Polemics of the Islamic Caliphate: A View From Ali Abd. Al-Raziq

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Abstract

While many Muslim sects are in agreement of the necessity of the Islamic Caliphate or Khilafah, modelled upon the ideal caliphate of the Prophet and the four rightly-guided caliphs, its necessity is sometimes completely denied. A very controversial view is that advanced by the Egyptian, Ali Abd. al-Raziq (1888-1966) in his treatise al-Islam wa Usul al-Hukm (Islam and the Principles of Government) published in 1925. This paper reviews the argument forwarded by Ali Abd. al-Raziq on the necessity of the Islamic Caliphate using a secondary data analysis and published materials written by scholars on this issue. It is found that the nature and some fundamental principles of the khilafah arose very early in Islam and has continued to provoke discussion into the modern world. Amongst Ali Abd. al-Raziq's views were the claim that caliphate has no basis, whether in the Qur'an, the traditions or the consensus (ijmac) and the assertion of separation between religion and political power. His view, which remarks violent controversy in the modern Muslim world, is discussed throughout this paper.

Keywords: Islamic caliphate; Ali Abd. al-Raziq; Sunni; Shi'i; Islamic civilization.

1. Introduction

The issue of the caliphate has become one of the major problems in Islam since the death of the Prophet and later during the reigns of Umayyad, Abbasid, Ottoman and the abolition of the Ottoman dynasty. Ever since that time, Muslim and non-Muslim western scholars have analysed the concept of the caliphate and the consequences of its abolition. According to some historical sources, the caliphate issue affected the Muslim community in terms of Islamic faith, the institution of Islamic State and the formation of religious and political authority. The existence of various Muslim sects is a result of the different views on this matter (Adam, 2014).

During the reign of the first four rightly-guided caliphs (11/632-40/661), however, appointment of the caliphate had been solved by referring to the three main sources, which are the Qur'an, *hadith* and consensus (*ijma'*). Subsequently, this matter became complicated during the Umayyad dynasty where the Shi'ite and other opposition sides also fought for the post. This situation was prolonged until the caliphate system was totally abolished during the Ottoman reign in Turkey. Since then, the caliphate system has ceased to exist in all Muslim countries. In support of this state of affairs, some Muslim modernists question the validity of the Islamic system of the caliphate after the death of the Prophet.

The most controversial view was held by the Egyptian, Ali Abd. al-Raziq. He took advantage of the abolition of the Ottoman caliphate in Turkey to launch a forceful attack on the entire traditional school of Islamic political thought. He contested the views of not only the orthodox *'ulama*, but also modernists like Rashid Rida. However, his writing, unlike some other scholars, did not incorporate much western thought.

The modernist Sunni attitude toward the question of the imamate has fluctuated. The need for an imamate according to religious teaching was sometimes completely denied, for example by Ali Abd. al-Raziq in his treatise "*al-Islam wa usul al-Hukm*". At the same time, others have advocated the restoration of a universal imamate modelled upon the ideal caliphate of the four rightly guided caliphs (Madelung, 1971).

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Necessity of the Caliphate in Muslim Civilization

The discussion on the issue of the caliphate among Muslims is twofold: some are in agreement of its necessity whereas some are in deep-seated differences of opinion regarding the need for a caliph. Although its necessity has been unanimously accepted, there has been a debate about the possibility of having more than one caliph. According to the history of Islamic caliphate, its importance has been proved by the establishment of the Prophet's caliphate, the four rightly-guided caliphs, the Umayyads, the Abbasids and the Ottomans. However, the office of the caliphate does not own an absolute authority but acts as representative of the people (Ab. Majid, 2002).

Looking back to the day after the death of the Prophet, the election of a leader was seen essential in order to preserve the religion and administer the affairs of the Muslim community. Although that particular moment was regarded as the turning point for Muslim disunity and sectarian, the Sunni and the Shi'ite who were considered two main sects of Muslim community insisted that it is necessary to have a leader or *khalifah* for the earlier mentioned purpose. The former believed that the maintenance of the caliphate, as widely accepted by al-Mawardi (364/974-450/1058), al-Ghazali (450/1058-505/1111), Ibn Taymiyyah (661/1263-728-1328) and Ibn Khaldun (732/1332), is a social task and permanently obligatory on the community as established by the *shari'ah* (revelation) (Sachedina, 1995). Further emphasis of the importance to have a caliph as a means of avoiding sedition in society was supported by Imam Ahmad b. Hanbal (d. 241/855) (Ahmed, 1973). The right of the caliph was unanimously accepted to be given to Abu Bakar and succeeded by Umar and Uthman before the appointment of Ali as the fourth caliph.

The latter, on the hands, asserted its necessity by divine decree in order to maintain social justice and order (Al-Tusi, 1974). Moreover, the Shi'is differently presented their political doctrine which is based on the recognition of Ali as the legitimate imam after the death of the Prophet. This doctrine is believed to establish a hereditary right among the descendants of Ali (Abd al-Nazir, 1983). Thus it is resulted from this disagreement that later Muslim scholars including Ali Abd al-Raziq, form their understanding and principle of the necessity of the caliphate in the modern Muslim society.

3. Materials and Method

The writing of this article, which highlighted the view of Ali Abd Raziq on the necessity of caliphate system in the Muslim worlds, is based on content analysis of documents and materials mostly derived from secondary sources, published articles and books related to the subject. In this approach, in-depth analysis on the necessity of the caliphate from several Muslim sects and scholars are brought forward. Then the analysis on this issue discusses some important differences and argument controversially forwarded by Ali Abd al-Raziq.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Ali Abd al-Raziq: A Brief Biography

Ali Abd. al-Raziq (1988-1966), who came from a member of a famous and farmowning family, was born in Upper Egypt.

His father Hassan Abdel Raziq was among the founders of the Umma Party in 1907. His brother Mustafa Abdul Raziq was a well known philosopher and studied at Al-Azhar University under the famous reformer Muhammmad Abduh. Ali Abd. al-Raziq was an Egyptian shari'ah (divine law) judge and an early modernist with controversial thoughts (Boucek, 2012). He obtained degree from al-Azhar and Oxford universities. *Al-Islam wa Usul al-Hukm Bath fi al-Khilafah wa al-Hukumah fi al-Islam* (Islam and the Bases of Political Authority: A Study of the Caliphate and Government in Islam) and Introduction to the History of Islamic Philosophy are considered his major works. The former, which was published in Cairo in 1925 presented a challenge to legitimacy of Islam and generated violent controversy throughout the Muslim world. He was later expelled from his position as a shari'ah judge by the Egyptian Higher Council of 'Ulama following the popular debate around his book.

Abd al-Raziq's work concurrently published with two main historical occurences in the world namely the abolition of the caliphate by the Turkish government of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in 1924 and the World War I. In terms of his political affilliation, Abd al-Raziq was closely associated with the Liberal Constitutional Party which succeeded the People's Party. He was regarded as the intellectual father of secularism with the assertion of the separation between state and religion (Black, 2001).

4.2 Caliphate from the View of Ali Abd. al-Raziq

Ali Abd al-Raziq is mainly concerned with the role and nature of the caliphate in Muslim society. The central argument of his view is that the caliphate had no basis either in the Qur'an or the Traditions or the consensus (*ijma'*). To prove this argument, he dealt in detail with the major pieces of evidence, which are normally drawn from these three sources to establish the obligatory of the caliphate. He argued that the Qur'an nowhere makes any mention of the caliphate in the specific sense of the political institution known in history (Abd al-Raziq, 1983). Therefore, anything that is not specified in the Qur'an should not be accepted, and this must be applied to the caliphate. In support of this state of affairs, Abd al-Raziq quoted one Qur'anic verse:

> *"We have neglected nothing in the Book" (6:38)*

Furthermore, he argued that all the verses, which are commonly supposed to sanction the caliphate, in fact, do nothing of the sort, but they act to enjoin the Muslim to obey God, the Prophet and the Holders of authority (Enayat, 1982).

Moreover, he denies the relevant *hadith* which the Sunni claim to be the evidence of the obligatoriness of the caliphate, such as the *hadith*: "*The imams (should be) from the Quraysh*" or "*He who dies and has no obligation of allegiance (to the imam) dies the death of ignorance*". He argues that although these *hadiths* are assumed authentic, they do not stand as proof that the caliphate is a religious doctrine. In other words, even if the *hadith* is really referring to the caliph when it talks of 'the *imam*', this does not imply that there must always be a caliph (Hourani, 1983).

In addition, he also rejected consensus (*ijma'*) as the proof of the caliphate. Except for those first four rightly-guided caliphs, others were not established on the basis of consensus, but rather by force and had always been maintained by oppression (Abd. Al-Raziq, 1966). He also argued that the consensus had never been used in installing the caliphs except in the case of the first four. If there was any consensus serving as the legitimiser of the caliphate in history, it has been of the kind that the Muslim jurists refer to as 'the consensus of silence' (*ijma' sukuti*) (Enayat, 1982). The principles of caliphate in the Muslim society must be based on the election (appointment) of *ahl al-hill wa al-'iqd* (the learned and learned people) but according to Abd al-Raziq's theory, the Islamic caliphate was not based on this foundation except by the method of force. In order to prove this argument, he referred to the caliphate of Abu Bakr, which according to his analysis was formed on the basis of force and achieved by the use of sword. Furthermore, he regarded the caliphate of Abu Bakr as the beginning of the kingship system in the Islamic government.

The theory of Ali Abd al-Raziq caused a sensation in traditional Muslim circles because it laid down a doctrinal basis for the separation of the temporal and the spiritual, and suggested that the government of the Prophet of Medina was not dependent on the prophetic mission (Sourdel, 1978). The Prophetic mission was based on the religious mission, which was achieved through the prophetic mission, not through other ways. Once the Prophet died, it meant the end of the caliphate and no individual existed that could replace his role as the religious leader, as there would not be anyone who could replace his prophecy.

5. Conclusion

The discussion of the modern perceptions relating to the concept of caliphate, which concerns the formation and establishment of an Islamic state, has produced several interesting conclusions. Firstly and perhaps the most fundamental principle is the necessity to establish the office of the caliphate in the community. This principle is accepted by the majority of Muslim sects. Nevertheless, Ali Abd al-Raziq has interpreted in a very controversial argument as discussed in this paper. Secondly, the obligation of the Islamic caliphate has been endorsed by several sources such as the Islamic law, divine decree and the hadiths of the Prophet. According to Muslim belief, these sources constitute the strongest guarantee of the continuation and propagation of the Islamic caliphate. Finally, the spirit of Islamic revivalism and reformation, and the awareness of the reinstitution of the caliphate based on the *shari'ah* prove that Muslims have never abandoned or forgotten this essential idea. Despite all the misunderstanding and argument associated with the concept, as laid down by Ali Abd al-Raziq, it is a fundamental requirement of Islamic teaching that every Muslim community should maintain a form of caliphate. The matter of the caliphate will probably remain an inexhaustible source of discussion, argument and even controversy.

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