Causes of the Assassination of Uthman

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Uthman succeeded to the position of the third *khalifa* after Umar's assassination, and he lasted in that position for twelve years.

The power and management structure which he had inherited from Umar worked relatively well for the first few years of his reign. There was peace in the Muslim community. But soon after the early years, discontent began to build up against Uthman, and it went on building up until it reached the flash point in 656 AD/35 AH when an enraged and outraged mob lynched him in his own palace in Medina.

The people had genuine causes for their discontent. They knew that unlimited quantities of gold and silver were coming into the treasury from the provinces but they did not see any of it. All of it disappeared into the private coffers of the members of the ruling class.

This is not to justify the brutal killing of Uthman. Imam Ali (pbuh) had commented in later times that the killing of Uthman was a thing of the period of *Jahiliyyah*.

The ruling class was made up exclusively of the members of the clan of Banu Umayya – the clan to which Uthman himself belonged. The Umayyads, under Uthman, reached undreamed of affluence and the ultimate arrogance of power. General, larger Muslim populace resented their arrogance, ostentation and hauteur, and the vulgar and inflammatory display by them of their riches and power.

Uthman dismissed all the governors and commanders who had been appointed by Abu Bakr and Umar, one after the other, and in their stead, he appointed those men whose only qualifications were that they were Umayyads. The people in the provinces groaned under the oppressive policies of these new governors and commanders. Drunk with power as they were,

their excesses and highhandedness knew no bounds. They considered themselves above and beyond the reach of law.

Private interests of the Umayyads took precedence over public good and much needed social services, and their "rights" to depredate, dominated the rights of the Muslim *umma*. The *umma* knew them to be only impious opportunists and arrogant parasites who had seized control of the physical apparatus of Islam – the government of Medina. The provinces, therefore, were overcome by disaffection and later, open rebellion.

The original patrons of the Umayyads were Abu Bakr and Umar. It was both of them who had opened the Pandora's box but now it appeared to the *umma* that there was no way to squeeze the genie back into the bottle.

Uthman also changed the balance of the political equation by alienating such old party war-horses as Abdur-Rahman bin Auf and Amr bin Aas. He antagonized Banu Ghiffar and its allies by banishing Abu Dharr to Rabza where he died. He antagonized the Banu Makhzoom and their allies by savagely beating up Ammar ibn Yasir, and he made the Banu Hudhail and the Banu Zuhra his enemies by having Abdullah ibn Masood beaten up by his personal guards.

Uthman was safe as long as he banished or beat up such friends of the Apostle of God as Abu Dharr el-Ghiffari, Ammar ibn Yasir and Abdullah ibn Masood. They did not belong to powerful tribes and Uthman had nothing to fear from them. But then he dismissed Amr bin al-Aas, the governor of Egypt. By doing so, he wrote his own prescription for disaster. Amr bin al-Aas raked up a hornet's nest for Uthman.

Uthman appeared to be anxious to find new enemies. A new recruit into the ranks of his enemies was Hazrat Ayesha, one of the widows of the Prophet. In the times of her father, Abu Bakr, and Umar, she had been treated like a queen. But Uthman didn't show the same respect for her that the previous two rulers did. He even reduced her pension, and thus roused her anger. She called him *Na'athal* (a Jew of Medina), and openly incited the people against him by saying, "This Na'athal has relapsed into Kufr. Kill him. May God kill him."

Quoting R.V.C. Bodley's book *The Messenger – The Life of Mohammed*, "Uthman had never been an outstanding figure when Mohammed was alive. Today he showed that he lacked the qualities of his predecessors. He was easily swayed and had no scruples in replacing military leaders and governors by his favorites, regardless of their competence. He also made the mistake of offending Ayesha."

"The slight in itself was small, but it was of a kind to arouse all of Ayesha's most vindictive instincts: Uthman reduced her pension to the level of that of the other widows!"

"Ayesha had always deemed herself Mohammed's favorite. During her father's and Umar's reigns, she had been held in the same regard as when her husband was alive. But with her two protagonists dead, she knew that it might require all her wit to maintain her position."

"When, therefore, Uthman made his indirect attack, Ayesha resolved that he was no worthy successor to her husband. Once she had settled that, all that remained was to find the best way to get rid of the enemy. The excuse or the methods employed had no bearing on the situation. When Ayesha wanted something done, it was carried out regardless of ethics. In this case, Uthman gave Ayesha every assistance." (Bodley, R.V.C. The Messenger. 1964.)

Medina, once the symbol of piety and austerity, had changed. The city of the Prophet had become, after his death, the symbol of all the evils that foreign conquests and unrestrained capitalism bring in their wake. It must not be assumed that the Muslims of Medina acquiesced in all these aberrations and deviations from pristine Islam. They did not. But they had no power to check the abuse of power in the government. They protested but their protests fell on deaf ears.

The voices of Abu Dharr el-Ghiffari, Ammar ibn Yasir and Abdullah ibn Masood which rose in protest against the tide of materialism threatening to engulf Islam were silenced by brute force. Finding themselves at a dead-end, the companions who were in Medina began in 654 AD/32 AH a campaign of writing letters to the Muslims in the provinces, asking them to make representations to the *khalifa* against the crimes of Marwan and the provincial governors, and to request him to remove them.

The Muslims in the provinces, themselves victims of tyranny and terror, and at a loss to know what to do, decided, after exchanging some letters with the Companions, to send delegations to Medina to present their grievances to the *khalifa*, and to request him to remedy the situation. Uthman knew about the letters which the Companions had sent to the provinces. But instead of taking remedial action, he committed a faux pas. Tabari, the historian, says that Uthman wrote to Muawiyah, his governor in Syria, as follows:

"The people of Medina have relapsed into apostasy; they have broken the pledge of loyalty to me. They are now contemplating treason. You, therefore, send to me immediately in Medina, the fierce warriors of Syria, mounted on swift animals." (History, Tabari, Volume III).

But Muawiyah had no intention of obliging Uthman. Tabari further says:

"When Muawiyah received Uthman's letter, he decided to watch the situation, and he preferred not to oppose the companions of the Prophet openly because he knew that they were all united in their opposition to Uthman."

Muawiyah was watching how the situation would play into his hands. He was not the man who would be deterred by any moral compunctions to oppose the Companions of the Prophet. He had the ability but he did not have the willingness to help Uthman.

This actually shows the real character of Muawiyah. He was a member of the Umayyad clan. He was taking advantage of the *khalifa* being one of his clan. But when the same *khalifa* needed his help he would become absolutely selfish and callous because he saw hope for himself in the destruction of Uthman.

Abul-Fida, the historian, says that in 656 AD/35 AH, a delegation of 700 members came to Medina from Egypt, and similar delegations also came from Kufa and Basra. They came seeking redress of bureaucratic misrule and profligate mismanagement of public funds both in Medina and in the provinces. If Uthman had given them an audience, had heard their grievances, and if he had only assured them that he was in sympathy with them, they would have been pacified, and they would have returned to their homes. But unfortunately, he did not do so. Uthman was gradually, paving the way of his own destruction by his own hands.

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The Egyptian delegates who were encamped at the outskirts of Medina, sent a letter with an emissary to Uthman, asking him to give them an audience. In the letter they had requested him to remove his foster-brother, Abdullah bin Saad bin Abi Sarah, from his position as governor of Egypt, and to institute certain administrative reforms. But instead of considering the request, Uthman ordered his personal guards to throw the Egyptian emissary out.

The Egyptians then entered the city, and they told the other people what Uthman had done. The delegations of Kufa and Basra were already in Medina, and they declared their support for the Egyptians. All three delegations then pitched camp within sight of the palace of the *khalifa*. On the following Friday, Uthman led the congregational prayers, and he read the sermon. He could not have been more gauche and tactless. Standing in the pulpit, and addressing the delegations from Egypt and Iraq, he said:

"The Apostle of God had predicted that mischief-mongers would, one day, come to his city to disturb its peace. He cursed them all, and now you can see what you are doing."

The congregation bridled at these remarks, and there was much commotion in the mosque. Someone threw a rock at Uthman which caught him in the face; he fell from the pulpit, and was carried out of the mosque to his palace.

After this incident, Uthman was in a state of siege in his palace. But he could go into the mosque, and he still led the prayers. A few days later, however, the Egyptians and the Iraqis forbade him to enter the mosque unless he listened to what they had to say, and they appointed Ghafiqi, a member of the Egyptian delegation, to lead them in prayer.

In his distress, Uthman sought Ali's aid in dispersing the besiegers. Ali said to him:

"Their grievances are genuine, and their demands reasonable. They will not disperse merely because I ask them to disperse. They will disperse only if you can give them your pledge to accept their demands."

Uthman said, "I give you the authority to negotiate with them. Whatever may be your terms of agreement with them, I will accept them."

Ali met the leaders of the Egyptian delegation and talked with them. They agreed to return to Egypt if Uthman recalled his foster-brother, the infamous Abdullah bin Saad, and if, in his stead, he appointed Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr as the new governor. Ali told Uthman what he would have to do if he wished the Egyptians to leave Medina in peace.

Uthman agreed to appoint Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr as the new governor of Egypt. This satisfied the Egyptians. Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr left Medina to take charge of his new duties, and many of the Egyptians accompanied him. Uthman could once again enter the mosque and lead the Muslims in prayer. The incident, apparently, was closed.

But unfortunately it was not. Uthman's alter ego, Marwan, exhumed it. When he heard that the Egyptians had left Medina with the governor of their own choice, he gave Uthman the following advice:

"Some of the Egyptians have left Medina but those who came from the other provinces are still here. The example of the Egyptians will encourage them also to put forward impossible demands. To prevent this from happening, you must make a speech in the mosque saying, 'The Egyptians had only heard some rumors in their country. When they came to Medina, they discovered that whatever they had heard was nothing but falsehood. They were satisfied and they went back to their homes. Now you too should leave Medina, and return to your homes."

Uthman did not want to tell such a brazen lie but Marwan had the power to make him do anything. After some hesitation, he agreed. He led a prayer, and after the sermon, said:

"O Muslims! The Egyptians had heard some false reports about their *khalifa*, and they came to Medina to verify them. Here they noticed that whatever they had heard, was all lies. They were, therefore, satisfied, and they went back to Egypt. Now you too should return to your homes." (Tabari, History, Volume III)

These words were scarcely out of Uthman's mouth when pandemonium broke loose in the mosque. Everyone began to yell at him: "Uthman, repent! Uthman repent! You are lying. Fear God. You are lying in God's Own House, and in the pulpit of His Messenger." Uthman was seized with panic, and not knowing what to do, he had to "repent." He begged God to forgive his sin, and then went home.

Ali was shocked beyond belief at Uthman's volte-face, and at his brazenness in making a false statement in the mosque. Nevertheless, he called on the old man once again, and chided him for what he had done. Uthman begged him to intervene once again on his behalf with the Muslims.

Ali told him that Uthman could, if he wished, still win the confidence and respect of the Muslims if he admitted his errors, and if he sincerely apologized to them. He also warned him that if he did not, then the strangers who were in the city, might besiege him in his palace, and if they did, then he (Ali) might not be able to reconcile with them.

Uthman, in a chastened mood, assured Ali that he would indeed do as he had advised. Ali, in turn, assured the Iraqis, the Egyptians and the other Muslims that the *khalifa* would accept all their demands, and he reminded them that they too had some duties, such as showing respect to him, obeying him and supporting him.

On the following day, Uthman went into the mosque, admitted his errors, sought pardon and mercy from God, resolved not to repeat the errors, and promised to take immediate action upon the demands of the Muslims for reforms in the government.

The audience was deeply moved by the old *khalifa's* regrets and by his assurances, and many tears were shed on both sides as a mark of a "change of heart." It appeared that the tears had washed away the rancor, the resentment and the bitterness of all concerned.

Through Ali's efforts, a reconciliation, apparently, was achieved, and it was a miracle. But as it turned out, it was a very short-lived miracle.

Uthman left the mosque with many pious resolutions. But when he entered his palace, he found Marwan, his chief policy planner, awaiting him to give him a new piece of advice. But before he could say anything, Uthman's wife, Naila, who was also present, stopped him, and the following exchange took place between them:

Naila: For heaven's sake, you now keep your mouth shut after all the harm you have already done. If you don't, you will, without a doubt, cause the destruction of this old man (Uthman). You are, by your perversity, pushing him to the edge of the pit of death.

Marwan: Who are you to meddle in these affairs? Have you forgotten that you are the daughter of a man who did not even know how to take ablutions for the prayer?

Naila: You are the most unmitigated liar. Before mentioning my father, you ought to remember that you and your father are the accursed ones of God and His Apostle. If I were not exercising restraint because of this old man (Uthman), I would have taught you a lesson.

Naila then turned to her husband, and said to him:

"Do not listen to this foul and wretched man. What is he? Who gives him a hoot? If you want your own safety, then act upon Ali's advice. Don't you see how much prestige and influence he has among the Muslims?"

This was the most sagacious advice that Uthman ever received from any member of his own family but he didn't accept it. Naila then left the presence of her husband. As soon as she was out of sight, Marwan said to Uthman:

"You have committed a major blunder in the mosque by admitting your errors, and by 'repenting' in public. Admission of your sins has now brought the crowds from the mosque to the gate of your house. They are here only because they have seen your weakness. If you had been 'firm,' with them, they would not have dared to come here. The only way to deal with them, and to impress them with your power and authority, is to be 'firm' with them."

A crowd of Muslims had, in fact, gathered outside the palace of the *khalifa*. But it was a peaceful crowd. Many Muslims from in and out of town had gathered hoping to hear some important announcement relating to changes in policy and administration. Uthman should have gone out to greet them. But he did not. Instead, he gave Marwan his permission to face them, and to "impress" them with his "firmness."

Marwan's idea of being firm with the Muslims was to use violent, abusive and threatening language. With the new "carte blanche" from Uthman, he went out, and facing the crowd which was peaceful and friendly, said:

"Why have you gathered here? What are your intentions? Have you come to attack us or to rob us and to plunder us? If you have, then listen to this with attention. You will not succeed. You cannot wrest power and authority from our hands. We shall not be intimidated by you or by anyone else. Now be gone from here. May God curse you."

This time Uthman and Marwan had gone beyond the point of no return!

The Muslims were petrified with shock and horror at the insolence of Uthman's son-in-law. But they did not linger to palter with him. Instead, they went to see Ali, and reported to him the substance of Marwan's "speech."

Ali was aghast to hear the story. Was there anything he could still do to arrest the declension of the situation? He pondered the question, and then called on Uthman and said to him:

"Is this the hospitality that you have offered to your brother Muslims? If you have lost all good sense before them, you ought, at least, to fear the wrath of God. In your anxiety to shield an apostate and a liar, you have lost that fear also, and now you can tell lies publicly and in the mosque, and you can break solemn pledges without batting an eye. You have allowed Marwan to lead you wherever he wants to."

"Remember, he will lead you into the pit of iniquity if he hasn't already done so, and you will never be able to extricate yourself from it. Now I shall not try to mediate between you and the Muslims. I shall take no interest in your affairs. This is my last visit to you. You do what you like. But if you still need me, then first you will have to get rid of Marwan. I shall dissociate myself with you as long as Marwan stands between you and me."

Ali left Uthman's palace never to return. When Naila, the wife of Uthman, saw him leaving, she was deeply troubled. Events had proved that she had a better judge than most of

those around Uthman. Though her advice had not been accepted, she was still anxious to salvage whatever she could, and said to her husband:

"How many times have I told you to get rid of Marwan? He is a curse around your neck. You know that he is a man of bankrupt reputation, bankrupt morals and bankrupt senses. The situation is extremely dangerous, and is rapidly getting worse. You have lost your own credence by betraying the trust of the Muslims. Now if there is any man who can still save you, that man is Ali. If he doesn't help you, then you are lost."

Flustered as Uthman was by the incident, he realized that what his wife had told him, was the absolute truth. He, therefore, sent a messenger requesting Ali to come. But Ali refused to go whereupon Uthman decided to go himself to see him. Not to be seen by anyone, he went at night.

Before Ali, the old *khalifa* poured out the story of his own helplessness, and apologized for his many errors, and gave him assurance that he would, in future, stand by his word, if he (Ali) would mediate between him (Uthman) and the Muslims. Ali, however, said:

"You stand in the pulpit of the Apostle of God, and make a false statement. You give the Muslims your pledge to walk in truth, and then you break it. Now everyone has seen how you honor your commitments. If Muslims want to see you and talk with you, Marwan abuses them and curses them. How do you expect me to trust you now with such a record as you have? I do not accept any responsibility for any of your acts. The alternatives are there, and the choice is yours. Get rid of Marwan. If you cannot do that, then do not expect anything from me. With Marwan at your side, and as your chief adviser, there is nothing I can do for you anyway."

Uthman loved his son-in-law too much to part with him. Ali's terms, therefore, were not acceptable to him, and he returned home. (Ali was not asking Uthman to banish Marwan from Medina as the Apostle of God had done; he was only asking him not to be misled by him.)

While Marwan was jousting with the Muslims in Medina, Uthman had been writing letters to all his governors asking them to send their troops to Medina so he could "discipline" the "rebels." His best hopes lay in Muawiyah, and to him he wrote numerous letters, urging him

to bring his warriors to Medina or to send them with his trusted officers. But neither Muawiyah nor any other of his governors responded to his signals of distress.

One day a man saw Uthman outside his palace, and remarked: "How I wish I could drag you and those around you in dirt." Uthman said that those who were around him were none other than the Companions of the Apostle of God. He retorted that those "Companions" must be Hakam, Marwan, Walid bin Aqaba, Saeed bin Aas, Abdullah bin Saad bin Abi Sarh, and the rest of the brood. Uthman murmured: "Let the army come, and then I will teach you a lesson."

But the army never came. Muawiyah temporized, and figured that if there was chaos in Medina, he would maneuver in it, and if possible, would run away with the *khilafa* itself.

When these events were taking place in Medina, bad news came from the north. Muhammad ibn Abu Bakr, the governor designate of Egypt, had reached Elath on the Red Sea arm called the Gulf of Aqaba, and was soon going to enter Egypt. He was camping in Elath when some members of his entourage noticed a lone camel-rider coming from Medina.

They stopped him for interrogations, and finding his answers evasive, frisked him. A long search of his person and baggage yielded a letter hidden in a leaden tube at the bottom of his saddlebag. 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, and the following exchange took place between them:

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The companions: Did you write this letter?

Uthman: No.

The companions: Whose seal is on this letter?

Uthman: Mine.

The companions: Whose writing is this?

Uthman: My secretary's.

The companions: Whose slave is this letter-carrier?

Uthman: Mine.

The companions: Who sent him to Egypt?

Uthman: I do not know.

The companions: The seal on the letter is yours; the writing is your secretary's; the slave who carried it, is yours. If you are so unaware, then it would be both and still you do not know who sent him to Egypt. It is in your interest and in the interest of the Muslim *umma* that you abdicate from khilafat. Let some other man, conscientious and fit for the job, take charge of the government of the Muslims.

Uthman: Khilafat is a robe that God has given me, and I cannot take it off under any circumstance. What I can do, however, is to 'repent.'

The companions: Your repentance cannot hoodwink us any more. Already you have repented many times. You, therefore, quit and make room for someone worthier than you for the high office of khalifa. You say that you do not know who sent this letter. If you are telling the truth, then it cannot be anyone other than your son-in-law who is your secretary. He wrote it and he sent it. He is the real criminal who was going to take the lives of many innocent Muslims. Now if you are sincere, then surrender him to us so that we may investigate him, and uphold justice.

Uthman: I cannot surrender Marwan to you.

The companions: We then understand that you are an accomplice in the crime, and you too wanted innocent Muslims to be killed upon their arrival in Egypt merely because you and Marwan do not like them.

The companions then went to the mosque to report to the Iraqis and the Egyptians the outcome of their parleys with the *khalifa*. The Egyptians, thereupon, laid siege to Uthman's palace. The delegates who came from Kufa and Basra also pitched their tents around the palace of the *khalifa*, and declared that he would be their prisoner until he gave up Marwan to them for trial and judgment.

During the siege, drinking water ran out in the palace. Uthman appealed to some of the companions to send water but they ignored his appeals. Finally, he sent word to Ali, and the latter sent water with armed guards. The guards had to fight their way into the palace to deliver the life-giving and life-saving fluid.

Uthman still hoped that one of his governors, probably Muawiyah, would send his troops who would annihilate the unruly and presumptuous rebels. The rebels, in the meantime, were tightening their noose around his neck.

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