

The Revolution of al-Husayn ibn Ali: Causes and Reasons for its Failure: A Critical Historical Analysis

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Abstract

The revolution of al-Husayn ibn 'Alī (may Allah be pleased with him) represents a pivotal moment in early Islamic political history. Emerging during the final years of Mu'āwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān's rule, it was precipitated by the appointment of his son Yazīd as successor, marking a shift from the principles of rightly guided leadership to hereditary monarchy. This study examines the causes of the revolution, the factors contributing to its failure, and the historical lessons derived from it, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of historical patterns (sunan) in the rise and decline of Islamic states. Specifically, it addresses three key questions: What triggered al-Husayn's uprising? What led to its failure? And what lessons can be learned from its outcome? Methodologically, the paper employs historical, descriptive, and analytical approaches while engaging with both Sunni and Shi'i perspectives, including works such as 'Alī al-Ṣallābī's *The Umayyad State* and Muḥammad Maḥdī Shams al-Dīn's *The Revolution of Imam al-Husayn*. Structured into seven sections covering the background, causes, advice from contemporaries, potential success factors, sequence of events, reasons for failure, and concluding insights, the study underscores its significance through a critical re-examination of Islamic history, its contribution to the scholarly study of revolutions in Islam, and its practical relevance to contemporary scholars, thinkers, and policymakers.

Keywords: Al-Husayn ibn 'Ali, Islamic Political History, Revolution and Failure Factors, Historical Lessons (SUNAN)

Introduction

The revolution led by al-Husayn ibn 'Alī (may Allah be pleased with him) represents one of the most pivotal transformations in the early Islamic political history. This uprising was the culmination of a series of accumulating factors that began during the final years of the caliphate of Mu'āwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān (may Allah be pleased with him), particularly after his

decision to appoint his son Yazīd as his successor. This move was widely perceived as a departure from the rightly guided traditions of selecting caliphs and marked the inception of hereditary succession within the Islamic state. Consequently, this development opened the door to an era of political revolts, beginning with the revolution of al-Ḥusayn.

This paper aims to examine the causes behind this revolution, the reasons for its failure, and the key lessons that can be drawn from its events. The study seeks to offer a scholarly perspective that contributes to a deeper understanding of the historical laws (sunan) governing Islamic history, thereby enriching the historical and intellectual awareness of researchers and those interested in issues concerning the contemporary Islamic state.

Preliminary Political Context of the Revolution

The prelude to the revolution of al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī (may Allah be pleased with him) began with the declaration by Mu‘āwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān (may Allah be pleased with him) of his intention to appoint his son Yazīd as his successor. This was seen as a deviation from the rightly guided tradition based on *shūrā* (consultation) and the beginning of a hereditary system of governance. Several prominent Companions rejected this pledge of allegiance, most notably: al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī, ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr, ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abbās, ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Umar, and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Abī Bakr.

Scholars are divided in evaluating this decision into two perspectives:

- The first believes that Mu‘āwiyah made a *ijtihād* (independent judgment) to achieve stability and avoid conflict. Some even likened his act to that of Abū Bakr’s nomination of ‘Umar. Ibn Khaldūn defended this view, justifying it with the prevailing tribalism and socio-political context of the time.
- The second sees this act as a deviation from the Prophetic and rightly guided model of governance, and an entry point to political inheritance. This group cites the stance of the opposing Companions, especially the narration from ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Abī Bakr.

Immediate Causes of the Revolution

1. The Shift from Shūrā to Hereditary Rule: Imam al-Ḥusayn (may Allah be pleased with him) firmly rejected the transition from the *shūrā*-based system to a hereditary monarchy, which was initiated with the rule of Yazīd. This shift was seen as a betrayal of the political principles established during the Prophet’s era and the rightly guided caliphates.
2. Doubts Regarding Yazīd’s Justice and Piety: Many scholars and historians did not deny the accusations of immorality (*fisq*) attributed to Yazīd. These concerns led al-Ḥusayn to refuse pledging allegiance to him. Al-Ḥusayn explicitly addressed this in his famous sermon:

“Do you not see that the truth is not acted upon...?” This statement reflected his moral and religious stance that compelled him to oppose Yazīd’s leadership

The Advice of the Companions and Successors Urging al-Ḥusayn Not to Depart Several prominent Companions of the Prophet ﷺ advised Imam al-Ḥusayn against traveling to Kūfa, based on their previous experiences with its people who had abandoned both his father ‘Alī and his brother al-Ḥasan. Among those who warned him were: ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abbās, ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr, ‘Abd Allāh ibn Ja‘far, and ‘Amrah bint ‘Abd al-Raḥmān.

Despite their insistence, al-Ḥusayn remained resolute in his decision, justifying it with his fear that remaining in Mecca might lead to the sanctity of the Ḥaram being violated. He also cited a dream in which the Prophet ﷺ commanded him to take a course of action, though he did not disclose its content to others.

Analysis of al-Ḥusayn's Position His statements to the Companions reveal that his decision was not impulsive or reckless. Rather, it was a conscious and principled stance that weighed moral responsibility against potential risks. He chose martyrdom outside of Mecca over being the cause of bloodshed within its sacred precincts. His choice to keep the dream's meaning to himself adds a layer of spiritual conviction and highlights the profound ethical nature of his decision.

Factors That Were Expected to Contribute to the Success of al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī's Revolution

The Personality and Religious-Political Status of Imam al-Ḥusayn. Al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī (may Allah be pleased with both of them) held an exceptional position in the hearts of Muslims. He was the grandson of the Prophet ﷺ, the son of Fāṭimah al-Zahrā' and 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (may Allah be pleased with them all). Ibn Kathīr expressed this by saying: *"People were inclined toward al-Ḥusayn because he was the great leader... at that time there was no one on earth equal to him or comparable to him."*

This elevated status, coupled with the widespread criticism of Yazīd's conduct, granted al-Ḥusayn both religious and political legitimacy, making him a credible alternative leader in the eyes of the opposition that rejected Umayyad dynastic succession.

Political Turmoil Following the Death of Mu'āwiyah The death of Mu'āwiyah presented a significant political opportunity. There was a leadership vacuum and a lack of consensus around Yazīd's legitimacy. Several leading Companions, such as 'Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr, 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Umar, and 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Abbās, openly opposed Yazīd's accession. This created a politically ripe environment for a legitimate alternative figure such as al-Ḥusayn to emerge.

Letters and Initial Support from the People of Kūfa The people of Kūfa, known historically for their loyalty to the Ahl al-Bayt (the Prophet's family), played a major role in encouraging al-Ḥusayn to rise. Hundreds of letters from Kūfan nobles reached him, as reported by Ibn Kathīr, offering him allegiance and inviting him to come as their rightful Imam. One such letter stated: *"The land has turned green and the fruits have ripened... So come to us, for you have an army fully mobilized."*

Kūfa was strategically significant, both militarily and politically. It had a prior history of resisting Umayyad rule, and many of the non-Arab clients (mawālī) living there viewed al-Ḥusayn as a symbol of liberation from both social and political injustice.

Developments and Progression of the Revolution

The events of the revolution can be outlined based on the narration of Imam Ibn Kathīr as follows:

1. Al-Ḥusayn Sends His Cousin Muslim ibn 'Aqīl to Kūfa. The first step al-Ḥusayn took was to send his cousin, Muslim ibn 'Aqīl, to Kūfa to verify the sincerity of their calls for allegiance and

to formally receive their bay'ah (pledge of allegiance). The people welcomed Muslim with enthusiasm, and thousands pledged allegiance to him. He stayed in the house of Hānī' ibn 'Urwah, calling people to the cause both privately and publicly.

2. The Martyrdom of Muslim ibn 'Aqīl When 'Ubayd Allāh ibn Ziyād learned of Muslim's arrival, he sent spies, spread fear among the people, and made false promises to those who abandoned Muslim. Gradually, people deserted him until only a few remained. He was eventually arrested and executed; this occurred before al-Ḥusayn had arrived.

3. Al-Ḥusayn's Departure from Mecca Al-Ḥusayn left Mecca on the Day of Tarwiyah (8th of Dhū al-Ḥijjah), unaware at that time of Muslim's death. While en route, he received the devastating news. Some companions advised him to return, but he chose to continue out of loyalty to his word and mission.

4. Al-Ḥurr ibn Yazīd Intercepts al-Ḥusayn 'Ubayd Allāh ibn Ziyād dispatched al-Ḥurr ibn Yazīd al-Tamīmī to intercept al-Ḥusayn and prevent him from proceeding. Al-Ḥurr forced al-Ḥusayn to halt at Karbalā', compelling him to camp there.

5. Negotiations with 'Umar ibn Sa'd Ibn Ziyād then sent 'Umar ibn Sa'd with an army to besiege al-Ḥusayn. Al-Ḥusayn proposed three options: to return to where he came from, to be allowed to go to Yazīd, or to be permitted to go to the frontlines (thughūr) to fight for the Muslim state. However, Shamir ibn Dhī al-Jawshan rejected all proposals and insisted that al-Ḥusayn surrender unconditionally.

6. The Battle of Karbalā' On the 10th of Muḥarram ('Āshūrā'), the tragic Battle of Karbalā' took place. Al-Ḥusayn and his small group of family members and loyal companions fought valiantly against overwhelming odds. They were eventually martyred, having shown immense courage and sacrifice.

7. The End of the Revolution Around seventy members of al-Ḥusayn's family and supporters were martyred alongside him. The surviving women and children were taken as captives to Kūfa and then to Damascus. This marked the tragic end of the revolution, leaving a profound and lasting impact on the collective Muslim memory.

Factors Behind the Failure of al-Ḥusayn's Revolution

Before delving into the causes of the revolution's failure, two important introductory notes must be made:

First: Analyzing the reasons for the revolution's failure does not detract from the status of Imam al-Ḥusayn (may Allāh be pleased with him) or from his well-established religious standing in Islamic texts. The Prophet ﷺ testified that al-Ḥusayn is the master of the youth of Paradise and a chief among martyrs. However, he was still a human and not infallible, contrary to what the Shi'a believe. Because of this belief in infallibility, they typically reject any critical evaluation of the revolution and turn instead to emotional interpretations that shield their creed from perceived contradictions.

Second: There exists a narration from al-Wāqidī (reported in al-Dhahabī's *Tārīkh*) claiming that al-Ḥusayn knew of Muslim ibn 'Aqīl's death and the Kūfans' betrayal before continuing his journey. However, this report is weak due to the unreliability of al-Wāqidī, and the content itself is problematic, it is unreasonable to think al-Ḥusayn would knowingly lead his family to destruction.

The stronger narration, cited by Ibn Kathīr, states that al-Ḥusayn left Mecca on the Day of Tarwiyah without knowledge of Muslim's death, as Muslim was executed on the Day of 'Arafah. If, however, it is proven that al-Ḥusayn continued even after receiving news of Muslim's death, it can be understood as a decision made under intense pressure from Banū 'Aqīl and out of loyalty to his cousin's sacrifice.

Thus, discussing the revolution's failure must remain within a historical-analytical framework, without casting doubt on al-Ḥusayn's intentions or diminishing his stature.

Conclusion and Findings

- This study has demonstrated that the revolution of al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī (may Allāh be pleased with him) was a direct response to a historical transformation in the process of selecting the caliph, from the principle of *shūrā* (consultation) to hereditary monarchy—with additional concerns about the moral integrity (*fisq*) of Yazīd ibn Mu'āwiyah.
- The study clarified that al-Ḥusayn rejected the advice to remain in Mecca due to his fear that the sanctity of the holy city would be violated if conflict were to erupt there.
- The research identified several factors that were expected to contribute to the revolution's success: al-Ḥusayn's unparalleled religious and moral stature, the volatile political atmosphere following the death of Mu'āwiyah, and the anticipated support from the people of Kūfa and other provinces.
- The failure of the revolution was attributed to a combination of factors, most notably: the matter of divine destiny regarding the Caliphate, the strength and institutional solidity of the Umayyad state, insufficient revolutionary preparation, disunity among the Companions concerning opposition to Yazīd, a weak support base, the betrayal of the Kūfans, and al-Ḥusayn's decision to bring his family members along despite having only a small group of followers.
- The study also extracted a set of historical and moral lessons from the Ḥusaynī revolution, which remain relevant for understanding political reform, ethical leadership, and the dynamics of resistance movements

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