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Political Lessons of Karbala

Mansoor Akbar Kundi *

Introduction

The tragedy of Karbala where it serves as a paradigm of conviction, piety, hope, and sacrifice for mankind, there it has a number of political implications for good or just governance and legitimate order for which Hazrat Hussain sacrificed himself along his followers on the sandy grounds along the river Euphrates on 10 October 680 AD/10 Muharram 61 AH. It is an answer or catalyst to many political ills the majority of Islamic countries are suffering from and losing their sovereignty. It was a struggle against the misuse of power and authoritarian establishment based on lack of legitimacy. It stood against the principles of power politics, despotism and methods of its coerced establishment many countries' regimes are based on.

The paper is a humble attempt to highlight the political lessons from pre or the post events of the tragedy. Written without any religious biases, affiliation, or even consideration, it follows the political lessons of my approach as a political scientist. Having studied different data for years, as no direct material was available on the topic, I have ventured to draw the political lessons one can extract from the incident.

The tragedy by being mourned the Muslim World for the last 1329 years was the ultimate result of the nomination of Yazid by Hazrat Amir Muawiya against the rules of Islamic polity established by the Holy Prophet (SV) and followed by the four Caliphs. The crises deepened over the situation when Yazid soon after the death of his father in quest

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for strengthening his legitimacy asked Hazrat Hussain for allegiance. The culmination of crises leading to Karbala was the result of the crisis of legitimacy Yazid's corrupt and repressive establishment struggled with a fear of opposition from Hussain and his followers which it was ready to curb with strength and repression. Karbala represents lust of power and its misuse, hypocrisy, opportunism, defiance, injustice against truth, courage and honor over the principles of a just order.

Power Corrupts, Absolute Absolutely

The years leading to Karbala show that power corrupts and absolute absolutely: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely or it Unlimited power is apt to corrupt the minds of those who possess it".¹ In the early sieges of Constantinople in which Hazrat Ayub Ansari breathed his last and was buried near the rampart walls of the city, Yazid, the eldest son of Amir Muawiya commanded. "The siege of Istanbul (Constantinople) was the most striking expedition during the Caliphate of Muawiya which was commanded by Yazid (for certain period and not the whole time).²

He believed in piety and Jihad with his young age poetry full of courage and wisdom about which the famous Persian poet Hafiz begins his Diwan (collection of poems); Diwan Hafiz begins with the poetry of Yazid. But soon after Muawiya, in violation of all rules the pious Caliphate was set upon, tried to secure the Caliphate for his son, Yazid seemed a changed man. The lust for power and intolerance culminated in his personality, and he soon ignored the advice of his father not to interfere with Hazrat Hussain in Madina for allegiance. Hazrat Hussain's major difference with Yazid was over allegiance which he did not want to pay to him due to his nomination by his father contrary to the very principles the Islamic polity was set up on. None of the four Caliphs

were nominated by an individual, but were chosen by consent and consultation on the basis of their piety and devotion.

Karbala was a negation of a struggle for power and absolute power without the toleration of any opposition began on the patterns the despotic rulers did before with lust and luxuries around. The true spirit of an Islamic state the Prophet Muhammad (SAV) founded was totally ignored under Yazid. He immediately changed the Governors of his provinces and despised all who even asked him for status quo of not asking Hazrat Hussain for allegiance. In politics, reconciliation and tolerance which in modern polities of western democracies devolve on the role of opposition was lessons Islam preached and violated by its rulers Yazid onwards. What happened in Karbala was the ultimate result of power politics which led to the use of naked power ---- beheading the killed and their exhibition on lances, disrespecting women etc.³ As Binte Moosa Moosavi writes “The veils of daughters of prophet whom even the sun had not seen were taken away, they were fixed in ropes with their hands after their necks, their tents were set on fire, they were seated on bare backs of camels, and brought to the bazaars of Syria and Kufa and courts of Yazid and Ibne Zyad”.⁴ It was the “reversion to the pagan days of the age of ignorance, tolerance, clemency to a helpless enemy, for tolerance and forgiveness and other virtues”.⁵ A similar lessons from Karbala where the tents were set at fire were the ill intentions of removing the evidence the letters sent to Hussain contained, and if any other writings of his own or correspondence. Removal of evidence is necessitated by political opponents lest the facts are known.

Crisis of Legitimacy

Yazid suffered from crisis of legitimacy. The crisis of legitimacy can simply be defined as a situation in which those who rule and have power

are without consensus and consent of citizens and constitutional means. The initial source of their being in power actually comes from undemocratic and unrepresentative norms and practices which are illegitimate and aberrant. In such a situation where the ruler(s) enter the power through backdoors may later on try to secure constitutional means and supportive function of a political group to legitimize their actions and approaches to power the fact remains that the immediate concern of their being in power is the weakest and pseudo bases of power support. In order to secure legitimacy they are under circumstances to adapt a number of measures which are contrary to the spirit of good governance and established democracy. As Max Weber says *Legitimate force is the thread that runs through the action of political system, giving it its special quality and importance, and its coherence as a system.* The crisis of legitimacy since then has undermined fabric of Islamic systems in large after it was turned into illegitimacy monarchies and dictatorships. The crisis of legitimacy since the days of Treaty of Westphalia which led to the rise of nation-states (192 memberships at UN today) plays an important role in the integration and disintegration of statehood. Those in lieu of legitimacy are fearful of popular and rightful opponents and are in quest to turn them around. Similar was the situation with Yazid. He commissioned Waleed bin Utba to go to Madina as Governor with a special task to get allegiance from Hazrat Hussain(a.s). Hazrat Hussain neither wanted bloodshed nor allegiance to Yazid. He left Madina and reached Mecca.⁶ Five persons had not accepted the nomination of Yazid by Hazrat Muawiah. Rehman bin Abu Bakr; Abdullah bin Umar; Abdullah bin Abbas; Zubair bin Abdullah; and Hussain bin Ali (peace be upon all). After the nomination Hazrat Muawiah lived for ten years. But he did not force upon the taking of

allegiance, and historians write that he advised Yazid not to be aggressive with Hussain. It was the political blunder of Yazid to force Hazrat Hussain.

Application of Power Politics

Politics is a game in which ultimate aim for a player is to gain power or exert influence. The more fair is the game the higher are the benefits with less costs. When rules become selfish and aberrant it leads to power politics. Karbala reflects the struggle between fair and unfair struggle for power, although Hazrat Hussain (AS) did not want power but defied the power politics Yazid establishment believed in. Power politics without any tolerance of opposition is a feature of so many Muslim countries today. The rulers standing crises of legitimacy are engaged in all sorts of corruption, propaganda and pseudo representation. Karbala defied rule of corruption and intolerance. In the volatile game of politics in which ultimate goal if becomes the usurpation of power without any morality and justice then a Karbala is needed which Imam proved in his ailing 57 years of age a clash involving Islamic truths versus falsehood, right versus wrong, belief versus disbelief, the oppressed versus the oppressor, faith against brute force.

Karbala was about standing in the face of oppression, regardless no matter the cost. The goal of politics should be the fair game of representation and social justice, two corners of welfare society in modern politics, based on good general will for which find lessons in Karbala. It divided Muslims, as Ira M Lapidus writes, “more than any dispute over law or theology or any antipathy between tribes, races and linguistics groups”.⁷

Consultation in Politics

A root factor in cost-benefit analysis in democracies or any other dialogue making is the political consultation highly required before a major step is taken. Many historians agree that it was a political mistake Hazrat Hussain made to travel to Kofa. He was warned by his close associates, almost those who defied the rule of Yazid and did not accept the allegiance of Muawiah to Yazid. As mentioned those notables who did not accept the nomination of Yazid by Muawiah (Rehman bin Abu Bakr; Abdullah bin Umar; Abdullah bin Abbas; Zubair bin Abdullah; and Hazrat Hussain himself; only Rehman bin Abu Bakr had passed away); all advised him not to go to Kofa, particularly Abdullah bin Abbas and Zubair bin Abdullah. Ibn Abbas was a versatile genius!. He along his brothers had proverbial integrity and was devoted to Ali's family. They all participated in the battle of Camel and Siffin. He "*acted frequently as the envoy of the Caliph (Ali) and it was he whom Ali desired to nominate as the representative of the Horse of Mohammed when refractory troops to refer the dispute between himself and Muawiyah to arbitration*". He was known "John of aunt of Moslem History"⁸. He died in 67 AD being broken heart after the incident. Zubair bin Abdullah was again a stalwart who ruled Mecca at the time of Karbala. He having vision and leadership qualities and humbly advised him not to travel and rather tied hands with him to set up his own power base in Mecca with all the cooperation and subordination from himself. The rule Zubair established in Mecca met a huge blow after his martyrdom, despite all resistance by Yazid and his successor lasted for ten years with firm rule and justice. Had they been united would have garnered further support in wake of leadership crisis the death of Muawiah left, there could have been a counter strong hold; it was not

possible after.⁹ But it was Hazrat Hussain's exalted revolutionary nature, unlike his elder brother, Hassan which believed in action once an offer was indicated by Kofa people.

Renegades and Hypocrisy

The role of renegades and hypocrites in politics turn the course of good governance into bad or good decision into bad by leading to chaos and disaster. What Ruth W. Grant in his book *Hypocrisy and Integrity* discusses:

Hypocrisy is an epithet, never a term of praise, and for good reason. Consider the classical hypocritical types: the lecherous priest, smarmy flattering socialite, the reform politician with his hand in the till. What they share in the pretense of virtue, idealism or sympathetic concern used to further selfish ends. Their victims are more to be pitied because of the painful betrayal of trust involved in their victimization.¹⁰

Karbala represents the hypocrisy of Kofa people whom Hazrat Hussain trusted and was painfully betrayed and victimized. Hazrat Hussain received 12000 letters from Kofa to be their leader. Kofa was at the distance of 1100 miles (average journey on camel back was 45 miles) in the blistering heat. They all pledged their support in case he stood against the forces of Yazid. Hazrat Hussain did not follow blindly but first sent his cousin Muslim bin Aqeel who unfortunately was killed by Yazid men and true story did not reach him. Nevertheless, the people of Kofa changed their loyalties. It was a turning point in the happening of Karaba¹¹.

Role of Power Establishment

One of the major political lessons from Karbala is about the role of establishment in strengthening a corrupt rule against human innocence

and justice. It is use of naked power which silence the right of weak and oppressed class of society in favour of a regime built on force and oppression. Karbala stood against the recognition of a cruel establishment in which many like Ubaidullah Ibn Ziyad were behind Yazid to support his legitimacy. Yazid removed Numan ibn Baseer and appointed ibn Ziyad as a good choice for the action. Ziyad was a model of repression which is usually utilized as a tool in subduing a voice against authoritarian societies. His first step was to behead Mukhtar al Thaqafi and torture Hani Ibn Urwah with whom Muslim Ibn Aqil held secret meeting about Kofayids.

People of Kofa played the role of renegades who change loyalties and defect their leaders at odds. Hazrat Hussain had the same experience. He received 12000 letters from Kofa to be their leader. Kofa was at the distance of 1100 miles (average journey on camel back was 45 miles) in the blistering heat. Many advised Hazrat Hussain not to go to Kofa including Al-Farazdaq, a poet who he met on the way. He advised him not to go as the hearts may be with him the swords be against him.

A leading lesson of Karbala is that the rules of Establishment based on force are inhumane and retaliating in enhancement of an unjust order. It was also a rule of establishment, directed and redirected, in which Hazrat Hussain was to be besieged and subdued until he paid the allegiance. It was the similar rule under which the water of Euphrates was allowed for leopards, jackals and pigs, but the children of Muhammad (SAV) could not drink a drop of it. Why Innocent children and women with days of thirst and agony were denied access to water was a question even many from Yazid side raised. And even that Hazrat Hussain, Ibn Abbas, Hur and many others were rebels and defiant of

Yazid establishment, nonetheless, what about the infant Ali Asghar, children Abdullah, Zain-ul-Abideen and Ruqiya. The order of establishment was to be carried. The order of power establishment has largely been based or influenced by autocratic leadership style, if not dictatorial, with centralized authority with low participation rather than democratic/egalitarian style with institutional or representative one with popular support.

Such orders are directed and redirected in front of our eyes in present day societies which implementation becomes necessary at the cost of human sufferings and happiness for the glorification of a powerful establishment ---- be it of a superpower, monarch or dictator. Take alone the case of Pakistan. Karbala defies such an order of an establishment and makes its cruelties and repercussion naked for generations to come. It relates to the message of Karbala that the rules of an illegitimate establishment in such an action can be wrong and oppressive. It may try to make its own history, but it does't. It is rather made under circumstances in which the ultimate winner is truth and courage. Hazrat Hussain did not believe in power but opposed such an establishment.

The good sense he inherited from his maternal grandfather, as Alfred Guillaume describes in his book: *Islam, was* the despised sense for pomp of royalty which the apostle of God submitted to the menial offices of the family by kindling the fire, sweeping the floor, milking the ewes, and mending with his own hands the shoes and his woolen garment. Muhammad (SAV) disdained the penance and merit of a hermit by observed, without effort or vanity, the abstemious diet of an Arab and a soldier. It was the aberrance of the rule under Yazid which culminated in Karbala.

Conciliatory is a good approach in politics without leading to bloodshed and head to head confrontation. Hazrat Hussain was a conciliatory character and so was his attitude as he believed in negotiation till last. He avoided the bloodshed and raised his three conditions—a sort of political dialogue with Umar bin Saad from Yazid side: i). To allow him to cross the borders of Yazid (empire) for any other Muslim state to continue his struggle against non-Muslims, ii). To return to Mecca safely, or iii). To allow him to go to Damascus to see Yazid for negotiation.¹² But none of his conditions were met by Yazid lieutenants except taking allegiance from him for which Hazrat Hussain was not ready. Having suffered from the crisis of legitimacy, Yazid was shaky and could not afford his bail out, even on the last condition to negotiate with him. He had lost his face saving.

The night before the tragedy he gathered all around him by affording them a way out in case any desired not to join him in the battle now inevitable. He did not want to impose his will on others. The candles of his tent all men were gathered were turned off with reaffirmation of all those behind him. Those behind him were courageous and committed to his cause. They included his step brothers, cousins, nephews, friends and supporters including a Turk and two Christians, John and Aslam (Christian). He asked again John, a black free slave, to go out if willing, but he was adamant and asked Hazrat Hussain for blessing and permission to sacrifice his life for his cause. Hazrat Hussain allowed him with prophecy that on the Day of Judgment his body would smell all over as the herald of his entrance to paradise.

And finally the hour had arrived for them. They remained steadfast till they breathed their last under the supreme command of their

leader not ready for a corrupt political order. In Karbala the sons of Sons of Hazrat Hassan and Zainab, around 17, were also there.

As Edward Gibbon writes in his masterpiece (the 50th chapter on Islamic history) Hussain showed courage and piety with his hands and beard dyed with blood and dust with Muslims to mourn till the Day of Judgment.

“Alone, weary and wounded he (Hazrat Husstain) sat himself at the door of his tent. As he tasted a drop of water, he was pierced in the mouth with a dart; and his son and nephew, two beautiful youths, were killed in his arms. He lifted his hands to heaven. They were full of blood and he uttered a funeral prayer for the living and dead.”¹³

As Ameer Ali writes the *tragic fate of Hussain and his children sent a thrill of horror through Islam; and the revulsion of feeling which it caused proved through Islam.* It tarnished the future stability of Muslims in unity towards division.¹⁴

Female Leadership Qualities

A similar lesson of Karbala is the female leadership and crisis management qualities. The leadership role Hazrat Zainab played in the wake of Karabala is supportive of the fact that female have leadership qualities. She being in agony and pain of having lost her brother and close kith and kin did not lose heart and steadfast in highlighting the truth and principles of Karbala against dictatorial policies of Yazid. It is said that the familiarity of the principles of Karbala today is due to her role. She was steadfast behind her brother and consoled those left.

Conclusion

The tragedy of Karbala serves many political lessons. In the history of nations there are moments when someone with a cause is in position of

history making against an establishment it was subdued, punished or even humiliated by. The cause he stands for may for the time being be defied or silenced but the consequences of the moment sooner or later mortify the legitimacy of the establishment by changing the paradigm. Force begets force and if subdued results in further violence and chaos as the years after showed. As Syed Hyder discusses, Karbala serves as a celebration of martyrdom, a source of personal and communal identity, and even a tool for political protest and struggle.¹⁵

End Notes:

1. It is associated with John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton, first Baron Acton (1834–1902), the historian and moralist, who was otherwise known simply as Lord Acton, expressed this opinion in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton in 1887. ii. William Pitt said in 1770.

² Dr. M. Mukarram Ahmad, Encyclopedia of Islam, New Delhi, Anmol Publications Pvt. Ltd, 2007, p. 65 (They were tired under the repression of Yazid. Arabs put sieged twice 674-78 and 717-718)

³ Sayyid Abul A'la *Maududi*, *Khilafat aur Malukiyat* (Urdu) Lahore: Idara Tarjuman Quran, 23rd ed. 2006, pp 179-81.

⁴ [http://www.jafariyanews.com/articles/2k5/SayingsofImamZayn-ulAbideen\(as\).htm](http://www.jafariyanews.com/articles/2k5/SayingsofImamZayn-ulAbideen(as).htm)

⁵ Mazar ul Haq, *A Short History of Islam*, Lahore: Book Land, 1987, p. 418

⁶ Alfred Guilaume, *Islam*, New York: Pelican Books, 1954, p. 26

⁷ Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, pl. 59

⁸ Syed Ameer Ali, *The Sprit of Islam*, Lahore: Urdu Bazaar, 1978 ed. P. 251

⁹ Israr Ahmed. *The Tragedy of Karbala* (English Translation), Lahore, Markazi Anjuman Khuddam ul Quran, 2nd printing, 2003, p.25 and his lecture *Happening of Karbala*.

¹⁰ Ruth W. Grant *Hypocrisy and Integrity: Machiavelli, Rousseau and Ethics of Politics*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1997, p. 1

¹¹ Israr Ahmed. *The Tragedy of Karbala* p.22-23

¹² . Ibid 24

¹³ Edward Gibbon, *The Fall and Decline of Roman Empire*, p. 250

¹⁴ Ameer Ali, p. 249

¹⁵ Hyder, Syed Akbar, *Reliving Karbala: Martyrdom in South Asian Memory* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006.

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