

The Administration of Abbasids Caliphate: A Fateful Change in the Muslim History

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Abstract

The period of Abbasids was started in 750 A.D after the fall of Ummayyads. Abu al Abbas alsafah was the first abbasi caliph. The period of Haroon Rasheed and Mamoon Rasheed was considered the golden period of Abbasids. In this period Abbasi caliphate contributed a lot for education, science, literature and fine arts. In this era many inventions were made. In short, it can be concluded that it was a golden era of Abbasids, which brought a fateful change in the Muslim History.

Keywords: Abbasids, Ummayyads, caliph, administration.

1. Literature Review and Analysis

The replacement of the Umayyads by the Abbasids in the headship of the Islamic community was more than a mere change of dynasty. It was a revolution in the history of Islam as important a turning point as the French and Russian revolution in the history of the west. It came about not as the result of a palace conspiracy or a coup d'etat, but by the action of an extensive and successful revolutionary propaganda and its organization expressing the dissatisfactions of important elements of the Muslim population. Lewis throws light on the change of dynasty that completed a process of development in the organization of the state which had already begun under the Umayyads from a tribal Sheikh governing by the unwilling consents of the Arab ruling caste (Bernard, 1950).

Whereas the early caliphs has been Arabs, whom anyone could approach and address by name the Abbasids surrounded themselves with the pomp and ceremonial of an elaborate and hierarchic system. In theory the caliph was still subject to the rule of the sharia, the holy law of Islam. But in practice, these checks on his authority were not effective since there was no machinery other than revolt for its enforcement. The Abbasid caliphate was thus a despotism based on military force claiming almost divine right to rule. The Abbasids were stronger than the Umayyads in that sense they did not depend on the support of the Arabs and could therefore rule rather than persuade. On the other hand, they were weaker than the old oriental despots were in that they lacked the support of an

established feudal caste and of an entrenched priesthood. According to Lewis the change of dynasty completed a process of development in the organization of the state, which had already begun under the Umayyads. The caliph under the Abbasids became an autocrat claiming a divine origin for his authority, resting it on a salaried bureaucracy. In the new regime pedigree was no help to advancement, but only the favor of the sovereign, and an official hierarchy thus replaced the Arab aristocracy. With the foundation of their empire, the Abbasids introduced great changes in the mode and practice of administrative system. Actually the new regime was much impressed by the Persians and under their influence they adopted the sophisticated manners and etiquettes for their emperors. In emulating the example of the Persian kings they, went ahead of their Umayyad predecessors, who had previously introduced the Byzantine fashions. In the words of Hassan Ibrahim, "The adoption of such monarchic dignity with great pomp and show was the renaissance of the Sasanids kingship and Baghdad became just like the capital of the splendid Persian Empire" (Hassan, 1947).

We can point out the first and most obvious of this was the transfer of the centre of political gravity from Syria to Iraq, The traditional centre of the great cosmopolitan empires of the near and Middle East. Ameer Ali adds that with the rise of the Abbasids, the situation in Western Asia alters. The seat of government was removed from Syria to Iraq; the Syrians lost the monopoly of influence and power they had hitherto possessed and the tide of progress was diverted from the west to the East. Furtherer conquests were stopped but not without advantage, as it helped the founder of Abbasid caliphate to consolidate their power, organize its resources, and promote the material and intellectual development of their subjects (Ameer, 1975). We conclude that the revolution was not the victory of Abbasids over the Umayyads but it may be regarded as the victory of the Persians over the Arabs, establishing under the cloak of Persiansied Islam a new Iranian empire in place of the fallen Arab kingdom. The Abbasids under the influence of the Persians adopted the concept of the divine right of Kingship. Mansoor (754-775) introduced the idea that he was conferred sovereignty from god and not by the people. In other words he claimed that he was bestowed the divine right of kingship from god, so he was not accountable to any person. The Abbasids based their right of caliphate on the concept of the holy Prophet (peace be upon him). Their diplomacy was based on the fact that their sovereignty must be recognized as the spiritual and religious leadership on the Muslim world. Its main purpose was to distinguish their rule from that of the Umayyads. Such religious and spiritual up gradation of the institution of the caliphate was the main feature under the Abbasids (Ameer, 1975). Actually the only course now left under the critical circumstances was to reconstruct the institution of caliphate on religious basis so that they could survive in spite of their division and mutual rivalry, the originator of this scheme was al-Mansoor who is rightly regarded as the real founder of the Abbasid dynasty. He patronized Ulema and by enlisting their sympathies impressed upon the public mind that the caliphate belonged to the house of Abbas. He succeeded in replacing the famous tradition of the Holy Prophet "(peace be upon him), Al-Ayimma minal-Quraish by Al-Ayimma minal-Abbas. On account of this belief among the Muslims, the dynasty lasted for centuries after it had lost all temporal power (Husaini, 1949). Husaini describes that, the Abbasids took great care to lay much emphasis on the religious character and dignity of their office as an Imam (religious leadership). In about a century after the establishment of the Abbasid dynasty, the vicegerent of the Messenger of God (Khalifatu Rasulillah) become the vicegerent of God (Khalifatuallah) and God's

shadow on the earth (Zillallahi ala'l -ard) (Husaini, 1949). Lewis adds that the new dignity of the caliph was expressed in new titles. No longer was he the deputy of the Prophet (peace be upon him) of God, but simply the deputy of God, from whom he claimed to derive the authority directly. Imamuddin is of the opinion that drawing lessons from the Umayyads the Abbasids had laid emphasis on their religious leadership and the more the caliphs became weak and figurehead a century after the establishment of their rule, the more honorific titles they adopted (Imamuddin, 1976). Moreover, special stress was laid on the religious character of the state, possession of and reverence to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. The caliph used to wear the prophet's mantle and held his staff in his hand. Al Mutawakkhil (847-861) was the first to receive such titles. It was the time when all effective powers had passed out of the hands of the caliph. According to Siddiqi, being the creature of a strong religious revival, the Abbasids took great care to lay much emphasis on the religious character and dignity of their office as an Immamat (religious leadership). They in a real sense succeeded in introducing a religious halo in the concept of caliphate. Their victory was generally regarded as the substitution of the true concept of caliphate for the purely secular state (Mulk) of the Umayyads. From the very beginning the idea was cultivated that authority should remain forever in Abbasid hands, to be finally delivered to Jesus (Isa), the Messiah. Later on the people were made to believe that if this caliphate was destroyed, the whole universe would collapse (Siddiqi, 1956). The Abbasid state introduced fundamental changes in the idea of the government and the caliphate. Whereas the Umayyads had been little more than heads of a turbulent Arabian aristocracy, the Abbasids reverted to the old type of oriental despotism with which the Persians had been familiar. Like the Sassanids they ruled with absolute authority over the lives and properties of their subjects. In short the Abbasid caliph was not merely a secular sovereign; he was the spiritual head of a church and commonwealth, the actual representative of the divine government (Siddiqi, 1956). Above all, the Abbasids succeeded in founding their state on the chief characteristic of an Islamic system via, equality, liberty, fraternity, social justice and toleration. On the basis of such grounds it would therefore, be fallacy to call it an absolute monarchy after the pattern of a Persian or Byzantine despotism, where no doubt absolutism; reigned supreme. On the other side, they removed all discrimination between the old and the new Muslims, and provided equal opportunities to all in every field of activity. Since the Abbasids had come to power with the help of the new Persian converts (Malawi), it was but natural that they must be accorded equal treatment in economic, political and cultural fields. So every office was filled with Persian maw lies, even the highest office of the grand wazir was thrown open to them. Such behavior provided incentive for the non-Muslim to embrace Islam. The most amazing feature of the Abbasid caliphate had been the preponderating number of non-Muslim in civil administration. "It seemed that in their own state the Muslims were being ruled by the zimis (non-Muslim)" (Siddiqi, 1956). Under the Abbasids the non-Arabs, as common subjects of a great and civilized empire, assumed their proper place as citizens of Islam. It gave practical effect to the democratic enunciation of the equality and brotherhood of man. The acceptance of this fundamental principle of racial equality helped the early sovereigns of the house of Abbas to build up a fabric which endured without a rival for over five centuries (Siddiqi, 1956). Bernard Lewis admits that "under the Abbasids, Zimmis were infinitely superior to those communities who differed from the established church in Western Europe in the same period. They enjoyed free exercise of their religion, normal property rights. They were

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very frequently employed in the service of the state, often in the highest offices. They were admitted to the craft guilds, in some of which they actually predominated. They were never called upon to suffer martyrdom or exile for their beliefs” (Bernard, 1950).

So “the Abbasid dynasty ruled the world with a policy of mingled religion and kingship, the best and most religious of men obeyed them out of fear”. The religious organization filled the gap left by the breakup of Arab racial unity and served as the cement binding together the diverse ethnic and social elements of the population. The Abbasid dynasty claim itself to be dawlah (a revolutionary state) and indeed it departed from the Umayyad dynasty in many ways. The ascendancy of the Arabs was over and while the khurasanis became the caliph body-guards, the Persians occupied the key positions in the government, a new hierarchy of officers other than that of the Arabs (Ali, 1974). In short the dynasty though Arab in origin, was deeply personalized in cultural and administrative institutions. This was natural because the rulers of the new dynasty had risen to power with substantial help of their Persian supporters. The proximity of the new capital to Persia further helped the non-Arab elements to occupy positions of eminence in the administration of the new caliphate (Ali, 1974). The influence off the old Persian order of the Sasanids became increasingly strong and many Abbasid practices were a deliberate imitation of satanic habits which were now becoming known from Persian officials and from surviving Sasanid literature (Ali, 1974). With the passage of time Persian influences began to be felt in all fields of life. As it is known, Al-Mansur was the first to adopt the Persian characteristic, in which he was naturally followed by his subjects. Shaukat Ali writes that, “Abu Mohammed Ibanal-Muqaffa was perhaps among the earliest leading Persians who introduced swift persianization of the socio-political institutions in Islam. He is credited with works relating to manners and duties of civil servants and court etiquette” (Ali, 1974).

The Abbasid caliph used to prove themselves as the protectors of Islam and created awe in the eyes of the devout Muslims by elaborating the court etiquette. The color of the early Abbasids was black; therefore banner was also black, bearing white inscription “Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the messenger of God”. Emphasizing on the religious aspect in their court life, the caliph wore a black turban. On him rested the mantle of Muhammad (peace be upon him) and in his hand was placed the prophets (peace be upon him) staff. Quran was kept before him. One after another, the nobility first and then the others kissed the hand of the caliph. This was the form of paying homage (Hitti, 1949). The inscribing of the name of the caliph on the coinage became also the exclusive prerogative of the caliph during the Abbasid caliphate. The most important of them was the inclusion of the caliph’s name in the khutba (payers). The inclusion of caliph’s name in the khutba thus came one of the chief insignia of sovereignty and served as the only visible sign. The grant of a deed of investiture was the most important political prerogative enjoyed exclusively by the caliph. Since the latter was regarded as the chief source of power, no governor could be recognized as a legally constituted ruler unless he had obtained this deed from the caliphate. All the insignias were the symbols of sovereignty and were used for the recognition of caliph as the head of the state. They found their way in due course of time into the Islamic polity. As for their personal privileges, the Abbasid not only enjoyed their annuities but also shared in the booty (that of the Banu Hashim). Besides, they owned huge royal estates so much so that a separate department, Diwan un – Diya had to be established to administer the

private estates of the Abbasid caliphs. Moreover it was obvious that the Abbasid state had given preference to law and order (Hitti, 1949). The army, too, belonged to the court, the nucleus of it being concentrated in the caliph's residence. In this respect, the Abbasids were much different from the early caliphs of Islam and even the Umayyads.

Under the Abbasids new institutions were established. Among it the office of the Wizarat (Ministry) has special importance. The office did not exist under the pious caliphate, nor did it exist under the Umayyads. It was an Abbasid institution borrowed from the Persians. The first individual who was called wazir was Abu Salmah al Khallal under as Saffah. According to Hitti, Wazir stood next to the caliph and acted as his alter ego (Hitti, 1949). But mostly under the Abbasids there was a concept of Wazarat-ut-Tafwiz (The unlimited), delegated with all of the sovereign powers; and vested with absolute and unfettered discretion in all matters concerning the state (Hitti, 1949). With the help of their Persian wazirs, the Abbasids were able to streamline the existing administrative structure. Another important figure was the executioner who was perhaps the most outstanding figure among the official personnel. The Arabs knew no executioner, and the Umayyad kept none; with the Abbasids he was indispensable. Mover over each sovereign on his side maintained a commissary called shahna at the pontifical court charged with the duty of keenly watching the moves of the game on the part of his rivals, for the struggle for predominating influence over the source of all legitimate authority was as great at Baghdad as in Papal Roma. The pattern, on the whole was taken from the Iranians, from who was also taken the office of the court astrologer (Hitti, 1949). According to Ameer Ali, with the loss of the Abbasid actual authority, the wazir also lost his predominant position, and his place was taken by the Ameer-ul-Umra, or general in chief. The Buwahids afterwards transferred the title to their own ministers, leaving to the pontiff only a secretary who bore the name of Rais-ur-Ruasa (i.e. Chief of the Chiefs). When the caliphs under the Seljuk sultans resumed their temporal power, they again nominated their wazir and the wazierate were combined in one person.

Under the latter Abbasids when the caliphate was declining, there sprang out some of the new titles that were bestowed by the caliph to the strongest and the most important personalities of the court. The first of them was the title of Sultan, which, for the first time was bestowed by Wasik upon Ashnas, the commandant of the Turkish guard. Then it was conferred to the Buyide princes when they rose to power. Later on it was conferred on mighty conquerors like Mahmud of Ghazni, Tughril, Alp Arslan, Malik Shah etc. The next title was created, that of Malik, kings which sometimes jointly with the designation of Sultan sometimes separately, but always with a qualifying phrase, was a bestowed on ruling prince. The first to obtain his honour was the great Nur ud din Muhammad Zangi who received from the caliph the title of al Malik al Aadil, the just king (Ameer, 1975). During this period of decline, we find another important personage decorated with the title of usta ud dar or attendant of the palace. Under the weaker reigns, the Ameer ul Umra was also the ustad dar, and the Buyide princes did not hesitate to distinguish themselves by this title.

One thing that is important to conclude the topic is the natural aptitude of the people of the East, specially their love for local autonomy and hatred of centralization. Under such influence, throughout the Abbasides regime, each village and each town administered its own affairs. The government only interfered when disturbances arose, or the taxes were not paid. Such a policy, afterwards, developed the tendency of hereditary governorship.

Consequently it resulted in the split of the mighty empire. As a matter of fact during the early Abbasid period, four independent Muslim kingdoms were established in the East, each with its own separate history. As time rolled on, several independent dynasties arose in the East also (Siddiqi, 1943). Consequently, like every other autocratic system, the Abbasid administration had built in centrifugal tendencies, which continued to aggravate as the dynasty, after its earlier successes and glories, moved swiftly towards its downfall (Siddiqi, 1943). Lewis discussing on the other aspects of the downfall of the Abbasides writes, that as long as Baghdad retained control of the vital trade route leading through it the political break-up did not impede, but seems in some ways actually to have helped the expansion of economic and culture life. But soon more dangerous developments appeared and the authority of the caliph led even in the capital itself (Bernard, 1950). The excessive luxury of the court and the overweight of the bureaucracy produced financial disorder and a shortage of money, later aggravated by the drying up of or loss to invaders of sources of metal. But the most disastrous situation was created from the time of Mu'tasim (833-842) and Wathiq (842-847). From that time the caliphs gradually lost control to their own army commanders and guards, who were often able to appoint and depose them at will. These commanders and guards consisted to an increasing extend of Turkish Makluks. In the year 935 the office of Amir al Umara, or commander of Commander, was created in order to indicate the capital over the rest. Finally, in 945, the Persian house of Buwaik, which had already established itself as a virtually independent dynasty in Western Iran, invaded the capital and destroyed the last shreds off the caliphs were at the mercy of a series of mayors of the place, most of them Persian or Turkish, ruling through the armed forces under their own command. However the Abbasid caliph retained the status and dignity of the office of supreme sovereign of Islam, head of both church and state, or rather of the intermingled organism of the two, the caliphs real power had gone and his investiture of a Commander or governor was merely a formal post facto recognition of an existing situation (Siddiqi, 1943). During the decaying period of the Abbasids, the caliphs were mere puppets in the hands of the Amir al Umara, the Buwayhids and the Saljuqs, and were removed from the office as the courtiers desired. The situation in its own self concluded to the failure of Abbasids in 1258 A.D. through the attack of Halaqu Khan.

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