Uthman’s Caliphte

While 'Uthman was a successful merchant, before his election in 23/644 he had, at no time displayed any qualities of public leadership. Among the six members of the electoral council, he was the only one who had never been entrusted by the Prophet (S.A.W.A.) or the first two caliphs with leading a raid or an army.

Before the election, he had no political ambitions and can hardly even have thought of himself as a potential candidate for supreme reign. Yet he was put forward as the only counter-candidate to 'Ali. As twice the Prophet's son-in-law, he could better rival 'Ali's close kinship ties with the latter than could the rest. Quite unprepared for his office, he ascended the pulpit after his election and apologized, “O people, we have not been orators. If we live, the oration will come to you in proper shape, God willing.”

During the election, 'Uthman had twice pledged without hesitation that he would follow the Book of God, the Sunna of His Prophet, and the practice of Abu Bakr and 'Umar, while 'Ali b. Abi Talib had cautiously stated that he would do so to the limit of his ability. The unabashed favoritism towards his close kin that he showed from the beginning of his reign stood in marked contrast to this commitment. He granted his cousin Marwan b. al-Hakam the war booty (khums) of Ifriqia and gave his close relatives money from the treasury. He also took the sums of money and borrowed money from the treasury saying, Abu Bakr and 'Umar left what belonged to them of this money, but I take it and distribute to my kin.

Shortly after his accession, he deposed 'Umayr b. Sa'd al-Ansari, governor of Hims, Qinnasrin and Upper Mesopotamia, at his request and turned these provinces over to Mu'awiya. This meant a substantial increase in Mu'awiya's power, which enabled him later to challenge and defy 'Ali. 'Uthman also dismissed 'Amr b. al-'As as the governor of Egypt and appointed his own foster-brother 'Abd Allah b. Sa'd b. Abi Sarh. 'Abd Allah killed seven hundred men for one man, but 'Uthman only dismissed him and did not reproach him. In 25/695, he replaced Sa'd b. Abi Waqqas, whom he had appointed the previous year, as the governor of Kufa with a transgressor (fasiq) like 'Umayyad al-Walid b. 'Uqbas b. Abi Mu'ayt his maternal brother. He committed wine drinking. He performed praying out of time and one morning he performed four postures (rak'as) in his prayer instead of two and said, “I am drunk, if you wish I can perform more.” When Walid b. 'Uqba had to be disposed because of, misconduct in the year 30/650, 'Uthman replaced him with another Umayyad, Sa'id b. al-'As b. Abi Uhayha.'Uthman also granted the estate of Fadak, which the Prophet (S.A.W.A.) had bestowed to his daughter

Fatima, and Abu Bakr and 'Umar had confiscated it as a sadaqa, as an endowment for the benefit of Muslim community, to Marwan b. al-Hakam his cousin and his son-in-law, as land concession.

From 30/650, dissatisfaction and resistance were manifested throughout most of the empire. 'Uthman's generosity was now restricted to his kin, who seemed to dominate him. The prominent Companions of the shura more and more lost their influence over him. At the same time, his arrogant mistreatment of several of the earliest Companions, Abu Dharr al-Ghifari, 'Abd Allah b. Mas'ud and 'Ammar b. Yasir provoked outrage among the pious, as well as among their tribes and clans of Quraysh, to whom they were affiliated and who were liable for their protection.

Among Quraysh 'Amr b. al-'As was the first to agitate in Medina against the caliph after his removal from the governorship of Egypt. Another prominent Companion who fell out with 'Uthman was 'Abd Allah b. al-Arqam al-Zuhri, a former secretary of the Prophet (S.A.W.A.). 'Umar had put him in charge of the public treasury (bayt al-mal) and thought highly of him. Under 'Uthman, he continued his office until 'Uthman sent draft and ordered Ibn Arqam to pay 'Abd Allah b. Khalid b. Asid the caliph's nephew and brother-in-law 300'000 dirhams and each of his companions 100'000. Ibn Arqam found the amount excessive and returned the draft. When the caliph reprimanded him, calling him “treasurer of us”, he answered that he had considered himself treasurer of the Muslims and resigned, suspending the treasury keys on the pulpit.

Among the electors, the most active was Talha. He wrote letters to the provinces inciting revolt and made common cause with the rebellions during the siege of 'Uthman's palace. When he later came to Basra for revenge for the blood of 'Uthman, 'Abd Allah b. al-Hakim al-Tamimi showed him his earlier letters to him, and he acknowledged having written them. 'A’isha also wrote letters to the provinces stirring up rebellion, although, after the murder of 'Uthman, she denied it.

During the final siege of 'Uthman's palace 'A’isha decided to leave, together with Umm Salama, for pilgrimage. In the hope that her presence in Medina might hold back the rebels, 'Uthman sent Marwan and 'Abd al-Rahman b. 'Attab b. Asid to persuade her to stay for the sake of his safety. Having completed her preparations for the trip she told angrily that she wished 'Uthman were in one of her travel sacks so she could take it along and cast him to the sea.

'Ali clashed with 'Uthman in particular on questions of the religious law. As the Prophet's cousin and his son-in-law, he evidently saw himself as responsible for the preservation and execution of the norms of the Holy Qur'an and the Prophet's practice. At the beginning of the

'Uthman's reign, he protested against the pardon of 'Ubayd Allah b. 'Umar for the murder of Jufayna and al-Hurmuzan. He threatened to carry out the legal punishment when he could lay his hands on him.

He insisted that the legal punishment for wine drinking be applied to al-Walid b. 'Uqba b. Abi Mu'ayt and when others hesitated to flog the caliph's half-brother, he himself carried out the flogging. The relationship between 'Ali and 'Uthman was, however, not entirely antagonistic. Among the members of the electoral council, 'Ali was 'Uthman's closest kin. His kinship ties made 'Ali a natural mediator between the opposition and 'Uthman. When the general discontent reached dangerous levels in the year 34/659, a group of Meccan and other Companions asked 'Ali to speak to, and admonish 'Uthman. 'Ali thus addressed him, as representative of the people, but 'Uthman was not yet prepared to heed his warnings.

A year later, when the Egyptian rebels camped at Dhu Khushub, 'Uthman asked 'Ali to meet them at the head of a delegation of the Emigrants while also sent the Medinan Companion Muhammad b. Maslama at the head of a group of the Helpers. 'Ali b. Abi Talib and Muhammad b. Maslama persuaded the rebels to turn back by promising them, in the name of the caliph, redress of their grievances and agreeing the act as guarantors.

He was to see 'Uthman once more as the Egyptian rebels returned to Medina, outraged by 'Uthman's letter ordering the punishment of the rebel leaders. The Egyptians intercepted the letter. 'Ali b. Abi Talib and Muhammad b. Maslama as guarantors of 'Uthman's promises felt obliged to intervene and came jointly to see 'Uthman. When 'Ali informed the caliph of the rebels' new grievance, 'Uthman swore that he had no knowledge of the letter. While Muhammad b. Maslama accepted his word, adding that this was the work of Marwan, 'Ali insisted that 'Uthman receive the Egyptians himself and put his excuse to them.

Reminding him of his kinship ties, the caliph pleaded with him to go out to speak to them. The Egyptians were admitted and they stated their grievances. 'Uthman again denied any knowledge of the letter and both 'Ali b. Abi Talib and Muhammad b. Maslama attested that he was speaking the truth. The Egyptians now demanded that he resign if an official letter with his seal could be sent without his knowledge, but the caliph affirmed that he would not take off a garment with which God had clad him. As the turmoil broke out, 'Ali stood up and left, followed by Muhammad b. Maslama. The Egyptians also left and continued their siege.

Talha was the one toughest against 'Uthman during the siege. When Talha prevented the delivery of drinking water to the besieged caliph, 'Ali became angry. He talked to Talha and saw it that water was delivered. Looking down from his balcony 'Uthman greeted a group of the rebels among whom he saw Talha. As they failed to return the greeting, he addressed Talha

and told him that he did not think he would live to see the day when he should greet Talha and he did not return the greeting.

On Thursday, Dhu al-Hijja 17, the peace was broken. The act of aggression, opening the civil war, came from the palace. Among the rebels on that day was Niyar b. 'Iyadh Aslami, an aged Companion of the Prophet, who called for 'Uthman and, when the caliph looked down from his balcony, lectured him demanding his abdication. Abu Hafsa al-Yamani, an Arab freedman of Marwan dropped a rock on him, killing him instantly. The rebels sent to 'Uthman demanding the surrender of the murderer. The caliph once more protected Marwan, asserting that he did not know the killer.

The next day, Friday Dhu al-Hijja 18, 35/ June 17, 656, was 'the battle-day of the palace' (yawm al-dar), and 'Uthman was slain.

Deserted by all but his wife, Na'ila, he faced the inevitable end at peace with himself. Yet he must have felt he himself had to bear a large share of the blame for the disaster. The cancer in the body of the caliphate, which he had nurtured and proved unable to excise because of his doting love for a corrupt and rapacious kin, destroyed him. It was to continue to grow and to sweep away the Islamic meritocracy. 'Uthman's successor, Mu'awiya, turned it, as predicated by a well-known prophecy ascribed to the Prophet (S.A.W.A.), into traditional despotic kingdom.