The Struggle for Power (3) After The Holy Prophet (P.B.U.H (and Famliy

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Saqifa Banu Sa'eda

Bukhari has quoted Umar bin al-Khattab as saying:

“When he (the Apostle) died, the Ansar opposed us. They gathered in the Saqifa Banu Sa'eda. Ali, Zubayr and their friends also opposed us.”

What was it that Umar and his friends were doing, and which the Ansar opposed?

When the Apostle died, the Ansar, always sensitive to subsurface political currents, and fearful of the ambitions and intentions of the Muhajireen, gathered in an outhouse of Medina called Saqifa, and they told Saad ibn Ubada, their leader, what they knew about the plans of the Muhajireen. Saad was sick and he said to his son, Qays, that he did not feel strong enough to address the assembly, and that he would tell him what he wished to say, and he (Qays) should repeat it to the audience.

Saad spoke to his son, and he relayed its purport to the Ansar.

Saad's Speech

O group of Ansar! You enjoy a precedence in Islam which no one can deny, and this alone makes you something special in all Arabia. The Apostle of God preached Islam among his own people for 13 years and only a handful of them accepted his message. They were so weak that they were incapable of protecting him or of defending Islam. God in His mercy was pleased to bestow the honor of protecting him (Muhammad) upon you.

He selected you out of all other people to give sanctuary to His Messenger and to other Muslims from Makkah. He was pleased to strengthen Islam through you so that you fought against the enemies of His Faith. You protected His Messenger from his enemies until the message of Islam spread in all Arabia.

Through your swords, he conquered Arabia for Islam, and it was through your swords that all pagans were overcome. Then the time came when the Messenger of God departed from this world; he was pleased with you when he was going into the presence of his Lord. Therefore, after his death, it is your right to rule Arabia.”

The Ansar expressed unanimous agreement with Saad, and they added that in their opinion, there was no one better qualified than him to be the ruler of all Muslims.

It was at this time that Abu Bakr, Umar and Abu Obaida ibn al-Jarrah, arrived into the Saqifa.

When the Ansar saw them, one of them – Thabit bin Qays – rose and addressed them as follows:

"We are the slaves of God, and we are the supporters of His Messenger. And you, the fugitives from Makkah, are a mere handful of men. But we know that you want to seize the government of Medina, and you want to exclude us from it." (Tabari and Ibn Atheer)

This is a revealing statement. It means that the Muhajireen were drawing up plans to grab power, and the gathering of the Ansar in Saqifa was only a response to their gambit.

When Thabit bin Qays made his disclosure, no one of the three Muhajireen contradicted him. Umar says that when Thabit bin Qays sat down, he rose to say something appropriate. "I had prepared a very good speech anticipating an occasion just like this," he said. (Tarikh-ul-Khulafa).

This is admission by Umar himself that he had made elaborate preparations beforehand to meet every contingency. But Abu Bakr restrained him, and himself rose to address the Ansar. He said:

"There is no doubt that God sent Muhammad with the true Faith and with the light of His religion. He (Muhammad) therefore, invited people to God's religion. We were the first to respond to his call. We were the first to accept Islam. Whoever accepted Islam after us, followed our lead.

Furthermore, we are related to the Apostle of God, and we are the noblest of all Arabs in blood and country. There is no tribe that does not acknowledge the ascendancy of the Quraysh. And you, the Ansar, are those who gave sanctuary and who helped. You are our brothers in faith. We love you and respect you more than any other people. But the leaders must be from the Quraysh. We shall be the rulers and you shall be the wazirs.

You should not be jealous of us. You have helped us in the past, and now you ought not to be the first to oppose us. I call upon you to give your pledge of loyalty to one of these two men, Umar or Abu Obaida. I have chosen both of them for this purpose; both of them deserve this honor, and both of them are qualified for the position of the Amir."

Muhammad Husayn Haykal

Umar and Abu Bakr came to the courtyard of Banu Saidah. Joined by a number of Muhajirun, they took their seats in the assembly. Soon, a speaker rose and addressed the Ansar as follows: "All praise and thanks belong to Allah. We are al-Ansar, i.e., the Helpers of God and we are the army of Islam. You, the Muhajireen, are merely a small group in the army. Nevertheless, you are trying to deprive us of our right of leadership."

Actually, for the Ansar, it was an old complaint, even in the lifetime of the Prophet. Now when

Umar heard it again, he was very angry, and he was ready to put an end to it by the sword, if necessary. But Abu Bakr restrained him and asked him to act gently. He then turned to the Ansar and said: “O Ansar! We enjoy the noblest lineage and descendence. We are the most reputable and the best esteemed as well as the most numerous of any group in Arabia. Furthermore, we are the closest blood relatives of the Prophet. The Qur’an itself has given us preference. For it is God - may He be praised and blessed – Who said, First and foremost were al-Muhajirun, then al-Ansar, and then those who have followed these two groups in virtue and righteousness.

We were the first to emigrate for the sake of God, and you are the Ansar, i.e., the Helpers. However, you are our brothers in faith, our partners in war, and our helpers against the enemy. All the good you have claimed about yourselves, is true, for you are the most worthy of mankind. But the Arabs will not accept the leadership of any tribe except the Quraysh. Therefore, we will be the leaders, and you will be our ministers.”

At this an Ansari stood up and said: “Every verdict will depend upon us. And our verdict is that you may have your own leader; we shall have our own.” But Abu Bakr said that the leader of the Muslims must be from the Quraysh, and the wazirs from the Ansar. At this point he held the hands of Umar and Abu Obaida and said: “Any one of these two men is qualified to be the leader of the Muslims. Choose any one of them.” (The Life of Muhammad, Cairo, 1935)

But Umar rose and said in protest: “O Abu Bakr, it is not proper for anyone to take precedence over you because you are the best of all of us. You were the ‘companion of the cave,' and you are the ‘second of the two.' And has anyone forgotten that the Apostle ordered you to lead the prayer when he was sick? Therefore, you are the most qualified man to be his successor.”

Another Ansari got up to answer Abu Bakr and Umar, and said: “We acknowledge your precedence in Islam and your other qualities, and we love you too. But we are afraid that after you, other people will capture the government, and they would not be fair and just to us. Therefore, we suggest that there should be two rulers, one a Muhajir and the other an Ansar (this was the first dead giveaway on the part of the Ansar of their own weakness). If the Muhajir dies, he should be replaced by a Muhajir, and if the Ansari dies, he should be replaced by another Ansari. If you accept this plan, we shall give you our pledge of loyalty. This is the best arrangement that can be made because if a Qurayshite becomes the sole head of the state, the Ansar will live in fear, and if an Ansari becomes the khalifa, the Quraysh would live in fear.”

Abu Bakr spoke in reply thus:

“God sent Muhammad with His Book to mankind. At that time everyone worshipped idols.

When Muhammad told them to destroy those idols, they resented it. They did not want to abandon them. Therefore, God selected the Muhajireen to bear testimony to Muhammad's prophethood. The rest of the Arabs insulted and persecuted the Muhajireen but they were steadfast in their support to him. They were the first to worship God, and they were the first to obey His Apostle. They are related to him, and they are his own folks. Therefore, they alone deserve to be his successors, and no one will challenge them in this except the unjust. And you, O Ansar! you are a people whose excellence cannot be denied. No one can challenge your high position in Islam. God made you the supporters of His religion and His Apostle, and it was toward you that he migrated. Therefore, your rank in Islam is highest after the Muhajireen. We love you and esteem you. But it is only proper that the leaders should be from the Muhajireen and the ministers from the Ansar. Whatever we do, we shall do by consulting you."

The next speaker was Hubab ibn al-Mandhir of Medina. He said:

"O group of Ansar! These people (the Muhajireen) are under your protection. They do not have any power to oppose you. You are the people of honor and power. The eyes of all Arabia are fixed on you, and you have the same precedence in Islam that they have. By God, they (the Muhajireen) never dared to worship God in public until you gave them sanctuary in your city. Nowhere has prayer been said openly except in your city. The idolaters and the polytheists have not been overcome except with your swords. Therefore, leadership is your right and not theirs. But if they do not agree to this, then let there be two leaders, one from each of the two groups."

Umar answered the speech of Hubab ibn al-Mandhir saying:

"It is impossible that there should be two kings in one realm. Arabs will never submit to the rule of anyone who is not a member of the Quraysh since the Apostle of God himself was a member of that tribe. The khalifa of the Muslims, therefore, must be a man of the same tribe as the Apostle himself. The fact that he was a Qurayshite, clinches all argument. We are Qurayshites, and no one can challenge us in our leadership role."

Hubab ibn al-Mandhir again said:

"O Ansar! Do not pay any attention to this man and to his companions. Caliphate is your right. Take it. If they do not acknowledge this right, kick them out of your city. Then you select a ruler from among yourselves. What you have won with your swords, do not give that away to these people, and if anyone opposes me now, I shall silence him with my sword."

Abu Obaida ibn al-Jarrah then stood up, and said:

"O group of Ansar! You were the first to support the Apostle of God and to give sanctuary to his religion. Are you now going to be the first to cause disruption in that religion?"

The next speaker was another Ansari, one Bashir bin Saad. He knew that the Ansar were determined to choose Saad ibn Ubada as the leader of the Muslim umma. He was jealous of Saad and did not want to see him as the sovereign of Arabia. Therefore, what he said in Saqifa was prompted, not by the love of Abu Bakr or the Muhajireen but by his jealousy of Saad. He said:

"O group of Ansar! Without a doubt we have precedence in Islam, and in the wars of Islam. But since it is so, we must not become self-seekers. Our aim should only be to win the pleasure of God, and to obey His Messenger. Our services to Islam were for the sake of God, and not for the sake of any worldly gains, and He will reward you for them.

Therefore, we should not try to capitalize on those services now. The Apostle of God was from the tribe of Quraysh; therefore, it is right that his successors should also be from the same tribe. They deserve to be his heirs. Caliphate is their right and not ours, and we should not oppose them in this matter. Therefore, fear God, and do not try to take what is not yours."

This speech of Bashir bin Saad emboldened Abu Bakr to stand once again and say:

"As I said before, the leaders should be from the Quraysh. Therefore, O Ansar! do not create divisions among the Muslims. It is my advice to you that you give your pledge of loyalty to one of these two men present here, Umar and Obaida bin al-Jarrah. Both of them are worthy Qurayshites."

But Umar interrupted him saying, "How is it possible that anyone else should receive the pledge of loyalty while your are present among us. You are the oldest man in Quraysh, and you have spent more time in the company of the Apostle than any of us. Therefore, no one should put himself ahead of you. Extend your hand so that I may give you my pledge of loyalty."

Umar held Abu Bakr's hand, and placed his own hand on top of his as a sign of fealty. He had, by this act, acknowledged Abu Bakr as the khalifa.

Abu Obaida bin al-Jarrah and Bashir bin Saad Ansari also stepped forward, placed their hands on the hand of Abu Bakr, signifying their allegiance to him.

Bashir bin Saad Ansari was showing much eagerness in taking the oath of loyalty to Abu Bakr. Hubab ibn al-Mandhir who was watching him, shouted:

"O Bashir! you are a traitor to your own people. We know why you have leapt forward to take the oath of allegiance to Abu Bakr. You are jealous of Saad ibn Ubada, you miserable renegade. How you hate to see him become the Amir of the Muslims."

It was at this fateful moment that many of the Bedouin tribesmen who lived between Medina and Makkah, appeared on the scene. They were hostile to the Ansar, and they had entered the city when they heard the news of the death of the Apostle of God.

Finding out what was afoot in Medina, they spread themselves around Saqifa. Their sudden appearance gave a tremendous boost to the morale of Abu Bakr and Umar; and at the same time, it put a crimp upon the assurance of the Ansar. The tribesmen were all armed. With their arrival, the leverage in the long debate between the Muhajireen and the Ansar, passed to the former.

G. E. Von Grunebaum

At the stormy session the Ansar were finally persuaded not to insist on the succession going to one of their own members nor on the double rule of a Companion and a Helper, and partly under pressure from the Bedouin who were streaming into the city, they agreed to do homage to Abu Bakr. (Classical Islam - A History 600-1258)

Umar said later that until the arrival of the tribesmen in Saqifa, he had grave doubts about the outcome of the debate with the Ansar. Their timely arrival, and the application of pressure by them on the Ansar, guaranteed the acquiescence of the latter in the accession of Abu Bakr to the throne.

Bashir's ploy had succeeded. He undermined the Ansar's will-to-fight. The protests of Saad ibn Ubada and Hubab ibn al-Mandhir were of no avail. When Umar, Abu Obaida and Bashir took the oath of loyalty to Abu Bakr, the others followed like sheep. The Ansar had lost the battle!

The key to Abu Bakr's success in being elected khalifa in Saqifa was the mutual hostility of the two Medinan tribes of Aus and Khazraj. Both of them had fought a “Hundred Years' War” of their own, and they had suspended hostilities only because of their extreme physical exhaustion.

G. E. Von Grunebaum

The Aus and the Khazraj, had been in continuous state of guerrilla warfare against each other for generations. Their conflict came to a bloody climax in 617 in the “Battle of Bu'ath,” after which the protagonists were so exhausted that it gradually dwindled into an armistice, interrupted only by occasional acts of vengeance. (Classical Islam - A History 600-1258)

The last great battle between the Aus and the Khazraj had been fought only four years before the arrival of the Prophet in Medina as Peace-Maker. Once both of them acknowledged him as their sovereign, they also agreed to defer to his judgment all their disputes, and they called a truce to their interminable wars. But as soon as the Peace-Maker and the Judge died, their old jealousies, fears and suspicions flared up once again.

When the leaders of the Aus noticed that the Khazraj had put forward Saad ibn Ubada – a Khazrajite – as the candidate for caliphate, they thought that if he was elected khalifa, then they – the Aus – would be reduced to the status of serfs for all time. Their interests, they

figured, would be safeguarded better if the leader of the umma was a Muhajir from Makkah instead of a Khazrajite of Medina.

They, therefore, hastened to assure Abu Bakr that they were loyal to him before the Khazraj could proclaim Saad ibn Ubada as the new lord of Medina. It were thus the Aussites of Medina who were actually instrumental in securing Abu Bakr's success in his election as khalifa. Other factors, such as the treachery of Bashir bin Saad, himself a Khazrajite, to his own tribe, the Khazraj; and the intervention of the Bedouin tribesmen, at a critical moment, also contributed to Abu Bakr's success.

Maxime Rodinson

The Medinians, especially those belonging to the tribe of Khazraj, sensed that the Qurayshite Emigrants who had come from Mecca with Mohammed of whom they had always been jealous, would now attempt to claim the leadership for themselves.

The Prophet was dead. There was no longer any reason why they should submit to these foreigners. They called a meeting in the outhouse of one of their clans, the Banu Saida, to talk over the best way of safeguarding their interests. What they proposed to do was to elect one of their own leading men, Sa'd ibn Ubadah, as Chief of Medina.

Abu Bakr was in Mohammad's house, was warned of this and he hurried to the place along with his fellow politicians, Umar and Abu Ubayda. They were joined on the way by the chief of another Medinian tribe, the Aws, rivals of the Khazraj. The last thing they wanted was to see power in the hands of Khazraj.

In the streets the excitement was spreading to the members of other tribes in Medina, who had no desire to play the part of pawns in any power game that was about to begin. As night fell, everyone had forgotten the body (of Mohammed) still lying in Aisha's little hut (sic).

The discussion that went on by the light of torches and oil lamps was lengthy, heated and confused. One Medinian proposed that two chiefs should be elected, one Qurayshite and one Medinian. Most people realized that that would be the way to court dissension and disaster for the community. Everyone was shouting at once; they may even have come to blows.

(Mohammed translated by Ann Carter, 1971)

They did come to blows. Saad ibn Ubada seized Umar by his beard. Umar threatened to kill him if he pulled a single hair out of his beard. Umar said to Hubab ibn al-Mandhir: “May God kill you,” and the latter said to him: “May God kill you.”

Hubab ibn al-Mandhir made desperate efforts to save the situation. As he tried to stop the Ansar from taking the oath of allegiance to Abu Bakr, a crowd rushed upon him, snatched his sword, and pushed him out of the way. They were the Bedouin supporters of the Muhajireen.

Hubab lost his sword but he still struck at the faces of the citizens of Medina who were giving fealty to Abu Bakr. He cursed them and said: “O Ansar! I can see with my own eyes that your children are begging for food at the doors of the houses of these Makkans but instead of getting food, are being kicked in the teeth by them, and are being driven away.”

Abu Bakr asked Hubab: “Do you entertain such fears from me?” He said: “No. Not from you but from those who will come after you.” Trying to reassure him, Abu Bakr said: “If that happens, you can always repudiate your allegiance to your khalifas.” He bitterly retorted: “It would be too late then, and it would serve no purpose.”

It was this chaotic, bohemian and raucous assembly in the outhouse of Saqifa which elected Abu Bakr as khalifa. The Ansar gave his election only a negative endorsement. They didn't, by any means, designate the best-qualified man. Umar very deftly shelved the question of qualification, and never let it pop up in the debate. The question of a candidate's qualifications was buried under a cloud of evasive rhetoric.

Saad ibn Ubada, the leader of the Khazraj, and the “runner-up” in the Saqifa no-holds-barred, free-for-all, was one of those men who refused to take the oath of allegiance to Abu Bakr. He said to the latter: “O Abu Bakr! If I were not in this state of helplessness because of my debilitating sickness, I would have sent you and your friends back to Makkah to your own folks.”

Saad then asked his friends to take him out of Saqifa. For some time Abu Bakr did not meddle with him, and then one day sent word to him asking him to come and to give him the pledge of loyalty. Saad refused. Umar pressed Abu Bakr to get the pledge by force.

But Bashir bin Saad Ansari interposed by saying: “Once Saad has refused, he will never give you his pledge of loyalty. If you force him, it could lead to bloodshed, and all the Khazrajites will rise with him against you. In my opinion, it would not be prudent to force the issue. He is, after all, only one man, and left alone, cannot do much harm anyway.”

All those men who were present in the court of the khalifa, applauded Bashir's opinion, and Saad was left in peace. He recovered from his sickness, and three years later, migrated to Syria.

The text of the speeches delivered in Saqifa, and the account of the events which took place there, have been taken from the following sources:

1. History – Tabari

2. Tarikh al-Kamil – Ibn Atheer

3. Kitab-al-Imama was-Siyasa – Ibn Qutayba Dinwari

4. Seeret-ul-Halabiyya – Halaby