The Qur'an clearly declares that: *"their mischief is more grievous than killing" (2:191)*, and also:

"And obey not him whose hearts We have made neglectful of Our remembrance and who followed his own desires and whose affair exceeded the trust." (18:28)

Such are the clear instructions and guidelines for those who care to stand up to the bullies and try to reform the society. Evidently, to each according to his capacity and merit and piety.

People are free to interpret history in the light of their own conceptions of truth and fairness or in the darkness of their own narrow and biased mental blind spots. Some people may and some have actually interpreted Imam Husain's reactions

and actions as mere acts of political nature. People with such a non-ideological, materialistic mind-set may also consider Imam Husain's actions to be imprudent and unwise bravado in view of the heavy odds stacked against him.

In order to bring a reasonable fairness to this discussion, it is important to try to take into account some other relevant aspects of the total scenario. In this context, as the story unfolds according to various reports, two developments deserve to be briefly mentioned with their necessary background:

(1) According to Tabari in Volume 6, page 226 (d. 923), a polyhistor whose works on the Qur'an, the law and history are a marvel of erudition), Imam Husain received the news on his way towards Kufa that his emissary Muslim bin Aqeel was imprisoned and then slain by the authorities. This changed the whole picture. Imam Husain felt it necessary to inform all his companions about the devastating repercussions of this unexpected turn of events, particularly to those Beduins who, with a view to support him, had joined him on his way to Kufa. He then gave them all permission to leave him and return back if they so chose. Taking advantage of this offer, almost all the Beduins left and only those who had come with him all the way from Mecca stayed with him.

(2) Tabari (Vol. 6, pg. 220) gives us an account of how Imam Husain took the initiative at the appropriate time to offer the olive branch. Tabari's account is based on the report by Imam Muhammad al-Baqar, the grandson of Imam Husain. According to this report (assuming this to be an accurate and a more reliable version, as there are other reports too), Imam Husain's offer contained three alternatives. He made it clear that any of the three options would be acceptable to him. The offer was:

- a) Let me return back to where I came from, i.e., Mecca or Medina.
- b) Let me go to Yazid.
- c) Let me move out of here, out of your way, and proceed to the frontiers (where Jihad activities were in progress). Imam Husain made this offer to Umar bin Sa'd bin abi Waqqas, who accepted it and conveyed his acceptance to his superior, Ibn Ziad. The response from Ibn Ziad was in the negative. He insisted that Imam Husain must first take the oath of religions at his hand and only then Imam Husain's proposal would be considered. Whereupon, Imam Husain retorted: "No, by God No! This will never happen."

Now, the point to be born in mind is that Imam Husain did not hesitate to a) take appropriate steps to face the music and let people go freely, and b) explore reasonable, peaceful means of settling the dispute -- amicably and at the

appropriate time!

After taking this into consideration, let us now resume the discussion of numerical superiority and the situation of tremendous odds which Imam Husain faced. Suffice to say that those who have high aims and lofty ideals know it very well that numerical superiority has never been a deterring factor for those who stand for the Truth. Here lies the greatness of Imam Husain who stands a head and shoulders above his contemporaries: he chose to follow the most beautiful example of his own beloved grandfather, the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as well as the examples of so many other great reformers who started off with an even smaller minority -- a minority of no more than one!! As far as Imam Husain was concerned, it was nothing but a religious act, a religious duty that had to be fulfilled even at the cost of his own life and the lives of his dear ones. He felt strongly that the mischief (fitnah) had to be nipped in the bud. This effort of his was quite in accord with the very aim of human society which is none other than a) controlling temptations towards mischief in an environment where it would be wiser to diminish the occasions in which such evil could occur, and b) remedying the damage already done.

Is it not an inherent human right of every child of Adam and Eve to enjoy the liberty of conscience to choose their own ideology and also defend their convictions? How then can Imam Husain be denied his right to defend his convictions and also to establish the fundamental Islamic doctrine of religious tolerance at the same time -- all in obedience to Allah's commands? Is it also not the case that every Muslim is duty bound to not only establish the Sovereignty of Allah on earth, but also to make it possible for everyone to exercise their liberty of conscience?

Let's all reiterate once again that there is no objective more meaningful than the cherished dedication to establish on earth God's Kingdom and His Sovereignty. Can anyone declare this philosophy of life and death in words which are more comprehensive than the beautiful Qur'anic exhortation:

"Say, my Salah (prayer) and my sacrifice and my living and my dying are all for Allah Who is the Lord of all the worlds" (6:162)

Excerpted from the keynote address given by Syed Mumtaz Ali at the philosophy of Martyrdom Conference held in Toronto, Canada sponsored by Darul-Qur'an, 1998.
