

The Difference Between a Khaleefah (Caliph) and a King: When a Ruler Fears Allah (swt) Before He Fears the People

(Translated)

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The real issue is not the title of the ruler who sits on the seat of power, even if the title written before his name indicates the nature of his rule. Instead, what matters most is the methodology of governance by which he rules, the ultimate purpose for which it is established, and the limits at which his authority stops before the Law of Allah (Shariah) and the rights of the people.

Here, a noble stance from the biography of the Amir ul Mu'mineen, Umar ibn al-Khattab (ra), stands out to guide us. Ibn Sa'd reported on the authority of Zadhan from Salman (ra) that Umar said to Salman, «أملك أنا أم خليفة؟» "Am I a king or a Caliph?" Salman replied to him, «إن أنت جبيت من أرض المسلمين درهماً أو أقل أو أكثر، ثم وضعته في غير حقه، فأنت ملك غير خليفة» "If you collect a dirham—or less or more—from the land of the Muslims and then spend it unjustly, then you are a king and not a Caliph." Thereupon, Umar (ra) wept bitterly.

Another statement carrying the same meaning is reported from him (ra), as cited by Imam Ibn Sa'd in *Al-Tabaqat Al-Kubra*, «والله ما أدري أخليفة أنا أم ملك» "By Allah, I do not know whether I am a Caliph or a king." It was said to him, «إن بينهما فرقاً؛ الخليفة لا يأخذ إلا حقاً ولا يضعه إلا في حق، وأنت بحمد الله كذلك، والملك يعسف الناس، فيأخذ من هذا ويعطي هذا» "Indeed, there is a difference between the two; a Caliph takes only what is right and spends it only in what is right, and praise be to Allah, you are like that. A king, on the other hand, oppresses the people, taking from one person and giving to another."

So reflect upon this deep understanding!

Umar ibn al-Khattab (ra)—to whom the Arabs submitted, to whom non-Arabs and vast expanses of land bowed, and whose state extended from Persia to Ash-Sham and Egypt—did not view power as a personal privilege or as spoils of war to dispose of as he pleased. Instead, he saw himself answerable before Allah for every single dirham, every soul, and every right belonging to the Muslims. This is the core of the issue. The problem is not in the ruling authority in itself... rather, it is in the source of authority and the methodology of governance.

Indeed, Islam does not make the ruler a god above the people, nor does it grant him immunity from truth and justice, nor does it make the Ummah his personal property. The Noble Quran says, «إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَأْمُرُكُمْ أَنْ تُؤَدُّوا الْأَمَانَاتِ إِلَىٰ أَهْلِهَا وَإِذَا حَكَمْتُمْ بَيْنَ النَّاسِ أَنْ تَحْكُمُوا بِالْعَدْلِ» "Indeed, Allah commands you to render trusts to those to whom they are due and when you judge between people to judge with justice." [TMQ Surah An-Nisa: 58].

Authority in Islam is a trust (Amanah), governance is a responsibility, public wealth is not the ruler's personal property, the Ummah is not a private estate, and the subjects are not the property of an individual, a family, or a party.

Here, an important matter must be pointed out: not every dominion is blameworthy simply for being a dominion. For Allah (swt) said regarding Prophet Dawud (as), ﴿وَاتَاهُ اللَّهُ الْمُلْكَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ﴾ **“And Allah gave him dominion and wisdom.”** [TMQ Surah Al-Baqarah: 251].

And Allah (swt) said regarding Prophet Sulaiman (as), ﴿وَهَبْ لِي مُلْكًا لَا يَنْبَغِي لِأَحَدٍ مِنْ بَعْدِي﴾ **“And grant me a dominion such as shall not belong to anyone after me.”** [TMQ Surah Sad: 35].

Instead, the discussion here concerns the kind of dominion in which governance transforms into tyranny, oppression, authoritarianism, and monopolization of resources—which is described in the Hadith as hereditary dominion (*Al-Mulk Al-‘Adud*).

Where are we compared to the model of Umar (ra)?

Umar (ra) feared that Allah would hold him accountable for a single dirham of the Muslims' wealth. In our times, however, the wealth of the Ummah is turned into massive figures in accounts, projects, and privileges, after which the people are expected to remain silent, to consider holding the ruler accountable an assault on the state, and to treat criticism of authority as a crime, while public money is treated as if it were the private property of whoever holds decision-making power.

What a vast difference lies between a Khaleefah (Caliph) who fears spending a single dirham improperly, and a ruler who views the state—along with its land, resources, institutions, and assets—as personal property belonging to him and those around him! This is not a matter of slogans. It is a matter of trust, justice, and governance according to the Shariah Law of Allah (swt).

And what about the peoples that have paid heavy prices?

In recent decades, we have seen peoples revolt against tyranny, regimes fall after bloody conflicts, cities get destroyed, millions of human beings displaced, and immense costs paid. Syria stands as a painful example of what despotism and armed conflict can bring about when grievances accumulate, state institutions collapse, and justice disappears. However, the real lesson is not learned by replacing one individual with another, one slogan with another, or one ruling elite with another. The bigger question remains: what system will govern the people after the downfall of tyranny? If one tyrant departs and another tyrant arrives, what has actually changed? And if the faces change while the underlying rules that produce tyranny remain intact, has the problem truly ended?

What is required is not merely changing the person sitting on the throne, but transforming the methodology of governance so that authority is restricted by the Shariah, public wealth is protected, rights are preserved, and the ruler is held accountable for his subjects before Allah and before the Ummah. The Messenger of Allah (saw) said, «كُلُّكُمْ رَاعٍ وَكُلُّكُمْ مَسْئُولٌ عَنْ رَعِيَّتِهِ» **“Every one of you is a guardian and every one of you is responsible for his charge.”**

Thus, the ruler is a guardian, not an owner of the people. So let us examine ourselves; the time has come for us to pause for a moment—not merely to ask: *Who rules us?* But rather to ask: *By what does he rule us? In whose interest does he govern? From whom does he derive his authority? Does he consider the wealth of the*

Ummah a sacred trust or spoils of war? Can an oppressed person attain his rights under his rule? Can the people hold accountable those who oppress them through the means sanctioned by the Shariah? And is the ruler a servant to the Ummah or a despot over it? These are the questions that ought to occupy the minds of people of reason and insight.

The Ummah does not need to replace one tyrant with another tyrant, nor does it need to reproduce oppression under new names. Instead, the Ummah needs a system of governance built upon justice, Shariah, accountability, and the protection of lives, wealth, and honor. For this reason, it is the Shariah obligation of Muslims to demand the implementation of the Shariah Law of Allah (swt) in accordance with the Shariah method and through the Shariah approved means, and to work towards establishing a system of governance that achieves justice, safeguards rights, and establishes the rulings of Islam, far removed from chaos, vengeance, and the unlawful shedding of blood. For the objective is not merely to raise the slogan of Khilafah (Caliphate), but instead to comprehend its true meaning as responsibility, justice, trust, and ruling by the Shariah Law of Allah (swt).

And let us remember Umar ibn al-Khattab (ra) as he asked himself, «أملك أنا أم خليفة؟» “Am I a king or a Caliph?” for he feared that he might have taken a dirham from the wealth of the Muslims and placed it improperly.

O you who seek power, and O you who govern the affairs of the people: Are you able to pause and account yourselves as Umar (ra) did?

And O Ummah of Islam!

Shall we accept that Muslim lands remain captive to regimes of tyranny and dependency, or shall we work to build a political order that achieves justice, protects the Ummah, and makes the ruler answerable before Allah for his subjects?

Indeed, the Shariah path is through Shariah change—not through chaos, bloodshed, or aggression against innocent people—but through awareness, justice, organized Shariah legislated actions, and building the Ummah on the foundation of Islam, so that ruling governance becomes a trust rather than spoils, and guardianship rather than despotism. Allah (swt) says, ﴿إِنِ الْحُكْمُ إِلَّا لِلَّهِ﴾ **“Legislation is for none but Allah.”** [TMQ Surah Yusuf: 40].

O Allah, set right the affairs of the Muslims, show us the truth as truth and grant us the ability to follow it, show us falsehood as falsehood and grant us the ability to avoid it, establish justice within our Ummah, lift from it oppression, tyranny, and subjugation, and cause governance within it to be established upon obedience to Allah (swt), the achievement of justice, and the protection of lives, wealth, and honor.