

The Kharijites and their impact on Contemporary Islam (Part 2)

By Shaykh Seraj Hendricks

The Meeting between Sayyidina Ali and the Kharijites

Sayyidina Ali set out for Nahrawan, as mentioned earlier, with a party of 4,000 soldiers. Here he confronted the Kharajites. The story, however, is best told by Abdul Qahir al-Baghdadi in his work al-Farq bain al-Firaq (Differences between the Sects in Islam).

"When Ali approached the Kharajites he demanded that they hand over the one who killed Abdullah ibn Khabbab. They responded by saying that all of them were responsible for his death and that if they should get the opportunity they would kill Ali too. Ali and his army moved out and confronted them. Shortly before the battle, however, he said to them: 'For what reason do you seek revenge from me?' They replied: ' The first reason is that after having fought alongside you at the Battle of the Camel - and after having been victorious - you allowed us to take the spoils of war but you prohibited us from imprisoning their women and children. So how did you allow us the one and not the other?'

Ali replied, 'I allowed you the booty for the reason that they had unlawfully taken that wealth from the Bait al-Mal in Basra in the first place. That happened before I went to Basra. As for their women and children, they did not join in the battle. So their rights within Islam remain as it would for any Muslim living in a Dar al-Islam. Moreover, none of them apostatised and it's not permissible to shed the blood of those who remain within the fold. But above all, had I allowed you to imprison their women, then who amongst you would have had the temerity to take Aisha as a prisoner?' The Kharajites shuddered at this rejoinder.

They then said,

'The second reason for our revenge is that that when you signed the treaty of peace between yourself and Muawiyya you eliminated your title '*Amir al-Mu'minin*'.

To this Ali replied, 'In this respect I did exactly what the Prophet (s) of Allah did with Suhail ibn 'Amr at the Treaty of Hudaibiyya. Suhail said to him (s), 'Had I accepted that you were the Prophet of Allah then I would not be disputing with you in this fashion. So remove your title 'The Prophet of Allah' from the pact and write your name followed by the name of your father. The Prophet (s) acceded to this and had his Companions record 'This is what Muhammad ibn Abdullah and Suhail ibn 'Amr have agreed upon...'

Soon after that the Prophet informed me that I would one day find myself in a position similar to the one in which he had found himself at Hudaibiyya. So my situation today with the children of those people is identical to that of the Prophet with their fathers.

The Kharajites then said to Ali, 'Why did you say to the two arbitrators (Abu Musa al-Ashari and Amr ibn al-As), 'If I am suited for the position of Khalifa then you may appoint me.' By this you expressed doubt in your own ability as a Khalifa. It is therefore understandable, if not preferable, for others to hold similar doubts about you.'

Ali replied, 'Indeed through that I wished to be fair to Muawiyya. Had I unconditionally asked the arbitrators to appoint me as the Khalifa then Muawiyya would not have accepted that. In this regard, when the Prophet invited the Christians of Najran to earnestly pray to Allah for an answer he expressed a similar fair-mindedness. This is evident from the verse of the Qur'an,

'Say: Come! Let us gather together - our sons and your sons, our women and your women, ourselves and yourselves. Then let us earnestly pray, and invoke the curse of Allah upon the one who lies.'
(Qur'an 3: 61)

In this manner the Prophet was fair to the Christians. Had he (s) said, on the other hand, 'I will earnestly pray and invoke the curse of Allah upon you' then the Christians of Najran would never have accepted his invitation. For the same reason, therefore, I wished to be fair to Muawiyya. Moreover, at that point I could not be certain about Amr ibn al-As's position - whether he would mislead me or not.

Lastly they said to Ali, 'Why did you, in the first place, allow two arbitrators to arbitrate in a matter that was inherently your right?'

Ali responded,

'I was present when the Prophet of Allah appointed Sa'ad ibn Muadh as an arbitrator after the battle with the Jewish tribe of Quraitha. If he wished then he need not have appointed an arbitrator in the first place. So I did the same - and followed the example of the Prophet - when I appointed an arbitrator.'

After this lengthy discourse most of the Kharajites - 8,000 of them - capitulated and returned to the ranks of Sayyidina Ali. 4,000 of them - including Hurqus ibn Zuhair and Abdullah al-Rasibi - remained committed to their cause. This is a story of the integrity of Sayyidina Ali. And that integrity, as told in the narration of al-Baghdadi, continues where he records that Sayyidina Ali ordered the 8,000 who capitulated not to join them in the battle. He had come with 4,000 and with

4,000 he would fight. On that day too, he swore that no more than ten on his side would die and no more than ten on their side would survive. That is precisely what happened. Amongst those who survived was Hurqus ibn Zuhair.

The intractable Hurqus confronted Sayyidina Ali and said,

"O son of Abi Talib, I fight you not except for the sake of Allah, and for my reward in the afterlife."

Sayyidina Ali retorted, "Your kind, Hurqus, is the kind that Allahu Ta'ala refers to in the Qur'an where He states,

'Say: Shall We tell you of those who lose most in respect of their deeds? Those whose efforts have been wasted in this life, while they imagined that they were acquiring good by their works' (18: 103).

Amongst these - and I swear by this in the name of the Lord of the Ka'ba - are you Hurqus!"

Hurqus met his end and was killed.

Perhaps Hurqus would see the worth of his "good" deeds in the afterlife. But the roots of internecine hatred they left behind were firmly sunk in the soil of this world. Nevertheless, the story, if it needs to be told, need not be for the sake of the legacy the Kharajites left behind. If there is ever a need for the story to be told, then it is for the lessons to be learnt from Sayyidina Ali's attitude and approach to them during his short reign as Khalifa. Not only is he a model of justice and integrity, but, like his three great predecessors, is a model of how Muslim leaders, governors and communities ought to behave and conduct themselves.

In the next series we shall look at some of these instances.