

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

The Abbasid Revolution

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The Abbasid revolution was the first major military-political upheaval in the Muslim world, which resulted in the destruction of one dynasty and its replacement by another. The lessons from that revolution are as valid today as they were in the year 750.

Civilizations decay from within. External factors are mere occasions that provide the coup de grace for a civilization. Muslim history is no exception. The primary causes for the marginalization of Muslims in world history are internal. If one were alive in the year 740, one would see a Muslim empire extending from Paris to Lahore. Yet, within this enormous edifice, mighty forces were gathering momentum that would shake the empire to its very foundation. The question before a student of history is: what destroyed the internal cohesion of the Muslims?

In the historical context, faith embraces all human activity, including religious beliefs, economics, sociology, politics, statecraft, administration, science, art and culture. It is this all-embracing aspect of Islamic faith that is called *Tawhid* and a civilization that is based upon it is a *Tawhidic* civilization. Most Muslims today have reduced *Tawhid* to a single dimension—namely, belief in God—and have largely neglected its all-embracing dimensions.

The Omayyads fell from grace because they had departed from the *Tawhidic* civilization as it was founded by the Prophet and practiced by the first four Caliphs. The Omayyads were able soldiers, some were consummate politicians (Muawiya, Waleed I), one was pious and noble (Omar bin Abdul Aziz) but most were ruthless, impious and cruel. We will catalogue the most obvious of the deficiencies in their rule.

1. The Omayyads were unsuccessful in establishing the legitimacy of their rule. The issue of succession and legitimacy of rule arose immediately after the death of the Prophet. Elsewhere in these series, we have shown how Abu Bakr (r) was elected the Caliph after the Prophet, and also the turbulent circumstances surrounding the election of Ali ibn Abu Talib (r) to the Caliphate after the assassination of Uthman (r). By the year 740, there emerged multiple positions on the issue of succession after the Prophet. It is necessary to understand the more important of these because such understanding puts the rise of the Abbasids in perspective. More importantly, it helps us understand the historical context for some of the divisions that have rocked the Muslim world through the centuries and continue to rock it today. The issues are complex and what we present is but a brief summary.

2. The election of Abu Bakr (r) to the Caliphate was not unanimous. Ibn Khaldun records a conversation between Ibn Abbas and Abu Bakr (r), which clearly shows that the former believed Ali ibn Abu Talib (r) to be the rightful heir to the Prophet. The differences appear in greater clarity after the assassination of Omar ibn al Khattab (r) and at the meeting of the Shura committee constituted by Omar (r) to elect a successor. The majority view accepted not only the Qur'an and the Sunnah, but also the ijma (consensus) of the Companions. This was the opinion adopted by supporters of Uthman (r). The supporters of Ali (r) held that the chain of authority flowed from the Qur'an, Sunnah of the Prophet and by delegation from the Prophet to Ali ibn Abu Talib (r). Those who accepted the latter position were called *Shi'i-at-Ali* or *Shi' Aan e Ali* (partisans or party of Ali (r)).

From an internal Arab perspective, the differences arose from the conflicting claims of Bani Hashim and Banu Umayyah to the leadership of the community. Ali (r), a cousin of the Prophet, belonged to Bani Hashim. Muawiya as well as his progeny belonged to Banu Umayyah. After the Battle of Siffin and the tragedy of Karbala, there was no love lost between these two tribes. The Umayyads kept a close watch on the leadership of Bani Hashim and at times treated them with harshness, indeed cruelty.

The majority opinion which accepted the chain of political authority from the Qur'an, the *Sunnah* of the Prophet and the ijma (consensus) of the Companions, later crystallized into the orthodox Sunni position. Politically, this implies acceptance of the Caliphates of Abu Bakr (r), Omar (r), Uthman (r) and Ali (r) as a legitimate expression of the collective will of the Companions. This view was championed through the centuries by the Turks, the Moghuls and by successive dynasties in North and, Spain, Malaysia and Indonesia. The position is accepted today by approximately ninety percent of Muslims in the world. The minority opinion, which accepted the chain of authority from the Qur'an, the *Sunnah* of the Prophet and by delegation from the Prophet to Ali ibn Abu Talib (r) and his successor Imams was championed by the Safavids of Persia (1500-1720) and is designated the Shi'a position. About ten percent of the Muslims today subscribe to this position.

By the year 750, the Shi'a position had undergone further divisions. After the martyrdom of Hussain at Karbala, the mantle of leadership fell to his son Zainul Abedin, also known as Ali ibn Hussain. Repression from the Omayyads was heavy. Therefore, Zainul Abedin turned his attention to spiritual matters and to building the community from within. The absence of political activism was unacceptable to some of his followers who looked for a more activist leader. Zainul Abedin's son Zaid took up the challenge. Encouraged by a promise of help from the people of Kufa, he took on the Omayyads in battle. True to their historical perfidy, the Kufans abandoned Zaid and he fell in battle. His martyrdom created the Zaidi branch among Shi'a Muslims. The Zaidis believe in the Caliphate of Abu Bakr (r), Omar (r) and Ali (r) and in the Imamate of Hassan, Hussain, Zainul Abedin and Zaid. They reject the Caliphate of Uthman (r). In history, their primary contribution was the spread of Islam from Oman to East Africa and their resistance to Portuguese incursions in the 16th century.

A second schism took place amongst *Shi' Aan e Ali* after the fifth Imam, Ja'afar as Saadiq. His eldest son Ismail predeceased him. Therefore, Imam Ja'afar appointed his second son Musa Kazim as the Imam. But a section among the Shi'as refused to accept the Imamate of Musa Kazim and insisted on the Imamate of Ismail. This group is called the Ismailis. They are also referred to as Fatimids because of their lineage from Fatima (r), beloved daughter of the Prophet. The Fatimids played a pivotal part in Islamic history in the 9th and 10th centuries when they occupied Egypt, North Africa, Hejaz and Palestine. It was the Fatimids who made a serious attempt to conquer Italy in the 10th century and it was they who bore the first brunt of Crusader attacks on Jerusalem in the 11th century. It was their military challenge

that strengthened the Omayyad rule in Spain in the 10th century and brought the Seljuk Turks to the defense of the orthodox Caliphate in Baghdad (10th, 11th and 12th centuries). They were finally displaced by Salahuddin Ayyubi towards the end of the 12th century.

For clarity, we summarize here the spectrum of beliefs among Muslims. The Sunnis believe in the Qur'an, the Sunnah of the Prophet and accept the ijma of the Companions. This means acceptance of the first four Caliphs namely, Abu Bakr (r), Omar (r), Uthman (r) and Ali (r) as the rightly guided Caliphs (*Khulfa-e-Rashidoon*). The Ithna-Asharis believe in the Qur'an, the Sunnah of the Prophet and accept the Imamate of twelve Imams, namely, Ali (r), Hassan, Hussain, Zainul Abedin, Muhammed Baqir, Ja'afar as Saadiq, Musa Kazim, Ali Rada, Jawwad Razi, Ali Naqi Hadi, Hasan Askari and Muhammed Mahdi. The Sabayees (seveners) believe in the first seven Imams. The Fatimids believe in the Imamate of the first six Imams and of Ismail. The Ithna-Ashari, the Fatimids and the Sabayees are collectively referred to as Shi'a. Some historians also refer to them as Alavis. The Zaidis are intermediate in their beliefs between the Sunnis and the Shi'as. They believe in the Imamate of the first four Imams and of Zaid bin Ali and also in the Caliphate of Abu Bakr (r) and Omar (r) but not of Uthman (r). We must emphasize that all Muslims believe in the Qur'an and the *Sunnah* of the Prophet and disagree only in the historical unfolding of Islam in the matrix of human affairs. Like the branches of a mighty tree, the various schools of *Fiqh* shade the Muslim *Ummah* and Islamic history would not be the same without any of them.

During the time of Imam Ja'afar, yet another schism took place, which had a profound and lasting impact on Islamic history. Not satisfied with the political quietude of Imam Ja'afar, some supporters of Bani Hashim looked elsewhere for leadership. They found a leader in Muhammed bin Hanafia, a son of Ali ibn Abu Talib (r) from one of his marriages after the death of Fatima(r). This is the beginning of the non-Fatimid branch of the Alavis. After Muhammed bin Hanafia, his son Abu Sulaiman Abdullah became the Imam but he was poisoned by the Omayyad Caliph Sulaiman. As he lay dying, Abdullah looked around for someone from his family to pass on the Imamate. As no one from his immediate family was available, he found a Hashimite, Muhammed bin Ali Abbas, in a nearby town. Muhammed bin Ali Abbas was a grandson of Abbas, uncle of the Prophet. Thus, through a twist of historical circumstance, one branch of the Imamate passed from children of Ali ibn Abu Talib (r) to the children of Abbas. This branch is referred to as the Abbasids. It was the Abbasids who established their Caliphate in the year 750 and ruled from Baghdad the vast Islamic Empire for more than five hundred years until the Mongols destroyed Baghdad in 1258.

Muhammed bin Ali Abbas was a tireless worker for the Abbasid cause and established a network of supporters throughout Iraq, Persia, Khorasan and in areas that today lie in the Central Asian republics of Turkmen, Kyrgyz, Tadzig and Uzbek peoples. After Muhammed, his son Ibrahim became the Imam. As the Abbasid movement, centered on the claim that the Caliphate belonged to Bani Hashim of which the Abbasids were a branch, gained momentum, so did the repression from the Omayyads. The Omayyad Caliph Marwan had Ibrahim arrested, put in jail and finally killed by forcing his head into a sack of boiling lime. Before his death, Ibrahim managed to communicate with his brother Abul Abbas Abdullah and appointed him the Imam. Abul Abbas vowed to take revenge on the Omayyads for the cruel death of his brother and as we shall see later, he accomplished this with a vengeance.

The ideological basis for Abbasid rule was not provided until a generation after they gained power. It was Caliph Mansur, who provided this ideological basis in 770 in response to a question from a Kharijite. According to this position, since the Prophet left no sons and lineage passes from father to son, the children of Fatima(r) had no claim to succession. Accordingly, succession had to be through the male progeny of the Prophet's uncle Abbas.

There was yet another position on the Caliphate which was politically important at the time of the Abbasid revolution but which lost its vigor in later centuries. That was the position taken by the Kharijites who maintained that the Caliphate should be open to all Muslims, whether Arab or non-Arab and should not be the privilege only of Omayyads or Hashemites. This seemingly democratic position always remained at the fringe of the Muslim body politic because of the violent and cruel ways of the Kharijites and their extremist demands.

Thus it was that in the year 740, as the storms gathered on the horizon for a revolution, the body politic of the Muslims was rent asunder by conflicting claims to the Caliphate and Imamate. The Banu Omayya were in power but that power was increasingly challenged by Bani Hashim through the Abbasids. The Abbasids had inherited their legitimacy from the Alavis (or *Shi' Aan e Ali*) through an accident of history. But the Alavis were themselves divided between Zaidis, Fatimids (sixers), Sabayees (seveners) and the Ithna-Asharis (Twelvers).

The Omayyads had thrust themselves into the political process during the Caliphate of Ali ibn Abu Talib (r) and had consolidated their rule after his assassination. Even though they radically changed the Caliphate from electoral consensus to dynastic rule, the Omayyads championed the orthodox Sunni position out of political necessity. But they could not suppress the claims of Bani Hashim or of *Shi' Aan e Ali*. Except for Omar bin Abdul Aziz, no Omayyad made a serious attempt to reconcile the differences among the Muslims. Confrontations continued, leading to continuous warfare against the Kharijites and sporadic but violent clashes with *Shi' Aan e Ali* as manifested in the great tragedy of Karbala. The Omayyads were always vulnerable to charges that they had usurped power from the house of the Prophet. This was their weak political flank and this is precisely the ideological direction from which the Abbasid movement attacked them.

3. During the 92 years of Omayyad rule, there was a paradigm shift from *Tawhid* to the dinar. The rulers forgot that Islamic rule was a divine trust and its primary function was to transmit the message of *Tawhid*. It was this transcendence that had carried the *mujahids* (from the root word j-h-d, to struggle) from Hejaz to the outskirts of Paris and the banks of the River Indus. This transcendence was lost during the Omayyad period. The Omayyads became a dynasty just like other dynasties in Asia or Europe with their focus on riches and power. The rulers became tax collectors so that they could sustain their palaces in Damascus. They lost their spiritual claim to leadership. Where faith is weak, a civilization declines. When spirituality is lost, political rule must of necessity be sustained at the point of the blade. This is what happened with the Omayyads. Their rule became increasingly repressive and had to be sustained by increasing brutality. It would be unfair to single out the Omayyads for this behavior. The Islamic body politic lost its bearing after the first four pious Caliphs and has only on occasions risen to the task of Divine trusteeship. As an illustration, most of the Muslim rulers in the Indian subcontinent during the 13th to 17th centuries discouraged conversion to ensure that their tax revenues would not decrease. As a result, after five centuries of Muslim rule, only a quarter of the population of Hindustan had accepted Islam.

4. The Omayyads forgot the fraternal message of Islam and treated the new converts with disdain. Often, the converts were forced to pay the Jizya even after they had accepted Islam. It was against such discrimination that Imam Abu Haneefa (who lived through the Abbasid revolution) fought. In one of his dictums Abu Haneefa said: "The belief of a newly converted Turk is the same as that of an Arab from Hejaz". But the Omayyads resented such reforms and Imam Abu Haneefa was jailed for his activism. In Khorasan and Persia, the Arabs held most of the higher positions in the armed forces and in the upper echelons of government. The result was racial division and social fragmentation. As conversion increased, the center of gravity shifted to the newly converted Persians and the Turks, who were kept

away from the privileges of power. The social structure increasingly looked like an inverted pyramid with a small privileged Arab minority at the apex of power. The material for social revolution took root and it was only a matter of time before the pyramid was toppled.

5. The corruption that started from the top filtered down to the provincial governors and the petty officials. The cruelty and ruthlessness of Hajjaj bin Yusuf is proverbial. Instead of promoting officials on the basis of capability and integrity, as was the case during the Caliphate of Omar ibn al Khattab (r), or on the basis of examination and merit as was the case in the contemporary Tang dynasty of China, the Omayyads chose their governors and officials on the basis of loyalty to the rulers. The brutality of the governors was viewed as an asset in maintaining the conquered territories under control. Damascus, in essence, lost touch with the far-flung provinces, a fact that was exacerbated by the rudimentary communications of the day. So, when a determined challenge to Omayyad rule surfaced in far-away Khorasan, the response from the palaces of Damascus was slow, feeble and disjointed.

6. The Omayyads lost the ability to foster cohesion in society. Instead, they became partisans in the tribal squabbles of fellow Arabs. In pre-Islamic Arabia, the Arabs were hopelessly divided along tribal lines and often fought pitched battles against other tribes. One of the major tribal divisions was between the Muzruis (the northern Arabs) and the Yemenis (the southern Arabs). The Prophet had healed this crack and united the tribes into a common brotherhood. But during the Omayyad period, this schism resurfaced with renewed intensity. The Omayyads were supported by the Muzruis. Thanks to Omayyad blunders, the Yemenis became their enemies. The architects of the nascent Abbasid revolution exploited this division.

7. Lastly, it is the view of Ibn Khaldun that the Omayyads had become city dwellers and had lost the resilience of desert Arabs. The corruption of city life destroys the primal *asabiyah* (cohesion based on tribal loyalty), which Ibn Khaldun requires as the building block of civilizations. Surrounded by the opulence of Damascus, the later Omayyad rulers could hardly understand the drive, energy, enthusiasm and pristine faith of their desert forefathers. In other words, it was time for the Omayyads to leave the stage of history.

The Abbasids succeeded in every department that the Omayyads failed in. They were led by an outstanding leader, championed a popular cause, fielded brilliant generals and displayed a Machiavellian instinct for exploiting the weakness of their opponents.

The key figure in this revolution was Abu Muslim Khorasani. Abu Muslim was a man almost made for the hour. He was a Persian, born in Isfahan and therefore had impeccable credentials of birth with the exploited Persian majority. He grew up in Kufa and early in life acquired a dislike of Arab haughtiness and their superiority complex. Abbasid propaganda was active in small cells in Iraq and Abu Muslim received his early indoctrination from the Abbasid *Dayee* (one who invites people towards a doctrine), Eesa bin Musa Siraj. His intelligence and capability caught the attention of Eesa and he was introduced to Imam Muhammed bin Ali. The Imam saw the potential in this young man and in due time, appointed him Chief *Dayee* for the province of Khorasan. It was the year 744.

Khorasan was seething with discontent. The legacy of Omayyad excesses had created extreme bitterness among the local population. Unfair taxation had fostered dislike of the Arabs among the Persians. The Arabs were divided among themselves along tribal lines. Capable men and scholars were either silenced by the Omayyads or they withdrew from public life. In this atmosphere, Abbasid propaganda for the rights of the Hashemites and of *Ahl-al Bait* found an extremely positive reception. The Alavites

supported the Abbasids as the best opportunity to overthrow the hated Omayyads and perhaps establish the rule of the house of Ali (r) and Fatima(r). The common man had toiled too long under the oppressive maltreatment of Omayyad officials and prayed for deliverance.

Khorasan was governed at the time by Nasr bin Sayyar, a Mazrui (northern) Arab and a capable, loyal Omayyad supporter, but an old man of eighty who suffered from the same parochial approach to politics as his benefactors in Damascus. He took sides in a local quarrel between the Yemeni and Mazrui Arabs and had the chiefs of one of the tribes, Ali Kirmani, murdered. This alienated Kirmani's followers and they became bitter enemies of the Omayyads. Attempts were made to patch up these inter-Arab differences, but Abu Muslim was successful in preventing a rapprochement between the two Arab tribes through shrewd political maneuvering.

With the Arabs at loggerheads with each other, Abu Muslim made his move. Word was passed through the enormously effective underground cells that the 25th of Ramadan was to be a day of mourning in honor of the Imams who had been killed by the Omayyads. On the appointed day, the people of Khorasan hoisted black flags and an uprising began. The color black was later to become the color of the Abbasid emblem. The city of Merv was quickly overrun. Nasr appealed to Marwan for help. But, as happens at decisive moments in history, several critical events took place simultaneously and the Omayyads were hemmed in. There was a serious uprising of the Kharijites in Mecca and Madina. As he was busy suppressing this uprising, Marwan ordered the governor of Iraq to render assistance to Nasr. By the time the Iraqis arrived at the borders of Khorasan, it was too late. Abu Muslim had overrun the entire province of Khorasan and his resources in men and material had enormously increased. The Iraqis had no chance. They were routed.

It was about this time that Imam Ibrahim was cruelly murdered by Marwan, by having his head stuffed in a leather sack filled with boiling lime. This murder as well as its cruelty added fuel to the fire. Abul Abbas Abdallah became the new Imam and vowed revenge for the murder of his brother Ibrahim. Events moved rapidly. Abu Muslim had at his service some of the ablest generals of this era, among them Kahtaba bin Shabib, an Arab from Madina and Khalid bin Barmek, a Persian. Kahtaba pursued Nasr southwards towards Isfahan. Nasr died while fleeing. Hassan, a son of Kahtaba, laid siege to Nahawand, while Kahtaba himself defeated a relief force headed by Marwan's son Abdallah on the plains of Karbala (749). Kufa, the capital of Iraq, fell without further resistance.

The people of Kufa were summoned to the Jamia Masjid of Kufa. Abu Muslim, who had deftly forged unity between the disaffected Persians, Yemeni Arabs, the Abbasids and the Alavis and had carefully kept at bay competing claims to the Imamate and Caliphate, gave an impassioned speech in which he proclaimed that the usurper Omayyads had been overthrown by the might of the people. Whatever claims the Omayyads had to the leadership of the community had been forsaken by their impiety and oppression. It was now time to elect a new Imam and Caliph and there was no one better than Abul Abbas Abdallah who met all the criteria of the Imamate and the Caliphate. Abu Muslim thus nominated Abul Abbas as the first Abbasid Caliph in Kufa on the 13th of Rajab, 132 AH or the 25th of November, 749 and the Abbasid era began.

Marwan was finally alarmed at these developments and advanced towards Iraq with an army of 120,000. Marwan was an able soldier, but he was also impulsive and headstrong. Opposing him was an Abbasid army of 100,000 led by Abdullah bin Ali and the able general Abu Ayun. The two armies met on the banks of the River Zab in Iraq near the village of Kushaf on the 25th of January 750. The impulsive Marwan built a bridge across the river and advanced to meet the enemy, a tactical error that allowed him no chance to retreat. The Abbasids, impelled by a sense of grievance and revenge, charged. Fate

intervened. While Marwan was dismounted, his horse ran away without him. When they saw the horse without its rider, Marwan's troops assumed that he had been killed. It was a complete rout. Marwan fled towards Mosul but that city would not open its gates to him. He continued his flight westward towards Damascus, trying to raise another army. But the Abbasids were in hot pursuit. Abdullah bin Ali followed him from city to city. Damascus was stormed and captured in April 750. Marwan crossed into Egypt and reached Fustat (modern Cairo). Abdullah bin Ali sent his brother Saleh and General Abu Ayun after him. Marwan thought of invoking the help of the Christian Byzantines but was dissuaded from this effort by his lieutenants who would have nothing of external interference in this civil war. At last he was cornered in an abandoned monastery on the west bank of the River Nile. Undaunted, he charged, sword in hand, ready to offer combat and was slain by a lance hurled by an Abbasid soldier. Thus perished the last scion of the mighty Omayyads. Marwan was an able soldier. Had destiny been more kind to him, he might have excelled as a ruler. But he came upon the stage of history at time when he had zero chance to show his metal.

The Abbasids lived up to their vow to take revenge on the Omayyads. A reign of terror was let loose. The Omayyad men were hunted like rabbits and slaughtered. Only old men, women and children were spared. The bones of the Omayyad rulers (except those of Omar bin Abdul Aziz) were dug up and burned. In Damascus, Abdullah bin Ali, coaxed eighty of the Omayyad princes to dinner on the pretext of amnesty. As the princes sat down, they were tied with ropes, wrapped in carpets and clubbed to death.

But just as old trees die and in their wake new ones crop up from their seeds, old dynasties die and in their place new ones emerge. As the Omayyad princes were hunted from place to place, three of them reached the River Euphrates. Upon hearing the news of an amnesty, two of them turned back and were captured and killed. But one valiant prince, Abdur Rahman I, threw himself into the river. Undaunted by the swift current, he swam across and after years of travel incognito, arrived in Spain. There, he was received with favor by the remnants of the Omayyads and founded the Omayyad dynasty in Andalus. It was this dynasty that was to grow in later centuries to be the beacon of culture and learning in Europe. Under Abdur Rahman's lineage Andalus was to become a crown jewel of Islamic civilization.

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