

## The Lynching Of Uthman, The Third Khalifa

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After the demise of the Prophet of Islam, while Imam Ali and the rest of the family of Banu Hashim were busy in the funeral rites of the Prophet, a part of the community assembled at the Saaqee of Baa Saada and, in a haphazard meeting, they chose Abu Bakr to lead the community and labeled him as Khalifa.

Abu Bakr died two-and-half years later. Umar claimed that he (Abu Bakr) had nominated him (Umar) as his successor as he lay dying. The majority in the community accepted Umar's statement and Umar was appointed as the second Khalifa. Umar ruled for ten years; during that period great conquests were made and wealth flooded the Muslim society of Medina.

Umar was attacked by a disgruntled member of the community. He lingered for three days. In that time Umar formulated a council of six men and commanded that the council should choose one from among themselves as the next ruler. After some consideration Uthman was chosen to be the third Khalifa.



The previous two Khalifats were identified with strict rules of Qur'an and Prophetic edicts. The two Khalifas never favoured any of their own personal relatives and they tried hard to follow the precedents set by the Prophet himself in his life. Not surprisingly, the council which chose Uthman to rule took oaths from Uthman to adhere to the Qur'anic rules and *hadith* and also follow the precedents set by the previous two Khalifas. Uthman very blithely accepted the conditions, but his lifestyle as Khalifa showed from day one that he did not care much about his oath.

Uthman was installed on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of Muharram in the 24<sup>th</sup> year of Hijra, as the third Khalifa.

First of all, Uthman made some changes in the acts of worship: He introduced Azan before Salatul Jum'a, he changed the order of Salat and Khutba in Salatul-Eid.

Mas'oodi writes in his Murooj-az-Zahab that the Prophet had exiled Hakam ibn al-Aas (who was an uncle of Uthman) and his son Marwan ibn al-Hakam out of Medina). Uthman

allowed both of them back into Medina. Then all the other relatives of Uthman gathered round him. He in turn, started removing all the provincial managers who had been working from the time of the two previous Khalifas and replacing them by his own relatives.

Among the men appointed by Uthman to responsible positions, was his cousin, Waleed ibn Uqba. The Prophet had given him the news of the Hell Fire. Waleed would sit around with his friends all night drinking wine. When the Muazzin would call him for the morning prayers, he would just walk up to the leading Musalla and would start leading the Fajr Salat., while totally drunk. Occasionally he would do four Rak'as instead of the two Rak'as for the morning Salat. When people would object to that, Waleed would just say: Oh, what is the matter, if you like, I would do a few more Raka'as. Finally one day some of the congregants found him totally passed out in his drunken state. They took his finger ring from the leader's stamp and travelled to Medina and showed it to Uthman and complained to him about Waleed. Uthman, in turn, refused to listen to the people's complaints and would not accept the report that Waleed drank openly.

Abul-Fida writes in his *Tareekh*,

In the 26<sup>th</sup> year of Hijra, Uthman removed Amr ibn al-Aas from the governorship of Egypt and appointed his own milk-brother named Abdullah ibn Sa'ad ibn Abi Sarah. This Ibn Sarah is the same person about whom the Prophet had said on the Day Makkah was taken, that, even if you find Ibn Sarah holding the cover of Kaaba and weeping, still you should kill him.

After Amr's dismissal, the Byzantine emperor sent a fleet to Egypt which succeeded in capturing Alexandria in A.D. 646. Abdullah bin Saad could not defend the province, and Uthman was forced to reinstate Amr as governor and commander-in-chief. Amr defeated the Byzantine forces, and reoccupied Alexandria. But as soon as Egypt was cleared of the Byzantine troops, Uthman dismissed Amr again, and gave all powers in Egypt to his foster-brother.

Egypt was the first love of Amr bin Aas. His greatest ambition in life was to rule Egypt. Denied now not only the fruits of his labors, but also the recognition of his great services, he returned to Medina, a most embittered, resentful and frustrated man. Since in Medina he had

nothing to do, he occupied himself with the castigation of, and intrigue against, the author of his frustrations – Uthman.

In the 29<sup>th</sup> year of Hijra, Uthman removed Abu Moosa al-Ash'ari from Basra and appointed his maternal cousin named Abdullah ibn Aamir in his place.

In the 30<sup>th</sup> year of Hijra, Uthman's relationship with Abu Zar Ghifari deteriorated and finally Abu Zar was sent to Mu'awiyah in Damascus. Abu Zar's (vocal) agitation against the wrongdoings of the government were even more intensified.

The writer of Murooj az-Zahb says that Mu'awiya wrote back to Uthman that Abu Zar's agitation, although only vocal, might cause a rebellion against his government.

After Uthman agreed to that, Mu'awiya sent Abu Zar back to Medina, but he was put on a camel without a saddle. By the time he arrived in Medina, his thighs were bleeding and flesh had been exposed.

Uthman then ordered Abu Zar to be exiled to a barren piece of land where he died hungry and thirsty after a few days. This was the 32<sup>nd</sup> year of Hijra. The day Abu Zar died, his daughter who was with him went up to the road and started saying: maatal ghareeg, maatal ghareeb ( a traveler had died, a traveler had died). Hearing that, a caravan of seven people stopped. Among that caravan was the Prophet's Companion Huzayfa al-Yaman. They stopped and performed the funeral for Abu Zar, They then took his daughter with them and travelled to Medina.

A few days later Uthman had an altercation with Abdullah ibn Mas'ood. When things got heated, Uthman beckoned to his guards who beat up Abdullah ibn Masood; that broke his ribs and he remained bedridden for days and a few days later died.

Abul Fida writes in his *Tareekh*:

Things were disturbed in Kufa too, in the 33<sup>rd</sup> year of Hijra. The leaders in Kufa complained that Uthman had appointed many of his relatives from Banu Umayya to responsible positions in the government and most of them had no abilities to

the jobs they had been given. Uthman commanded the governor of Kufa to round up the dissenters and send them over to Mu'awiya in Damascus. That meeting ended in a violent confrontation between the Kufan leaders and Mu'awiya and his supporters.

*Tareekh-E-Rawdhat-Al-Manazir* writes, “In the 34<sup>th</sup> year of Hijra, Uthman gave the duchy of Fadak to Marwan. Fadak was wrongly confiscated by Abu Bakr from Fatima Zahra, after the passing away of the Prophet.

Things were going bad for Uthman in the public opinion. *Iqd-Al-Fareed* gives the following details as the cause for that:

- (1) Hakam ibn al-Aas was brought back from exile into Medina by Uthman. This man was exiled by the Prophet and both Abu Bakr and Umar had continued on that Prophetic order.
- (2) Abu Zar had been exiled by Uthman to Rabza, where he died as destitute.
- (3) Bazaar Mahzoon, which the Prophet had declared as *sadaqa* (charity) for the Muslims, Uthman had bestowed it to Harith ibn Hakam (Marwan's brother).
- (4) He gave the state of Fadak to Marwan.

The above details are also listed in the *Tareekh* of Abul-Fida.

Things were going from bad to worse for Uthman – only because of his own political and administrative actions. But, it looks like, he himself was much too confident in his place that Muslims would not rise up against their legitimate Khalifa.

By the 35<sup>th</sup> year of Hijra, it was talked about in public openly that Uthman was mismanaging the Muslim state, particularly the economic and financial affairs.

Many things which were being kept secret were being opened up and discussed in public.

Muslim were really very unhappy about the way Abdullah ibn Masood was mistreated by the governor and his guards – one result of that was that the tribe of Banu Huzayl turned against

Uthman. Ammar ibn Yasir was also mistreated by Uthman in full public view, and the misdeeds associated with Waleed ibn Uqba in the mosque.

On top of all that, Uthman married his daughter to Marwan. And he gave the Khums from the victories in Africa to Abdullah ibn Abi Sarah and appointed him the governor of Egypt.

Hazrat Ayesha was also very unhappy with Uthman. At one time she had declared “this na’thal has become a *kafir*– Kill him!” She was finally so unhappy that she left Medina and went to Makkah.

Sir John Glubb writes: “Amr ibn al-Aas, twice conqueror of Egypt, who had been summarily dismissed by Othman in favor of his foster-brother, was busy spreading disaffection in Medina.” (*The Great Arab Conquests*, p.299, 1963)

When Muslims lost all hope that Uthman would mend his ways, they turned, in sheer frustration, to Abdur Rahman bin Auf; told him that nothing in Dar-ul-Islam was right, everything was going wrong, and the responsibility for this state was entirely his since it was he who had made Uthman a Khalifa.

Abdur Rahman admitted that what he had done was wrong, and he added “I never expected such shameful conduct from Uthman. He has disappointed us. And now let God be a Witness that I will never talk with him again.”

Abdur Rahman's refusal to talk with Uthman could not undo the harm that had been done nor could it change anything for anyone. But he upheld his “principle” and did not talk with Uthman to show him how he resented his (Uthman's) deeds.

Abul Fida writes, “Finally in the 35<sup>th</sup> year of Hijra a group of Muslims from Egypt (7,000 strong), another from Basra and another from Kufa, arrived with their complaints in Medina and they surrounded the Khalifa's residence.”

When that Friday came, Uthman came to the *masjid* and performed *Jum'a Salat*. He then went up to the mimbar and started scolding the rebels who had arrived in Medina. He said to them:

“The Prophet had placed Allah’s *la’anat* on you guys. Some of the locals supported Uthman’s statement. The rebel groups pounced upon the locals of Medina and drove the locals out of the *masjid*. In that milieu, Uthman was dragged down from the *mimbar* and was wounded. His helpers took him to his house.”

The *Tareekh* of Ibn-al-Wardi gives further details:

In that chaotic situation, Uthman was able to lead the daily prayers in the *masjid* for three more days. Then the rebels stopped Uthman from coming to the *masjid*. And they made one of their own, a man from Egypt named Ghafiqi, the Imam of the *masjid*. The people of Medina were afraid to venture out of their houses. That condition continued for forty days. Then the rebels approached Imam Ali to mediate between them and Uthman. Imam Ali came and after some negotiations he persuaded Uthman to remove Marwan from the position of his personal secretary, and remove Abdullah ibn Abi Sarah from the governorship of Egypt. Uthman agreed to those conditions. On Imam Ali’s assurances the rebels were pacified and the chaotic situation in Medina was brought back to some normality.

However, Uthman rescinded his order to remove Marwan. But he removed Abdullah ibn Abi Sarah and ordered Muhammab ibn Abi Bakr in his place to go to Egypt and take charge.

Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr took the letter of his appointment as the new governor of Egypt and with a small party of the Egyptians rode towards Egypt, while the greater number of the Egyptian rebels stayed behind in Medina.

While Muhammad ibn abi Bakr and his party were resting at a campsite, they noticed a fast camel rider passing them. They intercepted the camel rider and questioned him. He said he was taking a very urgent message from the Khalifa to the governor of Egypt. The party said that the new governor of Egypt is right here among this party. Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr got suspicious and searched the camel rider. They discovered a sealed letter on him. The letter was signed by Uthman and had instructions for Abdullah ibn Abi Sarah, as follows:

The letter was addressed to Abdullah bin Saad bin Abi Sarh, the governor of Egypt, and it bore the seal of the Khalifa himself. They brought the letter and the letter-carrier before

Muhammad. The latter broke the seal, and was startled to read the following message: “When Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr and members of his party arrive in Egypt, seize them, and kill them all, and you carry on your duties as governor of Egypt.”

At first Muhammad could not believe his own eyes. How could Uthman order his governor to kill him and his companions? He read and reread the letter until its meaning began to sink in his mind.

Muhammad decided to return to Medina. In Medina, he went into the Mosque of the Prophet, and placed the letter before the Companions for their perusal. Some of them and members of Muhammad's party, called on Uthman, to show him the letter. On questioning Uthman admitted that the letter had his seal but it was not his letter. He suggested that Marwan must have done it. Muhammad asked Uthman to hand over Marawan, but Uthman refused to do it.

Muhammad held him by his beard. Uthman was outraged and said “Listen! Even your father had not touched this beard.” Muhammad was put to shame and let him go. In that midst other people came in the house and Uthman was brutally killed by the crowd.

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So far, what we have seen from authentic reports tells us that most of the unrest in the Muslim community was totally towards his own kinsmen, the Banu Umayya, due to Uthman's nepotism and his favouritism that he had been showing in his policies.

There is no trace of any sectarianism in the affairs. People were generally unhappy and resentful with Uthman's deeds as the Khalifa of the Muslim.

On the one hand, the previous politicians who had been in power before Uthman became Khalifa and were now dismissed from their positions, were actively opposing Uthman. On the other hand, the general public was unhappy due to the wrongdoings and Zulm generally perpetrated by those new government administrators appointed by Uthman. They had a double resentment against Uthman. Firstly people were unhappy due to his excesses on religious grounds and then secondly on Uthman's financial management which was depriving people of their daily bread.

Sir John Glubb writes:

“Amr ibn al-Aas, the conqueror of Egypt, had been living in Medina since his dismissal by Osman, and had been among the most acid critics of the old khalifa.” (*The Great Arab Conquests*, p.324, 1963)

Amr bin Aas had many a sharp encounter with Uthman in the Great Mosque and in the latter's palace. In one of them, he demanded from him a public apology (*tauba*) for his questionable conduct in governmental affairs.

“Amr ibn al-Aas, when consulted (by Osman), replied brutally, ‘You have subjected the whole nation to Bani Umayya. You have gone astray and so have the people. Either make up your mind to be just or give up the job.’” (*The Great Arab Conquests*, p.300, 1967)

Amr bin Aas denounced and cursed Uthman publicly, and did not spare even his father. Curiously, it never occurred to Uthman to use the same powers of state against him that he had invoked against Abu Dharr al-Ghiffari, Ammar ibn Yasir and Abdullah ibn Masood. He had, not one, but numerous confrontations with Amr bin Aas, and yet, he never threatened to banish him to Rabza, and he never ordered his slaves to throw him out of the mosque or his palace, and to break his ribs.

Perhaps Uthman figured, like a man of prudence that he was, that the tongue-lashing that Amr bin Aas gave him, did not break any bones in his body after all and, therefore, it was not necessary to chastise him. Furthermore, they differed but they differed within the conventions of the exclusive “club” to which both of them belonged. But Abu Dharr al-Ghiffari, Ammar ibn Yasir and Abdullah ibn Masood, were “non-members.” Therefore, the same rules did not apply to them which applied to a “member” like Amr bin Aas.

## Conclusion

After looking at all the above details we see very clearly some of the basic facts about this period of early Khilafat in Islamic history.



- (1) The community was still one community. There were no sectarian differences. There were no Shia and no Sunni Muslims, they were all Muslims.
- (2) The disturbance and the eventual lynching of the third Khalifa. Uthman, was the result of an internal strife in the community.
- (3) That strife was due to the unrest in the larger community because the ruler and generally the entire administration had become corrupt and they had been ignoring the issues of governance in the interest of their own personal gains and comfort.

## Further Reading

We have quoted some of the most authentic sources in Islamic history to list the events and their causes.

In modern times, particularly for the English language readers, many books have been written and published.

- (i) *Succession to Muhammad*, Wilfred Madelung, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England
- (ii) *The Crisis of Early Islam- Religion and Politics in Early Islam*, Mahmoud Ayoub, One World Publications
- (iii) *A Short History of the Saracens*, Syed Amir Ali