

Caliph Umar's pivotal role

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Friday feature

DESPITE much rhetoric on the part of governments of various hues, good governance, rule of law and real democracy is a dream that unfortunately does not seem to come true in the Islamic world. For a sincere government, however, there is a lot to learn in the way Hazrat Umar, the rightly-guided second caliph, ruled more than 14 hundred years ago.

The total area of his caliphate was around 23 lakh square miles with continuously expanding its frontiers. To rule over such a big caliphate stretched from Libya to Makran and from Yemen to Armenia, Hazrat Umar had to establish an entirely new administrative system. For the Arabs, in fact, it was for the first time that such a central government was established.

Hazrat Umar believed in shura and what today we call the devolution of power. He would take no decision without the consultation of the assembly of the great Companions. Common people were also consulted on matters of special significance.

He used to say: "There is no concept of caliphate without consultation". The roots of modern democracy can be clearly seen in the administration of Hazrat Umar at a time when the whole world was ruled by despotic kings and emperors.

Hazrat Umar divided the whole country into provinces and smaller units. He followed a very strict standard for the appointment of governors, and took particular care to appoint men of approved integrity to high offices under the state.

He kept a watch over them like a hawk, and as soon as any lapse on their part came to his notice, immediate action was taken. Before assuming his responsibility, a governor was required to declare his assets and a complete inventory of his possessions was prepared and kept in record.

If an unusual increase was reported in the assets of a governor, he was immediately called to account and the unlawful property was confiscated by the state. At the time of appointment, a governor was required to make the pledge: (1) that he would not ride a

integrity. He believed in simplicity and had contempt for pomp and luxury. Strong sense of justice, accountability before law, and equality for all were some of his cherished ideals. He took particular pains to provide effective, speedy and impartial justice to the people.

He was the first ruler in history to separate judiciary from the executive. Qazis/judges were appointed in sufficient numbers at all administrative levels for the administration of justice. They were chosen for their integrity and learning in Islamic law. High salaries were fixed for them and they were not allowed to engage in trade.

Hazrat Umar was a great social and political reformer and a man of extraordinary vision. He was the first Muslim ruler to establish public treasury, courts of justice, appoint judges, set up an army department and assign regular salaries to the men in the armed forces. He created a land revenue department and was the first ruler under whom survey and assessment work of land was undertaken.

In one of his ordinances issued to judicial officers, Hazrat Umar laid down the following principles: "Verily justice is an important obligation to God and man. You have been charged with this responsibility. Discharge the responsibility so that you may win the approbation of God and the goodwill of the people. Treat the people equally in your presence, in your company, and in your decisions, so that the weak despair not of justice and the high-placed have no hope of your favour..."

Hazrat Umar took particular steps to build a social order according to the teachings of Islam. He brought about far-reaching reforms in the social, economic and political sphere of collective life. It is but he who could say: "If a dog dies at the bank of Euphrates, Umar will be responsible for that".

As a consequence of large-scale conquests in Iraq, Persia and elsewhere a question arose as to the administration of land in the conquered territories.

them. They should be treated as full-fledged citizens and should enjoy equality before law. Their taxes should be fair, and no burden should be imposed on them which they cannot bear."

The high standards of integrity that Hazrat Umar set for himself and his family member should be emulated by the rulers of today particularly those of the Muslim world. The allowance that he drew was just enough for person of average means. When the people around him insisted that his allowance should be raised, he refused to accept any increase. He ate the most ordinary food, and wore clothes of the coarsest cloth.

Once he was late for the Friday prayer and the explanation that he offered was that he had his clothes washed, and that took some time to dry which delayed his departure for

the mosque. When the envoy of the Byzantine emperor came to Madinah, he expected that the caliph would be living in a heavily guarded palace. The envoy found no palace and no guard.

He found the caliph sitting in the mosque in the company of ordinary people. When he went to Palestine to receive the surrender of the city of Jerusalem the world witnessed the strange spectacle of his slave riding the camel, and he himself walking on foot holding the reins of the camel.

Once Hazrat Umar's wife, Umm Kulsum, purchased perfume for one dirham and sent it as a gift to the Byzantine empress. The Byzantine empress returned the empty phials of perfume filled with gems. When Hazrat Umar came to know of this, he sold the gems. Out of the sale proceeds he handed over one dirham to his wife and the rest was deposited in the state treasury. Hazrat Umar's son Abdullah was a very talented man but he refused to give him any office.

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Turkish horse; (2) that he would not wear fine clothes; (3) that he would not eat sifted flour; (4) that he would not keep a porter at his door; and (5) that he would always keep his door open to the public. This is how it was ensured that governors and principal officers would behave like common people and not like some extraordinary or heavenly creatures.

The governors were required to come to Makkah on the occasion of the Haj. In public assembly, Hazrat Umar would invite all those who had any grievance against any office to present the complaint. In the event of complaints, inquiries were made immediately and grievances redressed on the spot.

The rightly-guided caliph also established a special office for the investigation of complaints against the governors. The department was under the charge of Muhammad bin Maslamah Ansari, a man of undisputed integrity. In important cases Muhammad bin Maslamah was deputed by the caliph to proceed to the spot, investigate the charge and take action. Sometimes an inquiry commission was constituted to investigate the charge. On occasions the officers against whom complaints were received were summoned to Madinah, and put to explanation by the caliph himself.

Hazrat Umar was a man of inflexible

the army following the old maxim "spoils belong to the victors" insisted that all agricultural lands should be distributed among the conquering army, and the inhabitants should be made serfs and slaves. However, Hazrat Umar, after prolonged counselling and contemplation, rejected army's demand and decreed that the conquered land would be the property of the state and not of the conquering forces and the former occupants of the lands would not be dispossessed. This was a revolutionary decision. His general decree was that land belonged to the person who could cultivate it, and that, a person is entitled to possess only that much land that he could cultivate.

The caliph upheld the principle that there is no coercion in religion and the non-Muslim population was guaranteed life, liberty, and property. The non-Muslims were treated as full citizens of the state. There was to be no discrimination between Muslim and non-Muslim in the eyes of law. Even on his deathbed, the caliph thought of the state's responsibility to the non-Muslim citizens.

In his bequest to his successor, he said: "My bequest to my successor is that covenants with *ahl-ud-dhimma* i.e. the People of the Covenant or Obligation, should be observed faithfully. They should be defended against all invasions. No injustice should be done to

houses in all cities, rest houses on road-side from Madinah to Makkah for the comfort of travellers.

Hazrat Umar took special measures to minimize slavery. He ordered that any female captive who had given birth to a child should not be sold as a slave. He established schools throughout the country, and allowed generous salaries to school teachers. He fixed stipends for the poor and the needy, and provided for the care and upbringing of orphans. His caliphate was, in fact, a great welfare and egalitarian state.

Hazrat Umar (581-644 A.D.) was a great companion and a loyal friend of the Holy Prophet, may peace and blessings of Allah be upon him. Before his death, Hazrat Abu Bakr, with the consultation of the Companions, had appointed him as the caliph. During the ten years of his rule from 634 to 644 A.D., Hazrat Umar changed the course of history.

Under his wise and courageous leadership, the Islamic caliphate grew at an unprecedented rate, taking Iraq and parts of Iran from the Sassanids, and thereby ending that empire, and taking Egypt, Palestine, Syria, North Africa and Armenia from the Byzantines. He was assassinated by a Persian free slave, Abu Lulu Fairoz, and embraced shahadat on first of Muharram, 24 Hijri.